

Do you intend to die: Lauren Berlant on intimacy after suicide

x

Lauren Berlant
March 4, 2015

[Archive](#)

1) January 10, 2009

In the last two months, two people I know killed themselves; in the past few weeks, [many people](#) I don't know were [reported](#) to have killed themselves. *Time to collect the bodies*, I thought. I had the urge to create symptoms from all of them, to write a book that would make a pattern about what's impossible in contemporary life. That's how I manage things: I see a pattern, I ask why, then I find out what happened, describe, and conceptualize, to relieve myself of the feeling of too-closeness that makes certain stories and objects a mute-making threat and to produce scaffolds that can hold the event just so, so we (ok, I) can see it, walk around it, and move it somewhere else collectively. But it's not right to rush to take these deaths on pretending that their likeness is substantive just because they happened at the same time. We don't know enough about this time yet; what we know is what people do to continue keeping on, when they can.

The fiduciary suicides were events in the world because they're deemed auto-exemplary, self-evident illustrations of the unfolding meaning of the economic crisis that is becoming an atmosphere of social precarity that no one can disavow. Some people with power or fantasies of it, once covered in shame, cannot face the world with the face they have now lost. My personal suicides, on the other hand, might not have been examples of anything globally dramatic in the current historical moment – who knows? Anyone can be made exemplary, while also being singular beings trapped in life. Artists, as it happens, their precarity was affective more than economic, organized by a feeling of drowning in the impossibility of consequences. In their lives joys were brief interruptions from the disorganization of being that constant panic produces. No way out. That's what they all shared: not the end of optimism, but no end in sight of a pattern



That much I know. They couldn't detach from their situations. They couldn't tread water. They could not shut their minds up or down. They gave out. I don't want to numb with the details. This is a problem of method, ethics, storytelling.

II) February 17, 2009

self when I fell, but I wasn't alone.

— (Slogan for UK Telecare)

The question is about detaching. We are thinking about a particular case of the intention to die, that of suicide. There are other intentions related to risky addictive modes of physically self-undermining behavior that might also be characterized as part of the set of practices associated with intending to die (and writing in these tiny sixteenth notes makes me sound like a David Foster Wallace character, which scares me a little), but I think risky self-medicating behavior is as likely to be evidence of the drive to stay in proximity to life, to feeling, and to being present as it is to being dissociated and leaning toward the ultimate detachment. But one can't tell from the outside whether a given form of self-interruption moves toward life or its dissipation, for a little perturbation can mount a grand defense: a shift in the tonalities of dissociation can pretend to be a shift from absence or numbness to presence, while being actually a shift between dissociative modes.

My wonderful student [Anil](#) told me lots about this before he killed himself a few years ago. According to him, his warmth and presence intellectually, pedagogically, and intimately were just as detached as were his depressive recessions from life; according to him, each style of attachment-defense provided pleasure and armor of its own sort. I think he thought he would go on forever like this, living from a distance that often felt like too-closeness. But what he had no language for, and what I have some research language for developing now, is why those attachment-defenses might not have kept him in life, despite seeming both enervating and animating.

The work of being who you are, even if you take it for granted, depletes energy and produces those forms of lateral agency that your body (your brain, your nervous system) requires when you take breaks every few minutes, are incapable of more attention, devise ways of disappearing or being unreliable, and seek out opportunities for absorption that provide vacations from the will that is solicited in the guise of "your sovereignty". Thinking about suicide, the consequences of exhausted practical

III) March 21, 2009

The Campaign Against Living Miserably

Every day digs me deeper into the bumpy surface of this situation. Today, just for fun, I was reading a wonderful *Open Democracy* post on [the women of Greenham Common](#) and then the post turned suddenly from a discussion of women's emancipated political agency to a discussion of the global suicide epidemic among young men. The interviewee, an activist called Jane Powell, is now working in Manchester UK with a project called – heartbreakingly, really – “The Campaign Against Living Miserably (CALM)”.

[“The Campaign Against Living Miserably”](#) is aimed toward a – a what, a population, a world, a loose collection, a not-yet-formed intimate public – of young men who are alike not in their social location but in their styles of giving out so fast and so hard.

[Are you male? Are you living miserably?](#)

[Abuse](#) : [Alcohol](#) : [Drug Problems](#) : [Bereavement](#) : [Bullying](#) : [Divorce and Separation](#) : [Eating Disorders](#) : [Exam Stress](#) : [Financial Stress](#) : [Homelessness](#) : [Impotence](#) : [Masturbation](#) : [Mental Health](#) : [Racism](#) : [Relationships](#) : [Self Harm](#) : [Sexuality Suicide](#) : [Terminal illness Work Issues](#) : [In care?](#)

Drinking, doing serious drugs, hustling for life, they embody in extremity the paradox I talk about in my article [“Slow Death”](#): self-medicating activity that tilts toward self-destruction amidst overwhelming life. It can be seen as a refusal or embrace of sovereignty. But it can also be seen as a will to stay attached to a sense of unimpeded aliveness that can't be assimilated easily to ordinary or even physically possible projects of life building. The “Campaign Against Living Miserably” shows us how rapidly whole concepts of having and building a life can dissolve.

How much of this emergent discourse heralds the need to teach the formerly more [protected](#) economic classes how to adapt to poor people's ordinary stress? Or perhaps it manifests more simply a new deployment of popular culture's gift to the suffering: *you are not alone*. Each word of this piece could be linked to reportage on new precarious populations whose relation to “care of the self” tends pragmatically more toward affect management and material survival than politics, preserving something for futures, or making in the present a new affective and institutional infrastructure.

“Care” is a big buzzword in queer and feminist theory these days: in the U.S. the hope is that, rather than organizing the imaginaries of life and law around marriage and the couple form, durable relations of care could be protected so that people could make up



dependency and need.

At the same time, for many reasons I am bothered when “care” is defined as what happens among people face to face. It tends to assume that everyone has people and that everyone’s people have sufficient resources. Because this rhetoric of care is affective as well as institutional it obscures the centrality of antagonism, alterity, ambivalence, and not-caring to the adjudication of responsibility in collective life. It represses *money*. It brackets exploitation. As a politics, care rhetoric obscures how difficult it will be to orchestrate a new norm of equality-in-democracy for which we would have collectively to be willing to risk status loss. This was Roosevelt’s situation when Social Security was instantiated, and the tax-paying body politic’s commitment even to that is deflating. It will be threatening to have contingency and precarity as the new universals, and it will be instructive to see how people adjust politically to replacing the flying carpet of the American Dream.

If you begin, as I do, where people are giving out, you see that care often does not produce optimism about living, because it feels merely palliative: people have lost their faith in adding up to something. In [Cruel Optimism](#) “adding up to something” is my definition of the good life: the whole book looks at different styles of trying hard to stay in the world where adding up still seems to happen, amidst depleted resources.

IV) March 23, 2009

We have been talking about two kinds of detachment from life: detaching from life absolutely, and also detaching from *what counts* as life, from a particular way of imagining adding up to something or mattering. These are only sometimes the same process. “Detaching from life absolutely” tends toward the suicidal, from the literalization of the death drive to the achievement of a negative affective state, for example in aspirations to become numb, cool, dispassionate, flat, dissociated, defeated, a machine, normotic – whatever it takes to feel invulnerable to surprise.

But giving up on a deeply sustaining *idea* of life as such or the good life in particular can be shattering and life-affirming at the same time. You can’t know in advance whether you will want a feeling of negative liberty (freedom from) to be sustained indefinitely in the absence of maps. Stumbling around a landscape in the dark raises adrenalin that can tilt both toward thrill and threat. The economic crisis multiplies dramas of adjustment that register the cost of being in synch with crisis and out of synch too. Depression, both chemical and political, can have the same effect, producing the prisonhouse or the lightness of not caring; or the freedom or vertigo from detaching and seeing multiple horizons; or the excited scanning or dark melancholy that might saturate everywhere when desire no longer has an object to give living on a discrete shape

to the part of microadjustment that takes place as a bodily response, as proprioception, as mood, as a shadow in an episode, as coping, and not necessarily or usually in a causal chain or in consciousness or as an expressive symptom that can be read as a message. The activity of tightening and fraying the binding to life or life imaginary: these oscillations add up and subtract too. Detailing how is part of my project here.

So here's the frame-shifting story that gives this piece its name. I was to be in Melbourne last summer giving some talks, and my mother said to me, "Oh, your cousin is going to be in Australia too, maybe you can see each other!" Because I can be bratty-pedantic, I responded, "Australia's pretty big, Mom, I doubt it," but actually he was to be in Melbourne when I was.

This cousin is two or three years younger than me, but when we were growing up he seemed much much younger, partly because he was so irritatingly exuberant. We always had to perform for our families at Cousin's Clubs, and one kid after another was brought out to play the guitar, sing, or recite, and early on he became an amazing magician and thrilled the family, those "children of all ages" around whom I "loitered with intent to [mope](#)" until I left home for good.

So I didn't like him that much, because you couldn't have a real conversation with him: he was always too aspirational (trying to make you laugh or to be impressed or in awe of the spectacle). He was hilarious and explained things well, but it wasn't relaxing to be with him. Cuz left home at 14 to be a magician on cruise ships. Occasionally I would hear about him – the vast money he was making, his move out West, his apprenticeships with magicians, surgeons, and pop culture businessmen like Tony Robbins. Periodically we would talk on the phone, especially when he was beginning to turn his magic-related knowledge about what fools people into corporate-related knowledge about what binds people together. He began to help businesspeople understand how capitalist subjectivity works affectively.

We were deeply alike, but our audiences, styles, and aims remained starkly divergent. I'd see him on CNN explaining how sales were all about microaffective transactions between people more than about the qualities of the product, and I'd have to laugh at the fun-house mirror effect of it, because I was sure that we had both trained ourselves to understand – to develop knowledge and language for – what we really couldn't understand about the childhood environment we had both left earlier than our ages should have allowed.

I'm leaving a lot unsaid here, obviously. The point is that I grew a lot of abstract affection for him during the decades between conversations because, without knowing anything

to connect *now*. All they needed were knowledge and skills about connecting, transmitting confidence, and sustaining reciprocity.

On the day after I gave my master class on affect theory, we arranged to meet at the hotel in Melbourne where he was giving *his* master class, training and critiquing other financial-motivational speakers. We sat down to breakfast, and I said something like, so do you like your life, are you happy you've made these choices, is all of this traveling and being away from all those children you've had working for you? Many astonishing stories tumbled out – in the middle of which was this one.

He has three children, two girls and a boy. They're all named after precious commodities: name brands – say, like Mercedes – and natural resources – say, like Goldie. At some point the girls started acting weirdly, and dissociated from their formerly happy ways of being in the world. "Mercedes," the oldest, stopped eating. "Goldie" went very quiet. Cuz and his wife interrogated them: nothing, nothing, nothing. Denial. Finally, the youngest admitted to being molested by a family employee. "Mercedes" refused to admit anything, but continued not eating. She reached a stage about two weeks away from hospitalization, he thought. Cuz and I then talked about my later-life anorexia and I mentioned that I had always thought that it was wrong to say that the subject of anorexia wanted to die, that the very act of controlling the world while never being in control enough was a way of staying in life, staying focused and formally together while so much else seemed so close to crumbling.

At this point he starts to cry, so I do too, and we're both a little confused about that, and then he says something like: "So finally my wife let me try this tactic, although she didn't think it would work. I sat down with 'Mercedes'. I said to her: 'Mercedes,' do you intend to die? Because, if you intend to die, I'll pull the other children out of school and we'll take a trip around the world, so that at least you'll have had some experiences before you die. What do you think, would you like that? If you don't intend to die, then we have to do something else about this."

At this point he says to me, "Why are we crying?" I say that my best guess is that if anyone had ever talked to us like that when we were little, not only granting us our perspective on the world but organizing the world around the way we understood things, we wouldn't have had to become what we have become, people who go around helping other people find a way to use their particular minds to make themselves and the world they're in more possible. If anyone had ever talked to us like that, well – actually, people did talk to us like that, later, otherwise we couldn't have known that our knowledge was anything. We had teachers – the kind who wanted us genuinely to develop our own set of skills to become who we were, not who they were. Such relations

imagining mattering – “intending to live” – differently? What is the relation between flourishing materially and the will to affective reciprocity?

For most of my life it wasn't clear to me that living was better than not being alive, but I wasn't interested in not being alive, just in attending to what it is that people have to do to stay afloat. Staying alive was a given, but staying afloat wasn't. People need skills for that, and supports for that. The crisis of crumbling institutions of intimacy and durable consistency in the US at the present moment has something to do with a perceived loss of the relation of event to effect, so that it is harder and harder to know what it means materially to effectuate an intention to live, to float. My cousin was asking his daughter to state an intention that she didn't yet have, because that was the only way he could help her imagine mattering in the world. I am trying to learn what else there is to learn from that astonishing exchange.

*Note: We are publishing here a series of lightly edited posts from Lauren Berlant's research blog *Supervalent Thought*.*

All by Lauren Berlant:

[< Back to all articles](#)