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ONCE MORE WITH FEELING

Lara Langer Cohen

The Female Complaint: The Unfinished Business of Sentimentality in American Culture by Lauren Berlant. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008. Pp. 353. \$84.95 cloth, \$23.95 paper.

By turns sidesplitting and devastating but always revelatory, Lauren Berlant's new book explores why we insist that what the world needs now is love, and how much we lose in the process. *The Female Complaint* is the third installment in Berlant's "national sentimentality" project, following *The Anatomy of National Fantasy: Hawthorne, Utopia, and Everyday Life* (1991) and *The Queen of America Goes to Washington City: Essays on Sex and Citizenship* (1997). Historically speaking, however, it is the second, covering the mid-nineteenth century through the 1980s. It is also the most satisfyingly coherent of the series. *The Anatomy of National Fantasy* was brilliant but claustrophobic (can we really still be talking about Hawthorne?), whereas *The Queen of America* was the reverse, brilliant but scattered; it often read more like a collection of individually marvelous essays than a book (as indeed, its subtitle signaled). *The Female Complaint* is perfectly scaled, a series of interlocking case studies that together build a breathtaking account of U.S. "women's culture." The book's cohesion is especially impressive considering that Berlant began it in the late 1980s and published versions of many of the chapters as essays over the past fifteen or so years. Her archive and argument revisit that period's often heated discussions of the woman's film and especially sentimental literature, but throughout those back-and-forths over what

sentimentality did, there was an assumed consensus over what sentimentality *was*. Berlant vastly complicates that here, in part by articulating it with more recent developments in affect theory, object-relations psychoanalysis, and debates in queer theory over futurity and optimism, but mainly through an exhilarating critical practice that is manifestly her own.

That *The Female Complaint* maintains its coherence while traversing such a wide historical and generic range seems to testify to the shape of “women’s culture” itself, which “claim[s] a certain emotional generality among women, even though the stories that circulate demonstrate diverse historical locations of the readers and the audience, especially of class and race” (5). “Women’s culture” assumes that all women share a body of experiences, interests, and desires, and thus it assures each one that she is not alone. In its acknowledgment of alienation and its promise of belonging, it constitutes women as “the first mass cultural intimate public in the United States” (viii). An intimate public, Berlant explains, congeals around the “expectation that the consumers of its particular stuff *already* share a worldview and emotional knowledge that they have derived from a broadly common historical experience,” usually, one of structural subordination (viii). The term “consumers” here is key: women’s culture is the product of a mass

market in which women constitute a buying public and femininity is mediated by commodities. Its “politico-sentimental” (21) aesthetic registers structural inequity as emotional suffering, trading political transformation for a longing to feel better in terms one can already imagine inhabiting. The female complaint, Berlant explains, is its primary mode, an outcry of disappointment that simultaneously salves that disappointment with “tender fantasies of a better good life” (1). That “better good life”—one of Berlant’s signal phrases, whose bleakly attenuated, clichéd aspiration captures the book’s “disaffirming scenarios of necessity and optimism” (2)—tends to take the form of fantasies of conventionality, whose appeal lies in their ability to make women’s complex lives simple, intelligible, recognizable. (Toward the end of the book, Berlant offhandedly but wonderfully appropriates Emily Dickinson’s famous first line, “After great pain, a formal feeling comes,” to describe this trajectory, in which the hurt of subjugation sends one running into the arms of form, whose security is a pleasure.) Most often, this fantasy is expressed in terms of heterosexual love, whose demand for reciprocity is a “seeking out of form” (220), a form that functions when it is unmet as well as when it is met, for “where love is concerned, disappointment is the partner of fulfillment, not its opposite” (13). Not only does the female

complaint convert the "subject of politics" into "the subject of feeling" (145), promising that if we could only love and be loved, we could bear the world and our place in it, but by taking comfort in mutual disappointment, it binds together women's culture in an attachment to suffering. The paradox of the female complaint is that even as it expresses a longing for change, it prefers the expression of that longing to the change itself.

Berlant traces women's culture back to 1837, the first year of publication of *Godey's Lady's Book*, and although she does not press on the magazine's signal function, it fits her argument perfectly. Arguably the first commodity to mass market femininity in the United States, its title's confounding pileup of possessives dramatizes Berlant's point that the commercial distribution of femininity comes to be felt as identity. Which possessive comes first? Does the book belong to a lady, or is one's ladyhood conferred by publisher Louis A. Godey? (One thinks, too, of the tipped-in clothes patterns, sheet music, and architectural designs that made *Godey's* such a success. It is not just that commodities are part of the project of being a lady, although this is certainly true, but that these objects produce forms of femininity through desire rather than through the disciplinary models of normativity that remain more familiar to us theoretically. A pattern for an exquisitely trimmed jacket

tells readers, not this is how you should be, but this is how you could be.) The book's study properly begins, however, in 1852, with the "ur-text" for politico-sentimentality, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, and the genealogy of indivisible critique and bargaining it establishes (69). This first chapter, "Poor Eliza," showcases one of the book's most persuasive features, its methodological concern with adaptation (something Berlant emphasizes by ending each chapter with a section on "Unfinished Business," so that, while it ends, it does not close). Cited and echoed in texts ranging from the 1936 Shirley Temple vehicle *Dimples* to the 1948 Rodgers and Hammerstein musical *The King and I*, and from Toni Morrison's 1987 novel *Beloved* to Robert Waller's 1995 bestseller *The Bridges of Madison County*, *Uncle Tom's Cabin* serves as a "supertext" that "articulates an array of distinct and often conflicting desires about the execution of cultural difference through spectacles of subaltern pain and their alleviation" (28). Berlant's archive bears out her larger argument: its reiterations at once reveal a well of anger against U.S. political culture; the female complaint's function as a means to witness, critique, and endure it; and these survival tactics' tendencies to reproduce the structures they protest.

Chapters 2 and 3 follow a similar pattern. Chapter 2, "Pax Americana: The Case of *Show Boat*,"

charts a dizzying array of early-to mid-twentieth-century *Show Boats*: novel, stage musical, and three films; whereas chapter 3, “National Brands, National Body: *Imitation of Life*” examines *Imitation of Life*’s transformation, over roughly the same period, from Fannie Hurst’s novel to John Stahl’s black-and-white film to Douglas Sirk’s iconic color melodrama. Layered with repetitions that make little difference, these chapters are enormously rich, perhaps the most satisfying in the book. In the numerous revisions of *Show Boat*’s multigenerational entertainment romance, which revolves around the revival of slave songs as the vaudeville shows that thrill white audiences in the North, Berlant demonstrates how the history of African Americans becomes a “resource” (74) to produce a modernity that can leave that history behind. Her virtuoso formalist reading of the musical’s staging, dance numbers, and division of narrative from song (where African Americans’ memories of past and premonitions of future injustice collect), shows that African Americans both propel the love plot forward and are split off from its progress. Chapter 3 likewise examines the capitalization of black pain, this time as the commodification of black female bodies buys white women the citizenship generally reserved for men. Beginning with the observation that women’s and African Americans’ “surplus corporeality” (112) disqualifies them

from participation in the national public sphere, Berlant argues that *Imitation of Life* addresses this problem by transforming painful overembodiment into trademarks, commodified “prosthetic bodies” that could allow one to enter public life. All three versions of the text share a narrative in which the economic success of a white single mother is predicated on her black domestic employee. But the differences between the three, whose success stories shift from the white woman’s pancake empire built on the black woman’s image to the white woman’s movie stardom built on her own image, register the emergence of a mass culture that holds out spectacularization—deceptively—as the key to emancipation, prompting white women to move from using black women’s bodies to conceal their own to using black women’s bodies to publicize their own.

The book’s second half moves from nationally felt forms of sentimentality to subjective ones, which operate “as a therapeutic mode that organizes even the feminist-inflected fantasy of what being normal might be like if it could only be achieved and enjoyed unambivalently” (28). This second part doesn’t sustain the richness of the first quite so consistently. Berlant describes “Uncle Sam Needs a Wife: Citizenship and Denegation” as the hinge chapter, but its transitions from 1920s citizenship manuals to 1990s political celebrity

mourning to the 1933 film *The Island of Lost Souls* seem a little too loose to swing it, while chapter 7, on Carolyn Steedman's 1986 autobiography, *Landscape for a Good Woman*, and Fay Weldon's 1983 novel, *The Lives and Loves of a She-Devil*, is mainly a thick description of its texts. The best parts of the second half, however, illuminate conventionality in both its social and formal registers. Chapter 3, "Remembering Love, Forgetting Everything Else: *Now, Voyager*," takes its cue from the peculiar therapy the novel-turned-movie embraces. For patients like protagonist Charlotte Vale, crushed by the "stifling stereotypes and normalizing customs of conventional life" (186), psychiatrist Dr. Jacquith supplies a set of catchphrases to recite in times of stress, a mode of therapy Berlant skewers as "*the courage to live better clichés*" (193). Vale's love plot follows a similar track. As tragic as her narrative of star-crossed romance is, it only vaguely involves another person, the underdescribed married man J. D. Durrance. Instead, "conventionality is [Vale's] object choice," Berlant argues, and she proposes that this desire characterizes the female complaint's romantic aspirations more broadly: "Love's gift is the subject's simplification" (189, 190). Chapter 4 builds on this account of conventionality's comforts, turning from clichés to genre. It presents not only a nimble reading of Dorothy Parker's poetry but

a stunning theorization of "genre as defense" (216). Comparing the content of Parker's poetry, which unsparingly dissects feminine conventionality, with its hyperconventional form, all clipped rhythms and precise rhymes, Berlant concludes that genre's aesthetic normativity offers consolation for the disappointments of sexual normativity, allowing a middlebrow author like Parker to "have her sex and hate it too" (224). This kind of "bargaining," as Berlant terms it, is the hallmark of the female complaint, which "allow[s] people to maintain both their critical knowledge and their attachments to what disappoints" (22).

For many readers, myself included, the most arresting aspect of these unsatisfying bids for recognition may be that they seem so utterly, queasily recognizable. This speaks, I think, to the scope of Berlant's project—to the saturation of the women's culture, which renders mass-produced "femininity" as an essential truth about being a woman. "Everyone knows what the female complaint is," Berlant writes by way of an opening (1), and what makes *The Female Complaint* powerful is its elucidation of a survival mechanism so intimately familiar as to be almost invisible. Consequently, as dense as the book's argument is, the greatest challenge it poses to readers may be affective, not intellectual. It is difficult to read very far without feeling profoundly trapped. In part, this is

precisely because affective experiences remain so divided from other ones, especially political ones, in Berlant's model. (Although she never supplies a specific definition of the political, it seems to inhabit a very small, circumscribed space.) Affect is a one-way street, and once we turn that corner, we can go nowhere from there. Or perhaps we can, but only if we don't expect to know where we're going: "[E]ndings can be made into openings," Berlant maintains, defining an opening as a "potentially transformative scene to which one can return," but such change usually amounts to an adaptation that allows us to stay attached to the scene we already know (31, 272). A "transformative politics," by contrast, would require us to "detach" from that world that comforts but compromises us (278, 266). Berlant's point about the normativity of optimism is compelling, but it is hard to see what room her commitment to unimaginability leaves for organized political practice or resistance.

Yet if Berlant's account of this intimate public is alarming, perhaps even more troubling is how comforting it can be. Her illuminating analysis reflects back to us a host of experiences—loneliness, ambivalence, aversion, love, hope—knit together and newly intelligible. As a result, it can be a struggle to absorb the book's argument rather than wallow in its understanding—feel held by it, in Berlant's terms.

In other words, *The Female Complaint* itself tests the allure of recognition. Reading through, you will experience innumerable "Me, too!" moments, even as Berlant teaches you to kick yourself for the relief they bring. This doubled response may leave readers feeling slightly sick, but it amounts to a perversely effective pedagogy, whose dazzling clarification also challenges us to defy the pleasure of being known.

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