

# REVIEW OF *SEX, OR THE UN- BEARABLE* BY LAUREN BERLANT AND LEE EDELMAN

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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 reinstates 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 path-breaking 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.<sup>1</sup> 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 structural recapitulation 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 ruse. 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 divestiture advocated by Edelman, but in “attentiveness and will to make openings from within the overwhelming and perhaps impossible drive to make objects worthy of attachment” (19). Feeling shattered or undone by what’s unbearable about being in relation is precisely what nurtures not only the drive toward negation, but also the impulse toward queer world-building. Like Edelman, Berlant is critical of reparative, ameliorative political projects that inexorably shore up promises of cohesion and sovereignty—indeed, much of her work is concerned with neoliberalism’s “cruel-optimistic” promises of happiness and self-possession in an increasingly immiserated and stratified world.<sup>2</sup> She grants that the urge to repair may inevitably be an “impossible” one, but as a result she is “less threatened by the potential foreclosures of hope” (19). Departing from Edelman, Berlant remains invested in the possibility of world-building—not in a sunny, optimistic sense, but world-building as a project that is constantly interrupted and informed by negativity. Where Edelman sees in political and affective world-building only fantasies of escape from inevitable loss and nonsovereignty, Berlant insists on a more multiplicitous and atmospheric attention to a political scene. “The question,” she writes, is whether the wish to provide a rearrangement is a defense against the loss of everything or a wish for the unbearable to become habitable in a

way that actually risks changing something” (55). 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, visual art, and literature (including Lydia Davis’s short story “Break it Down,” which is published at the end of the book). In unpacking this archive, Edelman is particularly vigilant about moments when an encounter with nonsovereignty is in fact smoothed over by rendering nonsovereignty knowable, domesticating it. 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 worlding 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 reciprocity, still riven with ambivalence, but more conducive to flourishing than the toxic promises of sovereign individualism. Even though—and precisely because—the encounter with nonsovereignty and the recapitulation of sovereignty remain inexorable, she wonders, “If not repair, what?” (111). By refusing to presume in advance that the shoring up of sovereignty is necessarily all that

happens in an encounter with nonsovereignty, Berlant, though not necessarily optimistic, leaves room for more careful mappings of such experiments.

Given the centrality of questions of sovereignty and nonsovereignty in this debate, radical geographers, architects, and organizers with an eye toward the spatial may come to *Sex, or the Unbearable* with especial curiosity about the role of space in the project. As a great deal of psychoanalytically informed writing on the social has demonstrated, the psyche is itself a profoundly social and political space—a key site where socially organized traumas and prohibitions are negotiated, and where desires are repressed, revisited, and reinvigorated.<sup>3</sup> At the same time, thinking more about nonsovereignty and space can help push the project in politically and ethically urgent ways. After all, whether scaled at the ego, the nation, or between or across them, nonsovereignty comprises a manifestly geographical project. In particular, the book left me wondering how dialogues on affective and psychical sovereignty might address the insights and questions of decolonization and Indigenous sovereignty movements and scholarship. I suspect that Berlant’s observations about the maldistribution of the experience of nonsovereignty would resonate with the critiques of settler colonialism that Native activists and scholars are generating. Yet Indigenous sovereignty movements also provide alternative genealogies of sovereignty that exceed and flout the bad formulations of sovereignty that worry Berlant and Edelman.<sup>4</sup> Indigenous feminists have elaborated concepts of “active sovereignty” to describe the profound vulnerability, interdependence, and reciprocal obligation that exists between a wide range of living and nonliving beings. Such a multi-scalar concept of sovereignty simultaneously contests the sovereignty of the colonial nation-state and that of the atomized sovereign individual, in important ways that remain unaddressed in Berlant and Edelman’s nevertheless laudable work.

If encounters with some forms of nonsovereignty at some scales can prove both devastating and ethically generative, forms of

sovereignty at other geographical scales—such as for colonized peoples—might make the world more bearable and interrupt toxic forms of non-reciprocity. The task that remains, then, is one of carefully mapping the complex interplay between a radical “no” to bad relationality (or to relationality at all!), and radical experiments in world-building that, knowing the stakes and the liability of failure or cooptation, might yet generate alternative structures for being collective.

Published as the inaugural text in Duke University Press’s new “Theory Q” series, *Sex, or the Unbearable* should elicit wide interest, not only from readers with an interest in queer theory, but from anyone concerned with the forces that nourish and foreclose radical social transformation. Often hilarious and theoretically provocative, the book’s candor about what’s 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 radicals thinking 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).

**2** See Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011).

**3** See, for example, Kelly Oliver, *The Colonization of Psychic Space: A Psychoanalytic Social Theory of Oppression* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2004).

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