



Body Optimism

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This essay links five terms — bodies, friendship, the female complaint, queer attachments, and optimism — in an argument about the body's place in culture and politics. Readers may recognize *The Female Complaint* as the title of Lauren Berlant's most recent book (2008), and indeed this argument is in dialogue with Berlant's work.

Bodies

I come to Bodytalk as someone who writes about cultural politics, cultural production, and sex. That is where I'm likely to look for the body, and my body questions are usually more or less Foucauldian, which is to say that they are about how political systems organize bodies — as populations, cohorts, genders, raced and classed beings, children, citizens, border crossers, voters, elected officials, and sexual insiders and outsiders of all kinds. Here, though, I want to invert the question and ask not how institutions and discourses regulate bodies, but what bodies do for politics.

What don't they do? They embody the persons who stuff envelopes and who protest; the persons who vote, click, teach, and represent in the political and symbolic meanings of the word; the persons who fight, refuse, gather, organize, and celebrate. Bodies move; they traverse space and endure time in proximate and distant political projects. They also get stuck in repetition and paralysis. They slaughter and die; they decay, rejuvenate, and decay again. They think, they speak, and they feel. Bodies concentrate libidinal investments, mixing them up with other vernaculars to produce drives and delusions, starts and stops, commitments, attachments, memories, and projections — that feel of the future in the present. And they recombine — sometimes predictably, other times in ways their subjects can't account for. They encounter sense data and reconstruct themselves from the outside in. They find other bodies. If they're lucky and get what they need, they survive.

That's a long, idiomatic list, designed less to theorize where bodies end and something else begins than to implicate bodies in all social and political processes, and to do so in terms my usual attention to discourse doesn't address. Bodies are there, too, in discourse, but more often as its subjects than its agents. I am trying to get in the habit of adjusting that conceptual direction, especially at the end of a long project on queerness, class, and cultural production (Henderson, in progress). I close the project not by moving from discourse to subjugated bodies, but from embodied feeling to solidarity, through cultural reception and the under-sung practice of friendship.

Friendship

Friendship is a big and busy social intersection, as much about social systems, zip codes, tastes, and other forms of proximity as it is about embodied feeling. It is a form of relating no less determined by *habitus* — the deep dispositions of class fractions — than are family attachments and romance (Bourdieu, 1984); no less psychically complicated, no less painful when it ends, nor any less nostalgic when it fades. But it is potentially a different kind of good than are other normative attachments, easier to come and go within, more responsive to circumstance, devoted, and familiar, but perhaps less burdened by obligation, trauma, sameness, the myth of fit, or the deadening weight of relationship work. I work on relationships, but as a model for other social forms, friendship can buoy, calm, lighten things up. Amid political heaviness, this is an affective and social virtue, which is why *Love and Money* (Henderson, in progress) arrives at friendship's optimism.

It gets there through an account of the embodied practices of culture making in contexts where queer and class fortunes converge most forcefully, like queer filmmaking done at the nexus of independent and industrial sectors. But it also gets there through queer class texts that different groups of fans have taken on as their own. Two of those texts are the films *Brokeback Mountain* (Schamus & Lee, 2005) and *By Hook or By Crook* (Howard & Dodge, 2001), the first an indie blockbuster which many readers will have seen, and the second a no-budget butch buddy heist movie set in queer San Francisco, which relatively few people have seen, though it was devoutly received on the queer festival circuit and in limited release, has been written about by fans online and critics in print (e.g., Halberstam, 2005), and remains in independent DVD distribution from Wolfe Video. The different queer class registers of *Brokeback* and *By Hook* are pointedly revealed through the lens of the female complaint.

The Female Complaint

In *The Female Complaint: The Unfinished Business of Sentimentality in American Culture*, Lauren Berlant (2008) charts the formation of a genre of women's literature and film adaptation in which women characters, writers, readers, and viewers interact in states of serial disappointment about the possibilities of attachment, fulfillment, and intervention in the world. It is a sentimental genre, which would lead some critics to shy away. Berlant, instead, finds in the sentimental not politics, but what she calls the "juxtapolitical" (pp. 10–11) — a domain of life that exists publicly and alongside the political, but that distrusts formal politics in favor of the wish for "an unshearable suturing to a social world" (p. 266). Such a wish so often *is* articulated to disappointment as the root of "women's intimate public," but it needn't be. What else, Berlant asks, could be done with that wish? What other connections, outside of suffering and political estrangement, might be wrought between affect and cultural form?

To my ear, that is a better question than the more familiar one, which goes something like this: "Why do women persist with these deadening repetitions of romantic and social unfulfillment?" Why indeed? Because attachment — as any body, even or especially any activist body knows, is where it's at. For bodies, particularly for women in U.S. cultural tradition, as Berlant argues, the world of feeling offers the promise of thriving — not attrition — even when the attachments at the root of those feelings don't

work out. So, there are good and bad attachments, but the impulse to attachment itself is a social good available to be formed and reformed, not dismissed as the swill of sentimentality or sentimental genres.

Queer Attachment

Berlant's work on the female complaint has a lot to say to queer popular culture and *its* attachment to stories of romantic love, no matter how poorly that love goes. As a queer audience, we can be strangely appreciative of stories that feature the most devastating romantic outcomes. Think, for example, of the expression of gratitude with which *Brokeback Mountain* was received by so many of its viewers, especially gay men recalling their experience of romantic repression and loss in the early 1960s. On the one hand, the losses are real, and so is their recognition on Hollywood's A-list. *Brokeback* also makes sexually explicit what other cowboy movies have sustained as "merely" homosocial, exposing sexual queerness at the root of cowboy culture and Western genres (see Rich, 2005). But along with my affection for those accomplishments comes distrust, in response to how the film as melodrama — its other genre — signifies both its characters' and the culture's attachment to doomed romance as the measure and promise of human capacity. It is a queer articulation of an endlessly topped-off stream of cultural returns to the drama of love's unfulfilled promise.

This form of repetition is dubious not because romantic love is insufficient as a measure of human capacity after all. (It is insufficient, but that doesn't change its hold as fantasy or form, least of all where sex is involved.) It is dubious because such a return — repeatedly dressed in grandeur, celebrity, sincerity, and the deep gratitude of queer and other filmgoers who saw it and recognized pieces of their story or at least *how their story feels* — offers us nowhere else to go, no new attachments, no new pairings of affect and social form. We are grateful for queer recognition through the molten but still leaden glow of failed-attachment-plus-hope as the dominant popular account of love. Through its Western genre bravery, then, *Brokeback Mountain* re-welcomes queer history to an old message that is less brave than perversely consoling: love us when we're suffering.

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If popular narratives recognize our feelings, distill our impulses, and attach them to worlds and outcomes, why not link desire for connection to a world of solidarities and specificities, rather than to melodramas of generalized disappointment (see Berlant, 2008, p. 277–278)? This is not a bid to be happy, to feel only good feelings, or to substitute pride for shame. It is something more simple and less clear than that: an appeal to the practice of friendship as cultural-political resource, a practice with deep, if displaced, roots in the history of queer formation in the United States.

My counterplot to *Brokeback* is *By Hook or By Crook*, a story about Shy, Valentine, and Billie, three wildly creative characters from the queer and class margins of San Francisco in the 1990s. Shy migrates there from the Midwest after his father's death and finds Val and Billie. The three grift and rob vending machines to get by, moving through the city and its outskirts in states of restless vulnerability. They aren't always legible to each other, but they are trustworthy and energetic on each other's behalf.

Shot in color on mini-dv by a creative, accomplished, and semi-professional crew in some 60 Bay Area locations, *By Hook*'s image is absent the rich saturations and vistas of *Brokeback*, but its look and feel are no less affecting for that. It is rooted in the San Francisco queer art scene, with writing and performance by Silas "Flipper" Howard (Shy), Harry Dodge (Val), and Stanya Kahn (Billie), and rendered in a mixed, swirling style of colorful low-contrast; warehouse backdrops; cloistered and underlit interiors; spikey, refracted sunsets into the lens; a discordant, thrashing and melodic original score; and spectacular expanses of urban rooftops. *By Hook* isn't always easy to watch, but in its affinities among queer scene, queer story, found joy, and pulsing-spatio-temporal energy and style, it is a beautiful film.

In contrast to *Brokeback*, *By Hook* suggests a cultural political way out, an image, language, and feeling of solidarity that might anchor a queer future across class lines. I am not arguing that popular culture remakes the world, but that changes in popular feeling are needed in that project, changes wrought in cultural life. *By Hook* offers us an image and feeling of friendship — under bleak circumstances, not flush — as the context for new investments and new returns, in contrast to *Brokeback*'s repetition of death and doomed love as the strangely heralded measures of queer cultural arrival. Unlike the "cruel optimism" Berlant (2006) theorizes in people's and characters' attachments to the very ways of being that ensure our attrition (bad romance, say, or hoarding against the fear of loss), the optimism and new politics of friendship *By Hook* inspires, through forms and characters who fly below the radar of the big clichés, are plausible, not cruel; simple, if not easy; not whole, but still real.

One of the things bodies can do for politics, then, is hold feelings — mediate the affective or moving dimension of form, and, through it, forms of social attachment. Here, I am particularly interested in feelings of optimism attached to renewed narratives of friendship and solidarity. For cultural theory and change, and for queer scholarship in Communication, friendship is a disposition, a register, and a skill worth returning to. It is proximate and sustainable, and only bodies can go there.

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