



Tree Pose (Affect Theory as Media Theory)

CHRIS INGRAHAM

University of Utah, USA

Media Theory
Vol. 7 | No. 2 | 153-170

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<http://mediatheoryjournal.org/>

Abstract

This essay engages with Lauren Berlant's scholarship by considering its contributions to media theory. Despite Berlant's beloved following and many key impacts on critical theory, affect theory, and otherwise, media theory is not typically among the first things that come to mind about her work. By reading Berlant's interest in affect as conceptually homologous with the interest of more material media theorists in media as conditions of being, the essay raises the possibility that affect theory is a variation of media theory, which would make Berlant a key media theorist in disguise.

Keywords

Affect, Media, Mediation, Ideology, Aesthetics, Berlant

I.

I once saw Lauren Berlant give nearly an entire talk in tree pose. This was in Chicago a couple years after *Cruel Optimism* came out, and she was doing outtakes from one of the chapters. We all watched in awe: one hour of the highest-level thought imaginable, Lauren clicking through slides and holding forth, all while balanced on a single skinny leg. The talk began regularly enough, on two legs, behind a lectern: a thank you, some introductory ambling. She had pulled up a still frame from a film and was talking about it when, casually, she slipped out of her shoe, grabbed her bare foot and pulled it up against her thigh, all while carrying on unabated. I remember looking around the room

to see if others had noticed. We were all so engrossed, I'm not sure that *she* noticed. The maneuver felt so natural, unpremeditated, a body being in thought, moving *through* thought. Assuming the position.

Vrikshasana – tree pose – is a yoga position that involves drawing a foot up against your inner thigh, so your toes are fully above the knee and your heel nearly at your groin. The raised knee juts out to the side like a teenager with her hand on her hip. In yoga practice, the palms press together at heart-center or above the head, and the elbows wing out to the sides. In a lecture, evidently, the hands gesticulate along with the words. But Lauren's sturdiness was unshakable. Here was someone tall enough to reach the ground. That's the idea behind tree pose, too – to make the body tall but grounded, immovable but growing. Posing in the midst of a lecture like this risked reading as a touch precious (part sprezzatura, part performance), though if anyone had asked, I'm sure she would have dismissed it as nothing. And, of course, it was nothing, merely one part of the poetic multiplicity taking the shape of and around an existence that had drawn others to it. We had come to be so drawn, because that's what Lauren Berlant does. Less Rilke: "You must change your life" ([1908] 2011: 275). More Rankine: "Still you want to stop looking at the trees. You want to walk out and stand among them" (2014: 9).

In this essay, I take Berlant's lecture in tree pose as an opening to read their thinking about media and mediation as fundamentally inseparable from their thinking about affect. I don't intend to discuss the content of the lecture itself, but to take the 40+ minutes in tree pose during the lecture as a way into (and perhaps out of) a set of conceptual problems shared by the ideas of "media" and "affect" alike. Media studies, or even media theory, are probably not what Berlant is most known for doing. Yet, if we read their work in affect as inseparable from – indeed, impossible without – their attunement to mediation, a rare insight into both media theory *and* affect theory becomes apparent. We see, on one foot, that without its mediation in something at least approximating a material form, there would be no evidence of "affect" even existing. On the other foot, we see...there is no other foot. There's just this magnificent human, holding an improbable balance: she and they, sovereign and non-sovereign, sturdy and extending a branch all at once. Like so, affect and mediation are

part of the same trunk. Thinker thought, dancer dance. Affect theory *is* media theory. Realizing as much changes the way we need to think about both.

2.

Though what's come to be known as affect theory has for decades now been sporing into many fields and subfields to which it wasn't endemic, the ecotones where affect and media overlap have long been fertile spaces for both. What it means to say that affect theory *is* media theory is not, then, a claim about the novelty of supposing one informs the other, which has long been true, but rather about the ways affect and its mediation share a conceptual symmetry that binds them together as concept. And concepts are what Berlant plays with most. (This is one reason why *theory* – affect theory or media theory – is a better modifier in this case than *studies*, which can imply a final knowability that would miss the point, even if it were achievable, even if it were true.) In their book, *On the Inconvenience of Other People*, presumably inspired by Gayatri Spivak, Berlant writes that “work claiming to be theory must be read as propositional” (2022: 19), which I take to mean that *doing theory* entails a responsibility to hold open an otherwise that, nevertheless, isn't always an indeterminacy or ambivalence. We must be willing to be surprised, and not just pleasantly. There must be room for gesturing the elliptical “What follows if...” – in theory, anyway.

One question I want to ask here is this: What follows if affect theory *is* media theory? Would the reverse also hold? Not everyone doing media studies, or even those claiming to do more propositional media theory, is interested in affect. Most aren't. But neither are all those who study affect necessarily interested in media. If, across the many attunings of affect theory, there is now more or less a generalized agreement that “affect” designates something other than “emotion” or “feeling,” there is not the same agreement around what “media” are. The expansiveness of media as concept for theory, and as mover in the world for study, has become so unruly that the question “What is *not* a medium?” is not just merited, but at this moment at least partly constitutive of what the theorystudy of media entails (see, e.g., Parikka, 2020, and Peters, 2022). Affect and media share a certain capaciousness and expansiveness that smears each into arrays approaching the uncontainable, like a loaf of bread rising over the pan's edge, always exceeding the forms it's given.

The symmetry of affect and media cannot be accounted for by an affect's content any more than it can by a medium's form. Both are part of a recipe whose ingredients and ratios can't always be known in advance. Though affect theory is virtually unimaginable without Berlant – alongside queer theory, public sphere theory, and probably various others – *media* theory is not likely to poll well as one of their more prominent contributions. Yet, Berlant's work can be understood as articulated with media theory insofar as it prefigures *mediation* as a key element of the social and the political – that is, as one of the means by which things come to matter in ways that have consequences, personal or collective, that can feel exhausting, exalting, and many other things besides.

3.

What, then, can be said of Berlant's contributions to media theory? A quick survey of the "texts" that ground so many of her analyses reveals a rather familiar set of mediated objects. Most fit squarely among the 20th century cultural industry's more "literary" mediums: novels, poems, musical theater, film, television. The fodder of English departments. It's all rather staid material, media-wise, though the specific selections are rangy enough. There's an episode of *The Simpsons* (*Queen of America*, 1997); the Broadway musical *Showboat* (*Female Complaint*, 2008a); there's Mary Gaitskill's novel, *Two Girls, Fat and Thin* (*Cruel Optimism*, 2011); John Stahl's film, *Imitation of Life* (*Desire/Love*, 2012); there's the poetry of Juliana Spahr (*Inconvenience*, 2022), along with numerous other examples in the archive that show up across the oeuvre. Many of them are well known. Each is singular and fascinating in its own way. But none are especially unique or unexpected in terms of the *kinds* of media under consideration.

Berlant is not a theorist of "media" as such, so much as a keen interpreter of *mediation* as a process through which the many objects of attention or fixation in a life gain their affective force. Her wager is that this process – representational, but not only – can tell us something about those configurations of "the historical present" that facilitate what it feels like to be alive in it. The most famous example from their work is probably their central argument in *Cruel Optimism*, that we live in a time when social belonging or personal flourishing are both given to seem desirable and achievable for anyone, despite the very investment in those beliefs being what so often prevents their actualization – or delivers it, only to reveal something less than the fantasy seemed to

promise. This is media theory, maybe, but only to the extent it treats the felt-atmospheres of the historical present as semi-determinant mediums that contribute to how the dynamics of democracy, capitalism, and their attendant ideologies impinge upon affectable and always precarious bodies.

In other words, the “medium” that seems to interest Berlant most is essentially intangible: life itself. That perhaps explains one reason why Agamben and Foucault are go-to media theorists for Berlant, because they never steer far from the mediated condition of living within historically contingent ideologies or epistemes that create the parameters for validating some embodiments and means of life as worthier than others (see, e.g., 2011: 96-97, 274n.10). Berlant, like Agamben and Foucault, is such an immense, long-legged thinker that their work can’t be reduced to any particular “area of study,” the kind, say, with its own journal, or a dedicated interest group at conferences. Some people build the machine, the rest turn the cranks.

In her late turn to infrastructure, for instance, Berlant takes a wider approach than the one associated with the well-established (and growing) literature about infrastructures in critical media studies at large. Berlant doesn’t attend much to infrastructure in the sense of “stuff you can kick,” as Lisa Parks describes it (2015). Berlant’s interest is more – here again via Foucault – heterotopian: “a critical infrastructure that can bear the material dynamic that looks solid at a distance while being elastic, rubbery, animated, elliptical, context-changing, and the effect of the drift or clanging of many causes: ‘the part, that is, of life that is never given: an existence’” (2022: 15). Berlant is asking questions, searching for figures of thought, not to understand media per se, but to understand how media and media infrastructures mediate *what life is like*.

4.

If life’s likeness is too often experienced as a meanwhile mediated between fantasies that are either impossible or horrifying, the question of what life is like can’t be addressed without attending to what makes a life the way it is. And a big part of the answer to that question seems to be, *the way it feels*. Minimally, life *is* how it feels. Well, then, *what makes it feel that way?* One of the answers: *The way it’s mediated*. Berlant’s attention to mediation is most focused in the first section of the “Intuitionists” chapter of *Cruel Optimism*, the subheading of which has the giveaway: “*Affect, Mediation, Ideology.*”

Literally there, “mediation” is what comes between “affect” and “ideology.” We can trust that’s not accidental given her description of mediation in the later *Inconvenience* book, which comes as close to a definitional stance on the concept as we get. Berlant writes there, “Mediation is not a stable thing but a way of seeing the unstable relations among dynamically related things” (2022: 22). Affect and ideology are *the* dynamically related things that become related through the mediations between them.

Berlant underscores just this point in one of the more enticing among her many quotable insights: “Affect theory is another phase in the history of ideology theory” (2011: 53). A whole book could be written on just that sentence. Though I’m not the one to write it, others have come close: the journal *New Formations*, for instance, has devoted a special issue to the topic (Anderson and Secor, forthcoming). In the present special section on Lauren Berlant and Media Theory, the essay by Gregory Seigworth and Rebecca Coleman (this issue) has especially helped my thinking here. As they discuss, Berlant’s thinking about mediation bears the influence of Raymond Williams’s work on the topic in *Marxism and Literature* (1977: 95-100), particularly in their commitment to avoid oversimplifying the directionality of relationships between such scales of power as base/superstructure, or society/art, etc. There are many other helpful touchstones to think about mediation vis-à-vis affect and ideology. In addition to Williams, Berlant, Seigworth and Coleman, we must certainly include Sarah Kember and Joanna Zylińska (2012), Richard Grusin (2015), Coleman (2017), and Anna Kornbluh (2021).

Grusin’s work on this front has been some the most generative for me. For Grusin, the “dualistic character of mediation” involves media, and media technologies, that both “operate epistemologically as modes of knowledge production” *and* “generate and modulate individual and collective affective moods or structures of feeling” (2015: 125). This ability of mediation to produce a certain knowledge about what’s real or true or right (which goes by the name “ideology”) while also generating a personal or shared sense of how those truths feel and impinge upon bodies (which goes by the name “affect”) – means that mediation doesn’t perpetuate dualism, so much as produce it. How life *feels* so often depends upon the ways we’re given to believe it’s *supposed* to feel.

Grusin's point is that "stable dichotomies like those between subject and object, representation and reality, or human and nonhuman" are "outcomes of mediation, not its source" (2015: 142-143). Mediation, of course, and the dualisms it both produces and reinforces, need not happen through a screen or other media technology in the traditional sense. Signifying or representational media, including the speaking human's body as well as whole assemblages of non-human things, influence the bearing of those proximate to them, and otherwise. (Val Plumwood's work on the logics and techniques of dualism taught me this in ways that reward revisiting time and again [1993: 41-68]). Mediation is the cable-strong thread that joins affect and ideology, like a tree growing both above ground and below.

Berlant shows that the work of critical theory requires unsettling the fallacy that affect and ideology could ever *not* be mutually implicated. Affect theory, in part, thus becomes a way of reading mediation's role in instantiating the ways ideology inculcates a natural order felt as vindicating by those who share it, and oppressive by those who don't. Berlant's recurrent commitment is to *the aesthetic* as the most dynamic variation of mediation. The aesthetic, she writes, is what enables us to "rehabilitate our sensorium." In other words, the aesthetic, perhaps more than anything else, shifts the felt and sometimes scarcely recognized modes of encounter around what's capable of being experienced as novel, salient, or impactful in the first place. As Berlant explains (in a passage no one else could have written), the aesthetic is what "provides metrics for understanding how we pace and space our encounters with things, how we manage the too closeness of the world and also the desire to have an impact on it that has some relation to its impact on us" (2011: 12). And that brings us back to the question – or shall we call it the case? – of all her mediated texts.

5.

For someone more attuned than most to the contradictions and complexities of "the case" as a way of doing research across disciplinary and other sites of inquiry, Berlant sure uses a lot of them. To ponder about what makes something a case, she writes, "is to query the adequacy of an object to bear the weight of an explanation worthy of attending to and taking a lesson from" (2007: 666). Berlant's selected texts, whether we call them "cases" or not, skew decidedly toward the aesthetic in nature, nearly each

of them from signifying mediums that represent or enact the affective phenomena she sets out to explore.

In this sense, trying to fit Berlant into a particular tradition of media theory is tricky. Though the influence of Foucault's epistemic thought is there, there's no meddling with its uptake by Friedrich Kittler, the one most responsible for extending it to the context of media epistemology. Kittler's work, blasting similar fireworks as Marshall McLuhan's, doesn't bother much with media as a register of signs to be interpreted, favoring instead the treatment of media as cultural techniques to select, store, and process information (see, e.g., Kittler, 1990; 1999; Sybille Krämer's 2006 writing about Kittler has been helpful for me, too). Kittler, that is, rather than interpreting the different *meanings* media convey, attends to the ways different media delimit the very parameters of what any medium is able to communicate or mean in the first place.

For Berlant, meaning seems to matter to the degree it has felt consequences in the experience of what's possible within the ordinary sighs and stumbles of life, always scaled up to concept-level through the propositional generality of critical theory that endeavors, as one of Berlant's articles puts it, "thinking about feeling historical" (2008b: 4-9). Walter Benjamin is the one who made explicit that thinking about feeling historical can only be done as a commentary on one's own age (1968: 253-264), though of course Raymond Williams went further by naming the ways any "social experience *in solution*" (1977: 133) – that is, while it is lived and felt – has a structure unique to its time. Berlant seems more influenced by the latter. The cases or mediated texts that root her theoretical flights-through-concept in descriptive empirics and proxemics end up being those that illustrate both a same-old, same-old *and* its disruption. "The case," she's well aware, "is always normative but also always a perturbation in the normative" (2007: 670). Her ingenuity lies in pulling out the perturbation from within the familiar, to make the familiar something new, but never illegible, like irrupting into tree pose in the midst of a lecture.

Berlant does not explicitly avoid the starting place of representation in the ways she affects theory, but "representation" functions in her body of work much as a door functions: sometimes to open objects up, sometimes to close them down. What seeps are the impacts that representation has, both inside-out and outside-in. Which is to

say, Berlant is a keen reader of conventional media texts and she's able to do vertical reading into them or horizontal reading across them, at the same time that the interpretive modality of her analysis tilts less toward delivering textual *meaning* than those arrays of *feeling* that arise therefrom, as if what mattered about "meaning" to begin with were of course (and obviously, post-Berlant) how it affects your sensorium. Reader response criticism isn't the technique. She's not talking about *her* feelings as evoked by a text, but the ways that a film, a poem, a novel, a glance, a whining dog, whatever the object, is both an *expression of* a felt way of being in the world, and a *making legible of* the feltness of lived encounter as a material expression of how it feels to be in-common, or in-difference. Still, Berlant never reads "affects" as if they were fully deducible or reducible from texts. They're not. They're prismatic effervescences, airy nothings, splashes in still water that soon heal over.

6.

What interests me is the ways affect matters *because* it can't be usurped or contained; the ways its inability to be represented in language or consciously deployed for influence is bound up with its mattering for the in-betweenness of the social. At the same time, though, affects can only matter to the degree they are made legible in some substance-approaching form that manifests as an effect of their force. In an interview from 2020, Berlant said, "The thing about affect is that there is no direct evidence of it: but there is no direct evidence of anything, as all processes require refraction in solidity-approximating forms" (248). Affects are invisible without their mediation through such forms, even though these forms do not contain affects or imbue them with form. Affects show up when they rise from the petri dish of the culture or, more proximately, the social field where they're cultivated as attachments and aversions, that which sticks and that which doesn't, and that which sticks but isn't welcome. This paradox – that affects have no existence except through form, yet in no way are determined thereby – is at the heart of Berlant's thought.

It would do a disservice to their life's work to describe their interests (let alone its "heart"), when Berlant was *all* interest, and interested in all, all at once – even while insisting on the impossibility of the very endeavor. In the *Inconvenience* book, they write, "There is no possibility of drawing out this set of problems by addressing them 'all at

once,' if *all at once* means developing concepts from a pretense of knowing what leads from what. We have an ethical obligation to overdetermine our objects while clarifying the scenes of their action. This obligation is why work claiming to be theory must be read as propositional" (2022: 19).

What are we to understand by "the scenes of their action" if not that kind of "in which" where affects acquire the stickiness that configures our attachments? Sara Ahmed describes the process this way:

Stickiness then is about what objects do to other objects – it involves a transference of affect – but it is *a relation of 'doing' in which there is not a distinction between passive or active*, even though the stickiness of one object might come before the stickiness of the other, such that the other seems to cling to it (2014: 91, emphasis added).

Indeed, one way to think about *mediation* itself is as that scene of action or, in Ahmed's terms, that "relation of 'doing' in which there is not a distinction between passive or active." This false distinction troubles media theory to this day, and has at least since Marshall McLuhan bottle-rocketed the zeitgeist with the idea that modes of mediation at least partly determine any message's meaning or affects. We know intuitively that a song played on piano elicits different feelings than the same song played on kazoo, but the default understanding – which I'd add is an all too anthropocentric one – tends to attribute the pianist with the agency, and the piano as a mechanistic medium that merely extends her bidding. Well, a kazoo also mediates the notes of the musician who plays it, but with such radical difference from the piano that the kazoo player, even playing with the same virtuosity, comes to seem like a less important actor. Neither the pianist nor piano, the kazooist nor kazoo, can alone account for the difference. The instrument and player work together, come into a relation that is both active *and* passive, medium and message, through a process of mediation.

7.

The thread that I'm trying to tug away from its spool is the one that suggests affect theory isn't only another phase in the history of ideology theory; it's also *always already* media theory. That doesn't mean affect theory is a *phase* of media theory, the way it

may well be relative to the still ongoing course of theorizing ideology. Nor should the proposition of affect theory being media theory imply or overdetermine some parallel proposition that “affect” and “media” are the same, or that “to affect” and “to mediate” are, too. The suggestion is rather that “affect” shares important conceptual homologies with “media.” If so, then Berlant becomes a media theorist in a way far more central to their body of work than is typically acknowledged.

Some people must surely have been further ahead of this than me, but neglecting to register Berlant’s work as media-centric seems understandable enough, considering, for instance, that the word “media” appears not once as a keyword in any index from her many books (though “mediation” does), and that “media theorist” has never been a descriptor that at least I’ve ever heard used to describe her (though, in a conversation that I once had with Lauren, she surprised me by saying she’d always thought that the work she did was in *rhetoric*.) Without the tedium of typologizing, or the game of defining what counts as media theory before deciding who counts as someone who does it, the best way to approach Berlant’s (or anyone’s) ideas may be to walk around with them as the propositions that they are. What follows if we read Berlant as a media theorist, but not only?

In previous work (Ingraham, 2023), I’ve suggested that media theory might be an underacknowledged lineage to add to the growing genealogies of affect theory in the literature. To the Spinoza-Deleuze-Massumi strain, the Freud-Tomkins-Sedgwick version, or something like a Cvetkovich-Ahmed-Pedwell line, I suggested we might well add an Innis-McLuhan-Peters approach. The trouble is, none of these last have written, or at least written much, about affect directly. Raymond Williams – who of course has given us an enduring critical vocabulary to think about affect *and* about media – might seem to be a more appropriate figure to emphasize in any media-centric genealogy. But there is something differently generative about approaching affect theory through a materialist brand of media theory that has no major emphasis on affect at all. An Innis-McLuhan-Peters line accordingly reveals that many of the same concepts several affect theorists have talked about also characterize similar conversations among media theorists.

Harold Innis's early "dirt research" on the fur trade, Atlantic cod fisheries, and transcontinental railway makes clear that *media infrastructures are the subtle instruments of empire* (for a helpful overview, see Young, 2017). Innis was a major influence on McLuhan, whose well-known maxim that "the medium is the message" (1964) is one way of saying that *media are not themselves signifying, but they determine some conditions of signification's possibilities*. More recently, though in a similar vein, John Durham Peters's (2022) way of thinking of media as things "in the middle" is a commitment to the idea that *media are both passive and active, neither subject nor object*. "We are not skilled," he writes, "in knowing how to talk about entities that participate decisively in actions without causing them. To say that a medium matters is not to say that it played a causal role. The medium is in the middle, indispensable to what is going on, but neither the actor nor the acted-upon" (2022: 3). Although affect theory has expanded enough that reaching total agreement on the whatness of affect is hard to achieve, many of the truisms held by those invested in affect theory share striking similarities with those held among adherents of the Innis-McLuhan-Peters lineage of material approaches to media theory.

Media Theory: Infrastructures maintain empire.

Affect Theory: Affects modulate ideology.

Media Theory: The epistemic power of media lies less in the meaning or message they represent, more in each medium's way of delimiting what's possible to be represented at all.

Affect Theory: The epistemic power of affects lies less in any meaning or message they might convey, more in the force-effects that draw bodies toward or away from an object.

Media Theory: Media are both passive and active, neither subject nor object. They are what's in-between.

Affect Theory: Affects are passive in the sense that they're preconscious, active in the sense that they're always affecting things. Affects belong to no one while being in-between everyone.

8.

The stunning symmetries between media and affect reveal new ways of conceptualizing each as worlding forces that exceed any uni-directional influence implying an endpoint or outside to either. It's never been possible to be without affect or without mediation. Each in its own way is a fundamental condition of being. As Peters puts it, "We are conditioned by the conditions we condition." For him, that means "media studies is a general meditation on conditions" (2015: 51). One of Berlant's great achievements, routed through quite different literature and aims, is to show that the same goes for affect.

We see in Berlant that there is always too much happening at once, always some too-nearness striving toward spectacle but hurting too much, coming too close to achieve a spectacle's distance as a thing to observe. I'm reminded of lines from the Louis MacNeice poem, *Snow* (1967):

World is suddener than we fancy it.

World is crazier and more of it than we think,

Incorrigibly plural.

Berlant gives us precisely such a world: sudden, crazy, incorrigible, plural. There's only ever a view of the outside from outside it, intruding. They also give us, not order, exactly, but the means of attending to the plural as *what's* incorrigible, in a good way. We could do worse than to say that the fight for the incorrigibly plural is precisely the ethics that Berlant practices by doing theory as a propositional endeavor, sometimes with a wink, sometimes with a cold, hard stare. With Berlant, there's a genuine reverence for people, for the many ways of *being person*, that drives the prose toward its own resolve and willing indeterminacy. Some things are not okay. And sometimes (often times) the things that *are* okay, the things taken for granted as okay, end up being what's making other things seem *not* okay.

Incorrigible plurality doesn't mean chaos; it means friction in the sense Anna Tsing describes as "the awkward, unequal, unstable, and creative qualities of interconnection across difference" (2011: 4). The way Donna Haraway (2016), similarly, prefigures

trouble as the thing to stir-up, rearrange, stay with, Berlant understands impositions and inconveniences not to be events that occasionally punctuate a life, but rather one of life's ongoing conditions, which means the friction, the trouble, of living-working-persisting among others can often feel like what Berlant calls, "the extended meanwhile" (2022: 19; I've also found it helpful to think with Sharma, 2014). The conditions of living in the historical present, mediated and affective alike, can impinge upon your way of being you through an impossible paradox: that giving up parts of *you* to commune with others who are *not you* is the only thing that can make you recognizable as *you*, even though "*you*" have already been compromised in that process.

Berlant moves from the schizoid surfaces of Frederic Jameson's "waning of affect" (1984: 60-64) to track the "waning of genre" instead: the fathoms-deep separation between the incorrigible plurality of felt experience and the adequacy of aesthetic forms to keep up with emerging expectations about what life actually feels like, or ought to (2011: 6-7). If familiar genres wane, we need new forms to make them trenchant again. We need to condition new conditions more amenable to mutual flourishing, or at least to the bearable. And that takes renewing the capacity for improved attunement to those conditions, affective and mediated, that are all too hard to see from inside them.

This is why I keep coming back to that lecture Berlant gave in tree pose. Her topic had nothing to do with trees or yoga at all. Frankly, I don't remember much of what the talk was about, though I do remember being dazzled by the form it took, Lauren carrying on with that unshoreable sea of intellect, holding her improbable balance. Like an oddkin of Raphael's famous fresco, *School of Athens*, in which Aristotle points to the earth, while Plato points toward the heavens, there was Lauren in the meanwhile of history, doing both. Rooting down like a tree, growing upward all at once.

Some years later, in *The Hundreds*, Berlant's collaboration with Katie Stewart (2019), I would see this movement again in a differently mediated form, this time in writing. It's there, without distinguishing their writerly voices, that Lauren and Katie experiment with how movement happens around concepts and around descriptions, pulling and pushing until a genre becomes familiar at the same time that it becomes unprecedented. Stewart has always been one to start on the ground and work toward

the sky; Berlant was always more prone to start in the sky and grow toward the ground (listen to their appearance on the ‘Cultures of Energy’ podcast, 2019: episode 168). In *The Hundreds*, though, they each write in the opposite direction, tree-posing from concept into the description of a world it discloses, or tree-posing from description of a world to the concept it instantiates. What they know is that we can’t create the conditions we’re in, but we can create new conditions from those conditions. Any “scene of action” is also a scene of inaction, constituted as much by its passivity as by its activity – and sometimes, by the difficulty of distinguishing one from the other: affect theory as media theory.

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Chris Ingraham is an Associate Professor of Communication at the University of Utah, and core faculty in Environmental Humanities. His most recent book is *Rhetorical Climatology* by "A Reading Group" (Michigan State University Press, 2023).

Email: chris.ingraham@utah.edu

This article is part of a special section on 'Lauren Berlant and Media Theory', edited by Carolyn Pedwell and Simon Dawes, introduced by Carolyn Pedwell, and featuring articles by Ben Anderson, Ali Azhar & Megan Boler, Lisa Blackman, Sarah Cefai, Angharad Closs Stephens, Chole Turner & Rebecca Coleman, Yasmin Gunaratnam, Chris Ingraham, Henrike Kohpeiß, Susanna Paasonen & Vilja Jaaksi & Anu Koivunen & Kaarina Nikunen & Karoliina Talvitie-Lamberg & Annamari Vänskä, and Greg Seigworth & Rebecca Coleman.

A key detail about Lauren Berlant and pronouns: Lauren's estate provided a brief statement on this, which we quote here: "Lauren's pronoun practice was mixed – knowingly, we trust. Faced with queries as to 'which' pronoun Lauren used and 'which' should now be used, the position of Lauren's estate (Ian Horswill, executor; Laurie Shannon, literary executor) is that Lauren's pronoun(s) can best be described as 'she/they'. 'She/they' captures the actual scope of Lauren's pronoun archive, and it honors Lauren's signature commitment to multivalence and complexity. It also leaves thinkers free to adopt either pronoun, or both of them, as seems most fitting in their own writing about her/them".

