

Corner

see also *public feelings*

see also *intentional vulnerability*

Chad Shomura | CHADCAT'S CORNER OF HEART-TO-HEARTS: A PUBLIC FEELINGS PROJECT

Dear friend,

This Corner grew out of heart-to-hearts with friends at a bar. We're all male political theorists. As you might imagine, personal conversation is rare among us. I went to bed glowing and woke the next day longing for more. What if heart-to-hearts could be done intentionally? What could spark them? What might a corner for intimate chit-chat do?

Little ideas strung together into a party game. Two people sit in a cozy corner of a party. If they have a candle, they may light it. They have a set of cards, and each card has a single word, such as "loss," "fragility," or "dream." One player randomly draws a card and, spurred by the word, shares a personal story, memory, or experience. They may explore the word as they wish ("promise" could be about a broken promise or something that is promising). The other person listens closely and, when the speaker is done talking, asks questions and offers reactions. Then it's the listener's turn to share. The two people chat until conversation trails off. Then they return to the party while reflecting on living in a world where they meet people, share something meaningful, and then part ways, sometimes for good.

I have done the Corner at three parties. Some people eagerly participated. Others (usually men) were suspicious. Most participants, whether friend or stranger, explored deeply intimate matters. We opened up about regrets, addictions, shame. Conversations ran from fifteen minutes to an hour and a half. Everyone lit the candle. Some said the Corner was like therapy, and there is some truth to that. But it dispenses with the roles of therapist and patient and shirks the aura of credentials. In the Corner, time is unlimited, care is free, and everyone is an agent.

Why a party? I am shy, introverted, and typically uncomfortable with small talk. A corner of heart-to-hearts would provide reprieve for like-spirited people,

especially those who go to parties mainly out of fear of missing out. For others, it would be an opportunity to release a few nagging thoughts. Heart-to-hearts could also inflect the character of the party itself. For what is the expected atmosphere of a party? Why should it be loud and proud?

Though seemingly innocent, parties can reinforce the pressures found in the United States culture of compulsory positive thinking, which has been detailed by Barbara Ehrenreich in her book *Bright-Sided*. It is not always easy to feel comfortable at a party and, as many of us know very painfully, fitting in requires superhuman strength; one must reproduce the mood of a space that is under constant scrutiny. Of course, this affective labor is racialized and gendered: minoritized subjects have long been bright-sided, compelled to maintain optimism in U.S. democracy and the American Dream despite ongoing, intimate race-based exclusions and hierarchies. The culture of good feeling can be disastrous for antiracist politics; positive attitudes and forced smiles do little to upturn systemic racism.

Without diminishing the importance of good feelings, the Corner alleviates the pressure to perform at parties by welcoming so-called “negative affects,” such as sadness, guilt, and anxiety. It is inspired by feminist and queer scholarship under the title of “Public Feelings,” which have investigated the affects of public cultures and treated bad feelings as political resources.

Public Feelings offers a fruitful guide for Asian American engagements with mental health. For example, Ann Cvetkovich, in *Depression: A Public Feeling*, has treated depression less as a strictly medical diagnosis and more as a sociopolitical phenomenon that is tied to racial slavery, dispossession, and colonial settlement. Issues of mental health in Asian America are likewise political in nature. You might think of how trauma and its effects, as experienced by Vietnamese refugees and their families, have been critically engaged in academia (such as in Mimi Thi Nguyen’s *The Gift of Freedom: War, Debt, and Refugee Passages*) and in poetry (such as *Split*, by Cathy Linh Che). As Nguyen elaborates, the so-called refugee condition is not a psychic state to be treated by medication and therapy; presumptions that the refugee condition is treatable as such are beliefs disseminated by liberal governance.

Nguyen opens an important question: how can a state ever remedy the ills that it has created through its very nature? The U.S. has aggressively pursued a world organized by whiteness, imperial expansion, colonial settlement, the neoliberalization of society, and the normalization of sexuality. But because Asians and Asian Americans have survived and even thrived in the face of that destructive

vision, the U.S. has scrambled to reestablish its authority over health by asserting itself as the provider of cures through a medical apparatus that distracts from racial hierarchies that remain in place. One might say that issues of Asian American mental health are symptoms of racism, colonialism, imperialism, and global war. How could they ever be addressed through pills and paid-for couch time?

Asian Americans might pursue mental health and wellness on tangent from those avenues through what could be called the “micropolitics of mental health.” Departing from civic, policy, and activist channels, the micropolitics of mental health strives to refigure the minutiae of lived experience: habits, feelings, the atmospheres of everyday life. It defies efforts of the U.S. and its public cultures, in conjunction with medical, pharmaceutical, and therapeutic industries, to decide what constitutes good health, how the body and mind are assembled, where the seat of the “mental” is located, where the pain lies, what the cure may be, who bears the costs (financial, emotional), how public and private spheres are defined and parsed. Rather than working within predetermined, racialized frameworks of problem and cure, the micropolitics of mental health seeks different understandings of illness and wellness. It may sound like a fancy name for “self-care,” though its reach extends beyond the individual. It insists that the self is already communal and that mental health is always a collective phenomenon even as we experience it quite intimately.

The Corner of Heart-to-Hearts is a public feelings project. Neither a ballot box nor a street to march down, it is a space for close conversation. At its most ambitious, the Corner seeks to create what Lauren Berlant has called “minor intimacies,” or those connections that run awry of forms such as friendship and romance. Vulnerability is crucial. As Judith Butler has insisted, it is key to the development of ethical relations with others, particularly when the U.S. has asserted its inviolability in the “War on Terror” by detaining, torturing, and incinerating potential threats. Devaluation of vulnerability in the U.S. has also fueled the destruction of the welfare state, as seen in the feminization of social safety nets, racism towards poor minorities (e.g. “welfare queens”), and a macho public culture defined by boot-straps agency, self-sufficiency, and the belittlement of those who do not “make it.” In this racialized context, what could opening up to a friend, a stranger, do? Might doing so help to tone down the U.S.’s calls for beefed-up sovereignty and welcome others with greater tenderness? How might an acceptance of vulnerability work against racialized public cultures of ableism and stigmatization of Asian American mental health? What new

forms of solidarity become possible? What forms of care might emerge from radical listening?

At its core, the Corner of Heart-to-Hearts acknowledges that many hands help us along the course of life. No one can go it alone. I am thankful that Lawrence-Minh Bùi Davis and Mimi Khúc welcomed the Corner to be part of a larger project on Asian American mental health. My thanks extend to Linh Huỳnh, who designed the cards in this set and exemplifies the kind of understanding, affirmation, and care that the Corner aspires to provide.

Finally, I thank you, friend, for sharing this space with me. You might bring the Corner to a party, though a park where the breeze is light would do just as fine. It can be opened in an emergency or when things are less alarming but no less pressing. If the Corner does not amount to wellness, then perhaps it can at least make what is unbearable a little easier to carry. I hope its spirit may cultivate openness, connection, and a sense of possibility in your life and the lives of those around you.

Love,

chadcat.

PS: You might even have a heart-to-heart with yourself! You could sit with a pen

and paper, select a card, and let the word at hand lead you.

Maybe you'll end up with a letter that you never send or a journal entry that you set on fire. After all, what matters is not a keepsake but that you've written yourself into somewhere surprising. And maybe you'll find that a part of you had been there all along...

The snow melts. Blossoms bud and burst on branches. Flowers rouse from the earth. The seeds nestled in the loam before winter emerge as saplings. The trees grow thicker. The forest grows darker. Lichen and moss choke trunks. The ground is dense with mucoid fruit too sweet to eat. And the woman is joyous because she squats and grunts and cries and a baby boy emerges. She is so joyous that she collapses and dies.

So the man marries again.
(A son needs a mother.)

DREAM

PROMISE

FAMILY

FORGOTTEN

DISAPPOINTMENT

SECRET

DEPARTURES

PLAY

LOVE

TRIUMPH

DISCONNECT

SHAME

LOSS

FAILURE

BETRAYAL

ANXIETY

LONELINESS

DEVASTATED

GUILT

IMPERFECTION

ATONEMENT

PEACE

FRAGILE

BEAUTIFUL

LONGING

RAGE

LOST

ENOUGH

LIES

PRIDE

EXCLUDED

CHANGE

