THE FEMALE COMPLAINT

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The Unfinished Business of Sentimentality in American Culture

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PREFACE

Previous versions of this preface narrated how emotionally thorny it was to write this book. I wrote of myself and of women in my particular family—from Lena and Sadie to Mara and Cindy—who entered femaleness at different historical moments and yet whose styles of being in femininity have contained uncanny similarities. As you can imagine, such resonances raised intensities of attachment, love, protectiveness, gratitude, disappointment, despair, anger, and resentment that created obstacles to lithesome storytelling.

Then a friend not from the humanities asked me, "Why are you airing your personal business here? Isn't your knowledge the point?" Right, I responded—well, in the humanities we try to foreground what motivates and shapes our knowledge, and a personal story can telegraph a perspective efficiently and humanly. I wasn't happy with this somewhat canned response, although I also believe it. Yet the autobiographical isn't the personal. This nonintuitive phrase is a major presupposition of *The Female Complaint*. In the contemporary consumer public, and in the *longue durée* that I'm tracking, all sorts of narratives are read as autobiographies of collective experience. The personal is the general. Publics presume intimacy.

But how can I call "intimate" a public constituted by strangers who consume common texts and things? By "intimate public" I do not mean a public sphere organized by autobiographical confession and chest-baring, although there is often a significant amount of first-person narrative in an intimate public. What makes a public sphere intimate is an expectation that the consumers of its particular stuff *already* share a worldview and emotional knowledge that they have derived from a broadly common historical experience. A certain circularity structures an intimate public, therefore: its consumer participants are perceived to be marked by a commonly lived history; its narratives and things are deemed expressive of that history while also shaping its conventions of belonging; and, expressing the sensational, embodied experience of living as a certain kind of being in the world, it promises also to provide a better experience of social belonging—partly through participation in the relevant commodity culture, and partly because of its revelations about how people can live. So if, from a theoretical standpoint, an intimate public is a space of mediation in which the personal is refracted through the general, what's salient for its consumers is that it is a place of recognition and reflection. In an intimate public sphere emotional contact, of a sort, is made.

In other words, an intimate public is an achievement. Whether linked to women or other nondominant people, it flourishes as a porous, affective scene of identification among strangers that promises a certain experience of belonging and provides a complex of consolation, confirmation, discipline, and discussion about how to live as an *x*. One may have chosen freely to identify as an *x*; one may be marked by traditional taxonomies—those details matter, but not to the general operation of the public sense that some qualities or experience are held in common. The intimate public provides anchors for realistic, critical assessment of the way things are and provides material that foments enduring, resisting, overcoming, and enjoying being an *x*. To be all of these things to all of these people, though, the intimate public's relation to the political and to politics is extremely uneven and complex. This book tracks the "bargaining" with power and desire in which members of intimate publics always seem to be engaging.

The Female Complaint tells a story about the emergence and conventions of the first mass cultural intimate public in the United States. This "women's

culture" is distinguished by a view that the people marked by femininity already have something in common and are in need of a conversation that feels intimate, revelatory, and a relief even when it is mediated by commodities, even when it is written by strangers who might not be women, and even when its particular stories are about women who seem, on the face of it, vastly different from each other and from any particular reader.

Women have long come to "women's culture" to experience versions of personal life that are made up by other people claiming to derive their stories from other women's real lives, and who knows? The consumers of "women's culture" do not always need its material to be true empirically—so much of it is marked as fantasy and expressed in extreme genres tending to hyperbole and grandiosity, which are forms of realism when social suffering is the a priori of experience, seen historically and across a wide variety of locations. But the commodities of women's intimate public sphere implicitly claim to sanction perspectives derived broadly from women's experience. The contents are TBA.

This presumption that there is a structure of relevancy, address, and absorption enables the consumers of "women's culture" to feel that their emotional lives are already shared and have already been raised to a degree of general significance while remaining true to what's personal. The domain of detail is always being negotiated, debated, and taken personally. This means that people participate in it who may share nothing of the particular worlds being represented in a given magazine, book, film, or soap opera venue. But even when people speak out against the terms the intimate public sets out as normative, they are still participating in the promise of belonging that it represents insofar as they are trying to recalibrate whose experience it can absorb so that they can feel included in the mass intimacy that has promised to include them.

One of the main jobs of the minoritized arts that circulate through mass culture is to tell identifying consumers that "you are not alone (in your struggles, desires, pleasures)": this is something we know but never tire of hearing confirmed, because aloneness is one of the affective experiences of being collectively, structurally unprivileged. This is barely a paradox. You experience taxonomic saturation ("labels") personally, but they are not about *you* personally. They are bigger than the both of us. What gets uttered is a collective

story about the personal that is not organized by the singular autobiography. In "What Is a Minor Literature?" Deleuze and Guattari argue that one's identification with any material marked by a "minor" voice performs one's attachment to being generic, to being a member of a population that has been marked out as having collective qualities that are apprehensible in individuals. They also suggest that there are no simply personal voices for the minoritized author: the singular materials of a specific life are readable only as particulars that are exemplary not of the individual's life but of that *kind* of life. So consumption of "women's culture" would be, in this view, which is also my view, a way of experiencing one's own story as part of something social, even if one's singular relation to that belonging is extremely limited, episodic, ambivalent, rejecting, or mediated by random encounters with relevantly marked texts.

The works of "women's culture" enact a fantasy that my life is not just mine, but an experience understood by other women, even when it is not shared by many or any. Commodified genres of intimacy, such as Oprah-esque chat shows and "chick lit," circulate among strangers, enabling insider self-help talk such as "girl talk" to flourish in an intimate public. These genres claim to reflect a kernel of common experience and provide frames for encountering the impacts of living as a woman in the world. Sentimentality and complaint are two ends of this commercial convention, with feminism as a kind of nosy neighbor. In the book I call women's culture "juxtapolitical" because, like most mass-mediated nondominant communities, that of feminine realist-sentimentality thrives in *proximity* to the political, occasionally crossing over in political alliance, even more occasionally doing some politics, but most often not, acting as a critical chorus that sees the expression of emotional response and conceptual recalibration as achievement enough. The strange and widespread phenomenon of publics ambivalent about politics is one of the main concerns of this book.

The Female Complaint constitutes the second stage of my "national sentimentality" project, flanked by *The Anatomy of National Fantasy* on one side and *The Queen of America Goes to Washington City* on the other. This series charts the emergence of the U.S. political sphere as an affective space, a space of attachment and identification that is not saturated merely by ideological or cognitive content but is also an important sustainer of people's desires for

reciprocity with the world. Publics are affective insofar as they don't just respond to material interests but magnetize optimism about living and being connected to strangers in a kind of nebulous *communitas*. This book focuses on the ways a variety of nonprivileged subjects circulate through intimate publics to engender kinds of insider recognition and cultural self-development that, while denigrated in the privileged publics of the United States, provide an experience of social belonging in proximity to the technologies that make the nation itself a site of affective investment and emotional identification. (To readers who do think that women in the United States are subordinated no longer, here is another view. In modern liberal democratic societies, most inequality is partial, contradictory, and contested: it is often more informal [in behavior] than formal [law or policy]. Yet these complex conditions are not so complicated that their negative impacts are unpredictable. Disrespect for women is not unpredictable *enough*. It is more often affectively sensed or experienced in episodes than objective and dramatically fixable. Popular culture is terrible at dealing with mixed bags and mixed feelings when the register is ideological and the topic is intimate, and women remain the default managers of the intimate. Even if social negativity and antagonism are intricate and uneven and not merely top-down, the social field is still shaped powerfully by them.)

In *The Anatomy of National Fantasy* the law and the spaces of everyday life provide overlapping contexts for tracking the development of official and intimate publics in the early U.S. period: sometimes "the people" are authoritarian and identify with the law's strict discipline of its most vulnerable people *and at the same time* they develop their own networks of sympathy and recognition that create alternative spaces of survival and solidarity. This contradiction never bothers anyone: intimate publics, politically and institutionally mediated, but also emerging from shared spaces of the reproduction of life, thrive *because of* the extreme amount of contradiction they absorb about the range of possible, plausible responses to conditions of unfairness. Just as people are politically incoherent, so too are intimate publics and bodies politic: remember, national sentimentality is not about being right or logical but about maintaining an affective transaction with a world whose terms of recognition and reciprocity are being constantly struggled over and fine-tuned.

The last chapter of *Anatomy* opens up into the world of *The Female Complaint*, showing how Hawthorne's concept of a public was shaped by the sentimental focus on feminine suffering and conventions of reparative compassion. *The Female Complaint* then goes on to argue that starting in the 1830s an intimate public sphere of femininity constituted the first subcultural, mass-mediated, market population of relatively politically disenfranchised people in the United States. The intimate public branched off from, without entirely becoming antagonistic toward, the political scene of inequality that organized women as a subaltern population. Strategies for new improvisations and adaptations around women's suffering, emotional expertise, and practical agency became the main register for the sentimental publicity associated with this nondominant population. Even arguments about what the vote meant for women turned on how women feel and how that feeling produces knowledge that shapes what is politically possible. Popular and feminist melodramas repeat variations on this domain of feeling, where the question of the desire for and cost of feminine conventionality keeps being replayed in conventional texts. *The Queen of America* takes up this genealogy of public intimacy, tracking the development of a dominant public sphere organized around suffering and other intimate topics in the United States. What was a minor register of survival aesthetics has also become a predominant way even for elites to orchestrate a claim that their social discomfort amounts to evidence of injustice to them. Meanwhile, the fear and prospect of mass or live political activity by bodies politic permeates all of the books in this trilogy. The displacement of politics to the realm of feeling both opens a scene for the analysis of the operations of injustice in lived democracy and shows the obstacles to social change that emerge when politics becomes privatized.

At the same time, the fact that political feeling has a history of mediation means that its conventions can change. The optimism of this book, and there's not much of it, is located in the centrality of aesthetics and pedagogy to shaping fantasies, identifications, and attachments to particular identities and life narratives. The frustration accompanying that optimism has to do with the difficulty of inducing structural transformation out of shifts in collective feeling.

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INTRODUCTION Intimacy, Publicity, and Femininity

Every normal female yearns
to be a luminous person.
FANNIE HURST

Everyone knows what the female complaint is: women live for love, and love is the gift that keeps on taking.[1] Of course that's a simplifying phrase: but it's not false, just partial. In the contemporary world of U.S. women's popular culture the bitter vigilance of the intimately disappointed takes up a lot of space: *The Bitch in the House*; *The Bride Stripped Bare*; and *Are Men Necessary?* among many others.[2] These hard-edged titles, however, conceal the tender fantasies of a better good life that the books also express. They market what is sensational about the complaint, speaking from a pretense to skewer an open secret that has been opened and skewered, in U.S. popular culture, since at least the 1830s. Fusing feminine rage and feminist rage, each has its own style of hailing the wounded to testify, to judge, to yearn, and to think beyond the norms of sexual difference, a little.

These books manifest the latest developments in what this book calls the mode of "the female complaint." They foreground witnessing and explaining women's disappointment in the tenuous

relation of romantic fantasy to lived intimacy. Critical, they are also sentimental, and therefore ambivalent: they trust affective knowledge and irrational assurance more than the truths of any ideology; they associate femininity with the pleasures, burdens, and virtues of emotional expertise and track its methods in different situations; they focus on the sacrifice of women's emotional labor to a variety of kinds of callousness, incompetence, and structural inequity; they catalog strategies of bargaining, adaptation, and flouting the rules. But in popular culture ambivalence is seen as the failure of a relation, the opposite of happiness, rather than as an inevitable condition of intimate attachment and a pleasure in its own right (as evidenced in the affectionate ironies toward personality of the situation comedy and the thrilling reencounter with pleasure, foreboding, and disappointment familiar to fans of the soap opera and the melodrama).[3] The complaint genres of "women's culture," therefore, tend to foreground a view of power that blames flawed men and bad ideologies for women's intimate suffering, all the while maintaining some fidelity to the world of distinction and desire that produced such disappointment in the first place. They also provide tremendous pleasure in their vigilance toward recording how other women manage. One might say that it's a space of disappointment, but not disenchantment.

The Female Complaint focuses on what has evolved and shifted around but not changed profoundly in the history of public-sphere femininity in the United States—a love affair with conventionality. It emerges from a desire to understand what keeps people attached to disaffirming scenarios of necessity and optimism in their personal and political lives.[4] It argues that the unfinished business of sentimentality—that "tomorrow is another day" in which fantasies of the good life *can* be lived[5]—collaborates with a sentimental account of the social world as an affective space where people ought to be legitimated because they have feelings and because there is an intelligence in what they feel that *knows* something about the world that, if it were listened to, could make things better.

This very general sense of confidence in the critical intelligence of affect, emotion, and good intention produces an orientation toward agency that is focused on ongoing adaptation, adjustment, improvisation, and developing wiles for surviving, thriving, and transcending the world as it presents itself. It is not usually expressed in or addressed to the political register: as I indicated in the preface, generally intimate publics such as this one operate in

aesthetic worlds that are juxtapolitical, flourishing in proximity to the political because the political is deemed an elsewhere managed by elites who are interested in reproducing the conditions of their objective superiority, not in the well-being of ordinary people or life-worlds. As the first half of this book argues in some detail, even when women sentimentalists turn to politics, it is not usually because they view politics as a resource for living but because they see it as a degraded space and a threat to happiness and justice that needs reforming so that better living can take place.[6]

Each chapter of the book looks at a different permutation of the space of permission to thrive that this particular women's intimate public stands for, for its participants: permission to live small but to feel large; to live large but to want what is normal too; to be critical without detaching from disappointing and dangerous worlds and objects of desire. Over more than a century and a half of publication and circulation, the motivating engine of this scene has been the aesthetically expressed desire to be *somebody* in a world where the default is being nobody or, worse, being presumptively *all wrong*: the intimate public legitimates qualities, ways of being, and entire lives that have otherwise been deemed puny or discarded. It creates *situations* where those qualities can appear as luminous.

Thus to love conventionality is not only to love something that constrains someone or some condition of possibility: it is another way of talking about negotiating belonging to a world. To love a thing is not only to embrace its most banal iconic forms, but to work those forms so that individuals and populations can breathe and thrive in them or in proximity to them.[7] The convention is not only a *mere* placeholder for what could be richer in an underdeveloped social imaginary, but it is also sometimes a profound placeholder that provides an affective confirmation of the idea of a shared confirming imaginary in advance of inhabiting a material world in which that feeling can actually be lived. In short, this affair is not an assignation with inauthenticity. In popular culture, when conventionality is not being called a homogenizing threat to people's sovereignty and singularity it is seen as a true expression of something both deep and simple in the human. By "conventionality" I span the term's normative and aesthetic senses and claim that the mass mediation of desires in women's genres constructs a deep affinity between them.[8]

This is to say that, in the scene of this particular public, femininity is a genre with deep affinities to the genres associated with femininity. In this

book, a genre is an aesthetic structure of affective expectation, an institution or formation that absorbs all kinds of small variations or modifications while promising that the persons transacting with it will experience the pleasure of encountering what they expected, with details varying the theme. It mediates what is singular, in the details, and general about the subject.[9] It is a form of aesthetic expectation with porous boundaries allowing complex audience identifications: it locates real life in the affective capacity to bracket many kinds of structural and historical antagonism on behalf of finding a way to connect with the feeling of belonging to a larger world, however aesthetically mediated.[10]

To call an identity like a sexual identity a genre is to think about it as something repeated, detailed, and stretched while retaining its intelligibility, its capacity to remain readable or audible across the field of all its variations. For femininity to be a genre *like* an aesthetic one means that it is a structure of conventional expectation that people rely on to provide certain kinds of affective intensities and assurances. (This is to say that what we have called the "performativity" of personality usually produces variations *within* a conventional expectation of self- and world- continuity, rather than mainly providing dramas of potentially frame-breaking alternativity.[11]) Even the prospects of failure that haunt the performance of identity and genre are conventional: the power of a generic performance always involves moments of potential collapse that threaten the contract that genre makes with the viewer to fulfill experiential expectations. But those blockages or surprises are usually *part* of the convention and not a transgression of it, or anything radical. They make its conventionality interesting and rich, even.

The status of minor or inconsequential details and swerves from the usual is a major topic of this book, as women's culture always contains episodes of refusal and creative contravention to feminine normativity, even as it holds tightly to some versions of the imaginable conventional good life in love. Does this mean that its aim is to neutralize dissent, to protect the givens of ordinary life? Those two conserving aims are readily available, but they are not the whole story. Does this mean that the emphasis on convention secretly aims at making people sick of convention, releasing energies of radical critique toward substantial social change? Sometimes, in middlebrow texts, this is a motive (see chapter 6, on Dorothy Parker), but not usually: middlebrow

popular genres are about the management of ambivalence, and not the destruction of pleasures or power.[12] My claim is that the gender-marked texts of women's popular culture cultivate fantasies of vague belonging as an alleviation of what is hard to manage in the lived real—social antagonisms, exploitation, compromised intimacies, the attrition of life. Utopianism is in the air, but one of the main utopias is normativity itself, here a felt condition of general belonging and an aspirational site of rest and recognition in and by a social world.

Intimate Publics

"Women's culture" is one of many flourishing intimate publics in the United States. An intimate public operates when a market opens up to a bloc of consumers, claiming to circulate texts and things that express those people's particular core interests and desires. When this kind of "culture of circulation" takes hold, participants in the intimate public *feel* as though it expresses what is common among them, a subjective likeness that seems to emanate from their history and their ongoing attachments and actions.[13] Their participation seems to confirm the sense that even before there was a market addressed to them, there existed a world of strangers who would be emotionally literate in each other's experience of power, intimacy, desire, and discontent, with all that entails: varieties of suffering and fantasies of transcendence; longing for reciprocity with other humans and the world; irrational and rational attachments to the way things are; special styles of ferocity and refusal; and a creative will to survive that attends to everyday situations while imagining conditions of flourishing within and beyond them.

"Women's culture" was the first such mass-marketed intimate public in the United States of significant scale.[14] As a market domain where a set of problems associated with managing femininity is expressed and worked through incessantly, women's culture solicits belonging via modes of sentimental realism that span fantasy and experience and claim a certain emotional generality among women, even though the stories that circulate demonstrate diverse historical locations of the readers and the audience, especially of class and race. In all cases, it flourishes by circulating as an already felt need, a sense of emotional continuity among women who identify with the expectation that, as women, they will manage personal life and lubricate emotional worlds.

This commodity world and the ideology of normative, generic-but-unique femininity trains women to expect to be recognizable by other members of this intimate public, even if they reject or feel ambivalent about its dominant terms.

For example, this book argues that embedded in the often sweetly motivated and solidaristic activity of the intimate public of femininity is a white universalist paternalism, sometimes dressed as maternalism. As long as they have had a public sphere, bourgeois white women writers have mobilized fantasies of what black and working-class interiority based on suffering must feel like in order to find a language for their own more privileged suffering at the hands of other women, men, and callous institutions.[15] As we will see especially in "Poor Eliza," *Show Boat*, and *Imitation of Life*, in many instances melodramatic conventions that locate the human in a universal capacity to suffer and romantic conventions of individual historical acts of compassion and transcendence are adapted to imagine a nonhierarchical social world that is postracist and "at heart" democratic because good intentions and love flourish in it. Yet the mechanisms of this fantasy of generality through emotional likeness in the domain of pain are both very complex and not complex enough. Compassionate liberalism is, at best, a kind of sandpaper on the surface of the racist monument whose structural and economic solidity endures: in the intimate sphere of femininity a kind of soft supremacy rooted in compassion and coercive identification wants to dissolve all that structure through the work of good intentionality, while busily exoticizing and diminishing the inconvenient and the noncompliant. Hazel Carby, Paula Bennett, Laura Wexler, many others, and I have elsewhere noted that these aesthetic and ideological norms produced ambivalent responses from nonwhite, immigrant, and working-class literary writers writing in the United States, responses both critical and attached to the idea of a conversation among women.[16] Insofar as these writers were writing from *within* a sphere of address and demanding revision of its terms of recognition they were writing as critical members of an intimate public to demand its reorganization.

But most people who feel held by the intimacy of a public would not recognize this part of the description: intimate spheres *feel* like ethical places based on the sense of capacious emotional continuity they circulate, which seems to derive from an ongoing potential for relief from the hard, cold

world. Indeed the offer of the simplicity of the feeling of rich continuity with a vaguely defined set of like others is often the central affective magnet of an intimate public.

Indeed, "women's culture" survives as a recognizable thing in the United States not just because markets revitalize it constantly in all media; not just because the U.S. social field is so saturated by normative heterofemininity; and not just because the intimate sphere provides a convenient register in which to debate and obscure larger knots of social attachment and antagonism: it survives also because its central fantasy, and the one this book elaborates, is the constantly emplotted desire of a complex person to rework the details of her history to become a vague or simpler version of herself, usually in the vicinity of a love plot. If she cannot achieve this condition of generality through the standard marital and reproductive modes of building reciprocity with the world or having "a life" that adds up to something, she does it through gestures, episodes, and other forms of fantasy improvisation, perhaps with less conventional objects, so long as she can feel in a general sense that she has known the feeling of love and carries the memory of having been affectively recognized and emotionally important. The complexities and stresses of lives managed under all of the vectors of subordination that we know about produces a vast market in such moments of felt simplicity. But because those fantasies of translation are in relation to what is hard about surviving, there is nothing simple about them or the astounding amount of creativity they absorb in the course of the ordinary reproduction of life.

To market normalcy not as a lifestyle achievement but as a feeling of aspirational generality within an intimate public might be to describe the dissemination of a feeling we *could* call imminently political or democratic, if it were, and when it is. But to do this we would not need the language of an intimate public—"counterpublic" would do. Counterpublic theory, associated with Nancy Fraser and Michael Warner, has joined the terms "subculture" and "minor culture" in our critical attempts to address the public mediation and ongoing life of dominated social populations.[17] Are all groups who take pleasure in their identifications with themselves counterpublics? The counterpublic model tends to over-enmesh a mess of different things: a group's being nondominant; being historically subordinated; being distinct; having cultivated cultural specificity; being alternative; and being in an antagonistic

relation to a dominant paradigm. But these positions and processes are not the same, and it is worth paying attention to that so that we can understand how it is possible for publics to be overdetermined and also organized differently from each other.

Fraser distinguishes "weak" from "strong" publics to differentiate those that address themselves toward cultural flourishing from those that address questions of structural inequality mediated by the state and related institutions.[18] The strong public is strong because it organizes its sense of belonging in a conventionally political register, whereas the weak public is not focused by or aspirationally mimetic of a civic orientation. In her lexicon, an intimate public would function mainly as a weak public: but this taxonomy underdescribes the dynamics of indirection and mediation that characterize even strong publics, while bracketing the difficult question of what kinds of views can be said to constitute the circulated "opinion" that produces civil society as a force in institutional political life. Can absorption in affective and emotional transactions that take place at home, on the street, and between intimates and strangers be deemed irrelevant to civil society unless they are somehow addressed to institutions? What is the relation between feeling detached and being detached from the political, between feeling invested and exercising agency? The unclear line between these positions is manifest in the liberal sentimental imaginary of women's culture tracked in this book's first half, which follows adaptations of the *Uncle Tom's Cabin* tradition.

The problem at hand is of naming what appears when a collectivity is historically created by biopower, class antagonism, nationalism, imperialism, and/or the law and, at the same time, is engendered by an ongoing social life mediated by capital and organized by all kinds of pleasure (from personal consumption to active community membership to being "a regular" somewhere). Intimate publics elaborate themselves through a commodity culture; have an osmotic relation to many modes of life; and are organized by fantasies of transcending, dissolving, or refunctioning the obstacles that shape their historical conditions. But most nondominant collective public activity is not as saturated by the taxonomies of the political sphere as the counterpublic concept would suggest.

Biopower has indeed reorganized individuals into populations deemed incompetent to the privileges of citizenship—political, cultural, and/or social.

It produces fields of historical commonality that are at once specifically related to events (this bomb, that rape, this war, that police encounter, this epidemic, that moral panic) and to what it was like back in the day. As chapter 4, *Uncle Sam Needs a Wife*, argues, no population has ever erased the history of its social negativity from its ongoing social meaning. There are elaborations, amnesias, shifts, new potentials constantly released in the activity of living, but historical wounds always remain available for reopening. Nonetheless, ongoing and developing social practices and mobile identifications within a field of belonging generate diverse kinds of absorption in the activity of the reproduction of life—not just at work, but in domains of the pleasures.

In other words, distinct social populations, made so by law, science, religion, social conventions, and intellectuals, do not function at a level of theoretical coherence, even if a violent, simplifying force shaped their historical formation. Fantasies and practices of social belonging operate imprecisely, in interaction with complicated and contradictory environments of living. People live their fantasies incoherently too, in uneven practices of attachment and attention. Michael Moon has made a crucial contribution to this line of thought by pointing out that even conventional identity often lurks in the semi-public and semi-explicit spaces of consciousness and of the built world.[19] Additionally, to desire belonging to the normal world, the world as it appears, is at root a fantasy of a sense of continuity, a sense of being generally okay; it is a desire to be in proximity to okayness, without passing some test to prove it. In this version of the desire, the subject desires not to feel responsible for inhabiting or policing most social distinctions.

How should we calibrate this with what we also know about the discipline of normativity, which is that a hygienic, morally constrained version of the aspirational good life is always available as an instrument of moral trumping in the political public sphere? The vagueness of the affective fantasy of the normal requires activation of what Sedgwick calls "the privilege of unknowing" the social costs to others of a general sense of personal freedom.[20] One support for the privilege of unknowing is the desire to identify daily life as the space where living really takes place, and to see ordinary life as a scene of constant bargaining, dodging, strategizing, making claims, and moving under the radar. Plus, being vague can be a defense, a response to the attrition wrought by the pressures of living. These zones and practices are not scenes

of constant crisis but part of the *casualness* of identity. They are an effect of the ways agency is mediated and delegated in mass society. In focusing on the dynamics of lived structure as they manifest themselves in sentimental bargaining, each chapter of this book tells a story about living shiftingly among this cluster of forces.

The concept of the "intimate public" thus carries the fortitude of common sense or a vernacular sense of belonging to a community, with all the undefinedness that implies. A public is intimate when it foregrounds affective and emotional attachments located in fantasies of the common, the everyday, and a sense of ordinariness, a space where the social world is rich with anonymity and local recognitions, and where challenging and banal conditions of life take place in proximity to the attentions of power but also squarely in the radar of a recognition that can be provided by other humans. It is textually mediated: as Miriam Hansen has argued, modern publics required stylistic strategies and modes of narration to absorb viewers into textually constructed positions of general subjectivity that also served the historical convergence of social and economic objectives.[21] Juxta (*iuxta*, in Greek) means "near": more often than not, though, in mass society, what counts as collectivity has been a loosely organized, market-structured juxtapolitical sphere of people attached to each other by a *sense* that there is a common emotional world available to those individuals who have been marked by the historical burden of being harshly treated in a generic way and who have more than survived social negativity by making an aesthetic and spiritual scene that generates *relief from the political*. The "women's culture" concept grows from such a sense of lateral identification: it sees collective sociality routed in revelations of what is personal, regardless of how what is personal has itself been threaded through mediating institutions and social hierarchy. It marks out the nonpolitical situation of most ordinary life as it is lived as a space of continuity and optimism and social self-cultivation. If it were political, it would be democratic.[22]

Ironically, in the United States the denigration of the political sphere that has always marked mass politics increasingly utilizes these proximate or "juxtapolitical" sites as resources for providing and maintaining the experience of collectivity that also, sometimes, constitutes the body politic; intimate publics can provide alibis for politicians who claim to be members of every

community *except* the political one. There are lots of ways of inhabiting these intimate publics: a tiny point of identification can open up a field of fantasy and de-isolation, of vague continuity, or of ambivalence. All of these energies of attachment can indeed become mobilized as counterpublicity but usually aren't. Politics requires active antagonism, which threatens the *sense* in consensus: this is why, in an intimate public, the political sphere is more often seen as a field of threat, chaos, degradation, or retraumatization than a condition of possibility.

Addressing femininity from the perspective of the mediated fantasies that magnetize many different kinds of women to the scene of suffering, sacrifice, survival, criticism, and sometimes sublimity that has historically provided the narrative of women's culture thus shows us something about the operation of mass-mediated identity—that is, how it manages to sublimate singularity on behalf of maintaining proximity to a vague prospect of social belonging via the generic or conventional plot that isolates an identity as the desired relay from weakness to strength, aloneness to sociability, abandonment to recognition, and solitary agency to reciprocity. In this book we encounter these fantasies of emplacement, exchange, and transcendence for women in conventional narratives, fantasies, and ideologies of fulfillment. These alternative scenes of love—of projection, displacement, attachment, and belonging—operate in concert, though sometimes in competition: the couple/family form, the nation, and capitalism. For the writers of these narratives both the nation and capital have two special kinds of function. One function is institutional, in their disciplinary organization of materialized or lived life. The other function is to serve not as sources of reciprocity or justice, but as magnetizing forms for *fantasies* of reciprocity and justice whose very impersonality and constitution in an ongoing near future is a source of relief and optimism. This is why, in the pamphlets, novels, and films to follow, even when critical observations about the gap between lived and fantasy life survive the sifting through generic conventionality, political critique tends to appear mainly in episodes that don't matter narratively, or in resistant movements, phrases, or timbres.

Joan Copjec argues, nonetheless, that the perspective of feminine aesthetic sentimentality reveals and confronts the absence of ethical foundations in the world; Paula Bennett insists that women's culture's edge was

much less blunted than what I've suggested.[23] But from what I can tell, the feminine literary figures whom these scholars describe are defined so much by their desires for there to be a ground to stand on in the world as it exists that they remain, on the whole, committed to the normative permission of feminine fantasy as a ground—despite everything. The ground of mass normative fantasy is wobbly, a scene of bargaining for survival and jockeying for supremacy: but the cohabitation of critique, conventionality, and the commodity produces more movement within a space than toward being or wanting to be beyond it. This jerky aesthetics negotiates constantly the significant difference between fantasizing fulfillment, witnessing disappointment, and engendering transformative events. Tears and the varieties of mourning, melancholia, satire, and bargaining that respond to disappointment are gestures that define living as responsiveness to the urgencies of the ongoing moment, as a scene of heroism and pragmatism authorized by fantasy. A commitment to this mediation distracts from having to confront the potential for events to induce breaks. When politics is serious, it risks a loss of the ground of living in which people have come to know their competencies and their desires: fantasy, in contrast, is a zone of stop-loss, a demand for the ongoing present to be the scene of lived fulfillment.

To catch the drift of modern mass-mediated femininity in the United States we will look at the relation of social to aesthetic conventionality; of repetition to imitation; of adaptation to transformation; of ineloquence to expressivity. We will see women generate an affective and intimate public sphere that seeks to harness the power of emotion to change what is structural in the world. We will see a culture of "true feeling" emerge that sanctifies suffering as a relay to universality in a way that includes women in the universal while attaching the universal more fully to a generally lived experience; we will see commodities help to distribute and to enable the building of this intimate public of femininity, whose core is to witness women's lives in a conflation of extremity and ordinariness that constitutes the struggle to master a social situation rife with contradictions about desire, suffering, and fantasies of amelioration; and we will ask how transformed subjectivity can make and change worlds.

The example of the intimate public organized by affect and emotion also forces questions about the centrality of economies of suffering to mass capi-

talist aesthetics, and the relation between the aesthetic pleasures in extremity and the redeployment and banalization of violence and ordinary inequality. Why and how do specific kinds of collective but individually experienced pain get turned into modern forms of entertainment? How do we come to terms with the use of aesthetic conventions of excess (in melodrama, satire, comedy, romance) in processes of national cultural normativity and critique, especially insofar as these genres are depended on to express the true suffering and true desires of ordinary persons? How are different types of person and kinds of population hailed by the universalist icon of the person who loves, suffers, and desires to survive the obstacles that bind her or him to history? How are structural antagonisms refracted in the intimate anxieties of emplotted love, here mediated by conventions of addressing conventionality? What are the political consequences of a commoditized relation among subjects who are defined not as actors in history but as persons who shop and feel?

Mass-mediated popular culture is always generating more opportunities for fomenting a sense of focused belonging to an evolving world in this intensely connected yet mediated way. But the market frames belonging to an intimate public as a condition of possibility mainly for those who can pass as conventional within its limited terms. Belonging to an intimate public is therefore a condition of feeling general within a set of porous constraints, and of feeling held or sustained by an evolving sense of experience that confirms some homogeneity and elaborates social distinctions.

Love: Repeat after Me

The female complaint *is* a discourse of disappointment. But where love is concerned, disappointment is a partner of fulfillment, not an opposite. Each is central to the absorbing anxiety that gets animated by having an object of desire—anxiety being, after all, the affective copy of ambivalence, where we work out conflicting inclinations toward what kinds of closeness and distance we want, think we want, and can bear our object to have.[24] Think of the frequent moments in the life of a relationship when you experience frustrated sovereignty, needing to feel free to be vague, wrong, opaque, distracted, withholding, or irresponsible at the same time as you need your intimate to remain open, unsuspicious, clear, and caring, as well as alive with the

capacity to surprise you (but not too much!). Love demands an imbalancing act. This section lays out some of the psychoanalytic frames for what follows, which saturate the writing without usually being its explicit idiom. In advance of the cases, this may seem bizarre, since being overwhelmed by the specific historical and lived detail of the everyday is the sense that the chapters follow: but amid the scene of historical enunciation of the texts and their remakes, psychoanalytic formalism stands as training in thinking about the drive to become unhistorical, to become general through repetition into convention.

This double-time of the double-take so deeply inscribed in love leads Jacques Lacan to argue that "love is giving something one doesn't have to someone who doesn't want it"[25]: but by this he doesn't mean that one could choose otherwise.[26] His logic goes like this: you, the lover, assert that you love while demanding that your love object (the woman, in Lacan's symbolization) provide for you the surreal combination of ego recognition and idealization that you require in order to give love in the first place. This is why, when someone says, "I have so much love to give" he or she means that under the right circumstances he or she would return what was given to him or her. But circumstances are never just right; they are always just being righted. Therefore to Lacan love and melancholy are like "this," anxiously tangling the ongoing pleasures of desire, projection, and disappointment, and hauntingly aligned with the paradoxical certitudes of ecstasy (loss of self-control, or *jouissance*) and misery (absolute loss of the other and therefore of access to one's own idealized ego). By *pleasures* I mean the self-confirmation one receives by repeating the dynamics of an affective scene—something does not have to feel good viscerally for it to be a pleasure.[27] The loss of pleasure, then, can be defined as the insufferable interruption of a repetition with which a lover has identified the optimism of a fundamental attachment.[28]

In this view, love is a formal promise and an aspiration to try and try again to intend to be faithful to an enduring project of projection, mirroring, and repetition.[29] It is a fidelity to a form that only exists in its recurrence. While the conventions of romantic love identify it as an unmistakable feeling (except when it isn't and has to be revealed), love is a binding relation to time, not a steady state of object desire; it involves a need for events both of grandiose and credible ego confirmation; and it is a form of re-

petitive attachment that attracts to itself many affects and emotions all at once, usually in a jumble—but figuratively or ideologically they are all of a piece.[30] "Passion is no less real for the fact that it is repetition," writes Zelda Fitzgerald.[31] Modern lovers are defined by their desire to remain in proximity to the clarity—not simplicity—of the form of love; the form of love is an intention—not a compulsion—to repeat being attached. The intention to repeat is what gets expressed in wanting to "have a future together" or to be someone's "intended." This is why the sideways gaze, the held breath, the mumbled phrase, or the strange piece of paper can so disconcert the dynamics of an attachment. This is how intimates who repulse each other can remain coupled when it is no longer fun. They ride the wave of love's phantasmatic contract with imminent mutual transparency, simultaneity, and completion all too well.[32]

Love is the gift that keeps on *giving* when people can rely on re-experiencing their intimates' fundamental sympathy with the project of repetition and recognition, no small feat since the terms of that sympathy are constantly shifting internally just as they are renegotiated in the world. This explains the fetishistic optimism of romantic love about "tomorrow," as in "tomorrow is another day" when there will be opportunities to try again. Love is the gift that keeps on *taking* for the same reason: the search for mirroring (desire) demands constant improvisation (anxiety) and taking of accounts (disappointment). But let us not think that the complaint carries the force of devastating critique, even as it manifests the ruthlessness of emotional measurement. As I argue in the opening to this chapter, the fantasy dictum that love *ought to be* the gift that keeps on *giving* is a fundamental commitment of female complaint rhetoric. The position of the depressive realist who sees that love is nonetheless the gift that keeps on taking is the source of complaint epistemology.

In the ideology of romantic love, the successful negotiation of these projections and flows is called "reciprocity." In the universe of companionate intimacy that emerged during the consolidation of so-called middle-class cultural values in the American and English Victorian periods, when romantic love became elevated over economic interest as the normative motivator of long-term couplings, reciprocity emerged as central to what counts as care and carelessness.[33] Reciprocity is a morally laden, actuarial, and at the same

time lovely, fantasy-based concept of what mutuality in love might actually be like: mutuality is a tableau, reciprocity a practice. These are not psychoanalytically rich enough concepts—in fact psychoanalytic accounts from many schools of thought equate reciprocity and mutuality while providing very little analysis of their specific enactments apart from that of the maternal gaze or maternal/caretaking constancy and the patterns that extend from that formation.[34] (See chapter 5, on *Now, Voyager*, for more on this.)

But in the archive of women's culture, questions about what counts as emotional reciprocity matter tremendously. Which acts are commensurate? When do intentions matter? How ought lovers to track the relation of local acts to long-term practices? What is the status of the ordinary event in the project of collaborative, intimate life-making? From the nineteenth century on, we witness in women's culture's stories the many kinds of bargaining women do to stay in proximity to the work of love at the heart of normative femininity, the utopian and pathetic impulses behind this bargaining, and its costs and pleasures, including the tragicomic pleasures of the love plot's incompleteness up to and often beyond death. Women's will, aggression, abjection, and fatalism concerning the demand for reciprocity constitute the driving forces of these narratives. It is also worth noting that, according to Jacqueline Rose, anxiety is the core affect of femininity, which operates under an imperative never to fail to stop working on itself.[35]

Take, for example, Lydia Davis's recent book of prose episodes, *Almost No Memory*. The title story refers to a piece about a "certain woman" writer who takes notes on her reading and notes on her notes, but who is then consigned to living among her notebooks because she has almost no memory and must retrieve herself from them, as though she is not the author of what she has written.[36]

> And so she knew by this that these notebooks truly had a great deal to do with her, though it was hard for her to understand, and troubled her to try to understand, just how they had to do with her, how much they were of her and how much they were outside her and not of her, as they sat there on the shelf, being what she knew but did not know, being what she had read but did not remember reading, being what she had thought but did not now think, or remember thinking, or if she remembered, then

did not know whether she was thinking it now or whether she had only once thought it, or understand why she had had a thought once and then years later the same thought, or a thought once and then never that same thought again.[37]

The tight rhythms of Davis's piece, organized breathlessly by long sentences containing phrases parsed by commas, perform rhetorical realism in the workspace of ordinary life lived as so much crisis reactivity. (In the sentimental mise-en-scène all texts are docudramas, their realism intensified into a kind of soft surrealism that constitutes a command and a demand for the real to show up and be adequate to fantasy.) Davis's woman finds that she has cramped her "sharp consciousness" into pages and pages of phrases containing insights she has almost no capacity to remember, learn from, or work through. I am extrapolating here, as the woman gives no details about herself apart from the work of keeping up with herself through work: its very separateness from the labor of the reproduction of the unarchived life feels desperately hermetic, as the notebooks' wisdom archive is the place where she catches up with herself only to lose herself in fragments once again.

Generally, the women in *Almost No Memory* lament this cramped existence, turning into cedar trees that "group together in a corner of the graveyard and moan in the high wind"; fulfilling their femininity by being reactive to men and children; being emotionally central to intimates while querying the value of the bargains they've struck with these ongoing intimacies.[38] Their main fascination is in watching themselves shuttle between emotional generosity and resentment at the demands for emotional service by children and lovers to whom they are attached.[39] Says one woman, "I am trying to learn that this playful man who teases me is the same as that serious man talking money to me so seriously he does not even see me anymore and that patient man offering me advice in times of trouble."[40] She loves the patient man and wants to protect him from her resentment of the serious man, but the patient man is accidentally wounded when she speaks her bitter words to the aspect of him who is her "enemy": in other words, she is always too emotionally competent, overreactive, in the moment. She cannot respond to a whole person: her duty or habit is to be emotionally mimetic minute to minute. She feels a failure not because she has not developed emotional competence but because

she has overdeveloped it. Her feminine anxiety to demonstrate excellent emotionality bars her capacity to see a lover more complexly, over time. Her knowledge can only produce happiness in knowledge itself, in the products of its "sharp observation": because different knowledge styles dissolve the very bonds of intimacy that lovers' misrecognitions also generate, she keeps from falling apart by shifting between hypervigilance and inattention. This enables her to remain close not to her lover but to the situation of love and the promise of exchange, which is the low bar of reciprocity figured here in Davis's formalism.

Over and over in Davis's work, a woman's self-consciously writerly eloquence and keen insight lead to descriptions of what does *not* change despite the woman's frantic aspirational activity toward making emotional simultaneity. As Jacques Derrida's "The Law of Genre" would have predicted, Davis's point is to show that somehow the accumulation of knowledge leads to an *unraveling* for the writer/speaker and yet this unraveling, which ought to produce madness, is actually ordinary feminine consciousness. It turns out that even unraveling has its genres. The tightness of Davis's phrases belies the fraying of the emotional condition her narrators try to maintain by creating emotional harmonies that are in tune, at least, with themselves. But because they do not censor or defend themselves against the minute-to-minute anxieties of emotional adequation, they also perform the impossibility of reliable intersubjectivity across individuals and the fields of habitation zoned by laws and norms.[41] In this sense the repetition of laws and norms becomes the only intersubjectivity or practical reciprocity her couples can experience.

Davis's exposition of feminine undoing as a condition of normative feminine competence provides us with patterns that warrant further attention. There is likely to be a tension between the rhetorical or aesthetic representation of accumulated emotional experience (as in a plot) and the surfacing of sexual conventionality as a process, topic, and seeming inevitability in a text. In Davis's particular brand of avant-garde narrative, performances of feminine fraying align with the reader's capacity to make the sense the narrator can no longer surround, mentally or emotionally. Usually, though, in narratives of feminine expressivity, the load of detail eventuates not in disaster but in the emergence or agency of *genre* to provide the logic of rescue or amelio-

ration. Blockage is central to any genre's successful execution: the threat that *x* might *not* happen (love in a love plot, poetic justice in a thriller, death in a tragedy) allows absorbing but not shocking anxieties to be stimulated and vanquished. How else would narratives represent femininity as what does not or must not change fundamentally, if the whole thrust of a narrative were to invest its specific details with meaningful instability and transformative potential? In women's culture, normative femininity and aesthetic conventionality constitute the real central couple, with the love plot as the vehicle for and object of desire. Spivak's description of the "concept/metaphor" that is simultaneously descriptive and transformative is useful here[42]: in the texts of women's intimate public, however, femininity is a concept/metaphor for *not* changing, but adapting, propping the play of surface against a stubborn demand to remain in proximity to the promise.

Thus the complaint is often a half-truth in the guise of a whole one, hyperbole projected out of a consciousness that observes struggle and registers the failure of the desired world without wanting to break with the conditions of that struggle. Sometimes the motive for the bargaining relation of critique to defense performs a fear of throwing the whole norm of femininity and heterosexual romance into a crisis; sometimes the fear is of something more abstract, of entering the abyss of not knowing what another kind of life could be. Sometimes it expresses dissatisfaction with another set of social injustices and nonreciprocities (between mothers and children, between states and citizens, between labor and value). Often, it is a combination of these, appearing in the artwork propped on each other, and not theorized. But insofar as the intimate public of femininity registers this field of crisis as a crisis for femininity, the question will be phrased in the idiom of love.

For a woman committed to romantic fantasies of love as reciprocity to break with the normative emotional bargains is to threaten her participation in the good life that seems to unfold from desire and to be maintained by ordinary emotional labor. The sentimental bargain of femininity is, after all, that the emotional service economy serves both intimates and the woman herself, who receives her own value back not only in the labor of recognition she performs but in the sensual spectacle of its impacts. In this discursive field the emotional labor of women places them at the center of the *story* of what counts as life, regardless of what lives women actually live: the conjuncture

of family and romance so structures the emergence of modern sexuality, with its conflation of sexual and emotional truths, and in that nexus femininity marks the scene of the reproduction of life as a project. It is the project of femininity—whatever place in the wide variety of kinds of life women take up—to be proximate to this story of emotional centrality. The circularity of the feminine project will not escape you, therefore: it is a perfect form, a sphere infused with activities of ongoing circuits of attachment that can at the same time look like and feel like a zero.

Sentimentality: Love, Then Repeat

As the preface suggested, the intimate public of femininity has always conjoined the very act of consumption to a powerful hunger to know and adapt the ways other people survive being oppressed by life. The therapeutic intensity of this drive is so conventional to sentimentality it comprises a story that barely needs to be told, a promise of aesthetic recognition and redemption whose consumption is its own reward. Such an economy is an important part of the sense of belonging an intimate public provides: the cliché and the convention represent "insider knowledge." It would be easy to dismiss the social productivity of this kind of reward, as it associates subjective confirmation with fundamental changes of the sort the privileged rarely want to risk. But the mechanism of sentimental saturation of the intimate sphere with materials and signs of consumer citizenship has been crucial to what Mark Seltzer has called the "pathological public sphere" of the contemporary United States, which Karen Halttunen locates in the sensationalism of the late nineteenth and the early twentieth century.[43] The *Uncle Tom* genealogy is notable precisely because its sensationalism was a politically powerful suturing device of a bourgeois revolutionary aesthetic. The contradictions evoked by that phrase will be played out variously throughout each chapter: what links them is the centrality of affective intensity and emotional bargaining amid structural inequity, and the elaboration and management of ambivalent attachments to the world as such, the *as-suchness* of the world.[44]

I have been speaking of conventions, of stereotypes, and forms, the diacritics of congealed feeling that characterize the cultural scene of sentimentality: behind this is a desire to see the sentimental itself as a form—a dynamic pattern—not just a content with scenic themes, like that of weeping, sacrifice,

and sanctified death. As when a refrigerator is opened by a person hungry for something other than food, the turn to sentimental rhetoric at moments of social anxiety constitutes a generic wish for an unconflicted world, one wherein structural inequities, not emotions and intimacies, are epiphenomenal.[45] In this imaginary world the sentimental subject is connected to others who share the same sense that the world is out of joint, without necessarily having the same view of the reasons or solutions: historically, the sentimental intervention has tended to involve mobilizing a fantasy scene of collective desire, instruction, and identification that endures within the contingencies of the everyday. The politico-sentimental therefore exists paradoxically: it seeks out the monumental time of emotional recognition, a sphere of dreaming and memory, and translates that sense into an imaginary realm of possible acting, where agency is somehow unconstrained by the normative conventions of the real as it presents itself; and it holds the real accountable to what affective justice fantasy has constructed.

This is to say that where sentimental ideology is, so will there be a will to separate and compartmentalize fundamental psychically felt social ambivalences, so that a sense of potentiality can be experienced enduringly, motivatingly, and even utopianly. The downside is that, often, all of the forces in play can seem formally equivalent. For example, the critique of patriarchal familialism that sentimental texts constantly put forth can be used to argue against the normativity of the family; at the same time, the sacred discourse of family values also sustained within this domain works to preserve the fantasy of the family as a space of sociability in which flow, intimacy, and identification across difference can bridge life across generations and model intimate sociability for the social generally. Likewise, at the same time that bourgeois nationalism promotes a sentimental attachment among strangers that is routed through the form of the nation, it also abjures the sentimental when the idiom of certain claims is inconvenient. (Sentimentalists talk about the emotional costs of injustice, not the material ones; the personal impacts of *not* changing, not the structural benefits of continuity.) Arguments for rationality and individual affective and appetitive self-management in the everyday have also been used to build and to critique identity discourses associated with historically subordinated U.S. populations;[46] at the same time sentimental rhetoric is mobilized to describe everything from the timeless

psychic unity of citizens possessing a national identity to the fragility of normal culture itself when faced with challenges to it.[47] Meanwhile, social progressives have for over a century represented the ordinary effects of structural suffering in tactically sentimental ways—modes of testimony, witnessing, visual documentation about the personal impact of structural subordination—to critique the racist/patriarchal/capitalist world; now that same world has assimilated those genres to describe the psychic effects of feminism/multiculturalism on those who once felt truly free, nationally speaking.

What conclusions can we reach from this jumble of ambitions to use and refuse sentimentality in the political sphere? That politics, mediated by publics, demands expressive assurance, while political subjectivity is, nonetheless, incoherent; that ideological incoherence or attachment to contradictory ethics and ways of life is not a failure but a condition of mass belonging; that ambivalent critique produces domains (such as intimate publics) to one side of politics that flourish insofar as they can allow the circulation of the open secrets of insecurity and instability without those revelations and spectacles engendering transformative or strongly resistant action in the idiom of political agency as it is usually regarded. Tracking mass-mediated norms of belonging in the affective register and conventions of engendering emotional solidarities helps us to understand the reproduction of normative life amid serious doubts about the probability that anyone, except the lucky, will be able to forge durable relations of reciprocity among intimates or strangers; such fractures produce the complaint as a register not merely of a stuckness but of the conditions of bargaining that allow people to maintain both their critical knowledge and their attachments to what disappoints.

So, in the nineteenth-century history and legacy of liberal national sentimentality we see that at moments of crisis persons violate the zones of privacy that give them privilege and protection in order to fix something social that feels threatening.[48] They become public on behalf of privacy and imagine that their rupture of individuality by collective action is temporary and will be reversed once the national world is safe, once again, for a return to personal life. Sentimental politics in that idiom works on behalf of its eradication. This horizon of autoerasure constitutes the dream-work of sentiment and the culture industry that supports it, and in the heritage of sentimentality the nationally supported taxonomies—involving race, gender, class, and

regional hierarchies in particular—still largely govern the horizon of failure and possibility sentimental authors and readers construct. (This material is covered in chapters 1–4, with chapter 4 as the transitional study.) During the twentieth century, this publicity on behalf of affective and emotional privacy was added to and changed by the emergence of psychoanalysis and popular self-help psychologies, as well as by feminism among the bourgeoisie. These new idioms of understanding the shaping force of sexual subjectivity to human functioning produce more desperation around the impossibility of maintaining personal life as a stable, safe space. Therefore the affective range of sentimentality itself expands in these chapters to include narrations of depression, anxiety, and what Sedgwick calls *perversia*, those veerings of the sexual drive to find bearable terms of reciprocity in invented forms, nonce practices, or just adequate objects, rather than holding out for entire ways of life. (This is the material of chapters 4 through the final "Overture/Aperture.")[49]

On Method and Ambivalence

This book emerges in a terrible time: of vast and burgeoning global economic inequality, environmental destruction, and state antinomianism of the usual and unusual sorts; when distinctions between authoritarian and democratic motives, movements, and aims are profoundly unstable and contested: it is a time like any other modern time, but with its own bleak fractures. But this is a book about early twentieth-century fictions and their filmic adaptations, whose main gaze is at the United States, at white women, at liberal heterofemininity, fantasy, and love. The women who wrote and who populate the books and films adapted from these books about affective and emotional adaptation are often economically and culturally privileged, heirs at the intersection of two traditions, of genteel sentimentality and progressive solidarity. Fannie Hurst reported from the Russian Revolution and wrote diet books; Dorothy Parker reported the anti-Franco struggles in Spain and left her estate to Martin Luther King, while writing countless variations on the story of thwarted feminine heterosexuality; Edna Ferber fought tirelessly against fascist anti-Semitism in the United States, before doing so was a patriotic act, while also writing sprawling liberal patriotic historical novels of the United States such as *Come and Get It* and *Giant*; Olive Higgins Prouty wrote about posttraumatic stress disorder in World War I and wrote a suffrage novel,

too, while also producing two classic melodramas, *Stella Dallas* and *Now, Voyager*. All of these women were frank about their politics and their sentimentality: they were all critics and sustainers of fantasy as a mode of disappointment management or adaptation and of interruption of the realism of the present. They wrote fictions as well as journalism, produced analyses of fantasy in its relation to the lived real.

In a sense, my position is very like theirs. Why bother writing, publishing, or reading a book about fictions now? How can a focus on the juxtapolitical interfere with the reproduction of the present, as enumerated above? How can thinking about genres mediating survival and fantasies of transcendence deal with the pressures of the attrition of life for most people? Is it possible that the engagements of such a project can say something about why things do not change, or open up some vistas that do not reproduce the ordinary and extraordinary violence and carelessness whose thriving in the face of counterknowledge and political action mainly produces, in me, fantasies of more direct action and head-butting against power? As Ferber asks of *Show Boat* in the shadows of World War II (see chapter 2), I have asked myself this question many times: When does one have the ethical room for indirection?

In the public mode of sentimentality ordinary lives articulate with fantasies of being "somebody." The intimate publics of capitalist culture articulate historically subordinated populations with individuals' fantasies of becoming somebody to each other, in that vague and porous sense I outlined earlier. What makes this project worth doing is its attempt to understand what it means to flourish as a public on the condition that the register of importance in its negotiation of the process of survival *not* be in the idiom of politics, or valued in the elitist terms of value that mark capitalist culture. For too long the only importance a counterpublic has had to intellectuals is its convertibility to politics. The urgency of the scholarship has led to conventional distortions in the moral and political analysis of subculture, a concept that has been rightly critiqued for its tendency to homogenize members without having a *concept* of homogeneity as a desire. Even the world of post-subculture studies, largely back-room, dance-floor, and flash-mob based, has wanted to make transgression and resistance the values against which the data were measured. In this book the work of critical distance in the context of the reproduction of life focuses on scenes of ordinary survival, not trans-

gression, on disappointment, not refusal, to derive the register of critique. Here, ordinary restlessness appears as a symptom of ambivalence about aspirational normativity and not a pointer toward unrealized revolution. It seeks to understand the flourishing of the social to one side of the political as something other than a failure to be politics.

I first conceived this book in the late 1980s as a way of helping to elaborate what I had learned from *The Anatomy of National Fantasy*, that publics were not just structural effects but also affective spaces whose shapes, logics, and procedures were not identical to the intellectual and political history of public life that Hawthorne was also telling. My aim then became to tell the long story of U.S. women's culture as a sphere of intimacy with a complex relation to nationality or political metaculture.[50] My plan was to track novels that had become adapted into melodramas, often more than once, by the Hollywood culture industry: *Imitation of Life*; *Now, Voyager*; and *Show Boat*. I assumed I would have chapters on *Gone with the Wind* and *Stella Dallas* too (especially after that execrable remake appeared in 1990), along with multiple chapters on lesser-known novels by the same authors that had been multiply adapted, Fannie Hurst's *Back Street* and *Humoresque* and Edna Ferber's *Cimarron* and *Giant* in particular (the latter has not yet been remade but it is always being cited and seemed irresistible). I also wanted to say something of the authors' biographies because publicity around their lives was central to the marketing of their novels as "good" literature, and because the archives offer up amazing material. Above all I wanted to use the story of feminine publicity after 1837 (the first year of *Godey's Lady's Book*) to tell what happened as cities and mass culture became conjoined sites for the production of social belonging in the United States that did not always remediate the collective sense that was building through the political sphere.

I also expected to turn the question of mass cultural genre to the scene of political theory, having noted that both genre and normative identities traffic in the liberal imaginary of universal emotion as the place where the body politic can find its unity even when its political institutions are not adequate and even when the social field is rife with all sorts of antagonism. That book project had me visiting every relevant library and film archive in the United States as well as reading in the history of liberal political theory to get a sense of what the terms of emotional universalism actually were at a given

moment.[51] To tell the story of the twentieth century through the adaptation of novels and short stories into film was to see a broad story of femininity as a red thread throughout countless changes. Much of this aim persists in what follows.

But then, out of a sense of political urgency, I interrupted this project to formulate and write the essays that became *The Queen of America*, which tracks how the logic of intimate publicity became a tool of power, while not obliterating entirely the association of the intimate public with political subordination. In fact, the title chapter of *The Queen of America*, on Frances Ellen Watkins Harper, was originally destined for this book, which needs a chapter on black women's intimate publics and their complex interactions with white feminine presumptiveness, but because it became a chapter on Anita Hill and the pedagogy of failed teaching I decided to put it there.[52] Then I fell ill. Then I got better. As I made my way back to *The Female Complaint* I felt some great pleasure and relief in not having to tell the whole eighteenth- and nineteenth-century story of national sentimentality—Paula Bennett's *Poets in the Public Sphere*, Julia Stern's *The Plight of Feeling*, Julie Ellison's *Cato's Tears*, Elizabeth Barnes's *States of Sympathy*, and Lori Merish's *Sentimental Materialism* extended and reshaped expertly the precedents established by Philip Fisher, Ann Douglas, Jane Tompkins, Nina Baym, and Cathy Davidson, which had themselves been contested and expanded by my own generation's collection, Shirley Samuels's *The Culture of Sentiment*. That anthology grew into many important historicizing works of literary and cultural criticism around sentimentality and femininity as politically contradictory forces of institution and subjectivity building, as this chapter has already attested.

Much remains to be said about the particular authors of whom I am writing as well as of the twentieth-century activity of feminine sentimentality as it continues into the present. But I no longer felt required to write a literary or cultural *history* of it. Now, this is a project more focused on the concept and operation of intimate publics, and on their aesthetic conventions of generalization and transcendence, a project focused more on affect and emotion than on anyone's material practices. It is strongly informed by feminist and queer cultural studies, by the Frankfurt school from Habermas to Adorno and Jameson, by Lacanian and object relations psychoanalysis,

especially that of Christopher Bollas, by critical race theory, following Fanon and Spillers, and by writers following Foucault and Deleuze, especially Giorgio Agamben. It is strongly informed by my own idiosyncratic training as a close reader who wants to understand how a certain phrase or sentence got to seem meaningful when it seemed to me, after all, to be a placeholder for a set of intensities and aims that had not really yet found their full expressive form.

But this is also a project about why collectivities abjure politics in their imaginaries of the better good life. I have suggested that academic progressives tend only to respect and take seriously what is convertible to their vision of politics. But since most collective life takes place to one side of or under the radar of politics—and not just because people are trained to be passive, to delegate their political agency to institutional representatives, and to misunderstand action in consumer terms—it seems important to understand what is absorbing in the defensive, inventive, and adaptive activity of getting by, along with the great refusals to go through power to attain legitimacy. In a sentimental worldview, people's "interests" are less in changing the world than in not being defeated by it, and meanwhile finding satisfaction in minor pleasures and major fantasies. To see how the creative energy of living has gotten taken up in intimate spheres that promote such absorption is really what shapes this book's relation to the social tragedy of the attrition of life in which such folds of potentiality are enjoyed.

The Chapters

Each chapter of this book tracks the marriage of aesthetic conventions and subjective conventionality as detailed in women's intimate public. Profoundly overdetermined dissatisfactions, desires for change, and commitments to some aspects of imaginable intimacy come into contact within and are remediated by normative conventions of intimacy, which make the problem of imagining life outside women's terms feel often like a threat to everything importantly imaginable about the endurance of the subject in the life-world of love, even if she is unhappy at the moment. The texts of women's intimate public worry about what it means to live within the institutions of intimacy, across all kinds of domestic, laboring, cosmopolitan, rural, and political spaces, but they worry even more about what it would mean not to be framed by them. The threatening consequence of being outside of that

story is named by one of the most popular U.S. melodramas of the twentieth century's second half: *Imitation of Life*.

Just as this book has two beginnings, the preface and the introduction, so too it has two closings, a coda and an overture/aperture. The introductions lay out the affectivity and materiality of the intimate public from slightly different perspectives—moving from the personally to the impersonally intimate. The two closing pieces focus on the problem of normativity and formalism from two angles, investigating related but distinct problems for femininity after feminism and then for analysts of the affective-aesthetic elaboration of power and belonging as such. In between, the chapters cluster into two parts. The first three chapters move from sentimentality as a public form of intimate sociality where love's aura of authenticity and claim for recognition shape sentimental stories about democracy; the second cluster, chapters 5 through 7, looks at sentimentality as a therapeutic mode that organizes even the feminist-inflected fantasy of what being normal might be like, if it could only be achieved and enjoyed unambivalently. Chapter 4, "Uncle Sam Needs a Wife," is a hinge chapter, marking the transition from political to subjective happiness as the material for belonging.

More precisely, chapter 1, "Poor Eliza," tracks the politico-aesthetic aspects of compassionate emotion in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*'s continual adaptation. It establishes the novel's status as a master sign or supertext, whose reiteration in the twentieth century articulates an array of distinct and often conflicting desires about the execution of cultural difference through spectacles of subaltern pain and their alleviation. The textual span reaches from Stowe to *Beloved*, with Shirley Temple, James Baldwin, and *The Bridges of Madison County* in between. In this chapter, what releases people from their singular history into generality is the offer of affective communication itself as evidence for the universal potential of sentimental conventions, with their offer of absorptive emotional worlds that operate by better rules.

Chapter 2, "Pax Americana: The Case of *Show Boat*," follows revisions to Edna Ferber's novel on stage and screen. It looks particularly at the logic of adaptation that produces commoditized love as the optimism of modernity that might finally effectively drown out the haunting legacies of slavery in the body, the appetites, the law, and nature itself. Here love, performance, and entertainment are the vehicles of becoming general and American. Here ad-

aptation works not only in the revisions or remakes; it is thematized *within* the texts as an operation on freeing memory from its constitutive traumas. Detailing the uneven distribution of amnesias and memory across different scenes of privilege provides the analytic energy of this chapter; so does the spectacle of modernity as itself an amnesia machine dressed in memory's garb.

Chapter 3, "National Brands, National Body: *Imitation of Life*," develops the south-to-north route of national sentimentality by beginning where *Show Boat* ends, in the space of racialized performance in the north. This chapter develops a notion of prosthetic subjectivity and prosthetic bodies as vehicles for self-generalization, or leaving history behind through identification with celebrity (a topos throughout the book, to the very end). To identify with someone in mass society is not necessarily to want to be them or to have them, but to be freed from being who you were, with all of its burdensome historical determinations. To see an identification as a departure from rather than an imitation of might seem ironic in a chapter on imitating life, but the imitators turn out all to have chosen bad objects in their flights from their historical (racial, classed, sexual, and gendered) unfreedom. This chapter also tracks the white liberal exploitation of black pain as a source of white supremacy: white supremacy, here, is not protected by a split between personal and structural relations, as in *Show Boat*, but in the class and intergenerational trajectory of the women in this novel and these films, in the conscription of fantasy by racist law and social norms, and by the availability of a fantasy of sexuality as a relief from structural subordination that never quite fulfills its promise.

Chapter 4, "*Uncle Sam Needs a Wife*: Citizenship and Denegation," tells the other side of the story, using the long history of expanded suffrage in the United States to talk about politics as therapy culture for political depression. It focuses on juxtapolitical activity among consumers throughout the twentieth century, consumers who, depressed by the political, do not see it as a resource for its own reformulation or theirs. It looks at citizenship training manuals and the deaths of Princess Diana and John F. Kennedy Jr. as ways of understanding the endurance of mass optimism for intimate belonging that wants to sublate the universality of bare life (political meaninglessness) into juxtapolitical fantasies of collective and simultaneous social mourning for the political.

Chapter 5, "Remembering Love, Forgetting Everything Else: *Now, Voyager*," leaves behind the fantasy of nationality as the name for the space of vague generality that might absorb anyone and engages fully the flourishing forms of conventionality under the radar of public scrutiny that this classic melodrama dramatizes. This chapter puts forth a concept of "the enabling cliché" to describe the therapeutic episteme of U.S. mass-mediated popular culture and of culture generally as a solution to the problem of the burden of bearing a personality in a nonreciprocal and unjust world. *Now, Voyager* was written by Olive Higgins Prouty in 1941. The chapter looks at different mid-century psychoanalytic traditions as they played out in Prouty's life, works, and the film of the novel; it resituates the question of desire from the maternal plot on which most people focus to the fantasy of playing house that Charlotte maintains as she shifts from the sexual style of white Brahmin aristocracy to the miscegenated norms of mass cultural pleasure.

Chapter 6, "'It's Not the Tragedies That Kill Us, It's the Messes': Femininity, Formalism, and Dorothy Parker," takes the previous chapter's focus on cliché and femininity and extends it to poetic form. Its title could have been "The Economic Problem of Masochism," the essay by Freud that shapes this chapter's pursuit of form as an aftereffect of affective patterns and the rise and fall of psychic intensities. It elaborates a concept of the loved object as a placeholder form. It also considers the middlebrow location of so much female complaint literature and film, and the centrality of middlebrow disavowals of sentimentality to Parker's investment in the rationality of aesthetic form, as evidenced in her couples, couplets, stories, and her Academy Award winning screenplay for *A Star Is Born*.

Chapter 7, the coda, is called "The Compulsion to Repeat Femininity: *Landscape for a Good Woman* and *The Life and Loves of a She-Devil*." This chapter plays out the late twentieth-century interaction of sentimental and feminist female complaint in Carolyn Steedman's *Landscape for a Good Woman* and Fay Weldon's *The Life and Loves of a She-Devil* (this has been made into a film starring the brilliant female complainer Roseanne Barr, but the chapter does not track the unfinished business of sentimentality that Barr's story keeps linked to feminism). Steedman's autobiography introduces the class dimensions of feminine affective attachments to fantasies congealed in the consumption of *things*. The novel plays out fantasies that a feminist

femininity could serve to emancipate women from the means of sexual and economic *production*. But both heroines' feminism does not detach them from their sentimentality: they end wishing for a break they cannot instantiate. Both provide a tragi-comic confirmation, offering a view of what it would be like to share the goods of a sexually and economically emancipated life only to end, again, in the closed shop of sentimental fantasy.

Unfinished Business

Each chapter closes with an opening, a segment of "unfinished business." (So does the book: its final chapter, "Overture/Aperture," is organized around one more adaptation—*Showboat 1988—the Remake* [1977].) These segments point to unpredicted destinies of material in the chapter that precedes them. I won't describe the swerves each chapter segment performs here, but I will identify their purpose in the book as a whole.

This was a depressing book to write because it is a case study in what happens when a capitalist culture effectively markets conventionality as the source and solution to the problem of living in worlds that are economically, legally, and normatively not on the side of almost anyone's survival, let alone flourishing. Nonetheless, flourishing happens. For many people, sentimentality and the fantasy of a better proximate world so close that one can experience it affectively without being able to live it objectively produces art that does, that transports people somewhere into a *situation* for a minute. The next book in this sequence, *Cruel Optimism*, will focus more precisely on the terror of detaching, even when the object of sentimental assurance turns out to be a bad object. In *The Female Complaint*, the emphasis is on the process of bargaining with what there is. Here, the sections that focus on sentimentality's unfinished business resonate as critical pedagogies in the ongoing work of making better good lives *within* a space of belonging that is problematic and virtual but no less affectively sustaining for all that. They show that events are never exhausted, and that most revision and adaptation *is* the activity of making change take place, even if it is also usually the opposite of that, and a mirage. This is one reason why politically engaged people write criticism, to vitalize and shape the potential event within any concept or scene. The unfinished business of sentimentality mostly profits people other than the ones it solicits to do more business. But it also teaches that endings can be made into openings.