

Depressive Realism: An Interview with Lauren Berlant | Earl McCabe | The Hypocrite Reader

[Earl McCabe](#)

Depressive Realism: An Interview with Lauren Berlant

[ISSUE 5 | REALISM | JUN 2011](#)

In our moment of economic crisis, austerity, and unemployment, it seems especially important to be realistic about the objective constraints on life in our world. Lauren Berlant's¹ attempts to engage these constraints through the lens of affect, sensibility, and consciousness open novel and refreshing ways of getting to know our present. These modes of engagement in turn demand an encounter with forms of political practice and the quest for practical forms of getting un-stuck, getting beyond the present. In other words, this process of getting to know our present is also a process of asking what to do about it. How can we fantasize a new reality? How can we overcome our attachments to lives that don't work? And how can we build a pathway to something new and better?

* * *

Earl McCabe: You wrote in “Starved” that you were writing from a position of “depressive realism,” whereby you attempted to sit “around a thing” for a while instead of moving beyond it. Can you elaborate on what you mean by depressive realism? Are you still writing from this position?

Lauren Berlant: Is this the beginning of our interview? We need some context, I think. I've spent my career thinking about collective life as a sensed scene of affective projection and attachment, tracking how there comes to be such a sense across political, aesthetic, and everyday life registers. I've been interested in how being-in-common has developed, affected, and been stamped by normative and juridical activity while also generating affective infrastructures on the ground that take up quite a different shape than, and come to accompany and sometimes interfere with, the official and the normative.

This is what I mean by “sentimentality” when I say that I've written a “national sentimentality” trilogy. Sentimentality is not just the mawkish, nostalgic, and simpleminded mode with which it's conventionally associated, where people identify with wounds of saturated longing and suffering, and it's not just a synonym for a theatre of empathy: it is a mode of relationality in which people take emotions to express something authentic about themselves that they think the world should welcome and respect; a mode constituted by affective and emotional intelligibility and a kind of generosity, recognition, and solidarity among strangers. Another way to say this is that I am interested in a realist account of fantasy, insofar as the political and the social are floated by complex and historically specific affective investments. How do we learn to attach to (to identify the very sinews of our self-continuity with) abstractions like the nation form, the law, sexual identity, capitalism, and so on?

The essay “Starved” is about why people, including sexuality theorists, have tended to talk about relationality and kinship rather than remaining in the room with the idealization/perturbation/aversion for which sex itself inevitably and so complexly stands. “Depressive realism” is a phrase from

psychoanalysis. I learned it from Andrew Solomon's *The Noonday Demon*, which is an account of his depression in relation to other people's accounts of it and theories of it. Solomon writes there that most people self-idealize, imagining themselves to be more beautiful and more efficacious than they are: and he says that this kind of self-optimism is genuinely adaptive. Depressive realists, in contrast, are more accurate: their sense of realism isn't dark or tragic, but less defended against taking in the awkwardness and difficulty of living on in the world. So when I said I write as a depressive realist, I meant that I see awkwardness, incoherence, and the difficulty of staying in sync with the world at the heart of what also binds people to the social. What doesn't work, makes no sense, or is ungainly always accompanies fantasies of the good life, and other clarifying genres of optimism, and the question of fantasy is centrally about how it helps people remain attached to worlds and situations (and find ways of thriving within them) that are also quite toxic, difficult, infelicitous, or just messy. I look at the ways people bear how life proceeds without guarantees. This positioning—as my blog and my next book, *Cruel Optimism* (2011), argue—asks “Why do people stay attached to lives that don't work?” There, I am not interested centrally in asking how they *could* work, first; I am interested in how fantasies of belonging clash with the conditions of belonging in particular historical moments.

Depressive realism allows for an account of the utility of fantasy in maintaining but also imagining alternative modes of life. *Cruel Optimism* tells some pretty difficult stories about how people maintain their footing in worlds that are not there for them.

EM: I find your focus on affect as a force of reproducing present ways of life very exciting. There are however many other ways of thinking about this reproduction, the orthodox Marxist perspective looks for agentive domination by the bourgeois class (this quest for an intentional class seems to be shared by many on the right as well), an economic perspective would ground the stability of the contemporary upon objective constraints on possibility determined by economic forms (i.e. people can't stop working because then they can't eat), or there could be a naturalistic account based on evolutionary psychological research on basic human nature (altruism is inherently limited because some Stanford students behaved badly on camera). Why do you think that investigating affective and emotional rhythms of attachment is such an important, if not superior, way to tell the story of the persistence of the present?

LB: I learned my affect theory first not from psychoanalysis or aesthetics but from Marx and Lukács and Raymond Williams, etc., so I don't think your version of these alternative materialist or organicist explanations (I know you were being efficient) tells the whole story of any of them insofar as the dynamics they highlight here seem unrelated to each other as reifications of cause and effect. I am always interested in a methodology that tracks the overdetermination of an object/scene/relation that appears to us: so my tendency is to read widely and across disciplines.

In any case, Marxist cultural theory argues that the historical sense, the collective sense of the historical present, presents itself first affectively and then through mediations that help or induce people to navigate worlds whose materiality is overdetermined by many processes (means of production, social relations of production, normative traditions, etc.). Mediation shapes experience and imaginaries. For me, the focus on mediation links the aesthetic and the normatively social. The investment in certain forms for providing the continuity of life goes some way to explaining the stickiness of some kinds of injustice, inequality, and energy-siphoning that structure so much of the reproduction of life. It's not a project about the ways feeling bad (tired from work, disaffected from being exploited, alienated from most strangers and intimates) is distracted from by feel-good fantasy, but the ways that fantasies of the good life themselves remediate (contribute new forms to) realist accounts of causality and of the social. I argue that affect theory, in this sense, is another phase in the history of ideology theory.

But there are other motives too. I have long been engaged in sexuality studies, which I have seen as bound up in material ways with comprehending the work of the nation form and capital at the point of

production and consumption. Subjectification, subjectivization: how are the infrastructural activities of capital expressed in practice, experience, and subjectivity? How do the instabilities of sexual non-sovereignty work in proximity to the social, economic, and political ones? How does normative labor-related subjectivity (see the neoliberal entrepreneurial subject who sees gaming the system as freedom and autonomy; see the social democratic model of limited collective upward mobility) relate to the reproduction of heteronormativity in its molecular forms?

Finally, you mention the history of the present. Marxist historians tend to disrespect the present because political, social, and economic complexities are masked by appearance, and everyone disrespects “presentism” as a kind of shallow parochialism. I became an Americanist partly because, while teaching American literature in the United States, I discovered that my students thought they were learning something ontological about the United States—so I had to alienate the object, show it in its complexity as a magnet both of practices and fantasies, and think about the relation of those. The same goes for the historical present. It needs to find genres that enable its inhabitants to assess the relation of event to effect, of domination to creative life practices, of normativity to social imaginaries. I take that to be a central function of critical theory, art, and whatever work understands itself to be making a present from within it.



Illustration by Tom Tian

EM: Could you elaborate a little more on the concept of “normativity?” Where did it come from, and why do you think it has such analytic purchase? How does it relate to the “realist accounts of causality and of the social” that fantasy remediates?

LB: It comes to queer theory through Foucault by way of Georges Canguilhem, *The Normal and the Pathological*. Its importance to me and Michael Warner was to think not just about the statistical norm or the moral/conventional norm but the practices on which conventional modes of social intelligibility rest that become naturalized and moralized. Judith Butler calls them regulative norms. They govern by standing for common sense, by providing a tacit or seemingly foundational sense of scale and appropriateness for collective life. We wanted to call the regime of sexuality under which we currently

live heteronormativity rather than heterosexuality, in “Sex in Public,” because the point wasn’t to attack people with a particular pattern of object choice but the whole social regime propped on that pattern, which saturates the fantasy of the good life so thoroughly and in so many domains of social existence that its very robustness seemed to atrophy the skills for imagining alternative social and economic relations and institutions of intimacy, let alone what it means when we identify with any pattern of desire.

In those days, as now, people tended to see sexuality as cordoned off from the infrastructure of nationality and capitalism; they tended to see its appearance in those contexts as a scandal rather than as a revelation of an ongoing situation. Suturing normativity to heterosexuality was an attempt to remedy that, as well as an attempt to continue integrating radical political critique with a sex positivity that was not pastoral, that did not subtract the dangerousness and strangeness of sex.


I am seriously opposed to the reproduction of erotophobia; I am seriously for dismantling heteronormative economic and legal hegemony. But the aim is not to blast heterosexuality out of existence; it is to make it merely one patterning among many. But as there is no collective life without norms, the question isn’t how to become post-normative as such but how to respond to the urgency to engender other kinds of anchors or magnets for new social relations and modes of life. The psychoanalysts talk about the inevitability of “taking up a position” within a normative structure but in my view the project of detaching from toxic norms that bind the social to itself in its dominant mode reveals how dynamic the normative reproduction of life is both in subjective and structural terms. Bifo Berardi talks about neoliberalism as a response to increasingly powerful demands by workers for social equality and democracy (and there is no equality in capitalist terms); likewise the “culture wars” are responses to the emancipatory activity of people of color, migrants, and sexualized subjects. All of those responses have had serious structural consequences politically and economically and in the sensoriums of the beings affected by them. So it matters to fight for better normative representations of the social, not just because they provide the affective satisfaction of being-in-common but because they affect the very infrastructure that organizes time, health, care, intimacy...

EM: Going back to my alternative materialist and organicist explanations, I appreciate your criticism and I meant them to only be caricatures. I was trying to bring out a difficulty, or at least unfamiliarity, that many have with your emphasis on politics in the symbolic realm as opposed to material concerns. For example, discussions around the labor movement today predominantly focus on the ways that unions impact wages, benefits, and financial flexibility, and less on the production of solidarity or class consciousness. In contrast to this you stated in your interview with *Variant* magazine that, “Developing symbolic practical infrastructures for alternativity is the task of progressive praxis.” Why do you (or in fact do you) think that the notion of “symbolic practical infrastructures” is so alien to dominant discourse? To what extent do you think your emphasis changes the forms of political practices you endorse? Are there any recent developments in Left practice you find particularly promising?

LB: This question is too big for me really to respond to fully here. What I’m gesturing toward is this: what is the purpose of critically engaged thought and practice that emerges not in a reformist mode—e.g. is trying to make the currently dominant relational infrastructures less bad for more people—but in a radical one, with the aim of providing what Deleuze would call genuinely new “planes of consistency,” modes of movement that shift the terms and therefore social and subjective potentialities. Now, I’m more vulgar and materialist, in that I don’t distinguish as much as some people do between conceptual models of being in common and the work of staying in sync that sociality involves, work that includes the syncope, the falling away from being bound to the social and sensing one’s belonging. So a “symbolic practical infrastructure” straddles the conceptual and material organization of life: It tracks what the impact of a concept (any field of relation that looks like an object would count here) could have on the work of living, which is simultaneously material (the

reproduction of life as the struggles of politics) and fantasmatic (ideas of the political and the collective in relation to fantasies of agency, sociality and life-making).

I would want it to be our critical work to make alternativity imaginable, which includes livable; to induce glitches in the reproduction of the relation of effect to event, of cause to effect, of value to labor of all kinds. I would want to aim to remediate equality as a radically alive contingent relation and not just a process of authoritarian inversion (the story of who's on top and who's dominated). I don't want to presume that x relation leads to y or is expressed in y; my aim is not to conclude that the totality has this shape or that; I want to see what's to be made of the dynamic relation between the predictable and unpredictable (capitalism has its own genres of instability, after all, which is what makes it such a powerful inducer of existence, because it can absorb its own contradictions—until it can't, as at the present moment). I would want our work to refigure the relation of prehension (grabbing history) and apprehension (organizing the potential for new developments) by attending both to the variations that “manage the situation” and the variations that open up other ways to carve out modes of sociality.

My analogy is often to return to the socialist feminism of the second wave: it wasn't just a scene of solidarity based on critique of the political economy of the family or patriarchy, but was a genuine effort at imagining other living forms of relation and value transecting economy and intimacy. The autonomists are now doing this work of material/visceral organization, as are the queer activists, and the anarchists too, and it's all really exciting, the amount of genre-transgression and genre-invention that's going on behalf of reinventing what it means to have a life. This distinguishes them from the parts of the labor movement that were imagining expanding the middle class in such a way that reproduced the poor as the outside of democracy (which is what happens when people misrecognize capitalist modes of entrepreneurial subjectivity that's trying to game the system as practices of equality and evidence of freedom). But the new social movements are not presuming prosperity, property, accumulation, and kinship as the grounds for making life. Reinventing work and care, they're also attempting to change the affective resonance around dependency. In neoliberal normativity, to be dependent is to be non-sovereign: but in the era of austerity, it is the first step to solidarity. 

¹ Lauren Berlant is the George M. Pullman Professor of English at the University of Chicago. Her numerous articles and books include her "national sentimentality" trilogy *The Anatomy of National Fantasy* (1991), *The Female Complaint: The Unfinished Business of Sentimentality in American Culture* (2008), and *The Queen of America Goes to Washington City: Essays on Sex and Citizenship* (1997), and her soon-to-be-released book *Cruel Optimism* (2011).

Copyright © 2014 Hypocrite Reader. All Rights Reserved.