Cover Stories and the Counterfactual:

Berlant's Parenthetical Voice

LISA BLACKMAN

Goldsmiths, University of London, UK

Abstract

This essay pays tribute to Lauren Berlant, to their work, to their writing and to their commitment to "stranger and distance-based intimacies"[1]. It explores the cover story as a writing device, a form of writing that Berlant plays with, that mines and exploits the counterfactual as critical and creative method. The impetus for this essay is an interview that Lauren and I were discussing that was to explore some of the commonalities and differences between their work and an article by Valerie Walkerdine (1981) called "Video Replay". We were going to explore issues of autobiography and the non-personal, memory-work, the relationship between practices of censorious silencing and cover stories, and class differences, with an explicit focus on writing styles and method. We never quite got to the interview as our conversation digressed. These digressions have shaped the issues that I explore in this essay, which takes a more speculative approach to imagining how the interview might or perhaps did take a different form.

Keywords

Berlant, Affect, Cover stories, Counterfactual, Convolution, Supervalent thought.

Introduction

"Prince was at the cusp of my unclenching. I'll never be able to tell the story as long as people are still alive but I won't tell a cover story either. I mean, I won't intentionally tell a cover story, but all stories are cover stories: you can't say everything, even if you would. But if you are not free all the way through you can still build from a space where your freedom's not entirely crushed"[1] (Lauren Berlant).

This essay pays tribute to Lauren Berlant, to their work, to their writing and to their commitment to "stranger and distance-based intimacies"[2]. It explores the cover story as a writing device, a form of writing that Berlant plays with, that mines and exploits the counterfactual as critical and creative method. The impetus for this essay is an interview that Lauren and I were discussing that was to explore some of the commonalities and differences between their work and an article by Valerie Walkerdine (1981) called "Video Replay". We were going to explore issues of autobiography and the non-personal, memory-work, the relationship between practices of censorious silencing and cover stories, and class differences, with an explicit focus on writing styles and method. We never quite got to the interview as our conversation digressed. These digressions have shaped the issues that I explore in this essay, which takes a more speculative approach to imagining how the interview might or perhaps did take a different form.

The quote which opens this essay is taken from a story originally published on Berlant's blog, *Supervalent Thought*, which is a good example of how Berlant uses the counterfactual and a reworking of the cover story as a way of unsettling the personal and the nonpersonal. It starts with a series of memories, of being in a classroom, in different classrooms, but timelines are not important, as this is not a linear story. The story moves through different feelings captured in specific images, a nervous breakdown, the feeling of freezing, of detecting a deceptive microsmile (while being on the phone), and of the feeling of disjuncture, one where we might be in the same historical present but that doesn't mean it is shared. The story works with asides, with hints, with pre-emptive strategies that foreground the provisional and the conditional, including feeling the future, a future that has now arrived with Berlant's death; "We are alive at the same time you are reading this, for the time being". The statement is a stand-in, one version of a cover story, that hides something that cannot be spoken, for the time being. Another meaning emerges in the present of the now, that we are reading the writing "while the writer's still alive. I'm sorry to say".

The story works through digressions and indirect suggestions hinting that there is something more to say, but they won't say it. "I'll never be able to tell the story as long as people are still alive but I won't tell a cover story either". This ambiguous statement is diverted through replacing the aside with a more ordinary statement, that we all live

by cover stories. What is left is a trace or an opening to stories that exist on another plane, not of equivalence, but cover stories that can't be spoken, not directly, because you just can't say everything, but you can say something. Berlant's storytelling loosens, opens, tries to prise apart cover stories, their fictitious nature, to what is concealed or hidden, to unclench something that has been tightly closed. Cover stories in the dictionary definition are those that can be illustrative, or fabricated, false yet plausible, misleading, and deceiving, or stories that can expand imagination. Prince becomes the voice, a way of signalling that the essay will divert, but that the diversion is necessary, it will hopefully do the work: "I was driven to tell you something simple. Forgive me if I go astray". We can hear Prince emoting through the lyrics of the song, '1999', although the lyric itself has somewhat gone astray in Berlant's rendition. It has been reworked. Something simple, what might appear in the genre of a fact, something that happened, an event that can be described experientially, perhaps, becomes a different journey, one where we might get lost or get taken somewhere else.

The title of the essay is called, 'I went back 2 the Violent Room for the Time Being' published in *Berfois* in 2016. Going back to the room was a familiar theme in Berlant's writing, inventing scenes, encounters, genres, and media, real and imagined, that "float" an affective event, an event of feeling, perhaps in this case feeling overwhelmed. On Berlant's wordpress site where the blog is archived, the essay is filed under "craziness", with essays that explore experiments with form and method that became *The Hundreds,* later published with Katie Stewart, and with a variety of essays that explore what is structurally unjust (fact) and affectively impossible (feeling), including the essay 'The Trumping of Politics'*,* and the essay 'For Example', which explores the death of their mother; "My mother died of femininity". Berlant experimented with different forms of writing and with different modes of analysis, to create a setting for feeling-with and otherwise. The following comments are very well-rehearsed in how Berlant will be remembered within and across different fields of study. Not just for ground-breaking academic monographs, but for creative critical prose, hybrid writing that was blogged and then published in literary art magazines, in the short vignettes, published in *The Hundreds*, and with voice and different modes of attention. My interest in this essay is in modes of attention that are associated with distress and dissimulation, sometimes with dissociation, and more generally with

"craziness". As modes of attending they become the basis of writing methods that explore how the form and intensity of these processes provide a psychic map for how we all might attach and detach, including to fictions and fantasies that are impossible or unforgiveable. This was one of the key thematics that Berlant identified as central to their project.

In their last book, *On the Inconvenience of People*, Berlant referred to a mode of attention that they called an "insider's aside" or a parenthetical voice, exploring inconvenience as a "bothersome" affective relation that foregrounds the incidental and the supplementary in the entertainment of "non-sovereign" forms of relationality. Their writing used scenes from literature, from film, from popular culture, and sometimes scenes from their life. Not personal but something more akin to a *transmutational* gesturing to how worlds are composed and put together, and how the I, the sovereign I, is not the focus and can, perhaps, should or always has the potential to be undone. Not confession or autobiography, but what they called the non-personal. On the blog, Berlant played with the image of supervalent thought, which they defined as "an idea covering over psychic encounter with a wish that is its negation: but more properly, I think, it's a thought alive with an overdetermined set of barely articulated investments, a thought (a happening that finds a genre) that organizes these processes without neutralizing the resonating pressures they bring to bear". Supervalent thought comes from psychoanalysis, more usually known as rumination, an intensive obsession with something or someone that you cannot be diverted from. To deviate from the object of obsession is distressing, where you are stuck in a cycle, that has no end or closure. Turning away, straying, is impossible, all routes seem to find their way back to the object, or to objects that become linked in a chain of associations of thoughts and feelings without resolution.

The "Prince piece" plays with rumination, with attempts to divert, which ends with flat affect, the feeling of the disjuncture between the wish and the reality. The writing explores the indeterminacies between illustrative scenes and those that deviate from the scene of the piece that never quite comes, the violent room. "Which doesn't mean that stuff didn't happen". Berlant is explicit about their uses of the counterfactual in the piece, a hint perhaps that we are inhabiting a process of dissimulation, one where we are required to imagine something else through being led astray. Gregory J.

Seigworth's (2012) essay that explores Berlant's writing and its relation to theorizing argues that their writing is excessive, flat, and de-dramatizing as a form of critique, with an eye or even an ear that turns towards "hums, to incoherence and ambivalence." As he argues, "the architecture of Berlant's sentences is meant to resonate complicatedly with the incoherences and ambivalences of the subject matter that *they are* addressing". The writing is scenic, working with scenes, inventing scenes, and assembling archives that work with different genres of storytelling (popular, legal, literary, personal), interfering and entangling, backtracking, composing, and recomposing, creating moments where something else can be felt. Berlant did not uncover or expose, a process perhaps of subtraction, but enlarged or multiplied what could be felt and sensed, sometimes leaving a trail of connections that can be difficult to follow. As Berlant says, "That was a little unwieldy, I'm sorry".

Seigworth focuses on the hum, exploring their own resonances with Berlant's writing and what they "hear when they read Berlant". My interest in Berlant's work also comes from an aside, an interest in stories that are dismissed as nonsense and that are produced through perceptual registers that are considered abnormal and irrational, as craziness. A different kind of hearing is required, one that can attune to the sub-latent, to what Seigworth calls the "pathology lurking just below" in stories that aren't considered reasonable, but unreasonable. My mother told stories of this kind, broken narratives, voices that she heard, delusional scenes, stories that compressed time and space, real and imagined, the living and the dead. Stories that exist in a carrier bag written whilst she was hospitalized in psychiatric units (see Blackman, 2024). They can make sense, but only if we shift how we arbitrate what is considered to have meaning and what is meaningless. Nonsense requires genres of storytelling that can invent new scenarios to imagine differently. There are also of course many kinds of nonsense.

Nonsense must work much harder to make sense, requiring many eyes and ears, and distributed forms of mediation that can bring them into new thresholds of perception. Grace Cho's innovative approach to foregrounding nonsense as an important modality of sensemaking, expressed through her mother's voices, is a reference point for what I am pointing towards (see Cho, 2009; 2021). This work might be characterised as more of a labour of love, an ongoing relationship where the work of meaning doesn't happen in an instant, where there are stops and starts, gaps and silences, diversions,

and dead ends. Such labour is more likely to be characterised as a journey, or a long search, that requires different perceptual registers, listening in new ways to archives, for example, and that can be made to speak, albeit speculatively, to what is foreclosed and displaced (Hartman, 2019; 2021). Normative scenes, those that appear primarily as interlocutors in Berlant's writing, don't have to do so much work. Their work is done for them in popular narratives, canonical literary texts, in public policies, in medicalized categories, in legal concepts, in popular cultural dramatizations, and in what is experienced as ordinary affects (see Stewart, 2007). Their stagecraft is hidden, appealing to worlds held in common, carrying normative scripts and affective repertoires. Nonsense can become normative, but only under certain conditions. Trump is perhaps a good reference point here.

Cover stories that operate through normativity also contain what is not held in common, where the experiences they refer to might be common, but they are patterned through structures of feeling that are classed, racialized, sexed and gendered in different ways. These are scenes, which Berlant evocatively conjures, revealing moments of interruption, of a glitch, or troubled transmission, all terms Berlant used to capture and expose what is assumed and folded into normative scenes. The family is a normative scene they worked with for decades, as was sexuality, evoking glimpses of slippage, the shifting, and the clunking, revealing moments of hesitation, of cracks, silences, and breakthroughs. Perhaps troubled transmission works as a particularly beguiling image, like a broken gear stick. Like shifting gears, you try to get into another gear, perhaps even into reverse, to make moments of adjustment to the normative scene, but where sometimes rocking, rolling, and shaking provide the routes through which the struggles and the leakage are exposed and even transformed. The scene of the "Prince piece" is "the violent room", a room that conjures suffocation, numbness, a room that closes possibility, that stifles imagination, a room that hurts, that is full of pain, a room that Prince is invited into to shake up. It's going to be a beautiful night, after all.

Explicitly invoking the family, Berlant dwells in the disjuncture between worlds, those in common and those that aren't, where, using the counterfactual as a mode of thinking and feeling, we can attune to what "we didn't know wasn't shared because families are captioning machines whose frames we presume, until we don't". Perhaps art, poetry

and creative and experimental writing were more suited to writing about the violent room and Prince, with his stylistic and lyrical innovation that could carry the rocking, rolling, and shaking that embodied the kinds of feelings Berlant was possibly exploring, although the only affect scripts we are explicitly directed towards are feeling "sore", an autocorrect for sorry, or angry. The feelings primarily remain supplementary to the analysis; they are, perhaps, for the reader to determine for themselves. The "Prince piece" conjures something else, a resonant scene, an ambiguously violent scene, which does not make experiential claims. Berlant does not start with the violent room, indeed the violent room and the association with the family as a captioning machine never quite comes. It is an aside, a title, a placeholder that is there but not spoken, it is a constraint, one that is left unspoken, or never defeated or deleted.

The reader might expect one thing from the title but is placed within a classroom, another violent room for many, where, as they say, and to paraphrase Berlant, although we are alive at the same time, in the same room, we do not share the same historical present. We are then introduced to another classroom, in this example, one where Berlant is the teacher, sharing a statement with the students encouraging them not to assume that they share a world held in common. Instead of common, Berlant evokes a "fractured simultaneity", and creates a scenario for the students to explore this, to feel this. The experiment is loosely designed to encourage the students to explore various "what if" scenarios, a counterfactual experiment, where they are asked to imagine something that they can't imagine for themselves. The violent room, the association with family is an absent-presence not there, but there for some readers, perhaps, through the asides, the knowing and not knowing, "don't use your family as part of the experiment", Berlant says, or something similar.

This constraint conjures the feeling of anticipation for something that never comes, the hints and the hesitations, where the family becomes the parenthetical, transformed into an opening, a shift, particularly into imagining gender non-conformity. The storytelling encourages us to enlarge violence, not violent acts, but something more diffuse. We are invited to dwell, like rumination, to look around, and to slow down. This can be challenging, especially when the object isn't explicit. It can be hard to imagine otherwise and to impute the conditions which might plausibly allow the otherwise to take form. However, dampening down the movement and

indeterminacies that the experiment encourages, Berlant concludes that the opening, the possibilities that the "what if" scenarios might evoke, require a world that these shifts "might stick to"; they require compositions and repetitions. The hope is slowed down, leaving the reader with a counterfactual statement to imagine what it might take to defeat what is framed as "never quite vanquished violence". To vanquish is an interesting word to use, invoking an enemy or opponent, the scene of a battle. Perhaps there is another story to tell, but that is left to the reader's imagination.

Lauren sent me the "Prince piece" during emails that we were sending back and forth for an interview they were going to do for an academic journal I edit, but we never got there. Sadly, Lauren died of cancer just at the point I was diagnosed. We were discussing the cultural politics of disbelief, and its world-making potential. We shared examples of how disbelief can reveal, suddenly and often without warning, what is foreclosed, to what we don't or won't see or hear. Its world-making potential can arise from a shock, from a no-going back kind of event or situation, when one is forced into a mode of disorganisation, often catastrophic events, those where you are "forced to lose one's access to oneself because of a structural transformation in one's relation to the object world–death, divorce, ideological breach, war, imprisonment"[3].

We spoke about the slowing down of reactions that disbelief encourages, what Berlant had called in earlier writing, affects and emotions of convolution (2005; see Blackman, 2023). This potential is framed in a familiar refrain associated with disbelief; that the feelings that disbelief carries don't quite capture what people are feeling. The feeling exceeds the possible framings and explanations. There is something else hinted at and felt, an opening, that is usually closed down. Disbelief encourages counterfactual thinking, how is it possible for somebody to do something like that or say something (that is clearly a lie) or say one thing when they know that we all know they mean something else. How is it possible for this heinous event to happen, and for the responses to be weaponized as strategic opportunity? Some families provide a scaffold for imagining these scenarios as ordinary, but this 'what if' scenario never comes, at least not in this piece.

"What if" scenarios are part of the cultural politics of disbelief, but it is hard to sit with disbelief, which is also part of a normative genre of political feeling, where feelings of

disbelief are framed as momentary interruptions that will resettle. Disbelief is a cover story that establishes that the feelings won't outlast the diagnosis, motives will be found, although often the framing exceeds and troubles such normative captioning. Genres of disbelief generally evoke scenes that involve the invocation of evil, of disorder, and of cultural exclusion. These normative scripts capture and recaption, redrawing boundaries of sense, of what is considered meaningful and what should be excised. They are not unlike the systems of exclusion that Michel Foucault analysed in relation to the operations of power that work on and through normativity. These diffuse systems of power that challenge bounded authorial control require what Foucault (1989) called repression-suppression systems. When you explore the cultural politics of disbelief you will find them. They are everywhere, forming the backdrop to the framing of events that challenge the consensual real, and the cover stories that fold back and through their potential for something otherwise.

Lauren and I discussed how disbelief, with its feelings of bafflement, and of feeling mystified, befuddled, confused, overwhelmed, bewildered, perplexed, puzzled, and motionless, harbour the potential to feel and think otherwise, to empty out the pockets of desire to feel held in the world, as Lauren so poetically put it to me. Not to rush to easy interpretations, and to familiar scripts and interlocuters. We talked about convolution, and how inhabiting these states of unfeeling are central to marginalized practices of coping, survival, and refusal (see Yao, 2021; also see Walkerdine, 1996). They have distinct racial, sexual, and classed politics. Lauren said the "Prince piece" was a way of writing around issues, never quite getting to them, perhaps out of fear, disgust, or shame, a commitment to secrecy and silence, to respect for the living, and not knowing who you might share a world in common with, and the stigma and judgement if you get it wrong. I could breathe out and feel held, even if just for a moment.

Confabulation

The interview that never came, and the discussions that Lauren and I had over an extended period, were part of the start of a book project, and my attempt to write in a more parenthetical mode about "difficult stuff". I have taken inspiration from what Lauren called an "insider's aside" as a mode of writing the non-personal. The book

has taken form as an exploration of the cultural politics of disbelief and of what I am calling a Biopolitics of Convolution. The book is called *Grey Media*, or perhaps it will be called, *Disbelief, it Might be Political*; the title remains undecided at the time of writing. It explores the counterfactual dimensions of dissimulation in the context of post-truth politics, the perception of deception associated with gaslighting, and in debates about AI Deception.

One of the springboards for the project was another of Berlant's writings on the political emotion of disbelief, and the potential of what they called "affects and emotions of convolution" associated with disbelief as a political emotion. I have written about this piece, "Unfeeling Kerry" that was published in 2005, and the concept of affects and emotions of convolution in a chapter for *The Affect Theory Reader 2: Worldings, Tensions, Futures* (Seigworth and Pedwell, 2023). I hope I have done it some justice and that this contribution can be read in tandem with the arguments explored in that chapter in lieu of the book, which is a more developed account of the potential and possibilities of convolution as both speculative method and technology of power and control. In the argument I explore, convolution requires confabulation, a form of emotional reasoning that allows for the imagination of alternative scenarios to what happened.

Confabulation works in a counterfactual mode of storytelling, which has also been developed as speculative method in critical and creative approaches across the humanities. Confabulation is part of storytelling that evokes other conditions, where something else might emerge or be possible, the opening in Berlant's writing to the aside, to what is displaced or foreclosed. I am thinking here of Berlant's analysis of slow death, and the so-called obesity epidemic within the US, and the importance of the episodic, rather than the clearly defined event. Berlant defines slow death as "the physical wearing out of a population and the deterioration of people in that population that is very nearly a defining condition of their experience and historical existence" (2007: 754). One of the defining conditions of the populations Berlant analyzes is that they exist in a "zone of ordinariness", albeit one that is marked by extremity, and where "life building and the attrition of human life are indistinguishable" (*ibid.*). Although Berlant focuses on obesity as a case study, they cogently expand how we might understand "the case" as a genre. Using the language of episodes rather than distinct

events, they allow for a more amorphous and indeterminate notion of what might appear as the evidential base of a case study. They cogently show the importance of attending to what counts as evidence within official case studies, what is allowed in and left out.

Case studies can perform the work of creating a solidity of understanding that contracts what counts as evidence. They also highlight the need for new languages, concepts and understandings that expand how we understand agency within this context. One of the important contributions of the analysis is the need to develop understandings that challenge normative notions of "autonomous self-assertion" (2007: 757). The work of confabulation as creative and critical method in Berlant's storytelling multiplies realities, convoluting sense, feelings, moods, atmospheres, and emotions. Berlant held the possibilities of the counterfactual in tension, the hope, the need, and the grim realities. If the interview had progressed, I had wanted to explore with Lauren the etymology of the term, confabulation, which is said to originate with the Latin term confabulationem, which describes coming together to talk or chat, with fabula referring specifically to the production of stories or tales [4]. However, confabulation is shrouded by controversy and epistemic uncertainty. From its origins in conversation and being together, it became the subject of psychiatric regimes of knowledge in the 1800s, aligned more specifically to the concept of disorder. It was primarily linked to a range of conditions associated with the false production of memory (see Schnider, 2008).

The multiplications of reality, the convolution that is part of confabulation, also underpins our capacities to engage in dissimulation, producing alternatives to what happened that are not true. Convolution in this sense is also a key technology of power and control. *Grey Media* focuses on the psychopolitics of an apparatus of practices, tactics, things, people, laws, infrastructures, regimes of knowledge, power, and technical and political systems that provide a home for this curious form of emotional reasoning that is part of nonrational technologies of governance. Whilst at the same time that confabulation has become an ordinary mode of political storytelling, a key feature of post-truth politics, it is mirrored by attempts to redraw boundaries between sense and nonsense, the rational and irrational, through the concept of disorder. The social figure of the narcissist and the psychopath is writ large across the circuits of

disbelief through which confabulating and convoluting forms of power operate. The figure of the narcissist, of the calculating, deceptive other who threatens the government of reason, is a cover story that haunts liberal humanist storytelling.

I argue throughout the book that convolution can be a writing strategy that opens to alternative realities but is also a good description of forms of communicative control and symbolic combat that confabulate realities, where gaslighting is the paradigmatic example. Convolution has been used to refer to mathematical operations and computational models of mind, providing heuristics for mapping, programming, and intervening within complex language systems. The etymology of the term convolution comes from the Latin convolutus, which means to roll together, to turn and twist into forms that overlap and overlay, producing spirals of swirling movements (of information) in forms of circular repetition, where there is always more that can be folded in. Convolution describes relations that can be flipped, mutate, and that accumulate and change, as they move and circulate within a variety of different contexts. Convolution snakes and winds, producing confused matters that are difficult to follow. Convolution is a structural property of contemporary media infrastructures and a key aspect of power and politics that manifest in personal and public settings (Finlayson, 2021: 180). Convolution creates "grey areas", zones of indescribability, opacity, and discordance, and is a key feature of the distorted communication found in psychological abuse often described as grey.[5] Gaslighting as the representative example of grey media links the affective and semiotic practices of non-physical abuse with information warfare, as it has been developed within the context of colonial power, war, post-truth politics and AI Deception.

Affects and Emotions of Convolution

Affects and emotions of convolution are difficult to live, to process, to feel, they unsettle normative affect scripts and repertoires, they put you in a state of unfeeling, of disbelief, a state that Berlant suggests can also be generative, productive, and can lead to *unlearning*, if only. The "if only" captures the pause, the hestitation, the slowing down, the invitation to not react, but to dwell in the disbelief. The "if only" also relates to the performative work that disbelief as a political emotion does to mitigate, to arrest, to stop the work, to resolve through normative scripts that leave more questions

unanswered. Berlant holds and stays with disbelief as a political emotion that can be attuned to *unlearning,* and *unseeing,* to what we *don't* see or hear, Berlant suggests, perhaps pre-empting how disbelief can also be part of world-making and critical and creative responses to power and abuse. However, mediated expressions of disbelief more typically lead to strategies of rumination amplified by the drama of news reportage. People can get stuck "in loops of disbelief", haunted by unsettling images that shatter"[6]. Rumination attunes to the rhythms and tempo of news reporting, the repetition and regurgitation of similar stories, plucked from an existing genre of sense-making, which create a setting for the expression of scandalized disbelief.

As Berlant (2005) has cogently argued, disbelief and its operations require a consensual real that is thwarted, disrupted, challenged, blocked, or made visible in ways that produce dissonance, refusal and even a sense of an impasse. They have argued that norms surrounding the family and sexuality must remain unchanged for the consensual real to perpetuate, showing how coercive forms of power require contradiction, ambivalence, incoherences, and a range of mixed feelings to propagate. Disbelief as a political emotion repeatedly frames a range of events in the public sphere that challenge the consensual real, despite their ubiquity. Murders, military operations, election fraud claims, audacious narratives, domestic abuse, violence against women, racist killings, the scapegoating of the trans woman and man, routine ableism, disinformation, the so-called "war on truth", information warfare, social media manipulation, and battles for the control of narrative, for example. In different ways disbelief, across a range of contexts and settings, is expressed through feelings of bewilderment, of feeling stunned, shocked and through the expression of states of incomprehension.

In the last ten years disbelief has been a primary emotion expressing reactions to events that disrupt and exceed specific systems of intelligibility, challenging many assumptions that are made about sanity, reason, truth, and morality, as they register in politics, war, domestic abuse, systemic racism, and their mediation. We are repeatedly and regularly presented with events that challenge many liberal humanist assumptions that frame discourses of sanity and insanity, reason and unreason, morality, and immorality, good and evil, whilst the categories largely remain unchanged. Rather than upsetting what Berlant (2011) has called the "consensual real", those fictions and

fantasies of what makes us human, citizens, normal, and legible, the dissonances are more likely to be communicated through these collective structures of feeling. Disbelief can register what is foreclosed, displaced, and disavowed by normative social fictions and fantasies without resolution, even if for a moment. Pause, slow down, imagine otherwise, but recognise power, it is everywhere.

Media Theory

In the last two sections I return to scenes, and specifically to scenes of power and imagining otherwise. I also foreground the scenes of encounter, imaginary, and stranger-based forms of encounter and intimacy, that were an important part of Lauren's academic life. These networks exist in different modes of relating, perhaps more akin to rumour and gossip, than a will to knowledge performed through academic affiliations or patronage. They can also be formative in establishing common ground. As well as the intimacy that Berlant and I created and shared, at a distance, over email, we had spoken some years earlier in person. This time the sharing was in a more academic register and not one that explored our worlds in common, which seemed far apart, worlds apart even. On the face of it not much was shared; a privileged white north American academic at an elite university, and me, the first in my family to go to university, without the cultural and educational capital to appreciate the American literary canon that was often part of Berlant's analyses.

There were many blocks to meaning that formed part of this North American cultural archive that travelled widely, with little travelling back to challenge some of its own normativity. Issues of class and privilege were there and not there. Indeed, Lauren had seen the queer performance artist Bird La Bird and I deliver a joint performative lecture as part of the Trashing Performance series created by Gavin Butt and Adrian Heathcliffe. We were all there as contributors to an interdisciplinary AHRC programme of events related to the project, *Performance Matters* (2010-2011). The title of our contribution was "Middle Class Values Make Us Sick" with a direct nod to the working-class artist and photographer, Jo Spence. It was described as bombastic and irreverent and was a world away from Lauren's slow analysis of shallow affects in film, specifically boredom.

On this subsequent occasion, or perhaps it was before this visit, Lauren had come to Goldsmiths, University of London to do a talk, and in a Turkish restaurant, we spoke about an article that they told me was very influential at the beginning of their career. The article, 'Video Replay', by Valerie Walkerdine, was first published as a chapter in an edited collection called *Formations of Fantasy*, edited by Victor Burgin, James Donald, and Cora Caplan. The book, published in 1981, brought together a range of authors working across psychoanalysis and cultural theory to explore the subjective dimensions of power and how it was lived and mediated through fantasy and desire. The book was very much of its time, although Video Replay has had many afterlives. Video Replay was the subject of a special issue of the journal *Psychoanalysis, Culture and Society* in 2010 with various commentaries exploring its contemporary significance. A version of Video Replay was published in Part 3 of the book, *Schoolgirl Fictions* (Walkerdine, 1990), "Working Class Rooms", and I will use this version to explore some of the arguments.

The piece explores another kind of room, a working-class room, a living room, a domestic setting, where as a researcher Walkerdine tries to make sense of a working-class family, the Coles', media consumption. The interview, which Lauren and I never quite got to, was to explore this work, the common ground, and the connections between Lauren's approach to power, fantasy, desire and subjectivity and Walkerdine's approach to the psychosocial dynamics of mediation. In different ways, the media theory, if we can call it that, which they both innovated in their research and writing, comes out of critiques of the psychological subject, and the blockages it creates in understanding power, subjectivity, desire, and its operations. Indeed, Valerie and I developed some of this work in the context of media theory, attempting to formulate what we called a "critical media psychology", which became a book, *Mass Hysteria: Critical Psychology and Media Studies* (2001). I wonder now what Lauren would have said about Walkerdine's approach to the use of autobiography as a resource, especially in the context of their own history of innovative writing and its unsettling of the personal and the non-personal. Was this work an opening to the composition of how worlds are made and unmade, and to what academic theories often miss when they bracket, remove, or omit what might be dismissed as overly subjective?

Walkerdine frames a version of this position as a fantasy of academic mastery based on the "will to tell the truth" (1990: 174). She explores how countering this position

as a researcher unsettles the position of the "silent other" who is outside of the issues or relations they are analysing. This was certainly not the position Berlant created for their own authorial voice, but it was different, the "insider's aside", for example. These issues were contained in one of my opening questions for Lauren. Does the non-personal work as a cover-story that engenders an orientation that can move between different registers without the exposure? The "Prince piece" is more direct in its immediacy, it is saying something else, which is also left unsaid. Was this an example of the non-personal being slightly teased apart? 'Video Replay' is more open in its positionality, it is a subject that Walkerdine is close to, because the issues she is researching resonate with her own lived experiences of oppression, there are identifications that the Coles make, which she can feel, that provide a moment of shared identification. It is not clear whether Walkerdine shares her own identifications with the film with the Coles. She does however share them with the reader, with all the risks that inserting herself into the ethnography carried, particularly at the time (too personal, for example). It has been described as emancipatory and creative (see Yates, 2010) as well as narcissistic and overly confessional (Probyn, 1993).

Walkerdine vividly describes the scene that she watches with the Coles in this way.

> The Coles are a working-class family. They live on a council estate and have three children, Joanne, age 6, Robert, 9, and James, 13, together with a large Alsatian dog, Freeway. I am seated in their living room. The video *Rocky 2* is being watched sporadically by the whole family. I sit there, almost paralysed by the continued replay of Round 15 of the final boxing sequence, in which Mr Cole is taking such delight. Paralysed by the violence of the most vicious kind – bodies beaten almost to death. How can they? What do they see in it? (1990: 175).

The scene resonates fully with Walkerdine later, back in her academic office, where she watches the scene in private. It is a violent scene that Walkerdine describes as "gut churning" (1990: 174), where Sylvester Stallone, who plays the character of Rocky, a working-class boxer, is being beaten, violently, in the boxing ring. The scene, as she recounts, might be described as shameful and disgusting, making links between violence and working-class masculinities, a popular framing of the fear and danger of

violent media contained within media effects research at the time. Walkerdine describes being moved to tears, and feeling grief, identifying with the signifier, fighting, and the social figure of the fighter. She recounts how this carried her own fantasies of escape and transformation, of "memories of pain, struggle and class…" and the "struggle to make it" (*ibid*: 175). She is keen to qualify that the experiences she explores as part of her ethnography cannot be read off from relations of gender, class, or ethnicity alone. They require a complex account of subjectivity, of feeling, meaning, power and desire, and not just an account of positionality (see Henriques et al, 1998).

In later work Walkerdine has developed some of these issues more explicitly in relation to affect and the field of affect studies (see for example, Walkerdine, 2010; Blackman and Venn, 2010). In 'Video Replay', Walkerdine utilized a psychoanalytic conceptual framework, primarily drawing from Lacan, supplementing an account of subjectivity with a historical analysis using the work of Foucault. She uses the concepts of manifest and latent content from Lacanian psychoanalysis (supervalent and sublatent?) to explore the relations of power, desire, and subjectivity constituted within the film, emphasing that the manifest content of a film, for example, can produce the possibility of a latent content, a new identification, which is supplementary to the relations of fantasy, desire and meaning constructed within a media text. Walkerdine's own feelings are an important part of the analysis, a springboard to opening wider issues with how the field of media studies approached issues of subjectivity within processes of mediation. These questions are a defining issue within the field of cultural studies and the queering of approaches to affect and national and political lives that have been a central feature of Berlant's enduring legacy and contributions.

Beyond the Painted Smile

When I first read Berlant's *The Queen of America Goes to Washington City* (2007b) it felt like an odd companion piece to Walkerdine's *Schoolgirl Fictions* (1990). Odd, in that they shouldn't go together, worlds apart, but in other ways, familiar terrain, particularly in the ways in which both books explored how political and cultural forms are lived and experienced at the deepest and most intimate levels, what Berlant was to call an intimate public sphere. Where *Schoolgirl Fictions* has a series of nine images on the cover that are creative reproductions of three different photographs of Walkerdine herself

as a child, on the cover of *The Queen of America* is a grainy photographic image of a young girl with the White House in the background. The images on the cover of *Schoolgirl Fictions* are part of a series of artworks that Walkerdine called 'Beyond the Painted Smile', where she takes three photographs of a smiling young girl, herself, and using different colours, shading, and backgrounds, brings out what the smile covers over, what she describes as the "censorious silencing" (1990: 149). This cover story, the smile and what lurks beyond, expresses an emotional economy that might challenge the image of the good girl that she was so invested in, the rage, envy, and anger, for example. As she says, "I projected these onto a wall, placed a piece of paper on the wall and drew and coloured the projected image, … so that the image looked like a tinted slide, but without the slide the image itself became another and separate representation" (1990: 149).

In different ways, both book covers signal a focus on girlhood, and the disappointments and even unhappiness that attach to the fantasy of the good girl as crucial to the reproduction of normativity. In Berlant's analysis the social figure of the (good) girl slides into the figure of the foetus and the child, as well as a range of "vulnerable minor or virtual citizens", including the immigrant, who require protection, where the normative family becomes the fantasy site for regulating "infantile citizenship" through intimate and sexual life. In different ways, both *Schoolgirl Fictions* and *The Queen of America* explore the objects that take form in different practices (schooling and education, law) and the representational economies of popular culture that expose, challenge and displace the vulnerability and fragility of the political and cultural norms that are conditional on their reproduction. The backdrop to both books are the claims to citizenship and identity that shaped the struggles and protests surrounding Reaganism and Thatcherism, and what and who was seen as "under threat". Walkerdine's analysis is the class politics of these struggles and how they play out and are lived at an intimate level by young girls in the UK, and particularly young working-class girls, and the fictions and fantasies that are part of their operations. In different ways both books critique how resistance and resistant subjects have been articulated in cultural studies, calling for more complex accounts of the subjective and affective dimensions of mediated worlds.

Both books expose the cover stories that family, nation, sexuality, and state reply upon for their reproduction, and their ugly forms of displacement. This ugliness perhaps hides behind the "Prince piece" and its parenthetical mode of writing, where its object is never made explicit, and where the violence is never quite vanquished. Dwelling, looking around, unlearning, and unseeing are never one-time acts in any attempts to try and think and feel beyond normativity, or to try to imagine otherwise. Multiplying is one strategy for enlarging what could be – the "if only" – and creating a space for those stories that exist in minor forms, those ordinary, yet haunting presences that are part of normative circuits of distribution, consumption, and power. Berlant encouraged readers, through the assembly of their own archives (me and not-me), to embrace the silly, the waste, the ugly, the slippages, the reverse gears, the troubled transmissions, the asides, and the supplements, that unsettle the personal and the non-personal, and that speak back to the fragility of the consensual real. Not personal archives, although the personal might be interwoven, but something more akin to the struggles that Walkerdine has documented throughout her academic career, particularly to change the plot and invent new stories and genres of coping and survival that do not privatise and pathologize ordinary suffering.

Conclusion: *Disbelief, It might be Political?*

One of the statements associated with Berlant's writing within affect studies is the rhetorical question associated with the generativity of supposed negative states of being, *Depressed, it might be political?* This statement forms a thread throughout Berlant's writing and is also one that is part of the ordinary suffering that Walkerdine explores as part of the intimate life of structures of oppression and inequalities (also see Blackman, 2015). In the context of the current conjuncture, the cultural politics of disbelief, aligned to post-truth politics, information warfare, and non-physical abuse (see Blackman, 2023; 2022) is making more visible how "truth" has always been conditional on particular structures of believability (also see Banet-Weiser and Higgins, 2023). These structures are racialized, sexed, classed and gendered in particular ways and are key relations within what I call the potency and power of "abuse assemblages". I will finish this tribute therefore with another statement that seems apposite for now and one that I also think Berlant leaves us with to seriously consider: *Disbelief, it might be political?* This question was one that created the demand in this essay to respond to

the "Prince piece", a story that Berlant wrote before their untimely death, itself only hinted at as an aside in the story. In our communications, it appeared as something they were dealing with that was serious but recoverable. This feeling represents the sad disjuncture between the wish and the grim reality that was to come, and Berlant's attempt to continue to imagine otherwise.

References

Banet-Weiser, S. and Higgins, K. (2023) *Believability, Sexual Violence, the Media and the Politics of Doubt.* London: Polity Press.

Berlant, L. (2011) *Cruel Optimism.* Durham: Duke University Press.

Berlant, L. (2007) 'Slow Death (Sovereignty, Obesity, Lateral Agency', *Critical Inquiry* 33(4): 754-780.

Berlant, L. (2007b) *The Queen of America Goes to Washington City.* Durham: Duke University Press.

Berlant, L. (2005) 'Unfeeling Kerry', *Theory & Event* 8(2). doi:10.135/tae.2005.0021.

Blackman, L. (2024) 'Broken Narratives: Listening in and through another's voice, another's voices' in Fensham, R., Sumner, T., Barnwell, A., Butt, D., and Ravn, S (eds.) *Small Data is Beautiful.* Melbourne: Gratton St Press.

Blackman, L. (2023) 'Affects and Emotions of Convolution' in Seigworth, G, and Pedwell, C, (eds.) *The Affect Theory Reader 2: Worldings, Tensions, Futures.* Durham: Duke University Press.

Blackman, L. (2015) 'Affective Politics, Debility and Hearing Voices: Towards a Feminist Politics of Ordinary Suffering', *Feminist Review*, 111(1): 25–41. https://doi.org/10.1057/fr.2015.24

Blackman, L., & Venn, C. (2010) 'Affect', *Body & Society*, 16(1): 7–28. https://doi.org/10.1177/1357034X09354769

Blackman, L. and Walkerdine, V. (2001) *Mass Hysteria: Critical Psychology and Media Studies.* London and Basingstoke: Palgrave.

Cho, G. (2021) *Tastes Like War: A Memoir.* New York: The Feminist Press.

Cho, G. (2009) *Haunting the Korean Diaspora: Shame, Secrecy and the Forgotten War.* Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Finlayson, A. (2021) 'Neoliberalism, the Alt-Right and the Intellectual Dark Web', *Theory, Culture & Society*, 38(6): 167–190. https://doi.org/10.1177/02632764 211036731

Foucault, M. (1989) 'Rituals of Exclusion', *Foucault Live*. New York: Semiotexte.

Hartman, S. (2021) *Lose Your Mother: A Journey along the Atlantic Slave Route*. London and New York: Serpents Tail.

Hartman, S. (2019) *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments: Intimate Histories of Riotous Black Girls, Troublesome Women and Queer Radicals*. London and New York: Serpents Tail.

Henriques, J. et al (1998) *Changing the Subject. Psychology, Social Regulation and Subjectivity*. London and New York: Routledge.

Probyn, E. (1993) *Sexing the Self: Gendered Positions in Cultural Studies*. London: Routledge.

Schnider, A. (2008). *The Confabulating Mind: How the Brain Creates Reality*. Oxford. Oxford University Press. https://doi.org/10.1093/med/9780199206759.001.0001

Seigworth, G. (2012) 'Reading Lauren Berlant Writing', *Communication and Critical/Cultural Studies* 9(4): 346-352. DOI: 10.1080/14791420.2012.733212

Seigworth, G. and Pedwell, C. (eds.) (2023) *The Affect Theory Reader 2: Worldings, Tensions, Futures*. Durham: Duke University Press.

Stewart, K. (2007) *Ordinary Affects*. Durham. Duke University Press.

Walkerdine, V. (2010) 'Communal Beingness and Affect: An Exploration of Trauma in an Ex-industrial Community', *Body & Society*, 16(1): 91–116. https://doi.org/10.1177/1357034X09354127

Walkerdine, V. (1996) 'Working Class Women: Psychological and Social Aspects of Survival' in Wilkinson, S. (ed). *Feminist Social Psychologies*. Buckingham and Philadelphia: Open University Press.

Walkerdine, V. (1990) *Schoolgirl Fictions*. London and New York: Verso.

Walkerdine, V. (1981) 'Video Replay: Families, Films and Fantasy' in Burgin, V., Donald, J. and Caplan, C. (eds.) *Formations of Fantasy*. London: Metheuen.

Yao, X. (2021) *Disaffected. The Cultural Politics of Unfeeling in Nineteenth Century America*. Durham: Duke University Press.

Yates, C. (2010) '"Video Replay: Families, films and fantasy" as a transformational text. Commentary on Walkerdine's 'Video Replay"', *Psychoanalysis, Culture & Society* 15: 404–411. https://doi.org/10.1057/pcs.2010.19

Notes

[1] https://www.berfrois.com/2016/07/readers-writers-slopping-along-general-aliveness-time/
[2] https://www.berfrois.com/2014/12/lauren-berlant-performs-clicking/
[3] https://supervalentthought.wordpress.com/about/
[4] https://www.etymonline.com/word/confabulation
[5] https://medium.com/mental-health-and-addictions-community/the-grey-area-of-abuse-1169c38c1008
[6] "Ms Naz described being stuck in a "loop of disbelief" with images of her niece's last moments" https://www.newsandstar.co.uk/news/national/23191994.zara-aleenas-family-says-brutal-murder-made-campaigners-us/

Lisa Blackman is a Professor of Media and Communications at Goldsmiths, University of London. https://www.gold.ac.uk/media-communications/staff/blackman/

Email: L.Blackman@gold.ac.uk

This article is part of a special section on 'Lauren Berlant and Media Theory', edited by Carolyn Pedwell and Simon Dawes, introduced by Carolyn Pedwell, and featuring articles by Ben Anderson, Ali Azhar & Megan Boler, Lisa Blackman, Sarah Cefai, Angharad Closs Stephens, Chole Turner & Rebecca Coleman, Yasmin Gunaratnam, Chris Ingraham, Henrike Kohpeiß, Susanna Paasonen & Vilja Jaaksi & Anu Koivunen & Kaarina Nikunen & Karoliina Talvitie-Lamberg & Annamari Vänskä, and Greg Seigworth & Rebecca Coleman.

A key detail about Lauren Berlant and pronouns: Laurent's estate provided a brief statement on this, which we quote here: "Lauren's pronoun practice was mixed – knowingly, we trust. Faced with queries as to 'which' pronoun Lauren used and 'which' should now be used, the position of Lauren's estate (Ian Horswill, executor; Laurie Shannon, literary executor) is that Lauren's pronoun(s) can best be described as 'she/they'. 'She/they' captures the actual scope of Lauren's pronoun archive, and it honors Lauren's signature commitment to multivalence and complexity. It also leaves thinkers free to adopt either pronoun, or both of them, as seems most fitting in their own writing about her/them".