

Fractured Kinship and Failed Utopias: Remembering the Brilliant Lauren Berlant

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In February 2022, a group of geographers and anthropologists gathered at the virtual Annual Meeting of the American Association of Geographers to remember, honor, and discuss the work of the brilliant US feminist and queer cultural theorist Lauren Berlant (they/them/theirs) (1957–2021). Berlant’s death was deeply felt across the humanities, arts, and social sciences, including many corners of critical human geography. Their idiosyncratic and incisive thinking on neoliberalism, affect, infrastructure, citizenship, sexuality, gender, and more has found enthusiastic and critical conversation partners in our fields.

Berlant’s connections to geography are numerous and unique. In 2015, they gave the *Society and Space* lecture at the Chicago meeting of the AAG, which was published in the journal the following year under the title “The Commons: Infrastructures for Troubling Times” (Berlant 2016). But that publication was only the latest in a long series of engagements with geography and geographers, including the essay “Thinking about Feeling Historical” in *Emotion*,

Space, and Society (Berlant 2008), an earlier interview in *Society and Space* (Berlant and Seitz 2013), and extended dialogues with geographers dating back to the 1990s, if not earlier. Berlant once remarked that they would have been a geography major, had that course of study been offered at Oberlin College when they were a student there in the 1970s.

By bringing together junior geographers, artists, and community economies practitioners, we sought to collectively reflect on and share some of the ways that Berlant's writing has shaped our understanding of space, and our geographical imaginations more broadly. Berlant's thinking on infrastructures of the commons added nuance to geographic research on alternatives to neoliberal capitalism as they unsettled sentimental notions of commoning or working and living collectively. Instead, for them, collective spaces are awkward, messy, and antagonistic, spaces of fractured kinship and community. At the same time, Berlant saw potential in these contradictions and possibilities for crafting generative spaces of care in the contradictions, or what they called "failed utopias". They fiercely distrusted the professionalization of scholarly work in the neoliberal university, processes that normalize competition, wield metrics to measure our research "outputs", and celebrate individualistic notions of success. In collaboration with theorists, comedians, artists, and activists, they instead encouraged awkward, messy work that risks flopping and failing, and they saw hope in the frivolous and the unserious.

As geographers eagerly await the posthumous publication of Berlant's book, *On the Inconvenience of Other People* (Berlant 2022), we seek, as Berlant might say, to keep the event of moving and collaborating with their thought open, ongoing, and live. Here we share Beyhan Farhadi's, Soni Grant's, and Stephen Healy's reflections from the AAG memorial panel.¹ These unique reflections that bring together divergent threads of geographic thought demonstrate how Berlant's unique work has shaped their thinking. Each author shines a light on the ways that communities survive in an era of surreal, frustrating, and violent late capitalist systems and structures. Reflecting on their research in Eastern Navajo Agency, territory marred by a highly contested boom in fracking, Grant queries how Diné peoples engage in stopgap measures and

¹ We also thank Mónica Salas Landa and Derek Ruez, whose reflections will be published in *The Geographical Journal*, for their contributions.

creative interventions to negotiate infrastructure planning shaped by racial capitalist and white supremacist settler planning regimes. Healy then connects Berlant's theory making and praxis with his research on the "cruel sub-urbanism" of car-oriented urban planning in Sydney, Australia in an era of climate disaster and increasing extreme weather events. Farhadi, finally, critically analyzes the sudden shift to online education during the Covid-19 pandemic through a Berlantian lens, mapping the everyday ways that our attachments to ordinary life are entrenched by crisis.

Always traversing the material and the affective, Berlant's theoretical contributions add politicized depth, complexity, and hilarity to a range of sub-fields in geographic research and teaching. Through queer, feminist, and political economy lenses, their work continuously unsettles and resists limiting bourgeois, racial, hetero-patriarchal, and ableist attachments and temporalities, and tracks how the intimate both shapes and is shaped by politics at the national and global scales. Because of this richness, Berlant's writing continues to reverberate, refract, and mutate in radical geographical research and writing. We were intrigued by the geographical engagements with Berlant's thought that comprise this forum, and we are excited to share them with you.

References

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