

Lauren Berlant

*Desire/Love*

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Lauren Berlant ends her book *Desire/Love* with the message that love is capable of delivering its utopian promise, of managing what loving (and living) throws at us. However, this conclusion should not disguise the strong critique of love that is contained within its pages. In essence, Berlant argues that romantic love has been consistently used to maintain Western, conservative, white agendas, and further, to "justify economic and physical domination of nations, races, religions, gays, lesbians and women" (112). But perhaps this critique would not be so important if it were not for the fact that romantic love has become a central goal of modern life. Berlant argues that the pervasive message of love leads to the conclusion that it is the only plot to a successful and happy life. Love has become the only legitimate pursuit; it is "terrorizing" and "coercive," and it is "diminishing" not only on our imaginations but also on the practical ways we live our lives (87).

#### CENTRALITY OF LOVE

The first question that the book tackles is how and why love has become so central to our lives. Berlant claims that the centrality of the love plot in modernity occurs via the notions of personal autonomy, consent, choice, and fulfillment. The modern love plot works by a logic that asserts that romantic desire is capable of neutralizing power, hierarchies (108), and difference (110). This centrality is helped along by the discourse of psychoanalysis and the self-help therapy culture. Therapy culture links romance to emotional survival. It is seen as something we have control over and as embodying "emancipatory agency":

[L]ove induces stuckness and freedom; love and its absences induce mental/emotional illness or *amour fou*; love is therapy for what ails you; love is the cause of what ails you. (102)

Furthermore, the centrality of the love plot is also assisted by capitalism and neo-liberalism. Capitalism could not thrive without its constant stimulation of desire. Sex and romance are central to its persuasive strategies. The central messages in love—autonomy, consent, choice, and fulfilment—are shared by and in turn commodified

by capitalism (108–09). The idea of love is also used by liberal political culture to argue that love is universal. The idea that we all feel the same things, want the same intimacy, is used to bring "marginalized groups into the dominant social world" (110), at the same time as the very same groups are being discriminated against, because of their difference.

#### WHAT IS LOVE?

Berlant claims that regardless of the disciplinary lens one uses, love is always the outcome of fantasy. Only fantasy can help us to make sense of what is otherwise an "uneven field of attachments," and it is only fantasy that prevents us from being destroyed by it (69–70):

[F]antasy denotes a sense of affective coherence to what is incoherent and contradictory in the subject; provides a sense of reliable continuity amidst the flux of intensities and attachments; and allows out-of-sync-ness and unevenness of being in the ordinary world at once to generate a secure psychotic enclave and to maintain the subject's openness to the ordinary disturbances of experience. (75)

This way of thinking about love is significant because it allows us to move away from seeing love as stemming from deep psychological states and desires, such as the desire of a mother for her baby, and rather toward seeing love as a space of desire with "fields of scenes, tableaux, episodes, and events" (75). It is this methodology that Berlant then adopts in her analysis. Her sources are David O. Selznick's film *Gone with the Wind*, Alfred Hitchcock's film *Marnie*, Robert James Waller's novel *The Bridges of Madison County*, Toni Morrison's novel *Sula*, and Jonathan Dayton and Valerie Faris's film *Ruby Sparks*. This analysis reveals that the fantasy worlds of love are used "normatively—as a rule that legislates the boundary between a legitimate and valuable mode of living/loving and all the others" (87). Perhaps two of the most obvious ways that love is normative is the way in which it posits norms of gender and sexuality.

These sources show that the narrative of love popularly depicts women as faithful to the love plot, despite being both winners and losers at its hands. Women are love's winners because they are able to use it to "overcome the troubles of everyday life," But they also pay a cost and lose through their submission to men (98):

The institutions and ideologies of romantic/familial love declare woman/women to be the arbiters, sources, managers, agents, and victims of intimacy: the love plots that saturate the public sphere are central vehicles for reproducing normative or "generic" femininity. (88)

Furthermore, the conventional narratives of romance place the heterosexual couple and the intergenerational family at the center of what she calls "the life plot" (86) that makes that plot's survival "crucial for the survival of life as we know it" (100).

Berlant has been challenging the heteronormativity of romantic love for some time. In *Sex in Public*, she and co-author Michael Warner argue that heterosexual culture achieved its hegemony largely via the ideologies of intimacy. They argue that this

ideology conflates sex with love, and makes love central to coupling, reproduction, family, and kinship. In turn, love, understood in this heterosexual context, becomes central to community, citizenship, and the good life. In contrast, queer intimacy is unconnected to the domestic space, coupledness, kinship, property, or nation (Berlant and Warner 1998, 558).

Despite these now obvious problems with romantic love (which feminists have been talking about for many decades), why does Berlant remain positive about it? In "Love, a Queer Feeling," she describes love as a space "to which people can return, becoming as different as they can be from themselves without being traumatically shattered; it is a scene of optimism for change, for a transformational environment" (Berlant 2001, 448).

But this positive view is predicated on change. Love needs to be redefined, to be unshackled from heterosexual normative culture and from conservative institutions of marriage and family. At the core of Berlant's work on love, as she explained in a 2011 interview with Michael Hardt, is an engagement with "an ongoing tradition of social transformation" (Davis and Sarlin 2011, 7–8).

This argument is shared by other feminists. It appears that despite the oppressive patriarchal and heteronormative ideology of romantic love, its power to seduce even its most ardent critics remains. For example, Eva Illouz remains committed to romantic love as a central idea of modernity. She champions its egalitarian optimism and its ability to subvert patriarchy. We must not forget, she says, that the dominance of romantic love has directly correlated with a decline in men's power over women, and with an increase in equality between men and women (Illouz 2012, 5). However, love is capable of delivering on its promises when it is practiced according to the ideas of equality, freedom, and self-satisfaction, and when it embodies gender-blind display of care and autonomy (see also Jónasdóttir 1994; Langford 1999; and Gunnarsson 2014).

Finally, something must be said about the discussion of desire. Berlant has chosen to couple her discussion of love with one of desire, and, in fact, desire precedes her discussion of love. She argues (correctly in my view) that the two should be viewed separately. Desire, she argues, is a statement of attachment to something or someone that visits you from the outside, and it may lead to love and make it last (6–7). The relationship between the two is best described as a series of paradoxes that depend upon how we frame questions of attachment (8). Elsewhere, she has argued that desire and love must necessarily be related (Berlant 2011a, 684–85), and that "in making love matter analytically we encounter desire in formal dress" (Berlant 2001, 438).

*Desire/Love* is a book that began life as encyclopedia entries, and the book does not make sense if we try to read it any other way. It cannot be read in isolation from Berlant's other important scholarship on love, specifically, and affect and intimacy more generally, which includes, among others: *The Queen of America Goes to Washington City: Essays on Sex and Citizenship* (1997), *The Female Complaint: The Unfinished Business of Sentimentality in American Culture* (2004), *Cruel Optimism* (2011b), *Sex, or the Unbearable* (2013), co-written with Lee Edelman, and *Our Monica, Ourselves: The Clinton Affair and the National Interest* (2001), co-written with Lisa Duggan.

This impressive scholarship constitutes Berlant's desire, which she shares with much feminist scholarship, to reconcile love's intoxicating appeal. She places us at the center of love's struggle— its potential to deliver satisfaction and meaning, with its simultaneous ability to enslave us to traditional and conservative ideologies. What Berlant adds to the scholarship is an engagement with the issues at what some have described as a "transdisciplinary" level (Loizidou 2013); this engagement makes her work both extremely interesting, but also extremely difficult.

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