

Feminism, Three Ways

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THE QUEER ART OF FAILURE, by Judith Halberstam. Durham: Duke University Press, 2011. 224 pp. \$79.95 cloth; \$22.95 paper.

CRUEL OPTIMISM, by Lauren Berlant. Durham: Duke University Press, 2011. 352 pp. \$89.95 cloth; \$24.95 paper.

OBJECT LESSONS, by Robyn Wiegman. Durham: Duke University Press, 2012. 416 pp. \$99.95 cloth; \$26.95 paper.

Feminist theory has taken many forms in its late stages, some thirty years after its major institutionalization in the United States academy. This review essay follows three of those strands—queer studies, affect theory, and the interrogation of feminism’s academic field formation through women’s studies—each emblemized by three well-established, mid-career feminist scholars in their recent books: Judith Halberstam’s *The Queer Art of Failure* (2011), Lauren Berlant’s *Cruel Optimism* (2011), and Robyn Wiegman’s *Object Lessons* (2012).¹ Their books occasion a pause, a critical moment to map the state of feminist studies, which all three authors have helped to shape since the mid-1990s. Halberstam has insistently bridged feminist and queer studies; Berlant continues to produce influential work at the intersection of gender, genre, and studies of affect; and Wiegman has defined the turn to institutionalization in feminist thought.

These three “divergences” in feminist thought, as Wiegman would call them (p. 91), are instructive for thinking about the field and its future at a moment when feminist studies seems to be, if not obsolete, then, to use Berlant’s term, at an “impasse” (p. 4)—a pause as other objects of study, identities, and institutional formations eclipse it in their imagined urgency and relevance. To students, scholars, and activists, “feminism” may appear inadequate to read the global challenges of the digital age, the complexities of transgendered embodiment, or the trenchant critiques of the neoliberal state currently occupying the humanities, American studies, and left politics. Halberstam’s, Berlant’s, and Wiegman’s projects do not so much deny this state of affairs as delve deeply into the forms that such obsolescence might take: animated children’s film and television, art photography and installations, fascist history, the historical novel, news coverage, narrative film, legal cases, and academic practice itself. In this impressive archive of cultural texts that exemplify the waning of feminist political

feeling I outline above, all three authors take our stalled attachments to feminism as their twenty-first-century *raison d'être*. Their revaluations of postmillennial feminist thought are distinctive and yet informed by the very failures of feminism that have shaped all three scholars' careers. In both direct and subtle invocations of feminism, these works exercise the most flexible versions of interdisciplinarity and intersectionality they can while never fetishizing difference or antinormativity as easily achieved or even recognizable goals. In doing so, they provide evidence for feminist thought's significance as a methodology of rigorous critique—especially self-critique—that can lead to a transformative politics of interpretation.

Halberstam, a pioneer of queer studies within feminism, offers the cleanest, most accessible direction for rethinking feminism here: what if we fail? Or better yet, what if we acknowledge—find critical and political value in—our failures? In our twenty-first-century moment, post-“hope” or “naïve optimism” for any radical outsidership to the neoliberal system of global capital, can (feminist) critique be repurposed into something that does not just look like “resignation?” (p. 1). Halberstam exuberantly plunges forward with a yes, spending his first few chapters in the terrain of animated children's films and bromance stoner comedies, and the second half in a darker realm with material of queer Nazi and fascist histories and bleak high art photography and installations.

Halberstam sets the stakes early in his argument on the “animat[ed] revolt” of films such as *Chicken Run* (2000) and *Finding Nemo* (2003): “While many Marxist scholars have characterized and dismissed queer politics as ‘body politics’ or as simply superficial, these films recognize that alternative forms of embodiment and desire are central to the struggle against corporate domination” (pp. 27, 29). Putting queer theory broadly into the terms of resistance to neoliberal doctrine is a bold move here, especially as it claims space for broad, popular culture, itself a part of the capital machine, to contain its own excesses and critiques. The concept that in the unreal worlds of animated talking toys, animals, and monsters acting in modes of impossibly articulated subjectivity, we might “invent” and imagine anew “the models of resistance we need and lack,” is a powerful argument toward experimentation, risk, and failure (p. 51). I could have read an entire book on this move to animated genre and form and wished for more of Halberstam's trademark reading-against-the-grain plot summaries that make us reconsider the popular as a genre of feminist resistance. We can move away from social realism in our political imaginaries, Halberstam argues, and still remain politically engaged. And we might not even have to rely on high art and the avant-garde to do so.

Halberstam tellingly and significantly does not reserve his optimism (with caveats for representations of race) for his readings of children's film and television. His commitment to failure extends and critiques the

queer antisocial thesis of Lee Edelman's much-discussed *No Future* (2004), investigating failure as generative social relations, rather than the death drive, amongst the disempowered. Halberstam focuses on terms like "community" and "survival" throughout the book as critical to understanding feminist and queer political thought, even when they are expressed through negation and other forms of failure. He initiates this line of inquiry with a reading of the white-boy stoner comedy *Dude, Where's My Car?* (2000), which may or may not intentionally send up white male narratives of power in "the anarchic space of forgetting" that it privileges (p. 86). I say "may or may not" because Halberstam claims the power of forgetting both for "male stupidity" that "masks the will to power that lies just behind the goofy grin" (p. 57) and for left/queer/feminist projects, not as a mode of repair but as an alternate strategy for "see[ing] change"—for "recogniz[ing]" politics anew (p. 71). Perhaps, he suggests, forgetting can help to undo lines of dominant power as much as it enables them. In the following chapters, however, he also tracks more controversial histories of queer life aligned with fascism and Nazism. In doing so, he does not redeem such subjects. Rather, he tries to make this act of recovery redeeming to queer/feminist theory, begging us not to look away from "stupidity, failure, and forgetfulness," as well as "radical passivity" and masochism, as potential tactics of queer feminist studies (pp. 147, 140).

Halberstam's subject matter may turn dark for the majority of the book's second half, but its investments in "the linking of our desires to politics that disturb us" in queer and feminist studies is a call to cultural scholars to extend their critique beyond obvious queer neoliberal targets (gay marriage, for instance) to those at the margins, those that seem invested in challenging normativity but fail at being the ideal antinormative subjects we desire (p. 153). He believes that worlds of failure and impossibility, like animated life, are "in fact living and breathing systems with their own internal logics, with growing and living matter" (p. 177). *The Queer Art of Failure* assumes the complexity of failure, especially when it seeks to overturn received ideas in queer studies of utopic nonnormativity. One does not have to "succeed" all the way—and in fact, such totalizing notions of political success in feminist politics should be suspect. Likewise, one could critique the text for its emphasis on plot over form and its uneven coverage of various texts, theories, and so forth. But why should we, when Halberstam lays this out as his experiment in and toward failure, in the disciplinary sense, right from the book's introduction?

Just as Halberstam optimistically locates solidarity in failure, straight from his dedication "for all of history's losers" (p. v), Berlant takes on the dense terrain of loserdom in her own *Cruel Optimism*. The title, and central conceit, refers to the affectual bind of enduring hope for the future that is attached to an impossible desire to attain a "good life" (p. 3). That same

attachment, in the multiple forms it can take—Berlant suggests “food, or a kind of love, . . . or a political project” (p. 1)—is what causes harm, rather than the ideal one dreams it will give upon attainment. Where Halberstam delightfully plays with our ideas of surface, Berlant thoroughly dissects the temporality and genres of this affective structure of thought, arguing that “all attachment is optimistic” in its hope for relation between self and others, politics, objects, and so on (pp. 1-2). Though she still ascribes this problem to ideology, ideology here is democratic, inescapable, and even “ambitious,” instead of a mere false consciousness of object choice in the crumbling neoliberal state (p. 2). Berlant then imagines the texture of the “ordinary adjustments” that we make to deal with the constant losses and impossibilities that attend to “fantasies of the good life” (p. 3). She labels this state of the present as “crisis-ordinariness” and the time and site of its playing out as “the ‘impassé’” rather than the urgent temporality of an exceptional, traumatic event. In doing so, she brings to affect theory an immediate and thoughtful connection to material and economic circumstance (pp. 10, 4).

If all of this sounds incredibly dense, well, it is—but Berlant employs lovely textual readings of everything from Charles Johnson’s short fiction to historical novels to press coverage of the obesity epidemic to make her philosophical arguments resonate. She impressively argues for the way that fantasies of the good life cruelly promise progress narratives, but she finds, particularly in narrative fiction and film, moments of impasse that permit a rest from this narrative teleology. She investigates not the good life’s failures but instead how the time of the impasse “is a space of time lived without a narrative genre,” where “agency can be an activity of maintenance, not making” (pp. 199, 100). In this, even more than Halberstam, she seeks to remake explicitly our ideas of the political and the political subject.

Berlant’s expanded *South Atlantic Quarterly* chapter on obesity is particularly evocative and leaves us wanting more in the way of close-reading, topical questions that arise out of mass culture in the text. In this piece, she points to the sheer ordinariness of discourses of “crisis” linked to slow, ongoing deterioration—what she calls wearing out—in modern life. Within this genre of cruel optimism, though, she finds newly redesigned spaces for agency in “not acting in a life-building way—the way that liberal subjects and happy people are supposed to” (p. 100). Berlant extends this dystopic reading, at the book’s end, to nonnarrative art and sound projects that reimagine both political action and the political subject along the lines of the agency of the impasse dramatized above. Rather than focusing on the complex failures of justice as problems to be solved, Berlant focuses on the “dream” that “amidst all of the chaos, crisis, and injustice in front of us, the desire for alternative filters that produce the sense—if not the

scene—of a more livable and intimate sociality is another name for the desire for the political” (p. 227). That this desire is undeniably cruel is significant to Berlant, but naming that desire offers her, and feminist/left thought, “a confidence that proceeds without denying fragility” (p. 266). Affect theory then can lead us to what Berlant terms at the book’s end a “utopian realis[m]” that does not deny hope even as it recognizes impasses and failures as significant political sites (p. 266). As the dog in the cover painting that Berlant glosses in the coda suggests, much more could be made of cultural and philosophical questions of companionship, domesticity, and other quotidian phenomenon that would trace out *Cruel Optimism’s* populist analysis for a broader, nonliterary audience.

Berlant locates justice in a manner befitting Wiegman’s broad and compelling interrogation of the foundations of identity studies as “itself . . . a technology of deferral or patience that keeps people engrossed politically . . . in the ongoing drama of optimism and disappointment” (Berlant, p. 184). *Object Lessons* assumes that nothing about identity studies, especially its political assumptions of and immediate affinities to social justice, can be taken as a given. Instead, Wiegman argues that “objects and analytic categories are always incommensurate with the political desire invested in them” (p. 42). The ambitious chapters take on feminist, queer, whiteness, and American studies, as well as intersectional analysis and interdisciplinarity itself, not as exhaustive assessments of the states of their fields, but as case studies of identity’s continued and inevitable failure to live up to its stated political commitments.

Far from affect theory, Wiegman’s structural analysis in *Object Lessons* nonetheless inhabits Berlant’s impasse, arguing through a deconstruction of feminist studies and other identity-based interdisciplines that we may want to stop assuming the mantle of justice and its disappointments in quite the same scholarly ways. Her text should be required reading for all of us doing this work, as uncomfortable and cringe-worthy as her exposure of our most basic assumptions and affiliations might be. We must, she argues, at least acknowledge our attachments to those objects of study and their inherent failures as constitutive of the field. Her initial and paradigmatic case study is feminism itself, particularly its struggle and transition from women’s to gender studies. The belief in the more capacious, infallible, inclusive object haunts women’s and gender studies, signaling the very failures of inclusion and redefinition it sought to leave behind with “women.” Wiegman argues, “To take up one side or other of the divide is to reiterate the hopeful belief that agency lives somewhere close by and that with just the right instrument—call it a strategy, an object of study, or an analytic—we can intentionally grasp it” (p. 85). As such, she cautions against not the questioning that goes along with such expansions, but the fixation on a single right

object or method that will solve the problem of “women” as subjects and identity politics once and for all—and for the supposed better of the field and of the larger political world.

Wiegman goes on to levy impressively nuanced versions of this argument for the antinormative imperatives of various fields: queer studies, which so often takes feminism as its place of departure, or radical “divergence” from old school identity studies (and which, in a later chapter, she takes to task for obsessively pursuing antinormativity, thus producing a normative for queer studies methodology itself); American studies, which in remaking itself as critical ethnic and international studies against its prior Cold War navel-gazing, winds up, Wiegman argues, reaffirming precisely that history as an “enduring disciplinary romance” of transformation and progress (p. 238); and whiteness studies, which, in a chapter I was prepared to find critically irrelevant but found was actually about critical irrelevancy, Wiegman uses as a cautionary tale of how an attempt to decenter power and privilege actually reinstates those paradigms. Wiegman’s most surprising and surprisingly convincing analysis is her controversial critique of the limits of that holy grail of interdisciplinary methodology of identity politics, intersectionality, which promises specificity and enacts generalities in its ubiquitous use, “promis[ing] that through it every relation of subordination can be brought into critical view” (p. 246). Her scope and insight are exhilarating, contradicting a great deal of conventional wisdom on the “good” side of academic and political battles.

If Wiegman is evasive on the point of how to get out of these binds of object attachment, that is exactly her point. We cannot get out, and there is no object capacious enough to fulfill our political desires. She does not articulate a better model, but I think she demonstrates one in practice. All we have is a constant critique of our attachments themselves, and the knowledge that such attachments, fantasies, and failures are the necessary but necessarily flawed conditions that compel intellectual work at its base. If that leaves us frustrated as feminists, such frustration may be generative. At an impasse, identity-based studies can be remade through the recognition of how our methodology may not directly align with methods of political/judicial activism. In arguing for a method of self-critique that can produce moments of critical, albeit temporary, convergence, Wiegman offers not a retreat from but the endurance of impossible political desire. Failure, for all three texts, is what we have in common: desire for what cannot be attained, for a future we cannot predict or know. As feminist theorist Gayatri Spivak has said, “a fully just world is impossible, forever deferred and different from our projections.”² Here, all three authors suggest that we stop trying to know, to predict—but not that we stop trying altogether. Instead, and in the meantime, we can attempt to narrate value in those failing modes of analysis, in attachments unfulfilled.

These three feminist texts are also reacting, implicitly or in part, to the antinormativity strain in queer studies. Berlant, in particular, exhibits compassion and understanding for our investments in the normative, our always flawed visions and strivings for the good life. Halberstam's exuberant insistence on the possibilities of animated film speaks to the same generous impulse, as does Wiegman's reminder that it is from her own attachment that she critiques object attachment in critical practice around identity and social justice. All three suggest that there is more feminism can do besides be the normativity police, and that the very disciplinary structure of negative critique often implies a "better than" status occluding the risks and impasses many experience in the name of (or while hoping for small glimpses of) the good life. In the end, Halberstam, Wiegman, and Berlant are inevitably inside of the ideologies they critique, gleefully and critically so. This complicity is all a part of their trenchant critiques of existing models of social justice that are not critical of their own practical and political object attachments.

The Queer Art of Failure, *Cruel Optimism*, and *Object Lessons* then explore what it means to live and practice within disciplinary structures, structures that left politics, antinormativity, and antiracist social justice politics inhabit in complex ways. This does not mean avoiding critique—Wiegman is especially unflinching on this point—but rather not easily claiming in critique the assumed "better" position based on one's particular attachment. The move to an expansive self-critique feels like a feminist project for the twenty-first century in an American academy that is caught between corporatization and obsolescence. These texts reanimate the field of American feminism not in the name of an object whose future visions and versions of justice we cannot know, but under the mark of our attachment to seeing through and surviving this particular feminist present. Their argument for divergence under the rubric of progressive/left/feminist politics reinvigorates the scope of the political and hence the potential political promises of feminist thought.

In their differences from their fields and from each other, Halberstam, Berlant, and Wiegman offer us new archives of texts, but most importantly, new methods of reading within our interdisciplinary frames. In this, their training in literary studies proves critical at a time when the university and especially the humanities are struggling for a twenty-first-century redefinition. These scholars "are willing to stake the world, including its very future, on interpretation," an impulse that can also be tracked in the career trajectories of Spivak, Inderpal Grewal, Caren Kaplan, and other major feminist theorists (Wiegman, p. 306). All of these scholars investigate the divergences and ordinary failures of fields not with defensive retreat but with the imaginative, deconstructive methods of critical analysis—the critical thinking that literary studies has seen as its claim within the

academy and beyond. In this sense, Halberstam's, Berlant's, and Wiegman's moves away from the norms of feminist thought are risky, necessary, and yes, optimistic in their insistence on reading the failures of the field as constitutive of the same critical and political attachments and alliances they seek to build.

NOTES

¹ Halberstam, though published under the name "Judith" here, goes by "Jack." He tackles the question of pronoun use and preference himself—eloquently—in a post on his personal website: <http://www.jackhalberstam.com/on-pronouns/>.

² Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason: Toward a History of the Vanishing Present* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), 199.