Lauren Berlant and Lee Edelman, *Sex, or the Unbearable*
(Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2013)

DOUBLE NEGATIVES

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As a conversation about conversation, Lauren Berlant and Lee Edelman's *Sex, or the Unbearable* (2013) makes for a tricky object of review. The book is the first in the Duke Press series *Theory Q*, co-edited by Berlant and Edelman, which aims "to publish works that keep queerness and theory in productively transformative relation to each other."[1] In *Sex, or the Unbearable*, Berlant and Edelman engage various cultural objects to explicate their own overlapping-but-not-identical views on the "unbearable" contained in every social relation. The result is an engaging but challenging read that consciously and ironically performs the very missed connections it theorizes.

Berlant and Edelman have previously made important contributions to queer theory's "negative" or "anti-social" turn, contributions both of these authors expect their audience to already know and acknowledge.[2] In *Sex, or the Unbearable*, both Berlant and Edelman aim to complicate positions that, after a decade of debate, have somewhat lost their nuance to the field-wide shorthand, which would relegate both of them to the anti-social/negative camp. Both theorists understand social relations to be structured by an intractable "negativity," a term they jointly define early on as both "a resistance to or undoing of the stabilizing frameworks of coherence imposed on thought and lived experience" and "the dissent without which politics disappears."[3] Negativity, as understood by both Berlant and Edelman, is thus paradoxical. At once "inseparable from the struggles of subordinated persons to resist the social conditions of their devaluation" and an "obstacle" to that very resistance, "negativity" challenges "the coherence of the categories through which the subordinated produce their claims for legitimization."[4]

But while Edelman focuses on the Lacanian death drive and the traumatic shock of *jouissance,* and is suspicious of any utopian political claim,

Berlant is interested in the less dramatic incoherences of everyday inter-action, and is therefore slightly more willing to entertain the possibility of creating new, de-dramatized structures of relating. It is somewhat surpris-ing, then, that this book still relies on the very shorthand it wants to com-plicate, perhaps because the book assumes an audience already well-versed in the debates of queer theory. Assuming an audience already in-the-know, Berlant and Edelman don't spend much time reviewing the history of these debates, instead devoting most of their book to a series of close reads. Closeness and intimacy remain persistent themes in *Sex, or the Unbearable*: the authors theorize the failures of intimacy, practice close reading, address each other as close friends (using "Lee" and "Lauren" throughout), and presume a reader intimately acquainted with the theory they discuss.

Sex, or the Unbearable thus makes interesting reading for readers famil-iar with queer theory, gender and sexuality studies, affect theory, or literary criticism, and it provides an important intervention into these fields, add-ing needed disunity to the "anti-social" thesis. But reading this book is also difficult, if not quite unbearable, primarily because this messiness prohibits any neat conclusion. Both Berlant and Edelman find common ground in their insistence on the importance of the negative within the social, and yet these authors repeatedly fail to meet. "Negativity," though crucial to both theorists' understandings of sex, communication, and other forms of relating, proves a tricky concept to pin down.

Of course, the impossibility of resolution is the point. As Edelman and Berlant are first to tell us, the dialogic structure of the work alone pre-cludes a conclusion synonymous with understanding or mastery. The book clocks in at a short 149 pages, comprised of a preface, three chapters, and two afterwards. In chapter one, Berlant and Edelman each pick a cultural object that to them illustrates "sex without optimism." Edelman picks Lar-ry Johnson's 2007 photograph, *Untited (Ass),*[5] and Berlant picks Miranda July's 2005 film *You, Me, and Everyone We Know*.[6] What follows is a close reading of both objects that attempts to situate each theorist's particular understanding of negativity. Chapter two turns to the work of another queer theorist, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, a move that allows Berlant and Edelman to comment on the disciplinary stakes of their project for queer theory. The final chapter turns to a short story by Lydia Davis, "Break it Down,"[7] in an effort to "link the question of *living* with negativity to the question of *narrating* it."[8] Having laid out the stakes of the project, the two

authors now try to solve—or, at least, delve deeper into—the problems they've set up for themselves and for their fields.

With the exception of the Preface (which is co-authored) and the two concluding essays (which are monographs), each chapter is structured as a conversation between Berlant and Edelman. As such, readers are invited to watch the debate unfold in "real time," as the two authors disagree, converge, amend, retreat, advance, hypothesize, and critique. As readers, we're witness to each awkward interaction. Punches are thrown, but often miss their mark; concessions are made, but often unrecognized; sometimes there are shocking flashes of agreement, and sometimes it feels like we've just watched a botched high-five. Do we laugh embarrassedly? Do we make our own interventions, attempting in our marginalia to track what each is "really" saying? Do we choose sides? Or do we throw up our hands and admit that it might be harder to speak of "sides" here at all? The tiny volume, staged as an encounter between two theorists, takes up the problem of negativity in "the encounter" itself, a problem that both its authors understand as fundamental to social interaction.

Sex, or the Unbearable thus solicits meta-commentary from the outset, and its two authors are well aware of the precarious critical *mise en abyme* their dialogue creates: to review this book is to discuss a discussion about discussions; to summarize it is to communicate communications on the failure of communication. More than once, Berlant and Edelman anticipate the way their own discussion might read, and betray paranoia about being (mis)read too simplistically. Each worries that they will be cast as one side of an oppositional, often gendered pair (male versus female, paranoid versus reparative, top versus bottom) or, conversely, that they will be lumped together in a harmonious duet (grouped together as theorists of the "anti-social"). Edelman points out in chapter two: "…bound by the dialogic structure that also distinguishes our voices, we're certain to be staged, whether we like it or not, as instantiating the hendiadic logic of 'Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading.'[9] … but we're certainly susceptible to misrecognition in those binarizing terms."[10] In the afterward, Berlant too admits her discomfort with this "misrecognition": "I was surprised to be writing about *Bigger Than Life*[11] as though Lee had cast me as the woman or the child in the film, appearing in these pages variously as the weak theorist, the reparative sociologist, the politically correct subject seeking tour the virtuous archive and reparative gesture, the reader who

missed a crucial point."[12] Both Edelman and Berlant have disavowed the axis of sexual difference that might seem to structure the book; Berlant has complained in a recent podcast interview, for example, that readers and reviewers of *Sex, or the Unbearable* are "shockingly unimaginative" in their read of the dynamic between a male and female theorist.[13] Even readers wary of this binary structure (a structure that takes, and therefore makes, these two authors straight) may struggle to avoid the dualism that Berlant and Edelman are all too eager to renounce. Indeed, their vocal disavowals might serve to heighten readers' awareness of the binary structure of this book, which at times does read as "Lee versus Lauren."

Though these two authors have two quite distinct writing styles and critical methods, attention to the two very different voices in *Sex, or the Unbearable* complicates, contradicts, and confuses what appear to be two separate, if overlapping, arguments. As the chapters progress, style becomes a key means of distinguishing between Berlant and Edelman as authors, theorists, and critics: the two write, think, and explain differently, which is a source of both frustration and fruition in their dialogue against and with each other. While Edelman describes his method as directly challenging his adversary's claims under the "fantasy" of eventual persuasion, Berlant calls her approach "reading with," a form of reading that focuses not on directly challenging claims, but rather on "multiplying idioms and infrastructures for further thought that neither of us could have generated alone."[14] Given the degree to which Edelman and Berlant have been caricatured/pigeonholed/etc. in the field of queer theory as staunch structuralist and anti-normative affect theorist, respectively, these self-characterizations aren't surprising. But reading the actual methods and styles of each critic closely, it becomes hard to take Berlant and Edelman at their word.

Instead, readers may be struck by a strange pattern: throughout the book, it's not Edelman's, but Berlant's repetitive negations that most frequently puncture the dialogue. In chapter one, she is already using this mode: "I don't think that…" "I never suggested that…" "I don't see…"; in chapter two, the pattern continues: "I am not sure that…"; "I'm not saying…"; and in chapter three, it becomes even more frequent: "I have not been advocating…" "I am not trying to…" "[I am] not looking… nor seeking to," "I am not claiming…" and, again, "I never suggested."[15] These repeated phrases are hardly non-confrontational, and instead seem to mimic the intense, repetitive negation associated with Edelman's understanding of negativity—as elaborated, for

example, in *No Future*. With each of Berlant's denials, not only are readers forced to reevaluate their assumptions about Berlant's argument ("If she didn't mean that, what did she mean?"), but also forced to encounter the kind of doubt and incoherence theorized by the text itself.

Repeatedly, Berlant enacts the sort of verbal "No!"s associated more with Edelman's claims to the insistent shock of the negative than with her own claims of the messy or de-dramatized encounter. Writes Edelman: "I aim to locate… the queerness that is less an identity than an ongoing effort of divestiture, a practice of undoing. Such queerness, I claim, can make no claim."[16] Though in the paragraphs immediately afterwards Berlant claims that she *doesn't* "see queerness mainly as 'an effort of divestiture,'" this further denial also performs the elusive yet insistent "queerness," that repeated "No!," a repetitive negative tic one might more readily expect from a theorist of the death drive such as her co-author.[17]

Whether it is in the guise of correcting Edelman, or in the service of her own argument, Berlant will often remark on what she *isn't* saying. "*Not feeling* the failure as a happy confrontation with the rupture within reencounter, my mind turned away from both Eve and Lee, towards collective materials about loneliness," she writes.[18] And later: "*I never suggested* that anyone or any relation was freed, repaired, or liberated from anything by thinking about it, I do not know to what, or maybe whom, you're responding when you stake that claim," or, again, "Proposing to induce different settings from within a dynamic so as to change the becoming-form of an encounter… *is not the same* as substituting a new, better structure for an old, bad one. The affective *is not* external to the structure but part of it too. Thus *I am not claiming* that normativity, hetero or otherwise, induces nonsovereignty as opposed to the threat of the subject's ontological disorganization."[19] That we might then ask "so what *are* you claiming, then?" and that we might not always get a whole answer, runs counter to logics that would pigeonhole Berlant into the reparative theoretical position that she so fears being forced to figure.

Where Berlant's primary mode is, in fact, correction via negation, Edelman's argument consists of confident assertions. Not only does he "make claims" himself (as evidenced by the aforementioned quote), he often goes so far as to speak *for* the opposite side, goading a response by providing his take on the position his interlocutor is advocating. In fact, we might track Edelman's repeated ventriloquism as we tracked Berlant's repeated

refutations: both Berlant and Edelman quote each other, but Edelman is far more likely to rely on this kind of indirect quotation while making his arguments, and often doesn't shy away from directly quoting Berlant, often invoking her name. At various points in *Sex, or the Unbearable*, Edelman using the following (non-exhaustive) formulations: "Lauren would see…" "Lauren's focus…" "Lauren sees…" "Lauren calls…" "For Lauren…" etc.[20] These nominal citations are followed by several instances of either paraphrase (for example, "*Lauren tends to theorize* the social as the site for more scenic sorts of relation") or direct quotation, as when, for example, Edelman writes that "*Lauren calls herself* a utopian, which she links to the double project of 'imagining how to detach from lives that don't work' and expanding what she calls the 'field of fantasies' for 'flourishing in the ongoing now'"(emphasis mine).[21]

This peculiar argumentative style can be a strategy of direct confrontation, as Edelman later claims; it could at the same time be read as masculinist or domineering. But there's something else going on here, too. Edelman often seems to be purposefully mistranslating Berlant each time he offers a gloss on her position; either that, or Berlant seems to be deliberately denying her own actual claims. The action such readings perform is not always a clarification so much as it is an exercise in twisting Berlant's words. Consider, for example, Edelman's response to Berlant's example of "sex without optimism,"[22] a scene from *You, Me, and Everyone We Know* in which a boy constructs an erotic fantasy scene of "'poop' being passed between buttholes forever":

> Robby's fantasy of this back-and-forth movement … may seem at once a powerful emblem of nonfutural sexual optimism, of a rhythmic movement of opening and closing, reception and propulsion without end (at once interminable and nonteleological), but it can also be viewed, in the idiomatic translation it also seems to solicit, as just more of the same old shit.[23]

Edelman takes Berlant's own objects the wrong way; "shit," a signifier that has been there all along, now takes on new valence when presented in the context of the idiom "same old shit." With characteristic cyclic sentence structures, the occasional neologism, and more than a few well-placed *double entendres*, Edelman plays the part of master of language while simultaneously and paradoxically reminding us of language's ultimate resistance

to full mastery. Such aural and homographic slippages still create a rift in communication, and with each split in meaning, readers confront a version-in-miniature of the kind of shock Edelman is interested in. Insomuch as these stylistic moments function as linguistic ruptures, they remain in line with Edelman's version of negativity characterized by a Real, traumatic encounter with what is beyond processing, interpretation, and articulation. But there's another way to read them, too, one that, while not necessarily running counter to this version of the negative, might be operating differently. Wordplay, after all, isn't just a game: puns remind us how unreliable language can be. Lingering on the looping, polyvalent meanings of words and phrases, concentrating on paradox and pun, Edelman's deconstructive play might, in practice, look a lot like the "complex navigation of life and noise," and "ambivalence" that *Berlant* calls for.[24]

As Berlant's writing enacts certain aspects of the negativity endemic to Edelman's mechanistic death drive, so might Edelman's writing style remind readers of Berlant's primary theoretical and political concern: "that muddled middle where survival and threats to it engender social forms that transform the habitation of negativity's multiplicity, without necessarily achieving 'story'".[25] Thus when Berlant writes of "flourishing," one can't help but see the connection to Edelman's own linguistic flourishes. What a closer look at this dialogue reveals, then, is an ironic chiasmus of style and substance: never is Edelman more ambivalent than when he is attacking Berlant's call for ambivalence. Similarly, Berlant, though an advocate for "an attentiveness and will to make openings from within the overwhelming and perhaps impossible drive to make objects worthy of attachment," seems more foreclosing than open: shutting down Edelman's own characterizations of her as "pedantic," Berlant ironically begins to list what she is *not* in a rather pedantic fashion: "For the record, *I have not been* advocating a mode of reparative openness that 'replaces' nonsovereignity, nor seeking one not 'shadowed' by it. *I am not trying* to separate anything out from threat or 'the dramatics of undoing,' not looking for a neutralizing repair… *I do not think* that drama has to feel dramatic" (emphasis mine).[26]

Yes, there's a way to read Berlant's repeated negative sentence structure not as a project of outright denial, but as an attempt to clarify, even to repair (the reparative impulse in Klein is, after all, as bound up in negative aggression as it is in desire for amelioration). While Berlant's verbal tic might "no," her proclamations nonetheless name a less-foreclosing version of negativity,

one in which acknowledgement, messiness, quotidian misunderstandings, and non-dramatic incoherence might produce new, or at least different, political relations. But though these clarifying/reparative impulses are clearly there (and how could they not be, when Berlant, to her vocal frustration, finds herself constantly and purposefully misread in this text?), what's more interesting is their coincidence with an equal and deliberate effort to *refuse* meaning, positive claims, or bounded arguments. Likewise, though the substance of his argument remains invested in a steadfast rejection of the possibility of ever making peace with the unbearable self-negation at the core of social relation, Edelman forms his arguments under the very same fantasy of understanding, persuasion, or seduction that he adamantly argues against. Furthermore, he does so with a style that seems to enact not his own dramatic version of "the negative," but rather Berlant's messier one; his elaborate prose suggests a (rather Berlantian) proliferation of possibility. Performing, or rather re-performing, the other's words, under the guise of clarification, allows each theorist to ruminate on the multiple ways to take these words, until it becomes hard to take anyone at their word, at all.

Given these theorists' skepticism regarding the fantasy of positive relationality, and the book's own frustrating, at times unbearable ambiguity, how, then, might readers productively read this dialogue? Instead of one coherent message, *Sex, or the Unbearable* presents a series of near misses, misinterpretations, and repeated clarifications. Sometimes, the failures of communication between the two take the form of outright and acknowledged disagreements. At other times, however, the out-of-synch-ness the text both performs and theorizes manifests in more awkward, challenging impasses: Edelman and Berlant speak past each other, struggle with each other's terminology, and at times seem to willfully misread each other's arguments. If this book claims that "in neither politics nor sex do we engage the positivity of relation," it also teaches its readers—if "teach" is even the right word—that alongside "politics" and "sex," one might add "critical collaboration" itself.[27]

NOTES

1   "Theory Q Overview," *Duke University Press Catalogue*, www.dukepress.edu/Catalog/ProductList.

2   Lee Edelman, *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004); Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011).

3   Lauren Berlant and Lee Edelman, *Sex, or the Unbearable* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2013), xii.

4   Ibid.

5   Larry Johnson, *Untitled (Ass)*, Color photograph, 57 ⅝ x 62 ⅝ x 1 ½ in., (The Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, 2007).

6   *Me and You and Everyone We Know,* directed by Miranda July (IFC Films, 2005).

7   Lydia Davis, *Break it Down* (Farrar Straus & Giroux, 1986).

8   Berlant and Edelman, *Sex,* xvi.

9   Eve Sedgwick, "Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading; or, You're so Paranoid You Probably Think this Essay is About You," in *Touching Feeling* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2002), 123-151.

10   Berlant and Edelman, *Sex*, 57.

11   *Bigger Than Life,* directed by Nicholas Ray (20th Century Fox, 1956).

12   Berlant and Edelman, *Sex,* 124.

13   Lauren Berlant and Lee Edelman. *Episode 134 – Lee Edelman & Lauren Berlant Discuss* Sex, or the Unbearable. Audio Recording. (The Critical Lede, 2014). Podcast.

14   Berlant and Edelman, *Sex*, 125, 110.

15   Ibid., 2, 12, 19, 53, 57, 67, 109.

16   Ibid., 19.

17   Ibid.

18   Ibid., 37.

19   Ibid., 109, 67.

20   Ibid., 9, 10, 10, 11, 64.

21   Ibid., 9.

22   Ibid., 27.

23   Ibid.

24   Ibid., 12.

25   Ibid., 5.

26   Ibid., 19, 67.

27   Ibid., 95.