



---

*Surprising Taxonomies:  
A Book Review of Lauren Berlant and Kathleen Stewart's  
The Hundreds*

*Adrienne Kitchin  
Brock University*

**Abstract:**

In this book review, the form and function of what the writing is doing in Lauren Berlant and Kathleen Stewart's *The Hundreds* is one of the many points of focus. Following the lines of posthuman, new materialist, and affect theories, the poems (what the authors refer to as *makings*) offer a fresh and lively engagement with academic scholarship. This is a scholarship interwoven with creativity presenting *an elsewhere of form* for the merging of academic and creative thought. Berlant and Stewart use engaging ideas to offer their book as an encounter and allow for interactive opportunities for their readers. While this is a concise book at 173 pages, it has no shortage of depth and creativity, concepts that the reviewer explores.

**Keywords:** *punctum*; hundreds; posthuman; new materialisms; *makings*; *worlding*; *the new ordinary*

## Des taxonomies surprenantes : une recension du livre *The Hundreds* de Lauren Berlant et Kathleen Stewart

### Résumé :

Dans cette recension, la forme et la fonction de ce que fait l'écriture dans *The Hundreds* de Lauren Berlant et Kathleen Stewart est l'un des nombreux points d'intérêt. Suivant les lignes des théories posthumaines, matérialistes et affectives, les poèmes (ce que les auteurs appellent des *makings*) offrent un engagement nouveau et vivant avec l'érudition universitaire. Il s'agit d'une recherche entrelacée à la créativité présentant un « ailleurs de forme » pour la fusion de la pensée académique et créative. Berlant et Stewart utilisent des idées engageantes afin de proposer leur livre comme une *rencontre* et d'y offrir des occasions interactives à leurs lecteurs. Bien qu'il s'agisse d'un livre concis de 173 pages, il ne manque pas de profondeur et de créativité, des concepts explorés par la critique.

**Mots clés :** *punctum*; centaines; posthumain; néo-matérialismes; *makings* (néologisme); *worlding* (néologisme); *le nouvel ordinaire*

## Book Review

Berlant, L., & Stewart, K. (2019). *The hundreds*. Duke University Press.

“Punctum” ought to mean whatever grabs you into an elsewhere of form.

(Berlant & Stewart, 2019, p. 5)

*The Hundreds* is a *punctum*, operating as an *elsewhere of form* for the merging of academic and creative writing. Published by Duke University in 2019, *The Hundreds* employs “a one-hundred-word poetics exercise” (p. ix) and applies it to what Lauren Berlant and Kathleen Stewart call “the new ordinary” (p. ix). They note that “the process has changed our writing, and much else” (p. ix). The result is a punctum, a term Berlant and Stewart take from Roland Barthes’ (1980/1981) *Camera Lucida* where Barthes discusses a photograph’s ability to “pierce” its viewer with an impact that stands outside of what the photographer intended and any cultural conditioning the viewer brings to interpreting photographs. Barthes (1980/1981) defines the Latin term punctum as a “sting, speck, cut, little hole—and also a cast of the die” and notes that “a photograph’s *punctum* is that accident which pricks me (but also bruises me, is poignant to me)” (p. 25). Berlant and Stewart’s book begins with the reference to Barthes’ work on photographic puncta and extends the concept to apply to any context, art form or scene that can bring one “into an elsewhere of form” (p. 5). Almost paradoxically, the authors note that they have also employed what they call a constraint to get at the contingent qualities of written work. By restricting their writing to multiples of hundreds, they have approached their process as one that employs “exercises in following out the impact of things (words, thoughts, people, objects, ideas, worlds) in hundred-word units or units of hundred multiples” (p. ix). The result is a blending of academic and poetic form, both a relaxing of one constraint (traditional academic writing) while increasing another (creative writing), resulting in creative outcomes.

In this way, the authors explore the challenges of wrestling ideas into words and how the ideas and concepts change through the act of writing. With this dive into process, glimpses of the active nature of writing are presented. The book serves as an exploration of the creative act of writing itself. Thus, *The Hundreds* can pivot as both an instructional tool as well as an example for future curriculum considerations in courses related to academic and/or creative writing. Additionally, curricula that focus on creative generation of ideas and critical engagement with creative forms would benefit from the ideas presented in *The Hundreds*.

Drawing on posthuman and new materialist ideas, Berlant and Stewart write “hundreds do things” (p. 117). This is posthuman through its focus on something other than humans as having agency and new materialist in that it is something material that is *doing*. Hundreds work both as a concept and a material reality through producing writing in multiples of hundreds as an intentional act. The authors note that the idea of writing in multiples of hundreds emerged from anthropologist Circe Sturm who in turn learned of the practice from a writing workshop led by Emily Bernard, writer, scholar and Professor of English from the University of Vermont (p. ix).

The constraint of writing in multiples of hundreds is important to education and curriculum as it offers a clear example of how creative and academic writing can blend and offer something new. When preparing students to create written assignments (for example, in a postsecondary academic writing course), offering exercises that use the multiple of hundreds “constraint” is a useful way to inspire creativity, which can be beneficial to both academic and creative writing. *The Hundreds* provides an excellent example of infusing creativity into academic writing as well as infusing academic engagement into creative writing. Additionally, the book can also be read as a study in posthuman writing that draws on new materialisms. There are so many moving and breathing pieces in this book that it can be read as an experience in a variety of ways, most of which the authors hesitate to prescribe. Fittingly, Berlant and Stewart (2019) write, “we don’t want to say much about what kind of event of reading or encounter this book can become” (p. x). They invite the reader to think about the book in ways that may be atypical to a familiar experience.

Presenting reading a book as an *event* or *encounter* offers a fresh way to consider the everyday experience of reading. In this way, the contingent nature of reading is another facet of *The Hundreds* that could be useful for curricula that include critical reading skills, especially as they apply to critical thinking and academic writing. *The Hundreds* is lively with its ability to affect and intervene, to rise in poems such as “Swells” (p. 4), expand in ones such as “Dilations” (p. 5) and fall into points of focus as in “A Place” (p. 63) like the rising, expansion and contraction of breath.

As indicated above, many parts of the book include comments on writing and the writing process. In “Dilations”, Berlant and Stewart expand on the things that hundreds do and note that “if our way is to notice relations and varieties of impact, we’re neither stuffing our pockets with ontology nor denying it: attention and riffing sustain our heuristics” (p. 5). By paying attention and riffing, Berlant and Stewart create what they call “makings” (p. i), which are the creative pieces that comprise the book. Poems have forms, but what of makings? To this, Berlant and Stewart offer opportunities throughout the text to move beyond standard taxonomies, especially as they are concerned with language and the writing process, including creative and academic styles.

In *The Hundreds*, Berlant and Stewart draw on academic scholars, everyday observations, and their own poetic inspiration, to create a form of writing that falls somewhere between academic and creative writing resulting in a punctum. In the context of *The Hundreds*, puncta arise from objects, thoughts, the environment, ideas, and “whatever grabs you into an elsewhere of form” (p. 5). Writing as process and form are motifs that act as refrains throughout the book, which, while not very long at 173 pages, is rich with creativity. In many ways, the text presents as a collection of poems, but the inclusion of citations and academic works keep it from being poetry alone, as do the illustrations in the “Not-Index” by Andrew Causey and C. Thresher towards the end. As Berlant and Stewart note, “the theoretical reflections were shaped as hundreds and folded into the analytic, observational, and transferential ways we move” (p. x). These ways of moving have produced something unique and surprising: creative responses to academic works and everyday living. The new ordinary emerges.

*The Hundreds* is iterative in its use of words arranged in hundreds or multiples of hundreds that respond to and reflect on academic works, modes of living and manners of being in creative and

poetic ways. The process involves academic thought and analysis but does not limit itself to those parameters or presume to disentangle the mind and body doing the work of academic engagement from the processes of being, through which minds and bodies are always already engaged. This is also an element of posthumanism, one that pushes against Cartesian dualism that separates mind from body. Indeed, Berlant and Stewart reflect on this in "Red Bull Diaries" where they write, "the university is a harbor for Cartesian OCDers testing out their desire for impact" (p. 12). Of course, it may seem commonplace that scholars employed at a university would want their work to have impact, but the use of the phrase "Cartesian OCDers" implies that Berlant and Stewart are referring to scholars not yet able to let go of humanist renderings of hierarchies that prefer mind over body, humans over nonhuman animals, and some humans as mattering more than other humans (Braidotti, 2019).

Posthuman ideas are woven into the writing in *The Hundreds*, as are new materialisms. These become apparent in both literal and figurative phrasings. Exemplifying a combination of literal and figurative usage in "As If", Berlant and Stewart write that "built environments have gone live in an all sensory surround" (p. 14). The built environment, those public (and private) buildings and spaces built by humans, is cited as THE BUILT ENVIRONMENT, in all-capital letters, as one of the endnotes. This illustrates the authors' attention and attunement to the impact the built environment can have on people. It also illustrates creativity with citations. By working creatively with citational style and what would typically be included in citations, Berlant and Stewart continue to insert a unique flare into their creative makings on scholarly themes.

The built environment as a phrase also conjures thoughts of John Lenihan and William Fletcher's (1978) *The Built Environment*, but this book is not what Berlant and Stewart are citing. They are referring to the material aspects of the built environment, which is shown in the entry for the built environment in "Some Things We Thought With" —which functions as a references list. The entry is literally written simply as The built environment (now not all in capitals, and so in a different citational form). Additionally, writing of the built environment as going "live" doesn't mean that it is alive in a biological sense; rather, it refers to the new materialist idea that matter has affect and, as Karen Barad (2007) notes, is "not a thing, but a doing" (p. 151). The creative play on and with words is one of the many ways *The Hundreds* functions as an elsewhere of form that engages the reader in ways the authors could not have intended, as they are contingent upon the reader's experience. Thus, the makings as well as the way the book is organized, offer examples of the complexities of conveying un/intended meanings in writing.

In the poem "This is vanilla", Berlant and Stewart write, "these prose poems come from a long poetic and noetic collaboration. The project pays attention to the relation of scenes to form, observation to implication, encounters to events, and figuration to what sticks in the mind" (p. 8). Berlant and Stewart move in and out of musing on what the book is, the format it has taken and their process(es) of writing.

In the poem (or, *making*) "Against literal minded explorations of the ordinary", the first line reads, "So, you're writing" (p. 46). The effect shows an inquiry into habits already well-known to the

authors, a paying attention to the ordinary, a “worlding” of the familiar. In the “Preludic”, which functions as a quasi-introduction, Berlant and Stewart note that *The Hundreds* includes “reflection in many spots about how the writing attempts to get at a scene or process a hook” (p. x). This kind of attention to the writing process is presented throughout the book, as well as in “Against literal minded explorations of the ordinary”, as seen in the line “writing’s mechanics of expansion and contraction change the concept’s environment” (p. 46). The process that wrestles ideas into words, then to writing, and on to reader engagement, is followed, troubled and celebrated, but never prescribed. For this making, the authors refer to a variety of academic scholars in parentheses at the end, rather than throughout, as a creative way to give credit to the scholars’ work with which they are thinking.

Indeed, in “The Things We Think With” the authors write, “our citations are dilations, not just memories we have fidelity to” (p. 20). The unique style of citations in *The Hundreds* reflects the authors’ expansion on form as a creative act, rather than a following of academic convention. This further illustrates how the authors draw attention to the active nature of the exchange between writer and reader. The experience a reader has in reading a book is contingent upon many things and is tied into being and knowing in varied ways. What form the book takes, how the words are interpreted by the reader, and the reader’s body, are all interplaying to create unique *encounters*. It is not only the reader’s experience that is contingent, however. Berlant and Stewart reflect that “every edit set off a cascade of word falls, Rubik’s Cubes, tropes, infrastructures, genres, rhymes and off rhymes, tonal flips and half steps this way and that” (p. x). Like the edits that set off cascades of word falls, *The Hundreds* creates cascades of thought falls within the reader and the contingent nature of the process continues.

Berlant and Stewart play with the concept of contingency as well as the integration of creative and academic form/s. For example, as mentioned above, they call their list of sources “Some Things We Thought With” (p. 157) —an answer to the call of “The Things We Think With” (p. 20) —which include traditional reference style for written works and expand to include non-traditional and embodied elements like “A phrase in circulation” and “Immersion —unintended, serial, unnoticed” (p. 164). By including material items, language usages, ideas and feelings in their things they thought with, the authors’ play is both surprising and indicative of the posthuman and new materialist elements that inform the experience of engaging with their book. Thus, *The Hundreds* further draws on posthumanism in that it refuses the hierarchies of what is considered important in academic conversation. It engages the reader through its own unique embodiment and thereby invites the reader to consider their embodiments as well. This is shown in the inclusion of blank pages as an index for the reader to engage creatively with indexing, in a section entitled “For Your Indexing Pleasure” (pp. 155-156). Such engagement is contingent on the reader’s actions and interactions and, while curated by the authors to allow for that, the reversal of roles from reader to writer (or illustrator, or still something else entirely) is the stuff of immersive art experiences. Berlant and Stewart also collaborated with other writers and artists and included additional indexes for *The Hundreds* in ways that “surprise us” (p. i). These indexes include poems, illustrations and makings by Fred Moten, Andrew Causey, C. Thresher, Susan Lepselter and Stephen Muecke, in ways that certainly

## *Book Review*

do surprise. With the inclusion of these indexes, in their differing styles and forms, Berlant and Stewart are actively *not* “presuming the standard taxonomic form” (p. 1). These examples connect ways in which *The Hundreds* has further implication for education contexts and curricula that wish to include arts-based approaches to teaching and learning.

In “Hundreds do things” Berlant and Stewart write, “we call them poems because they’re about making. Because language is such a force from the world, we [jury-rig] figures and fiddle with pulse to make things accessible” (p. 117). In this elsewhere of form, the authors have indeed “jury-rigged” an interesting balance that is at once challenging and accessible. What is clear is that Berlant and Stewart do not want to profess what the book is, what it should do, or how it should be read. Thus, they recognize their book’s contingency/ies. Poems, makings, creative prose: choose your own adventure in considering what genre this book falls into or let go of labels entirely in the surprising taxonomies of *The Hundreds*.

## References

- Barad, K. (2007). *Meeting the universe halfway: Quantum physics and the entanglement of matter and meaning*. Duke University Press.
- Barthes, R. (1981). *Camera lucida: Reflections on photography* (R. Howard, Trans.). Hill and Wang. (First published in 1980)
- Berlant, L., & Stewart, K. (2019). *The hundreds*. Duke University Press.
- Lenihan, J. M. A., & Fletcher, W. W. (1978). *The built environment*. Academic Press.