



The Queen of America Goes to Washington City: Essays on Sex and Citizenship

Lauren Berlant

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In *The Queen of America Goes to Washington City*, Lauren Berlant focuses on the need to revitalize public life and political agency in the United States. Delivering a devastating critique of contemporary discourses of American citizenship, she addresses the triumph of the idea of private life over that of public life borne in the right-wing agenda of the Reagan revolution. By beaming light onto the idealized images and narratives about sex and citizenship that now dominate the U.S. public sphere, Berlant argues that the political public sphere has become an intimate public sphere. She asks why the contemporary ideal of citizenship is measured by personal and private acts and values rather than civic acts, and the ideal citizen has become one who, paradoxically, cannot yet act as a citizen—epitomized by the American child and the American fetus. As Berlant traces the guiding images of U.S. citizenship through the process of privatization, she discusses the ideas of intimacy that have come to define national culture. From the fantasy of the American dream to the lessons of Forrest Gump, Lisa Simpson to Queer Nation, the reactionary culture of imperilled privilege to the testimony of Anita Hill, Berlant charts the landscape of American politics and culture. She examines the consequences of a shrinking and privatized concept of citizenship on increasing class, racial, sexual, and gender animosity and explores the contradictions of a conservative politics that maintains the sacredness of privacy, the virtue of the free market, and the immorality of state overregulation—except when it comes to issues of intimacy.

Drawing on literature, the law, and popular media, *The Queen of America Goes to Washington City* is a stunning and major statement about the nation and its citizens in an age of mass mediation. As it opens a critical space for new theory of agency, its narratives and gallery of images will challenge readers to rethink what it means to be American and to seek salvation in its promise.

The Queen of America Goes to Washington City: Essays on Sex and Citizenship Details

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Cara Ungar-Gutierrez says

i love lauren berlant--i love how she talks about monumental representations of americaness and how much i recognize my own wants and desires within the context of how these monuments have come to mean..

Leonardo says

Esta omni-crisis de las instituciones se ve muy distinta en diferentes casos. Por ejemplo, proporciones continuamente decrecientes de la población de Estados Unidos se involucran en la familia nuclear, mientras que proporciones crecientes son confinadas en prisión. Sin embargo, ambas instituciones, la familia nuclear y las prisiones, están igualmente en crisis, en el sentido que el lugar de su efectividad está cada vez más indeterminado. Y no debemos suponer que la crisis de la familia nuclear ha traído una declinación de las fuerzas del patriarcado. Contrariamente, los discursos y las prácticas de los “valores familiares” parecen estar en todo el campo social. El viejo slogan feminista “lo personal es lo político” se ha revertido de modo tal que se han quebrado los límites entre lo público y lo privado, desatando circuitos de control a través de la “esfera pública íntima”.

Imperio Pág.148

Susan says

Queer Theory makes sense to me now

Mills College Library says

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Matt Sautman says

The second book in Berlant’s trilogy on citizenship, *The Queen of America Goes to Washington* is less an example of easily accessible literary criticism that is equally theoretical and is more a cultural criticism that expands her construct of the national fantasy with more investigation in regard to the intricacies of what citizenship means in the United States.

Minh-Ha says

my vote for the best title of any theoretical text and Berlant's observations about our culture of intimacy is really smart!

Michael says

In *The Queen of America Goes to Washington City* (2007), Lauren Berlant explores the "privatization of U.S. citizenship", taking it for granted that "there is no public sphere in the contemporary United States" (3). Citizenship has been reduced to personal acts and values, especially modeled after or directed toward the family (5). She argues that citizens have been made "like children, infantilized, passive, and overdependent on the 'immense and tutelary power' of the state" (27). Citizenship has become "dead citizenship," where citizenship takes place in the private zone (59) and citizens aspire to "dead identities," "Identities not live, or in play, but dead, frozen, fixed, or at rest" (60).

ralowe says

with this i complete my survey of the lauren berlant bound corpus. per usual this is berlant's alternate (perhaps sideways?) look at power relations, vibrantly representing the culture war as one that ethically compels every living individual into its conflict. you can of course expect my righteously overdetermined chafing at the model of "citizen;" it's kind of a stretch with me, no really, and the dodgy conservatism of this "citizen" of politics ("politics" itself perhaps as a priori a foreclusive conformity and demanding something elsewhere and -where supplemental and/or in excess) predicts the future inquiries i go simply mad for in her work. such things i love zestily invoking questions whether a coherent identity, social recognition and legibility always mean the same as statehood ((precarious) sovereignty); and how that lack of philosophical closure bears upon what counts as politics or if not that merely being in sustained and yet not wholly consensual proximity with others. the tricky kinda foucauldian mess of autonomy in surrender; interdependence; relation... i emailed lauren a while ago with my anxiety around the mass (social) mediated post-ferguson re-emergent solidarity black power fist tradition (is it just in my feed?), the amnesia of queer black feminism... but perhaps unfairly put the screws to her on contentions that are still in play in queer of color critique. is this a break with fanon's insights against recognition in a return to the raised fist, what is disrupted in the return to authenticity, is blackness solely a public sphere question? can mass maroon-type sun ra-ean fugitivity be a viable alternative to the nation-form? babies? what? but most of my concerns get a light dusting of description in the chapter examining the anita hill debacle. not just because it's our subsection on black people, but it does recall the experienced asymmetry between public and private in the scarlet letter exegesis back in *the anatomy of national fantasy* obs. symbolism is especially precious to me given the visual construction of blackness and what that does to self-determination (the problem is implicit in recovering a literal reading of the term from its well-known nationalist circulation). i had just read *the anatomy* and was thinking about her notion of transubstantiation, how the body, chiefly the body of woman, carries with it the fate of someone's nation. this is explored in the figure of the the powerless innocence of the fetal citizen in rabid pro-life propaganda. my, this is such a '90s book! what were talking about is less a subject and more an object. how is that not terrifying? or is the nation just something we turn to when we want a sign for our (glissantian) collectivity? the chapter on queer nation in this book frustrates these seemingly totalizing effects further, as in berlant's lens u.s. citizenship is only a fortiori identified by its disidentification (a la "freedom of speech"). but i don't want to be a u.s. citizen. and the witness of trayvon's

extrajudicial street execution only further proves this impossibility. is this a scandalous misrepresentation of the queer nation project? the whole trip about the infantile and fetal citizen shrugs towards ways to be with the dysfunction of political participation in diminishing scales. this is inscribed in a supplicating pilgrimage narrative; the book's title is excerpted from a harriet jacobs fabulation of illiterate and intramural slave myth regarding the abolition of slavery 1865 in the united states. thus sourced the title is just as untenable as the agency under study. subservience experience narrated as an exodus to the seat of power, washington d.c. berlant examines queen mister lisa simpson's trip to washington for a patriotic essay-writing contest and the show's closure in the punchline "the system works!" through fundamental system dysfunction. i enjoyed talking about the simpsons, though this paves the way for pur analyzing south park and jack analyzing pixar. i'm less interested in those cultural products. i think berlant makes better choices. i seemed to get a lot out of her tearing apart of forrest gump, and the account of forrest's ideal reaganite citizenship anticipates her "ambient citizenship" affect theory in the amazing *cruel optimism*. with berlant none are exempt from the incipient chatter of officialdom. there is no true privacy. deal with it.

Josh says

In this book Berlant develops her theory of 'infantile citizenship': that the Reaganite revolution furthered the tendency of democracies to create an ill-informed and Pavlovian electorate. Her bibliography ranges from high-concept plays, to Life magazine, from Audre Lorde, to Matt Groening, and is an intriguing look into a number of these works if you are familiar with the source material.

Without context, Berlant is little dry and wordy to keep this reader rapt-- a problem I would later encounter with Zizek, but her theoretical framework makes sense. It is unfortunate, though, that her argument comes across as very lumpy with incisivity compromised by big, bourgeois blind-spots.

Mary says

Lauren Berlant articulates one of those problems with America which I'd never been able to put my finger on: the government's infantilization of working adults. She makes sense of why abortion has been center-stage in our political arenas for so long, and gives a historical context for what brought about the conditions that perpetuate these problems. Even if you only read the introduction this book is well worth the price.

T Coughlin says

One of the most insightful texts I've read.

sdw says

This book is described by the author as a series of essays on the intersections of sex and citizenship. It is surely more coherent than that. The entire book is concerned with the transformation of the relationship

between sex and citizenship in the contemporary period in which heterosexuality becomes marked and visible. The discomfort with the visibility of heterosexuality (its marker as an identity) leads the conservative attack which is figured on protecting the nation from sexual and racial degeneracy. The first chapter examines the theory of infantile citizenship, and specifically dwells on an episode of the Simpsons entitled Mr. Lisa Goes to Washington. The infantile citizen is the innocent or naive citizen with the uncorrupted values of the child's patriotism. The infantile citizen goes to DC and encounters the messiness and corrupt practicality of DC. This citizen then renews his or her faith in the nation. Protecting this innocence is a way of protecting the nation. The second chapter "Live Sex Acts" examines the debates within feminism about porn, pointing out the protection of the Little Girl from the Adult in both feminist anti-porn activism and right wing activities. She specifically examines the meaning of "live" in "live" sex acts. Chapter Three looks at the relationship between depictions of fat, depictions of the pregnant woman, and the imagery of the moving fetus. This includes a reading of several right wing anti-choice videos, the depictions of the "beginnings of life" in Time Magazine, the sonograms taken of her nephew, and the films Look Whose Talking and Look Whose Talking Too. Chapter Four written with Elizabeth Freeman provides a reading of the activism of Queer Nation. Chapter Five examines the "Changing Face of America" (Think Time Magazine and Michael Jackson's "Black or White.") Although I watched the premiere of "Black or White" on television, I did not realize that Jackson was bashing in car windows that specifically had racist graffiti on them. (Nor at that age did it seem significant to me that he entered the frame as a black panther). Apparently, when the controversial video was re-released the masturbation remained but the racist graffiti on the car windows disappeared. The sixth chapter did a comparative reading of Jacob's Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl, Harper's Iola Leroy and the Anita Hill testimony (including the depiction of the testimony of the sitcom Designing Women). The Coda examines Berlant's theories of Diva Citizenship in relation to these three texts.

Throughout the book the textual readings are substantive. The book will definitely make you think, and it is very convincing. It isn't useful as a work of history, in that as a reading or interpretation of cultural texts it involves a lot of conjecture as opposed to a broad range of evidence. But it is excellent cultural criticism. It was very readable and engaging.

Korri says

read from 2 July - 6 August 2012; will resume when my brain is up to speed

Brian says

Tried maybe five times to read this...I was in way over my head.
