

This article was downloaded by: [New York University]

On: 18 May 2013, At: 12:48

Publisher: Routledge

Informa Ltd Registered in England and Wales Registered Number: 1072954 Registered office: Mortimer House, 37-41 Mortimer Street, London W1T 3JH, UK



Communication and Critical/Cultural Studies

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:

<http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/rccc20>

Feeling the Nation, Mining the Archive: Reflections on Lauren Berlant's Queen of America

Marita Sturken

Published online: 26 Nov 2012.

To cite this article: Marita Sturken (2012): Feeling the Nation, Mining the Archive: Reflections on Lauren Berlant's Queen of America, Communication and Critical/Cultural Studies, 9:4, 353-364

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/14791420.2012.741099>

PLEASE SCROLL DOWN FOR ARTICLE

Full terms and conditions of use: <http://www.tandfonline.com/page/terms-and-conditions>

This article may be used for research, teaching, and private study purposes. Any substantial or systematic reproduction, redistribution, reselling, loan, sub-licensing, systematic supply, or distribution in any form to anyone is expressly forbidden.

The publisher does not give any warranty express or implied or make any representation that the contents will be complete or accurate or up to date. The accuracy of any instructions, formulae, and drug doses should be independently verified with primary sources. The publisher shall not be liable for any loss, actions, claims, proceedings, demand, or costs or damages whatsoever or howsoever caused arising directly or indirectly in connection with or arising out of the use of this material.

Feeling the Nation, Mining the Archive: Reflections on Lauren Berlant's *Queen of America*

Marita Sturken

This essay engages with Lauren Berlant's 2007 book, The Queen of America Goes to Washington City, as a key text in the trajectory of cultural studies scholarship and the emergence of affect theory. It analyzes Berlant's concepts of infantile citizenship, the affective relationship to the nation, the intimate public sphere, the emergence of a national sexuality, and the counter-practices of "Diva" citizenship. The essay argues that Queen of America is a pivotal book in cultural studies scholarship for understanding nationalism, political agency, and the individual, intimate impact of mass culture.

Keywords: Nation; Affect; Citizenship; Public; Queer

Who is that little girl in the snapshot on the cover of *The Queen of America Goes to Washington City*?¹ In her neatly pressed outfit, with her trimmed bangs, fitting for the pilgrimage to the nation's capital, in her posing, the sun in her eyes, before the White House, surrounded by people dressed in their Sunday best for a visit to the site of national meaning—in all this, she embodies the aspirations of the pilgrimage to Washington. Many things can be read through this small image (chosen by its author) on the cover of this book—its snapshot quality, its faded color, its amateur composition with the White House awkwardly framing the little girl's hair, its evocation of the historical and a memory.² Finally, though, it is her unhappiness that speaks to us, her turned-down mouth, her refusal to smile, her *discontent*. Yet, her

Marita Sturken is Department Chair and Professor of Media, Culture, and Communication at New York University, where she teaches courses in visual culture, cultural memory, and consumerism. She is the author of *Tangled Memories: The Vietnam War, the AIDS Epidemic, and the Politics of Remembering* (University of California Press, 1997), *Tourists of History: Memory, Kitsch, and Consumerism from Oklahoma City to Ground Zero* (Duke University Press, 2007), and *Practices of Looking: An Introduction to Visual Culture* (with Lisa Cartwright, Oxford University Press, 2009). Correspondence to: Marita Sturken, NYU Steinhardt, Department of Media, Culture, and Communication, 239 Greene Street, 7th Floor, New York, NY 10003, USA. Email: marita.sturken@nyu.edu.

discontent does not indicate that she is, in any simple way, a resistant subject; she is at once an “infantile” citizen and an unhappy one.

Lauren Berlant’s *Queen of America* can be seen in the theoretical trajectory of cultural studies as a field-defining work. When the book was published in 1997, its argument was firmly situated in relation not only to the legacies of Reaganism but also to the ideological critique of cultural studies scholarship in its British origins and American counterpart. While the book is clearly within the tradition of both British and American cultural studies, in its deep engagement with ideology, normativity, and the role of cultural forms in the negotiation of national identity, it also indicates a shift of cultural studies scholarship toward a new set of theoretical paradigms for understanding mass culture and political agency. This move is on a continuum with the aim and goals of that earlier era of cultural studies and communication scholarship in its critique of dominant ideology, yet is also one that signals an important theoretical shift—from an analysis of cultural practices as a negotiation of cultural meaning and resistance within the context of identity politics to a theoretical framework that deploys intimacy, sexuality, and affect as the key modes through which to analyze the public, the nation, and the citizen. The book thus signals the nascent beginnings of the field of affect studies as a new paradigm within the study of culture. This means that the power of the book is its deep and ultimately devastating critique of how dominant, mass culture works at the most intimate level. Hence, we see the little girl in the photograph who is not necessarily resistant, but who is unhappy, and whose unhappiness is not signaled in the photograph as individual, but is rather framed by (and generated by, we might say) the nation (in the form of its iconic structure, the White House). Years later, Berlant would characterize this position as worthy of a slogan: “Depressed?... It Might Be Political.”³

It may seem odd to situate *Queen of America* as indicative of the emergence of the study of mass culture and cultural forms through affect, since affect is not literally a key term on which the book’s argument rests. Yet, in its complex engagements with rethinking the nation, the public sphere, and citizenship through sexuality and intimacy, in placing the body and its meanings at the center of an analysis of nation, politics, and culture, the book lays the groundwork for Berlant’s subsequent work: in particular her writings on intimacy and sentimentality and her work (in collaboration with Michael Warner) on the intimate public sphere.⁴ In the context of a special issue that aims to examine the importance of the scholarship of Lauren Berlant to the field of cultural studies and its intersection with the fields of both communication studies and American studies, I would argue that *Queen of America* can be understood as important precisely because of its demarcation of a new set of theoretical strategies for understanding the nation, citizenship, and America. These are topics that have long histories of engagement in the fields of cultural studies and American studies, yet here they are resituated through a set of theoretical strategies that draw on feminist theory, queer theory, and a reimagining of intimacy. The book thus intervenes at several disciplinary intersections, including the intersection of queer theory and the study of nationalism; of media studies and feminist theory; and of affect theory and theories of ideology and representation.

The question “what is the nation?”—at once naive and complex—is at the center of the book’s inquiry. Importantly, the book asks, How is the nation experienced, felt, lived at an intimate level? In defining a theoretical move, shifting from the traditional ideological definition of the modern nation state as a political force to which loyalty is constructed toward the concept of the nation as an entity that is experienced at the level of emotion and intimacy, toward the concept of citizenship as lived within and through the body at an intimate and sexual level, *Queen of America* signals an important intervention into the study of the nation, modes of patriotism, and the figures through which the nation is embodied (here, the fetus and the child).

It must be said, first off, that *Queen of America* is firmly situated in its moment of the mid-1990s. It is framed by the struggles of the Reagan era and its immediate legacies—Anita Hill, Bill Clinton, battles over reproductive rights, etc. Some aspects of the book seem more of that time (more historical) than others—one could argue that the fetus does not demand our national consciousness in quite the same way today, for instance. Other aspects (the infantile citizen, the fantasy of racial integration via digital technology of *The Face of America*, the fear of the immigrant) remain startlingly present. From the perspective of 2012, fifteen years since the book was published, the Reagan era has moved from being a specific historical moment, framed by the decade of the 1980s, to defining the beginning of a political era in which we remain. This is an era of neoliberalism, the dismantling of social welfare and the destruction of the notion of the state’s responsibility to the wellbeing of its citizens, with a culture war that is so constant as to be unremarkable as it moves from one target to the next, a context in which the legacies of Reaganism are fully embedded across the political spectrum. Berlant’s claim that “liberals and the left have absorbed the conservative world view”⁵ has only become even more apparent to the point where they are essentially embodied in a president who is a Democrat and black.

In what follows, I reflect on several key themes of this book, and what it indicates about the kind of interdisciplinary scholarship that takes its “silly objects” seriously: the concept of an *intimate* public sphere, the sexual status and heteronormativity of the nation, the infantile citizen, and an archive of culture and media. These themes interlock to form a portrait of a national culture that operates at the level of the body, affect, and subjectivity. Yet, ultimately, *Queen of America* is not simply a book about scholarship, but rather a book about how politics is experienced and what it means to be political. As such, it provides a model for thinking about *both* political disempowerment and political agency.

The Intimate Public

“Something strange has happened to citizenship,” begins *Queen of America*. “In the process of collapsing the political and the personal into a world of public intimacy, a nation made for adult citizens has been replaced by one imagined for fetuses and children.”⁶ This argument exposes the paradox that arises when the experience of citizenship is increasingly enacted through sexuality and intimacy—when the culture

wars and their intrusion into the personal intersect with new paradigms of identity and sexuality. Thus, the 1980s and 1990s were a historical moment of upheaval, contestation, and negotiation during which the threatened sites and figures of power dug in while the fissures and cracks opened up. Crucial here is how this is worked out in relation to popular culture, through the seemingly insignificant terrain of the trivial and the domestic. *Queen of America* aims to examine affect as political through its deployment of feminist analysis and queer theory in relation to media analysis. Feminist media studies has long incorporated an understanding of affect through its analysis of the sentimental and the melodramatic, as Berlant's larger body of work demonstrates. In *Queen of America*, this integration of affect and mediation is a crucial strategy, one that ultimately creates new models for thinking about dominant power and the functioning of ideology.

One of the key insights of *Queen of America* is its analysis of how the experience of public life is framed by the modality of affect. The book does this by examining the status of the public sphere as a site of intimacy. The public sphere, Berlant contends, is as much defined by intimacy and public feelings as it is by the rational discourse it is imagined to have. Indeed, if the legacy of Reaganism has spawned an increasingly irrational and sentimental discourse of politics, it has at the same time produced a discourse of family that not only polices the borders of what constitutes familial relations but also, as a consequence, (paradoxically) enables an increasingly intimate mode of imagining the public. Citizenship is embodied on deeply personal levels into the lives of individuals. In the wake of demands for and reactions to identity politics that have produced trauma envy in those who are privileged, citizenship is imagined in regressive, angry, childlike ways. How have these figures, the fetus and the child, who are seen as needing protection, come to signify America? They are symptoms of how citizenship is increasingly not simply a practice but a means through which an affective public sphere has emerged. *Queen of America* asks:

why it is, how it has come to be, that a certain cluster of demonic and idealized images and narratives about sex and citizenship has come to obsess the official national public sphere. It asks why the most hopeful national pictures of "life" circulating in the public sphere are not of adults in everyday life, in public, or in politics, but rather of the most vulnerable minor or virtual citizens—fetuses, children, real and imaginary immigrants—persons that, paradoxically, cannot yet act as citizens. It asks why acts that are not civic acts, like sex, have to bear the burden of defining proper citizenship.⁷

The "something strange" that has happened to create this "intimate sphere of the US present tense" is, in fact, the culture of anxiety that has been produced by the shifting norms of identity, family, and sexuality that have emerged in the post-1960s decades, charted from the moment that the little girl in the photograph frowned before the White House to the present. This sense of threat, embodied in what Berlant terms the "ex-iconic" figure of the white American male, responds to the fact that the nation and the American citizen as they were once imagined to be (stable, loyal, Christian, white, heterosexual) have been reimagined because of the entry into the public sphere of different and new citizens (and noncitizens). This is a deep anxiety, potentially

threatening to the stability of the nation, so it must be displaced and disavowed—it is at the root of the economic fragility of American Empire, the instability of the project of America. Its objects of displacement (the fetus, the child, the immigrant) serve to mediate the fact that the vulnerability and instability of the categories Nation, America, and Citizenship have been exposed. America, and American Empire, cannot tolerate this exposure of its actual vulnerability, and so these cultural forms emerge to mask, distract, and sublimate the threat. The citizen is innocent in this narrative, and, by extension, the nation is innocent too; in a strange way, this affirms the nation's power through sentiment. Thus, the paradoxical effect of the nation under threat is that modes of sentiment that might have been perceived as weakening its stature become the terrain through which it is recuperated.

The concept of the intimate public sphere, which Berlant refined further in her work with Michael Warner, specifically in their co-authored 1998 essay “Sex in Public,” builds in important ways on the critiques of the original concept of the public sphere as defined by Jürgen Habermas.⁸ The reworkings of the concept of the public have unpacked the assumptions undergirding the binary division of public and private as particularly gendered and proposed the model of counterpublics as a means to make sense of the publics that have a critical relationship to power.⁹ To conceive of the public sphere as intimate is to make two key interventions: the first takes into account the importance of mediation as an active element of publics (plural) and counterpublics; the second signals the collapse of the public and private that has existed throughout history yet which has also taken on new meaning in relation to contemporary American political culture. As Berlant writes, unlike Habermas's model, “the intimate public sphere of the US present tense renders citizenship as a condition of social membership produced by personal acts and values, especially acts originating in or directed toward the family sphere.”¹⁰

The term *intimate public sphere* thus evokes the devaluing of the concept of the public as a site of civic engagement. This intimate public sphere is driven by a utopian and nostalgic fantasy of the family as the core site for identification and the enactment of the “American way of life.” This fantasy of the family “usurps the modernist promise of the culturally vital, multiethnic city”¹¹ as it affirms traditional notions of home, family, and community. The intimacy of the public sphere thus circles back, so the collapse of private into public means that sex and citizenship are fully entwined in public discourse. This is not simply an aspect of biopolitics, with the state monitoring and categorizing sexuality; it is, rather, a context in which the nation is in actuality defined within the terms of sexuality. To confront the existence of the intimate public sphere is to rewrite the definition of the nation. As Berlant notes, if the genealogy of sex in America were attributed to the nation, rather than to individuals, it would “expose the circuits of erotic and political dominance that have permeated collective life in the United States . . . [and] it would radically transform what is considered national about the history of the ‘public’ and ‘private.’”¹² As I will discuss further, it is precisely through queer theory that this theoretical formulation can take place.

National Feeling

Queen of America is a defining book of American studies, one that pushes in important ways at the question, What is the nation? Such a question has been seen throughout the history of scholarship as both a simple and enormously complex one. The imperative of the question has been transformed over the past few decades to the following queries: Who gets to define the nation? How is the nation experienced by its citizens? How does the nation intervene in the lives of individuals at a personal, intimate level? In many ways, *Queen of America* exemplifies a new and radical form of American studies scholarship that emerged in the 1990s, one that connected the study of nation, patriotism, and American identity with the theoretical aims of cultural studies and ethnic studies.

The nation, Berlant argues, is a fragile entity. Its perceived (its necessary) unity is an illusion, the exposure of which renders it vulnerable. The nation is a set of modalities, a site of affective identification in which, according to Berlant, “fragments of identity are held to become whole.”¹³ Sentiment is thus the glue that holds together the idealized nation. Importantly, this idealized nation emerges in the United States at the same time with the erosion of the state—a “simultaneous contraction of the state and expansion of the nation” that “produces an incoherent set of boundary-drawing panics about the profound economic and cultural effects of transnational capital and immigration.”¹⁴ The nation, in this case America, is thus a site of fantasy and longing, separate from the actual policy-making and policy-destroying state. As Berlant notes, America feels unsure of its value in domains where it previously maintained an illusion of superiority—global military power, global economics, and the American dream of guaranteed prosperity—and is threatened by transnationalism and multiculturalism, so its nationhood is enacted in other realms: culture, the family, and sexuality.¹⁵ In certain ways, this is only truer today in the context of the Obama era culture wars, the rise of the Tea Party, and the fallout of the post-9/11 era and the economic crisis.

A queer reading of the public sphere and the nation is a crucial tactic of *Queen of America* in its argument that heterosexuality is a normative aspect of the nation. The book examines how when the unexamined and unacknowledged identity categories of the American elite (white, heterosexual, class privileged)—what Berlant calls the “birthright assumptions”—are forced by identity politics into “vulnerable explicitness,” the backlash is swift and deep. The nation will be heterosexual; this is made fundamentally clear within the legal, political, and cultural domains. In her introduction, Berlant notes that she has often been told by readers that she is too hard on heterosexuality, to which she responds:

I simply do not see why the nation has to have an official sexuality, especially one that authorizes the norm of a violent gentility; that narrows the field of legitimate political action; that supports the amputation of personal complexity into categories of simple identity; that uses cruel and mundane strategies both to promote shame for non-normative populations and to deny them state, federal, and juridical supports because they are deemed morally incompetent to their own citizenship. That is the heterosexuality that I repudiate.¹⁶

The heteronormativity of the nation is a symptom of the backlash to the unpacking of the unmarked category of the white, male citizens, what Berlant calls the “icons who have only recently lost the protection of their national iconicity.”¹⁷ These former iconic figures feel anxious—in Berlant’s words, “they sense they now have identities, when it used to be just other people who had them.” To restore the “imagined nation, the American ex-icon denigrates the political present tense and incites nostalgia for the national world of its iconicity, setting up that lost world as a utopian horizon of political aspiration.”¹⁸

Berlant makes clear that the heteronormativity of the nation emerges with brutal force when the heterosexual life is no longer the only mentionable one in the United States. This creates a state of emergency.¹⁹ Thus, conservative rage over the challenges to the heterosexual norm fuels not only murderous rage, disciplinary tactics, and a culture war, but the constant need to affirm heterosexual figures in national symbolic culture. Yes, the nation has a sexuality.

The Infantile Citizen

An investigation into the category of citizenship within new paradigms of cultural analysis can be seen as one of the most crucial contributions of *Queen of America* to cultural and communication studies and to American studies. Berlant’s “theory of infantile citizenship” is perhaps the most cited and influential intervention of the book—not only because it is a clever and smart engagement with the concept of citizenship, and because its concept of infantile citizenship is startlingly original, but also because the essay is a model of engagement with popular culture as situated in dialogue with other cultural texts. In a classic ideological critique of citizenship, practices of citizenship allow citizens (and would-be citizens) of a nation state to feel good about their sense of patriotic belonging. We affirm patriotic allegiances because they make us feel that we belong, yet it is precisely that allegiance that allows us to not see—to misrecognize—the costs of that belonging. Berlant’s intervention, which builds on this position, came at a moment when the category of the citizen was being rethought through the framework of cultural studies, with an increased focus on the ways in which practices of citizenship could be seen as counter-hegemonic and as forms of cultural citizenship and citizen-consumers.²⁰ The theory of infantile citizenship expands on these concepts of citizenship as potentially resistant practices, in that it is a theory about the complexity of the disempowerment of the citizen that can then be counterbalanced by other forms of citizenship (active, “live,” transgressive, “Diva” citizenship). Yet it is precisely the essay’s powerful critique of disempowerment, rather than resistance, that gives it the weight it produces out of its “silly” objects.

Understanding the modes of infantile citizenship within American culture takes the understanding of citizenship as ideological further by situating it within a longer history of citizenship modes within American culture. Berlant herself returns to Alexis de Tocqueville to note how democracies can produce not only the familial love of citizens but also “a special form of tyranny that makes citizens like children,

infantilized, passive, and overdependent on the ‘immense and tutelary power’ of the state.”²¹ In using the concept of the infantile citizen as a way to understand an identification with the state at one’s own expense, Berlant points to the affective context in which the citizen is not only disempowered but also situated within the subjectivity of the child, with childlike emotional responses and childlike naivete. In Berlant’s analysis, it is this unknowing and naivete that allows the infantile citizen to “unsettle, expose, and reframe the machinery of national life”²² yet also to then be paternalistically contained within it. This formulation is particularly useful in making clear the ways in which the tropes of American patriotism consistently reaffirm American innocence—both the American innocence of a culture that proclaims its Puritanism, and the innocence of a nation that disavows its imperial actions by calling them “defense.”

Thus, in her moving story of her childhood experience of segregation while making a pilgrimage to Washington with her family, Audre Lorde steps from the space of infantile citizenship (unknowing, believing) to adult citizenship, anger, and nausea—an “unlearning of her patriotism.”²³ *Queen of America* thus affirms an oppositional theory of (adult) citizenship, “live citizenship” (embodied in Queer Nation’s “We are Everywhere, We Want Everything”), and “Diva Citizenship.” An act of Diva Citizenship, according to Berlant, is when a person stages a dramatic coup in a public sphere in which she does not have privilege.²⁴ These acts do not produce radical social change, but they shake things up, they are public, and they speak to the unspoken intersection of sexuality and power. National culture needs to beat back the potential power of Diva Citizenship, as Berlant’s examples of Harriet Jacobs’s *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, Frances E. W. Harper’s *Iola Leroy*, and Anita Hill’s Senate testimony demonstrate. Yet, history tends to rise to affirm these acts.

Queen of America does not allow these affirmative and oppositional practices of citizenship to be embraced fully without a cautionary (and devastating) critique of the oppressiveness of national culture. Yet, this is in many ways a book that embraces optimism through its belief in the power of good ideas to make a difference—to help us to think “past the scene of normativity that pervades the contemporary United States.”²⁵ As Berlant puts it,

The Queen does a diva turn on citizenship, attempting to transform it from a dead (entirely abstract) category of analysis into a live social scene that exudes sparks, has practical consequences, forces better ways of thinking about nationality, culture, politics, and personhood.²⁶

“I Hate Your Archive”

One of the crucial interventions of *Queen of America* is its analysis of the mediated experience of the “official national culture industry.”²⁷ The book thus engages at a deep level with the project of how to understand mass culture (with the term used quite self-consciously), and offers a model for considering the ways media studies and communication scholarship can engage with how mass culture manages, shapes, and reduces political thought and agency. One of Berlant’s central interventions is the

construction of an alternative “archive” through which to understand the nation. This archive includes and takes seriously—in addition to numerous literary texts such as Jacobs’s *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, Harper’s *Iola Leroy*, and Raymond Carver’s story “Fat”; and artifacts of political activism, such as the work of Queer Nation—popular films such as *Forrest Gump*, *Look Who’s Talking*, and *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington*; TV shows such as *I Love Lucy*, *Designing Women*, and *The Simpsons*; anti-abortion videos; Michael Jackson’s 1991 music video *Black or White*; and several *Time* magazine covers. In the introduction to *Queen of America*, Berlant recounts the responses of colleagues and audience members over the years to what she calls the “silly objects” of her analysis. As one colleague notes, “I really admire your thinking, but—I hate your archive.”²⁸ Another remarks, “Why bother reading middlebrow nonsense like *Time* magazine and reactionary dogma like the *Contract with America*, when you could be theorizing and promoting the world-building activities evident in pamphlets, zines, polemics, and literatures of radical or subaltern publics?”²⁹ As I noted at the outset, it is precisely this juxtaposition of dominant and resistant culture that the book resists as its method. Indeed, the unapologetic “silly” object is a central aspect of the methodology that Berlant proposes for an analysis of national culture. She writes:

In this book I am conducting a counterpolitics of the silly object by focusing on some instances of it and by developing a mode of criticism and conceptualization that reads the waste materials of everyday communication in the national public sphere as pivotal documents in the construction, experience, and rhetoric of quotidian citizenship in the United States.³⁰

Hence, her argument is not that the silly object is an avenue toward resistant cultural practices so much that it is an (ideologically unstable) object of cultural weight and consequence. Berlant goes on to note that it is the everydayness, the ephemerality, and the very popularity of such texts that makes them worth reading. Importantly, this method of analysis creates synthesis across cultural realms, and connects popular culture to political texts to advertising to personal photographs and ultrasound images to political posters. The “waste materials of everyday communication” are thus reimagined as pivotal to the construction of citizenship. In this, Berlant deploys her archive as a means to redefine the terrain of citizenship. The book’s archive itself redefines national culture, with mediation as the interlinking mode that connects its elements.

Berlant’s engagement with popular culture takes it seriously in a way that follows the legacies of cultural studies and its demand that the academic object of inquiry be expanded to the popular. Yet, her analysis both takes these “silly” objects seriously and deploys them as elements of a deep critique of national culture. So, the silly archive of *Queen of America* bears little relation to the archives assembled by scholars of fan culture for whom the popular is a means toward tactics and empowerment.³¹ The silly objects of the archive are deep both in what they tell us and in what they reveal about the depth (intimate, sentimental, trivial) of our connections to national culture—their importance is rooted in their role as affective objects.

At the root of the I-hate-your-archive phenomenon is, of course, the example of *The Simpsons*. What does it mean to read citizenship through *The Simpsons*? In Berlant's analysis, the pilgrimage to Washington is seen through the character of Lisa, the "smart" Simpson, who heads to the capital after winning an essay contest on patriotism, an essay that engages with the feeling of the nation. Lisa goes from feeling "national, symbolic, invulnerable, intellectual" to experiencing disillusion and dejection when she witnesses a bribe and sees the corrupt nation unmasked. Yet, in another (narratively necessary) twist, the corrupt congressman is exposed, he is expelled from the Senate and miraculously immediately put into jail. Lisa responds, "The system works!"³² Berlant writes:

when Lisa says, "The system works!" she embodies the Reaganite "patriot of tomorrow," because despite all the perverse privileged prerogative she has witnessed she continues to believe that a system exists, that "bills" motivated by democratic virtue do become law, that a truly good nation will always emerge heroically to snuff out a bad one.³³

Berlant can be said to be taking *The Simpsons* too seriously, for its deployment of parody and satire actually parallel her critique of citizenship. As José Esteban Muñoz has written:

The Simpsons is meta-TV, television about television. The very immutability of the show and its characters, their inability to learn, is part of the satire. . . . it does not offer strategies of hope and transformation that let us imagine a remade world or future, but, on the other hand, it still offers what many spectators understand as an important and highly successful critique through humor and parody.³⁴

As Muñoz notes, the show operates at a different level than simply using humor to smooth over the hypocrisy of national identification at our own expense. Lisa's revelation that the system works is, of course, meant to be understood by a viewer of *The Simpsons* as a joke—as Lisa's true naivete despite her smarts. The show is already framing the infantile citizen in quotes, demanding that we notice it. In other words, *The Simpsons's* position on citizenship is closer to Berlant's than it is to the position of *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington*, the classic 1939 Jimmy Stewart film that she reads with it. In this sense, the method of affective reading in *Queen of America* needs to deploy irony within its understanding of national culture. Importantly, in relation to *Queen of America*, one of the key features of *The Simpsons* is its Americanness. *The Simpsons* is emblematic of ironic, referential, postmodern culture, and signals a particularly American engagement with political satire. Imagining the generation(s) who have been raised watching *The Simpsons* thus might offer a glimmer of hopefulness in the context of national popular culture.

Berlant's reading of a national culture industry through its "silly objects" is also about reading the texts that construct a nostalgia for a unified national culture, a hopefulness for a conflict-free state, and fantasies about national unity. In the chapter "The Face of America and the State of Emergency," she does this most effectively in her well-known reading of the now famous 1993 *Time* magazine cover entitled "The New Face of America." The cover features the face of a virtual woman, whose racial

makeup replicates the racial statistics of the United States, offered as a “preview” of how immigrants are shaping “the world’s first multicultural society.”³⁵ The then-relatively new morphing technology (which also produced the effects for the Jackson music video *Black or White*) thus realizes a fantasy of racial harmony and integration, one that apparently inspired real-world fantasies in the image’s computer geek creators. The woman of the Face of America is a cyborg figure, a “Frankenstein monster composed from other ‘ethnic’ human images. . . . [and] a national fantasy from the present representing a posthistorical—that is, postwhite—future.”³⁶ Berlant writes, “at the moment of its statistical decline, it becomes necessary to reinvent the image archive of the nation in a way that turns the loss of white cultural prestige into a gain for white cultural prestige.”³⁷ Thus, the fantasy of the Face of America is a love for a new face that both embodies and screens over other, less hopeful, feelings—disappointment in and disavowal of cultural and economic violence, rage at the new cultural politics of difference, and ambition for the nation’s future.³⁸ Yet, this analysis is guided by its understanding of the affective power of hope, of the shaping sense that fantasy plays in the meaning of the nation.

Queen of America is a powerful (I have called it devastating, which seems the most fitting adjective) critique of American national culture, and how it forecloses on political action and subjectivity. Yet ultimately, perhaps ironically, it is also a hopeful book. In its sharp analytic sense of the meaning found in the most trivial of artifacts; in its rich analysis of the complexity of the experience of citizenship; in its mining of the alternative stories to dominant ideology that contest the texts of national culture; and in its taking seriously the implications of “silly objects,” the book is a model of why cultural analysis matters. Yet, in its integration of affect as a methodological guide, it is also an empathetic book—this is crucial to its effect and mediates its outrage in ways that make it an even more devastating critique of America today. *Queen of America* not only offers a model for scholarship, but also offers a model of critical political agency, one that does not demand that politics separate from emotion but rather one which demands that we understand our politics as feeling, and that we rethink the project of politics itself.

Notes

- [1] Lauren Berlant, *The Queen of America Goes to Washington City: Essays on Sex and Citizenship* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1997).
- [2] I know from Berlant that the photo came from her former student Katie Crawford (now teaching at Vanderbilt University), whose father was a lawyer for President Richard Nixon and who was attending the White House Easter Egg Hunt during the Nixon administration.
- [3] Lauren Berlant, “Critical Inquiry, Affirmative Culture,” *Critical Inquiry* 30, no. 2 (2004): 451.
- [4] See Lauren Berlant, ed., Intimacy special issue, *Critical Inquiry* 24, no. 2 (1998): 281–637, specifically Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner, “Sex in Public,” 547–66, republished in Michael Warner, *Publics and Counterpublics* (Brooklyn, NY: Zone Books, 2002), 187–208; and Lauren Berlant, *The Female Complaint: The Unfinished Business of Sentimentality in American Culture* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008).
- [5] Berlant, *Queen of America*, 5–6.

- [6] *Ibid.*, 1.
- [7] *Ibid.*, 5.
- [8] Berlant and Warner, "Sex in Public."
- [9] Warner, *Publics and Counterpublics*, 56.
- [10] Berlant, *Queen of America*, 5.
- [11] *Ibid.*
- [12] *Ibid.*, 221.
- [13] *Ibid.*, 14.
- [14] *Ibid.*
- [15] *Ibid.*, 18.
- [16] *Ibid.*, 19.
- [17] *Ibid.*, 2.
- [18] *Ibid.*
- [19] *Ibid.*, 18.
- [20] For instance, see Toby Miller, *Technologies of Truth: Cultural Citizenship and the Popular Media* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998); Néstor García Canclini, *Consumers and Citizens: Globalization and Multicultural Conflicts*, trans. George Yúdice (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001); and Sarah Banet-Weiser, *Kids Rule! Nickelodeon and Consumer Citizenship* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007).
- [21] Berlant, *Queen of America*, 27.
- [22] *Ibid.*, 29.
- [23] *Ibid.*, 26.
- [24] *Ibid.*, 223.
- [25] *Ibid.*, 20.
- [26] *Ibid.*
- [27] *Ibid.*, 13.
- [28] *Ibid.*, 11–12.
- [29] *Ibid.*, 13.
- [30] *Ibid.*, 12.
- [31] The classic texts of 1980s scholarship on fan culture and resistant cultural practices are: Henry Jenkins, *Textual Poachers: Television Fans and Participatory Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1992); Constance Penley, *NASA/Trek: Popular Science and Sex in America* (London: Verso, 1997); and John Fiske, *Reading the Popular* (New York: Routledge, 1991).
- [32] Berlant, *Queen of America*, 47.
- [33] *Ibid.*, 49.
- [34] José Esteban Muñoz, "Citizens and Superheroes," *American Quarterly* 52, no. 2 (2000): 401.
- [35] "The New Face of America," *Time*, November 18, 1993, <http://www.time.com/time/covers/0,16641,19931118,00.html>.
- [36] Berlant, *Queen of America*, 201.
- [37] *Ibid.*, 200.
- [38] *Ibid.*, 204.