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Impasse, Infrastructure, Jurisdiction: Thinking with Lauren Berlant

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I was Lauren's student before I was a reader of their work. I remember stumbling into their Advanced Theories of Sex/Gender class on a cold January morning in my first year of a PhD program in anthropology at the University of Chicago. Shivering, from both cold and nerves, I found a seat in the back of the small seminar room that was already packed with students vying for a spot in Berlant's class. I had been told that Lauren was a "very big deal". Their courses and talks on campus tended to attract a hive of buzzing queers. What I didn't yet know was that part of Lauren's pedagogy was to help their students unlearn, and think critically about, the desperately performative norms of the academy in favor of a more collaborative approach to knowledge making and world building. Lauren believed that the most transformative thinking and learning happened out loud, in the company of others (see Berlant 2009).[1] Their example

[1] See also, for example, the FAQ with Lauren on the University of Chicago Department of English website. To the question "What would you have liked to tell the 20-year-old version of yourself about college?" Lauren responds, "I'd just say what I say to my students now: we have classrooms rather than MOOCS because you have to learn how to sustain a thought aloud, exposed to others and to your own ineloquence, in part to see that other people can help

taught me to embrace collective thinking and teaching—always asking in meetings or in class "Yes! But what would it mean if X?"—which started to work once I let my guard down.

That frigid winter, I was flailing, trying to figure out how my commitments to queerness might find room to breathe through my objects of study—the environment, extraction, legal geographies of settler colonialism—objects that might not typically be the subjects of queer commentary.[2] Lauren affirmed this impulse and helped me sharpen it. With them I began to understand, as they would later write in *On the Inconvenience of Other People*, that "[t]o queer something doesn't mean just to stick an antinormative needle into it, but to open up a vein to unpredicted and nonsovereign infusions" (Berlant 2022: 16).

In the years that followed, Lauren taught me how queer theory's refusal to translate systemic violence into "normal states and administrative problems" (Berlant and Warner 1995: 348) could generatively help me attend to practices of boundary making, world building, and management. Thinking with Lauren's writing and pedagogy helped me track material, affective, and juridical infrastructures that reproduce violence and normative engagements with power, as well the vital forms of activity and improvisation that go on amid conditions of impasse.[3]

The last time I saw Lauren in person, in early March 2020, we sat together in a Starbucks next to the university hospital. Lauren was the kind of person who would make time to meet just before a CT scan if that was the only slot during which our schedules aligned. I found them sitting at a table with their iPad, engrossed in a text. The same iPad from which they would float me files throughout our many conversations over the years—"lauren berlant has shared a file

you reach where you can't quite go, and in part to see that you can be a resource to help them reach better clarity…" https://english.uchicago.edu/faq-lauren-berlant (last accessed 19 October 2022).

[2] Of course, there is lots of great work that does this. For exciting recent work, see for example the contributions in Barker 2017; see also Ahuja 2015; Chen 2012; Cram 2022; Luciano and Chen 2015; Mortimer-Sandilands and Erickson 2010; Murphy 2017; Wölfle Hazard 2022.

[3] An impasse is "a stretch of time in which one moves around with a sense that the world is at once intensely present and enigmatic, such that the activity of living demands both a wandering absorptive awareness and a hypervigilance that collects material that might help to clarify things, maintain one's sea legs, and coordinate the standard melodramatic crises with those processes that have not yet have found their genre…" (Berlant 2011: 4).

with you using Dropbox", the subject would read, with a link: "Munoz_disidentifications", "differences_Povinelli", "Kaplan_Atmospheric", or a comic about climate grief, among dozens and dozens of others. Lauren's Dropbox, like their mind, an infinite repository.

That day we were meant to check in about my dissertation, which I was slowly but surely writing. "You drive, it's your meeting", Lauren said, smiling. I took a deep breath and launched into a story about roads, infrastructure, and jurisdiction, with Lauren prodding me along the way.

In Eastern Navajo Agency, where I had been doing research with Diné communities for several years, a fracking boom had radically altered social-ecological relations. One of the most discernible changes brought on by this wave of extraction was the rapid deterioration of local roads. Fracking brought hundreds of large trucks hauling water, sand, chemicals, and hydrocarbons in and out of well sites every day.

The roads were wearing out. With the increased traffic came dust and more accidents. School buses couldn't get by on dirt roads torn up by semi-trucks. This meant that on some days, Diné kids got to school late, or they didn't make it at all. Residents were delayed on their trips to the grocery store in the nearest bordertown.[4] Ambulances, too, were slowed down or rerouted. These kinds of delays could be deadly—in an instant, or in the attrition of life chances over generations.

The Navajo Nation Chapters (local governments) and residents I worked with were concerned about all these impacts and many others (Atencio et al. 2022; Grant 2020). But when it came to the roads, perhaps what upset them the most was the crisis of repair they faced.

For in Eastern Navajo Agency, a century-and-a-half of settler colonial dispossession has carved up Diné lands into a hodgepodge of tracts alternately administered by federal, state, tribal, and private entities (Grant 2021; Redhouse 1984). In this landscape, referred to colloquially as the "checkerboard" for its patchwork pattern of jurisdiction, no one could agree whose responsibility it was to fix the roads.

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[4] Here, a "bordertown" refers to mostly white settler towns, villages, and cities on the outskirts of the Navajo Nation, where infrastructure, wealth, and amenities tend to be concentrated (see Denetdale 2016; Estes et al. 2021).

The roads, whether they were dirt, gravel, or pockmarked asphalt, crossed multiple jurisdictions in just a few miles. The Chapters had been meeting with federal, state, tribal, and county governments for years, urging these bodies to invest in maintenance, but nothing had changed. One jurisdiction always pointed the finger at the next, and no jurisdiction could make a move without another.

My interlocutors helped me recognize this condition of *entangled sovereignty*—an axiom for Lauren—and the jurisdictional friction the entanglement often created.[5] I began to think of this condition, at the conjuncture of infrastructure and jurisdiction, as a form of "gridlock".

"Gridlock" describes the experience of impasse within the jurisdictional tangle of the checkerboard. It is the sticky space of deferred promise in which Diné people navigate when trying to get something done, like building or maintaining infrastructure. Gridlock happens when the gears of bureaucracies are misaligned, rubbing up against each other abrasively. The resulting friction can cause a standstill or a crisis of responsibility. Things stall because no one knows or can agree about who is responsible. Gridlock occurs in the moment when the

[5]Indigenous Studies scholars have analyzed conditions of entangled, interdependent, and nested sovereignties in settler states like the so-called United States and Canada, and my thinking here is indebted to them (see Cattelino 2010; Dennison 2017; Palmer 2020; Pasternak 2017; Simpson 2014). For debates about sovereignty as a category of action and analysis within Indigenous studies, see Barker (2006). For Lauren Berlant, much of whose work has focused on nonsovereign relationality, sovereignty is a fantasy of jurisdiction (on this point, see also Pasternak 2017). But Lauren recognized the difference and different stakes between the political distinctiveness and collective autonomy of Indigenous nations, and the imagined sovereignty of the individual liberal subject. Lauren addressed this in their forthcoming book: "The sovereign fantasy is not hardwired into personality, in other words: as US scholars of indigeneity such as Jessica Cattelino, Jodi A. Byrd, and Michelle Rajaha have demonstrated, sovereignty as idea, ideal, aesthetic, and identity claim is an effect of an ideology of settler-state control over personal and political territories of action that sanctions some privileged individuals as microsovereigns. This fantasy, which saturates the liberal colonial state and the citizenship subjectivity shaped by it, is thus seen as a natural condition worthy of defense. But sovereignty is always in defense of something, not a right or a natural state" (Berlant 2022: 3).

expectation of jurisdiction—to locate oneself in space and time vis-à-vis the law and invoke a relation of property or accountability—gets so jammed up with claims that it disintegrates.[6]

I learned to think about the work of Diné residents to increase the pace and safety of their movement amid gridlock as critical gestures that take measure of something, bodily and tactical maneuvers that register glitches in the reproduction of life, as Berlant might put it (2011: 198, 2016: 393).

The event that first cued me to this gestural work was when George Werito, President of Ojo Encino Chapter, launched a pothole-filling campaign on the main road to the Chapter House. Having spent years negotiating with other authorities only to see nothing get done, the Chapter allocated its own limited funding to purchase tools and supplies. George and a crew of local volunteers began fixing the road themselves.

Partaking in this labor helped me attune to other hacks and adaptations that residents develop to transit through the present. The detours the ambulance and school bus drivers take, the new routes they develop to get by on mud days. Transporting a patient in a pickup to meet an ambulance when the roads are too rough. Small breaches of protocol, ambivalent as they may be, that become necessary to get through. Forms of sociality and organizing, and above all, of reconciling the needs of the present with long-term political projects for self-determination.

Resulting from the fabrication of jurisdictional ambiguity across Indian Country, gridlock points to the complex negotiations in which Indigenous peoples in the United States must often engage with other jurisdictions to exercise tribal sovereignty while demanding fulfilment of the federal trust relationship.

In the spacetime of gridlock, anticipation and stasis intermix to produce anxiety, frustration, and sometimes a sense of resignation to how things are. There is movement within gridlock, though it may often feel like repetition, like moving in place or in circles instead of moving towards something different. Like patching a road, it can leave broader issues feeling

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[6] I develop these arguments further in my book manuscript *Patchwork: Land, Law, and Extraction in Greater Chaco* and in a forthcoming article.

unresolved, though that doesn't mean that people lose sight of other projects, like getting the land back or bringing about an end to extraction.

In *Cruel Optimism* Berlant describes an impasse as a "holding station that doesn't hold securely but opens out into anxiety … it marks a delay that demands activity" (2011: 199). As I've briefly sketched, there's all kinds of activity amid gridlock. People invent stopgap measures, they improvise, and they come up with creative workarounds to go on living, and sometimes live a bit better.

If these are tactics for "managing the meanwhile within damaged life's perdurance" (Berlant 2016: 394) they also exemplify a commitment to collective social existence outside the norms of racial capital and white settler supremacy. The infrastructures of concern in this case, after all, are not only roads, but again as Lauren teaches, the acts, relations, and attachments that reproduce a particular kind of life across time and space.

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