

2018

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Recommended Citation

van den Oever, Roel (2018) "The (Un)bearable Lightness of Sex," *Criticism*: Vol. 59 : Iss. 1 , Article 12.
Available at: <https://digitalcommons.wayne.edu/criticism/vol59/iss1/12>

THE (UN)BEARABLE LIGHTNESS OF SEX

Roel van den Oever

Sex, or the Unbearable by Lauren Berlant and Lee Edelman.
Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2014. Pp. 168. \$79.95 cloth, \$22.95 paper.

The premise of *Sex, or the Unbearable* is certainly appealing. Lauren Berlant and Lee Edelman, two key authors in queer theory today, discuss the concept of *negativity* in the context of the antisocial thesis that has galvanized the field.¹ Their previous publications, Berlant's *Cruel Optimism* (2011) and Edelman's *No Future* (2004) in particular, suggest a fruitful disparity between the two, with Berlant being less pessimistic than Edelman about "what it means to seek to transform what's nonsovereign in desire and unbearable in relation" (122).² After a preface written in a shared voice ("we"), the book contains three essays in which "LB" and "LE" respond to each other's contributions in dialogue form. The first essay, "Sex without Optimism," is based on a joint paper that Berlant and Edelman presented at a 2009 conference in honor of Gayle Rubin. The second one, "What Survives," derives from another joint paper, this time delivered in 2010 at an MLA panel in memory of Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick. The third essay, "Living with Negativity," is new work and takes as its starting point a close reading of the short story "Break It Down" (1986) by Lydia Davis, helpfully reprinted in full. In short, all the ingredients are there for both a stocktaking of queer studies and the addition of an inventive new chapter to the discipline.

In several ways, *Sex, or the Unbearable* at once lives up to this promise and falls short of it. This paradox is perhaps best demonstrated regarding the book's dialogic structure. On the one hand, the frankness with which Berlant and Edelman lay bare their different strategies towards this particular way of exchanging ideas is deeply insightful. Edelman's *modus operandi* is to perform a deconstructive reading of Berlant's previous comments and subsequently oppose himself to her supposed argument. Meanwhile, Berlant adopts a variety of approaches, ranging from amenability—"I learned a lot from what you lay out here" (78)—via metareflection—"One of your styles of response, Lee, is to pose some version of the question 'Is *x* necessarily so?'" (88)—to introducing a new perspective to keep the conversation going—"Here's another walk around the situation" (90). In her afterword (there are two, one by Edelman and one by Berlant), she admits that, "often, I was feeling my way, both focused on moving the discussion forward . . . and also irritated about how I'd been characterized" (122). After three essays worth of this balancing act, Berlant finally poses Edelman the question that I suspect many queer-studies scholars have been wanting to ask him: "What would you do if I closed by saying, Okay, you win, you're right: the capacity to make new settings for

occupying the irreparable rivenness of subjects and worlds is just my fantasy of the possibility of social and personal transformation?" (111). Edelman's response is revealing, summing up the conundrum of not only his own recent academic output, but of the antisocial thesis in general: rather than persuading Berlant, he would prefer to be persuaded by her, "But I don't, as yet, see proof" (115). While wanting to believe in "the possibility of social and personal transformation," then, Edelman does not allow himself the pleasure of this "fantasy." In terms of the psychoanalytic grounding of *Sex, or the Unbearable*, denying oneself pleasure can of course also be understood as a libidinal position. In other words, both Berlant's "fantasy of . . . transformation" and Edelman's rejection of this "fantasy" are fueled by desire. As such, Edelman here embodies the "rivenness" of the subject that is the topic of his exchange with Berlant, his scholarly work serving two opposing libidinal investments at once: he both wants and does not want to be persuaded otherwise.

On the other hand, the dialogic structure of the book obscures as much as it exposes. For all their *no, you've misunderstood me's*, Berlant and Edelman speak the same lingo, refer to the same thinkers, and work within the same paradigm of psychoanalytic theory and queer affect. As Berlant states, "We were brought together as like-minded

polemicists against futurity” (116). While her “version of negativity feels more ‘livable’” (107) than his, says Edelman, staging an opposition between them would be a “misrecognition in . . . binarizing terms” (57). Hence, what appears to be an exchange between two voices can also be characterized as a two-fold actualization of the same idiom and ideas. In addition, the dialogic potential is undermined by the length of Berlant’s and Edelman’s respective contributions, which easily take up three pages per turn. The result is a sequence of monologues rather than a conversation in which the roles of addresser and addressee switch quickly enough for the created discourse to never fully stabilize. The subject position offered to the reader is consequently that of a passive receptor rather than a cocreator who can inhabit the interstices between “LB” and “LE.”

Regarding the content of the book, too, there exists a gap between appearance and reality. Considering its title, there is a surprising absence of sex in *Sex, or the Unbearable*. Or better, whenever the term is evoked, a new definition is attached to it, resulting in a concept that becomes less and less tangible. For instance, after quoting Edelman’s earlier understanding of sex as a “site where desire, for all its potential mobility, remains fixed to a primal attachment that alone makes

our objects appear as desirable” (91), Berlant proposes a series of paraphrases: “Likewise I see sex as an arena where a cluster of excited inclinations to discover a (dis)place within attachment is played out. It is a place where the trembling of one’s penetration by relationality is always revealed, even when no one else is in the room. It is a scene in which one enjoys the risk of moving through a field of ambivalence, resistance, and interest” (91). Perhaps aware of the consequent illusiveness of their notion of sex, Berlant proposes that Edelman and she each come up with a cultural artifact that exemplifies their respective comprehensions of “sex without optimism” (7). Unfortunately, the chosen texts are not entirely illuminating either. Edelman suggests a color photograph by Larry Johnson titled *Untitled (Ass)* (2007), which he reads as a metapicture (W. J. T. Mitchell) or theoretical object (Hubert Damisch) that reflects on the workings of representation and sex.³ Berlant, meanwhile, brings in the movie *Me and You and Everyone We Know* (2005) directed by July Miranda, in which sex is signified by a series of punctuation symbols:))<>((. What started as an attempt to provide recognizable instances of “sex without optimism” thus turns into theory (Edelman) and abstraction (Berlant). To speak with Sedgwick as approvingly

quoted by Edelman, the ungraspable nature of sex in *Sex, or the Unbearable* at times causes the book to fail a so-called “gut check”—that is, it does not always have “a reassuring groundedness, a sense of reality” (60).⁴

In the end, though, the pros outweigh the cons. With both Berlant and Edelman being professors of English, the close readings of *Untitled (Ass)*, *Me and You and Everyone We Know*, and “Break It Down” are at times stunning—Edelman’s interpretation of the pronoun “it” in Davis’s short story in particular is a highlight. Their fluency in a wide range of theoretical paradigms has resulted in an astute rethinking of how the subject and its world can come undone through a (sexual) encounter. As such, *Sex, or the Unbearable* functions as a valuable companion piece to Judith Butler’s meditation on being “Beside Oneself” from 2004.⁵ Above all, the forthrightness with which the authors engage in the dialogic format is exemplary and enlightening. In short, while the book might be light on sex, it is far from unbearable.

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NOTES

1. Robert L. Caserio, Lee Edelman, Judith Halberstam, José Esteban Muñoz, and Tim Dean, “The Antisocial Thesis in Queer Theory,” *PMLA* 121, no. 3 (2006): 819–28.
2. Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011); and Lee Edelman, *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive*, Series Q (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004).
3. W[illiam] J[ohn] T[homas] Mitchell, “Metapictures,” in *Picture Theory: Essays on Verbal and Visual Representation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 35–82; and Yve-Alain Bois, Denis Hollier, and Rosalind Kraus, “A Conversation with Hubert Damisch,” *October* 85 (1998): 3–17.
4. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, “Melanie Klein and the Difference Affect Makes,” *South Atlantic Quarterly* 106, no. 3 (2007): 625–42.
5. Judith Butler, “Beside Oneself: On the Limits of Sexual Autonomy,” in *Undoing Gender* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 17–39.