



Sex, or the Unbearable

Lauren Berlant, Lee Edelman

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Sex, or the Unbearable is a dialogue between Lauren Berlant and Lee Edelman, two of our leading theorists of sexuality, politics, and culture. In juxtaposing sex and the unbearable they don't propose that sex is unbearable, only that it unleashes unbearable contradictions that we nonetheless struggle to bear. In Berlant and Edelman's exchange, those terms invoke disturbances produced in encounters with others, ourselves, and the world, disturbances that tap into threats induced by fears of loss or rupture as well as by our hopes for repair.

Through virtuoso interpretations of works of cinema, photography, critical theory, and literature, including Lydia Davis's story "Break It Down" (reprinted in full here), Berlant and Edelman explore what it means to live with negativity, with those divisions that may be irreparable. Together, they consider how such negativity affects politics, theory, and intimately felt encounters. But where their critical approaches differ, neither hesitates to voice disagreement. Their very discussion—punctuated with moments of frustration, misconstruction, anxiety, aggression, recognition, exhilaration, and inspiration—enacts both the difficulty and the potential of encounter, the subject of this unusual exchange between two eminent critics and close friends.

Sex, or the Unbearable Details

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From Reader Review Sex, or the Unbearable for online ebook

Toby Wiggins says

Engaging discussion between two prominent queer thinkers, a meta discourse on unbearable relationality. I found Edelman's responses to the question of politics in his Lacanian anti-social thesis to be particularly helpful, after reading No Future.

Jeremiah says

Not for the faint of heart. Read this for my first graduate class in critical theory. It was pretty intimidating. Written in a conversational manner, which is somewhat helpful as Berlant's tone is much more reader-friendly than Edelman's. Hard to say what I think presently. We're discussing this book in class tomorrow. Maybe I'll come back to this for a second read over the summer while I'm catching up on gender and queer theory readings.

Heidi says

I received this book as a First Reads giveaway

Definitely thought-provoking and very refreshing as it's been written in the form of a dialogue. Concentration and a theoretical mindset are both required before tackling this book.

Duke Press says

"Berlant and Edelman's three-act dialogue is wonderfully intriguing, especially in regard to how the dialogue itself bears witness to the intellectual process of 'thinking through' in the dialogic form." --Marcie Bianco, *Lambda Literary Review*

"What's lovely about this exchange is that Berlant and Edelman's mutually locked horns don't make us feel as though a cleverer person has already figured things out and we're simply not smart or qualified enough to piece together the unspoken counterarguments they would have to our doubts." --Colin Low, *Against the Hype*

Verdie Culbreath says

This is definitely an important book for anyone interested in queer theory, psychoanalysis, affect, and sexuality. Reading this book was a roller coaster for me in a lot of ways. I admire the critical conversation that develops and I am constantly reminding myself, since encountering this text, to think "with and against" everything I read--that "thinking with and against are the same." That is probably the most important take

away here. At other points it feels as though Edelman and Berlant talk in circles around each other or concepts and never quite reach productive end points, as in "Living With Negativity." However, the critical readings that develop around these, at times circular, conversations sometimes had me excited in a way I have not been excited by a critical text in some time: the queer adorable being one of the high points, I do very much appreciate Berlant's reading of "Me and You and Everyone We Know." Edelman, however, is stronger in the reading of pronouns in Lydia Davis' "Break it Down."

One major issue that I have with the conversation style is that it seems to make Berlant pay less attention to the intersectionality of race and sexuality than she does in her earlier texts. This is often a problem for Edelman, whose work tends to neglect feminist and critical race theory. In dialogue with Edelman, Berlant seems less engaged with nuanced thinking on race, class, gender, and sex as well.

University of Chicago Magazine says

Laura Berlant

George M. Pullman Distinguished Service Professor in the Department of English Language and Literature (Humanities Division)

<http://english.uchicago.edu/faculty/b...>

A. F. says

Viva la cute asshole!

Mary K says

"Alain Badiou has good reason to remind us that 'every definition of Man based on happiness is nihilist,' but we can never be reminded often enough that the political program of happiness as a regulatory norm is less a recipe for liberation than an inducement to entomb oneself in the stillness of an image." 18

Macartney says

Not enough sex, and sometimes rather unbearable to slog through. My main takeaway was that I need to read Eve Sedgwick and Lydia Davis.

Corey says

Anyone remotely interested in affect theory or queer theory would do well to read this book.

In some respects, this is an incredibly compelling book. The questions posed that trouble both Edelman's and Berlant's theories about relation, politics, etc. are substantial. LE, if negativity is itself structure, can the so-called "antisocial" project do what it claims to do? LB, what if the encounter with the unbearable cannot shift the consequences of world-building; what if the Symbolic is as intractable as Edelman thinks it is?

Of course, in another sense the book is a failure. It concludes with LB asking, with some exasperation: "If not repair, what? If not world-building, what?" Meanwhile, in his respective concluding statement, Edelman continues to more or less implicitly dismiss Berlant's optimism as naive. Though they both explicitly say that they would like to somehow "multiply" their formulations, it's not clear how that might ever happen, unless both Edelman and Berlant are willing to make some serious theoretical concessions (spoiler alert: they're not).

Personally, I tend to reluctantly agree with Edelman. We can't think outside the Symbolic structure until that structure has become totally unlivable.

William Gooding says

The dialogical format of the book provided a fascinating example of the unbearable nature of communication and relationality. *Sex, or the Unbearable* led me in a very different direction from what I expected but it was a welcome shift

Amanda Hobson says

Very thought provoking. The structure is fascinating. Full review coming in *Journal of Popular Romance Studies*.
