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# Introduction:
# Lauren Berlant and Media Theory

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## Abstract

In this Introduction to our special section on 'Laurent Berlant and Media Theory', I argue, with our contributors, that both appreciating *and* extending Berlant's vital contributions to media theory requires addressing the distinctive place of 'mediation' in her/their writing. The first section addresses the challenges and potentialities of efforts to position Berlant within existing genealogies of media theory, with particular attention to their work on affective genres, scenes, cases, and attachments. The second section explores the shifting relations among infrastructure, data politics and the making of media theory that Berlant's capacious mode of cultural critique helps us sense and make sense of – with a focus on intimacy-infrastructure entanglements, whether with respect to the 'inconvenience' of networked media and AI or the affective possibilities of collaborative projects of writing otherwise. What constitutes Berlant's most profound lesson concerning what it means to live lives immanently mediated by aesthetic-material forms, genres, and infrastructures, I conclude, is that friction, vulnerability, and ambivalence, are our vital animating conditions – and how we negotiate them personally and collectively is both a matter of survival and an affective-political art.

## Keywords

affect, digital culture, mediation, infrastructure, writing

The focus of this Special Section might at first feel strange or surprising. Lauren Berlant – who, at the time of her/their death in 2021, was the George M. Pullman Distinguished Service Professor in the Department of English Language and Literature at the University of Chicago – is renowned as a foundational scholar in many fields; cultural theory, queer and feminist studies, affect theory, and American studies,

to name just a few. Yet 'media theory' is not one of the scholarly areas or contributions with which Berlant is typically associated. This is despite the fact that, spanning the period from their first book, *The Anatomy of National Fantasy* (1991), to their posthumous book, *On the Inconvenience of Other People* (2022), Berlant assembled and mobilised a vibrant archive of (both mainstream and more minor) media and cultural 'texts' and objects – from the musical *Showboat* and the television series *The Simpsons* to Greg Borowitz's film *Habit* and Colson Whitehead's novel *The Intuitionist*. More than this, Berlant's oeuvre pivots centrally around the pervasive role of media, popular culture, and 'the aesthetic' in shaping, constraining, and refracting everyday lived experience amid the ordinary crises of the present in post-war, late capitalist America and far beyond. Nonetheless, within the pervasively digitalised media cultures of the twenty-first century, it is notable that Berlant rarely engaged directly with digital culture, nor has their work (with notable pockets of exception) been drawn on widely in accounts of networked media within media studies, digital humanities, or critical data studies.

In the face of such contradictions (and Berlant loved contradictions), this collection grapples with how both appreciating *and* extending Lauren Berlant's vital contributions to media theory requires addressing the distinctive place of 'mediation' in their writing. Mediation, of course, has a long history in media theory, which it is not my project here to trace in any detail. We might note, however, that everyday definitions of mediation invoke phrases such as 'to transfer something'; 'to be between'; and 'involving intermediate action'. The Oxford English Dictionary tells us, moreover, that the word 'mediate' derives from the Latin *mediare*: 'place in the middle'. Yet as the contributors to this special section suggest, there can be a world of difference between differently situated understandings of the kind of 'middling' work that mediation entails – from the traditional view of mediation as what happens *in between* two entities posed as separate and distinct (i.e. a 'media representation' and an 'audience' or a 'digital technology' and 'a human body') to, for instance, the media ecologist John Durham Peters' perspective on media as *environmental;* as things 'in the middle' which are 'both passive and active, neither subject nor object' (Peters, 2022: 3 cited in Ingraham, this issue).[1] Or consider the media philosophers and affect theorists Erin Manning, Anna Munster, and Bodil Marie Stavning Thomsen's rejection of mediation

in favour of *immediation*, as a process that 'cuts right through, into the middle and from there … explores what exceeds the mediation of a form pre-visited' (2019: 10). Media, from this perspective, 'do not inform "us" about the world'; rather, 'media are in-formed by the world's lively communicability' (Munster, 2019: 14) – a view I see as resonant with Berlant's own.

For Berlant, mediation is about the immanent, everyday processes that entangle and co-constitute 'the individual and the social, personal and political, intimate and public' (Azhar and Boler, this issue). It entails the ambivalent generic and affective-material dynamics via which 'things come to matter in ways that have consequences, personal or collective' (Ingraham, this issue). Of all of Berlant's concepts, 'intimate publics' – which develops most prominently across the three books constituting their national sentimentality trilogy, *The Anatomy of National Fantasy* (1991), *The Queen of America Goes to Washington City* (1997), and *The Female Complaint* (2008) – is probably the one that *has* been drawn on most widely in media studies, including varied scholarship on digital culture. In this work, as Ali Azhar and Megan Boler suggest in their contribution to the special section, the intimate public 'functions as a site of mediation between public and private spheres'. It is constituted by 'a mediatised linkage of producers, viewers and readers … bound together by a cluster of promises, attachments and affective registers' (this issue). From this angle, as Chris Ingraham proposes in his essay in this collection, Berlant is not a theorist of media per se, but rather 'a keen interpreter of mediation as a process through which the many objects of attention or fixation in a life gain their affective force' (this issue).

In inhabiting the flow of everyday mediated affect across a range of aesthetic sites, scenes, and encounters, Berlant explores through their oeuvre how, and with what felt implications, 'media circulate and distribute the swirl of promises that are dramatized through popular culture – utopian intimacy, unconflicted belonging, a future, an enlivened present' (Anderson, this issue). Crucially, however, mediation, for Berlant, is not so much *in* the middle of 'the individual' and 'the social', 'the intimate' and 'public' or 'the technological' and 'the cultural'; rather, mediation *is* the middle (the melding, the muddling, the mess) of these imagined vectors, which are always already entangled.[2] As such, mediation within Berlant's writing is, I would suggest, in close synergy with *immediation*: it is 'a practice for developing techniques to stay with

duration, within the world, with events to pass away with them all, in their continuous variation' (Munster, 2019: 15). In these ways, we might say, following Yasmin Gunaratnam in her contribution to the special section, that Berlant is 'an affect translator'. Their writing, that is, offers a 'propositional, in-process translation of affect worlds' (this issue). To refer to Berlant as an affect translator is not, Gunaratnam emphasises, to invoke translation as a matter of miming (or mining) affect 'in words language or writing' but rather something more akin to Gayatri Spivak's (1992: 178) account of translation 'as the most intimate act of reading' – in which 'Language is not everything. It is only a vital clue to where the self loses its boundaries'.

In what follows, I synthesise how the contributors to this collection affectively track the development of mediation across Berlant's oeuvre, teasing out its immense value in and for media theory. The first section addresses the challenges and potentialities of efforts to position Berlant within existing genealogies of media theory, with particular attention to their work on affective genres, scenes, cases, and attachments. The second section explores the shifting relations among infrastructure, data politics and the making of media theory that Berlant's capacious mode of cultural critique helps us sense and make sense of – with a focus on intimacy-infrastructure entanglements (Paasonen et al, this issue), whether with respect to the 'inconvenience' of networked media and AI or the affective possibilities of collaborative projects of writing otherwise.

## Mediating media theory's traditions

If Berlant is, in fact, a media scholar – or, in Ingraham's suggestive phrasing, 'a media theorist in disguise' (this issue) – situating her/them within existing parameters of, or traditions in, media studies is not straightforward. In addition to developing an idiosyncratic approach to driving concepts such as 'mediation', Berlant does not engage in 'reader response' criticism, nor do they interpret media objects for 'meaning' in any conventional way (Ingraham, this issue). If, moreover, it has been customary in the field to understand genre 'as textual types linked to cultural economies or artistic movements' (Cefai, this issue), Berlant approaches genre as much broader and more immanently linked to how cultural and aesthetic forms channel 'the force and potential effects of affect' (Seigworth and Coleman, this issue). Inhabiting Berlant's distinctive

approach to, *and opening up of*, mediation, however, does offer valuable coordinates for mapping some of their most generative influences and interlocuters within and beyond media theory – as our contributors flesh out in a range of provocative and illuminating ways.

In grappling with how to situate Berlant within available genealogies of media (and media adjacent) theory, Ingraham highlights Berlant's debt to Michel Foucault's heterotopic thinking and Giorgio Agamben's critical theory which, in different ways, engage mediated conditions of living 'that create the parameters for validating some embodiments and means of life as worthier than others' (this issue). Ingraham is most enthusiastically drawn, however, to the productive resonances between Berlant's writing and the materialist tradition in media studies epitomised by the scholarship of Harold Innis, Marshall McLuhan, and John Durham Peters. If we understand the account of mediation that emerges across Berlant's work as oriented less towards understanding media *themselves*, and more towards 'how media and media infrastructures mediate "what life is like"', he suggests that we can register its powerful reverberations with, for instance, Peters' ecological account of media studies as 'a general mediation on conditions' (2015: 51). Berlant's approach to the mediating dynamics of popular culture is also (at least partly) homologous with McLuhan's (1964) famous proposition that 'the medium is the message' – with the conviction, that is, that 'media are not themselves signifying, but they determine some conditions of signification's possibilities' (Ingraham, this issue). Yet if McLuhan attends to the determining force of historically-situated technologies, from the lightbulb to the 'new' medium of television, the medium that most concerns Berlant, Ingraham argues, is 'life itself'. Berlant's oeuvre can thus be considered media theory 'to the extent that it treats the felt-atmospheres of the historical present as semi-determinant mediums that contribute to how the dynamics of democracy, capitalism, and their attendant ideologies impinge upon affectable and always precarious bodies' (ibid).

And yet, nothing is ever really deterministic in Berlant's hands: the point, as illustrated most potently, I would suggest, in their rich renderings of 'ordinary affect' (Stewart, 2007), is that everyday life amid the 'crisis ordinariness' (Berlant, 2011) of the present is always messy, overdetermined, and in flux. Popular media infrastructures, forms, and genres of 'public intimacy' are pivotal in choreographing shared expectations

concerning 'how an unfolding situation will (and can) take shape' (Berlant, 2008: 4) – and often in ways that model 'how affect becomes conventional' (Azhar and Boler, this volume). Such immanent mediating processes, however, are not mechanistically predictable, nor are they ever all-encompassing or neatly uniform in their effects. This is partly because genres and aesthetic forms are always straining to 'keep up with emerging expectations of what life actually feels like, or ought to' (Berlant, 2011: 6-7 cited in Ingraham, this issue; see also Cefai, this issue). As such, mediation, for Berlant, *is emphatically not about cause and effect* (Seigworth and Coleman, this issue). Rather, as articulated most explicitly in their *On the Inconvenience of Other People*, mediation is 'a way of seeing the unstable relations among dynamically related things' (2022: 22). Or, in a resonant formulation, as Ingraham articulates in his account of Peters' media theoretic: 'to say that a medium matters is not to say that that it plays a causal role. The medium is [in] the middle, indispensable to what is going on, but neither the actor nor the acted upon' (this issue).

In this vein, what is most suggestive about juxtaposing Berlant's writing with the 'Innis-McLuhan-Peters line' of media theory, for Ingraham, is how the resultant ontological and epistemological reverberations reveal 'stunning symmetries between media and affect'. That is, across these overlapping critical literatures, affect and media are both 'worlding forces that exceed any uni-directional influence implying an endpoint or outside to either'. Moreover, 'each in its own way is a fundamental condition of being' (Ingraham, this issue). For Berlant and these materialist media theorists alike, then, framing mediation as 'overdetermined' (i.e. as involving multiple interconnected factors that cannot be isolated as causal in any fixed or linear way) means that mediation can never be equated to a narrow or delimited process of framing or filtering involving particular media actors, forms, or technologies. Instead (similar to processes of affecting and being affected in Berlant's rendering) mediation is more fundamentally about how we are 'conditioned by the conditions we condition' (Peters, 2015: 51). The implications of Ingraham's scholarly juxtaposition, then, are not only that media theory 'might be an unacknowledged lineage to add to growing genealogies of affect theory' (this issue)[3], but also that Berlant's particular formulation of affect theory may be much more vital to interpreting the changing nature of mediation, re-mediation, pre-mediation, and immediation than currently reflected within the field.

Similarly tracking the affective life of 'mediation' as it becomes 'an ever more foundational coordinate' in Berlant's writing, Seigworth and Coleman, in their contribution to the special section, focus on Berlant's close engagement with a different kind of materialist thinker: the Welsh cultural theorist Raymond Williams. Across his landmark publications, from *The Long Revolution* (1961) to *Marxism and Literature* (1977), what Williams objects to most in received understandings of mediation, Seigworth and Coleman suggest, is the tendency to figure it as occupying a space of action '"between" this particular *something* and another *something else*' – or, relatedly (as per the then reigning Lacanian-Althusserian formulation), as a process which differentiates 'between a primary site of action of determination' (i.e. a base) and a secondary 'world of sensations or 'practical consciousness' (i.e. superstructure). Rather than constituting 'a separable agency', they emphasise, mediation is for Williams 'the continua of transformation in forms, shapes, patternings, assemblings … across our uneven and inequitably lived existences…' (Seigworth and Coleman, this issue). When Berlant introduces *Cruel Optimism* as emerging 'from a long engagement with Raymond Williams' incitement to think about the present as a process of emergence' (2011: 7), it is, in part, the account of mediation surfacing from Williams' sustained analysis of the entanglement of aesthetics and materialism with which Berlant is implicitly aligning her own scholarship, Seigworth and Coleman argue. For Berlant, as for Williams, then, mediation is concerned not 'primarily with content *but form* (shapes, habituations, patterns, rhythms, conventions)'– a formulation not dissimilar, I would note, to the sensibility Ingraham attributes to the Innis-McLuhan-Peters line of media theory.[4]

Yet where Seigworth and Coleman see Berlant's writing as more emphatically aligned with Williams' legacy is in her/their sustained engagement with the social, political and ideological as central to the affective logics of mediation. For Williams, to understand aesthetics as always thoroughly material is to see it as immanently 'mediated through the physical, the material, the bodily' (Seigworth and Coleman, this issue). The socialist politics Williams pursued, they suggest, explored ways of '*making common*' through 'the rhythms of experiences and experimentation' opened up by various aesthetic forms and possibilities. All of this, Seigworth and Coleman propose, is reflected in Berlant's approach to mediation and its concern with how affect finds its 'force and potential

effects' via popular culture and other aesthetic forms. Given that, as Berlant puts it, 'the thing about affect is that there is no direct evidence of it' (2020: 248), her/their sustained critical political project becomes one of tracing when and how feeling *finds form* 'through its lived specificity' (this issue). This persistent concern with form is, Seigworth and Coleman suggest, why Berlant orients their discussions around, not only the concept of genre, but also the case, the object, the scene, the encounter etc. It is through cultivating 'conceptual affective hook[s]' – whether "intimate publics", "cruel optimism", or the "inconvenience drive" – that Berlant 'makes *real* what might have been – perhaps only a moment ago – a set of vague impressions, a swirl of atmospheres, a tangle of vectors'. And, importantly, through this 'making real', they are able to 'open up an analysis of the mechanisms that enable the reproduction of normativity not as a political programme, but a *structure of feeling, as an affect*' (italics mine, Berlant, 2008: 266 cited in Seigworth and Coleman, this issue).

In other words, it is through tracing the shifting aesthetic logics of mediation across specific sites and encounters that Berlant shows how *affect becomes ideology*. And yet, like much (if not all) of Berlant's work, there is always a paradox at play: while 'affects have no existence except from form' they are, at the same time, 'in no way determined [by it]' (Ingraham, this issue). It is in this indeterminacy (and its inconvenience) that Berlant both charts and brings to life emergent political possibilities for the kinds of 'making common' that Williams envisioned.

If Berlant's contributions to media theory can be compellingly situated in relation to the (differently) materialist vectors of Marshall McLuhan and Raymond Williams, Angharad Closs Stephens, in her contribution to the collection, draws parallels between Berlant's writing and the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies lineage of Stuart Hall. Much like Hall, she notes, Berlant's attunement to the affective and political dynamics of mediation demonstrates deep empathy with 'how people find themselves believing in narratives that might simultaneously harm them or oppress them' (Closs Stephens, this issue). If Hall grappled with the affective ideologies of Margaret Thatcher's Britain and their role in the making of 'neoliberal common sense' through the 1980s, 1990s and beyond (Hall and O'Shea, 2015), Berlant's writings from the first decade of the 21st century, Closs Stephens suggests, form a rich archive for approaching today's culture wars, 'as the intimate sphere is

again weaponised by right-wing populist movements' (this issue). Like Hall, Berlant is deeply interested in 'people's sense of belonging to affective space' which requires 'a commitment to critique as something other than ascertaining causes or making moral judgements'. In cultivating a generative affective space between 'non-contempt and endorsement' (Ngai, 2021 cited in Closs Stephens, this issue), Berlant's writing, Closs Stephens argues, is significant to the study of contemporary global politics – and particularly to the question of how politics is mediated – because it 'challenges us to see others (including those who we disagree with, and those whose views we find repugnant) … as needing to be understood rather than explained'. And this, above all, requires understanding the affective atmospheres and genres that 'shape how we see the world as we do'.

Another way to frame Berlant's approach to the affective politics of mediation is to say, as Ben Anderson does in his contribution to the special section, that they are never interested in 'shaming people's objects' (Berlant and Seitz, 2013: n.p.). Rather, as enacted so potently in *Cruel Optimism*, Berlant (2011: 4) attunes to how our attachments are always 'scenes of negotiated sustenance' – to how, that is, whether pertaining to the promise of romantic love, investment in a new habit of productivity, or fraying hope in 'the good life' amid economic insecurity and precarity, attachments are always ambivalent and contradictory. Extending his recent work on affect theory and attachment (Anderson, 2022), Anderson contends, in this vein, that Berlant's writing offers rich foundations for a media theory oriented around *the affective dynamics of attaching and detaching*. The vital question animating such an approach, he proposes, is not the traditional one of 'what does something represent?', nor the more materialist query of 'what does it do?', but rather the thoroughly affective contemplation of '*what does media attach us to*, how, and with what consequences for building and being in a life with and without others'? (Anderson, this issue). Attending, in particular, to the promise of romantic love as mediated through the popular music of Beyoncé, Adele and others, Anderson suggests that Berlant's capacious understanding of mediation lends itself to an account of 'media systems that create economic and other value, in part, through the circulation of occasions for complex, overdetermined attachments'– which are always also linked to the difficulties and potentialities of particular detachments.

Together, these contributions open out to thought-provoking questions of how, and with what implications for contemporary media theory, Berlant's take on mediation melds the Marxist-influenced cultural theory of figures like Raymond Williams and Stuart Hall with more psychosocial sources and concerns, including Freudian and Lacanian psychoanalysis as well as influential works in feminist, queer and (de/post)colonial theory. Taking up the significant psychoanalytic strain in Berlant's work more directly, Henrike Kohpeiß draws on 'the complex repercussions of traumatic experience' addressed in Berlant's article 'Structures of Unfeeling' (2015) to consider how sexual violence is affectively mediated in the intimate public sphere. Unfeeling is, as Kohpeiß notes, 'rooted in what Freud calls repression as a neurotic, inner-psychic defense mechanism' (this issue). In Berlant's rendering, however, unfeeling – as a response to 'things that are too overwhelming to process' – becomes at once more expansive and more ordinary (this issue). Displacing expectations of emotional coherence, Berlant develops a theory of affective mediation in which 'being overwhelmed is a very common state of being a subject and often expresses itself in unexpected forms or "coping mechanisms"' (Kohpeiß, this issue). Within Kohpeiß's analysis of the mediation of sexual violence in German popular music fan cultures, a 'profoundly ambivalent' concept of unfeeling coheres in which 'the necessity to mediate disruptive violence for the sake of everyday life, is a necessary and continuous act oscillating between self-protection by repression and harmful denial of structural violence'. In other words, 'the ability to *unfeel* what happened or what was witnessed is a tool to continue life elsewhere, whether used as a means of survival or neglect of responsibility' (this issue). While Berlant's account of mediation is thus deeply psychosocial, emerging in close dialogue with Freudian and other psychoanalytic resources, it resists traditional psychoanalytic accounts of both subjectivity and trauma. As Kohpeiß puts it, dissociation, for Berlant, 'is more than a splitting off of traumatic experience to prevent repetition': rather than a 'giving up' it is 'a way to remain in life' (Berlant, 2022: 145) with the aid of 'veils and other tools of mediation' (Kohpeiß, this issue).

If Berlant's account of affect 'as a resource for the mediation of unbearable states' is centred on 'how subjects, who are aware of the damaged world that surrounds them, cope instead' (Kohpeiß, this issue), it also attends closely to the role of fantasy in

personal and collective transformation. In this vein, the critical theorist and human geographer Felicity Callard, in a recent co-authored set of tributes to Berlant in *The Geographical Journal*, notes that Berlant was 'consumed by fantasy' – not least because 'you need fantasy for the "work of undoing a world while making one"' (Berlant, 2011: 263 cited in Anderson et al, 2022: 121). Indeed, without fantasy – as Berlant illuminates across key texts from *The Anatomy of National Fantasy* to their short book *Desire/Love* (2012) – 'there would be no love, no object, no optimism, no attachment' (ibid). While feminist psychoanalytic thinkers like Jacqueline Rose 'taught Berlant how to think the "antiformalist tendencies of the intimate" – how desire can never be stabilised', Callard suggests, postcolonial theorists like Frantz Fanon 'showed them the agonistic struggle through which a nation attempts to make itself real to and for every citizen' (Anderson et al, 2022: 121). Drawing together such rich resources, it is in affectively tracking how 'scenes, objects, cultural practices and aesthetic artefacts organise fantasy' (ibid) in ways that invest life with meaning that Berlant animates the suturing of the psychic and the social at the heart of their writing.

Asking how this concern with fantasy, and the psychosocial more broadly, figures in Berlant's distinctive approach to mediation, Lisa Blackman's contribution to the special section considers connections between Berlant's writing and the critical media psychology pioneered by the British social theorist Valerie Walkerdine.[5] In their respective engagements with personal and collective fantasy amid the shifting gendered, sexualised, racialised, and classed dynamics of post-war America and Britain, Berlant and Walkerdine each, Blackman suggests, develop approaches to 'the psychosocial dynamics of mediation' that emerge from 'critiques of the psychological subject' (this issue). A suggestive focus for Blackman here is Walkerdine's 1981 essay 'Video Replay' (originally published in the collection *Formations of Fantasy* and later appearing in Walkerdine's 1991 book *Schoolgirl Fictions*), which Berlant had identified as particularly influential to them during graduate school. Grappling with the media consumption of a working-class British family in this ethnographic essay, Walkerdine draws on her 'lived experience of oppression' and 'fantasies of escape and transformation' to analyse the family's identifications as they sporadically watch the film *Rocky 2* in their council flat living room – particularly in relation to themes of 'pain, struggle and class' (Blackman, this issue). Walkerdine emphasises, however, 'that

the experiences she explores as part of her ethnography cannot be read off from relations of gender, class, or ethnicity alone'. Moving beyond a schematics of positionality, what is needed, 'Video Replay' insists, is '*a complex account of subjectivity*, of feeling, meaning, power, and desire' (italics mine, Blackman, this issue) – perhaps not unlike that which Berlant goes on to flesh out in her national sentimentality trilogy.

For Blackman, both Walkerdine's *Schoolgirl Fictions* (1990) and Berlant's *The Queen of America Goes to Washington City* (1997) offer compelling critiques of 'how resistance and resistant subjects have been articulated in cultural studies, calling for more complex accounts of the subjectivities and affective dimensions of mediated worlds'. The wider contributions of both scholars to cultural theory and media studies, moreover, illuminate 'the "cover stories" that family, nation, sexuality and state rely upon for their reproduction, and their ugly forms of displacement' (Blackman, this issue). Yet if Walkerdine's critical media psychology draws on and extends feminist epistemological traditions percolating in the 1970s and 1980s by foregrounding the personal and autobiographical in scholarly analysis, Berlant's account of psychosocial mediation moves rather through 'the non-personal' – employing the 'cover story' and 'the counterfactual as critical and creative method' (ibid). While the dictionary definition of the cover story relates to what is 'illustrative, or fabricated, false, yet plausible, misleading and deceiving, or stories that can expand the imagination', within Berlant's particular mode of cultural story-telling, Blackman argues, the cover story operates primarily to unsettle the personal and the non-personal. That is, rather than working through the autobiographical or the confessional, it offers 'a *transmutational* gesturing to how worlds are composed and put together, and how the I, the sovereign I, is not the focus and can, perhaps, should or always has the potential to be undone'. The non-personal for Berlant may therefore work 'as a cover-story that engenders an orientation that can move between different registers without exposure' (ibid).

What this means for Berlant's expansive and textured account of mediation, I want to suggest, is that it is always premised on deep, unfolding entanglements and co-constitutions of not only 'the material' and 'the aesthetic' or the 'structural' and 'the affective', but also 'the social' and 'the psychic', and 'the personal' and the 'non-personal'. If conventional approaches to mediation depend on 'setting the world apart from the things that occur in it, setting the things that occur in the world apart from

ourselves', mediation, for Berlant, as for Erin Manning et al (though with, perhaps, a different affective-political and psycho-social inflection), is 'the middling technique through which an awareness is felt that what moves events is not an exterior force, not a human exterior to the act, but an acting ecology (Manning et al, 2019: 12). Concomitantly, as the contributions discussed in this section illuminate, it is evident that Berlant's rich and longstanding work on affect – the scholarly area for which they are perhaps most well-known – 'is inseparable from – indeed impossible without – their attunement to mediation' (Ingraham, this issue).

Synthesising these points in her contribution to the collection, Sarah Cefai suggests that Berlant's writing 'teaches us how to think through genre as the deeper mediation of cultural concepts by which people's life-world aesthetics are drawn into a wider articulation, and whose analysis yields insight into how material relations of power differentiate in registers of experience'. From this angle, Berlant's inhabitation of the immanent mediation of everyday life, in one sense (and a rather counterintuitive one), 'reveals affect (theory) to be all about language. All about ways of telling story. All about ways of understanding convention – the relation between norm and form' (Cefai, this issue). If, on one hand, this proposition underscores what is, for Berlant, the *inherently social* (and thus inherently mediated) nature of affect, it also, on the other hand, highlights the centrality of affective intensities, relations, and attunements to the study of emergent media forms, technologies and infrastructures.

## Infrastructure, data politics, and the making of media theory

Although Lauren Berlant does not offer a sustained focus on networked media technologies or emergent data cultures, following the travels of 'infrastructure' across their work illuminates its significant value to contemporary studies of media and digital life. Rather than restricting infrastructure to a materialist definition of 'stuff you can kick' (Parks, 2015 cited in Ingraham, this issue), Berlant, as we might expect, takes a more capacious and eclectic approach. As articulated in *The Inconvenience of Other People*, their interest is in both tracking and cultivating 'critical infrastructure[s] that can bear the material dynamic that looks solid at a distance while being elastic, rubbery, animated, elliptical, context-changing, and the effect of the drift or clanging of many causes' (Berlant, 2022: 15). Infrastructure for Berlant, then, imbricates the material

(which could include road systems, electronic grids, or data centres) and the organisational, which may be more 'ephemeral and metaphorical' (Paasonen et al, this issue). Infrastructure in Berlant's writing is also deeply affective and generative: it is what assembles 'all the systems that link ongoing proximity to being in a world-sustaining relation' (Berlant, 2016: 393). This means, as our contributors illustrate, that attending to the felt dynamics of infrastructure could revolve around anything from the affective intimacies of networked media to shared practices of thinking and writing otherwise.

In their joint contribution to the special section, the members of the 'Intimacy in data-driven culture' project team (IDA, 2019-2025), Susanna Paasonen, Vilja Jaaksi, Anu Koivunen, Kaarina Nikunen, Koroliina Talvitie-Lamberg, and Annamari Vänskä, contend that appreciating the possibilities of Berlant's account of infrastructure in and for media theory requires tracing its unfolding relationship with intimacy across their writing. In introducing their 1998 special issue of *Critical Inquiry* on 'Intimacy', Berlant figures intimacy as 'the kinds of connections that *impact* on people, and on which they depend for a living (if not a life)' – whether such connections entail 'nations and citizens', 'workers at work', 'fetishists and objects', or 'writers and readers' (Berlant, 1998: 284 cited in Paasonen et al, this issue). In the wake of 1990s queer and feminist activism, Paasonen et al note, Berlant sought to disrupt any notion of intimacy as tied exclusively to particular, often heteronormative, 'institutions (family, couple, friendship)' by approaching it more expansively as 'mobile processes of attachment' (this issue) – thus exposing the blurred imbrications of the public and private spheres. Here and beyond, intimate connections, investments, and attachments operate, for Berlant, *infrastructurally*; they are 'that which uphold and afford modes of being and relating' (Paasonen et al, this issue). It is only more recently, however, leading up to their *Inconvenience* book, that infrastructure consolidates as a key concept in Berlant's oeuvre (see also Berlant, 2016). Constituted by 'patterns, habits, norms, and scenes of assemblage and use', infrastructure in Berlant's later work addresses 'both "how to live with ambivalence" and how to engender transformation' (Berlant, 2022: 95 cited in Paasonen et al).

Yet if we are to draw out the critical implications of Berlant's analysis of infrastructure-intimacy entanglements for the study of twenty-first century media, Paasonen et al

argue, we need to foreground digital culture more directly in these conversations – by, for instance, exploring how 'networked connectivity comprises an infrastructure that impacts the ways in which connecting is possible, shaping forms of mundane agency and world-making' (this issue). In 'inserting technology and non-human actors into Berlant's consideration of attachment, dependencies, and connections', Paasonen et al unfold an affective media theoretic in which infrastructures are 'simultaneously vital attachments to people' *and* 'dependencies on the operability of devices, platforms, and information networks' (Paasonen et al, this issue). Informed by Berlant's unique style of cultural analysis, one key contribution such an approach to infrastructure makes to contemporary media studies, they suggest, is a framework for grappling with the socio-affective dynamics of platform, surveillance, and/or data capitalism in more nuanced and textured ways. Focusing on intimacy in the study of data cultures and societies, that is, furnishes a mode of thinking in which 'data extraction and mass surveillance are met with the complexity and vitality of everyday forms of relating, impacting, and world-making, and techno-capitalist infrastructures are considered in tandem with other attachments and connections that bind' (Paasonen et al, this issue). In this way, Paasonen et al argue, Berlant's late 'turn to infrastructure' suggests compellingly that 'a macro/ structural/ ideological/ political economy level of critique does not suffice alone'. Rather, interpreting infrastructure affectively offers media theory generative techniques for 'thinking with a logic of both/and where mundane world-making through networked means is considered with equal gravity, and care, as analyses of data capitalism's exploitative practices, and where the former is not seen as dictated or predetermined by the latter' (ibid).[6]

Taking up Berlant's approach to infrastructure from a resonant perspective, though with a distinctive empirical focus, Yasmin Gunaratnam, in her contribution to the special section, explores the affective infrastructures of universities as vital contemporary sites through which to address where it is that media theory actually comes from. While infrastructure for Berlant emerges most potently as 'the lively patterning or connective tissue of social forms' that 'buoys our sociality (Gunaratnam, this issue), Gunaratnam is specifically concerned with the contradictions of writing with/in university infrastructures amid the often crushing pressure of 'metrics, audit cultures, systemic underinvestment, and the suppression of wages and working

conditions'. In grappling with what constitute Berlant's most potent contributions to media studies, Gunaratnam's focus is less on the subjects of their engagements, 'which fall more squarely within media theory (cinema, art, fiction, images, TV)', and more the *mode and form* of Berlant's engagement; in particular, what Gunaratnam calls their 'queer reparative style' of writing and its infrastructural life both within and outside 'the university'. As much as 'our stuckness in cruel optimism feels like an affective fact' within higher education institutions in the UK and beyond, Gunaratnam acknowledges how, and with what generative implications, Berlant stays here with cruel optimism's 'creative liquidity'. That is, Berlant both richly describes and affectively enacts how 'reparative reading and writing practices hold together universities as sites of neoliberal regulation in which critical scholars are enmeshed, while showing some of the potential of convivial pleasure and play' (Gunaratnam, this issue).

As a potent example (or indeed 'case'), Gunaratnam takes up Berlant's collection, *The Hundreds* (2019), co-authored with their long-time writing partner, the anthropologist Kathleen Stewart. Growing out of the Austin Public Feelings Project, one 'local hub in a national network of those wanting to figure out different ways of building alliances outside of the academy', *The Hundreds* is part of a wider project of creating affective infrastructures for thinking and writing otherwise – as well as for 'surviving the academy' (Gunaratnam, this issue). As will be familiar to Berlant's readers, *The Hundreds* is organised around 'the use of number', in that each short scene of everyday affect it showcases is delimited by 'hundred word-units or units of hundred multiples' (i.e. 100 words, 300 words, 800 words) (Berlant and Stewart, 2019: ix). In this joint experiment with form, then, 'constraint is in the scene, measure, and heuristic of the collection' (Gunaratnam, this issue). Within the twenty-first century university, 'instrumental numerical systems' are, of course, 'the surround sound: workload allocation models, citation indexes, publication records, student evaluation scores, university league tables'. Yet by *queering these metrics*, Berlant and Stewart invite 'us into the creative possibilities of quantification' – while cultivating infrastructure as 'the lifeworld of structure' (ibid). It is through clever interventions as this, Gunaratnam emphasises, that Berlant illuminates in and for media theory the world-sustaining force and function of writing – while revealing 'how much of our lives are framed and saturated by numbers and metrics, yet not necessarily flattened or drained of colour'.

With respect to both writing as affective infrastructure and the everyday making of media theory, the nation-wide Public Feelings Project and its associated 'Feel Tanks' form a substantive component of Berlant's scholarly archive as well as their wider political project. Initiated in 2001, amid ambient political disenfranchisement and disaffection in the post- 9/11 and Iraq War US, The Public Feelings Project mobilised a collective intuition 'that examining the texture of affect and embodied experience provides vital insight into the mechanisms by which power dynamics and social inequalities are reproduced' (Turner and Coleman, this issue; see also Cvetkovich, 2007; 2012). From the turn of the millennium, Feel Tank Chicago, Berlant's local collective, assembled 'academics, activists and cultural producers' to experiment with new modes of political engagement, whether via writing, art, collaborative performances or collective feeling (Turner and Coleman, this issue). For Berlant, such interventions centrally informed their experiments in written form, as means of both otherwise engaging the affective politics of mediated events and of generating 'transitional infrastructures' (Berlant, 2022) to weather the 'political depression' of the early 2000s. As Angharad Closs Stephens (this issue) suggests, Berlant is deeply engaged with 'major events' and 'dominant affects', but what they do differently is 'address those events from the side, by following the non-dramatic, seemingly uneventful movement of the event as it gathers and fades' – an affective technique which Closs Stephens draws on and extends in her own recent book, *National Affects: The Everyday Atmospheres of Being Political* (2023). Berlant's capacity to tune into what Gregory J. Seigworth (2012) calls the 'hum' of social life is vital to the study of mediation and media infrastructures, Closs Stephens argues, 'because this is both where we can hear or otherwise sense which of the dominant narratives or affects are "sticking", but also where we are reminded that alternative affects, and other senses of the commons are present' (this issue).

In this vein, Chloe Turner and Rebecca Coleman, in their contribution to the special section, describe how the Public Feelings Project's Feel Tanks 'were employed not to extract predetermined outcomes or circular conversations but to sound out possibilities available at the register of feeling from new connections' (this issue). This, they contend, links to Berlant's wider project of affective infrastructure building through what she calls 'elliptical thinking': a mode of sensing-thinking-writing

concerned with how 'our encounter with some-thing [can] become a scene of unlearning and engendering from within the very intensity of that encounter' (Berlant, 2014: n.p.; see also Cefai, this issue). Elliptical life, as Berlant articulates it in their *Inconvenience* book, 'emerges in places where what's known meets what's unknowable, and what goes without saying meets what fails to reach meaning' (2022: 125). If Feel Tanks open up space for elliptical life in-action, they also, however, engage directly with genre – which, as touched on in the previous section, constitutes, for Berlant (1997), 'an emotionally invested patterned set of expectations about how to act and how to interpret, which organises a relationship between the acting and the interpreting subject, their feelings and impressions, their struggles and their historical present' (Turner and Coleman, this issue). Within a present that is constantly unfolding and uncertain, genre enables 'sense-making, providing framings, forms and conventions through which subjects can articulate experience and tether themselves to the world and others' (ibid; see also Cefai, this issue). Yet what happens, Turner and Coleman ask, when genres radically flail and fail in, for instance, the context of a global pandemic? What role, moreover, do digital media forms, technologies, and infrastructures play in modes of 'crisis management' arising amid such an upswell of global uncertainty, vulnerability, and precarity?

Genre flailing, as Turner and Coleman suggest, refers to 'the thrashing around that happens when conventions and expectations about the world are paused or ruptured' (see Berlant, 2018). While the COVID-19 pandemic quite obviously provided 'a situation in which genre flails as the normal or ordinary is thrown into relief', they note how it may also be one that 'requires new genres of writing, or at least gives pause for us to consider whether the genres through which we usually express ourselves are up to the task' (this issue) – a proposition Berlant animates so potently in their posthumously published 'Poisonality' (2023) poems, crafted during the intensive conjunction of the pandemic and their diagnosis and treatment for cancer. Extending Berlant's thinking and experimentation around the creative and sustaining possibilities of form, genre, and infrastructure, Turner and Coleman reflect on their ongoing collaborative research project on COVID temporalities, which has mobilised Feel Tanks as a method. Recalling a particular encounter with a research participant who, when prompted to reflect on 'how their experience of time had shifted during the

pandemic' responded 'with three pages of memes … haphazardly layered over one another in a Microsoft Word Document', they consider the ambivalent generic function of digital memes during COVID-19. On one hand, they note, memes exude the traditional stability of genre during a time of crisis: 'The world is flailing, but genre is not'. On the other hand, in their very 'capaciousness, variability and participatory character', memes themselves can perform 'a kind of genre flailing'. That is, in a way that resonates with Gunaratnam's discussion of *The Hundreds* as opening up the more expansive possibilities of metric and numerical constraint, Turner and Coleman consider how the 'templatability' of memes provides not only (or not so much) 'standardisation and solidification', but also (or rather) 'genre as a transmuting form that repeats with difference'. In other words, 'memes as genre flail resonate with the world as genre flail. They do this in concert as the pandemic is *happening*' (this issue).

If, for Turner and Coleman, memes cohered during COVID-19 as, perhaps, one version of a 'critical infrastructure' (Berlant, 2022) that sustained through the possibilities it offered for elliptical thinking, Ali Azhar and Megan Boler, in their contribution to the special issue, consider the ambivalent relations among media infrastructures, isolation, and 'epidemics of loneliness' brought into relief during the pandemic, and linked, more broadly, to fraying hopes for the post-war democratic promise of 'the good life' (Berlant, 2011). In their reading, Berlant's 'cruel optimism' provides a pertinent framework for addressing how 'the promises of mediated connection simultaneously become obstacles to our flourishing' (this issue). Citing the digital media scholar Jason Young, Azhar and Boler suggest that the affective dynamics of networked disinformation are particularly reflective of the weaponization of cruel optimism: our 'loss of affective belonging has driven us to social media and made us susceptible to misinformation' which 'acts as a constantly proliferating source of new promises to which we can (cruelly and optimistically) attach ourselves' (Young, 2021: 2 cited in Azhar and Boler, this issue). At stake here is not simply our rising vulnerability to misinformation, but rather that we may *actively crave it* as compensation for what Berlant describes as the collective material and phantasmatic losses of late capitalism (ibid). While the networked social polarization that disinformation tends to produce via its 'comforting' moral certainties and oppositions appears to provide a 'quick fix' to isolation and loneliness it is, in fact, Azhar and Boler argue, more likely

to exacerbate these affective states – for 'in the quick end-run around inconvenience it often bypasses the messy dissensus'.

How then, Azhar and Boler ask, might Berlant's concept of inconvenience open up an alternative infrastructural route to 'making common' other than digitized polarization and melodrama? Inconvenience, as Berlant describes it, is 'the affective sense of the familiar friction of being in relation' (2022: 1) that permeates the everyday and flows through 'our attachments to political objects and desires' (Azhar and Boler, this issue). Otherwise put, inconvenience and impositions are not, in Berlant's oeuvre, 'events that occasionally punctuate a life, but rather one of life's ongoing conditions' (Ingraham, this issue). This is why, when we seek to avoid inconvenience, whether through networked identifications of "us" and "them" or other forms of 'convenient connection', Azhar and Boler emphasise, we invite 'even greater and grander disconnection'. Yet if 'desire is that which draws us out to be in relation with the world', they venture, 'what would it look like to direct these not to the convenience of chambers of familiarity, but instead to be inconvenienced, and to thwart loneliness in a much more radical sense?'. Inconvenience can *feel* any number of (seemingly negating) ways, from frustrating to numbing to unfathomable, yet it can also, in Berlant's rendering, provide an affective resource for 'building solidarity and alliance across ambivalence' (2022: 8) – a resource that can 'produce renewing, transitional infrastructures of living and acting in the commons' (Azhar and Boler, this issue). Ultimately, Azhar and Boler argue, Berlant's writing 'asks us to think inconvenience as an affect and drive that privileges the hard work of being-in-relation'. It is about continually 'encountering blockages, knots and impasses, with the hope that objects can be unloosened, reconfigured and reconstituted' – modes of collective affective attunement and labour that, they wager, will become ever more crucial amid the deeply ambivalent dynamics of networked media, including 'present and future challenges posed by the growth of artificial intelligence, conspiracies and misinformation' (this issue).

In this vein, and returning the discussion back to the theme of writing as affective infrastructure that has animated this section, Gunaratnam considers how '[a]long with the so-called culture wars and tussles over free speech, intellectual fakery using AI is fast becoming a morally laden and number driven fault line' (this issue). The

'epistemological and technoaesthetic questions' raised by the kind of AI writing enabled by Large Language Models like ChatGPT-3 are, she notes, considerable:

> [W]hat is the nature and 'product' of reading and writing in an increasingly automated landscape? What might scholarly knowledge – and the metrics of workload for that matter – be when released from the immaterial and bodily labour of close reading, skimming, forgetting, conversation, listening, watching, questioning, being floored, winging-it and synthesising? In what ways will expertise shift around? How might a routinised, habitual use of AI systems reassemble what thinking and feeling are; the relationships between language and the non/unconscious? … might affect be re-evaluated as the mortar of a scholarly habitus? … What sort of affect? (Gunaratnam, this issue).

These urgent onto-political questions in and for media theory are, I would suggest, ones with which Berlant's distinctive approach to genre, infrastructure, affective translation, and the 'middling' of mediation may be uniquely positioned to engage. And yet in grappling with the particular forms of inconvenience generative AI infrastructures present, Gunaratnam urges us, in the spirit of Berlant, not to turn away from how such algorithmic forms of mediation deeply implicate our own vulnerability. Probing the nature of 'academics' panicky outrage at machine writing', Gunaratnam questions whether what is at stake is not intellectual 'integrity' or such 'fantasies of writing as our richly textured individuality' but rather our 'fearful, curled up fragility'. Our fear, that is, of 'what cracking open the drag closet of mastery might expose' (Gunaratnam, this issue).

Yet if Berlant's oeuvre has taught us anything about what it means to live lives immanently mediated by aesthetic-material forms and infrastructures, it is that friction, vulnerability, and ambivalence are constants, they are our vital animating conditions – how we personally and collectively negotiate them is not only a matter of survival, of 'keeping on, in spite of everything', but also, perhaps, an affective-political art; 'in which the question of politics becomes identical with the reinvention of infrastructures for managing unevenness, violence and ordinary contingency of contemporary existence' (Berlant, 2022: 25).

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## Notes

[1] See also, for example, Kember and Zylinska, 2012; Grusin, 2015; Peters, 2015; Coleman & Paasonen, 2020; Seigworth and Pedwell, 2023.

[2] My thanks to Greg Seigworth for informing this phrasing (personal communication).
[3] See also Ingraham, 2023; Gregg and Seigworth, 2010; Seigworth and Pedwell, 2023.
[4] Despite, of course, how Williams famously critiqued the more technologically determinist leanings of McLuhan's interventions.
[5] See, for example, Walkerdine, 1990; 1996; Blackman and Walkerdine, 2001.
[6] See also Coleman, 2017; Paasonen, 2021; Pedwell, 2021.

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This article is part of a special section on 'Lauren Berlant and Media Theory', edited by Carolyn Pedwell and Simon Dawes, introduced by Carolyn Pedwell, and featuring articles by Ben Anderson, Ali Azhar & Megan Boler, Lisa Blackman, Sarah Cefai, Angharad Closs Stephens, Chole Turner & Rebecca Coleman, Yasmin Gunaratnam, Chris Ingraham, Henrike Kohpeiß, Susanna Paasonen & Vilja Jaaksi & Anu Koivunen & Kaarina Nikunen & Karoliina Talvitie-Lamberg & Annamari Vänskä, and Greg Seigworth & Rebecca Coleman.

A key detail about Lauren Berlant and pronouns: Laurent's estate provided a brief statement on this, which we quote here: "Lauren's pronoun practice was mixed – knowingly, we trust. Faced with queries as to 'which' pronoun Lauren used and 'which' should now be used, the position of Lauren's estate (Ian Horswill, executor; Laurie Shannon, literary executor) is that Lauren's pronoun(s) can best be described as 'she/they'. 'She/they' captures the actual scope of Lauren's pronoun archive, and it honors Lauren's signature commitment to multivalence and complexity. It also leaves thinkers free to adopt either pronoun, or both of them, as seems most fitting in their own writing about her/them".