LAUREN BERLANT

THE UNFINISHED BUSINESS OF SENTIMENTALITY IN AMERICAN CULTURE

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*The Unfinished Business of Sentimentality in American Culture*

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## PREFACE

Previous versions of this preface narrated how emotionally thorny it was to write this book. I wrote of myself and of women in my particular family—from Lena and Sadie to Mara and Cindy—who entered femaleness at different historical moments and yet whose styles of being in femininity have contained uncanny similarities. As you can imagine, such resonances raised intensities of attachment, love, protectiveness, gratitude, disappointment, despair, anger, and resentment that created obstacles to lithesome storytelling.

Then a friend not from the humanities asked me, "Why are you airing your personal business here? Isn't your knowledge the point?" Right, I responded—well, in the humanities we try to foreground what motivates and shapes our knowledge, and a personal story can telegraph a perspective efficiently and humanly. I wasn't happy with this somewhat canned response, although I also believe it. Yet the autobiographical isn't the personal. This nonintuitive phrase is a major presupposition of *The Female Complaint*. In the contemporary consumer public, and in the *longue durée* that I'm tracking, all sorts of narratives are read as autobiographies of collective experience. The personal is the general. Publics presume intimacy.

But how can I call "intimate" a public constituted by strangers who consume common texts and things? By "intimate public" I do not mean a public sphere organized by autobiographical confession and chest-baring, although there is often a significant amount of first-person narrative in an intimate public. What makes a public sphere intimate is an expectation that the consumers of its particular stuff *already* share a worldview and emotional knowledge that they have derived from a broadly common historical experience. A certain circularity structures an intimate public, therefore: its consumer participants are perceived to be marked by a commonly lived history; its narratives and things are deemed expressive of that history while also shaping its conventions of belonging; and, expressing the sensational, embodied experience of living as a certain kind of being in the world, it promises also to provide a better experience of social belonging—partly through participation in the relevant commodity culture, and partly because of its revelations about how people can live. So if, from a theoretical standpoint, an intimate public is a space of mediation in which the personal is refracted through the general, what's salient for its consumers is that it is a place of recognition and reflection. In an intimate public sphere emotional contact, of a sort, is made.

In other words, an intimate public is an achievement. Whether linked to women or other nondominant people, it flourishes as a porous, affective scene of identification among strangers that promises a certain experience of belonging and provides a complex of consolation, confirmation, discipline, and discussion about how to live as an *x*. One may have chosen freely to identify as an *x*; one may be marked by traditional taxonomies—those details matter, but not to the general operation of the public sense that some qualities or experience are held in common. The intimate public provides anchors for realistic, critical assessment of the way things are and provides material that foments enduring, resisting, overcoming, and enjoying being an *x*. To be all of these things to all of these people, though, the intimate public's relation to the political and to politics is extremely uneven and complex. This book tracks the "bargaining" with power and desire in which members of intimate publics always seem to be engaging.

*The Female Complaint* tells a story about the emergence and conventions of the first mass cultural intimate public in the United States. This "women's

culture" is distinguished by a view that the people marked by femininity already have something in common and are in need of a conversation that feels intimate, revelatory, and a relief even when it is mediated by commodities, even when it is written by strangers who might not be women, and even when its particular stories are about women who seem, on the face of it, vastly different from each other and from any particular reader.

Women have long come to "women's culture" to experience versions of personal life that are made up by other people claiming to derive their stories from other women's real lives, and who knows? The consumers of "women's culture" do not always need its material to be true empirically—so much of it is marked as fantasy and expressed in extreme genres tending to hyperbole and grandiosity, which are forms of realism when social suffering is the a priori of experience, seen historically and across a wide variety of locations. But the commodities of women's intimate public sphere implicitly claim to sanction perspectives derived broadly from women's experience. The contents are TBA.

This presumption that there is a structure of relevancy, address, and absorption enables the consumers of "women's culture" to feel that their emotional lives are already shared and have already been raised to a degree of general significance while remaining true to what's personal. The domain of detail is always being negotiated, debated, and taken personally. This means that people participate in it who may share nothing of the particular worlds being represented in a given magazine, book, film, or soap opera venue. But even when people speak out against the terms the intimate public sets out as normative, they are still participating in the promise of belonging that it represents insofar as they are trying to recalibrate whose experience it can absorb so that they can feel included in the mass intimacy that has promised to include them.

One of the main jobs of the minoritized arts that circulate through mass culture is to tell identifying consumers that "you are not alone (in your struggles, desires, pleasures)": this is something we know but never tire of hearing confirmed, because aloneness is one of the affective experiences of being collectively, structurally unprivileged. This is barely a paradox. You experience taxonomic saturation ("labels") personally, but they are not about *you* personally. They are bigger than the both of us. What gets uttered is a collective

story about the personal that is not organized by the singular autobiography. In "What Is a Minor Literature?" Deleuze and Guattari argue that one's identification with any material marked by a "minor" voice performs one's attachment to being generic, to being a member of a population that has been marked out as having collective qualities that are apprehensible in individuals. They also suggest that there are no simply personal voices for the minoritized author: the singular materials of a specific life are readable only as particulars that are exemplary not of the individual's life but of that *kind* of life. So consumption of "women's culture" would be, in this view, which is also my view, a way of experiencing one's own story as part of something social, even if one's singular relation to that belonging is extremely limited, episodic, ambivalent, rejecting, or mediated by random encounters with relevantly marked texts.

The works of "women's culture" enact a fantasy that my life is not just mine, but an experience understood by other women, even when it is not shared by many or any. Commodified genres of intimacy, such as Oprahesque chat shows and "chick lit," circulate among strangers, enabling insider self-help talk such as "girl talk" to flourish in an intimate public. These genres claim to reflect a kernel of common experience and provide frames for encountering the impacts of living as a woman in the world. Sentimentality and complaint are two ends of this commercial convention, with feminism as a kind of nosy neighbor. In the book I call women's culture "juxtapolitical" because, like most mass-mediated nondominant communities, that of feminine realist-sentimentality thrives in *proximity* to the political, occasionally crossing over in political alliance, even more occasionally doing some politics, but most often not, acting as a critical chorus that sees the expression of emotional response and conceptual recalibration as achievement enough. The strange and widespread phenomenon of publics ambivalent about politics is one of the main concerns of this book.

*The Female Complaint* constitutes the second stage of my "national sentimentality" project, flanked by *The Anatomy of National Fantasy* on one side and *The Queen of America Goes to Washington City* on the other. This series charts the emergence of the U.S. political sphere as an affective space, a space of attachment and identification that is not saturated merely by ideological or cognitive content but is also an important sustainer of people's desires for

reciprocity with the world. Publics are affective insofar as they don't just respond to material interests but magnetize optimism about living and being connected to strangers in a kind of nebulous *communitas*. This book focuses on the ways a variety of nonprivileged subjects circulate through intimate publics to engender kinds of insider recognition and cultural self-development that, while denigrated in the privileged publics of the United States, provide an experience of social belonging in proximity to the technologies that make the nation itself a site of affective investment and emotional identification. (To readers who do think that women in the United States are subordinated no longer, here is another view. In modern liberal democratic societies, most inequality is partial, contradictory, and contested: it is often more informal [in behavior] than formal [law or policy]. Yet these complex conditions are not so complicated that their negative impacts are unpredictable. Disrespect for women is not unpredictable *enough*. It is more often affectively sensed or experienced in episodes than objective and dramatically fixable. Popular culture is terrible at dealing with mixed bags and mixed feelings when the register is ideological and the topic is intimate, and women remain the default managers of the intimate. Even if social negativity and antagonism are intricate and uneven and not merely top-down, the social field is still shaped powerfully by them.)

In *The Anatomy of National Fantasy* the law and the spaces of everyday life provide overlapping contexts for tracking the development of official and intimate publics in the early U.S. period: sometimes "the people" are authoritarian and identify with the law's strict discipline of its most vulnerable people *and at the same time* they develop their own networks of sympathy and recognition that create alternative spaces of survival and solidarity. This contradiction never bothers anyone: intimate publics, politically and institutionally mediated, but also emerging from shared spaces of the reproduction of life, thrive *because of* the extreme amount of contradiction they absorb about the range of possible, plausible responses to conditions of unfairness. Just as people are politically incoherent, so too are intimate publics and bodies politic: remember, national sentimentality is not about being right or logical but about maintaining an affective transaction with a world whose terms of recognition and reciprocity are being constantly struggled over and fine-tuned.

The last chapter of *Anatomy* opens up into the world of *The Female Complaint*, showing how Hawthorne's concept of a public was shaped by the sentimental focus on feminine suffering and conventions of reparative compassion. *The Female Complaint* then goes on to argue that starting in the 1830s an intimate public sphere of femininity constituted the first subcultural, mass-mediated, market population of relatively politically disenfranchised people in the United States. The intimate public branched off from, without entirely becoming antagonistic toward, the political scene of inequality that organized women as a subaltern population. Strategies for new improvisations and adaptations around women's suffering, emotional expertise, and practical agency became the main register for the sentimental publicity associated with this nondominant population. Even arguments about what the vote meant for women turned on how women feel and how that feeling produces knowledge that shapes what is politically possible. Popular and feminist melodramas repeat variations on this domain of feeling, where the question of the desire for and cost of feminine conventionality keeps being replayed in conventional texts. *The Queen of America* takes up this genealogy of public intimacy, tracking the development of a dominant public sphere organized around suffering and other intimate topics in the United States. What was a minor register of survival aesthetics has also become a predominant way even for elites to orchestrate a claim that their social discomfort amounts to evidence of injustice to them. Meanwhile, the fear and prospect of mass or live political activity by bodies politic permeates all of the books in this trilogy. The displacement of politics to the realm of feeling both opens a scene for the analysis of the operations of injustice in lived democracy and shows the obstacles to social change that emerge when politics becomes privatized.

At the same time, the fact that political feeling has a history of mediation means that its conventions can change. The optimism of this book, and there's not much of it, is located in the centrality of aesthetics and pedagogy to shaping fantasies, identifications, and attachments to particular identities and life narratives. The frustration accompanying that optimism has to do with the difficulty of inducing structural transformation out of shifts in collective feeling.

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## CONTENTS

# INTRODUCTION Intimacy, Publicity, and Femininity

> Every normal female yearns
> to be a luminous person.
> FANNIE HURST

Everyone knows what the female complaint is: women live for love, and love is the gift that keeps on taking.[1] Of course that's a simplifying phrase: but it's not false, just partial. In the contemporary world of U.S. women's popular culture the bitter vigilance of the intimately disappointed takes up a lot of space: *The Bitch in the House*; *The Bride Stripped Bare*; and *Are Men Necessary?* among many others.[2] These hard-edged titles, however, conceal the tender fantasies of a better good life that the books also express. They market what is sensational about the complaint, speaking from a pretense to skewer an open secret that has been opened and skewered, in U.S. popular culture, since at least the 1830s. Fusing feminine rage and feminist rage, each has its own style of hailing the wounded to testify, to judge, to yearn, and to think beyond the norms of sexual difference, a little.

These books manifest the latest developments in what this book calls the mode of "the female complaint." They foreground witnessing and explaining women's disappointment in the tenuous

relation of romantic fantasy to lived intimacy. Critical, they are also sentimental, and therefore ambivalent: they trust affective knowledge and irrational assurance more than the truths of any ideology; they associate femininity with the pleasures, burdens, and virtues of emotional expertise and track its methods in different situations; they focus on the sacrifice of women's emotional labor to a variety of kinds of callousness, incompetence, and structural inequity; they catalog strategies of bargaining, adaptation, and flouting the rules. But in popular culture ambivalence is seen as the failure of a relation, the opposite of happiness, rather than as an inevitable condition of intimate attachment and a pleasure in its own right (as evidenced in the affectionate ironies toward personality of the situation comedy and the thrilling reencounter with pleasure, foreboding, and disappointment familiar to fans of the soap opera and the melodrama).[3] The complaint genres of "women's culture," therefore, tend to foreground a view of power that blames flawed men and bad ideologies for women's intimate suffering, all the while maintaining some fidelity to the world of distinction and desire that produced such disappointment in the first place. They also provide tremendous pleasure in their vigilance toward recording how other women manage. One might say that it's a space of disappointment, but not disenchantment.

*The Female Complaint* focuses on what has evolved and shifted around but not changed profoundly in the history of public-sphere femininity in the United States—a love affair with conventionality. It emerges from a desire to understand what keeps people attached to disaffirming scenarios of necessity and optimism in their personal and political lives.[4] It argues that the unfinished business of sentimentality—that "tomorrow is another day" in which fantasies of the good life *can* be lived[5]—collaborates with a sentimental account of the social world as an affective space where people ought to be legitimated because they have feelings and because there is an intelligence in what they feel that *knows* something about the world that, if it were listened to, could make things better.

This very general sense of confidence in the critical intelligence of affect, emotion, and good intention produces an orientation toward agency that is focused on ongoing adaptation, adjustment, improvisation, and developing wiles for surviving, thriving, and transcending the world as it presents itself. It is not usually expressed in or addressed to the political register: as I indicated in the preface, generally intimate publics such as this one operate in

aesthetic worlds that are juxtapolitical, flourishing in proximity to the political because the political is deemed an elsewhere managed by elites who are interested in reproducing the conditions of their objective superiority, not in the well-being of ordinary people or life-worlds. As the first half of this book argues in some detail, even when women sentimentalists turn to politics, it is not usually because they view politics as a resource for living but because they see it as a degraded space and a threat to happiness and justice that needs reforming so that better living can take place.[6]

Each chapter of the book looks at a different permutation of the space of permission to thrive that this particular women's intimate public stands for, for its participants: permission to live small but to feel large; to live large but to want what is normal too; to be critical without detaching from disappointing and dangerous worlds and objects of desire. Over more than a century and a half of publication and circulation, the motivating engine of this scene has been the aesthetically expressed desire to be *somebody* in a world where the default is being nobody or, worse, being presumptively *all wrong*: the intimate public legitimates qualities, ways of being, and entire lives that have otherwise been deemed puny or discarded. It creates *situations* where those qualities can appear as luminous.

Thus to love conventionality is not only to love something that constrains someone or some condition of possibility: it is another way of talking about negotiating belonging to a world. To love a thing is not only to embrace its most banal iconic forms, but to work those forms so that individuals and populations can breathe and thrive in them or in proximity to them.[7] The convention is not only a *mere* placeholder for what could be richer in an underdeveloped social imaginary, but it is also sometimes a profound placeholder that provides an affective confirmation of the idea of a shared confirming imaginary in advance of inhabiting a material world in which that feeling can actually be lived. In short, this affair is not an assignation with inauthenticity. In popular culture, when conventionality is not being called a homogenizing threat to people's sovereignty and singularity it is seen as a true expression of something both deep and simple in the human. By "conventionality" I span the term's normative and aesthetic senses and claim that the mass mediation of desires in women's genres constructs a deep affinity between them.[8]

This is to say that, in the scene of this particular public, femininity is a genre with deep affinities to the genres associated with femininity. In this