

Berlant, Lauren and Lee Edelman. *Sex, or the Unbearable*. Pp. 168. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2014. US \$21.95 print; \$12.49 online. ISBN: 9780822355946.

Cahill, Ann J. *Overcoming Objectification: A Carnal Ethics*. Pp. 200. New York: Routledge, 2011. US \$39.95 print; \$35.96 online. ISBN: 9780415811538.

Gwynne, Joel. *Erotic Memoirs and Postfeminism: The Politics of Pleasure*. Pp. 136. Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan, 2013. US \$49.00 print; \$31.33 online. ISBN: 9781137326539.

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Sexuality and the erotic play central roles within the realm of the romance novel. As evidenced by recent contemporary criticism from some media outlets, the literary elite continues to deride romance novels as pornography for women and as objectifying the female characters thereby reinforcing cultural notions of gender and objectification.[1] Romance authors, scholars, and fans have taken to blogs and columns to combat these criticisms, yet larger cultural questions about the portrayal of sexuality and the issues about objectification in popular culture must be further explored.[2]

Sex and the erotic are often unsettling topics within contemporary culture, particularly expressions that lie outside the constructions of the heteronormative commodification model of sexuality. While Lauren Berlant and Lee Edelman's *Sex, or the Unbearable*, Ann J. Cahill's *Overcoming Objectification*, or Joel Gwynne's *Erotic Memoirs and Postfeminism* do not specifically address these issues within romance scholarship and contemporary popular culture, they offer insight into the core questions of these debates. Underpinned by feminist and queer theory, these three texts take on questions of the erotic, sexuality, and objectification in both historiographical and theoretical approaches. Their usefulness for romance scholars specifically and popular culture scholarship more

broadly is in their use of relatable and rich examples from art, film, and literature. All three texts offer maps, albeit strikingly different ones, for scholarship in popular culture.

Berlant and Edelman's *Sex, or the Unbearable* grows from the work of these two leading scholars of queer theory. The text seeks to articulate the spaces in our lives in which we are both comfortable and unsettled, in which we both connect and disconnect from others and ourselves: sex is the best example of this space for Berlant and Edelman. They write in the preface, "What we offer [...] is an analysis of relations that both overwhelm and anchor us—an affective paradox that often shapes the experience of sex. We approach sex here as a site, therefore, at which relationality is invested with hopes, expectations, and anxieties that are often *experienced* as unbearable" (vii). They utilize sex as the interaction with self and others as the core expression of their vision of the unbearable precisely because of its potential to be both settling and unsettling. At the heart of this discussion is the concept of negativity that undermines the idea of complete or stable identities. For Berlant and Edelman, sex offers a sense that the boundaries of identity and of self are undone, open, and disconcerting. Berlant writes, "Sex and love are not events that change anything, usually; they induce a loosening of the subject that puts fear, pleasure, awkwardness, and above all experimentality in a scene that forces its participants to disturb what it has meant to be a person and to 'have' a world" (117). Sex, love, the erotic, relationships with others do, indeed, unsettle the ability to claim a stable, fixed identity, as these encounters question the impermeability of the borders of self.

The structure of Berlant and Edelman's text is demonstrative of their larger thesis about relationality and the unbearable. They organize the text as a dialogue between the two of them, in which there is back and forth commentary and disagreements about the other's and their own arguments. The structure is incredibly dense and is at times unsettling to the reader. Indeed, at times the book is unbearable in the manner that Berlant and Edelman show the unsettling nature of relationality and dialogue. They practice a dialogic approach to creating their narrative by writing and responding to each other throughout the text, and their disagreement on the theories can cause confusion about the argument of the overall text. It is often like the reader is an unsuspecting audience to their private conversations and frequently ones that seem to have already been in progress. These unsettled feelings would be amplified if the reader were not familiar with their earlier individual works, such as Berlant's *Cruel Optimism* (2011) and Edelman's *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (2004). Additionally, they utilize and create a dialogue with Jacques Lacan, Gayle Rubin, and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick in the first two chapters, and in the third they apply their methodology to the short story "Break It Down" by Lydia Davis, in which a narrator discusses the breakdown of a relationship. Through their engagement with this text, Berlant and Edelman articulate the manner in which their individual positions differ but also build a shared argument that sex and by association relationships undo the stability of knowledge and identity. Thus, for example, Edelman writes, "To encounter another is to have to confront our otherness to ourselves. The wonder is not that we get things wrong: dialogue tends to proceed, after all, as much by identifying and correcting misreadings as by concurring with the other's account" (68-69). Berlant responds, "As in politics and sex, in theory the encounter induces all the concomitant dread and excitement at the potential for something to become different" (71). While sex and encounters with others destabilize identity, they also create potential for growth, for change, for an indefinable something else.

This discussion of sex and the unbearable offers a great deal for the romance scholar. Berlant and Edelman practice a scholarship based in relationality and dialogue. Berlant writes in the afterword, “Structural consistency is a fantasy; the noise of relation’s impact, inducing incompleteness where it emerges, is the overwhelming condition that enables the change that, within collaborative action, can shift lived worlds” (125). Sex and relationships do shift individual’s worlds and undermine that structural consistency that Berlant cites, which many readers and scholars of romance see within the stories that are so much a part of the romance genre. A sexual encounter or falling in love can and frequently does upend the identity and lives of so many characters in our favorite novels. While Berlant and Edelman do not address popular romances, their work can be informative to the work of romance scholars in tackling issues of the place of sex and the erotic, especially within some romance tropes, such as discovery of a new sexual orientation plots in queer romances, or submissive-for-you plots in many erotic romances of all orientations.

While Berlant and Edelman address the realm of sex as a moment of decentering, Ann Cahill’s *Overcoming Objectification: A Carnal Ethics* seeks to confront the topic of objectification and determine a new approach to the issues at the heart of the feminist concerns with the concept. She writes,

Among the many indispensable concepts associated with feminist theory, objectification holds a privileged position. The claim that patriarchy renders women things, thus robbing them of a host of qualities central to personhood—moral agency, self-worth, autonomy, to name a few—connects a disparate group of social realities that otherwise might remain conceptually separate. (1)

She examines the literature of feminist approaches to the concept of objectification, which she states is a central tenant of feminist theory historically and has impacted the broader dialogue about gender and sexuality. Cahill addresses issues surrounding objectification and masculine bodies, “unsexed women” (women who are not viewed through the lens of sexual objectification, for instance mothers and women who are disabled) sex work, and sexual violence. Her project is to describe the theories of objectification, and to express a different model for discussing the body, articulating a new vision of sexual ethics that posits the possibility of sexual encounters as positive experiences for those involved. She relies upon Luce Irigaray as a theoretical guidepost for her argument against the prioritization of the concept of objectification and in her articulation of “carnal ethics.”

Cahill outlines two positions of feminist thinkers and their expressions of objectification; those who use it as an underpinning to their theories, such as Catherine MacKinnon and Simone de Beauvoir, and those who analyze the idea itself, such as Linda LeMoncheck, Martha Nussbaum, and Rae Langton. As Cahill examines these positions, she notes that the ideas of objectification all rely upon a particularly Enlightenment and Kantian notion of the modern construction of self that prioritizes the mind over the body, thus disembodimenting human beings. Through their reliance on this Kantian construction, feminist theorists invoking the idea of objectification disassociate women from their bodies in order to address the sexual objectification that occurs. The core of these analyses is that women are reduced only to their bodies and not treated as more than their body and that,

most frequently, these arguments center on women in pornography as the example to the manner in which objectification functions.

Cahill breaks down this theory of objectification, stating that the objectified woman is different than any other type of object as she is still able to communicate her desire and behaviors, which is part of the point in the theory of the objectification—to deny that the woman is a talking, functioning being. She writes, “To be sexual is to be a thing, and often to be the object of another’s gaze and attention; the pleasure of being such an object cannot be explained simply by the internalization of a dominance/submission framework, since we can imagine and even experience such objectification without hierarchy” (26). For Cahill, being a sexual being and engaging in sexual activity has at the heart of it being seen substantively as an other.

Sexuality cannot be divorced from the body, and therefore, objectification, as the definition stands, may not be the most effective tool to understanding the concepts of subjecthood and identity. She argues that sexual objects can be men, women, and trans* people and that the objectification may not be harmful but a part of sexual desire in that it acknowledges the embodiment of the other. Objectification, as it stands within feminist theory, does not allow for positive sexual interactions from Cahill’s standpoint. Cahill, therefore, argues that using the concept of *derivatization* would be better for articulating the potential for harm in sexual interactions. Cahill writes, “To derivatize is to portray, render, understand, or approach a being solely or primarily as the reflection, projection, or expression of another being’s identity, desires, fears, etc.” (32). What is damaging, for Cahill, is the derivatization of others, in which the other serves only to fulfill the desire of the one to the detriment or dismissal of the other.

In the end, Cahill argues for a concept of an embodied intersubjectivity, which she describes as “be[ing] open (even vulnerable) to the attention, acts, and being of the other” (xiv). Later, she writes,

To be sexually intersubjective is to be aware of one’s sexual particularity as an ongoing project, a project grounded in one’s material existence and location while simultaneously invested in and marked by the sexual particularity of others. Difference is described here not as a threat to be negotiated or a problem to be solved, but rather as the possibility condition for the embodied interactions through which the self develops. (153)

For Cahill, sexuality must be grounded within the body as it is embedded within the lived experiences of the individual’s materiality. As she argues, this sexuality is one that is based in dialogue, consent, and negotiations. It is about sharing desires and determining together what is sustainable sexuality within the relationship.

With this conceptual model of an embodied intersubjectivity, Cahill seeks to overcome the disassociation from the body that occurs through traditional constructions of objectification, but she also argues for a sexuality that is built upon positive agency. Cahill’s text offers the romance scholar an alternative to the feminist constructions of objectification that have often underscored criticisms of the portrayals of erotic romance heroines and heroes within the text as well as in their representations on novel covers. Moreover by nuancing the ideas around embodiment and sexuality, she demonstrates an approach that opens discussions around sexuality and identity for all individuals, not just

addressing issues facing women. Additionally, Cahill's text is engaging as it utilizes examples from popular culture, such as a 2003 Miller Lite advertisements, Eve Ensler's *The Vagina Monologues* (1996), *Striptease* (1996), and *The Full Monty* (1997), and dissects complicated theoretical models in understandable and readable ways. In this manner, *Overcoming Objectification* is not just a solid text for scholars looking to complicate notions of objectification but would also be adaptable to a classroom setting.

While Cahill and Berlant and Edelman offer theoretical arguments about issues around sex and sexuality, Joel Gwynne creates an analysis of source material in his *Erotic Memoirs and Postfeminism*, thus making his project feel different from the two previous texts under discussion. His project is to study a sample set of women's erotic memoirs (fewer than twenty in total) with the earliest published in 1993 to the latest in 2009. He breaks his text into thematic chapters—agency, intimacy, pornography, and transgression—which are,

committed to analysing the ways in which contemporary women express and live their individual, diverse and private sexual identities amidst conflicting narratives of female sexuality. This study is premised on the belief that contemporary erotic memoirs may have a special role to play in the process of reconfiguring female sexuality as active and agentic . . . It is also premised on the conviction that, while offering private conceptualisations of female sexual subjectivity, women's memoirs are inherently political in their colonisation of the male dominated space within mass culture where mainstream narratives of human sexuality reside. (6)

These memoirs demonstrate the ways in which women interact with and represent their sexualities and, beyond that, the world around them. He argues for the social project of the erotic, through which he examines and critiques these women's memoirs. The sociality of the erotic grows out of the continual reexamination and revising of ideas of sex and sexuality that occurs through dialogue, media, and other institutions and interactions.

Gwynne draws widely on feminist theory, and he instructively articulates the historiographic trajectory of such theory and of the feminist movement. His analysis of the idea of postfeminism, which he posits early in the text, is also substantive, and his use of this terminology in conjunction with his source material demonstrates the cultural milieu in which these memoirs are published and that demonstrate a postfeminist consciousness. This consciousness foregrounds the belief that feminism accomplished its goals, and Gwynne argues that the memoirs he studies are framed by their authors and publishers as postfeminist and liberatory but ultimately demonstrate an on-going oppressive environment for women and their sexuality. "One cannot avoid concluding that popular women's erotic memoirs—while framed as liberating—continue to celebrate male sexual-domination," he writes (119), and he views the authors' sexual explorations as failures of their own liberation. To use Cahill's term, Gwynne presents the authors as derivatized, arguing that their sexuality and their experiences are reflections of their culture and their lovers and not their own desires and choices.

For the romance scholar, Gwynne's text offers an excellent source for feminist theoretical approaches to sexuality over the last few decades. His feminist historiography is thoughtful and would be helpful for students, especially in conjunction with some of the

memoirs themselves as well as other texts on women's sexuality and popular romance. Unlike the other authors in this review, Gwynne does address the popular romance occasionally throughout his text, and he links certain trends in erotic romance with these erotic memoirs. Not all of these links are convincing. For example, Gwynne discusses briefly the popular juggernaut that is the *Fifty Shades* series, although he compares it to the *Twilight* Saga without seeming to understand that *Fifty Shades* began as *Twilight* fan fiction. He writes, "[Anastasia Steele] reminds the reader of another virginal romantic heroine of postfeminist popular culture—Isabella Swan" (8). This language could easily have been an editing error, but it might also suggest a lack of knowledge about the romances he occasionally mentions, and there are equally jarring moments throughout the text in which a derisive attitude about certain sexual practices and lifestyles bleeds through his writing either intentionally or unintentionally. Of particular interest here, are his discussions of BDSM, which he calls an "eroticisation of power" (24). When examining the women's discussions of their explorations of D/s dynamics and rape fantasies, his analysis recalls the concept of "false consciousness" that he couches in a discussion about feminist responses to these issues (92). He argues that these memoirs "engage in a process of normalizing and destigmatising not only ostensibly transgressive female behaviour, such as sexual promiscuity, but even more extreme forms of taboo sexuality such as sadomasochism, prostitution and paedophilia" (12-13). His articulation establishes a negative view of these author's experiences and by extension their choices and desires.

All three of these texts—Berlant and Edelman's *Sex, or the Unbearable*, Cahill's *Overcoming Objectification*, and Gwynne's *Erotic Memoirs and Postfeminism*—will be of use to scholars of popular romance. They offer romance scholars new theoretical approaches and critical methodologies, as well as new structural models for pairing fictional and non-fictional accounts of sex, the erotic, and sexuality within contemporary culture.

[1] See, for instance, William Giraldi's column for *The New Republic* on May 19, 2014 entitled "Finally an Academic Text Devoted to '50 Shades of Grey': When a Very Smart Scholar Takes on a Very Dumb Book," <http://www.newrepublic.com/article/117814/50-shades-grey-academic-study-feminist-point-view>.

[2] To name a few examples, see Alyssa Rosenberg's "Men, Stop Lecturing Women about Reading Romance Novels" for *The Washington Post* on May 20, 2014, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/news/act-four/wp/2014/05/20/men-stop-lecturing-women-about-reading-romance-novels/>, or Rachel Kramer Bussel's interview with Eloisa James on May 29, 2014, for *Vulture*, "Eloisa James on Feminism, Sexuality, and Why Romance Novels Are More Than Worthy of Respect," <http://www.vulture.com/2014/05/romance-novelist-elioisa-james-interview.html>.