At the heart of the dialogue between Lauren Berlant and Lee Edelman in *Sex, or the Unbearable* (Duke, 2013) is a debate about how to approach the relationship between the radical negativity of critique and the world-building promise of radical politics. What’s unbearable about sex, the two authors suggest, is not so much sex itself (good sex, bad sex, or whatever), but the “nonsovereignty” and incoherence that relationality (including but not limited to sex) forces us to encounter. Sex, the two write, “holds the prospect of discovering new ways of being and of being in the world. But it also raises the possibility of confronting our limit in ourselves or in another, of being inundated psychically or emotionally” (vii). Such a confrontation can unsettle fantasies of sovereign subjectivity—being independent, in control, of fully knowing oneself and one’s motivations. It turns out that the experience of being undone, shattered, or out of control in sex is not limited to sex at all, but rather that it directs our attention to a wide range of scenes of nonsovereignty and incoherence amidst many forms of relationality. Writing in a neoliberal, racist, and colonial context where the fantasy of the sovereign subject does so much damage and authorizes so much state violence, Berlant and Edelman agree that the encounter with nonsovereignty has far-reaching political and ethical consequences. The debate between them hinges on just what those consequences are.

One of the most productive tensions in *Sex, or the Unbearable* concerns the multiple meanings attached to one of the project’s key terms: nonsovereignty. The two agree that nonsovereignty is inexorably a part of confronting (but never fully knowing) one’s inchoate desire, dependency, and incoherence. Yet nonsovereignty is also taken up to describe the uneven geographies and material "conditions that produce the encounter with nonsovereignty in the first place" (viii).

For Edelman, whose thought is anchored in Lacanian psychoanalysis, radical politics finds a valuable site of negativity in the work of the Freudian death drive. The death drive acts as a persistent "no" to relationality, to the possibility of a sovereign or cohesive self or collectivity, and instead tends toward shattering—of the self and the social (18). Any political project of repair or amelioration, Edelman insists, depends on the figure of a more coherent future, on a promise that “it gets better” that tacitly reinstantiates the fantasy of a sovereign subject. The horizon for radical politics, then, necessarily becomes the refusal of the reparative, ultimately conservative promise of futurity. Edelman’s work advancing this and related claims, particularly in his pathbreaking 2004 book *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive*, has been criticized for being “antisocial”—devoid of historical, political, or geographical referents, and operating on a purely formal psychoanalytic level. Yet, however formal his thinking, Edelman’s insistence on radical politics and queer politics—and on the operation of the death drive as a queer figure and force—as the work of divestiture from relentless promises of the sovereignty to come, seems of tremendous ethical and political salience. Indeed, his formulation of negativity seems especially
useful when the sovereignty promised is so often that of vexed and unsatisfying forms of identity politics (tokenizing multiculturalism, conservative queer politics) and neoliberal individualism. Faced with the structuralization of conservative promises of sovereignty, Edelman argues for a queerness that divests from futurity precisely in order to interrupt the reproduction of the socio-symbolic order—to say “no” to toxic forms of relationality by recognizing the promise of betterment itself as structured by a rule. One might think here of the promises of mainstream electoral politics, which consolidate existing political structures with allusions to a better future, perpetually deferred.

For Berlant, by contrast, queer politics (and radical politics more broadly) might find horizons not only in the devastation advocated by Edelman, but in the possibility of nonsovereignty. If people’s political desires are approached as contradictory, and attached to multiple objects that stand in for more wide-ranging fantasies, Berlant suggests, attending to the fields of everyday life, and the ways that people cultivate sustenance from non-nourishing environments, could vitally inform queer and radical imaginings about world-building that exceed the terms of the prevailing socio-symbolic order.

Investigating the ethical and political force of negativity and nonsovereignty from these different vantages, Edelman and Berlant compile an illuminating and at times uproarious archive that spans literary, psychoanalytic, and political theory, film, art, and literature (including Lydia Davis’s short story “Break It Down,” which is published at the end of the book). In unpacking these texts, Berlant is particularly vigilant about moments when an encounter with nonsovereignty is in fact smoothed over by rendering nonsovereignty knowable, domesticate. For Edelman, nonsovereignty is linked to Lacan’s concept of the Real, that which resists symbolization, remains constitutively unknowable, and shatters any conscious claim to self-knowledge or coherence. Later in the book, Edelman asks a trenchant question of Berlant’s vision of a world-building project that acknowledges its own nonsovereignty, wondering whether such a conscious acknowledgment might itself recapitulate a fantasy of mastery (83). Countering, Berlant suggests that the potential “structural generativity of working work” cannot be known or foreclosed in advance (111). In contrast to Edelman’s structural economy of nonsovereignty, Berlant suggests that experiments in being nonsovereign, being beside oneself, and being collective might generate other forms of relationality that remain unacknowledged and unamenable to the forces that nourish and foreclose radical social transformation. Often hilarious and theoretically provocative, the book’s clarity about what is inexorably unbearable about relationality might, for precisely that reason, help us to imagine better worlds and risk the change needed to build them. By thinking hard about sovereignty at multiple scales, and by attending carefully to alternative genealogies of sovereignty, critical geographers and other radical thinkers about space are particularly well-positioned to engage the book’s insights, and take them further.

1 See, for example, José Esteban Muñoz, Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity (New York: New York University Press, 2009).


3 See, for example, Kelly Oliver, The Constitution of Psychic Space: Madness and the Colonialism of Oppression (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2004).

4 See, for example, Audra Simpson, Mohawk Interventions: Political Life Across the Borders of Settler States (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2014).