

The Fantasy of Public Education and Thinking with Lauren Berlant to Imagine Otherwise

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Identity, belonging, and the politics of our fantasies are themes that bridge my interdisciplinary work on inequality in public schools, especially as they are mobilized in neoliberal formations of online education. This work requires thinking with cultural studies and social science, both of which are critically oriented toward political transformation and imagining the object under study otherwise. My research, which focused on the use of online education in Toronto to respond to the impact of provincial austerity policies (Farhadi 2019) has extended to the context of the COVID-19 pandemic at multiple sites and scales (Farhadi and Winton 2021). Focusing on the context within which neoliberalism emerges, my latest work examines the impact of crisis on an ordinary education context. Recently, I examined variables that impact policy implementation and evaluate this impact against the stated goals and competing visions for public education.

My encounter with Lauren Berlant has been serendipitous and I make no truth claims on their collective body of work. However, in this brief reflection, I share how their conceptual framework offers a means of holding the contradictions of relation and shape what is possible to imagine and do in an oppressive world that chokes our curiosity. It is language to think about desire and power together, as a production of norms through which we “produce attachments to living through certain fantasies” (Berlant 2012: 7). During a historically fragile moment, emerging from a multi-year pandemic that has left many more people acutely disposable and differentially precarious, thinking with Berlant offers one way of making meaning of and

responding to our contemporary moment irrespective of our practice of living and object of research.

In a virtual roundtable convened by Jasbir Puar titled “Precarity Talk” (2012), Berlant raises a question social theory must experiment with and refine if one is to organize a political response to the normalization and hegemony of neoliberal precarity and to pressures on the common good: “What formal and informal institutions, but also what affective aspirations, should arise to create and multiply structures for our collective good-life imaginary?” (Berlant, in Puar 2012: 172). *Cruel Optimism* offers scaffolding: Berlant (2011) is attentive to the ways in which singularity gets generalized, to possibilities for its interruption, and to aesthetics as a metric for understanding our encounters and desires. But notable to me is their focus on the conditions of ordinary life, the ordinariness of suffering, and the normative demands its structures place on our subjectivity, our body and psychic life. My research is attuned to the crisis of ordinary life and the ways that our attachments to ordinary life are entrenched by crisis.

From the affective register of mass crisis to a historicization of the present that creates opportunities for living otherwise, thinking with the legacy Berlant offers compels me to question what connects the ordinary and aesthetic, scholarship and history, what world-building project does our attachments organize? How can my work be useful with respect to this project? And how can I orient my attention to affective infrastructures within worlds already created, radical singularities I can mobilize? Public schools have long been an anchor of society, composing the habits through which labour power and social relations are reproduced (Bhattacharya 2017). While we have traditionally understood the institution of schooling as an exclusively physical and linear in-person experience, virtual learning environments are also dependent upon the logics of schooling, which have increasingly deepened the state of surveillance (Human Rights Watch 2022). Their infrastructures must be included in an analysis of a collective world-building project that includes a fantasy of the public and their education for a good life.

Berlant positions neoliberalism as a space of transition rather than an inevitability, which offers a path toward new possibility and a direction toward which to aim action, where action constitutes an activity of the senses that sustains present-day collective world-making

geographies. Geographic scholarship on education engages how emotional politics and social forces, including sexism, compulsory heteronormativity, colonialism and racialized capitalism, shape schooling as a formal institution (Nguyen et al. 2017). It also considers the ways in which education alternatives are shaped in relation and resistance to the violence of schooling arrangements (Henry 2020). Rather than abandon the promise public education makes on behalf of the state, I consider attachments that “make people public”, the identities and subjectivities that emerge from policy and schooling, and their connection to “less institutionalized events, which might take place on the street, on the phone, in fantasy, at work, but rarely register as anything but residue” (Berlant 1998: 283).

Thinking about the *public* in schools requires reframing intimacy and examining the fantasies of division that drives our attachment to “spatial taxonomies” such as the boundary between private and public through which modes of “ordinary subjectivity” emerge (Berlant 1998: 283). Because intimacy is more than attachment; it is also about mobility, unpredictability, and contradiction: “To rethink intimacy is to appraise how we have been and how we live and how we might imagine lives that make more sense than the ones so many are living” (Berlant 1998: 286). How can the idiom of affect theory counter the processes by which education is commodified and extracted from land and community? Technologies that reconfigure our senses and obscure vulnerability? How can we remediate our intuition so it can better engage the affective dimensions of the historical present? These questions animate my research on educational inequality and online learning.

Berlant explains that we must do more than just focus on the “orthodoxies of institutions and practices” but also engage affective dimensions that produce normativity “in relation to the disorganized and disorganizing processes of labor, longing, memory, fantasy, grief, acting out, and sheer psychic creativity through which people constantly (consciously, unconsciously, dynamically) renegotiate the terms of reciprocity that contour their historical situation” (Berlant 2011: 53). More recently, I have turned toward critical policy studies in my analysis, compelled to do more than describe the historical context of institutions and their practice; by engaging the affective dimensions of text I extend the discursive field to an archive of feeling. My

methodology includes interviews and focus groups, within which participants tease out variables of policy enactment that often leave them feeling disorganized, in contradiction, and unsatisfied.

Berlant informs not only my analysis, but also my hope. They remind me that the singular matters, that not all attachments are cruel, and that (most importantly) political action need not be about “mapping out the better good life” but can be valued as “the action of not being worn out by politics” (2011: 262). By situating potentiality in the realm of affective worlds, I leverage my work toward the ceiling of what’s possible rather than the floor of survival, engaging the affective attachment that connects my research object to the historical, political, and cultural field of its mobilization. I think with Berlant in an effort to make meaning of our cruel attachments to a good life fantasy that has compromised if not, in many cases, eliminated conditions of possibility; it is the unsatisfying answer to the frustration of living in political contradiction.

The desire for the political, which shapes my professional practice, experience with social and cultural marginalization, and research questions, informs how I think about schooling, whose dominant function is to reproduce relations of order and control, a social democratic promise of upward mobility and citizenship building which betrays us under the calculus of neoliberal governance (Berlant 2011: 3). *To think* is to orient toward action and my action has woven together scholarship, lived expertise, professional practice, community work and care, futures yet to be imagined. The value of my research is captured by the potential it offers to imagine otherwise and to positively impact those working for change.

Action requires attention to the work of activists organizing for change in a climate of crisis that is framed by Berlant not as exceptional to history but instead as ordinary, “a process embedded in the ordinary that unfolds in stories about navigating what’s overwhelming” (2011: 10). It also requires thinking about the object, which Berlant describes as the anchoring interest organizing our research and writing, and what to do with it: how to open it up to fresh associations and when to close it up to stabilize its meaning (Berlant 2018). They remind us that an object can do both and that by working with the object we may be able to change what it can do.

While Berlant wrote about the slow death of living and possibilities otherwise, their passing reminds us that the boundary between life and death is also a fantasy of division. Through the work of memorial as a mode of intimacy we can engage the processes of grief and memory, affective registers through which we can continue to live otherwise, dream, play, and (re)build worlds we deserve attachments to. Worlds that will not fail us.

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