The(e)ories: Critical Theory & Sexuality Studies presents

FANTASIES OF THE GOOD LIFE: READING LAUREN BERLANT’S CRUEL OPTIMISM

A two-day intensive, interdisciplinary seminar
Sponsored by the UCD Humanities Institute

Friday 7-Saturday 8 June 2013
Humanities Institute, University College Dublin, Ireland

VENUE DETAILS
Friday 7 June 2013: Seminar Room, Clinton Institute for American Studies, University College Dublin, Belfield, Dublin 4, Ireland (http://www.ucdclinton.ie/). A campus map is available to download here: http://www.ucd.ie/maps

Saturday 8 June 2013: Room H204, Humanities Institute, University College Dublin, Belfield, Dublin 4, Ireland (http://www.ucd.ie/humanities). A campus map is available to download here: http://www.ucd.ie/maps

SEMINAR DESCRIPTION
“Cruel optimism” names a relation of attachment to compromised conditions of possibility. What is cruel about these attachments, and not merely inconvenient or tragic, is that the subjects who have x in their lives might not well endure the loss of their object or scene of desire, even though its presence threatens their well-being, because whatever the content of the attachment, the continuity of the form
of it provides something of the continuity of the subject’s sense of what it means to keep on living on and to look forward to being in the world. This phrase points to a condition different than that of melancholia, which is enacted in the subject’s desire to temporize an experience of the loss of an object/scene with which she has identified her ego continuity. Cruel optimism is the condition of maintaining an attachment to a problematic object in advance of its loss’ (Lauren Berlant, ‘Cruel Optimism’, differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies 17.5 (2006): 21).

This two-day intensive, interdisciplinary seminar will be devoted to reading and discussing Professor Lauren Berlant’s recently-published book Cruel Optimism (Durham: Duke University Press 2011), from a range of theoretical and interdisciplinary perspectives including feminism, queer theory, visual culture, sociology, political theory, literary studies, psychoanalysis, disability studies, race and ethnicity studies, philosophy, management studies, American studies and critical legal studies among others. The seminar will feature a lecture by Lauren Berlant on her current research, followed by a series of thematic discussions, each preceded by panels of informal responses (5-10 mins) to the issues raised in Cruel Optimism. While the seminar will pay attention to a wide range of topics treated across Berlant’s work and in her current book (including the good life, fantasy, desire, temporality, sovereignty, trauma, crisis, citizenship, intimacy, antinormativity, pedagogy, obesity, public sex, among others) we will be primarily focusing on three broad themes in our discussions: 1) Affect, 2) Biopolitics, and 3) Precarity. The emphasis in this two-day seminar will be on discussion.

REQUIRED READING
All delegates must purchase and read a copy of Cruel Optimism by Lauren Berlant (Durham: Duke University Press 2011) in advance of the seminar.

DESCRIPTION OF CRUEL OPTIMISM (DUKE UNIVERSITY PRESS 2011)
A relation of cruel optimism exists when something you desire is actually an obstacle to your flourishing. Offering bold new ways of conceiving the present, Lauren Berlant describes the cruel optimism that has prevailed since the 1980s, as the social-democratic promise of the postwar period in the United States and Europe has retracted. People have remained attached to unachievable fantasies of the good life — with its promises of upward mobility, job security, political and social equality, and durable intimacy — despite evidence that liberal-capitalist societies can no longer be counted on to provide opportunities for individuals to make their lives ‘add up to something’.

Arguing that the historical present is perceived affectively before it is understood in any other way, Berlant traces affective and aesthetic responses to the dramas of adjustment that unfold amid talk of precarity, contingency, and crisis. She suggests that our stretched-out present is characterized by new modes of temporality, and she explains why trauma theory — with its focus on reactions to the exceptional event that shatters the ordinary — is not useful for understanding the ways that people adjust over time, once crisis itself has become ordinary. Cruel Optimism is a remarkable affective history of the present.

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LAUREN BERLANT

Lauren Berlant is George M. Pullman Professor of English at the University of Chicago, USA. Her national sentimentality trilogy — The Anatomy of National Fantasy (Chicago University Press 1991), The Queen of America Goes to Washington City (Duke University Press 1997) and The Female Complaint (Duke University Press 2008) — has now morphed into a quartet, with Cruel Optimism (Duke University Press 2011) addressing precarious publics and the aesthetics of affective adjustment in the contemporary US and Europe. A co-editor of the journal Critical Inquiry, she is also editor of Intimacy (2000); Our Monica, Ourselves: The Clinton Affair and the National Interest (2001, with Lisa Duggan); Compassion: The Culture and Politics of an Emotion (2004); and On the Case (a special issue of Critical Inquiry, 2007). Her most recent book is Desire/Love (Punctum 2012). She blogs at www.supervalentthought.com and is also a founding member of the art/activist group Feel Tank Chicago.

Further details about Lauren Berlant: http://english.uchicago.edu/faculty/berlant

REGISTRATION

Delegates must be available to attend both days of the seminar. There is a registration fee of €30 (academics/waged) and €10 (students/unwaged) payable in advance or on the day of the seminar. To register please email: Noreen Giffney (noreen.giffney@gmail.com), Anne Mulhall (anne.mulhall@ucd.ie) and Michael O’Rourke (tranquilised_icon@yahoo.com). We require the following details to confirm your place:

➢ Name
➢ Affiliation/organisation (if applicable)
➢ Short biographical note (c. 150-200 words) for inclusion in the seminar pack

For delegates travelling from outside Ireland, we ask that you send us your flight details by Friday 17 May 2013 in order to confirm your place.

Early booking is advisable as places are limited. Registration operates on a first-come, first-served basis.

SEMINAR SCHEDULE

Day One: Friday 7 June 2013
Venue: Seminar Room, Clinton Institute of American Studies, University College Dublin

12.15 pm-1.00 pm Registration

1.15 pm-1.30 pm Welcome & Opening Remarks: Noreen Giffney, Anne Mulhall & Michael O’Rourke
1.30 pm-2.30 pm Lauren Berlant (University of Chicago, USA) ‘No World Poetics: On Biopolitics and the Attachment to Life’

Lecture Description: Hannah Arendt argues that worldlessness is a catastrophe. This talk offers another view. Reading with Claudia Rankine (Don’t Let Me Be Lonely), the novel and film of A Single Man (Christopher Isherwood, 1964; Tom Ford, 2009), and Harryette Mullen (Sleeping with the Dictionary (2002)), it describes an aesthetics and a subjectivity shaped on one side by suicide and on the other by a life drive that is also, paradoxically, negative, in that it turns toward life by turning away from the world of injury, negation, and tedious contingency that endure as an defining presence for biopolitical subjects. It suggests attending to and developing a dissociative poetics. The talk will be less abstract than this abstract.

2.30-3.00 pm Tea & Coffee Break

3.00-4.00 pm Discussion with Lauren Berlant

4.00 pm Close of Day One

Day Two: Saturday 8 June 2013
Venue: Room H204, Humanities Institute of Ireland, University College Dublin

9.45 am-10.00 am Welcome & Opening Remarks: Noreen Giffney, Anne Mulhall & Michael O’Rourke

10.00 am-10.30 am Introductions

10.30 am-12.15 pm AFFECT
A series of short, informal responses (5-10 mins each) will precede a general discussion of the Introduction and chapters 1 & 2.

12.15 pm-1.15 pm Lunch

1.15 pm-3.00 pm BIOPOLITICS
A series of short, informal responses (5-10 mins each) will precede a general discussion of chapters 3 & 4.

3.00 pm-3.30 pm Tea & Coffee Break

3.30 pm-5.15 pm PRECARITY
A series of short, informal responses (5-10 mins each) will precede a general discussion of the Introduction and chapters 5, 6 & 7.

5.15 pm Thanks & Close of Seminar: Noreen Giffney, Anne Mulhall & Michael O’Rourke

SEMINAR SPONSORS
Noreen Giffney & Michael O’Rourke have been convening events together since 2001. Noreen, Michael & Anne Mulhall have been organising events together since 2007. This event is sponsored by The(e)ories: Critical Theory & Sexuality
Studies, as well as the following at University College Dublin: the MA in Gender, Sexuality and Culture, the Graduate Research and Education Programme in Gender, Culture and Identity, and the Humanities Institute.

**The(e)ories: Critical Theory & Sexuality Studies** is an interdisciplinary seminar series that was founded and has been organised by Noreen Giffney and Michael O’Rourke since 2002. Originally entitled The(e)ories: Advanced Seminars for Queer Research, Noreen and Michael changed the subtitle to Critical Theory & Sexuality Studies in 2007 to reflect their broadening research interests in psychoanalysis and deconstruction respectively. Anne Mulhall joined the organising committee of The(e)ories in 2012. The(e)ories is devoted to examining issues relating to gender and sexuality within the context of critical theory across a wide range of disciplines. The term ‘seminar series’ is a misnomer as The(e)ories also includes conferences, symposia and roundtable discussions. The series has featured speakers from Europe, the USA, Canada, Australia and New Zealand, including some of the world’s most eminent thinkers in this area: Judith Butler, Judith Halberstam, Lee Edelman, Leo Bersani, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, Jeffrey Weeks, Tim Dean, Nikki Sullivan, David M. Halperin, Bracha L. Ettinger, Sally R. Munt, Sasha Roseneil, Tamsin Wilton, Del LaGrace Volcano, Luciana Parisi, Lisa Baraitser, Sara Ahmed, Nicholas Royle, Elizabeth Freeman, Lisa Downing, Robyn Wiegman and Martin McQuillan to name a few. People have travelled from Europe, Australia, Canada and the USA to attend and participate in events.

The organisers have also been keen to develop links with people working on critical theory in the context of gender and sexuality, and have been committed to inviting participants and respondents—academics and postgraduates—based at UCD, TCD, UCC, NUIG, UL, QUB, UCD, NCAD, St Patrick’s College, Drumcondra, Griffith College Dublin and Independent College, Dublin among others. Specific events have also attracted a number of professionals working in contexts outside or in conjunction with the university, in the applied fields of psychiatry, psychoanalysis, clinical psychology, counselling psychology, psychotherapy, medicine and counselling. In this, The(e)ories operates a trans-academic policy, in which the organisers endeavour to include not only health professionals, but also activists, artists and other non-academic members of the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer community who wish to participate in events.

**MA in Gender, Sexuality and Culture (School of English, Drama and Film, University College Dublin, University College Dublin)** Convened by Dr Anne Mulhall, this interdisciplinary MA programme draws on the extensive expertise in the area of gender studies and sexuality studies in the School of English, Drama and Film Studies at UCD. The MA offers students a dynamic and challenging range of modules where students will explore the theory, history and representation of gender and sexuality in literature, film, television, visual culture, drama and popular culture with a particular attention to the significance of race, ethnicity and class in relation to the understanding and politics of gender and sexuality across time and location. This course provides students with a thorough and wide-ranging training in the fields of literary, visual and cultural studies.

**Graduate Research and Education Programme (GREP) in Gender, Culture and Identity (University College Dublin)** Directed by Professor Gerardine Meaney, Director of the Humanities Institute, this interdisciplinary thematic doctoral programme hosted by University College Dublin brings together a unique combination of expertise and postgraduate training opportunities in the humanities from specialists in gender and sexuality based at University College Dublin, the University of Limerick, and Queen’s University Belfast. Courses offered include two core modules (Digital Humanities and Research Methods in Historical and Literary Studies). Students are welcome, by arrangement, to take courses forming part of the MA in Gender, Sexuality and Culture, and courses offered by staff associated with the programme.

**Web:** [www.ucd.ie/humanities/research/culturesocietyandchange/theories/#d.en.159954](http://www.ucd.ie/humanities/research/culturesocietyandchange/theories/#d.en.159954)

**MA in Gender, Sexuality and Culture** [www.ucd.ie/englishanddrama/graduatestudies/maprogrammes/gendersexualityandculture/](http://www.ucd.ie/englishanddrama/graduatestudies/maprogrammes/gendersexualityandculture/)

**Graduate Research and Education Programme** [www.ucd.ie/gendercultureidentity](http://www.ucd.ie/gendercultureidentity)
**UCD Humanities Institute** Directed by Professor Gerardine Meaney, the UCD Humanities Institute is a successful and prestigious resource for the humanities within University College Dublin and nationally. Building on its impressive record of doctoral completion rates and reputation as a vibrant centre for research, debate and scholarship, the Humanities Institute works to deepen its role as a catalyst for innovative and high quality research in the arts and humanities. Talks given in the Institute are archived in the Institute’s podcast series which has, to date, been accessed by over 24,000 web users.

Web: www.ucd.ie/humanities
Podcast Series: www.ucd.ie/humanities/newsevents/podcasts/
Podcast Series on iTunes: https://itunes.apple.com/ie/podcast/ucd-humanities-institute-ireland/id417437263

**FUNDING**

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**ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

This intensive seminar has been generously funded by the UCD Humanities Institute, and we wish to express our thanks in particular to Professor Gerardine Meaney for her ongoing support of this collaborative seminar series. We are grateful to Professor Liam Kennedy, Ms Catherine Carey and the Clinton Institute for American Studies for allowing us to use their seminar room on Friday 7 June.