

Affective Assemblages: Entanglements and Ruptures— An Interview with Lauren Berlant

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Lauren Berlant is George M. Pullman Professor of English at the University of Chicago. She is also co-editor of *Critical Inquiry* and a founding member of the art/activist group Feel Tank Chicago. Currently working on flat affect, Berlant has written widely about the complex entanglements of affective, political, social, aesthetic, and material life, sovereignty and its discontents, intimate publics, the commons, and humourlessness with a focus on the contemporary US. Her most recent publications include the edition of the special issue *Comedy: An Issue for Critical Inquiry* (2017), with Sianne Ngai, where they dispel the paradoxical nature of comedy, with its pleasures and its ingrained displeasures. Other influential publications include *Sex, or the Unbearable* (Duke UP, 2014), with Lee Edelman, and *Desire/Love* (Punctum, 2012). What has been called “her national sentimentality quartet” includes *The Anatomy of National Fantasy: Hawthorne, Utopia, and Everyday Life* (Chicago UP, 1991), *The Queen of America Goes to Washington City: Essays on Sex and Citizenship* (Duke UP, 1997), *The Female Complaint* (Duke UP, 2008), and *Cruel Optimism* (Duke UP, 2011). Berlant’s numerous edited volumes and collections further attest to the collaborative nature of her work: *On the Case* (*Critical Inquiry*, 2007); *Compassion: The Culture and Politics of an Emotion* (Routledge, 2004); *Our Monica, Ourselves: The Clinton Affair and the National Interest* (New York UP, 2001), and *Intimacy* (*Critical Inquiry*, 1998). Berlant regularly blogs at *Supervalent Thought*, <https://supervalentthought.com>.

Ambition is desire in the lifeworld of capitalism.

Lauren Berlant "Humorlessness"
(2017: 315)

Lauren Berlant's inventory of the world, as illustrated in her robust body of work, signals a saturation of ugly feelings (Ngai 2005). These negative affects often block desire, hope, and pleasure as potential activators of social change and political transformation. In a moment of utter uncertainty, intensified by the ascent of Donald Trump to the Presidency of the United States and the rise of neofascisms in Europe, the editors of this special issue consider feminist anti-racist enquiry more necessary than ever. The centrality of the affective realm, as Berlant's interview illustrates, is unquestionable to begin to unravel this matrix of tensions, ruptures, and paradoxes. This interview was conducted over email in the summer and fall of 2014.

Libe & Evelyne

While being aware of the compulsive need to re-fashion terminologies in academia, would you like to reflect on the so-called "recent" turn to affect, particularly in the Humanities (Clough and Halley 2007)? Given the precarious state of the Humanities today, with radical worldwide funding cuts, do you think there is potential in affect theory to provide some counter-discourse to rampant neoliberal ideologies? If so, how? Could a feminist and queer theorization of affect, for instance, contribute to suspending/delaying the "slow death" (Berlant 2007b) of the Humanities as a discipline? What are the particularities (if any) of doing affect studies in the US academic system, particularly in this contemporary age of global crisis?

Lauren Berlant

I might be less optimistic than you. Of course, there is a potential for almost anything to become a transformative resource! But I'm enough of a Gramscian to believe in the hegemonic process as a war, not a solution to the problem of war. So I don't conclude that affect or any theory on its own, even from a feminist or queer perspective, can induce a better new consistency for living. For one thing, movements are sites of contestation, scenes of competitive exemplification whose power can be assessed according to how solidarity can be maintained amid antagonism. A good theory

helps shape what we pay attention to and how we live and imagine living; it can be an anchor when things are awry, but it can be a harm when it stops us from taking in singularity, anomaly, and unpredicted forms of life.

So, for example, I have been thinking lately about irregular guerrilla actions: wildcat sickouts, unpredictable disturbances. Mental health days. Unpredicted tones of voice, of idioms of response. Because the strategies of "our" better intentionality against "their" bad intentionality have not worked very well, on their own. The threat of the unpredictable idiom and outcome is an important weapon in our arsenal. But it is easier to think the interruption and the increment than to reboot the totality.

Then there's the problem of affect theory's emergence in neoliberal times. The *Cruel Optimism* (2011) chapter on the Laurent Cantet films *Human Resources* and *Time Out* critiques from a position of solidarity the universalist aspects of precarity politics within the spaces of contemporary crisis, arguing that neoliberal austerity policies are quite compatible with the affective turn. As Deleuze and Massumi argue, societies of control see the overproduction of affect as a good fuel for private capital growth and the exhaustion of the subject, who is reduced to the dramatics of getting by while thinking of affect as an inalienable resource. So sometimes affect theory is the theory of our bodies within contemporary modes of production, a new focus for realism in the guise of a potentially revolutionary surplus or inalienable property.

The second problem with investing too much in affect theory to solve the problem of assessing social life is that using affects and emotions to measure injustice tends to assume that justice and the good life can be sensed, that there's some authenticity or purity in our discernment. That just seems false to me. It's central, though, to any prefigurative politics, and therefore can't be summarily negated either. To me, what affect theory best helps us see are the contradictions and ambivalences in our projects and attachments. It is a training in paying attention; at its best a way of describing the overdetermining forces that make a scene (like the historical present) complicated, overwhelming, and in movement. It is less clarifying about what to do and how find form for what we want.

Finally, the question of the Humanities: as you phrase it, our options are minimal—how to suspend or

delay its death. My political test is always to evaluate how different social projects cast the value of non-productivist subjects (kids, the aged, the disabled, the unemployed) and non-productivist modes of thought (the Humanities). What would a non-capitalist version of social value really be like? How can we build practices to sustain it? We are hammering out new visions at this point. The US had less of a social democracy than Canada and many places in Europe, and so the shock of privatization is geopolitically different; what isn't transnationally too different is our collective attempt to face down the drive to sell off knowledge-creation to the highest bidder. In the US, additionally, there continues to be a drive to censor publicly-funded knowledge that's inconvenient to the moral universe of the hegemony (straight white religio-patriarchy with legislative access has made a virulent comeback in the last five years in the US).

The idea of a liberal education for anyone who wants it, an education that values a genuine experimentality as to the value of a pursued thought was a beautiful one. One didn't have to be deserving or have leisure time to occupy. One had the right to expect and cultivate a cushion of knowledge that did not lead to the building of a skill for capital, economic or social. People of different classes and backgrounds were all considered to deserve access to interpretive and reflective skill-building. I want that to be part of whatever emerges from this crisis; I think this part of the interpretive Humanities and Social Sciences is worth fighting for.

Libe & Evelyne

In this special issue, we tend to favor the term "affect" over "feeling" in that, as Deleuzian critics claim, affect entails the capacity to become whereas feeling consists of the "stabilizing of being" (Davy and Steinbock 2012; Crawford 2008). In which ways is a discussion of terminology productive in articulating new feminist and queer theories of affect?

Lauren Berlant

Language makes everyone anxious. Just recently, I read someone saying once that the feeling/emotion/affect distinction was patriarchal. I read someone else say the next day that the distinction was the work of ideology itself, a romanticism of the nervous system that idealizes our responses without considering how they're

shaped by capital and liberal ideology. These desires to foreclose or shame debate make me sad. Clearly, affect theory is central to the history of our concepts of ideology (the relation of explicit to affective attachment) but it is also a way of describing the force of the unsaid in collective life that shape how what can be said is thought and transmitted. These problems of finding form for the empiricism of the unsaid aren't limited to feminist and queer theories. But feminists and queers are especially interested in affect because desire is unruly and induces intensities of attachment outside of calculation, and if this is what makes us powerful and threatening and fun then affect theory should be valued as a resource.

Libe & Evelyne

If affects are never intrinsically good or bad, as you state in *Cruel Optimism* (2011), and if their effects depend on the context and are rather uncontrollable, could we nonetheless think of some affects being more suitable to political movements? For instance, which kind of affects should contemporary (third- or fourth-wave) feminism mobilize not only to touch, move and reach others, but also to move beyond itself and expand its boundaries? As theorists, professors, and artists, how can we rethink affect so as to contribute to the sustenance of feminist and queer genealogies/archives?

Lauren Berlant

There are so many feminisms, and so many assemblages in which feminism operates as a disruptive/transformatory resource!

If we organize our exhaustion into a refusal to reproduce normativity (which is not easy, because normativity is a convenience that works *against* exhaustion at the same time as it takes a depleting toll); if we organize outrage into violence or its threat; if we organize our anxiety by pushing against the disorganization and siphoning of energy that constitutes the productivist life; if we reimagine health as different from the ability to work and wealth from the ability to hoard; if we embrace relationality over sovereign individuality as the ground for social theory and the good life; if we begin to see teaching as an opportunity to bring all of our intellectual and historical resources to the table; if we begin to think differently about infrastructures and temporalities of dependence, care, and intimacy; if our project's collective and not sovereign-heroic – things could hap-

pen. The political life demands an impatient patience.

From my very first publication—"The Female Complaint" (1988) in *Social Text*—I have been arguing that the problem of non-identity is at the core of feminism (and now, queer work too), as identity is an engine for the reproduction of iconic figures that are supposed to function as realist aspirations. Male privilege controls women through reducing us to a thing – reproduction, sexual appetite, consumption, maternity; the personal, the bodily—just as racism is a drive to undetermine the subject of color. Feminism and queer work need to fight against the homogeneity drive, what Jasbir Puar (2007) and others call homonormativity. I want feminism and queer work as motors for intimate publics to fight for pride in the capacity to maintain solidarity within a tangled space of antagonism, inconvenience, and non-recognition, to be able to bear and be interested in all kinds of differences. If misogyny and heteronormativity are norms in which women and femininity become stuck in figurations from which some men and class elites benefit and derive pleasure, what would it mean to release woman and femininity into a freedom from normative figuration—or at least an always transforming figuration? Can feminism bear it? It hasn't yet: the ongoing work of French, antiracist, postcolonial, and socialist feminisms testifies that supporting the multiplicity of women is an ongoing project for many feminists as well as patriarchally-defined misogynists (and the people who were raised within regimes of negative attachment to women, which pretty much defines most people).

This is an ongoing problem: I am not sure if it's possible to have a non-egoistic social movement. In any case, I have another specific commitment, which is to an anti-erotophobic politics. This requires affect theory, because it's so often about unconscious and confused visceral attachments. In my view, biopolitical subjects, populations whose persons are defined as bodies whose appetites need controlling by power, are all associated negatively with sexuality and likewise explicit sexuality carries negative value because of its association with populations and persons deemed too close to appetite. Lately, I have been hearing feminists and queer activists saying that pro-sex feminism went too far and that we need to reassert our erotophobia as a principle against patriarchy. It's my view that the hatred and suspicion of sex turns it into a weapon and not a space of disturbance we know how to inhabit. Affect theory to me, as

a crusader against biopolitical violence, helps to fuel the hard work of not presuming bodies mainly as threats to happiness.

Libe & Evelyne

In the introduction to *Cruel Optimism* (2011), you mention the difficulty to write about affects and the "need to invent new genre for the kinds of speculative work we call 'theory'" (21). A look at other texts that pertain to the field of "affect studies" shows indeed how difficult is it to find a genre able to translate something as abstract though very much corporeal and as ordinary as affects. Does every different kind of affect ask for a particular genre? How genre and affects relate? How "personal criticism" and more poetic and/or autobiographical forms of writing could further or serve better our understanding of what affect does?

Lauren Berlant

I don't think there is a genre for every affect, no. This is partly because I think of the assessment of affect as the representation of a *scene* of convergence—moods, atmospheres, complexities—and not as a thing that can be anchored to one figuration. This is partly why autobiographical writing has become so important to affective work—not because it is *truer* about visceral epistemologies, but because its visceral epistemologies need to be considered *along with* the other evaluative styles of figuration we're used to, inducing productive interruptions and resonances.

Libe & Evelyne

In *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity*, Eve K. Sedgwick (2003) explains how "Affects can be, and are, attached to things, people, ideas, sensations, relations, activities, ambitions, institutions, and any number of other things, including other affects" (19). What happens then when certain populations are negated the possibility of creating affective communities? What are the limitations of affect? How to theorize the lack of affect?

Lauren Berlant

I hate to close our interview by disagreeing again with the presuppositions in your questions, but... I don't think any populations are "negated the possibility of creating affective communities." But then I am

not sure what kind of value you're attaching to "community" here, either. There are populations deemed inadequate or threatening in their styles of sociality and atmospheres of the ordinary—but that's not because of an *absence* of affective community—rather, a threatening overpresence. Hegemons can't bear their irrelevance to the flourishing of alternative affective communities, and they understand that the extension of the intimate publics that are not addressed to them is a threat to their dominant status.

Anyway, as it happily happens, I am writing on affective flatness now, and have a lot to say about it. Flatness is different than lack. It is not only a subtraction, but a form of performance, a style of showing up. It may be a performance of an enigmatic transmission that forces the interlocutor into anxiety or discomfort; at the same time, a performance of casualness or recessive force that might produce an atmosphere of ease. I wouldn't presume that affective presence is freedom and affective lack is failure; nor the opposite, that affective reserve is authenticity and presence is normativity in the bad sense. Having said that, I have been blown away by how racialized the assessment of affective comportment is: whose "lack" designates power ("the man" is affectless) and whose reticence is deemed a resistant inscrutability or mental health problem. Thinking about the hot and cool intensities of affect, and how they magnetize political desire and threat, might well become central questions of feminist and queer work on the forms of social life, from the aesthetic statement to the glance across the room to the judicial opinion.

I know you want me to say that affect theory can become a revolutionary force, insofar as it can transform what shapes knowledge, and I do think that it can. But we have ourselves to begin questioning our norms of how health and happiness are identified and tracked, not presuming that affective minimalism or disintegration is a symptom of one thing (maybe going under the radar is a symptom of defeat, but maybe it's a path to freedom!). The questions are empirical: they require us to track patterns, lines of flight, and the convergence of freedom from and freedom for, of ambivalence and desire.

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