

Intimacy: A Special Issue

Author(s): Lauren Berlant

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## Intimacy: A Special Issue

**Lauren Berlant**

“I didn’t think it would turn out this way” is the secret epitaph of intimacy. To intimate is to communicate with the sparest of signs and gestures, and at its root intimacy has the quality of eloquence and brevity. But intimacy also involves an aspiration for a narrative about something shared, a story about both oneself and others that will turn out in a particular way. Usually, this story is set within zones of familiarity and comfort: friendship, the couple, and the family form, animated by expressive and emancipating kinds of love. Yet the inwardness of the intimate is met by a corresponding publicness. People consent to trust their desire for “a life” to institutions of intimacy; and it is hoped that the relations formed within those frames will turn out beautifully, lasting over the long duration, perhaps across generations.

This view of “a life” that unfolds intact within the intimate sphere represses, of course, another fact about it: the unavoidable troubles, the distractions and disruptions that make things turn out in unpredicted scenarios. Romance and friendship inevitably meet the instabilities of sexuality, money, expectation, and exhaustion, producing, at the extreme, moral dramas of estrangement and betrayal, along with terrible spectacles of neglect and violence even where desire, perhaps, endures. Since the early twentieth century these strong ambivalences within the intimate sphere have been recorded by proliferating forms of therapeutic publicity. At present, in the U.S., therapy saturates the scene of intimacy, from

psychoanalysis and twelve-step groups to girl talk, talk shows, and other witnessing genres.

Jurisprudence has also taken on a therapeutic function in this domain, notably as it radically recasts interpretations of responsibility in cases of marital and child abuse. But it is sexual harassment that remains the most controversial of these changes. The emergence of sexual harassment law as a remedy for the unwanted sexualization of institutional spaces starkly marks the amnesia around which desire's optimism and its ruthlessness converge. Again and again, we see how hard it is to adjudicate the norms of a public world when it is also an intimate one, especially where the mixed-up instrumental and affective relations of collegiality are concerned.

These relations between desire and therapy, which have become internal to the modern, mass-mediated sense of intimacy, tell us something else about it: intimacy builds worlds; it creates spaces and usurps places meant for other kinds of relation. Its potential failure to stabilize closeness always haunts its persistent activity, making the very attachments deemed to buttress "a life" seem in a state of constant if latent vulnerability. Even from this small cluster of examples and scenes it becomes clear that virtually no one knows how to do intimacy; that everyone feels expert about it (at least about other people's disasters); and that mass fascination with the aggression, incoherence, vulnerability, and ambivalence at the scene of desire somehow escalates the demand for the traditional promise of intimate happiness to be fulfilled in everyone's everyday life.

The intensities of these multiple domains indeed designate *intimacy* as a special issue. This number of *Critical Inquiry* takes on as a problem how to articulate the ways the utopian, optimism-sustaining versions of intimacy meet the normative practices, fantasies, institutions, and ideologies that organize people's worlds. The essays gathered here, whose cases traverse many disciplines and domains, vary widely in the critical and rhetorical registers in which they represent the continuities and discontinuities within the intimate field, looking at their particular impacts on the categorization of experience and subjectivity. They seek to understand the pedagogies that encourage people to identify having a life with having an intimate life. They track the processes by which intimate lives absorb and repel the rhetorics, laws, ethics, and ideologies of the hegemonic public sphere, but also personalize the effects of the public sphere

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**Lauren Berlant**, a coeditor of *Critical Inquiry*, teaches English at the University of Chicago. She is the author of *The Queen of America Goes to Washington City: Essays on Sex and Citizenship* (1997) and *The Anatomy of National Fantasy: Hawthorne, Utopia, and Everyday Life* (1991).

and reproduce a fantasy that private life is the real in contrast to collective life: the surreal, the elsewhere, the fallen, the irrelevant. How can we think about the ways attachments make people public, producing transpersonal identities and subjectivities, when those attachments come from within spaces as varied as those of domestic intimacy, state policy, and mass-mediated experiences of intensely disruptive crises? And what have these formative encounters to do with the effects of other, less institutionalized events, which might take place on the street, on the phone, in fantasy, at work, but rarely register as anything but residue? Intimacy names the enigma of this range of attachments, and more; and it poses a question of scale that links the instability of individual lives to the trajectories of the collective.

A related aim of this reframing of intimacy is thus to engage and disable a prevalent U.S. discourse on the proper relation between public and private, spaces traditionally associated with the gendered division of labor. These categories are considered by many scholars to be archaic formations, legacies of a Victorian fantasy that the world can be divided into a controllable space (the private-affective) and an uncontrollable one (the public-instrumental). *Fantasy*, however, may underdescribe the continuing attraction of the attachment to this division because the discourse world described by the public and the private has, historically, organized and justified other legally and conventionally based forms of social division (male and female, work and family, colonizer and colonized, friend and lover, hetero and homo, "unmarked" personhood versus racial-, ethnic-, and class-marked identities). A simple boundary can reverberate and make the world intelligible; the taken-for-grantedness of spatial taxonomies like public and private makes this cluster of taxonomic associations into facts within ordinary subjectivity as well. This chain of disassociations provides one way of conceiving why so many institutions not usually associated with feeling can be read as institutions of intimacy.

There is a history to the advent of intimacy as a public mode of identification and self-development, to which I can allude only briefly here. Jürgen Habermas has argued that the bourgeois idea of a public sphere relied on the emergence of a mode of critical public discourse that formulated and represented a public's interests within civil society against the state.<sup>1</sup> The development of critical publicness depended on the expansion of class-mixed semiformal institutions like the salon and the café, circulating print media, and industrial capitalism; the notion of the democratic public sphere thus made collective intimacy a public and social ideal, one of fundamental political interest. Without it the public's role as critic could not be established.

1. See Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*, trans. Thomas Burger and Frederick Lawrence (Cambridge, Mass., 1989).

Persons were to be prepared for their critical social function in what Habermas calls the intimate spheres of domesticity, where they would learn (say, from novels and newspapers) to experience their internal lives theatrically, as though oriented toward an audience. This is to say that liberal society was founded on the migration of intimacy expectations between the public and the domestic. But if the emergence and expansion of institutions that generated an intimacy in which people participated actively were seen to be crucial to the democratic polity, institutions that produced collective experience, like cinema and other entertainment forms, came to mix the critical demands of democratic culture with the desire for entertainment taken for pleasure. Since the nonrational and noninstitutionally indexed aspects of the intimate had been (theoretically) banished from legitimate democratic publicness, pleasure-knowledge creates problems for the notional rationality with which collective critical consciousness is supposed to proceed. This development, along with the expansion of minoritized publics that resist or are denied universalist collective intimacy expectations, has much complicated the possibility of (and even the ethics of the desire for) a general mass-critical public sphere deemed to be culturally and politically intimate with itself.<sup>2</sup>

For intimacy refers to more than that which takes place within the purview of institutions, the state, and an ideal of publicness. What if we saw it emerge from much more mobile processes of attachment? While the fantasies associated with intimacy usually end up occupying the space of convention, in practice the drive toward it is a kind of wild thing that is not necessarily organized that way, or any way.<sup>3</sup> It can be portable, unattached to a concrete space: a drive that creates spaces around it through practices. The kinds of connections that *impact* on people, and on which they depend for living (if not “a life”), do not always respect the predictable forms: nations and citizens, churches and the faithful, workers at work, writers and readers, memorizers of songs, people who walk dogs or swim at the same time each day, fetishists and their objects, teachers and students, serial lovers, sports lovers, listeners to voices who explain things manageably (on the radio, at conferences, on television screens,

2. See Oskar Negt and Alexander Kluge, *Public Sphere and Experience: Toward an Analysis of the Bourgeois and Proletarian Public Sphere*, trans. Peter Labanyi, Jamie Daniel, and Assenka Oksiloff (Minneapolis, 1993). See also Miriam Hansen, forward to Negt and Kluge, *Public Sphere and Experience*, pp. ix–xli and *Babel and Babylon: Spectatorship in American Silent Film* (Cambridge, Mass., 1991). For a powerful meditation on the contradiction between the unconscious drive toward omnipotence and the project of democracy, see Joel Whitebook, *Perversion and Utopia: A Study in Psychoanalysis and Critical Theory* (Cambridge, Mass., 1995).

3. Foucault’s work on recognizing the multiplicity of relations engendered at every moment by sexuality has been central to this project. See, for example, Michel Foucault, “Friendship as a Way of Life” and “Sex, Power, and the Politics of Identity,” in *Ethics: Subjectivity and Truth*, ed. Paul Rabinow (New York, 1997), pp. 135–40, 163–73.

on line, in therapy), fans and celebrities—I (or you) could go on.<sup>4</sup> These spaces are produced relationally; people and/in institutions can return repeatedly to them and produce *something*, though frequently not history in its ordinary, memorable, or valorized sense, and not always “something” of positive value.<sup>5</sup>

Intimacy seen in this spreading way does generate an aesthetic, an aesthetic of attachment, but no inevitable forms or feelings are attached to it.<sup>6</sup> This is where normative ideologies come in, when certain “expressive” relations are promoted across public and private domains—love, community, patriotism—while other relations, motivated, say, by the “appetites,” are discredited or simply neglected. Contradictory desires mark the intimacy of daily life: people want to be both overwhelmed and omnipotent, caring and aggressive, known and incognito. These polar energies get played out in the intimate zones of everyday life and can be recognized in psychoanalysis, yet mainly they are seen not as intimacy but as a danger to it. Likewise, desires for intimacy that bypass the couple or the life narrative it generates have no alternative plots, let alone few laws and stable spaces of culture in which to clarify and to cultivate them. What happens to the energy of attachment when it has no designated place?<sup>7</sup> To the glances, gestures, encounters, collaborations, or fantasies that have no canon? As with minor literatures, minor intimacies have been forced to develop aesthetics of the extreme to push these spaces into being by way of small and grand gestures;<sup>8</sup> the wish for normalcy everywhere heard these days, voiced by minoritized subjects, often expresses a wish not to have to push so hard in order to have “a life.” To

4. Many of these thoughts about the circulation of intimacy through stories and encounters that have *impact* emerged in conversations with Katie Stewart. See Kathleen Stewart, *A Space on the Side of the Road: Cultural Poetics in an “Other” America* (Princeton, N.J., 1996).

5. On the transformational possibilities of the something that holds a place open for unforeseen changes, see Lauren Berlant, “‘68, or Something,” *Critical Inquiry* 21 (Fall 1994): 124–55. For more on some official and popular contexts of contemporary U.S. intimacy politics, see Berlant, *The Queen of America Goes to Washington City: Essays on Sex and Citizenship* (Durham, N.C., 1997) and “Feminism and the Institutions of Intimacy,” in *The Politics of Research*, ed. E. Ann Kaplan and George Levine (New Brunswick, N.J., 1997), pp. 143–61.

6. I have learned to think about the antiformalist tendencies of the intimate from reading Jacqueline Rose, whose work since *Sexuality in the Field of Vision* (London, 1986) has explored the uneven circulation of desire through language in many domains—cinema, sexuality, psychoanalysis, literature, family, and nations. She shows how the linguistic instability in which fantasy is couched leads to an inevitable failure to stabilize desire in identity, a countervailing desire by dominating structures to disavow or demonize that instability, and, nonetheless, the ongoing career of desire that pushes apart the very frames that organize it. See especially Rose, *The Haunting of Sylvia Plath* (Cambridge, Mass., 1991) and *States of Fantasy* (New York, 1996).

7. For an elaborate answer to this question, see Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, “A Poem Is Being Written,” *Tendencies* (Durham, 1993), pp. 177–214.

8. See Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, “What Is a Minor Literature?” trans. Dana Polan, in *Out There: Marginalization and Contemporary Cultures*, ed. Russell Ferguson et al. (Cambridge, Mass., 1990), pp. 59–69. See also Berlant, “‘68, or Something.”

live as if threatening contexts are merely elsewhere might well neutralize the ghostly image of one's own social negativity; and the constant energy of public self-protectiveness can be sublimated into personal relations of passion, care, and good intention.<sup>9</sup> There are good reasons for this aspiration. Domestic privacy can feel like a controllable space, a world of potential unconflictedness (even for five minutes a day): a world built for you. It may seem of a manageable scale and pacing; at best, it makes visible the effects of one's agency, consciousness, and intention. This leads to another reason the couple form and its spinoffs so effectively siphon off critical thought about the personal and the political: to refuse the maturational narrative of "a life" would require a confrontation with another idea, that social forces and problems of living that seem not about the private "you" are, nonetheless, central to the shape of your story.<sup>10</sup>

I learned to think about these questions in the contexts of feminist/queer pedagogy; and how many times have I asked my own students to explain why, when there are so many people, only one plot counts as "life" (first comes love, then . . .)? Those who don't or can't find their way in that story—the queers, the single, the something else—can become so easily unimaginable, even often to themselves. Yet it is hard not to see lying about everywhere the detritus and the amputations that come from attempts to fit into the fold; meanwhile, a lot of world-building energy atrophies. Rethinking intimacy calls out not only for redescription but for transformative analyses of the rhetorical and material conditions that enable hegemonic fantasies to thrive in the minds and on the bodies of subjects while, at the same time, attachments are developing that might redirect the different routes taken by history and biography. To rethink intimacy is to appraise how we have been and how we live and how we might imagine lives that make more sense than the ones so many are living.

For intimacy only rarely makes sense of things. People talk about the desire for it and the fear of it, but is the "it" simply commitment? In its instantiation as desire, it destabilizes the very things that institutions of intimacy are created to stabilize; and people are constantly surprised about this. This basic disavowal is supported by the centrality of intimation to intimacy. Conventionally, in its expression through language, intimacy relies heavily on the shifting registers of unspoken ambivalence. It is interfered with by metadiscourse (relationship talk) and prefers the calm of internal pressure, the taken-for-grantedness of the feeling that

9. For a strong reading of the ways "the extimate" (the rejected, projected out but never fully lost objects of self-identity) can take on narrative shape and intensity, see Joan Copjec, *Read My Desire: Lacan against the Historicists* (Cambridge, Mass., 1995), pp. 117–39.

10. For a mode of social theory that rhetorically and analytically links the possibility of concrete justice to a radical understanding of the ways people are politically (dis)possessed by stories, see Patricia J. Williams, *The Alchemy of Race and Rights: Diary of a Law Professor* (Cambridge, Mass., 1991).

there would be a flowing reiteration where the intimate is. Thus when friends or lovers want to talk about “the relationship”; when citizens feel that the nation’s consented-to qualities are shifting away; when newsreaders or hosts of television shows bow out of their agreement to recast the world in comforting ways; when people of apparently different races and classes find themselves in slow, crowded elevators; or when students and analysts feel suddenly mistrustful of the contexts into which they have entered in order to change, but not traumatically, intimacy reveals itself to be a relation associated with tacit fantasies, tacit rules, and tacit obligations to remain unproblematic. We notice it when something about it takes on a charge, so that the intimacy becomes something else, an “issue”—something that requires analytic eloquence. It becomes harder to see the presumption or even the desire for stable tacitness itself as a problem that reproduces panic in the intimate field.

These crises are not just personal. When states, populations, or persons sense that their definition of the real is under threat; when the normative relays between personal and collective ethics become frayed and exposed; and when traditional sites of pleasure and profit seem to get “taken away” by the political actions of subordinated groups, a sense of anxiety will be pervasively felt about how to determine responsibility for the disruption of hegemonic comfort. This unease unsettles social and political relations between, within, and among many people, nations, and populations, especially formerly sovereign ones. Various kinds of hate crime, bitterness, and “comedic” satire frequently ensue.

In particular, across the globe challenges to the public/private taxonomy from feminist, antihomophobic, antiracist, and antipoverty movements have been experienced as an irruption of the most sacred and rational forms of intimate intelligibility, a cancelling out of individual and collective destinies, an impediment to narrativity and the future itself. What kinds of (collective, personal) authority, expertise, entailment, and memory can be supposed, and what kind of (collective, personal) future can be imagined if, for example, sexuality is no longer bound to its narrative, does not lead to stabilizing *something*, something institutional (like patriarchal families or other kinds of reproduction that prop up the future of persons and nations); if citizens and workers are no longer created by families and the institutions of *loco parentis*, namely, schools and religions; if (because of AIDS, globally high mortality rates among national minorities, environmental toxins, virulent transnational exploitation, ongoing military and starvation genocides, and other ongoing sources of destruction) a generation is no longer defined by procreational chronology, but marked by trauma and death? The immediacy of trauma is always sensual, but it is as likely to be a mass-mediated event, an event of hearsay and *post facto* witnessing, as it is to be a direct blow to the body; and we can see from trauma’s current prevalence as an occasion for testimony how shocking it is when an intimate relation is animated by sheer



devastation. Intimacy was supposed to be about optimism, remember? But it is also formed around threats to the image of the world it seeks to sustain.

This special issue seeks to further ongoing conversations in the humanities and humanistic social sciences about the modes of attachment that make persons public and collective and that make collective scenes intimate spaces. The essays to follow begin to catalog some of intimacy's norms, forms, and crimes: how public institutions use issues of intimate life to normalize particular forms of knowledge and practice and to create compliant subjects (Poovey, Grayson, Povinelli, Warner and Berlant); how discourses of sexual suffering or trauma have so magnetized crises in a whole set of related fields that stories of the intimate have become inseparable from, for example, stories about citizenship, capitalism, aesthetic forms, political violence, and the writing of history (Hanchard, Boym, Herzog, Kipnis, Poovey, Vogler, Povinelli, Warner and Berlant); how people become surprised by the ways ordinary exchanges become intensified performances of mutuality and grounded by the centrality of ritualized language for intimacy (Sedgwick, Feld, Vogler, Kipnis); how memory works to create portable scenes that remind one of past intimacies and perform their strange reappearance in unusual spaces (Boym, Herzog, Povinelli, Sedgwick, Feld) and usual ones (Snyder and Letinsky).

The work of this "special issue" is not finished, not by a long shot. The vicissitudes of editing and deadlines leave me longing for more cases, more narratives, more attempts to bring to expression the ways attachments make worlds and world-changing fantasies, bribe people to live what should be unlivable relations of domination and violence, and so on. There is neither psychoanalytically based exploration in this issue, nor work on cinema, television, literature, or less globalized media, like stamps or zines; and its general presentness and focus on normativity suggest other places that future work might go. But I should stop here. Introductions are captions to the image a text makes, and like Joel Snyder, who curated Laura Letinsky's photos but wanted to caption them only minimally, I wanted to chart the project for you without overinterpreting the work that follows. In any case, let me thank my hard-working authors and producers here; the editors on the masthead who reviewed many essays with me; the friends, authors, and colleagues who read the introduction (Bill Brown, Laura Kipnis, Beth Povinelli, Roger Rouse, Katie Stewart, Candace Vogler, Michael Warner, Lisa Wedeen); and Jay Williams, Aeron Hunt, Jennifer Peterson, Zarena Aslami, and Neda Ulaby, who did the hard editorial work of actually putting the issue together. Thanks also to Allan Sekula for permission to use his image on the cover. Finally, should any readers be interested in submitting to *CI* work related to this intimacy project, they should flag it as such. Then, perhaps, we can look forward to clusters of intimacy in future issues.