

**ARTICLE****Special Section: Encountering Berlant****Encountering Berlant part one: Concepts otherwise**

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Durham University, Durham, UK.Email: [ben.anderson@durham.ac.uk](mailto:ben.anderson@durham.ac.uk)**Abstract**

In Part 1 of ‘Encountering Berlant’, we encounter the promise and provocation of Lauren Berlant’s work. In 1000-word contributions, geographers and others stay with what Berlant’s thought offers contemporary human geography. They amplify an encounter with their work, demonstrating how a concept, idea, or style disrupts something, opens up a new possibility, or simply invites thinking otherwise. The encounters range across the incredible body of work Berlant left

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us with, from the ‘national sentimentality’ trilogy through to recent work on negativity. Varying in form and tone, the encounters exemplify and enact the inexhaustible plenitude of Berlant’s thought: fantasy, the case, love, impasse, feel tanks, slow death, ellipses, gesture, attrition, intimate public, ambivalence, style. Part 2 of ‘Encountering Berlant’ focuses on Berlant’s most influential concept: ‘cruel optimism’. Across these heterogeneous encounters, Berlant’s enduring concern with the tensions and possibilities of relationality and how to enact better forms of common life shine through. These enduring concerns and Berlant’s commitment to the incoherence and overdetermination of phenomena are summarised in the Introduction, which also explores how Berlant’s work has been engaged with in geography. The result is a repository of what an encounter with Berlant’s thought makes possible.

#### KEYWORDS

Berlant, feminism, geography, Marxism, queer theory, relations

## 1 | INTRODUCTION: CONCEPTS OTHERWISE

### Ben Anderson

In a 2013 interview with David Seitz on the *Society and Space* blog, Lauren Berlant describes their intellectual-political practice:

For me, it’s never about shaming people’s objects, it’s always about creating better and better objects. It’s always about creating better worlds, making it possible for us to think in more and different kinds of ways about how we relationally can move through life.

(Berlant & Seitz, 2013, n.p.)

The occasion for their description was a discussion about the aspiration to normative citizenship by minoritised groups, in particular LGBTQ communities. It articulates the almost utopian orientation that crosses Berlant’s work, as well as their empathy for how people strive to stay in sync with the world, however defined. Whatever the ‘object’, whether it be the materials of popular culture or the nation, fraying post-War good life fantasies, or sexual citizenship in the shadow of Reagan-era conservatism, Berlant’s intellectual-political work is dedicated to loosening the hold of some ‘objects’ while creating ‘better and better’ objects. In doing so, they left us an archive of attempts to find new and better ways of moving with others through life.

At the time of their passing at the age of 63, Lauren was George M. Pullman Distinguished Service Professor in the Department of English Language and Literature at the University of Chicago, a position they held since 1984. They made countless field-defining contributions to queer and feminist theory, literary and American studies, and interdisciplinary work on affect. In addition to the published work we encounter and amplify here, they were a teacher attached to ‘the thought experiment and the story problem’ who regularly wrote of education and the pedagogical (Berlant, 2020b, n.p.); an intense collaborator who spoke of the ‘complete joy of the “not me”’ when working with others (Berlant, 2019a); and a committed institution-builder, co-creating the affective-material conditions for thought and action by working across the lines that separate academy from artists and activists (as eulogies regularly testified too – see The Affective Publics Reading Group, 2021).

In this and its companion piece, geographers and other social scientists encounter the conceptual idioms and infrastructures that Berlant left us. Our aim across ‘Encountering Berlant Parts 1 and 2’ is to perform some of the ways in which the concepts, problems, phrases, and tones that composed their body of work have offered – and might continue to offer – new resources for social scientists to think and feel with. In 1000 words, contributors stay with and try to do justice to their encounter with Berlant’s work, amplifying something that affected them, and exploring what Berlant offers us for thinking-feeling and acting.<sup>1</sup> The pieces create relays between Berlant’s work and some of the ideas, scenes, and

concepts that populate human geography, and linked fields, doing so in different styles and tones – didactic, pervasive, elusive, intimate, suggestive, and more.

Our aim in ‘Encountering Berlant Part 1: Concepts Otherwise’ is to perform the capaciousness of Berlant’s thought and articulate its promise. In this Part, contributors amplify a concept, idea, or style that they find in Berlant’s writings: fantasy, the case, love, impasse, slow death, feel tanks, ellipses, gesture, attrition, intimate public, ambivalence, style. The list is deliberately heterogeneous, but not exhaustive. There is more in the ‘transformative infrastructure’ (Berlant, 2022) of Berlant’s thought than is found here. Instead of an introduction that secretly desires to offer the last word, this Part is a partial repository of what an encounter with Berlant’s thought makes possible. The contributions are wide-ranging, covering encounters with some of their earliest published work – *The anatomy of national fantasy* (Berlant, 1991) – through to the posthumously published *The inconvenience of other people* (Berlant, 2022). Part 2 focuses on their most influential concept – ‘cruel optimism’, finding in it new ways to think about the perennial problem of how harm and damage are reproduced (Anderson et al., 2023). Neither Part is one, their lines of flight are many. They perform a fidelity to the excess of Berlant’s work.

Berlant’s work is animated by a political-ethical concern with how to imagine, experiment, build, and inhabit new forms of common life. This necessitates dwelling with the ‘intimate publics’ and other forms of being-in-common that are made by and available to people. It requires an attentiveness and openness to what keeps people attached to ‘objects’, while staying with disappointment, and practising a critical method that involves ‘see[ing] with the perspective of an object, while also moving through the world in your difference from it’ (Berlant, 2018, p. 161). It also means writing from the case, the example, the scene, and the anecdote as a way of exemplifying their axiom that ‘the personal is the generic’ (Berlant, 2007; Berlant & Stewart, 2019). Their ‘national sentimentality’ trilogy (Berlant, 1991, 1997a, 2008a) questioned the role of sentimentality in creating types of unity and their promises and dispossessions. The trilogy began with how ‘nations produce fantasy’ via an analysis of Hawthorne’s *The scarlet letter* (Berlant, 1991, p. 1), moved through women’s ‘intimate publics’ in US mass media culture from the early 20th century onwards (Berlant, 2008a), and concluded by analysing the collapsing of the political and personal into a ‘world of public intimacy’ during the rise of the Reaganite right (Berlant, 1997a, p. 1). Through engaging with the complex ways that intimate publics relate to politics and the political, Berlant explores how juridical and normative activity shapes and imposes on collective life, and how participation in collective life promises belonging and sustains desires for reciprocity with the world. Berlant’s is a *both/and* orientation to what is reproduced through *and* enabled by attachment to restricted, collective forms of life. We find their singular orientation expressed in, for example, the proximity of discipline to consolation in their definition of an intimate public: ‘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’ (Berlant, 2008a, p. viii). Berlant’s *both/and* orientation to fantasies of belonging and intimacy rings out across their diagnostic-anticipatory analyses of US cultural-political figures, events, movements over the last 20+ years – Monica Lewinsky (Berlant & Duggin, 2001), John Kerry (Berlant, 2005), Barak Obama (Berlant, 2011e), Donald Trump (Berlant, 2016b), Bojak Horseman (Berlant, 2020a), #metoo (Berlant, 2017b).

Traces of Berlant as a thinker of collective life appeared in human geography as the ‘national sentimentality’ trilogy was published, perhaps most notably in geographies of sexuality. This field is unthinkable without the concept of heteronormativity and linked ideas around the erotic and intimacy, which were elaborated by Berlant and Warner (1998) in their classic *Sex in public*, after Warner’s, 1991 introduction of the term (e.g., Binnie, 2009; Valentine, 2008). There are also echoes of Berlant’s work on mediated affect and the ‘politics of sentiment’ in some work in the field of ‘public geographies’ (Barnett, 2008), as well as heterodox work on citizenship (Seitz, 2017) and nationalism (Closs-Stephens, 2015) and the family (Rose, 2010). From the mid-2000s onwards, their work was also in the margins of the interest in affect and emotion, but only through quick citation rather than engagement (see Bondi, 2008; Thrift, 2007).

It was only with the publication of *Cruel optimism* (2011a) that Berlant’s work crossed a threshold to become a key resource in geography for understanding the affective present. As contributors to Part 2 testify (Anderson et al., 2023), the book’s emphasis on stuckness, the difficulties of detachment, and affective incoherence seemed to fit with a present scarred by precarity and caught in intractable impasses in the aftermath of the 2008 financial crisis. The conceptual infrastructure Berlant offered – crisis ordinariness, glitch, slow death, impasse, aspirational normativity, precarity, as well as cruel optimism – offered a vocabulary for depleting, difficult worlds. As neoliberalising processes continued amid ever-widening gaps between fantasies for intimacy and belonging and political-economic conditions for their realisation, the question that animated *Cruel optimism* felt urgent: ‘Why is it so hard to leave those forms of life that don’t work? Why is it that, when precariousness is spread throughout the world, people fear giving up on the institutions that have worn out their confidence in living?’ (Berlant, 2012c, n.p.). *Cruel optimism* offered answers to the problem of political paralysis by reframing it as a question of why detachment is so difficult. Other work towards the end of Berlant’s life

affirmed the need to generate, build, and sustain new infrastructures of intimacy and belonging, often learning from queer, feminist, and neo-anarchist activist communities; infrastructures that might better support worldings that exit the binds of cruel optimism, and make room for other sustaining objects and relations (see Berlant (2016a) on the commons; Bosworth, 2022; McCormack, 2016).

The publication of *Cruel optimism* sparked engagement with the multiple tendencies and latencies of Berlant's thought, finding in them resources for making sense of the dramas and tensions of relationality and vocabularies for everyday violences and harms in the crisis-prone present (see, for example, Anderson, 2022; Bissell, 2022; Brickell, 2020; Cockayne, 2016; Linz, 2021; Pain & Cahill, 2022; Wilkinson & Ortega-Alcazár, 2019). Berlant's is no simple affirmation of being-in-common as counterpoint to the ravages of neoliberal individuation, though. Their 'queer optimism' (Berlant, 2008b) or 'depressive realism' (Berlant & McCabe, 2011) is underpinned by an enduring commitment to the overdetermination and incoherence of all phenomena, whether a nation or love, Bojack Horseman or heteronormativity, a person or our collective attachment to the promise of Berlant's work. Inevitably, ambivalence is ever present in Berlant's thought (see Ruez & Cockayne, 2021). Attachment is so often about stuckness, where it becomes hard to discern what is good or bad as flourishing and harm mix. Attunement is hard work, riven by failure and frustration. Others are inconvenient, blockages and interruptions to fantasies, and yet we desire the friction of inconvenience. Intimate publics are scenes of sustenance, even as they discipline subjects to norms and offer consolation for ongoing affective injuries. Berlant's recent work explicitly thematises the constraint and potential of (non-)relation by experimenting with concepts for modes of relationality that stand in-between minimal affection and deep entanglement – the unbearable (Berlant & Edelman, 2014) and the inconvenient (Berlant, 2022). A heterotopian emphasis on the disruption of non-sovereign relationalities also courses through work on 'structures of unfeeling' and styles of detachment (Berlant, 2015), as well as sole and joint editorial work on intimacy (Berlant, 1998), compassion (Berlant, 2004b), and comedy (Berlant & Ngai, 2017). Unsurprisingly, they kept coming back to love (Berlant, 2011b; Berlant & Hardt, 2012), finding in it an orientation to the risks of relationality, even as love is refracted through normative infrastructures of intimacy. Identifying as a 'love theorist' (Berlant, 2014b), for Berlant love is 'one of the few places where people actually admit they want to become different. And so it's like change without trauma, but it's not change without instability. It's change without guarantees, without knowing what the other side of it is, because it's entering into relationality' (Berlant & Hardt, 2012: n.p.; see in geography, Wilkinson, 2017; Zhang, 2022).

Despite deeper engagement with their work since the publication of *Cruel optimism*, Berlant is far from incorporated into geography, not that such a relation is desirable or possible. Much will always remain to be encountered. Their writings are an inexhaustible occasion for curiosity, puzzlement, and jolts that shift thinking, rather than offering consoling certainty or weary repetition. However, Berlant's work is not only promissory because of its resonances with a crisis-prone present and its glitches and impasses, but because it remains adjacent to many recent tendencies in human geography. Their thought is inconvenient in all kinds of ways; their qualified humanism and embrace of desire and fantasy and attachment at a time of post-humanism; their insistence that political-economic structures are affect structures; their curiosity about normativity as a scene of negotiated sustenance rather than only regulative or punitive; their centring of negativity and the difficulty of relation at a time when 'relations' and 'relationality' have come to promise too much; their career-long critique of erotophobia; their refusal to find a truth in feeling or coherence in emotion; their concern with a method and mood that cannot be reduced to 'critical' or 'postcritical', and so on. Perhaps the distance that remains from geography is also partly because of the singularity of a style that performs paradox, dissonance, and contradiction in every dense, precise sentence (on Berlant's style, see Seigworth, 2012). But perhaps it is also due to the heterogeneous tendencies that Berlant thought-with, and means that there could never be or should ever be a single 'Berlantian geography'. Key is the meeting between psychoanalysis and Marxism, as refracted through feminist and queer theory and activism, deconstruction, and material poststructuralism. But the stability of proper names obscures the tangle of influences and inheritances. In every interview the list of fields and names vary, testimony to the motility of a practice of thinking-with: Franz Fanon, trauma studies, Augusto Boal, Marxist cultural theory, Jean Copjec, Raymond Williams, feminist phenomenologies, and so on. The result is novel juxtapositions, strange constellations, and claims that interrupt consensus. Who, other than Berlant, would have claimed that 'affect theory is another phase in the history of ideology' (Berlant, 2011a, p. 52), for example?

There's a passage from *The female complaint* that struck and stayed with me. It is an iteration of Berlant's axiom that 'the personal is the generic', and goes to the heart of what, for me, is the promise of Berlant's thought. I teach it as part of a second-year lecture on romantic love and the crisis present, juxtaposing it with an analysis of the theme of disappointment in Adele's 'Someone Like You', and other pop songs by female artists:

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.

(Berlant, 2008a, p. ix)

I love how a simple proposition – that the message of much popular culture is ‘you are not alone’ – opens up an empathetic relation to people's objects. This proposition made me think again and interrupted some of my habits of thinking about popular culture. The two Parts of ‘Encountering Berlant’ gather together such encounters with Berlant's work. We hope they unfurl like one of Berlant's sentences, refusing the pleasures of closure in favour of unsettling expansion, arresting ruptures, and strange returns. We also hope they evoke the brilliance, promise, and plenitude of Lauren Berlant's inexhaustible thought:

More and more and more. I never want someone to talk less in class, I want everyone to talk more. I never want less fantasy, I always want more. I never want less citizenship, I always want more. More different ways of being in relation. And then we struggle it out, because we struggle with the ways in which they are incommensurate.

(Berlant & Seitz, 2013, n.p.)

## 2 | FANTASY

### Felicity Callard

Berlant provokes fantasy. Our collective paper ‘Encountering Berlant’ is evidence of that. And Berlant herself is consumed by fantasy. Without fantasy, they insist, there would be no love, no object, no optimism, no attachment. The political and psychosocial stakes could not be higher. After all, you need fantasy for the ‘work of undoing a world while making one’ (Berlant, 2011a, p. 263). And Berlant does not simply tell us about fantasy, they show us too. Berlant closes *The Queen of America goes to Washington City* by overtaking a senator's body ‘through an orifice he was incapable of fully closing, an ear or an eye’. They want to make him lose his coy innocence over ‘the sexuality of his own power’ (Berlant, 1997a, p. 241). Berlant stops only because the fantasy stops knowing what it wants. Fantasy appears in the first sentence of their first monograph (Berlant, 1991) and on the first page of *Cruel optimism*. Fantasy has its own, substantial sub-section in their short book *Desire/love* (Berlant, 2012a). Notably, it's embedded in the chapter ‘Love’, not ‘Desire’. Berlant cannot escape fantasy.

That fantasy is everywhere makes clear the indispensability of psychoanalysis to Berlant's project. Their models of fantasy carry traces of many psychoanalytic thinkers. One touchstone is the edited volume *Formations of fantasy* (Burgin et al., 1986). This collection brought the famous 1960s essay on fantasy by Laplanche and Pontalis (1968) to wide audiences, and transformed understandings of fantasy across film studies, visual culture, and literary studies. Laplanche and Pontalis made clear not only that fantasy, through the category of psychical reality, escapes the opposition reality–illusion, but that fantasy acts as the very ‘stage-setting’ of desire. The concept of stage-setting or scene is central to Berlant's work: their oeuvre might be read as a restless exploration of how exactly unconscious fantasy presses up against ‘the theatrical or scenic structure of normative fantasy’ (Berlant, 2012a, p. 69). Important too for Berlant are the writings of Jacqueline Rose (1986) and Franz Fanon (1963). If Rose taught Berlant how to think the ‘antiformalist tendencies of the intimate’ – how desire can never be stabilised (Berlant, 1998) – Fanon showed them the agonistic struggle through which a nation attempts to make itself real to and for every citizen (Berlant, 1991).

Berlant shows us how fantasies sit *inside* and not at some distance to the real. They demand that any attempt at describing practices reckons with fantasies' obdurate work. Fantasies pose a problem for those wishing to effect progressive political change: fantasies are hard to budge. But here's where Berlant's use of fantasy departs from some of their more structuralist collaborators. The best way to track this is to follow Berlant and Lee Edelman's intense exchanges over fantasy in *Sex, or the unbearable* (Berlant & Edelman, 2014). Edelman circles around his provocative question that asks if politics is ‘the fantasy, when you break it down, of breaking down figures of fantasy’ (2014, p. 71). Berlant counters with the potency that political contestation over imaginaries can possess. While such contestation might not transform the *structure* of fantasy, Berlant acknowledges, it might destabilise how fantasy ‘arcs, what it reaches and what's available to be in play’ (Berlant & Edelman, 2014, p. 89). Hence Berlant's many heady accounts of small shifts in atmosphere: when a scene quivers, desire is on the move. That scenes fold within them histories as well as futures means that tussles over

national stories or over how a subject comes to encounter themselves hold the potential not only to change the atmosphere but to shift how a fantasy plays itself out. And hence the potential to change a world.

Berlant's objects – predominantly novels, films, short stories – are different from those of many geographers. And fantasy poses challenges for certain kinds of empirical geographic research: which methods and modes of attention might allow us to glimpse its work? Some geographers, particularly those indebted to Lacan, have offered suggestions (Healy, 2010; Thomas, 2007). I have taken a different tack, becoming obsessed with how the human sciences have thought about, collected, and attempted to taxonomise fantasy. (Psychoanalytic) fantasy's origin story often invokes Anna O, the famous patient who co-created the psychoanalytic cure (Anna's frequent daydreaming constituted her own 'private theatre'). But there are multiple other protagonists to follow in and out of 20th- and 21st-century psychology, psychoanalysis, sociology, psychiatry, anthropology, geography, and criminology. I've gotten lost for the last few years in my own daydream archive (Callard, 2016). I'm attempting to track the work that fantasies do, the set-ups and places through which and in which they have been collected, and the means by which they have been pathologised or celebrated. Berlant offers a hand here. They push me to ask how scenes, objects, cultural practices, and aesthetic artefacts organise fantasy; they encourage me to recognise the importance of fantasy as that which 'really gives life its meaning' (Berlant, 2008a, 2008b, p. 239); they expand what I think an archive might be.

In showing how the psychic is sutured to the social, Berlant makes clear how fantasy lies at the heart of our social and political lives and how fantasy holds the door ajar. But Berlant leaves me with unanswered questions. One of them is: Whence do fantasies come? (Their bald statement, 'that's one theory' in response to their own sentence 'The origin of fantasy may still be the trauma of infantile separation' suggests they were not so sure (Berlant, 2012a, 2012b, p. 75).) There's more work for many of us to do.

Numerous disciplines have been transformed by or constituted through their encounters with fantasy. Feminist theory, queer theory, film studies, cultural studies, and psychosocial studies are unimaginable without it. There are fantasy seams coursing through history and anthropology (Gammeltoft & Segal, 2016; Scott, 2001). That geography could be said to have ingested Berlant but not ingested fantasy – a few psychoanalytic geographers and fellow travellers notwithstanding (e.g., Dubow, 2022) – makes me pause. It makes me wonder not only about the unimaginability of Berlant without fantasy, but about the fantasies that course through geography (Callard, 2003, 2019).

### 3 | IMPASSE

#### Steve Marotta

In the crescendo towards introducing impasse as a term for understanding the affective present, Lauren Berlant ruminates on 'what it feels like to be in the middle of a shift' (Berlant, 2011a, p. 198). The sentence struck me like a thunderbolt. I was overwhelmed when it found me: each of my children were enduring very different world-defining situations; the city outside my door was transforming at an extraordinary pace; the climate clock was ticking; fascism had accepted the invitation of the neoliberal state; and an oversaturated academic job market was consuming whatever was left of my will (it still is). I was dragging uncertainty around like a shadow,<sup>2</sup> from paediatric cardiologist waiting rooms to middle school counsellor offices to dissertation committee meetings. Even before the pandemic, everything felt like it was shifting; making sense of things resembled drunken appraisals about which attachments were still worth maintaining.

Berlant's term for this is impasse. Being in the impasse means being (and feeling) anchorless amid the ambiguity and turbulence of shifting conditions. The impasse is an affect world, an atmospheric attunement to structural transformation in which crisis is normalised and people become at once hyperaware of potential threats and exhausted by the constant management required to fend those threats off. An impasse is a kind of middle, but 'a middle without boundaries, edges, a shape' (Berlant, 2011a, p. 200). On one hand, it's the 'middleness' of impassivity that's unnerving; on the other, racial capitalism's 'durative present' (Povinelli, 2011, p. 3) is always already a middle. If, as Deleuze says, one 'enters in the middle' (1988, p. 123), then the impasse is a good place on Berlant's map to climb in and look around. My imaginary of Berlant's impasse bends in two directions (without imagining these directions as poles): towards cruel optimism and towards non-sovereignty.

I see their work as broadly about attachment, especially to things (objects, places, fantasies, even hierarchies) that sustain one's sense of affective durability, e.g., to normative forms of citizenship and sexuality (1997a), shared intimacy and conventionality (2008a), and especially 'that moral-intimate-economic thing called "a good life"' (2011a, p. 2). An attachment, for Berlant, is something of a contract with those things, a 'cluster of promises' (2011a, p. 23) for the possibility of living in worlds worthy of one's desire. Impassivity – being 'in the middle of a shift' – suggests thinking about attachments as they suffer attrition or are rent apart: what is left of an attachment when it loses its anchor, or when that

anchor-object becomes an impediment to the reciprocity it promised? What does one do when their attachments become hostile to the worlds they once held together?

If optimism organises one's 'world-sustaining relations' (Berlant, 2016a, p. 393), *cruel* optimism is a problematic attachment that is at once affirming and threatening; such an attachment scaffolds one's world but also has the potential to destroy it. It implies unrealised fantasy, unrequited sacrifice, and unravelling tethers, particularly to the 'good life' imaginaries that have provided anchors for the (white, cis-het, colonist) hegemony of western capitalist democracies. I've woven cruel optimism and its impassive consequences through my own work on craftpeople's rejection of globalisation (Marotta, 2021a), melancholic confrontations with racial privilege in gentrifying Detroit (Marotta, 2021b), and a shifting Portland neighbourhood littered with imaginaries of the future (Marotta & Cummings, 2018). And admittedly, I return to *Cruel optimism* sometimes just for the sentences. But what impacted me most was the revelation that political economy is necessarily a space of feelings, moods, atmospheres, attachments; it closed a gap between the personal and the political, between the structural and the embodied. One can *know* capitalism, for example, because they can *feel* it: it has bodily effects, it makes you anxious, exhausted, desperate, jealous, driven, desired, defeated, angry, satiated, hungry, lost – sometimes all at once.

What kinds of worlds might be desired or built after cruel optimism, after the worn-out ambivalence of the impasse? Losing one's world-sustaining object is ultimately to encounter non-sovereignty. If sovereignty is 'a fantasy of self-ratifying control over a situation or space' (Berlant, 2017a, p. 308), non-sovereignty is 'the relentless force that unsettles [that] fantasy' (Berlant & Edelman, 2014, p. viii). Non-sovereignty is an exercise in letting go; it necessarily underpins being in common, because being involved with others in the project of world-building demands forms of attachment that are antagonistic to fantasies of control (Berlant, 2016a, 2016b). 'What the political holds out', says Berlant, is 'the possibility of a good nonsovereignty' – the possibility of common worlds, that is, where freedom is divorced from sovereignty and belonging feels something like trust (Berlant, 2011b).

I'm reminded of my oldest son's gender journey,<sup>3</sup> a transitional period in which he and I talked at length about Berlant's writings (we still do). He was working on a thesis project, a narrative series of illustrations that imagined a miniature society situated precariously in the palms of giant disembodied, outstretched hands.<sup>4</sup> In a way, it's an allegory for his desire for confirmation and security in an extended moment of impasse: during his thesis defence, he admitted that 'beginning hormone replacement therapy (and falling in love) felt like I was building my house in the palm of a hand'. At any moment the house could be crushed by the thing that provides its foundation. And yet the world-building project carried on, because although 'being in the middle of a shift' is horrible and full of precarity and ambivalence, the impasse is also an 'ongoing exploration of *what might be*' (Hartman, 2019, p. 228). It's a meanwhile that's cruel, devoid of handrails, and at times overwhelming, but somewhere on the map is a good non-sovereignty.

As Claire Hemmings says: 'in order to know differently we have to feel differently' (2012, p. 150). That scream trapped in your chest, that's the revolution. Into the impasse we go.

## 4 | 'THE PLACE WHERE...'

### Joe Jukes

In 'Neither monstrous nor pastoral, but scary and sweet', Lauren Berlant (2009) responds to works by David Halperin and Leo Bersani to 'go places' with sex and sexuality. In doing so, Berlant supposes that sexuality is a place, or rather a set of simultaneously existing and possible places. For geographers of sexualities, Berlant reminds us that sexuality is a specifically spatial problematic, one as contested, affective, and self-effacing as the ground on which it rests.

For Berlant, 'sexuality takes place in the real time of encounters and in contradictory structurings of desire' (2009, p. 262). Social, as in materially real, and relational, as in not one's own, sexuality is constituted as something we want and do not want, something we are attached to, that attaches us to affects we do not choose (for example, shame).

In 'Neither monstrous nor pastoral', Berlant (2009, p. 264) names sexuality repeatedly *as* place. Sexuality, 'the more interesting place', is a 'complex place disciplined by norms [and] hierarchical ideologies of intelligibility', describing a certain field of knowledges and yielding an experience of space defined and limited by subjectivity. Sexuality affords subjects the chance to push up against the limits of the space it encloses.

Sexuality is 'also the place where atmospheres of affective discernment and emotional creativity engender possibilities for better reciprocity that were not defeated by political norms or institutions' (Berlant, 2009, p. 264). While Berlant frames sexuality as a spatial terrain produced out of norms, discourses, and disciplines, they remind that sexualities are themselves productive and felt. A sexuality might become, say, in the departure from those other sexuality-places one inherits, navigates, or resists.

For me, Berlant's is a reminder that sexuality does not simply 'take place', or happen in spaces, but is itself a strategy for comprehending place- and world-making where sex and sexuality are always-already geographical categories. Sexuality already demarcates a field of possibilities, sketches a terrain for erotic, social, and sexual relation, and serves as a porous political arena, all the while indebted to those who make and inhabit its place-ness. Sex denotes the libidinal churn of space – the social 'contact' (Delany, 1999), gestures of 'congregation', 'circulation' (Howard, 2001), and contestation (cf. Gray, 2009) that all constitute and challenge any given spatial form we might name 'place'.

Berlant (2009) cleaves sex from sexuality, arguing that the terms work in different registers. In geographies of sexualities literatures one finds this argument present too (see for example Bell & Valentine, 1995; Gray et al., 2016; Johnston & Longhurst, 2010), wherein 'place' comes to bear on how sexualities are comprised by and lived in socio-cultural contexts, and how this 'living in' sexuality impinges on and fails to capture actual sexual practices (see Bell (2017) and De Craene (2017) provocative discussions around geography's sexual 'squeamishness'). In turn, these latter sex-es compromise, contradict, or undo sexuality.

Berlant's sex, rather than working through place, becomes a genre for 'managing the distance and proximity of what touches us' (2009, p. 261). In sex, we touch and are touched, but in touching, as Berlant and Edelman (2014) outlined, we risk coming apart. Sex is the 'unbearable', it brings another within and in spite of oneself, but it can also bring close affects that dis-orient, dissolve, and 'move' us to places we may not choose, disrupting normative conceptions of body- and bounded-geographies. Sex therefore concerns proximity, the slippage and management of borders, and transit. Sex may take us to traumatic places, for instance, or may yield an ecstasy that feels shameful, wrong, or 'out of place'. A place, like sexuality, however, it is not.

The risk of sex's 'nonsovereignty' is that it 'reveals the cleavages in normalising ideology and creates openings for better futures' (Berlant, 2009, p. 264). A better future may pose a challenge, come at a cost, or require that we give up attachments to the places we already inhabit, like sexuality. Sex 'provides a context for talking about what's irrational in ordinary action' (Berlant, 2009, p. 264), to test, exceed, and be defeated by the attachments that make sexuality so confirming as a geographic placement, that constitute its borders. Sex opens those borders, but it does not guarantee what will be let in, nor that it will not return you somewhere else entirely, or anti-thetical.

It is for this reason that Berlant notes 'the impossibility of sexual ethics' (Berlant, 2009, p. 264). One cannot predict what sex can do to and for us until it has us already in relation with another. We would do better to appreciate sex for the ways it can both create and destroy places familiar and fulfilling to us, queer or otherwise. For the study of sexualities, we must question how geography operates by placing, and therefore shoring up certain sexualities, certain 'places where...'

Perhaps this terrain is defined by the *attachments* that hold it up and in tension, 'attachments to modes of life to which no one remembers consenting' (Berlant, 2009, p. 263). For this was one of Berlant's greatest gifts: to expose how our attachments to structures and places inflect our most intimate encounters with the social and material world, and shape our desires before we feel them. Sex is how we attempt to bear, or manage, these attachments, even if it contradicts our sexualities or social or political lives so often.

After Berlant, sex is spatial promise, and sexuality a situated knowledge. The latter a placing of oneself by the affective attachments that bind one to and in response to structures of hegemonic power, say, US nationalism (in *The Queen of America goes to Washington City*), exhaustion and appetite (in *Slow Death*), or space, as in my own research on queer relationships to rural life. Yet to be 'situated' is also to be placed in proximity to that which would be unbearable, to know that sex – the promise of un-doing – could at any time dis-place the locational and locative fixings of the subject's own position.

Berlant has left us a *geography without optimism*. A geography that is ever-present, but not straightforwardly emancipatory. For geographers of gender, sex, and sexuality, it amounts to say that one can never stop having a sexuality – one can never not be located somewhere – just as one can only adopt a position of or as (a) sexuality ambiguously.

After Berlant, sexuality is not the place *here* where I am touched in particular ways, and it is not the place *there*, to which I could easily arrive. Rather it is *the place where* that remains a little distanced and discursive, but to which we are unfathomably attached.

## 5 | FEEL TANKS

### Chloe Turner

The final line of Lauren Berlant's one paragraph article 'Feel Tanks': 'I close with the slogan that will be on our first cache of T-shirts and stickers: Depressed? ... It Might be Political' (2012b, p. 340) seems the right opening line for this one. Like much of their writing, it is a disarmingly humble articulation that manages to hold political and affective registers in

conversation at once. In trusting that the most generative thinking begins in half-formed ideas, I offer a short piece to celebrate how Berlant's 'unfinishedness' (2014a, n.p.) of thought invites in other potential futures. 'But this is terrible storytelling. Let me set the table' (Berlant, 2011c, p. 84).

'Feel Tanks' (2012) outlines the political investments of Feel Tank Chicago, one working group of a larger gathering known as the Public Feelings Project. Based across multiple US universities, the Project works from the conviction that attending to the texture of feelings was both an important and necessary way to understand how the workings of oppression underpin power structures (Berlant, 2004a; Carmody & Love, 2008; Cvetkovich, 2007, 2012a, 2012b). The Tank, led by a collective of academics, artists, and community organisers, of whom Berlant was one, engaged in 'taking the emotional temperature of the body politic' (Feel Tank Chicago, 2012, n.p.) through performance, art, criticism, and reading groups from 2001 onwards. In their recognition of public spheres as affect worlds, they aim to make apparent the feeling work undertaken to 'endure and sustain ourselves during cruel times' (Muñoz, 2011, n.p.). Berlant describes their thought as 'elliptical ... it both tracks concepts and allows for unfinishedness' (2014a, n.p.); I'm interested in the liveness this allows, a permission for thinking that is attentive to fluctuating trajectories, to being surprised, to stopping halfway to back-track on itself and starting over. At the 'Anxiety, Urgency, Outrage, Hope ... Conference' in Chicago in 2007, Berlant explained that the ellipsis in the title was meant to 'suggest that the possibilities remain to be thought' (Carmody & Love, 2008, p. 135). On the page, the ellipsis holds the sentence in suspension, a held breath between how it sets out and how it ends. Berlant encourages us to consider what possibilities are glimpsed in sentences that stutter and pause.

There is an 'unfinishedness' in the Feel Tank Chicago manifesto in which they explain they named themselves so 'to produce a double take' (2012, n.p.). To enact a double-take is to unconsciously intervene in time, to re-enact and look again. I am reminded of a recent conference paper by Joe Jukes at the 2021 Following the Affective Turn Symposium where they spoke of that second, more fervent, glance of the double-take gesture as 'a secret space within a space' (2021, n.p.). To read 'Feel Tank' through the act of a double take is then first to recognise the tongue-in-cheek play on the policy-making 'think tank' and consider how both political and affective registers are held in conversation. Second, in producing the double take, where looking back for the second glance becomes looking forward, is to reveal and welcome in a secret time within a time. To be out of time.

Since 2018 I have been using the phrase 'Feel Tanks' as both intellectual enquiry and call-to-arms, to consider what it means to live under the complexity of capitalism *in the current moment*. I have designed and facilitated over 15 discussion-led Feel Tank workshops and seminars across academic, arts/performance, and activist spaces. In a time of competing emergencies I ask: how do we reckon with our own increasing precarity in academia and its relationship to the precarity of art, activism, and academia? How can we create sanctuary in a debilitating present? Amid such tangled feelings, 'situated in contradiction' (Berlant, 2012b, p. 340), what does it mean to think through a lens feminist, queer, anti-racist, and anti-ableist politics in a world when so much 'good' scholarship and 'good' action arise from places of negativity and conflict? How can communities envision care structures and tactics for redistributing negative emotions and/or re-appropriating them as resistance ...? Rather than seeking direct responses, these lofty (uncomfortable?) questions are intended to generate points of connection and dis-connection between individuals, groups, and wider social and cultural registers. They are invitations to meet me in the ellipsis with whatever thoughts you can muster in the present, as we collectively 'throw language at an intellectual problem until something could stick' (Affective Public Reading Group on Berlant, 2021, n.p.).

Such questions follow Berlant's lead to connect how we feel in the world and the world we want to bring into being, to 'wrestle with the back and forth between having feelings and critiquing feelings' (Cvetkovich, 2021, n.p.). To take seriously this observation as methodological enquiry is to be content leaving these discussions with even more questions and half-formed answers than you began with. When the present feels in constant crisis, Berlant's temporal rerouting through Feel Tanks enables us to catch sight of other possible futures as we suspend and intervene in time. Ones where we gift our labour to each other as opposed to institutions, co-create spaces to weather the coming disasters, and mobilise a resistance that centres pleasure and joy.

## 6 | IN ANY CASE

### Thomas Jellis

... to ask the question of what makes something a case, and not a merely gestural instance, illustration, or example, is to query the adequacy of an object to bear the weight of an explanation worthy of attending to and taking a lesson from ...

(Berlant, 2007, p. 666)

My first encounter with the work of Lauren Berlant came towards the end of my PhD and as I was beginning to take on some teaching. I remember being slightly perplexed when asked to deliver a seminar on case studies. I remember feeling fortunate that there was last year's reading list to go on. But mainly I remember being thrown by the topic itself. The 'case can incite an opening, an altered way of feeling things out, of falling out of line' (Berlant, 2007, p. 666).

As part of attempts to think through my own emerging research on experimental spaces, I had sought to foreground resonances between theory and empirics, seeking partial points of convergence and divergence, rather than following a logic of demonstration or illustration. Berlant's (2007) 'On the Case', full of careful observation and beautiful associations, seemed to speak directly to me. It connected to suspicions about how geographers have conceived of case studies (Barnett, 2020; Castree, 2005); to oscillations between grounded details and ambitious abstractions (Choy, 2011); to suggestions that there be some irreducibility to the case (Barry, 2010). But it also underscored the instability of the term and gestured towards how the case 'reveals itself not fundamentally as a form but as an *event* that takes shape' (Berlant, 2007, p. 670, my emphasis).

Since that initial encounter, I found myself wanting to read more of their work. Berlant's discussion of the impasse was striking, expressed as 'a holding station that doesn't hold securely but opens out into anxiety' (2011a, p. 199). And some of their earlier work highlighting a range of political emotions of our times – such as vagueness, confusion, exhaustion, apathy, and ambivalence (see Berlant, 2004a) – was just as acute as work which has come to be better known. It's not that I agree with all that they wrote; their dismissal of ethics as 'politics-lite' continues to trouble me.

I had hoped to see Berlant speak at the AAG in Chicago back in 2015 but missed it due to a (possibly misplaced) sense of commitment to the sessions that I was contributing to (on failure, no less). The article which eventually came out (Berlant, 2016a), incidentally, has a striking passage where they use the term 'exemplum': example or model, especially a story told to illustrate a moral point.

As a genre, the case hovers about the singular, the general, and the normative.

(Berlant, 2007, p. 664)

Back to the case in point, though. What Berlant encourages us to think about are the important associations between the case, the example (Massumi, 2002), and the 'exposure' (Dewsbury, 2009). Others, like Derek McCormack, have already begun to make such connections, noting that a practice of exemplification coupled with Berlant's notion of case as 'problem-event', 'provides a way of avoiding using ... details as a case study of a process or phenomenon that has *already been defined in advance*' (McCormack, 2013, p. 12, my emphasis).

Such a concern with details or empirical exposures or – put simply – fieldwork, is something of a refrain in geography. Many of us have felt 'a kind of pull that marks a commitment – or participation – to a particular field or "case"' (Gerlach & Jellis, 2015, p. 136–137). For me, fieldwork became less about 'identifying a specific bounded example but rather ... as a series of graspings' (2015, p. 147), of holding on to threads and following where they lead. In this sense, fieldwork could be understood not as distinct sites so much as different ways in which the things we are interested in can relate to one another. This is an acknowledgement that fieldwork proceeds not only through connection (whether that be resonance, friction, tension, or otherwise) but also happenstance.

But it might also mean that we modify the ways in which we write about cases. Berlant writes of their love for 'thought that welcomes the risk of formlessness' (2004a, p. 447). They are 'puzzled by the persistent claim-case-case-case-conclusion-coda shape of so much scholarly work, a form repeated usually without methodological reflection' (2007, p. 671). The case corralled, closed, cold.

The case is always normative but also always a perturbation in the normative.

(Berlant, 2007, p. 670)

One of the many versions of the case that Berlant teases out is that of a genre, one which organises singularities into patterns. It can be a specific professional genre, such as a legal case, or a medical case. Let us also, for completeness, add psychoanalytic cases too. Over the past few years, a lot of my time has been spent familiarising myself with a medical case close to home. We sometimes use the phrase 'medical condition'; sometimes more disconcertingly, we might talk of 'a syndrome'. The latter, from Ancient Greek, is often translated as *concurrency*. A syndrome is characterised by a group of concurring symptoms. A coincidence.

The case 'reveals itself not fundamentally as a form but as an *event* that takes shape' (Berlant, 2007, p. 670). I'm repeating myself. That's sort of the point. When 'an event occurs out of which a case is constructed, it represents a situation in



We<sup>5</sup> speculate on what we, a transnational collective of artists/researchers/teachers, might offer geographers and others through the hundreds done otherwise; ‘We w/rite and right our re-search iteratively as co-labourers, using multiple data sources as part of the ritual of practice’ (Healy et al., 2021, p. 81). We w/rite from the creative encounter as we unfurl Berlant through Irwin staying with what opened up or is opening up or might open up as it unfolds, refolds, folds. ‘Encounter[ing] with words’ (Berlant, 2019b, p. 290) in the sense of w/riting. Writing creates the past, present, and future like our steps create the past, present, and future (Pujol, 2018).

W/riting gives glimpses of my thinking.  
 Thinking provokes or invites others to right their thinking.  
 W/riting is becoming a bridge  
 in-between you and I, past and present, present, and future, now,  
 and then or you and others.

We take a breath approximately 8–16 times a minute. During and in-between our mostly unconscious breaths we ‘do’ our lives. We rarely factor the need to breathe into our daily plans. But what if we consciously decide to suspend our breathing for a minute, half a minute, or even ten seconds, and enact our plans without taking a breath? We become hurried, anxious, hot, unnerved. We make quick choices about actions to discard, how far to push ourselves. How does our knowledge generation change? Do we see our worlds differently?

Unfurling Berlant through Irwin, we paused. Unpaused. Paused. Unpaused. Like a dog panting.  
 Expiringgginspiringggexpiringgginspiringggexpiringgginspiringggexpiringgginspiringggexpiringgginspiringgg.  
 It is the continuous breathing in and out that gives life.

Walking affords time to unfurl memories, offering iterative space where past and present is contemplated – mapping memories, fraught with representation and overlaid by temporal elasticity, layering as a cartographer would view a coast-line. Time blurs events and places. As we created opportunities for inspiration by connecting people to place through shared sensemaking across both physical and digital sites of practice we variously encounter people/nature/air/animals/times. Physical mobilities are constrained by government (and disease) yet enabled through the digital and virtual. Another form of collective im/mobility comes to pass.

Echoes pulling me inward, eecchhooiinngg, bbeeccoommiinngg aanneeww.

Observing human experience through the interlinked self-actions of inspiration and expiration. The action of inspiration kickstarts our breathing, an unconscious action that becomes an automatic and permanent undertaking across our lifespan. We draw in air and over time, this air is joined by nourishment, learning, movement, knowledge, joy, sadness, health, illness. We expire (small e) so that we can continue our breathing as we fulfil our living (breathing). We expire (big E) when that living is done. It seems that everything inspired ends in one final, deflating, and permanent expiration. In this final expiration, everything that is us is redistributed.

‘Walking gives us opportunities to freely contemplate, to look expectantly and with gratitude’ (Irwin, 2006, p. 78). The feet move, the heart beats. The ground swells with intrigue about the possibilities of unfurling, unfolding, and undoing with others. Methods gifted by work that ruptured the Academy have made room for us and others to move. The creative affects of relational reciprocities are gifted in return. All around. As we listen to the sounds of moving between knowing and unknowing. The walking, skipping, tripping excursions into new sites/cites/sights are performed through unfurling our w/riting.

Navigating the backslash in a/r/tography  
 being playful, there is the back/slash,  
 back[s]lash, perhaps back[sl]ash  
 back/s/lash, back/sl/ash;  
 the folds play with us, immersing us in the liminality  
 of the vast in-between  
 in that sliver of space,  
 that ever so slim line of the in-between

the folding space of knowing and not knowing, all at once  
 being one or the other, neither or both  
 perhaps all of the above  
 the backslash gives us permission  
 to move ahead without certainty  
 trusting the process to unfold  
 that which is folded into existence  
 the backslash moves ahead with certainty,  
 with confidence, with generosity  
 and hope

A/r/tographies fold analogue, digital, and virtual; creating opportunities to activate all senses including the sense of movement and site. Walking and w/riting in and between physical, digital, and virtual sites during a crisis troubles the politics of forced immobility; with forced im/mobility such as 'shelter in place' mandates being and becoming something many of us (and our students) experienced for the first time during the lockdowns of 2020 and 2021. A slant, a back/slash, is inserted between the im and mobility to indicate the relationality of im/mobility. Similarly, the slant may be located at the point where the breath transforms from and expiration (small e) to inspiration; with the constant state of flux being and becoming a part of sustained life and learning through a curerre that has the capacity to encompass our collective acts of grieving, moving, breathing, wondering, pausing, unfurling, walking, w/riting.

## 8 | INTIMATE PUBLICS

### Justin Tse

I teach a module at Singapore Management University titled 'Publics and Privates on the Pacific Rim'. It started out as a joke. The basket of courses called 'Cultures of the Modern World' needed a syllabus quickly – in six hours, they told me. A memory of myself flashed before my eyes. I was grading midterms as a graduate student at the University of British Columbia. The course for which I was a teaching assistant was called 'Geographies of the Pacific Rim'. It focused on the political, economic, and social circulations that have entangled the Asia-Pacific and the Americas especially since the 1980s and the advent of neoliberalism. The student whose midterm I was grading wrote the word 'public' in a sentence, presumably to talk about such circulatory processes. Somehow, through either bad handwriting or hasty scribbling, they had omitted the 'l'. I circled it in red.

Publics and Privates on the Pacific Rim was where the joke became serious. In relating spheres regarded as 'public' to 'private' ones on the Pacific Rim, I engaged Lauren Berlant's (2008a) term 'intimate publics' when I taught Wong Kar Wai's 2000 film, *In the mood for love*. I invited students to consider what relationship the 'public', broadly construed, has to the intimate lives of the main characters, Chan Mo-wan (played by Tony Leung) and Su Li-zhen (played by Maggie Cheung). Chan and Su are neighbours in a small Hong Kong apartment building. Their spouses are never shown on screen. They learn, however, that their spouses – Chan's wife and Su's husband – are having an affair because Chan has the same tie as Su's husband and his wife has the same handbag as Su. Su's husband is a businessperson who frequently travels to Japan. These objects of intimacy are only present in the lives of the Hong Kong characters because of his trips abroad.

What retained my students' attention, they told me, was the way that Chan and Su's friendship, and subsequent romance, develop. Chan is a journalist for a Hong Kong newspaper and begins moonlighting as a martial arts story columnist. He enlists Su as a writing partner, and she joins him in the intimate spaces of his bedroom at first, and then a rented office, to come up with what seem to be fantastical plots. The viewers learn nothing about their stories because their discussions are covered up by a soundtrack featuring Nat King Cole singing Spanish songs with a heavy American accent.

What my students notice is the way that Chan and Su's neighbours observe them and even police their intimacies. Su's landlady, for example, tells her that it is not proper to be meeting with someone else's husband. In another scene, they are writing in Chan's bedroom only for all the neighbours to come home to play mah-jong. They are trapped there for an entire night and decide not to leave the room, for fear of the neighbours speculating that *they* are the ones having an affair.

In my classroom, *In the mood for love* becomes a platform through which my students talk about the loves and intimacies that they themselves hide from those they live and interact with – their parents, their friends, their neighbours, their relatives. No one speaks about what exactly they are hiding – it is like Cole's bad Spanish singing mutes their narrative too – but they are usually secret relationships that they attempt to hide from those who might judge them according to norms where those loves, romances, and friendships would be transgressive. Just like Chan and Su use the martial arts story as a space through which they can encounter each other, my students speak and write cryptically about how what they take to be the 'public' – which for them is anyone who is close enough to observe their lives – police and surveil their intimacies.

I am often tempted to correct my students' understanding of the public. Intimate publics, I try to tell them from my reading of Berlant, are circuits where objects of intimacy like the handbag and the tie, as well as narratives about what is and is not proper in intimate behaviour, circulate. But I wonder whether my students might be onto something that Berlant is also trying to open up with the term. When Jay Prosser interviewed Berlant as *Cruel optimism* was coming out in 2011 (Berlant & Prosser, 2011), he asked them if there was a United States-centricity to the concept of 'intimate publics'. He opined that its applications in places outside the American nation-state might be problematic. The 'national sentimentality' trilogy, where Berlant coins the term in *The female complaint*, grew out of Berlant's work on American culture.

Berlant acknowledges the point, but they reply that 'the real project for me has not been to generalize about US culture'. Instead, intimate publics are 'about the simultaneously flourishing logics of belonging' generated by the national organs of 'the state, the law, and related institutions of social reproduction' that affectively bind 'strangers both directly (in modes of social control) and imaginatively (in terms of their saturation of collective imaginaries of the social)'. The Pacific Rim is a prime example of such a 'transnational' formation (Berlant's words, not mine). It is the structural extension of American circulation to the markets and publics of the Asia-Pacific. But in so extending, 'intimacy' and the 'public' are revealed not to be discursive categories that must be made 'translatable' in what Prosser opines to be great variation 'across cultures, nations, and continents', but to be material structures and affects that already travel across communities and networks (Berlant & Prosser, 2011, p. 83).

When my students connect to the intimate policing of the intimacies in *In the mood for love*, they are telling each other about the way that they experience the relationship between their intimate lives and what they consider the 'public'. The circulation of commodities and narratives are invisible to them at first, but where they come into contact with those circuits is through the publics that are closest to them, which include their own families, they say. The spaces conventionally called 'intimate', in other words, turn out to have a public valence because it is in such spaces that my students feel observed, policed, and surveilled. That is what they understand to be 'intimate publics' as a term unmoored from Berlant. And yet, perhaps the point of extending the background circulatory processes that Berlant is describing as 'intimate publics' (in this case in a transpacific dimension) is for the term to travel into fields of meaning that are only tenuously attached to its original formulation.

My classroom becomes a space through which such intimacies are discussed, often in as indirect ways as *In the mood for love* mutes Chan and Su through Cole. There is a kind of intimacy to this kind of pedagogical encounter that makes me wonder whether educational spaces are also nodes in the circulation of intimate publics. Certainly, they are sites where I can teach about such circulations. But I am also not going to correct my students anymore, I do not think, when they tell me about how they encounter the 'public' in unconventionally intimate ways, or even when they might spell it without the 'I'. Perhaps they are not getting intimate publics wrong. They are doing exactly what Berlant would have wanted with the term. They are extending it to their own lives.

## 9 | SLOW DEATH

### Jana Bacevic

Slow death prospers not in traumatic events, as discrete time-framed phenomena like military encounters and genocides can appear to do, but in temporally labile environments whose qualities and whose contours in time and space are often identified with the presentness of ordinariness itself.

(Berlant, 2011a, p. 100)

How should we understand and contemplate mass death? Twentieth-century theorists like Adorno, Habermas, and Arendt faced this question in the aftermath of the Second World War in relation to death camps. Today, there are many other sites, forms, and scenes of mass death to ponder: wars (like the one in Ukraine), hurricanes (like Katrina), tsunamis

(like the one that followed the Fukushima nuclear meltdown), or the almost-daily drowning of refugees in the Mediterranean or the English Channel. In this context, however, I want to ponder another kind of mass deaths: those brought about by phenomena like pandemics and climate change.

At the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, theorists were quick to label it as an ‘event’ in the philosophical sense (Žižek, 2020); it was a ‘crisis’, a form of the ‘unprecedented’, a rupture offering the opportunity to rebuild societies along more equal, just, and environmentally sustainable lines (Walby, 2021). Some saw COVID-19 as only confirming (or affirming) existing theories about capitalism, like Giorgio Agamben’s – somewhat ill-fated – attempt to ‘explain away’ pandemic governance as the operation of sovereign power through the state of exception (Agamben, 2021; Prozorov, 2021). Yet, what gets lost between the common theoretical moves of ‘nothing new under the sun’ vs ‘everything new’ is precisely how crises *become* ordinary. For this, we need Lauren Berlant’s concept of ‘slow death’.

‘Slow death’ encapsulates the process through which risk or harm gets intertwined with ordinary events or contexts and blend into the ‘backdrop’, becoming part of ordinariness itself. This challenges the idea of death as a net effect of sovereign power – Foucault’s ‘biopolitics’, Agamben’s ‘bare life’, Mbembe’s ‘necropolitics’, Povinelli’s ‘ontopolitics – or of ‘simple’ structural inequalities of classical Marxism: ‘Since catastrophe means change, crisis rhetoric belies the constitutive point that slow death – or the structurally induced attrition of persons keyed to their membership in certain populations – is neither a state of exception nor the opposite, mere banality, but a domain where an upsetting scene of living is revealed to be interwoven with ordinary life after all’ (Berlant, 2011a, p. 102).

It is these scenes of normal life that we should turn towards as one of the primary sites of the biopolitical today. In a pandemic of an airborne virus, ‘ordinary’ activities – shopping, going out for a meal, riding on public transport – are *at the same time* environments of harm, especially in the context of removal of masks and social distancing. The fact that most people seem to go along – many willingly – with these arrangements highlights the problem of locating agency. Why would people conspire in their own (slow) death?

The concept of ‘cruel optimism’ was developed precisely to capture the paradox of persisting in practices, regimes, or acts that harm us. Berlant uses the example of food in the context of the ‘obesity epidemic’ in the USA. For ‘obese’ subjects, food becomes a source of comfort provoked – at least in part – by exposure to structural forms of harm, including sexist and racist forms of abuse. This kind of abuse is, of course, mediated/intersectionally amplified by ‘fat-shaming’, at least for certain bodies. In this context, food – at the same time a source of harm – becomes a mode for subjects to at least temporarily inhabit (or feel) their interiority, and thus push back (or out) the effects of slow violence.<sup>6</sup>

This is not a passive process, nor one governed by resignation. On the contrary, it involves quite a degree of agency, but the kind that can be conceived of as ‘lateral’ (Berlant, 2011a, p. 100). Lateral agency is not resistance in the strict sense of the term, though it does arise as a reaction to perceived harm. It is less disruptive than interruptive, or, as Berlant frames it, *self-interrupting*.

Self-interruption emphasises the degree to which living in contemporary capitalism negates the possibility of acting in a ‘pure’ or agentially straightforward way. Going to restaurants, football games, shopping malls, or the pub provides temporary respite from frustration, fear, and exhaustion – pandemic-generated or otherwise. At the same time, however, these activities become occasions for virus transmission. This normalisation of exposure to risk involved in social activities during a pandemic is an example of the optimism with which people can conspire in their own ‘slow death’ while, simultaneously, having a good time.

In this sense, ‘ordinary’ scenes are as (if not more) relevant for understanding contemporary politics of affect as is the *absence* of sustained public displays of disruptive affect – mourning, anger, violence – in the face of an event that should, under most descriptions, be traumatic. Throughout the pandemic, mourning and grief mostly happened in private – often, in extreme privacy of Zoom-mediated goodbyes and funerals. It was only with the passing of Queen Elizabeth II that occasion was provided for the public display of collective grief – in this case, clearly serving to solidify the nation. Similarly, anger, when manifested, often served to either aid the reproduction of the virus (anti-mask and anti-vaccination protests) or remained constrained to expressions on social media (this was aided by measures aimed to actually curtail protests, like the UK’s new Police, Crime and Sentencing Bill). But most people are not *forced* to go to the cinema or to nightclubs. There is no operation of sovereign power at play.

Slow death and lateral agency are better descriptions of the ordinarisation of harm than interpretations of behaviour that follow the logic of agential sovereignty (e.g., Packer et al., 2021; for critique, see Bacevic, 2021). This distinguishes ‘slow death’ from concepts that similarly recognise the biopolitical relevance of exposure to harm, in particular environmental harm, but nonetheless equate agency with the ability to resist (Nixon, 2011; Davies, 2022; Liboiron et al., 2018; for a different perspective, see Wladiwel, 2016). In slow death’s labile environments, even attempts to temporarily manoeuvre to the side of (literally *laterally* to) structural pressures increasingly involve the acceptance of death.

This does not mean, of course, that there is nothing to do. Environments of harm are social environments; so are modes of coexistence within them. Their temporal lability, if nothing else, suggests they can be made otherwise.

## 10 | ATTRITION AND THE NEGATIVE

### Salman Khan

Didn't they [the Global North] pollute the world for 150 years or so? Isn't that how they generated enough wealth to transition to a service economy? One in which they now hire us as their factory instead?

The above quote, attributable to a friend who resides in my hometown of Lahore, may in some respects seem quite simplistic, or even naïve. It is one fragment of a series of encounters I've had with a certain genre of ambivalent affects: climate affects running through those from the Global South. These affects, which for me have thrown up several and largely unresolved questions, have two dimensions. First, there are interactions with educated, upper-middle-class friends during visits back to Lahore; when prompted to share their views on climate action, they broke their silence only to betray a withdrawal in relation to it. There was a furrowing of eyebrows, and affects veered off in all sorts of directions, dancing around the issue itself. The friend quoted above spoke about the right to industrialise, just like the West did in the colonial era, and how this right is supposedly, by implication, cast as unreasonable by climate activism on that end. Another allegorically pointed to how the transfer of industry to countries like ours helps keep the air clean in wealthy countries, air that they fondly remember from past travels. There was a resignation that given the lack of public transport, sidewalks, or alternatives to manufacturing jobs, not much can be done to reduce the detrimental level of emissions. And rather than the inefficiency of energy, it was its insufficient provision, as well as uneven distribution, to which affects came to be attached. All these interactions also relate to, and had in fact been spurred by, the second dimension, which pertains to the uncertain reactions I've noticed in myself when – as a migrant to Britain – I've been in spaces where people have expressed their frustration, anger, and disappointment in relation to the climate crisis. Despite appreciating these reactions, and the affects tied to them, I noticed a disablement, a failure in myself to 'be moved' in the same way. This has always stirred a potent realisation of how, as Massumi puts it, 'The escape of affect cannot but be perceived, alongside the perceptions that are its capture' (2002, p. 35).

How to make sense of the Lahore scenes in particular, considering that they took place in what is now routinely ranked as the most polluted city on the planet (Tanis, 2022) – a city where the winter is almost entirely lost to smog? Shouldn't the climate crisis be of concern to those physically worn out by breathing toxic air by the day? Like many social scientists, what I am grappling with here are not just ambivalent affects, but *negative* ones – affects that, in terms of Spinozist-Deleuzian relational thinking, diminish instead of augment capacities to affect or be affected, fold the body in on itself, create fissures through the teeming swarm of intensities, potentialities, and becomings that have so enthused scholars across the social sciences, myself included. Rose et al. say that the negative denotes 'the ineliminable hollows that shadow all relational activity' (Rose et al., 2021, p. 17), a force that 'weakens our confidence and undermines our reasoning; it illuminates not what is possible but what is impossible' (2021, p. 12). Making space for negativity so we can account for its uncertain modalities – refusal, quietude, dissonance, dejection, disengagement – within affective relationality is surely a welcome step. Yet in my bid to understand the affects I'd encountered, it wasn't enough; I continued to wonder why these affects dis/articulated in the way they did. It was here that my meaningful encounter with Berlant began.

In *Cruel optimism*, Berlant challenges us to reconsider why we continue to think of 'a manifest lack of self-cultivating attention' as 'refusal, or incapacity' (2011a, p. 99; emphasis added). The key implication is that unquestioned bodily attrition, such as that happening to Lahore's residents, may *not* be an instance of a muting impassivity that indicates the shutting down of affects. Rather, it indicates a response, a 'coasting' (Berlant, 2011a, p. 43), in the face of an endemic realisation that a desired object – the 'good life' (Berlant, 2011a, p. 3) in Berlant's case, attaining 'development' through industrialisation in mine – looks more and more beyond reach, yet its total loss would be to lose your orientation to the world. So you retain this orientation, even as it means inhaling air that'll shorten your life, day after day, in a scene of 'slow death' (Berlant, 2011a, p. 117). Attachments, then, can *act on* the expressive-material assemblages we all inhabit. Interrogating my encounters from this angle, I began to see why the climate crisis, with some of its framings thought-felt as imposed and unfair, can fail to summon the feelings of urgency, emergency, rage in the manner that it does in the West; indeed, such affects themselves come to be seen as partial, as stating that you aren't part of the conversation. Where these

affects do arise, they always articulate differently. Intermittent events of climate disaster, of which the mammoth flooding in Pakistan is a current example, are revealing of the peculiarity of such articulations: cries for ‘climate justice’ attribute the ultimate inability to forge a safer path as well as the wounds endured – including the object of ‘development’ moving *even further* out of reach – to actions beyond those of the country itself.

Going beyond a Lacanian framing, Berlant beckons us to take note of the *historicity* of such desired objects, which in my case are rooted in colonial extraction (Bhambra, 2022) and, as one of its consequences, the continuing subjective penetration of the framework of relations we call coloniality (Quijano, 2000). Tying this back into my engagement with negativity, what Berlant underlines is that the negative, beyond being an existential condition, can also be a historically inflicted one. In their terms, our undoing by the negative is a ‘sensual, historical experience’, such that our incoherent, flailing attempts at navigating that undoing necessarily transpire in settings that are both ‘continuously contemporary’ to our expressive-material relations *and* bear an ‘anachronistic force’ – in both directions – of those relations (Berlant & Edelman, 2014, p. 89–116). Those of us with fidelity to relational approaches thus arrive at a problem: how do we reconcile overflows of the past into undosings present, as in Berlant’s work and the case I have sketched, with our enchantments by vitality, immanence, and affirmation on one end, and negativity on the other (Dekeyser et al., 2022)?

The imperative behind raising this problem is to provoke some thought on whether our concepts are sufficiently attuned to the affective consequences of objects that traverse between past, present, and future. To return to my case: if dominant framings of the climate crisis are failing to resonate in Lahore, then do we have the vocabulary to articulate how an attachment to ‘development’, an out-of-reach desired object that cannot be understood in isolation from coloniality, modulates both affect and negativity in that place? I think not, but after facing negativity, attempts at tracing its rootedness in histories lived may well be another step towards ‘thinking relationality anew’ (Rose et al., 2021, p. 6). In such an undertaking, we have much to learn from the ways in which Berlant sought to open up, to problematise rather than resolve, how ‘different objects and scenes produce different potentials for living with negativity’ (Berlant & Edelman, 2014, p. 90).

## 11 | AMBIVALENT LOVE

### Eleanor Wilkinson

Berlant’s critical thought begins in unfolding scenes, fragmentary stories, and chance encounters, for as Berlant writes, ‘in the intensified everyday there are always pointers to alternative experiences, even the yet un-lived’ (Berlant, 2008a, 2008b, p. 273). Berlant’s work is underpinned by a pressing desire for new forms of relationality and alternative ways to flourish. There is an urgency to their writing: feelings are political, affective life sustains the possibilities for other life-worlds. In some ways, Berlant’s work resonates with that of Raymond Williams, with their ‘national sentimentality’ trilogy forming a bold, ambitious project that tries to capture particular political epochs: paying close attention to fantasy, objects of desire, the lure of ideology and convention, but always looking for glimpses of something otherwise. Yet Berlant’s political hope is not founded on a projected fantasy of a yet-to-be-realised future. They do not propose some sort of grand manifesto for political transformation, no neat script of what we should do next. Instead, their starting place is in the heterotopic potentialities found in the broken-down present: moments of undoing, contradictory desires, latent fantasies of flourishing. Berlant’s scholarship should thus be a key point of engagement for geographers working on ideology, the commons, political transformation, and solidarity.

Notably, Berlant’s focus on the everyday can help us make better sense of the political impasse of the present: of what holds people in place. They carve out space to think about how people may be ‘stuck’ in conventional plots, and how political depression may make us unable to take the leap of faith needed to imagine the world anew. Berlant recognises that political hope can be devastating. But their work never dismisses or ridicules people for their attachments to conventional life plots, their crushed hopes, or failures to imagine other life-worlds. Instead, Berlant offers a careful and generous attempt to understand what sustains people’s sense of connection to the world. Their scholarship dwells in these everyday affective milieux, taking time to attune to the rhythms of often seemingly ordinary affects. In doing so, Berlant’s scholarship helps us uncover subtle ‘pointers to alternative experiences’, glimpses of new forms of relationality that are in the process of becoming. Berlant’s thought helps us think more deeply about what it would take to unsettle conventional affective relationalities and the infrastructures that uphold them.

Berlant’s deep engagement with the everyday also helps bring to the fore the complexities and incoherence of affective life: drawing out oscillating moments of contradiction and ambivalence. Their approach to affective life never seeks to straighten complexity, they urge us to consider how feelings and desires are always unruly, multiple, often incoherent.

What makes Berlant's thought so significant then is its capaciousness, an ability to hold together multiple affects and contradictory attachments – pleasure and pain, joy and sadness, optimism and exhaustion, to think with the both/and rather than the either/or. We see this at work in Berlant's conversations with Michael Hardt around the political potentials of love (Berlant, 2011d; Wilkinson, 2017). Here, Hardt's assured proposition for a 'properly political concept of love' comes up against Berlant's unruly and capacious vision of love.

For Hardt, love is a central idiom for a non-sovereign politics: a joyful force and a site of collective transformation. Hardt delineates between good and bad forms of love, suggesting that people can be trained to love better objects. In an interview with Berlant, Hardt provides a metaphor for his vision for the political potentialities of love, asking us to think of love 'as muscles' which 'require a kind of training and increase with use ... a kind of training in order to increase its power'. Berlant quickly retorts, 'Another way to think about your metaphor, Michael, is that in order to make a muscle you have to rip your tendons' (Berlant & Hardt, 2012, n.p.). For Berlant, forging new infrastructures of sociality will never simply be a joyous project, it can also be a violent painful rupture. Hardt's conceptualisation of love as joy straightens things out, tries to make affective coherence out of tangled complexity. Yet for Berlant, love will always be unsettling and contradictory, we often feel disassociated from the objects of our love: promise and fantasy are always proximate to loss and failure. Berlant opens up space for a more capacious understanding of love, one that allows us to hold together joy and pain, hope and failure. Such a move offers a richer affective understanding of love: recognising moments of not just joy and connection, but ambivalence and impossibility, dissociation and depletion. What Berlant proposes then is 'an affective register which recognises the relationship between the joy-giving parts and the parts that require a kind of patience with the way things do not fit. The out-of-synchness of being matters' (Berlant & Hardt, 2012, n.p.).

Yet, like Hardt, Berlant also outlines how the idiom of love may help us think about the non-sovereignty and incoherence of the subject. For Berlant, love is greedy and urgent, it is a desire for change. But love is uncertain, a moment of disorder and instability, it has no guarantee but it is a risk we are willing to take. We are possessed and dispossessed by love. Love then, as Berlant notes, is a distinctly queer feeling:

Part of the reason I think that queer theory and love theory are related to each other as political idioms is that queer theory presumes the affective incoherence of the subject with respect to the objects that anchor it or to which they're attached.

(Berlant & Hardt, 2012, n.p.)

Berlant helps us think about affective life through the lens of ambivalence, contradiction, and incoherence, rather than certainty and singularity. It is this that makes Berlant's social theory so generative: an invitation to always ask questions, to unravel our own objects of attachment and fantasies of political transformation. Berlant compels us to think capaciously about the affective dimensions it will take to rebuild the world from the fragments of the present.

## 12 | ELLIPSES

### Stuart C. Aitken

With their keynote address at the Emotional Geographies conference in Edinburgh (2015), Lauren Berlant used the idea of 'living in ellipses' as a metaphor for ... the dissociations, jumps, and abridgements that permeate and perforate lived experience. As a series of dots in a text, an ellipsis usually indicates an intentional omission of a word or sentence in a sequence of meaning. Berlant suggests something unwritten ... a pause, taking a breath, a nod, a wink, a knowing and a not knowing. For Adorno, encountering an ellipsis 'suggests an infinitude of thoughts and associations' (1990, p. 303). Berlant does not allude to geometric ellipses, but it is worth noting that in Euclidian space elliptical forms are ovals created by a moving point so that the sum of its distances from two other points is constant. Graphically, there is disconnection, a pushing out if you will, followed by a pulling in and a reconciliation. There is the idea of a square 'falling short' of the entire length of its lateral lines. Both the geometric and grammatical senses of the word first show up in 17th-century English from the Greek *élleipsis*, meaning, literally, defect or failure; it is a compound verb formed from the prefix *en-* meaning 'in' and *léipein*, meaning 'leave, loan, or relinquish' (Ayto, 1990). The etymological roots of the grammatical and geometric concept, then, rehearse a compound verb that points to an ensuing action.

Berlant's contention is that we live in elliptical space to the degree that life is a processual relationship between disassociation, dislocation and change, relocation and transformation. Their ellipses are spaces where the known meets what is unknowable. There is a push out into the unknown ... out into a curiously unfamiliar and yet familiar space/moment/

encounter. Here, I want to make a wilful connection to Winnicott's (1950) object relations. Winnicott thought of a subject (for him it was an infant) and an object (perhaps a favourite toy or a blanket, or perhaps a person like a mother or father) and the relations between the two as a potential space. He does not separate the child from their environment in terms of the discovery of self, objective distancing, existential angst, naming, rationalising, or compartmentalising. Rather, a potential space for change and transformation occurs when an object of desire is removed and the infant faces the limits of her or his omnipotence. Winnicott (1965) emphasised the notion of transitional spaces as holding or facilitating environments where increased capacities are enabled. As such, his ideas parallel those of Berlant in important ways. When subjects and objects do not cease to exist with a crisis (a falling apart), there are opportunities to come together in new ways. Winnicott was careful not to delineate clear subject/object borders, emphasising rather that action within a potential space is a process of becoming wherein the subject learns the limitations of their control over other people, places and things. Ideas and objects, then, may cohere and transform each other, perhaps opening potentials and capacities. These formulations emerge, for both Winnicott and Berlant, from neither the subject nor the object, but from the movement of subject to object, and object to subject. The playful and creative capacities of potential spaces enable hatred, grief, resistance, and push-back as much as they accommodate the possibility of love, gratitude, reconnection, and reconciliation.

Although there are no direct connections between Berlant and Winnicott, Berlant comes close to his form of object relations in their reading of Eve Sedgwick's work. They ponder the ways Sedgwick articulates parts and wholes, connections and coherences. Berlant and Edelman allude to the reparative function of an object relation that 'strives to assembly and confer plentitude on an object', to 'turn part objects into something like a whole' (Berlant & Elderman, 2019, p. 39–44). The function of a psychic object (e.g., an idea of home) helps to turn part objects (e.g., an apartment) into something that resembles a whole. This sometimes happens with overcoming a crisis (e.g., an eviction). Space is created with the loss of an object (e.g., a home or a relationship) and the 'loss preserves relation in absence of its object. Affirming the object's contingency, from which relation first takes its sting, even if or when the object is mourned as irreplaceable'. It is possible to grieve and also become unstuck from the strictures of irreplaceability. To perhaps turn grief into gratitude and by so doing open up the possibility of new relations. From this comes the idea of 'being in [objects] without being torn up by them', creating '[m]ore and more potential orientations towards the object' (Berlant & Elderman, 2019, p. 48–49). Ideas and objects, then, may cohere and transform each other, opening potentials and capacities. In this way, the ideas of Berlant and Winnicott bear an uncanny resemblance to each other. For Berlant (2011a), living in ellipses can be playful, ironic, and scary, like living in Winnicott's potential spaces, but also comedic in the sense that the subject falls apart without ceasing to exist or being torn up by an object's loss. Further, if an ellipse is 'good enough' – from Winnicott's (1950) contentious idea about 'good enough' mothering – then it provides sufficient potential for growth, development, and transformation. Objects that anchor ellipses (texts, homes, partners, family, communities) are always inadequate but hope resides in the degree of elliptical openness or good-enoughness (Aitken & Arpagian, 2022).

Ellipses are about relationships and potentials that move out and in, producing a time/space of openings and closings and transformed relations between objects.

Living in ellipses is about a complex world of disassociations and perturbations, connections and contrivances, flows and leaps from one event to another, where good enough facilitating environments enable increased capacities for individuals and collectives. Not to have this elliptical flexibility, and a good enough space for where the known meets what is unknowable, is to risk descent into pathologies, breakdowns, and ultimately a real ceasing to exist. Elliptical thinking, as I outline it here, extends hope without diminishing uncertainty and precarity.

### 13 | 'DO YOU AGREE?'

#### David K. Seitz

It's their quips, gestures, idiosyncratic attentiveness that I recall first. Chiding my misguided attempt to accept a teapot from a barista mid-air (an ergonomics lesson articulated with a feminist politics of social reproduction). Retorting, from the back of a mostly empty auditorium, 'I'm a big believer in non-self-evidence!' to a recalcitrant conference panellist who insisted a claim was 'obvious'. Lamenting that human geography would have been their undergraduate course of study, had their alma mater offered it in the late 1970s (it still does not). Playfully inquiring why I had pronounced the word 'dinner' in such an affected manner, which led us down a rabbit-hole about Tim Curry's role in *Clue* (Lynn, 1985). Puncturing a brief lull in a stimulating discussion to ask 'Do you agree?' – then effusively interrupting me to riff off my seven-word reply.

Perhaps opening with Lauren Berlant's gestures discloses a wish for intimacy with an esteemed, now-departed pedagogue. Berlant himself was a keen diagnostician of the ways the neoliberal university's identity disciplines promise an intimate, therapeutic student experience, exhausting and alienating faculty while obscuring the bureaucratic tedium of academic work (1997b). Worse, perhaps staging such a wish bespeaks a competitive desire to seem closer to Berlant than I actually was. As another Berlant collaborator, Beth Freeman put it, 'Fuck all that' (2021, n.p.). All told, I only personally encountered Berlant a handful of times between 2013 and 2017, beginning with an interview I conducted with them for *Society and Space* (Berlant & Seitz, 2013).

Perhaps worst of all, a paranoid reading (Sedgwick, 2003) might take my focus on Berlant's gestures, rather than high theory, to be a kind of micro-aggression, a trivialising, inappropriate approach to the towering legacy of a non-binary queer-feminist Jewish thinker. Not at all. Since their passing, I find myself thinking about their writing almost every day. My first monograph (Seitz, 2017) cites eight works authored or co-authored by Berlant, often in detail. That's not a flex – as I tell first-year undergraduate students when I assign *Cruel optimism* (Berlant, 2011a), I've been reading that book for ten years and I still do not understand much of it. Anyone who reads Berlant's work knows what a humbling, seductively charming, and rewarding experience it can be; it is, itself, a 'scene ... we can barely get our eyes around' (Berlant, 2011b, p. 80).

But it was Berlant's gestures – a joke, a verbal tic, a rhetorical flourish – that for me concretised many of their key insights: that aesthetics are the training grounds for political emotions (Berlant & Seitz, 2013), that collaboration can be a condensed form of teaching (Wang, 2019), that complaint and preaching to the choir are underrated genres for Left world-building projects (Berlant, 1997a, Berlant, 2008a, 2008b, Berlant, 2011a), and that the most particular things can have a way of becoming general (Berlant, 2011a).

When we met in 2013, I experienced Berlant's query to me – 'Do you agree?' – as an imposing dare to disagree with a figure of such authority. But given Berlant's layered understanding of gesture and temporality – the way an event stays open, as long as new interpretations of it are being produced (Berlant, 1994, 2005) – I have come to think of it as a sincere, ongoing invitation to keep reading, and to be willing to disagree with them as I do so, rather than simply apply their work, as if from on high, to deadened geographical case studies (McKittrick, 2021). Given Berlant's militancy against demands on the university to produce serious, expert talking heads (Berlant, 1994), 'Do you agree?' might even satirise (without subverting) their interpellation as all-knowing teacher.

I may well be projecting here. But since projection, as Berlant knew very well, is part of all pedagogical encounters, the question becomes what such projections make possible. 'I do not know whether I expected it,' Berlant wrote of their own feminist professors, 'or demanded it, or even whether they knew what they were doing, or whether I deserved it. But my relation to school has always been that the everyday time of it was like an alternate world in which it would be safe, potentially, to have the courage to invent new things out of what is available long before activism or pedagogy or experimental and critical thinking became some of the names I could give to what I wanted to do' (Berlant, 1997b, p. 159). Critical as they were of the expectations of closeness with which feminist and queer pedagogies are often saddled, and ever mindful of the inadequacy of language and the incoherence of desire, Berlant nevertheless affirmed that their own teachers had made hard-to-name personal and political projects begin to feel possible for them.

This is a fitting contradiction, as Berlant was in many ways an intellectual both of and against their time and place: An unabashed utopian whose career flourished against the dystopian backdrop of ascendant 'family values' neoliberalism at an institution that has served as that ideology's nursery, if not its birthplace; a fierce critic of the American Dream's inducements to optimistic conventionality, even and especially during the rise of their erstwhile University of Chicago colleague, Barack Obama; a canonical queer-feminist academic who hated professionalisation, loathed competition among identity disciplines, and sought to construct and elicit identifications, rather than consolidate identities.

Geographers should take greater inspiration from Berlant's stylistic irreverence and verve, and the formal experiments in this forum contribute to a long but still-marginalised tradition of efforts to shake up more turgid, self-serious geographical prose (Blomley, 2008). And Berlant's attention to the political cunning of the frivolous and the sentimental should likewise enliven a field that can remain a bit precious about the moral gravity of many of its objects of analysis (Horton, 2018). But I also wonder in what ways the political-economic-affective 'impasse' so keenly diagnosed in *Cruel optimism* (2011a) might require reformulation to describe a still-stuck, but differently stuck, historical-geographical present. In the restive decade since Berlant's book debuted, words like 'abolition' and 'socialism' have, again and differently, become quotidian in the USA, and it is not yet clear whether the ever-fragile legitimacy of US state and market institutions has restabilised since the George Floyd uprising in 2020 and a wave of labour unrest in 2021. There remains a great deal more, then, for geographers to learn from keeping the event of encountering Berlant's thoughts and gestures open – from both agreeing and disagreeing with them.

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Data sharing is not applicable to this article as no new data were created or analyzed in this study.

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## ENDNOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Contributors all responded to a call for contributions circulated via social media and listservs, asking for 1000-word encounters with Berlant's work.
- <sup>2</sup> A nod to Berlant's arresting prose: 'the political economy of disavowal we drag around like a shadow' (2011a, p. 28).
- <sup>3</sup> He has given his permission to discuss his gender journey as well as his artwork.
- <sup>4</sup> For more on the project, see: <https://pnca.edu/gallery/cas-marotta>.

- <sup>5</sup> 'We' includes contributing artist-teachers who participated in The International Society for Education Through Art 2021 South East Asia and Pacific Webinar Series: Healing through Visual Arts and Education. Drawing in the Wild invited artist-teachers to listen, draw, w/rite, share through creative healing practices that enfold physical and digital spaces. Our collaboration can be accessed in this Padlet Image Quilt (<https://doi.org/10.26188/19151450>). The Padlet Image Quilt acknowledges our collaborations with Country that we live, work, learn, and know from as being and becoming a/r/tographers (Irwin, 2013), including the sky, lands, waterways, peoples, and animals form the places-tories quilted here. The quilt is threaded by collaborations between known and unknown artist-teachers who came together to heal through art, research, and teaching during the COVID-19 pandemic.
- <sup>6</sup> It is important to distinguish this from the 'fat positivity' movement, which is oppositional in the more conventional sense insofar as it aims to re-signify a form of abuse and thus use it to empower those on the receiving end.

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