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Lauren Berlant and Lee Edelman, *Sex, Or The Unbearable* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2014), pp. 168, ISBN: 9780822355946, £13.99, paperback.

'So few colleges and universities bother to teach human sexuality...so much stigma adheres even to scholarly investigation of sex,' Gayle Rubin lamented in her 1984 essay 'Thinking Sex'.¹ But it was an academic conference on Rubin's work - 'Rethinking Sex', a lavish three-day event, held at the University of Pennsylvania in 2009² - that provided the initial impetus for Lauren Berlant and Lee Edelman to enter into a dialogue on sexuality. The result is *Sex, or the Unbearable*, published by Duke University Press, the first in a series on queer theory edited by the authors.

The stigma Rubin identified in the early 1980s has lifted. Rarefied discussions of fisting, drag, sodomy and pre-pubescent masturbation frequently form part of a liberal arts undergraduate education and can easily be found cosily ensconced on the pages of a proliferating number of peer-reviewed journals. Not only have discussions on sexuality permeated the university, but theorists of sexuality frequently foreground their work's basis in academic institutions and events. Kevin Floyd's recent *Reification of Desire* (2009) begins portentously: 'One evening in December 1996, Judith Butler delivered a plenary presentation...'³ A snowstorm prevented Floyd from hearing the paper which, he claims in earnest, caused a storm in its own right.

Fruitful debates may well arise from such events, but it requires a certain lack of self-reflexivity to situate the major 'storms' buffeting sexuality firmly within the hallowed walls of the university. Perhaps it was ever thus – the very term 'queer theory' was coined for an academic conference – but however theoretically dense and wilfully prolix, founding texts by Judith Butler et al. analysed liminal spaces, the liminal subjects that inhabited them, and probed the relation of such places and practices to the dominant culture. In 'Thinking Sex', Rubin identifies a direct link between political struggle and intellectual debate: 'The sex wars out on the streets have been partly responsible for provoking a new intellectual focus on sexuality.'⁴ She claims that past struggles continue to echo long after their rowdy noise has

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subsided, they 'leave a residue... which then affects the way in which sexuality is experienced long after the immediate conflicts have faded'.⁵ These echoes can certainly be discerned in Berlant and Edelman's text, but only if you strain to hear them. The political urgency that animates Rubin's discussion does not course through Edelman and Berlant's dialogue, which is insulated from the noise and violence of the streets. The legal and political terrain that Rubin charts may have changed substantially in the intervening years but that hardly spells the end of persecution, discrimination, sexual violence and oppression. It would be unfair to accuse Edelman and Berlant of presenting a blithe Whiggish account of increasing liberal tolerance, but there is a certain detached complacency to their discussion. Berlant's insistence on optimism and anti-normative activism is more explicitly engaged with social critique than Edelman's adherence to negativity, yet the terms of that critique do not seem pressing. The authors are at pains to distinguish the dialogic structure of their text from more conventional forms, but this conversation addresses a small coterie of people already inducted into the nuanced theoretical vocabularies associated with queer theory, rather than attempting to initiate a dialogue with the world beyond the university.

Still, a dialogue is not a manifesto and there are moments when the discussion proves a subtle means of exploring complex ideas. Following their initial chapter inspired by Rubin, the text turns to a consideration of the late works of Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick. The book's second chapter 'What Survives?' might be read as a kind of eulogy to Sedgwick. Here the conversation hinges on the question of repair. The authors broach the relation between rupture and repair, asking how it might be possible to survive negatively, to repair without disavowing the persistence of the negative or, as Berlant phrases it, 'knowing what brokenness is while managing the rage to repair' (p. 49). Here, though still abstract, the discussion does raise potent questions and the dialogue form seems fitting. Edelman and Berlant provide contrasting perspectives on Sedgwick's work, building on and diverging from each other's insights in illuminating ways.

For Sedgwick, attachment and abandonment are connected to a kind of economy of heartbreak, which Berlant frames in terms of loneliness. But repair is also accompanied by dread and paranoia. For Edelman, dread 'gives a fundamentally queer shape to life' (p. 3). Dread poses a threat to the desire to repair; it offers an alternative to teleology. Dread is connected in Sedgwick's work to the AIDS crisis and the collective confrontation with the

irreparable it brought in its wake. As such, it provides a rare example of the links between concrete experiences and intellectual debates discussed by Rubin.

Implicit in this conversation is the relationship between repair and normativity. Repair raises the spectre of the 'the unclarity of what repair would fix' (p. 39). As Berlant articulates in the book's opening chapter, fantasies of repair:

are ways of staying bound to the possibility of staying bound to a world whose terms of reciprocity – whether in intimate personal or political idioms – are not entirely in anyone's control and which cannot yet be changed by a radical collective refusal of normative causality, of the normative relation of event to effect. (p. 20)

To repair something implies returning it to the form from which it started, which in turn implies that the original form was somehow desirable. Repair into what? Or conversely, broken from or by what? Edelman and Berlant are alert to the paradox of attempting to mend in a damaged and damaging world.

But these reflections on repair do not pertain exclusively to sexuality. Sedgwick's work on Proust is engaged with attachments to objects understood in a more capacious sense. Of course, books with the word 'sex' in their titles need not be bawdy, fleshy affairs replete with erotic tensions, lusty encounters and orgasmic excretions. But what exactly is 'sex' for Berlant and Edelman? Often it seems more like a space than an event. Sex is a 'site', a 'scene', an 'arena'. Sex might refer to desire, lust, arousal or fantasy, whilst at other times it seems to stand for relationality as such. Sex is not just sexual intercourse but all forms of intercourse (the authors even note that the dialogic structure of their text mimics the faltering rhythms and misrecognitions that characterize sexual relations). Sometimes sex seems cordoned off from quotidian experience, a separate realm, while at others it seems to permeate identity through and through. Unlike Rubin, Berlant and Edelman are not overly concerned with who is having sex with whom or how they are doing it. Instead they seem interested in describing something more universal.

Sex, they say, 'disorganizes accustomed ways of being' (p. 64). Sex is syncopation. The radical potential of sexual encounters lies in their capacity to disrupt the regular flows of life. But due to the abstract register of the discussion, the implication is often that all sex is disruptive, that sex as such is inherently anti-normative, that all sex forces the subject into a confrontation with otherness, that the brief interlude of the sexual encounter invariably destabilizes the encounters that surround it. In the book's introduction Edelman declares that sex:

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offers, in its most intensely felt and therefore least routinized forms, something in excess of pleasure or happiness or the self-evidence of value. It takes us instead to a limit, and it is that limit, or the breaking beyond it, toward which sex without optimism points (p. 12).

This sounds like sex with optimism to me. For what, ultimately, separates this 'intensely felt' experience from familiar accounts of romantic (heterosexual) love that form the basis of many normative assumptions about sexual relations? Most sentimental pop songs and Hollywood rom coms frame sex as an intense experience that might provide respite from the monotony of the everyday. Here the authors fail to explore the implications of their discussions of the paradoxical qualities of repair - they fail to address how sex *simultaneously* disrupts and consolidates. This is consistent with Edelman's lopsided version of the Freudian death drive, which tends to downplay its relation to the life instincts or Eros (p. 61). This account of sex offers a break from routine; it cannot break routine altogether.

The book's final discussion centres on the Lydia Davis short story 'Break it Down' (included as an appendix), which describes a heterosexual encounter in a contemporary American city. Here the conversation continues to probe the opacity of the other. Edelman meditates on impersonal pronouns, Berlant on the non-sovereignty of conversation. They talk at length about fantasy, fetishistic attachment to objects and the disavowal such attachment implies. But bizarrely absent is any discussion of how the story links libidinal and monetary economies. If any fetishism is at stake here it is commodity fetishism. 'Break It Down' begins with the male protagonist attempting to attach a monetary value to his sexual encounter and concludes with him reflecting: 'So I'm just thinking about it, how you can go in with \$600, more like \$1000, and how you can come out with an old shirt' (p. 133). Reading the story myself it struck me that the dualistic logic at work in Davis' story is akin to the advertising slogan: 'There are some things money can't buy. For everything else there's Mastercard.' The implication of both is that there are qualitative elements of human existence that escape the clutches of the value form, even as that form is shown to subsume and eviscerate those qualities.

When his lover departs the protagonist does not break down, he breaks it down. For me at least, Davis' story points to the cold conditions that govern human relations under capitalism. Edelman speaks of the 'something in excess of pleasure or happiness or the self-evidence of value' but in 'Break it Down' the logic of value is shown to operate even on this excess, on the things money can't - or shouldn't be able to - buy.

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Berlant and Edelman discourse eloquently on the fraught relations between people, but despite professing an anti-normative agenda, there is little in their conversation that is explicitly addressed at radically overturning the existing state of things. The concluding remark of Rubin's 'Thinking Sex' bears repeating: 'It is time to recognize the political dimensions of erotic life.'⁶

1 Gayle Rubin, 'Thinking Sex: Notes for a Radical Theory in Sexuality', in Richard Parker and Peter Aggleton, eds., *Culture, Society and Sexuality* (London: Routledge, 1999), pp. 150-187, p. 154.

2 The introduction to 'Rethinking Sex' credits Rubin with inaugurating the contemporary field of sexuality studies. Indeed, Rubin's piece was itself first presented at a conference on Sexuality at Barnard College, famous for igniting the 'sex wars' in 1982.

3 Kevin Floyd, *The Reification of Desire: Toward a Queer Marxism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009), p. 1.

4 Rubin, p. 171.

5 Rubin, p. 148.

6 Rubin, p. 172.

References

Floyd, Kevin, *The Reification of Desire: Toward a Queer Marxism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009)

Rubin, Gayle, 'Thinking Sex: Notes for a Radical Theory in Sexuality', in Richard Parker and Peter Aggleton, eds., *Culture, Society and Sexuality* (London: Routledge, 1999), pp. 150-187