

**Lauren Berlant and Lee Edelman. *Sex, or, the Unbearable*.  
Durham: Duke University Press, 2014. ISBN: 9780822355946.**

***Jessica Durham***

Lauren Berlant and Lee Edelman's *Sex, or the unbearable* is an experimental work of queer-theory-inflected psychoanalytic cultural criticism, a collaborative dialogue "in which theory, politics, and close textual analysis encounter the pedagogical necessity of responding to the provocations of otherness" (ix). The text forms a dialogic exploration of multimedia representations of sex, loosely understood as a scene of relationality—the experiences and events by which we encounter otherness and experience ourselves, including processes of negotiation, the unbearable, hopes, anxieties, the object, etc. (viii). The authors ask and explore how "sex in the absence of optimism" could be thought, desired, or conceptualised.

The book is divided into three sections. In section one, "Sex Without Optimism," Edelman close reads a drawing named *Untitled (Ass)* and Berlant close reads an Internet sex-chat scene from the film *You and Me and Everyone We Know*. In section two, "What Survives," both authors write in response to an academic session on Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's texts "Paranoid and Reparative Reading" and *A Dialogue on Love*. And in section three, "Living with Negativity," both authors close read the Lydia Davis short story "Break It Down" (handily included as an appendix) in terms of the problems of living with negativity, including potential responses of mastery or disavowal.

The book is one of only two in the very recent Duke University Press series Theory Q, edited by Berlant and Edelman themselves. Theory Q appears to be a successor of sorts to Series Q, a Duke series which contained many of the most influential works of queer theory since 1993, including Berlant's *The Queen of America Goes to Washington City* and Edelman's *No Future*. Theory Q is marketed on the Duke University Press website as "encouraging a wide spectrum of critical approaches, invit[ing] the rethinking of disciplinary logics, social life, aesthetic form, political and cultural practices, and criticism itself . . . presuppos[ing] little about what constitutes sexuality except that norms are not laws."

The academic discourse of the text is very specific to the particular kind of psychoanalytic critical theory and cultural criticism practiced by the leading queer theorists with their homes in the faculties of Literature and Cultural Studies at American universities including Duke, Chicago, and the University of California at Berkeley and Los Angeles. Lauren Berlant and Lee Edelman are two of the most prominent critics in this corner of queer theory, with their colleagues including Leo Bersani, Amy Villarejo and Teresa De Lauretis (it comes as no surprise that Bersani and Villarejo were the book's peer reviewers). This book is clearly written for a very sophisticated, narrow audience largely comprising, I suspect, the faculty and graduate students trained in this particular kind of psychoanalytically-inflected queer theory taught in the closed-loop of these universities. I'm a reasonably cluey Australian graduate student who's read a little bit of a lot of queer theory, including the psychoanalytically-informed works of Berlant and Edelman, and even with the competencies I bring and the *Dictionary of Psychoanalysis* by my side, I was locked out of comprehension more often than not.

But perhaps the value of this text might be more like what we as audiences often value in experimental art—difficulty, withholdingness, originality, and brilliance—and less like what we as academics value in critical theory—clarity, economy of thought, and work that is applicable, teachable, justifiable, and repeatable. Because while the text is erudite, intellectually well-informed, self-reflexive and highly original, it is frequently inscrutable and even uncitable. One of the biggest drawbacks for an academic reader of this text, especially a student, is the frequency of passages dense with undefined terms I recognise as those of psychoanalysis, and this can make really crucial points very difficult to understand. And there are surely debates in psychoanalysis as practiced in the Humanities about what each of these terms refer to, debates which are not present. This complicates how an academic reader could contextualise and interpret passages with frequent specialist terms, such as the following:

The insuperable otherness of this nonrelation finds expression in the negativity that marks the subject's encounter with nonsovereignty as something of its own rather than as something that disappropriates it of ownership of itself (10).

There are frequently no citations, no disciplinary markers, no definitions, and no evidence for these kinds of statements. And as the *Dictionary of Psychoanalysis* makes clear, there are long-running debates within psychoanalysis as practiced in the Humanities about the definition, significance, and relations between all the major psychoanalytic terms, especially between the field's prominent theorists including Freud, Lacan, Klein, Tomkins, Winnicott, and their followers. And I enjoy a good critical theory pun highlighting the slippery non-binary nature of meaning as much as the next poststructuralist, but on several occasions this clouds comprehension, as for example in the phrase: "Inherent in the proliferation of social forms lies what structures the social as form: the void of the nonrelation that in-forms, which is to say, forms from within, the imperative to formalize relation even while deforming it as well" (10-11).

Among the book's major attractions is its inventive dialogic form, and Berlant and Edelman's masterful close readings of diverse media. The authors alternate named passages, riffing on each others' ideas and including their moments of complex ambiguous affect, including responses to the other of misappropriation, frustration, delight and surprise, so often elided in collaborative critical theory. This dialogic form and its auto-analysis is one of the great intellectual joys of the book, a fascinating and inventive device well-suited to a discussion of the complex investments subjects have in relationality, including sex, conversation, and pedagogy. Both authors have moments of terrific insight, and it's usually when they're staying close to the textual object and giving examples of phenomena with actual groups of people and experiences named. For example, here is Berlant on the relationship between sex and safety:

As I wrote recently in an essay about the work of Leo Bersani and David Halperin, 'When in a romance someone has sex and then says to the lover, "You make me feel safe," we understand that she means that there's been an emotional compensation to neutralize how unsafe and close to the abject sex makes her feel. "You make me feel safe" means that I can relax and have fun where I am also not safe, where I am too close to the ridiculous, the disgusting, the merely weird, or—simply too close to having a desire. But some situations are riskier than others, as the meanings of unsafe sex change according to who's having the sex (Berlant 2009, 266).'

That's where the politics comes in (13).

This strikes me as wonderfully insightful, the kind of phenomenon that seems perfectly obvious once it's stated but invisible beforehand, because so everyday. This is what I understand good critical theory to do. It is a shame there is not more discussion of representations of sex scenes in the book. The favoured objects of the book are depictions of awkward or aborted loosely erotic encounters—the kind of close readings at which psychoanalysis always seemed to excel. Psychoanalytic criticism tends to see sex as a metaphor for power, and this disappoints me, as I'm much more interested in the kind of works trying to read sex as sex without abstracting away—such as in the contemporary fields of Porn Studies, the study of erotica in feminist literary criticism, and some of the earlier works of queer theory. I can't say I wasn't warned, as the third sentence of the Preface states “there's not that much sex in the book” (vii), but it's still disappointing.

Nevertheless, the text is dotted with some fantastic moments and some truly brilliant analyses. These include Berlant describing the abstract as academia's genre of futurity, “an ambition . . . an often hastily condensed fantasy decked out as a project” (35)—spot on! Edelman's contribution includes a fascinating discussion on the relations between anality, control, and capitalism in the West, during an extraordinary analysis of his chosen object. This is an artwork, a photo of a male artist's hand, holding a pencil, which is at eraser-point on a drawing of a donkey where its asshole would be, with Edelman spinning this into an analysis of self-hood, cuteness, erasure, self-effacement, and presence/absence—classic psychoanalytic and poststructuralist concepts re-made interesting and relevant.

This book suits graduate students and academics with advanced training in specifically queer-theory-inflected psychoanalytic cultural criticism as practiced in the US academy, as an experimental reflection on the possibilities of collaborative textual analysis. Unfortunately, the text will not suit students of queer theory with an interest in minority sexualities, as there is little in the text specific to LGBTIQA people and their cultures or experiences—something I suggest is characteristic of the dominant anti-normative practices of contemporary queer theory more widely. It will not suit scholars interested in representations of sex scenes, as the textual objects analysed are more like awkward, mildly erotic representations of misunderstandings and relations gone awry. Nor will this text suit scholars seeking a citable, authoritative source for the psychoanalytic terms discussed, as the specialist terms are too infrequently defined, contextualised, or referenced. Nevertheless, this is an ambitious, dialogic, self-reflexive work of experimental queer-theory-inflected psychoanalytic cultural criti-

cism, and I suspect it's probably brilliant.

*Monash University*  
*jessica.t.durham@gmail.com*