

Pockets

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This comment notes how Lauren Berlant's work attends to the compelling but not necessarily explicit emergence of forms in the course of everyday scenes of living through things.

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In *The Garden of Last Days*, Andre Dubus describes a bouncer in a stripclub watching for “pockets” to open up:

It was September, the low season, but the place was filling up, and he leaned back against the bar with his ginger ale and scanned the club for pockets, those dark human spaces in the room where something has just changed: above the music a man lets out an appreciative yell when before he was quiet; one of the dancers out on the floor laughs a little too hard or steps back too fast; a chair leg scrapes the carpet—something Lonnie can't hear, just feels, a shift of objects in the space there, this change in the air, a pocket of possible trouble.¹

Lauren Berlant's work is a labor of attending to pockets—not just pockets of possible trouble but pockets per se. A space opens up in the ordinary. There is a pause, a temporal suspension animated by the sense that something is coming into existence. The subject is called to a state of attention that is also an impassivity—a watching and waiting, a living through, an attunement to what might rind up or snap into place. The subject finds itself in a situation. Events and outcomes are immanent, unknown but pressing.

...one moves around with a sense that the world is at once intensely present and enigmatic, such that the activity of living demands both a wandering absorptive awareness and hypervigilance that collects the material that might help to ... maintain one's sea legs.²

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Berlant teaches us that things hanging in the air are rhythms and refrains worth describing. Not only because they have tentacular connections to other things but also because they are not the kinds of things that can be summarily described or approached in known realist genres. Describing them requires a digressive detour and a slowing and de-dramatization of analytic frames. Theory becomes a *method* that turns its object into an impasse, an enigma, a thing of promise and contact. A pocket. Theory is a skidding into tricky alignment with analytic objects that can only be approached awkwardly, described around. That is why Berlant's writing turns on finely attuned percepts of the proximate, the aspirational, the noncoherent, the cluster. The act of writing becomes a critical amplification of objects that are oblique, noted in passing out of the corner of the eye, barely sensed but compelling too, packed with sensory stuff from the highly charged to the barely breathing. Her writing is also unflinching—sharp and alert. It flays. It flays neoliberalism, capitalism, normative fantasies. It cuts through to what is too complicated, too contingent, just too much. But its performativity is not diva-melodramatic; rather, it is subtle, careful, caring, generous, big. It brings lovely tidbits to the reader. It labors, then, first to be sentient to all the too-muchness in the precarity of the world and, second, to build sentient spaces out of pockets hiding in plain view—mashing the public secrets into publics; or something resembling them; or surrounding them, but with a broader corpus of tones, genres, modes of living, and lines or pools of potential.

What matters here is what Roland Barthes calls the “inconsequentialities,” the kinds of sensations—“odors, exhaustions, sounds of voices, errands, changing light”—that surround a situation.³ The bouncers in stripclubs are watching and waiting for pockets to open up, the parents at a soccer game have eyes trained on unfolding scenarios of threat and possibility for their children, the residents of Fort Hood, Texas live with deployment always hanging in the air. This description of pockets pulls the disparate and the potential into the form of lists—ways of magnetizing all the bits and pieces of what is happening across a prolific landscape and in moments of suspension or in moments of the emergence of something snapping into form or intimating that something might become recognizable as a thing.

In *Making War at Fort Hood*, Kenneth MacLeish describes the airs and affects of deployment that hang over the biggest military base in the United States in diffuse situations, in subtle but absolutely recognizable sensibilities, and in pockets that crystalize.⁴ Deployment is in Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, infidelity, drugs, but it is also in forms of love and belonging, and in temporalities themselves. It sutures to the mile-long row of strip malls, fast food chains, and auto parts stores on the main street of Killeen. It is in death by speeding on the “Widows Highway” the day after returning from war or in the dull sense of propriety on the base that amounts to a hope that everything will be okay. It is in trust, in ten miles of tanks and then nothing—the open prairie of tornado country. It is in the ordinary moments on the base when army sensibilities present as a shared recognition of form performed in voices and gestures: Someone in line at the pancake breakfast says you can always tell which ones are military children because you can just say “line up!” and they do it; there are support and thanks signs in every business you go into in town; at the

Christmas party, a woman is making announcements and getting everyone to play the games—"it's her sergeant major voice," someone remarks, and that is not a strange thing to say because everyone knows what kind of voice that is.

Berlant's legacy is a labor of attending to emergent forces in the course of the ordinary, attuning to the agitations of a subject troubled by the world's potential for event, and culling the current precarity of life itself into a new object of analysis. Things hanging in the air are pulled into slowed, careful analytic frames. Theory's object is the sentience of forms throwing together for people living through them. Layers of habit, pipe dreams, and power plays skitter or languish all around. Sensibilities, the very affectivity of being in a situation, or potentiality itself can remain ungathered and unsignified, or such things can throw together into a full blown ideology. In efforts to list expansively, yet capture something that moves in and out of form, theory and writing attach to incommensurate objects orbiting potential pockets. Elements circulate, are inhabited or rejected, are lived out as rhythms and shocks. They generate obstinacies and promises, ruts and disorientations, intensities and resting points. They throw together into bodies of all kinds—atmospheres, landscapes, expectations, institutions, states of acclimation or endurance or pleasure, senses of humor, problems with depression. The living out of what is happening is variously accrued, sloughed off, realized, imagined, enjoyed, hated, brought to bear, or just born. Fraying fantasies are splayed on murals or they quietly shade the everyday. Conventions surge in the face of trouble, taking on the expressivity of things coming into existence. The affects of the ordinary living through of things take on trajectories, gradients, valences, moods, sensations, tempos, and lifespans of their own, becoming things in themselves.

Berlant's recent work, including *Cruel Optimism*, theorizes the event and the subject who finds herself in a situation—an event that does not yet have its form, a moment of unforeclosed experience. This open, contingent, highly attuned, and precarious way of living through things has proliferated as fantasies of the good life have frayed and deflated or become situations in themselves that require a labor of constant reimagining and adjusting to keep them afloat. "Fantasy," she says, "is a warehouse where people hoard idealizing theories and tableaux of how they will 'add up to something.'"⁵ In the precarious ordinary, hoarding has reached extremes; it is now classified as a mental illness, and there are hordes of people living in shame in houses and yards so piled up with miscellaneous collections jumbled together in partially filled boxes and piles that the space of human inhabitation has become airless and unmaneuverable. Left to their own devices, efforts to add up to something can go terribly awry.

As Berlant says, "The *situation* of the ordinary is not a genre, but a resource for making form."⁶ Hoarding is a hyperactive, laterally oriented response to this. Modes of existence become rhythmically compelling, or they dissipate in a moment when things go flat or when an attunement switches from hypervigilance to denial, or something else. Situations demand the commonplace labor of becoming sentient; that amazing, sometimes eventful, sometimes buoyant, sometimes endured, sometimes so sad work of living through things that come to matter because they have

qualities, rhythms, and movements. In a situation, *agency* is a thing bound to the labors of sentience and generativity. Nothing is simply intended or unintended. There is no pure agency of marching forward, like a zombie going doggedly after what it wants. And people are not couch-potato-passive either, not even close. They are busy balling up and unraveling states of attending to what might be happening. A living through that shows up in the precarity of ordinary sensibilities of not knowing what compels: not being able to sit still; being exhausted; being left behind or being ahead of the curve; being in history; being in a predicament; being ready for something—anything—to happen; or being oriented to the sole goal of making sure that nothing (*more*) will happen.

The intensities of living through things accumulate and pool up in worldings and forms of attending, like trauma cultures, redemption cultures, recreational societies, cocooning, volunteering, self-help, quick humor and malingering rage, critique, activism, art, and little worlds of all kinds into which people immerse themselves, or dip in and of, or make fun of, or build a light and temporary link to before they move on to something else. Situations do not just *express* fantasies and realities; they *resonate* them. They are resonating chambers filled with all the consequences of the inconsequentialities.

Situations can be pulled into a trajectory, stretched out like taffy onto the line of a project, a career, a relationship, an addiction. Or they can go laterally. They can feel like something you are (sort of) in or just something you are around. Worlds and lives often get tweaked with so much impact that they permanently resonate and squeak. Yet, in what Berlant calls the impasse of adjustment, a precarious public sphere acts as a resource for proliferating intimate, but not necessarily protective, publics of people figuring out how to live on with others similarly impacted. Running to the grocery store and tracking down one's big dream are both open and compelling gestures—worldings that can fill up one's life for a while if that is what happens. People are on alert to what seems to be happening or what seems to have happened, piecing together frayed fantasies half imagined or honed down to a hard kernel bigger than life. Throwing out some kind of line to something.

Notes

- [1] Andre Dubus III, *The Garden of Last Days* (New York: Norton, 2008), 38.
- [2] Lauren Berlant, "The New Ordinary," (unpublished manuscript, September 2, 2009), Word files, notes, and personal communication. Concepts and working ideas cited as "The New Ordinary" at the time of first writing this commentary have since appeared in Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011).
- [3] Roland Barthes, *Incidents*, trans. Richard Howard (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992), 7.
- [4] Kenneth MacLeish, *Making War at Fort Hood: Life and Uncertainty in a Military Community* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, forthcoming).
- [5] Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*, 110.
- [6] Berlant, "The New Ordinary," 4.