



# What Does Lauren Berlant Teach Us about Affect, Mediation, and Global Nationalism?

ANGHARAD CLOSS STEPHENS

Swansea University, UK

Media Theory  
Vol. 7 | No. 2 | 191-208  
© The Author(s) 2023  
CC-BY  
<http://mediatheoryjournal.org/>

## Abstract

In this article, I show how Berlant offers important resources for thinking about the relationship between affect, mediation and global nationalism, and for considering how to build alternative forms of belonging. These resources include: how they address people's sense of belonging to an affective space, and how they map the affective states that form part of living in the present under late capitalism. In these ways, Berlant offers material for helping us understand why nationalist ways of understanding belonging should appear so *persistent*, and continue to provide convincing narratives of attachment. The article goes on to outline methodological approaches pursued by Berlant, which I suggest others interested in engaging the mediation of national affects can adopt. This includes paying attention to moments that do not appear to form significant "national events". Taken together, I demonstrate how these different elements can teach us a substantial amount about the rise of global nationalism.

## Keywords

Nation, Nationalism, Affect, Populism, Method

## Introduction

On 5 November 2021, I joined an online event organised to remember the brilliant philosopher and critic, Lauren Berlant. It was titled "What does Lauren Berlant teach us about X?" The title draws on an article written by Heather Love in 2012, which in turn draws on an article written by Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner, titled "What

Can Queer Theory Teach Us About X?”, published in 1995. In the event held to remember Berlant, it allowed the different contributors – Deborah Lynn Nelson, Romi Crawford, Lee Edelman, Sianne Ngai and Kathleen Stewart – to reflect on how Berlant’s way of seeing, thinking and writing in so many instances led to a “genuine opening in thought or experience” (Berlant’s words, although not used about herself, 2007: 2).

In this article, I borrow the question of “what does Berlant teach us about X” to ask how Berlant’s attention to affect contributes to our understanding of global nationalism. Berlant was Professor of English, founder and director of the Centre for the Study of Gender and Sexuality at Chicago University. Their work has had a wide-ranging impact on my discipline, Human Geography, especially around the implications of affect theory (Anderson et al, 2023a; 2023b). Yet despite Berlant being author of one of the most widely read humanities books of recent decades (according to the American Comparative Literature Association – Butler, 2021) – *Cruel Optimism*, and being “inarguably the most important theorist of gender and sexuality of their generation” (Nelson and Schilt, 2021), there are still very few attempts at considering the legacy of their work for studying global nationalism, its relationship with the media, and contemporary populisms. Despite their critical acclaim, Berlant rarely appears on essential reading lists for Global Politics, Media Studies, or Nations and Nationalism programmes, in the UK at least. This may be in part because they are an interdisciplinary thinker, and so not considered a “key thinker” for one discipline. It also may be because their work is not reducible to a single concept or approach (although “affective atmospheres” vies for such status). However, overlooking Berlant in this way makes me wonder whether emotions, affects, and matters of the “intimate public sphere” (Berlant, 1997) – abortion, sexuality, sexual violence, pornography, marriage and reproduction – are still considered *only tangentially connected* to the study of borders, ethnicity, race, migration, conflict and war. In this article, I want to argue otherwise. The question “what does Berlant teach us about X” suggests that a solution will be offered (Love, 2012). But as we will see, Berlant’s work does not offer solutions. Often it will leave us thinking that the problem is more complex than we may have thought. Indeed, Berlant invites us to think in much more imaginative ways about the

late-capitalist world that we now live in, why it is so hard to imagine ways of changing it, and how we are also already living other possible worlds.

### **Affect theory and critique**

One of Berlant's consistent interests is in how people are not moved politically on rational or materialistic bases alone. This is a point that I kept returning to as I digested the fallout from the "Brexit" vote in the UK – that is, the referendum held on 23 June 2016 to decide whether the UK should leave the European Union. It would take another four years for politicians to agree what "leaving" might mean, and seven years later, this is still not settled. The work of agreeing new trade deals, protocols, legal and financial agreements between the UK and the EU is complex and protracted. However, the political feelings around Brexit, at least at the time of the vote, appeared much more clear-cut: you either wanted to leave or you wanted to remain. And up until the Covid-19 pandemic, this dividing line tore up friendships and families and oppressively overshadowed every other political issue and debate in UK politics. Whilst many different explanations were offered for the event itself, there were far fewer efforts to try and understand it. Furthermore, those who consider themselves cosmopolitan and progressive often blamed the result on the "others", asking "what have they done?" (Smith, 2016). To make sense of this context, I found myself re-reading Berlant on how politics is not organised on rational grounds, and the value of *understanding* as a form of critique (rather than explaining, determining, or predicting). This seemed especially important in this period of heightened tension, which included a rise in racism, in "ugly feelings" (Ngai, 2005) and "negative affects" (Dekeyser et al., 2021). It provided a way in for critiquing right-wing populism, as well as for critiquing many of the terms through which this event was being opposed.

Berlant is across their work interested in people's sense of belonging to an affective space – "a space of attachment and identification" (2008: x-xi), and in how such spaces of attachment cannot be fully explained or understood through accounts about ideology, or accounts about reason alone. As Stuart Hall said about the right-wing nationalism of the 1980s, and the move towards neoliberalism in the UK under the then Prime Minister, Margaret Thatcher: the "effectivity [of this political movement] does not lie in its capacity to dupe unsuspecting folk but in the way it addresses real

problems, real and lived experiences, real contradictions” (1979: 20). What connects populism and the nation is the focus on and struggle over the category of “the people”. Of course, this idea of “the people” is rarely neutral, and it derives from establishing a boundary between who belongs and who does not (Butler, 2012; De Genova, 2018). It becomes important to examine how these processes of establishing “the people” are made and contested. Much like Hall, Berlant demonstrates a deep empathy with how people find themselves believing in narratives that might simultaneously harm them or oppress them. This forms an important scaffold for their concept of “cruel optimism” – coined to describe how people “stay attached to conventional good-life fantasies...[even] when the evidence of their instability, fragility and dear cost abounds” (2011: 2). This concept is made possible by Berlant’s understanding of the centrality of affect to everyday life, and by their philosophical commitment to critique as something other than ascertaining causes or making moral judgements. Critique is instead driven by the desire to portray the world as it is. For Berlant, as for Hall, people find themselves committing to a political movement or a set of beliefs, not so much because they share in one cause rather than another, but because these provide a way to feel we belong in the world.

Drawing intellectually on Eve Sedgwick’s work on paranoid and reparative reading, Berlant’s approach therefore presumes that affective spaces are never fully controlled by a sovereign authority. This is Hall’s point too: that there is no single authority in charge of “duping unsuspecting folk” (1979: 20). This is an important – and notably difficult insight for those interested in thinking about the intersections among affect, politics and the media. This is because it is often seductive to document how we are *persuaded* or *manipulated* to think or to vote in various ways by powerful organisations, authorities, institutions, and corporations. The aim here is not to underplay such forces, but to consider how this work also fails in its desired effects, or at least how our identification with organisations, authorities, institutions and corporations cannot be fully explained as a relationship of obedience, exploitation or extraction only. There is more to our attachments, and it is precisely this affective quality, of “living and being connected to strangers in a kind of nebulous *communitas*” (Berlant, 2008: x-xi), which cannot be fully predicted or determined, that interests Berlant. This is also, I want to argue, central for understanding the affective force of various political attachments.

Berlant draws on Sedgwick's work in many ways, not least in their pioneering of queer theory. They also share Sedgwick's philosophical commitment to "the project of thinking otherwise" (2003: 11). In their introduction to *Thinking Feeling*, Sedgwick turns to Michel Foucault's *The History of Sexuality*, where he attempts to think the "delirious promise" (Sedgwick, 2003: 9) of conceptualising power beyond the "repressive hypothesis". In it, Foucault asks whether there can only be a "negative relation" between power and sex. His aim is to draw attention to the proliferation of ways sex and sexuality are talked about in the modern age, which include suppression, but which also go beyond that. The point, then, is to query whether power *only* operates through repression, prohibition, censorship, and denial or whether power is also exercised in other ways, and through a plurality of discourses. This significantly opens the possibilities for studying how power works, to consider the "polymorphous techniques of power" (Foucault, 1998: 11). It also provides significant context for reading Berlant: together with Sedgwick, they develop an "empathetic view of the other as at once good, damaged, integral, and requiring and eliciting love and care" (Sedgwick, 2003: 137). This is significant when we turn to study global politics, and the question of how politics is mediated, for it challenges us to see others (including those we disagree with, and those whose views we find repugnant) as also "requiring and eliciting love and care", and so as needing to be understood rather than explained.

Berlant puts this into practice by stating how easy it would be to mock the American dream. Instead, they ask us to try and understand it: how as a story it "addresses the fear of being stuck or reduced to a type, a redemptive story pinning its hopes on class mobility" (1997: 4), and which has few narratives to offer when the dream goes wrong or disappoints (as it is structurally bound to do). She takes seriously the fear of being "barred from living the 'Dream'", whilst showing how it produces a "vicious yet sentimental cultural politics" (1997: 4), which reduces political life to the protection of private interests. The American dream does not account for the way the nation forms "a space of struggle violently separated by racial, sexual, and economic inequalities" (1997: 4). Indeed, Berlant's work in *The Queen of America Goes to Washington City* (1997), *The Female Complaint* (2008) and, with Lisa Duggan, as editor of *Our Monica, Ourselves: The Clinton Affair and the National Interest* (2001), tracks the obsession with matters of sex, intimacy and identity in the public sphere in the United States from the 1970s to

the 1990s, and how a conservative ideology made private lives central to questions of citizenship. This included the “violent gentility” of the presumption that heterosexuality must form the “norm” of national culture (1997: 5). In this period, which saw an obsession with “demonic and idealized images and narratives about sex and citizenship”, questions of citizenship became “downsized...to a mode of voluntarism and privacy” (1997: 5), at the expense of ideas about the public good.

Later, and following Donald Trump’s election as US President in 2016, Berlant claims that their teaching “returned to citizenship in a more intense way” (Berlant et al., 2022: 371), confirming how questions of citizenship and intimacy emerged again as central to understanding heightened nationalism. Indeed, Berlant’s writings from the late 1990s and the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century form a rich archive for reflecting on today’s “culture wars”, as the intimate sphere is again weaponised by right-wing and populist movements, as evidenced in the anti-gender movements on the rise across the globe (Hemmings, 2022; Weber, 2017). These anti-gender movements present new “idealized images” of sex and citizenship, and what counts as Woman and Man, as suggested by UK Prime Minister Rishi Sunak when he addressed the Conservative Party Conference in 2023, with the line that: “a man is a man and a woman is a woman. That’s just common sense” (*The Spectator*, 2023). Alongside a range of deliberate references Sunak (and before him Prime Minister Boris Johnson) has made to the figure of Thatcher, what is demonstrated here again is the political work of occupying what counts as “common sense”. Berlant encourages us to connect these reactionary narratives with the story of redemption offered by the American dream (as well as other national dreams), and how these emerge as one explanation (but not the only explanation) offered for people’s disappointment and frustrations with their lives.

To conclude, Berlant helps us recognise that politics involves more than a decision or action (Martin, 1998), and seeks instead to understand the affective atmospheres that shape the ways we see the world as we do. The next section expands on some of the affects that Berlant charts as part of advanced capitalist, contemporary life in US societies, focusing on *dissociation*. With this concept, Berlant delves more deeply into questions of disappointment and frustration, and stays with the feelings, to unpack them politically. What emerges as a result is the potential of a different political response. This matters because it allows Berlant to not only present her argument with

a right-wing cultural agenda, but also with the ways it is resisted. For example, she cautions against “both the terms of the Reaganite revolution [referring to the Presidency of Ronald Reagan in the 1980s] and the ways it has been opposed” (1997: 10). This brings us back to the influence of Foucault’s work, and that larger aim of “thinking otherwise”. What is key here is the way that movements of opposition risk borrowing the language, narrative, imagery and frameworks which they initially set to resist. This became evident under Brexit, as various progressive movements blamed “others” for voting the wrong way. Rather than stay within a dualistic framework of power, Berlant’s work is situated alongside that of Foucault’s in appreciating the “polymorphous techniques of power” (Foucault, 1998: 11). This suggests that the critical task has to involve more than resisting the Dream, deconstructing the dream, or showing how it fails: we also come to appreciate how the dream is affective, and moves us in ways that cannot be easily undone.

### **Dissociation and the affects of populist times**

In Berlant’s posthumous book, *On the Inconvenience of Other People* (2022), a chapter is dedicated to the affect of “dissociation”. This adds to their catalogue of affects and moods that characterise contemporary life under late capitalism, charted in responses to the fraying of good-life fantasies: “depression, dissociation, pragmatism, cynicism, optimism, activism, or an incoherent mash” (2011: 2). Berlant goes about unpacking dissociation, into five kinds of things, which include: a mode of “cognitive delay in the wake of any affective impact”; “disbelief”; a process of separating out intensities that may potentially be “self-disintegrating” – a coping process; a “condition of dispersed – multiple awareness states” that present themselves in going about ordinary tasks; and widespread, everyday responses to aggressions including “racism, misogyny, homophobia, xenophobic and class disgust” (2022: 118). This effort to deeply engage dissociation is impressive because of its capacity to chime in the context of living under neoliberal capitalism, and for how it makes a barely acknowledged – barely registering, collective affect into a category of analysis.

Positioning their project a little to the side of the work of explaining and responding to historical and environmental conditions of violence, Berlant opts to “feel out” these moments of living dissociation, to consider people’s different “forms of getting

through episodes and existence that allow for continued attachment to life” (Berlant, 2022: 120). This may include “illness and diagnosis” (2022: 119), but rather than seek resolutions or medications for dissociation, their interest lies in magnifying these affective states, and politicising them. She casts dissociation as an ordinary, recognisable and familiar affective condition produced by living under the conditions of late capitalism, new technologies, heightened nationalisms and inequalities. The portraits she paints reverberate with a truthfulness that feels very current in the aftermath of the Covid-19 pandemic, and the global increase in anxiety and depression (WHO, 2022). Indeed, there are clear connections to the Feel Tank Chicago collective’s earlier work on depression as a political feeling (2022: 365-366). Berlant’s portrayal of contemporary forms of subjectivity also chimes with the increase in diagnoses of ADD/ADHD and ASD conditions across the world. Consider for example Berlant’s description of how: “the prolific splits of affect and attention in the face of disturbing events and insecure objects provide opportunities to hold out for life detached from the damage wrought by the usual ways that making up a life can use up a person” (2022: 121). Instead of medicalising these conditions (and whilst accepting the need to medicalise them), Berlant seeks to understand the connections between dissociation and the current political times, yielding the possibility that these fraying subjectivities may yet lead to other ways of being in common.

When discussing political emotions, we may gravitate towards exceptional events, to highlight one recognisable social affect: for example, shame, happiness, fear or trauma (2022: 123). In the context of the nation, this may include looking at political emotions in response to the violence of non-state and state actors, or a collective mega-event, such as a high-profile football game. However, in contrast to those recognisable affects, Berlant is more interested in ambivalence – that is, when a mood or tone may not be easily summed up or already known to us: the “unincorporated domains of experience” (2022: 123). Furthermore, Berlant draws attention to the political stakes of highlighting these states of ambivalence. For the recognisable affects of fear, shame, happiness, or trauma can also often suggest a recognisable political narrative: for example, they often attach to, or travel alongside familiar ideas about “us and them”, or “progress and the left behind”. In staying with more ambivalent affects, for example the feeling of wanting to “be in life without wanting the world” (2022: 124), Berlant



opens up a space for considering different kinds of political positions, including non-sovereign forms of subjectivity, where “action” feels too strong a term for the kinds of practices we can manage – which may include slow and uncertain actions. Indeed, Berlant’s focus on ambivalence is reflected in forms of political activism that have emerged through and after the Covid-19 pandemic, such as the Tang Ping movement in China, which elevated the experience of “lying flat” as a way of collectively taking “a break from relentless work” (Davidovic, 2022). Environmental movements, such as Extinction Rebellion, have also moved recently to using different kinds of tactics, including bridge-building (Booth, 2023) [although this must also be contextualised in relation to rising state powers in the UK, in the new Public Order Act, 2023]. Even in taking this context into account, Berlant’s focus is in tune with a new generation of activists and activism, which build from non-heroic ways of being in the world.

This is very interesting terrain to occupy politically, and I’m one of many who have been inspired by it. It opens up a space under conditions of heightened nationalism, somewhere in-between “us and them”. However, it may also leave us dissatisfied. We may agree that we want to appreciate different affective spaces in upholding people’s sense of the normal, and how “many people in dominant populations are less interested in changing the world than in not being defeated by it” (2011). But we may want to push further with questions about how we achieve change, and how it is necessary to also question and resist what practices count as normal, and what pass as ordinary pleasures under advanced capitalism. This has become more obvious in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic and the climate change emergency: consider for example the “violent gentility” of fast fashion, driving cars, eating meat, new plastic toys, decisions about where and how we go on holidays. Berlant does not go into detail about some of the compromises we make from day to day in the name of upholding a way of living that is hard to let go of, or because it’s what we feel we need. How do we challenge the normal in ways that bring people with us and, simultaneously, change ourselves? As Sianne Ngai reminded us in the obituary event with which I opened this article, Berlant refuses to be contemptuous of people’s desire for the normal. This is a significant starting point, which in itself changes how we think about change, not least in helping us avoid positioning ourselves as outside of any change that needs to be made (Edkins, 2019). Ngai went on to point out how Berlant opens up a space *between*

“non-contempt and endorsement” (2021). This is a delicate, and immensely valuable space, which under intensified nationalist atmospheres, can form an *essential space* of dialogue, diffusion, and building an alternative commons.

## **Methods for the study of national affects**

Much to the frustration of some, Berlant’s work does not proceed through case studies that can be used to demonstrate a point, and with a method reported in a way that allows for its replicability. What they do is invite us to sit with them and look at the world, drawing on the queer, feminist, literary and cultural archive that they have amassed, and ask what kind of method would suit this object that we have in our frame (Berlant, 2007: 669). Suspicious of the case study that provides “evidence” of the “value” of an approach (Berlant, 2007), Berlant instead queries how a particular case study comes to achieve its status, and organise knowledge, whilst introducing cases that will also query what we think we already know. This demands another style of writing academic work, which is less about closing a case, and more about opening a case up. To this end, their work unfolds through sentences that communicate “the sound or tonality of thought” (Seigworth, 2012: 347). Gregory Seigworth calls this the “hum” of Berlant’s work. Thinking with Berlant means spending time listening to this “hum”. There are two parts to this: it means attuning to the hums of social life, and writing about social life through its hums – drawing attention to moments that otherwise “barely (or perhaps never) cross the “low bar” of conscious threshold” (2012: 349). In this sense, Berlant’s work provides a lively example of Sedgwick’s aim of “thinking, feeling”. And as with Raymond Williams’s idea of the “pre-emergent” in his “structures of feeling”, Berlant takes an interest in both what is culturally dominant, and with public feelings that do not yet have a name, a history, or an archive.

When studying the concepts of nation, nationalism, citizenship and identity, we are often drawn to major events as case studies. These might include the Olympic Games or a World Cup, for the way they offer a representation of the nation-state framework. But as geographers Tim Edensor (2015) and David McCormack (2013) point out, a football match (for example) also suggests the liveliness of the nation – how it can be sensed through affects and atmospheres in the combination of the noise, lights and bodies packed together in a stadium and the way the event is mediated –through

television, social media updates, or radio, performing the pace of the game. The latter approach gestures to how an affective approach differs from the study of representations, and allows for a sense of the nation unfolding in time, and as coming in and out of focus in different spaces. Berlant argues that a case study can often serve as a shorthand for making a point that we already anticipate and recognise, rather than as an invitation to stop and think. Berlant argues that this could be gleaned following the events of 9/11 – the attacks on the World Trade Centre in New York, in Washington DC, and in Pennsylvania – and the wars waged in Afghanistan and Iraq. In this context, “Guantánamo” and “Abu Ghraib” became familiar case studies, often postulated as “self-evident” concepts that assumed we all shared in a consensus (2007: 669). This was a time when many critical theorists were engaged in critiquing the US-led wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. Berlant’s point is not to dispute that critique, but to highlight how critical work also operates with a set of already agreed ideas, viewpoints and assumptions, that are often placed beyond question. We return here to Berlant’s point that strategies for resisting dominant affects can often reinforce the terms that they seek to oppose. It is not enough, then, to look for the *less obvious* cases, rather than the *major* events. As their book dedicated to the case of Monica Lewinsky demonstrates, Berlant is interested in the mediation of major events and dominant affects. What they do differently, however, is address those events from the side, by following the non-dramatic, seemingly uneventful moments of an event as it gathers and fades.

In my book, *National Affects*, I drew on this method to discuss the funeral of former British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher on 17 April 2013. Thatcher was a leading figure in the advancement of neoliberalism. I described a scene of watching people, sat in a pub off Fleet Street, watching the funeral on television screens, as the event itself simultaneously unfolded on the street outside. In reflecting on this scene, I suggested that no one watched the funeral purposefully. In this scene of people half-watching television, the funeral played out as part of the background, mediated through multiple screens and felt through the changing atmospheres of the city. The figure of Thatcher echoes with many ideas, practices and habits that still form part of the background of collective social life: ideas about self-improvement and progress, as measured through shopping, fitness tracking, or building up a CV. Thatcher – much

like the figure of Ronald Reagan, a “face of mass affect” (Massumi, 2015: 33) – encapsulates many of these ideas, but the ideas also exceed the figures themselves. It is why in watching this funeral, both as part of the crowd, and on television and in print media, I wondered about what it would mean to think about politics *after* Thatcher. Using Berlant, I explored how this event was composed through the representational symbols of seven hundred armed services personnel, the music and drum beat of the military bands, the silencing of Big Ben, and the coffin transported in a hearse and then by gun carriage, from the Palace of Westminster to St Paul’s Cathedral. But also, how the event unfolded through “history’s contingencies, people’s memories and ambivalence” (Closs Stephens, citing Berlant, 2022: 38), meaning that it was never possible to fully predict how it might be received and experienced. As the event unfolded both online and on the ground, it combined with narratives of austerity, both past and present, and worked through “affective amplification through broadcast and diffusion” (2015: 31), reaching the people, who were only half-watching, through “contagion rather than convincing” (Massumi, 2015: 25).

As well as observing major events from the side, Berlant turns to events that do not achieve the same status as “major national events”. This is evidenced in their discussion of “1963: A Holocaust of Little Girls”, when she discusses the case of the four African-American girls that were killed in a church on 15 September 1963 in Birmingham, Alabama by a bomb planted by white supremacists (1994). As with many other events that do, and do not, make their way into a “national history”, Berlant tracks how the case has nevertheless been kept alive through other engagements with the event (Toni Morrison’s *Song of Solomon*), which forbid the event from being forgotten. Berlant follows in Walter Benjamin’s footsteps by studying the past for the way it is relevant in the present, and by seeking to “wrest tradition away from a conformism that is about to overpower it” (Benjamin, 1968: 255). Berlant’s discussion of this case is relevant for considering the Grenfell Tower fire on 14 June 2017 in London, which killed 72 people when a fire that started in a regular domestic appliance entered the cladding of the building and spread rapidly. Of those killed, most were black and minority ethnic residents of the city. The event became emblematic of the rising inequalities in the global city of London and the UK, the neglect of proper regulations on building companies, and the lack of good quality, affordable housing.

Yet as International Relations scholar Jenny Edkins argues, with few exceptions, scholars of global politics have hardly engaged with Grenfell, “presumably because they see it as a local or purely national event” (2019: 170). Using Berlant, we might ask, how do some events achieve a status as a “national event”?

The horror of what happened at Grenfell, as people found their homes were on fire and were unable to escape, has only remained in the national public imagination because of the work of community activists, such as the local residents that organised a silent walk on the 14<sup>th</sup> day of each month, for many months, and where at the end of it, mourners gathered to read out the names of those who died (Beck, 2021). This event also stays in a collective memory through cultural artworks such as “Requiem” by Chris Ofili, now at Tate Britain, which pays tribute to the Black British artist Khadije Saye, who was killed in the fire (Tate, 2023). These are some of the ways this event continues to circulate, get mediated, and impress on us affectively. Borrowing from Berlant’s engagement with the events of 1963, we can also ask how some events achieve a status as significant events that must be formally taught, remembered, memorialised, whilst others rely on community and artistic engagements, filling in for the silences of dominant, national narratives. “How to narrate?” Berlant asks in the context of the event of the four young girls killed in Birmingham, Alabama in 1963. Whilst the event says “something”, “no commentary can fully gloss the heat of the meanings its violence generates” (1994: 139). Whilst Grenfell has, through the Grenfell Tower Inquiry, become a legal case study to establish what happened and prevent recurrence, its status as a “national event” that raises urgent questions about race, class and inequalities remains precarious. What Berlant invites us to do is consider how such events keep these affective resonances by being sounded and mediated anew.

Berlant’s ability to tune in to the “hum” of social life is important, because this is both where we can hear or otherwise sense which of the dominant narratives and affects are “sticking”, but also, where we are reminded that alternative affects, and another sense of the commons, are present: “that, affectively speaking, there is already a better sensorial world right here, right now, more intimate and secure and just as real as the world made by the media’s anxiogenic analysis” (2011: 224-5). Edkins draws on Berlant’s work to show how Grenfell was an exceptional event, but that the discursive framework of the exception, and of the traumatic break with the norm, fails to account

for what happened. Instead, Edkins draws on Berlant's concept of "crisis ordinariness" – defined by how people "manage the incoherence of lives that proceed in the face of threats to the good life they imagine" (2019: 171). That is, Grenfell revealed the dreadful housing conditions that poor and racialised communities live with every day in the UK, and which have worsened with increasing cuts to public spending, following the financial crisis of 2008. It also revealed the vast inequalities in the Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea – one of the richest councils in the UK – which owned the building and which was responsible for the refurbishment of it in flammable materials. In the wake of this horrific disaster, it was possible to see the hum of social life on the streets of Kensington and Chelsea, in the form of the communities that came out to mourn the dead and to demand justice. These communities were, as Edkins says: "revealed as politically engaged, thoroughly capable organisationally, and united across religious, political and other externally imposed divides. The contrast with the absence, incompetence and disorganisation of local and national government was stark" (2019: 174). It is these alternative forms of being together that Berlant's work makes possible to see.

### **Conclusion: feeling political together**

In *Cruel Optimism*, Berlant draws attention to a line uttered by former US President George W. Bush, when he said: "Somehow you just got to go over the heads of the filter and speak directly to the people" (2011: 224). In the context of this line, Berlant discusses the centrality of "*the affect of feeling political together*" (2011: 224). As audiences are presented with an endless reel of crisis-events (2011: 225), Bush's line speaks to the capacity to draw from it a story about a way forwards. Whilst we could read the line cynically, Berlant says, as an attempt to deflect from urgent problems and crises, it also highlights the centrality of affective communities and intimate publics, whether those gather in solidarity to *oppose* Bush's politics or seek, through a figure such as him, some sort of connection. That feeling political together is difficult to find in modernised building environments, in shopping experiences where all intimacy has been extracted from the process of buying goods, or from work that is increasingly disconnected from a sense of making a contribution. Significantly, Berlant's probing of affective connection forms something very different to the nostalgic yearning for an anchoring framework, or the principle of homogeneity sought by Bush, and familiar

to nationalist and populist politics. Berlant's efforts here are squarely anti-populist. Constantly attuned to how claims about "the people" exclude, how they are racialised and gendered, how they are exclusionary to migrant and minority populations, Berlant takes seriously the desire to feel political together, without allowing the return to a conservative and identifiable "people" to form the only possible response.

Berlant's quest for an affective public where there is "reliable reciprocity" between governments, workers, churches, citizens, political parties and strangers (2011: 225), echoes with Ash Amin's search for an intimate public that is "freed from the obligation of recognition" (2012: 13). Amin pursues a society of strangers that is formed around the "principle of multiplicity", where "collective life [is] a constant negotiation of difference" (2012: 7). This echoes Berlant on how a "culturally vital, multiethnic city" offers a very different icon for building a national culture to that of the (tacitly white) family (1997: 6). This attempt to recast citizenship refuses the politics of nostalgia and mourning, and squarely faces the challenges of building a public life suitable for the transnational, hyper-capitalist times. Whilst George W. Bush's conservative and imperialist government wished to "bracket" people's uncertainty (Berlant, 2011: 225), Berlant asks how we live with uncertainty, without resorting to what Wendy Brown describes as "reactionary 'we' formations" (Brown, 2010). Whilst never judging various personal and collective efforts at surviving neoliberal capitalism, from a "politics of care" (Amin, 2012: 7) to "vigils...witnessing, testimony, and yelling" (Berlant, 2011: 225), Berlant, like Amin, suggests that more is also needed to build a new form of citizenship.

In this article I have shown how Lauren Berlant's focus on affect offers a refreshing angle for addressing the persistence of global nationalisms and rise of contemporary populisms. It does so by examining how people manage the gap between the dreams they may have been promised and the present as it turns out, and how these are mediated through events, TV shows, films, books, adverts, as well as the figures and faces of mass affect. Berlant's focus on understanding the "production of the present" forms a way of understanding the "impasses of the political" (2011: 4), and for mapping the potential for other political responses. In engaging deeply, and sensitively, with how people think and feel, and in making ordinary ways of getting by worthy of academic attention, they demonstrate how things could have and can be otherwise

(Berlant in Berlant et al., 2022: 377), whilst offering glimpses of alternative ways of living together that are already present and available.

## References

- Amin, A. (2012) *Land of Strangers*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Anderson, B. et al. (2023a) 'Encountering Berlant part one: Concepts otherwise', *The Geographical Journal*, 189: 117–142.
- Anderson, B. et al. (2023b) 'Encountering Berlant part two: Cruel and other optimisms', *The Geographical Journal*, 189: 143–160.
- Back, L. (2021) 'Hope's Work', *Antipode*, 53: 3-20.
- Benjamin, W. (1968) *Illuminations*. New York: Schocken Books.
- Berlant, L. (1994) "'68 or Something'", *Critical Inquiry*, 21(1): 124-155.
- Berlant, L. (1997) *The Queen of America Goes to Washington City. Essays on Sex and Citizenship*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Berlant, L. (2007) 'On the case', *Critical Inquiry*, 33(4): 663-672.
- Berlant, L. (2008) *The Female Complaint*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Berlant, L. (2011) *Cruel Optimism*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Berlant, L. (2022) *The Inconvenience of Other People*, Durham NC: Duke University Press.
- Berlant, L. et al. (2022) 'On taking the affective turn: interview with Lauren Berlant, Ann Cvetkovich, and Deborah Gould', *Cultural Studies*, 36(3): 360-377.
- Brown, W. (2010) *Walled States, Waning Sovereignty*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Bulley, D. (2019) 'Everyday Life and Death in the Global City', in Bulley, D., Edkins, J. and El-Anani, N. (eds.) *After Grenfell: Violence, Resistance and Response*. London: Pluto Press, pp. 1-18.
- Butler, J. (2012) *Notes Toward a Performative Theory of Assembly*. Harvard: Harvard University Press.
- Butler, J. (2021) 'Ways of Hoping', in 'What Would It Mean to Think That Thought?: The Era of Lauren Berlant', *The Nation*, July 8, <https://www.thenation.com/article/culture/lauren-berlant-obituary/>
- Coward, M. (2024) 'Senses of togetherness in a Covid city', in Closs Stephens, A. and Tazzioli, M. (eds.) *Collective Movements and Emerging Political Spaces*, London: Routledge.



- Davidovic, I. (2022) 'Lying flat: Why some Chinese are putting work second', BBC News, 16 February, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/business-60353916>
- Dekeyser, T. et al. (2022) 'Negativity: space, politics and affects', *Cultural Geographies*, 29(1): 5-21.
- De Genova, N. (2018) 'Rebordering 'the People': Notes on Theorizing Populism', *The South Atlantic Quarterly*, 117(2): 357-374.
- Edensor, T. (2015) 'Producing atmospheres at the match: Fan cultures, commercialisation and mood management in English football', *Emotion, Space and Society*, 15: 82-89.
- Edkins, J. (2019) *Change and the Politics of Certainty*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.
- Enany, N. (eds.) *After Grenfell. Violence, Resistance and Response*. London: Pluto Press.
- Foucault, M. (1979) *The History of Sexuality. Vol. 1*. London: Penguin.
- Hall, S. (1979) 'The Great Moving Right Show', *Marxism Today*, January: 14-20.
- Hemmings, C. (2022) "'But I thought we'd already won that argument!": 'Anti-gender' Mobilizations, Affect and Temporality', *Feminist Studies*, 48(3): 594-615.
- Love, H. (2012) 'What Does Lauren Berlant Teach Us about X?', *Communication and Critical/Cultural Studies*, 9(4): 320-336.
- Nelson, D. and Schilt, K. (2021) 'In Memory of Lauren Berlant', Center for the Study of Gender and Sexuality, The University of Chicago, <https://gendersexuality.uchicago.edu/news/berlant.shtml>
- Ngai, S. (2005) *Ugly Feelings*. Harvard: Harvard University Press.
- Martin, R. (1998) *Critical Moves: Dance Studies in Theory and Practice*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Massumi, B. (2015) *The Politics of Affect*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- McCormack, D. (2013) *Refrains for Moving Bodies*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Sedgwick, E.K. (2003) *Touching Feeling*. Durham and London: Duke University Press.
- Seigworth, G.J. (2012) 'Reading Lauren Berlant: Writing, Communication and Critical/Cultural Studies', *Communication and Critical/Cultural Studies*, 9(4): 346-352.
- Tate Press Release (2023) 'Requiem by Chris Ofili unveiled at Tate Britain', 12 September, <https://www.tate.org.uk/press/press-releases/requiem-by-chris-ofili-unveiled-at-tate-britain>

- Smith, Z. (2016) 'Fences. A Brexit Diary', *New York Review of Books*. 18 August, <https://www.nybooks.com/articles/2016/08/18/fences-brexit-diary/>
- Sunak, R. (2023) 'Full text: Rishi Sunak's Tory conference speech', *The Spectator*, 4 October, <https://www.spectator.co.uk/article/full-text-rishi-sunaks-tory-conference-speech/>
- Weber, C. (2017) 'Right-Wing Populism, Anti-Genderism, and Real US Americans in the Age of Trump', *The Disorder of Things Blog*, July 6, <https://thedisorderofthings.com/2017/07/06/right-wing-populism-anti-genderism-and-real-us-americans-in-the-age-of-trump/>
- World Health Organization (2022) 'Mental health and Covid-19: Early evidence of the pandemic's impact: Scientific brief, 2 March 2022', WHO/2019-nCoV/Sci\_Brief/Mental\_health/2022.1

**Dr Angharad Closs** Stephens is Associate Professor in Human Geography at Swansea University and author of *National Affects: The Everyday Atmospheres of Being Political* (Bloomsbury, 2022) and *The Persistence of Nationalism: From Imagined Communities to Urban Encounters* (Routledge, 2013).

**Email:** [a.c.stephens@swansea.ac.uk](mailto:a.c.stephens@swansea.ac.uk)

This article is part of a special section on 'Lauren Berlant and Media Theory', edited by Carolyn Pedwell and Simon Dawes, introduced by Carolyn Pedwell, and featuring articles by Ben Anderson, Ali Azhar & Megan Boler, Lisa Blackman, Sarah Cefai, Angharad Closs Stephens, Chole Turner & Rebecca 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: Lauren'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".