



Lauren Berlant on Genre

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Abstract

There is no doubt that the writing of Lauren Berlant is influential in media and cultural studies as well as across gender and feminist studies and other work in critical, cultural and materialist traditions. Given the complexity of Berlant's work and its integral refusal of taxonomic and hegemonic terms, it can be difficult for the reader to coherently grasp the singularity of even their most powerful concepts. This essay attempts to think with Berlant's conceptualisation of genre without displacing the concept from their work through representational summarisation. The essay is part close reading, part exegesis and part experimentation – I hope just as Berlant would have wished. Rather than aim for an even description that accounts for Berlant's various interventions in a measured way, the method of this essay is to think-write with the ellipsis, to undertake a translation that puts to one side the fantasy of mastery but still seeks to deepen our understanding of the intended meaning of Berlant's texts. For Berlant, intended meanings would be about what something brings into the world. At minimum, this is my best effort at partaking in a cultural studies pedagogy that foregrounds the practice of critical thinking as world making. The essay then offers an invitation to the reader to learn from Berlant's work about what the theoretical concept of genre can do. Just as this abstract does, the essay moves in and out of convention, where the sociality of affect does its work to congeal, to disturb, to make sense and make senseless. To move on.

Keywords

Genre, attachment, affect, climate change, trauma, optimism, Lauren Berlant

Life in the ellipsis

Lauren Berlant said that [...].

Lauren Berlant said that [...] one of the things that theory can do is slow down time. That, “the object was to learn to what extent the effort to think one’s own history can free thought from what it silently thinks, and so enable it to think differently” (Foucault, [1985] 1990: 9).

Thought carries with it so many obligations. Too many to name. Inside and outside of language. We said we’d never be the same.

Lauren Berlant said that [...] “what we call obstacles are really the way the world and our entire experience teach us where we’re stuck” (Chödrön, 1997: 87).

Lauren Berlant said that [...] “I get myself out of a funk by ...” (Hinge, 2022).

Shorthand short-circuits but it would take too long to live otherwise. Intimacy is a genre of brevity. We feel our way through the knots that pierce our existence with “the sparest of signs” (Berlant, 2001: 2). Intimate ways of speaking let distance land. To intimate is always to communicate. In this complexly and completely historical life, we do so much with contractions and condensations. We birth, we drink, we die. Genres draw precise differentiations from the density and sparsity of language as a lived thing. Genre switching releases discordant tones that register as questions over meaning where there is already available language with which to hone.

Lauren Berlant’s ellipsis weighs heavy in my heart.

Lauren Berlant said that [...] we have no choice other than to become “a poet of the episode, the elision, the ellipsis...” (2011a: 34). A poet of the unseen. The unsayable and the unsaid. “There is not one but many silences” (Foucault, 1976: 27). Silences between, within and of things said. There is speaking and saying nothing, and not finding the words to say [...]. There is saying everything in saying or not saying *something*.

“Elliptical life then emerges in the place where what’s known meets what’s unknowable and what goes without saying meets what fails to reach meaning” (Berlant, 2022: 125).¹

What if we knew Lauren only in their ellipsis?

Lauren Berlant said that a change in the speed of thought can give us the chance to differently apprehend our object. It is as a genre that theory can do this, open up the speeds and slowness of things. The conventions of the theoretical genres with which we think through relations, or don’t, are and require material conditions. In these and other ways theory itself becomes an object, transforming what’s available to perception, but also deciding where we might stumble – what remains unseen, misunderstood, or intractable in sense-perception. As itself an object, theory is part of the relations of attachment that sustain our sense of the ongoingness of the world. This is theory thought and understood as an intervention *in* the world, as “modes of attachment, endurance, and attunement *to* the world”, not as the application of concepts or an interpretive frame (Berlant, 2011a: 13, emphasis mine). Theory is immanent in this way among others, existing in relations among things and as a doubling self-relation that is and takes an object. As a mode of attachment, theory can “loosen an object” so as “to make it available to transition” (Berlant, 2022: 12).

In Berlant’s theoretical undertaking, genre is a generative object of optimistic attachment par excellence. Berlant consistently interrogates the capacious singularity and transversality of genre as an historically embedded cultural concept uniquely able to open theory to the history of the present of affect. Genre is that by which nation, subjectivity, sex and the political cluster in the vicinity of power, that by which the strange carnalities of racial capitalism are made sensible. The personalisation of national fantasy in the cultural agendas of successive neoliberal governments is a relocation of citizenship from “political ideas about the nation” to “the development of feelings about it” (Berlant, 1997: 8-9). These feelings are cultivated as new zones of intensity within the body politic, with intimacy being the predominant zone, and cultural genres gaining primacy as the means of their socialisation. The emphasis that Berlant gives to genre as an account of the relation between affect and the aesthetic distinguishes their work from much of “affect theory”. For them, genre is key to how

we understand cultural texts as forms and objects of critique given how their circulation as expressive forms draws on, butts or reconfigures the sentimentality of feeling – the impersonality and intimacy of national power (Berlant, 1997).²

Accordingly, media produce and think through not only the limits of representation – an important but limiting paradigm in critical media studies – but the aesthetic contours of affective life worlds. Berlant views genre as the consistency of these contours, the contouring of the contour, the implications of which we encounter as the material realities of living. It is in this way that organised aesthetics mediate affect to us, insofar as their generic conventions mine the historical sensorium we are already living. This approach entails viewing genre as centrally involved in all forms of cultural mediation, from identity to politics, organising what becomes the intrinsic relation between aesthetic value and cultural identity. In one sense then, and an important one, Berlant’s theorisation of genre reveals affect (theory) to be all about language. All about ways of telling story. All about ways of understanding convention – the relation between norm and form, “dimension, texture, and resonance for emergent and ongoing alt-forms of life” (Berlant, 2022: 13). All about possibilities for attending to phenomena whose articulation bears a relation to expectation.

Entering the weather

“Beginning to write, then getting up. Stopped by the movements of a huge early bumblebee which has somehow gotten inside this house and is reeling, bumping, stunning itself against windowpanes and sills” (Rich, 1986: 211). I imagine fewer of us writing in houses now, increasingly unlikely to be interrupted by bees. Genres call for beginnings when the only place to start is in the middle by “entering an existing wave” (Deleuze, 1995: 121). The weather, a mood, a predicament, a reflection, can be something that points to the historical present by virtue of the genre that circulates its form. The “situation, the episode, the interruption, the aside, the conversation, the travelogue, and the happening” are all genres of the emerging event (Berlant, 2011a: 5). They are forms of the middle, the middle taking form.

With an almost never-ending archive of images, the weather works well to begin story, to orient an interlocuter to a scene or encounter. The aesthetic mediation of the weather is both ubiquitous and heterogeneously specific. Just think of all the political,

social, economic and technological processes involved in the logistics of delivering mouthfuls of calorific sunshine to northern economies, whether as tropical fruit or cane sugar. Or the way that erratic weather in out-of-the-way places threatens economies of leisure such as tourism, whose geographies of transit intersect the weathered tracks of (de)colonisation. The weather gives us a story to tell about historical processes. Moreover, events of the weather, even the great British pastime of discussing the weather (that never disappoints – we’ve just had one of the warmest and wettest summers on record), have become aesthetic mediations of climate change. It’s not just that climate change exists as a scientific, political, or otherwise discursive knowledge. Climate change has become a genre of the emerging present, full of “crisis ordinariness” by which we navigate “what’s overwhelming” (Berlant, 2011a: 10). The question of how we are able to sense climate change is part of the urgency of its phenomena. We are often not *yet* able to feel out what’s overwhelming in any kind of sustained, ordinary way. Climate change “is felt and thought with intensity [...] not easily accommodated to given habits of feeling” (Murphie, 2018a: 19). Newly affected by events of the weather, the “we” of the historical present comes into question. Climate change is set to become, in the time of my expected lifetime, a preeminent genre like one we’ve never seen before. A newly cataclysmic mapping of the ravages of capitalism in which we are globally, unequally, implicated. Already, climate change changes the “usual cadences” of the weather’s event, becoming “the occasion of the telling” (Berlant, 2008b: 9). In turn, weather occasions the possibility that climate change will take a form for its affective impact, mediating to us its “historical sensorium” (Berlant, 2011a: 3).

Genres of the emerging event circulate the weather as “aesthetically mediated affective responses [that] exemplify a shared historical sense” (Berlant, 2011a: 3).³ Some of these genres are pedagogical, some political, some “conspirational”. New concepts, such as “climate colonialism”, “climate grief”, “environmental media” and “extreme weather events”, suggest our adjustment to the speeds and slowness of the changing climate. The unfolding temporalities of climate catastrophe intersect those of capitalism, compounding and making newly perceivable deep structural inequalities, such as the impasses of precarity. As part of “our habits of affecting and being affected”, informational and aesthetic media “take on not only the likes of climate change, media

change, and social change, but also a more general catastrophic multiplicity in which they are interwoven” (Murphie, 2018a: 19).

From this view of genre, media are not that different from the weather. The media example or storyline are not themselves the genre or the affective structure, neither are they representational reflections of more substantive realities. Berlant’s view contrasts the convention in media studies, which is to think of genres as textual types linked to cultural economies or artistic movements whose prototypes refer indexically to propositional knowledges that lay claim to empirical formations. In feminist cultural and media studies too, the concept of genre leads with textual and audience framings, the ideological coherency of interpellation, rather than a theory of mediatised mediation.⁴ The social implications of media representation tend to be derived through retroactive examination of *how media discourses construct norm X*, for example. In contemporary literature oriented to popular digital culture, the need to develop and apply a theory of genre as such is given short shrift. Closer inspection reveals genre to be precisely that by which any sensibility or figuration is able to yield power as a sensible object of political, economic, social and cultural change. To illustrate with reference to an example with which I am familiar, the examination of what a particular media example tells us about “consent”, and how girls and boys, men and women, negotiate “consent”, too easily invites generalised applicability as the principle of representation where analysis fails to enquire into the intersecting historical social and cultural phenomena that link consent *affectively* to other cultural concepts. Accordingly, an account of mediatisation is essential to locating consent in the historical sensorium that renders consent “commonsense” (Cefai, 2023: 6), aligned to normative values and the explicatory powers of universalist philosophies but also to “the material and speculative senses already pulsating in lifeworld solidarities” (Berlant, 2022: 84). That is, genres of consent rather than consent’s ideological abstraction alone better describe how consent shows up to the encounter. Berlant’s work teaches us how to think through genre as the deeper mediation of the cultural concepts by which people’s lifeworld aesthetics are drawn into a wider articulation, and whose analysis yields insight into how material realities of power differentiate in registers of experience.

Genres of attachment

Berlant defines genre as “a loose affectively-invested zone of expectations about the narrative shape a situation will take” (2011b: np). As “[g]enres provide an affective expectation of the experience of watching something unfold, whether that thing is in life or in art” (Berlant, 2011a: 6), they locate media as avenues of attachment that are experientially derived. Suggested here is the way attachment as a theory of genre’s internal binding distinguishes Berlant’s approach to mediation. Attachment designates the generic internality of social life and as such “what draws you out into the world” (Berlant, 2022: 6). For Berlant, all attachments are optimistic and at the same time inherently incoherent, contradictory and unstable. In *Cruel Optimism*, Berlant argues that optimism is entrained in a kind of holding pattern that reflects both the impasses that stop one from moving forward and the impassivity of “diverse class, racial, sexual, and gendered styles of composure” (Berlant, 2011a: 5).⁵

Berlant’s work on genre follows the cultural studies tradition of locating affect neither in viewer subjectivity nor in the artful thisness of the media example, but in the cultural formation by which an aesthetic gains internal composition, communicates, and distributes affective latitudes. The implications of what gets said are not a matter of subjective intention, even if the subject intends the outcome. Media become expressive according to generic conventions that express the conditions of possibility of affective social realities – “the existence that emerges from what is said and nowhere else” (Foucault, [1972] 2002: 31). The centrality of expectation to social language (inclusive of gestures and the nonverbal) makes possible a sense of the inevitable, a currency of the enduring moment that guides what is possible to have heard and by whom, what will resonate or evaporate through iteration and exchange. Feeling out what is already in motion, intuiting the direction of the surrounding wave, requires a thinking through of affect in the context of attachment. We are spectators to ourselves insofar as we perceive events unfolding through genres of the present, in ways that can be poetic even when based in coolness and calculation. It is genre rather than the parameters of a text that give consistency to what is a contradictory set of dispositions or phantasmatic distortions – to what is (unsaid).

The need to think through contradictions among disclosed intentions and affective dispositions pervades Berlant’s work. In *On the Inconvenience of Other People*, this

culminates in the claim that ambivalent feelings, “strongly mixed, drawn in many directions, positively and negatively charged” (Berlant, 2022: 27), are felt in infrastructures for being in relation. These contradictory affects that register inconvenience, theorised as “at a minimum [...] the force that makes one shift a little while processing the world” (2), inhere in “any affective infrastructure that importantly holds up one’s world” (27). Berlant’s insight that “[a]ll attachment opens defenses against the receptivity one also wants to cultivate” (76) should require us to question our assumptions about expressivity and media that treat defensiveness as separate from connection.

Consider, for example, the situation and the genre flail. The situation is “a genre of social time and practice in which a relation of persons and worlds is sensed to be changing but the rules for habitation and the genres of storytelling about it are unstable, in chaos” (Berlant, 2011a: 6). The situation involves unfolding, presentness, uncertainty, temporality, an entanglement of elements, a sense of something happening, being in relation, and the becoming of an event linked to a change in circumstance. We might think of the situation as something that we are trying to get out of, or as an object of attachment – the thing we want to get into. While the genre flail “is a mode of crisis management that arises after an object, or object world, becomes disturbed in a way that intrudes on one’s confidence about how to move in it” (Berlant, 2018: 162). That is, the genre flail is a type of situation defined as disturbance, perhaps the absence, discordance or ineptitude of what’s usually present to the situation. It occurs when a situation doesn’t meet up to an expectation about its unfolding, and the scrambling of usual coordinates impedes an intuition about what will happen next. Yet, rather than fall through the cracks with initial “gasps of shock or disbelief”, we try to “return to normal science or common sense – whatever offers relief in established clarity” (157). We flail, “throwing language and gesture and policy and interpretation at a thing to make it slow or make it stop” (157).

Genre patterns attachment – public intimacy, cruel optimism, the situation. Or it doesn’t – the flail. Of particular interest to Berlant are expressive modes other than melodrama that permit or prize open zones of the inexpressible. For Berlant, the underperformed emotion of flat affect, for example, effects a “recession from melodramatic norms” (Berlant, 2015: 193), delaminating intelligibility from immediacy:

what is unintelligible is not distant. Flatness is not a pathology of expressive emotion but an ordinary pathway through suffering. People draw on the conventions of emergent genres less by instruction and more by intuition, “where affect meets history, in all of its chaos, normative ideology, and embodied practices of discipline and invention” (Berlant, 2011a: 52). “A situation becomes-genre, finds its genres of event” (Berlant, 2011b: np). Where genres can’t illuminate the terms of an experience, genres flail. For Berlant, even the traumatic “turns out mainly to be one genre of explanation for the situation of being without genre” (Berlant, 2011a: 80).

The becoming infrastructural of media

Crucially, Berlant avoids striking false equivalences between quotidian language and what might be felt or sensed by a subject. It is now commonplace in media studies and elsewhere to describe social media content as circulations of affect, as if the affect of emotion described by the informational content that populates an interface can be taken *as* affect, as a description of affect or something consciously felt. What a subject tells us they’re feeling doesn’t necessarily add up to an account of what they’re feeling, let alone the cultural organisation of an affect (Berlant, 1999; 2008b; 2011a). As Berlant said, an optimistic attachment might not *feel* optimistic, it “might *feel* any number of ways, from the romantic to the fatalistic to the numb to the nothing” (2011a: 13). Affective structures can be encountered in any manner of ways, meaning one encounter cannot provide the basis for an estimation of others. Berlant’s most widely cited work, *Cruel Optimism*, foregrounds the periodisation of optimism as a national cultural strategy employed in post-Second World War United States and Europe. This genealogy that locates the historical present in relation to “the good-life fantasy” that wielded together the hope that people’s lives and the world would “add up to something” (2) with the democratic promise of equality and social justice, powerfully contextualises Berlant’s national sentimentality trilogy – *The Anatomy of National Fantasy*, *The Female Complaint*, and *The Queen of America Goes to Washington City* – if not all their work. In Berlant’s analysis, cruel optimism is a genre first, a theorisation derived from the historical sensorium, rather than a personal state or story, or conversely, an institutional one. The powers of explication can be relevant to any number of contexts, to any number of biographies of attachment, insofar as they illustrate or probe the bounds of the genre. In the case of cruel optimism this means

articulating an affective encounter to the waning of “the good life”. Cruel optimism is a relation to an historical experience, not one’s personal difficulty; it is the profoundly impersonal and social mediation of that difficulty, that might or might not be felt in its encounter by you. Confusing the personal with the structural is the very problem Berlant’s work addresses, particularly the misrecognition and nonrelation of the subject’s fantasy.

Different ways to make claims about textual (in)coherence assume different ways of comprehending the relation between the particularity of the example and a wider sense of the meaning of things. Berlant notes the influence of authors whose work brings together “history, phenomenology, [and] trust in the potential exemplarity of any episode, and the ongoing work of storytelling (including criticism) in the making and mediation of worlds” that make “observable [how] lived relations in this work always have a backstory and induce a poetic of immanent world making” (2011a: 8). Description and descriptive possibility are part of the historical specificity of the emerging present, immanent to the aesthetic encounter by which media make sense to and of us. Accordingly, close readings are not the basis for generalisation, as through extrapolation, deduction, discursive positioning or other means of jumping from the specific to the general. Rather, practices of interpretation generate exemplary descriptions of phenomena that compose the social world, more akin to “politics of location” (Rich, 1986: 210) than discourses of representation. The evidence of a genre lies in what Berlant’s co-author Kathleen Stewart called “ordinary affects”, that cannot be generalised to abstraction, or abstracted to generalisation (Stewart, 2007: 1). Building on the work of writers like Walter Benjamin and Georg Simmel, Berlant expands genre to social spectatorship and the way that any object potentially registers multiplicities.

To illustrate with one of Stewart’s examples, the road registers “mobility, and/or speed and the military industrial complex, spatio-temporal orientations, scenes of possibility, privacy and publicness, nationalism, industries, landscapes, practices, literary compositions, aesthetic and kinaesthetic sensibilities, state regulations, styles, kinds of journeys, modes of agency, or the political-economic-social-material-aesthetic-kinaesthetic forces of class and race or gender” (2014: 552). Genres bring the road an affective relay. The road as a genre of national, social and cultural living – the open

road, the tree-lined high-street, the suburban cul-de-sac, etc. – intersects, for example, the weather already circulating as an environment modified by ways of living. Dysregulated weather produces a downpour, but a flash flood is also shaped by altered waterways and soil; lawns brown at the end of summer thanks to the hosepipe ban; vehicles salt the roads in the early hours to prevent ice forming during a cold snap. The road is a site of conservation and risk, supply chain logistics and reproductive whiteness, pointing to what Berlant comes to theorise as the affective mediation of infrastructure – “the living mediation of what provides the consistency of life in the ordinary” (2022: 20). Berlant’s last book, *On the Inconvenience of Other People*, recognises infrastructure as types of material mediation, “a material process of binding” (22). Aesthetic genres become infrastructural as they loop through, sprout from, and multiply in the technologies, norms, habits, and knowledges they bind. This binding becomes propositional, a political and theoretical enquiry, when it interrupts the stable reproduction of the world. Such a view of infrastructure is made possible by understanding mediation not as “a stable thing but as a way of seeing the unstable relations among dynamically related things” (22).

Detraumatising affect

Trauma genre forms the backdrop to much of Berlant’s work. *Cruel Optimism* develops “crisis ordinariness” as a response to the realisation that “in critical theory and mass society generally, ‘trauma’ has become the primary genre of the last eighty years for describing the historical present as the scene of an exception that has just shattered some ongoing, uneventful ordinary life that was supposed to just keep going on and with respect to which people felt solid and confident” (Berlant, 2011a: 9–10). Just as genres provide the conventions of attachment by which we stay attached to something or someone, “the core of who we are or what we belong to” (125), they also determine what appears to belong to this or that set of expectations. Given the primacy of trauma, boundaries are especially porous. Trauma is all-round. Or, we might start to think of trauma genres as connected through the infrastructure-making of trauma. Listen to how Berlant’s genre concept of the “traumatic” echoes through a teaching from Buddha as imparted by Pema Chödrön: “Instead of a tragedy or melodrama, this mara [force] is more like a situation comedy. Just as we are on the verge of really understanding something, allowing our heart to truly open, just as we have the opportunity to see

clearly, we put on a Groucho Marx mask with fluffy eyebrows and a big nose. Then we refuse to laugh or let go, because we might discover – who knows what?” (Chödrön, 1997: 91–92). Berlant defines the traumatic as a genre in which the conventions of situation comedy and situation tragedy converge, drawing on “what’s dark about the situation comedy and ludicrous in the situation tragedy” (2020: 3). Speaking of the traumatic and of the genre flail, there could hardly be a better example of both than the public intimacy of the dating app, whose barely concealed crisis ordinariness of anxiety, loneliness and political depression are reflected in profile prompts such as Hinge’s “I get myself out of a funk by ...”. While Chicago based academic, activist and critic Yasmin Nair observes the popular trauma culture of comedic complaint, where: “In a bizarre but deeply untheorised set of events, the era of #MeToo has meant that rape has become a condition by which women are granted legibility as women” (2018: np). Furthermore, the new legibility of female experience evident in the mediated traction of rape, sexual assault and harassment is subject to the opaque “taste clusters” of major streaming providers whose datapoints track distinctions in mood, such as whether content is “uplifting”. Complexities in derivation such as these and their interventions in our collective attunement to attachment do not produce a cogent trauma genre, but also are not unstructured. They allude to the existence of mediating infrastructures of crisis ordinariness that pattern events and along which trauma stories take place, are felt, and gain meaning.

Genre’s method

The key idea that Raymond Williams introduced in his discussion of “structures of feeling” (1977) is that there is such a thing as a feeling that is an emergent property shared among people living a collective historical relation of social, economic and political change. The structure of feeling is not determined by a dominant national culture, but in relation to it – in Berlant’s words, an “affective mutuality in the atmosphere of the common historical experience of class antagonism” (2022: 82). While notions of class have transformed since the mid-twentieth century and appear quite differently across the world, structures of feeling are still not to be confused with national or dominant cultural sentiment – an analytic principle all the more relevant given the way, since Williams’ time of writing, dominant cultures assimilate minor hermeneutics and their affective life-worlds. While media convene dominant thinking,

making the analysis of hegemonic forms imperative, the affective realities that media formations mediate are based in “the affective activity of attachment [...] located formally in a historical, cultural, and political field” (2011a: 51-52). When Berlant speaks about “adaptation” or “adjustment”, she invokes attachment as a mode of historicising the subject. Indeed, Berlant states expressly, “affect theory is another phase in the history of ideology theory” (53). Attachments involve optimistic sentiment that is noncoincidental with conscious knowledge but “has historical significance in domains of subjectivity”; attachments “impact in a new but also recognizable way” and are shaped by “a collectively lived situation” (53). Berlant historicises this phase in ideology theory through bringing to bear their critical archive of the otherwise of “queer theory, psychoanalysis, deconstruction, antiracist theory, subaltern studies, and other radical ethnographic historiographies of the present (anthropological, sociological, and journalistic)” (13).

Such genealogical influences are crucial to how Berlant upholds a distinction between affect and emotion, contrary to much recent work in feminist media and cultural studies that calls for a closer relation between the terms. This call often positions feminist theories of emotion as a counter to affect theory’s perceived shortcomings. In my view, the dialectical style of such debates is often limiting, and their interdisciplinarity convoluted. Berlant eschews the literalising tendencies of the social and political sciences and to a lesser extent, the humanities, by positioning the aesthetic as a language of affect. This does not mean that Berlant was not influenced by process philosophers, notably Gilles Deleuze, and others from whom claims on affect as nonconscious are derived. Rather, if “everything is, beginning, middle and end, a matter of affecting and being affected” and affect is therefore “only impossibly an ‘object of study’” (Murphie, 2018b: ii), the recruitment of affect by cultural studies’ ideology theory necessarily delimits the term. Our conceptual rigour is in fact precisely linked to this delimitation, by which affect is understood to hold open the encounter without being overdetermined by what is felt. On Berlant’s account, while expressive modes provide ways to talk about the sensibility that is mediated to us, how this is encountered – as modes of attachment, endurance and attunement *to* the world – are held open by the sociality of affect.

Feminism's genres

Berlant's conceptualisation of genre offers a means to explore the role of methodological supposition of all kinds. Remember that genre is what makes sense of attachment – making sense as in creating a style, making sensible, rather than delivering the panacea of reason. Consider the confusions of “empowerment feminism”, in which gestural slogans stand in for political theory and individual sentiments are interpreted as signs of social change. Discursive reasoning makes possible the compatibility of equality (the success of feminism) with sexism (the ongoing denigration of women's lives) and misogyny (feminism as something to do with women), combined in aesthetic portraits of ideal femininities, such as the “phallic” femininity that occupies, by not threatening, masculine power (McRobbie, 2007). It is as genres that not only popular feminism, but feminisms of all kinds, insist upon liberal ideals of women's autonomy beyond their fraying material realities. Autonomy is a powerful idea that cannot be easily extracted from ordinary life in neoliberal societies. The flipside to this confusion is the ethical claim that politics aren't properties of persons. Berlant's work centres the idea that “dependence on others is not antagonistic to feminism but intrinsic to it”, providing relief from the confusion of “feminism with self-sufficiency” (Maglaque, 2023: np). This idea lifts feminist critique out of the entrepreneurialism and responsibilisation of neoliberal feminist sentiment.

What matters to Berlant's work is how affect has been and can be thought culturally and in the context of theoretical knowledge. Taking the view that “visceral response is a trained thing, not just autonomic activity” (2011a: 52), what is in our purview as subjects of knowledge and critical culture are the aesthetics of that training. Here, Berlant is clearly indebted to what we would now call the feminist epistemology of feeling, but wary of the way that the concept of emotionality tends to impart and pertain to the sustaining fantasy of selfhood. For Berlant, sovereignty “is a fantasy misrecognized as an objective state: an aspirational position of personal and institutional self-legitimizing performativity and an affective sense of control in relation to the fantasy of that position's offer of security and efficacy” (97). The political culture of emotion does not supersede this fantasy but is a site of its investment, even though “subjects don't feel *accurately* or objectively” (64, original emphasis). Hence, affective genres are incomplete and changing reflecting the

inherently social nature of affect. In contrast, any fantasy of sovereignty that inheres in an emotion is profoundly antisocial. Fantasy is “an inexhaustible nonrelationality” (42-43). Affect is a social activity, unable to be thought outside of “[o]ur epistemology self-attachment” (52). No matter how intensively we might feel something that feels personal to us, “[t]o the degree that the conventional forms of the social direct us to recognize only some of our attachments as the core of who we are and what we belong to, one’s relation to attachment is *impersonal*” (125, my emphasis). Affect is therefore always “bound up with literacy in normativity” (52). Thinking of media as circulating affect, or of fictionalised representations as invoking real social struggles, tends to underdescribe the infrastructural mediation of affect in this way. What is glossed over by the repetitious citation of certain juxtapositions, presently “affect/emotion”, and/or “affect/representation”, are the mediating processes intrinsic to the social life of affect, such as infrastructures of attachment. From the view of Berlant’s theorisation of genre then, work underpinned by these contractions tends not to move much further beyond them.

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Notes

- ¹ Berlant continues: "Whether or not a sentence shaped by its ellipsis insists on what is already known, lapses into failure, or follows multiple tracks, it always sets off speculation and interrupts realism [...] the placeholder for the lost body that finds sense anew, displaced from fantasies of its origin – a sense that can encounter itself only as absurd, always out of context" (2022: 125).
- ² In *The Queen of America: Essays on Sex and Citizenship*, the second title in Berlant's national sentimentality trilogy, Berlant singles out the importance of citizenry disidentification with government in neoliberalism that "makes citizenship into a category of feeling irrelevant to practices of hegemony or sociality in everyday life [...] 'national sentimentality'", "politics that abjures politics, made on behalf of a private life protected from the harsh realities of power"(1997: 11).
- ³ Some might wonder how I can describe the weather, such as rain or cloud formations, as "aesthetic". Here I'm invoking a perception of the natural world as, firstly, subject to processes of mediation (*qua* the Anthropocene), and secondly, as existing within our perception (*qua* process philosophies). In these and other ways, the very concept of weather is replete with meaning. Moreover, my use of the term "aesthetics" refers to that which is available to sense perception, rather than that associated to beauty.
- ⁴ What mediates goes between. Materialist philosophies most expressly commit to a theory of mediation and implicate the study of media within a materialist conception of sense. I would argue for the importance of the term mediation as a way to locate the effects of power.
- ⁵ Note the meaning of impassivity here, as not feeling or showing emotion (also, apathy).

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Coleman, Yasmin Gunaratnam, Chris Ingraham, Henrike Kohpeiß, Susanna Paasonen & Vilja Jaaksi & Anu Koivunen & Kaarina Nikunen & Karoliina Talvitie-Lamberg & Annamari Vänskä, and Greg Seigworth & Rebecca Coleman.

A key detail about Lauren Berlant and pronouns: Laurent's estate provided a brief statement on this, which we quote here: "Lauren's pronoun practice was mixed – knowingly, we trust. Faced with queries as to 'which' pronoun Lauren used and 'which' should now be used, the position of Lauren's estate (Ian Horswill, executor; Laurie Shannon, literary executor) is that Lauren's pronoun(s) can best be described as 'she/they'. 'She/they' captures the actual scope of Lauren's pronoun archive, and it honors Lauren's signature commitment to multivalence and complexity. It also leaves thinkers free to adopt either pronoun, or both of them, as seems most fitting in their own writing about her/them".