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Sentimentality In American Culture

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The Female Complaint is part of Lauren Berlant's groundbreaking "national sentimentality" project charting the emergence of the U.S. political sphere as an affective space of attachment and identification. In this book, Berlant chronicles the origins and conventions of the first mass-cultural "intimate public" in the United States, a "women's culture" distinguished by a view that women inevitably have something in common and are in need of a conversation that feels intimate and revelatory. As Berlant explains, "women's" books, films, and television shows enact a fantasy that a woman's life is not just her own, but an experience understood by other women, no matter how dissimilar they are. The commodified genres of intimacy, such as "chick lit," circulate among strangers, enabling insider self-help talk to flourish in an intimate public. Sentimentality and complaint are central to this commercial convention of critique; their relation to the political realm is ambivalent, as politics seems both to threaten sentimental values and to provide certain opportunities for their extension.

Pairing literary criticism and historical analysis, Berlant explores the territory of this intimate public sphere through close readings of U.S. women's literary works and their stage and film adaptations. Her interpretation of Uncle Tom's Cabin and its literary descendants reaches from Harriet Beecher Stowe to Toni Morrison's Beloved, touching on Shirley Temple, James Baldwin, and The Bridges of Madison County along the way. Berlant illuminates different permutations of the women's intimate public through her readings of Edna Ferber's Show Boat; Fannie Hurst's Imitation of Life; Olive Higgins Prouty's feminist melodrama Now, Voyager; Dorothy Parker's poetry, prose, and Academy Award-winning screenplay for A Star Is Born; the Fay Weldon novel and Roseanne Barr film The Life and Loves of a She-Devil; and the queer, avant-garde film Showboat 1988-The Remake. The Female Complaint is a major contribution from a leading Americanist.