10. Style under Stress
Quotability and Disaster in Lauren Berlant's *Cruel Optimism* (2011)

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1.

How does it feel to write about a crisis so large that it calls into question the very possibility of critical writing? This question does not currently stand at the center of humanist discourse, but it seems to have animated some of the most innovative work done in this field since the turn of the millennium. "Those of us who think for a living" (124)—as Lauren Berlant characterizes herself and her readers—tend to live for thought, which is another way of saying that they ("we"?) are often among the first who get to name a crisis.[1] After all, this is what intellectuals do in market societies; this is the function they have evolved to serve: institutions of higher learning pay good money to an entire class of people for reading and writing (and flying to conferences), because these activities promise to render intelligible the collectivity and historicity of processes that might otherwise appear as mere accidents of social

1 All parenthetical citations in the text refer to Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011). I would like to thank my readers Maxi Albrecht, Dustin Breitenwischer, Emmy Fu, Anja Johannsen, Till Kadritzke, Christian Klöckner, Susanne Krugmann, Fabius Mayland, Anthony Obst, Tabea Vohmann, and Stephan Porombka. I am especially grateful to Annelot Prins, Simon Strick, and Maria Sulimma; their suggestions and objections have greatly contributed to my understanding of Lauren Berlant. On Lauren Berlant's pronouns, see tweet on facing page and the "Entry" chapter in this volume. Research for this essay has been supported by the Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft (DFG, German Research Foundation) under Germany's Excellence Strategy in the context of the Cluster of Excellence *Temporal Communities: Doing Literature in a Global Perspective*—EXC 2020—Project ID 390608380.

life. In the humanities, intellection makes political sense of subjective experience. Traveling under the sign of "theory," this work often retains core traits of its forerunners, theology and philosophy—revelation, exegesis, scholasticism—but its rhetoric is essentially one of public analysis, sometimes in the organized mode of systemic critique, sometimes in the more managerial form of criticism, surveying never-ending publications and arranging them into constellations of order.

But what about the feelings involved? How does it *affect* critical writing when the crisis at hand is no singular catastrophe, no repressed trauma that could be cured or alleviated by disclosure, but a banal everyday reality? And what if the shape of our daily calamities remains unrecognized not because they are hidden away from inspection but because they are utterly commonplace, taken for granted like the air we breathe? These questions drive Lauren Berlant's *Cruel Optimism*, an eminently quotable book. In fact, *Cruel Optimism* may be one of the most frequently quoted books of Anglophone theory after 2011. In it, Berlant describes life under neoliberalism as a psycho-political disaster zone. While more or less avoiding the term "neoliberalism"—for reasons worth looking into—Berlant is in effect talking about a world ruled by transnational market extremism, a world in which "[c]ollective infrastructures are collapsing all over the United States and the globe" (154).

According to *Cruel Optimism*, the psychological and environmental costs of this situation are immense. The fact that they are nevertheless accepted by populations and governments worldwide poses a keen challenge to theories of popular agency (or as some call it: democracy). To make sense of this predicament, Berlant asks us to consider ordinary people's attachments to ways of life that at least hold a promise of happiness even when they fail to deliver it. For many contemporaries, she writes, living a "good life" means holding on to *something* regardless of its dependability. It means establishing a sense of belonging without necessarily belonging to something sensible. It means "proximity to a *whatever, wherever*" (63).

One feels reminded of modernist justifications of religious belief that stress the psychological utility of faith over its doctrinal content. Berlant's pleas for ordinary attachments follow a similar logic but, as a feminist critic of gendered normativity, she does not think that this settles anything. Rather, Berlant maintains that what she calls "the promise of the promise" (174) can have disastrous consequences further down the road. The cruel oxymoron of "cruel optimism" expresses as much: "A relation of cruel optimism exists when something you desire is actually an obstacle to your flourishing. … These kinds

of optimistic relation … become cruel when the object that draws your attachment actively impedes the aim that brought you to it initially" (1).

An older brand of theory would have no qualms calling such detrimental beliefs by the simple name of ideology. And indeed, what is ideology if not a collectively shared and publicly reinforced system of subjective misapprehensions? Again, Berlant agrees but feels uneasy about imposing such terms on experiential realities that she characterizes as being aware of their plight, aware of what they are going through, and yet remote from such explanatory abstractions.

Berlant's wariness of judgment is not untypical of contemporary theory. One might ask how subjectivity is even thought to manifest itself here (ontologically? expressively? culturally?) and why the ordinariness of ordinary life should depend on a type of self-knowledge that is said to be averse to conceptual detachment. (Invoking the lexicon of ontological withdrawal, *Cruel Optimism* talks about "the hesitancy and recessiveness in ordinary being" (124).) But in view of the loaded history of Marxist vanguardism, contemporary theory has good reason, especially in its feminist and queer manifestations, to concentrate on other questions, many of them focused on its own assumptions of epistemological superiority. Berlant, too, seems to be acutely conscious of her institutional position and the privileges that come with it. Like many Anglophone thinkers of the twenty-first century, she suspects academic critique to hold a demeaning attitude toward "popular pleasures" (123). Deploring "the ease with which intellectuals shit on people who hold to a dream" (ibid.)—paraphrasing a complaint made by, not about, Adorno—she feels that there might be something wrong with the language that humanities scholars bring to bear on the crisis of neoliberalism.

Repeatedly, therefore, the voice speaking in *Cruel Optimism* is on the verge of charging its own diagnostic stance with improper motives. Determined to bypass the trap of condescension, Berlant carefully avoids blaming those who are trying to make the best of a bad situation—those who do not push for structural change but muddle through, on the search for "a less-bad experience" (117). Realizing that "ordinary" people may regard the institutionalized negativity of critical discourse as a luxury and a taunt, *Cruel Optimism* is as much a book about stressed-out subjects trying to get by as it is a book about its own work of academic theorizing. It is theory struggling with its own position of observation—and Berlant, in numerous self-referential asides, lets us know that this is the case.

For a text with deep roots in feminist and queer theory, this is unsurprising. Berlant's indebtedness to feminist standpoint theory and other forms of situated knowledge is obvious.[2] Still there is something special about Berlant's interest in positionality. I want to suggest that *Cruel Optimism*, rather than recommending situated knowledge as an unambiguous antidote to false universalisms, begins to probe and question the very distinction between (objective) universalism and (subjective) situatedness. Constantly reflecting on the terms and conditions of her writing, Berlant tries to locate an appropriate style for a genre of intellection that has evidently lost belief in the transformative power of (economic, historical, psycho) analysis, while she also casts doubt on the utopian potential of alternative epistemologies of embodiment, proposing instead "to desubjectivize queerness" (18).

Berlant's book thus captures the movement of a style of thought that finds it increasingly difficult to take political confidence, or hope, from its own dedication to standpoint theory. Early on, when Berlant delineates how *Cruel Optimism* differs from her previous work and the feminist/queer theories that animated it, she stresses the need to rethink heterodox optimisms of affect, any affect, in light of the disaster of the present: "I therefore make no claims about what specific experiential modes of emotional reflexivity, if any, are especially queer, cool, resistant, revolutionary, or not" (13). The phrase "if any" reveals the depth of historical despair that this theory confronts. And then something surprising happens: "Nonetheless," Berlant writes, she wants to acknowledge her debt and continued commitment to the styles of thought that brought her to this point—and in order to summarize their commonality, in order to introduce them by name and to pay homage to their shared intellectual work, their radical necessity, she invokes—Theodor Adorno, of all people. "Nonetheless, I could have had none of these thoughts … without a training in multiple critical theories of what Adorno calls the 'it could have been otherwise' of commitment: queer theory, psychoanalysis, deconstruction, antiracist theory, subaltern studies, and other radical ethnographic historiographies of the present (anthropological, sociological, and journalistic)" (13).

In a way, my essay is about the little surprise of this little moment, which marks both a tribute and a departure. Or, in Berlant's disillusioned translation of my clichés: a cruel optimism and an impasse. I will return to Adorno as an unlikely patron saint of Berlant's productive theoretical despair. At this point,

2 Compare, e.g., Sandra Harding, ed., *The Feminist Standpoint Theory Reader: Intellectual and Political Controversies* (New York: Routledge, 2004).

let me simply say that, to me, this counter-intuitive moment encapsulates what is intellectually most original and historically most poignant about *Cruel Optimism*, the bleakest work of theory I have read in a long time. Its utter lack of rhetorical triumphalism strikes me as uniquely adequate to the anarcho-capitalist endgame it talks about, and at the same time inseparable from the book's inner linguistic conflict, its often frustrating and self-frustrated, fully self-aware, rhetorical non-triumph.

2.

Despite all its epistemological doubts, *Cruel Optimism* commits to one particular historical conclusion, which rings painfully true indeed. Berlant insists that scenarios of misplaced hope abound in a world organized around an impossible promise, which is the promise of capitalism as the best historical option for establishing "the good life." No matter whether this elusive goal is sought in orthodox expectations of upward mobility, or in the arrival of another person who will finally bring happiness, or in the simple act of eating tasty food, any vision of "the good life"—in fact, any moment of temporary enjoyment in a time of "crisis ordinariness" (that is, crisis as a way of life, not an event)—is already entangled, in Berlant's description, with a political economy that postpones and prevents the very satisfactions it promotes.[3] In other words, what Berlant at one point refers to by its most banal postwar name, "the American Dream" (29), is shown to be exactly that: a dream, wishful but unreal, and yet enabling peculiarly American realities (within and without the United States) ranging from profound trust in monogamous notions of sexual fulfillment to the industrial provision of sweet and fatty diets.

Ten years after the publication of *Cruel Optimism*, the urgency of this diagnosis—implying that the globalized production of pleasures in the twenty-first century is bound to harm the bodies it claims to serve, and likely to destroy the habitat that sustains them—has become even more dramatic amid pandemic shock and irreversible ecological devastation. "Infrastructural stress" (43) is now a common, indeed an inescapable, condition of life on earth. In writing about this situation, however, Berlant wants to distance herself from the "melodrama" of "symptomatic reading" (15). As a student of

3 On "crisis ordinariness," see: "[c]risis is not exceptional to history or consciousness but a process embedded in the ordinary" (10).

American sentimentalism—her previous work includes three interconnected volumes on national ideologies of intimacy—she has a fine-tuned ear for the workings of romantic victimization narratives in modern fields of knowledge (sociology, psychology, economics, etc.). Trauma theory, in particular, comes in for nuanced critique in *Cruel Optimism* because it privileges the idea of a singular rupture over the likelihood of therapeutic feedback loops and retrospective arrangements. (For reasons that I will discuss below, Berlant stops short of a more fundamental critique of "event" ontology; her vocabulary often holds on to a language of being and becoming, contending only that there is nothing extra-ordinary or transcendental about such moments of subjective instantiation.)

My point is that Berlant's frustrations with classical theory and structural critique are stylistic as much as they are substantial. There is a palpable sense of rhetorical, perhaps even aesthetic, dissatisfaction with a specific type of academic writing. Consider her objections to the word "neoliberalism," which she characterizes as a "heuristic" that tends to personify "impersonal forces" for the sake of some larger morality play about malign perpetrators and objectified dupes (15). While this is an odd take on existing studies of neoliberalism (including the term "heuristic"), what strikes me as important is how Berlant justifies her dislike of the concept: her aim, she says, is "to avoid the closures of symptomatic reading" (15). With this refusal *to close things down*, Berlant implies that the abstract moniker "neoliberalism" does not explain much if it is invoked as a final address of critical inquiry. Such concepts of last resort serve as short-cuts, she suggests, absolving academics from doing the hard work of what Hortense Spillers has called "writing as revision"—a type of minute redescription that "makes the 'discovery' all over again."[4]

This is a fair and important argument. It is also an argument against bad usage, not against the concept of neoliberalism as such. Above all, *avoiding closure* is a stylistic ideal. Its prevalence in postclassical theory seems to arise from concerns of professional rhetoric, which in turn are grounded in theory's growing awareness of its own institutional history. Note, for instance, that methodological debates in literary and cultural studies are virtually forced to describe themselves in pioneering terms. Typically in these self-reinforcing controversies, new methods of "reading" (always conveniently labeled: distant, surface, reparative, etc.) are offered on the strength of their power of

4 Hortense Spillers, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book," *Diacritics* 17, no. 2 (1987): 64–81, here 69.

programmatic innovation, usually more so than on the strength of their concrete performance. Their biggest *promise*, it seems, is the promise of field-intrinsic renewal in a situation of institutional *crisis*.

In particular, debates about "postcritique" are inextricable from their academic sites of articulation. In fact, some of the most prominent interventions in this vein seem to be less concerned with the epistemological validity of certain critical practices than with their grating effects on professional rhetoric in a struggling discipline. Especially among US humanities scholars, there is at the moment a strong tendency to think (and write) about critical detachment not as a cognitive tool but as an affective attitude. While this perspective has illuminated the gendered bias of supposedly "universalist" epistemologies—that is, their foundation in white, masculine, heterosexual, bourgeois power, made visible with far-reaching political ripple effects by critics like Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick or Heather Love—such historicization takes a backseat in the more aestheticist types of postcritical scholarship when they treat critical detachment as a deeply subjective, indeed competitively personal desire (rather than, say, an affectively charged matter of intersubjective knowledge). Framed like this, critique appears responsible for unpleasant social situations in which other (mostly leftist) writers strike a pose of condescending "coolness."[5] In other words, certain styles of writing have come to feel irritating,

5 An implicit tone of personal resentment is not uncommon in these exchanges, particularly on Twitter, that invaluable source of academic affect performance. Entire social media accounts seem devoted to documenting imagined charges of naiveté and annoying collegial affectations. A random but typical tweet in this vein calls critique "a stock reflexive gesture of distancing, disavowal, & self-protection" that serves to uphold "the critic's image of themselves as resistant, discriminating, immune to charm, 'cool'." The same author says that this attitude is particularly widespread among colleagues who have read too much Frankfurt School "and think that if they just sound depressed and contemptuous enough at all times that that will also mean that what they are saying about Random Object X is smart, interesting & politically salient" (19 April 2020). Berlant, by contrast, is more careful—and more understanding of the emotional dimension of critical distancing, which she, too, describes as a gesture of protection, but without inveighing against this stance and without reducing epistemological concerns to attitudes of needy posturing. But institutional anxieties run high in many recent attempts to cultivate positivity and affirmation as counter-affects to negativity and critique. — Parts of the paragraph above are adapted from Frank Kelleter, "DISCIPLINE COOL. Notes, Quotes, Tweets, and Facebook Postings on the Study of American Self-Studies (LookingForward Remix)," in *Projecting American Studies: Essays on The-*

boring, or inopportune within a highly specific, highly self-referential, and highly competitive professional ecology.

This state of affairs is reflected in *Cruel Optimism*. More than just an analysis of peak capitalism, Berlant's book performs reproductive labor for a communicative network worried about its survival. "The closures of symptomatic reading" are risky in this regard as they conflict with the requirements of knowledge production in the neoliberal university—but not because symptomatic closures are too radical but because they are too predictable. This raises an infrastructural question: could the awful tedium of systemic critique be related to the tedious awfulness of systemic realities? Indeed I argue that there is more at stake in Berlant's aversion to externalized judgment than the descent of academic writing into formulaic staleness—a fate that awaits any successful method. In the case of postcritique, scholarship's search for programmatic disruption also appears to be motivated by the very forces scholarship finds it increasingly boring to critique. How else to explain all the games of epistemological one-upmanship in which theoretical vocabularies compete about who still falsely believes in "hidden" causes (despite claims to the contrary) and who already addresses "immanent" potentials or defeats (despite practices that suggest otherwise)? Not paranoia but schizophrenia—or intense nervousness at least—seems to be the hallmark of the humanities in the age of disappearing resources.

Fully aware of such institutional background noise, *Cruel Optimism* registers the indispensability of materialist, constructivist, and Marxian modes of inquiry, but struggles with their socio-political futility, their sometimes compromised relationship to queer theory, and their retrograde reputation in literary studies. Berlant does not quite put it that way—in fact, she does not even address postcritique—but her subtle theoretical self-positioning, if not the title of her book, makes me wonder if the anti-hegemonic self-positioning of current discourses of attachment (countering the supposedly ruling negativity of critical thought with something more "positive") should be taken at face value. What if the much-quoted impact of Jameson's and Althusser's Hegelianism on literary studies was much exaggerated in the initial 1990s salvos against suspicious minds and paranoid readings? What if this exaggeration served to position more deeply entrenched philosophies, with

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ory, Method, and Practice, ed. Frank Kelleter and Alexander Starre (Heidelberg: Winter, 2018), 287–307, here 298.

even stronger commitments to profundity, such as Deleuzianism and neo-Heideggerianism, as suppressed and novel? And what if feminism, queer theory, critical race studies, disability studies, and other anti-bourgeois epistemologies were implicated in these schisms not only as radical alternatives, but always also as partisan doubles, competitively aligned with critique or post-critique, socialism or liberalism, structural analysis or ontological philosophy, etc.?[6]

Berlant's place in these discussions is remarkable because her writing is structured by such a high degree of self-awareness. This prompts her to frequently shift perspectives, sometimes experimentally so. True, large parts of *Cruel Optimism* rely on styles of thought that regard talk of "immanence" and "intensity" as new and even newly materialist. But then, Berlant always stresses the ordinariness of immanent life, rejecting any assumption of unique transcendence. This puts her in an interesting and productive position toward classical modes of social critique. While avoiding, like most of her peers, the Marxist notion of false consciousness—which in the hands of theorists such as Theodor Adorno or Sara Ahmed has never been a moral but always a structural concept—she invokes Marxism's "long tradition" of connecting the study of material production and social reproduction with "the affective components of labor-related subjectivity" (64). Like Raymond Williams, then, Berlant holds that subjective feelings are tightly interwoven with trans-subjective arrangements of collective life: "The 'structure of feeling' is a residue of common historical experience sensed but not spoken in a social formation" (65). This, she says, is "why the phrase 'political economy' must thread throughout our analysis" (37). And so it happens that contemporary affect theory, with its interest in what is felt even when it is not known, can figure in *Cruel Optimism* as "another phase in the history of ideology theory" (53).

3.

Is this a way out of Anglophone theory's current field-intrinsic anxieties? "How does one go about defetishizing negation while remaining critical?"

6 For a famous example within Anglophone feminism, see the 1998 debate between Nancy Fraser and Judith Butler in *New Left Critique*, with Fraser mapping various cross-combinations of such competing theoretical perspectives.

(123), Berlant asks. Her answer is that critical writing can try "to formulate, *without closing down*, the investments and incoherence of political subjectivity and subjectification in relation to the world's disheveled but predictable dynamics" (53, my emphasis). In other words, Berlant's intellectual desire is for "nonuniversal but general abstraction" (44).[7] I take this to call for a language of objective research that can generalize subjective experiences, but without over-generalizing them into the false objectivity of historical determinism. How does this work in *Cruel Optimism*?

Evidently, Berlant's chief interest is in personal practices of *adjustment*. How do "we" continue to live, she asks, how is life being "reproduced" from day to day, when any hope for transformation is already compromised by its anticipated disappointment?[8] The answer provided by *Cruel Optimism*—the book as well as the concept—is: "We" do so by "fantasies" of protective composure and intuitive relief, which Berlant finds developed and explored in various cultural "genres" that provide a repertoire of more or less self-aware, more or less self-suspecting coping "styles." Her archive thus consists of novels, films, and works of art since the 1990s, but also of the conflicted habits of "everyday life" that are registered, simulated, or formalized in these sources.

This method of searching for "patterns of adjustment" (9) in artworks comes naturally to a literary scholar, but it is not without problems. Leaving aside the vexing question of representativeness (which is important, however, if one wants to identify patterns), there is the more basic difficulty that studying stories *about* feelings—or ideas *about* objects—or images *of* embodiment—is not the same as studying feelings, objects, embodiment. This is a recurring conundrum for literary studies whenever it tries to make use of philosophical or sociological knowledge. What results from such borrowings is often circular validation: first the translation of aesthetic practices into more universal meanings (as if theory provided a dictionary to the hieroglyphics of art) and then the self-recognition of interpretation in its material or its

7 Berlant's phrase chiastically recalls Édouard Glissant's idea of "a nongeneralizing universal"; see Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, trans. Betsy Wing (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, [1990] 1997), 34. But where Glissant is reaching for a holistic epistemological perspective on life's endless production of difference—similar, in this regard, to Sylvia Wynter and other postcolonial theorists—Berlant is skeptical about the possibility and desirability of such an overarching view. In this, her concerns are more explicitly compositional.

8 All terms in quotation marks in this paragraph are used repeatedly throughout *Cruel Optimism*; I refrain from citing individual occurrences.

philosophical tools. Of course, this is not what Berlant is aiming at. In fact, she emphasizes that her material provides "affective *scenarios*" (9), not pure affect. But since the idea of purity is central to the brand of affect theory she quotes—where it refers to a type of ontological immanence that is said to be pre-social, pre-linguistic, pre-conceptual, etc.—Berlant's contrapuntal stress on construction, arrangement, and history makes all the difference.

Once more, *Cruel Optimism* struggles with the conflicting demands of two established styles of writing. On the one hand, Berlant's interpretations of artworks follow an old and venerable tradition of scholarship that regards literary texts (and films) as empathetic windows onto diverse human realities. It was William Empson who declared in 1973 (in a *Festschrift* for I.A. Richards): "The main purpose of reading imaginative literature is to grasp a wide variety of experience, imagining people with codes and customs very unlike our own."[9] Empson's term "experience" intersects in telling ways with Berlant's project, but so does the expression "our own," spoken here with discreet class consciousness. The relationship between literary humanism and imperial ventures of (sensual, geographic, economic) expansion is certainly a complicated one, but it is no coincidence that empathy was a standard motif in colonial romanticism. Ever since, "understanding the feelings of another" has become an indispensable feature of Western theories of fiction, especially those which focus on that most bourgeois of aesthetic figures: the domestic reader, always in the singular, alone with his or her book. For such individuals, we are told time and again, stories of foreign experiential worlds allow for self-transcendence without self-loss. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, this pleasing self-description of literature takes many forms but it always also responds to the historically novel feeling of travelers, merchants, missionaries, soldiers, social upstarts, lovers, and other Western subjects to find themselves in places where they suspect they may not belong.[10] Part of this problem still echoes in *Cruel Optimism*, when Berlant discusses lower class

9 William Empson, "The Hammer's Ring," in *I.A. Richards: Essays in His Honor*, ed. Reuben Brower, Helen Vendler, John Hollander (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1973), 73–84, here 75.

10 Frank Kelleter, "Koloniale Körper, blutüberströmt: Siedlungslust und Siedlungshorror in James Fenimore Coopers *The Last of the Mohicans: A Narrative of 1757* (1826)," in *race & sex: Eine Geschichte der Neuzeit: 49 Schlüsseltexte aus vier Jahrzehnten neu gelesen*, ed. Olaf Stieglitz and Jürgen Martschukat (Berlin: Neofelis, 2016), 337–344.

adjustments to infrastructural stress—using as one of her key entryways into "worker subjectivity" (189) an art-house film.

On the other hand, institutional self-awareness becomes methodical in *Cruel Optimism*. Naturally, Berlant knows that the works she enlists to access affective realities "unlike our own" (in Empson's terms) are highly fashioned artifacts, not unadulterated pieces of documentary evidence. Her response to this problem is to fold her awareness of this fact back into her interpretation, making it analytically consequential. At one point, for example, she explains how an avant-garde video project protesting the US occupation of Iraq exemplifies "the sonic aspects of ambient citizenship" (232). Immediately after this interpretation, however, she gives a pointed assessment of *The PSA Project*'s production culture, reception history, and institutional ecosystem. Suddenly deploying vocabulary reminiscent of Bourdieu (an otherwise under-quoted source despite Berlant's interest in "habit"), she concludes:

> [T]he narrative avant-gardism and polytonal dissonance of *The PSA Project* confirm the audience's cultural and emotional capital. As such … its aim is not to make its consumers more vulnerable, as they are already in some sense socially marginal, but to provide a scene for being together in the political. … Not challenging its audience politically, but only aesthetically, *The PSA Project* preaches to the choir. (237–238)

The rhetorical strategy here is *to do both*: deal with the artwork in a humanistic fashion, then *follow up* this more philosophical approach with a cultural analysis that regards the artwork as a social agent in its own right. Berlant initially treats what the work *shows* as a screen of illumination, only to switch perspective in a next step, focusing on what the work *does* when it shows what it shows. Thus, phenomenological "trust in the potential exemplarity of any episode" (8) is brought together with the historical politics of mediation, yet not in an integrative manner, but conjunctively and chronologically: first one, then the other. The fact that this sequence is repeated so often in *Cruel Optimism* suggests that the voice speaking here is itself attached to certain intellectual styles of composure and adjustment that carry it through this effort to make sense—until even the wide-ranging optimism of humanist reading, tracking "resonances among many scenes" (12), reveals its severely disappointing limits. Perhaps this is why the cruel part of these interpretations, the one about political economy, usually comes after the narratives and the images and the installation pieces have been translated into high concepts of the mind. And yet the voice that speaks in *Cruel Optimism* never fully crosses

over into critical pattern recognition, preferring instead to bring in the economic or cultural-ecological dimensions of its analyses as separate points of view. Berlant apparently worries that anything else would amount to structural cynicism or a disavowal of subjective self-presence. "Preaching to the choir," she says at the end of her critique of *The PSA Project*, "is always undervalued" (238).

I may be excused for finding something rather American in this attitude. There is an unmistakably Emersonian tone in Berlant's appreciation of the ordinary—and more than a touch of democratic populism in her tendency to think of individual agency as a counterforce to social structure. The chapter on "obesity" is a case in point. As an almost invisible "national epidemic" (103) that condemns entire sections of the population to "slow death" (38) because they lack access to regular infrastructures of welfare (time, money, information, suitable health services, but also certain types of stores and products), obesity in the United States is an almost perfect example of "crisis ordinariness." It is a crisis in which medical plight and socio-economic discrimination overlap and reinforce each other. Like many emergencies of everyday life, this crisis is "ordinary"—that is, widely taken for granted, including by many who suffer it—precisely in the sense that it relatively rarely affects upper- and middle-class people. During the coronavirus pandemic, obesity has been an important factor in the unduly high death rate among African Americans and poor people, but reports treating it as a cause (of sorts) could hardly conceal their racist foundations.[11] In this manner, body normativity is always doubly oppressive, and not only for people classified as overweight: it subjects living bodies of all varieties to impossible images of happiness through self-mastery—and simultaneously accelerates the physical damages resulting from these fantasies through an unjust allocation of health resources.[12]

It may be noted in passing that this situation illustrates how a traditional sense of crisis, in which "crisis" is understood as a collective emergency that requires immediate action, differs from neoliberalism's "crisis ordinariness":

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11 On the close interrelation between infrastructural racism and "pre-existing illnesses," see Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor, "The Black Plague," *The New Yorker*, 16 April, 2020, https://www.newyorker.com/news/our-columnists/the-black-plague.

12 See Amy Erdman Farrell, *Fat Shame: Stigma and the Fat Body in American Culture* (New York: New York University Press, 2011); Hannele Harjunen, *Neoliberal Bodies and the Gendered Fat Body* (London: Routledge, 2017). I thank Maria Sulimma for discussing fat studies with me.

the latter is recognized as an urgent disaster only when it begins to reach parts of the population that previously considered themselves immune to it. As long as this does not happen, both liberal and conservative observers will likely culturalize the troubles of the poor and structurally disadvantaged. In many Western countries, this class of people, suffering from chronic public disinvestment in the wellbeing of their bodies, is disproportionately non-white. Thus, discussions of obesity in the US are heavily inflected by racialism and classism, framing certain eating habits as lifestyle choices particularly prevalent in Black and Brown and poor neighborhoods.

Against such invocations of personal responsibility, Berlant forcefully insists that America's obesity crisis is inextricable from "the global circulation of unhealthy commodities" (104). But then her inclination to think about subjectivity as a realm of affective existence categorically distinct from, if not opposed to, political objectification qualifies this insight in interesting ways. Again, *Cruel Optimism* offers two perspectives side by side, this time, however, explicitly disconnecting them in terms of their cognitive jurisdiction, stressing that "obesity seen as a biopolitical event *needs to be separated from* eating as a phenomenological act, and from food as a space of expressivity" (115, my emphasis).

Does it? The prompt epistemological alliance of phenomenology and expressivity in this sentence, and their joint distinction from political economy, are worth pondering. Doesn't subjectivity in this constellation begin to look a lot like an upscale name for liberal individualism? Both concepts, after all, are primed to describe personal experience as a relief from the constraints of material power. One can appreciate the counter-hegemonic impulse of this model and still remain unconvinced by its political consequences, that is, the effects of its built-in idealism in the era of post-bourgeois capitalism. Put more concretely, one can share Berlant's distaste for "scandals of the appetite" (105) that curtail, censor, or criminalize non-bourgeois practices of eating, sex, self-medication, etc.—and even more so her conviction that one cannot talk about such moral panics "without talking about the temporality of the workday, the debt cycle, and consumer practice and fantasy" (105)—and still feel unsure about the rhetorical wisdom of conceptually separating structures of consumption that invite entire classes of people to "undermine their own health one bad decision at a time" (105) from a hopeful ontology of eating, which regards food as "one of the few spaces of controllable, reliable pleasure people have" (115).

Slow death by demographic belonging is difficult to translate into a celebration of cultural expressivity, even when the subjects exposed to such conditions insist on individual dignity, as they regularly will, when they fight *against* fat shaming no less than *for* better living options. Like poverty itself, obesity is no ontology. Or rather, it becomes one only by way of ideology. Otherwise the poor like to leave their situation behind, just as racialized subjects who embrace a common experience will, in all likelihood, still want to get rid of racism. Identity, in this sense, is inevitably a political issue—and politics, in these circumstances, by definition identity politics, occurring strategically within a larger struggle against social degradation and physical harm.

Berlant, I think, would not disagree. In fact, she expresses similar thoughts with much greater eloquence. "[T]here is nothing promising, heroic, or critical," she writes, about "the malnourishment of the poor throughout the contemporary world" (107). But then her analysis shifts back and forth between critiquing "the inculcation in children of a taste for salt, sugar, and fat" (112) and endorsements of the subjective "interruption" and "intermission" inherent in eating, no matter which food. Apparently, the phenomenological part of the argument becomes necessary because *Cruel Optimism* feels that a structural critique of bad diet, by itself, would be imposed on real people who are, after all, making real choices. On the one hand, this scruple reflects the mixed historical record, to put it mildly, of Marxist vanguardism. In this respect, Berlant's cautionary tone is fully justified. On the other hand, phenomenological rhetoric is a tricky candidate for making such corrections, perhaps even in its politicized queer versions, because phenomenology strongly tends to privilege ontological over sociohistorical notions of identity.[13] Identifying subjects with their perceptions and collectivities with their experiences, this style of thought typically measures lifeworlds by the instruments of their consciousness, locking identities into the sensations and desires instantaneously available to them. In fact, the mere act of feeling or desiring something often attains an aura of dissidence, or at least obstinacy, in phenomenological writing. Hence all these invocations of interruption, singularity, event, encounter, epiphany—an entire

13 For heterodox revisions of phenomenology that try to deal with this problem, see Gail Weiss, *Body Images: Embodiment as Intercorporeality* (London: Routledge, 1999); Iris Marion Young, *On Female Body Experience: "Throwing Like a Girl" and Other Essays* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005); Sara Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006).

metaphysics of the transformative moment, which has turned modernist ontology into an attractive alternative to materialist-historical analysis after all grand political utopias of modernity have been discredited.[14] Just like the attrition of society mobilizes ideologies of community, so the recession of credible images of a worthwhile future sustains philosophies that seek fulfillment in the *kairos* of the present—or what Benjamin, in an inaugural text of this tradition, called messianic "Jetztzeit."[15]

Many intellectual topoi and habits emit from here. One is the rhetoric of immanent life with its fondness for tautology—a stylistic quirk that indicates less a failure of logic than the emphasis of devotion. "[L]ived immanence" (28), writes Berlant, means "thinking about life during lived time" (59), as if there could be any other kind of living and thinking. Of course, the point of these redundancies is to shelve any notion of disinterested truth (whether it speaks in the language of scientific objectivity or theological authority) but their rhetorical effect can advance an involuntary mysticism of its own, a mysticism of the here and now.[16] Far from replacing the religious distinction of transcendence and immanence with something more appropriate, this philosophy of life often elevates immanence to the status of a transcendent force itself, with all the soteriological implications of such a move on stylistic display, as I will argue below.[17]

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14 Ironically, one of the most influential sources of this mode of thought, Deleuze and Guattari's *Anti-Oedipus* (1972), can be read as warning against a too-idealistic notion of desire—or a too-subjectivist one, for that matter. Fascism, one reads in *Anti-Oedipus*, has never simply been forced on populations but always also affectively chosen by them. What people desire can be their own subjection: a thought with obvious connections to the idea of cruel optimism, but like most American readers of Deleuze and Guattari, Berlant focuses on affect's improvisational creativity in this regard (influentially celebrated in Brian Massumi's crypto-pragmatist introduction to his English translation of Deleuze and Guattari's *Mille Plateaux* in 1987).

15 Walter Benjamin, "Über den Begriff der Geschichte," in *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 1, no. 2, ed. Rolf Tiedemann and Herman Schweppenhäuser (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, [1940] 1980), 691–704, here 701.

16 Put differently: As a *terminus technicus* in phenomenology, "lived experience" is not illogical but philosophically significant. This does not mean that its tautological structure cannot be historicized or questioned—nor that such questioning devalues political appeals to "lived experience" (first-hand familiarity) as a foundation for subaltern knowledge.

17 Incidentally, a tautological epistemology that would not require belief in the single event—or a romance of subjectivity—is provided by Luhmann's systems theory, which

Another intellectual resource for the project of "figuring out how to stay attached to life from within it" (11)—and from where else?—is the psychoanalytic notion of object choice, which, especially in its poststructuralist versions, tends to demystify the object (always suspect of fetishism) while sublimating the subjective act of choosing. For instance, when Berlant notes that obese people are often scolded for undermining their health "one bad decision at a time" (105), the word "decision" is doing more work in this description than the word "bad." For what does it even mean to say that someone "decides" to damage their body with junk food? Does such wording indicate a "paranoid style" (105) or does it describe a matter of object choice? Asked differently: if bad but tasty food is "one of the few stress relievers" (116) in struggling households, in how far does the simplicity of this simple pleasure alleviate the cruel insight that there is really nothing simple about it, dependent as it is on global systems of production and depletion? In fact, the cruelest part of all these ordinary crises may well be their active *promotion* of everyday coping and adjustment. After all, this is how corporate providers advertise junk food and other hyper-artificial wares: not as utopian harbingers of permanent well-being but precisely as the kind of individual self-interruptions that affect theory proclaims them to be: stress relievers, small indulgences, guilty pleasures, makeshift improvisations, momentary acts of recovery, temporary respites from the burden of being oneself, everyday boosts to our *resilience* (a word dutifully avoided in *Cruel Optimism* although Berlant's entire theory seems to circle around it).[18] Some of the conceptual tools that this anti-normative theory brings to bear on the subjective dimension of "crisis ordinariness"—including the idea of adjustment itself—are strangely compatible with libertarian notions of lifestyle choice. Is this because these slogans preserve some residual idea of true fulfillment or because no vision of a better life is anymore possible without them?

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stresses the autopoietic maintenance of social worlds. It is interesting to speculate how *Cruel Optimism* might have unfolded in dialogue with this theoretical framework. Perhaps "contingency"—an important term for Luhmann and Berlant alike—would have emerged more explicitly as a central concept, but not to stress the possibility of a change that finally sets things right, but to argue that nothing is stable without enormous present effort, because it always might have evolved differently in the past. Things could be otherwise—but not as a promise of redemption.

18 *Cruel Optimism* mentions "resilience" only once, early on, as part of a sequence that covers "dignity, resilience, desire, or optimism" (16).

Perhaps neither: if *Cruel Optimism* occasionally reads like deep philosophy triggered by the simple fact that commercial products never keep their promise—that the satisfactions provided by chain stores or corny illusions like "the American Dream" leave people feeling sick—this is so, I think, because Berlant's positive theory of attachment is predisposed (for good historical reason but potentially conflicting with her wish to "desubjectivize queerness") to deal with negative choices, whether queer or not, by honoring their romance of subjective experience. And is this not exactly how cruel optimism works, according to Berlant's definition and handling of it? At this meta-theoretical level, cruel optimism means making bad choices that may be no choices at all but that theory will allow itself to call "bad" only up to a point, because one can always turn the tables and reclaim their immanent pleasure as, somehow, liberating, in spite of everything. It is as if theory is having its critical cake and eating it too. What remains unclear is why human fulfillment should even depend on *attachment to something* or some *thing* (rather than, say, nourishment of life).[19] "[W]anting to be near *x*" (25) is presented by Berlant along psychoanalytic lines as a universal given of human existence, but then she also feels the need to discuss it as a historical contingency, dependent on complicated Western ideals of happiness that are inherently entangled with capitalist ideas of "objects" and liberal-democratic notions of "choice."

4.

Why go through all these moves? Why all these quotations from competing theories, conceptual frameworks, and master thinkers, in *Cruel Optimism* and other texts of its genre, including this reading of Berlant's readings? Speaking from within this self-referential field, one might feel tempted to say that

19 If the question of "what will secure one's happiness" (126) is bound to be disappointed, perhaps this has less to do with the elusiveness of a suitable "what" than with the assumption that happiness is a goal to be secured—and that doing so means encountering or choosing an object "so that we can imagine that someone or something can fulfill our desire" (122). For a critique of this belief system, see Sara Ahmed, *The Promise of Happiness* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), a book philosophically close to Berlant's discourse. For a discussion of other intellectual and ethic traditions (that do not rely on the idea of desire as something to be fulfilled), see François Jullien, *Vital Nourishment: Departing from Happiness*, trans. Arthur Goldhammer (New York: Zone Books, 2007).

most intuitions collected under the term "cruel optimism" have already been captured by Engels's idea of false consciousness. This would seem especially true when one relied on Sara Ahmed's understanding of false consciousness, which emphasizes "that we do not have to assume that consciousness is what belongs to an individual subject." According to Ahmed, false consciousness "might be about how the social is arranged through the sharing of deceptions that precede the arrival of subjects."[20] On this view, the analysis of consumer "choices" deserves the name of critique only when it abandons the idiom of personal disapprobation and starts speaking directly to the larger situation of the people involved (or what Ahmed calls the concrete arrangement of the social in which they find themselves).

Berlant would be correct to point out that this is exactly what *Cruel Optimism* is trying to do—and that one of her foremost aims in this regard, fully compatible with her previous work on heteronormative dictates of (un)happiness, is to highlight the *un-dramatic* nature of everyday suffering and adjustment: "being treads water" (10). I have already explained why I find this project compromised by certain populisms that I have termed, perhaps polemically but not without historical reflection, "American." At the same time, these American—or should I say: deeply liberal?—impulses are aided, as so often in Anglophone academia, by some of the most esoterically difficult—and originally conservative, even illiberal—varieties of European high theory. (The seemingly simple term "being" in the quotation above is a case in point.) In fact, there is nothing ordinary about the intellectual style of this book on ordinariness.

To make sense of this, one can apply Berlant to Berlant. I have suggested that her theory—or rather, her practice of theorizing—constitutes, in itself, a genre of affective composure and intellectual adaptation. In other words, Berlant's writing style affords and performs ways of coping that resemble the politico-emotional techniques of "living on" she recognizes in her material. This aspect of *Cruel Optimism* illuminates not only Berlant's use of quotations (from literary and theoretical works) but also the high degree of quotability of her own text. Anecdotally speaking, my impression is that the presence of *Cruel Optimism* in current academic discourse—but especially in keynote lectures, conference papers, classroom discussions, etc.—hinges on a register of *momentary insight*. Arresting turns of phrase or surprising re-descriptions

20 Ahmed, *The Promise of Happiness*, 165.

(quite in Luhmann's sense of the term) are singled out for quotation, sometimes preceded by the words "or as Lauren Berlant calls it ...." Apparently, one of the most widely appreciated virtues of this style is how it manages to reanimate ideas that in more established idiom would risk sounding formulaic or objectifying. If there is cognitive pleasure to a book as bleak as *Cruel Optimism*, it surely has to do with all these passages of sudden clarification, all the serendipitous conceptual combinations that you cannot avoid underlining, because they give a fresh sense of intellectual urgency to some of the oldest questions and answers of critical theory.

Some might say that this is simply memification, a process of breaking down theory into affectively charged instants of explanatory brilliance, underwritten by an academic star system. And true, Berlant's own politics of quotation can feel that way, often bypassing the nitty-gritty of bottom-up research and preferring instead the more rarefied company of a few master thinkers who are represented by memorable sayings ("Life has been interrupted and, as Badiou would say, settled by an event that demands fidelity," 32) or the unavoidable reference to some theoretical master text ("an underheralded aspect of *The Political Unconscious* was the centrality of Deleuze's and Guattari's *Anti-Oedipus* to the working through of Jameson's three interpretive horizons ...", 67).[21] But this is grossly underselling the stylistic complexity of *Cruel Optimism*. Remarkably—even surprisingly, given Berlant's interest in the ordinary—her lively innervations of cultural theory do not simply *exemplify* abstract observations with poignant case stories. Instead, her style often works the other way round, *translating* cases (mostly culled from literature) into philosophical constellations that are enlightening precisely because they evade the trap of critical blueprints. Converting and continually re-converting narrative scenarios into conceptual sequences, *Cruel Optimism* produces event-like moments of insight that nevertheless refuse to converge into a systematic account of political economy. To me, this is largely a matter of syntax. Berlant's talent for brilliant aphorisms and her fondness of serial relative clauses need to be seen in this context. Here are two typical sentences from *Cruel Optimism*:

21 A point rarely reflected upon is how such academic quotation practices are a matter of professional *time*. The neoliberal university is draining the humanities not only of financial resources but also temporal ones. The resulting regime of research, writing, and publishing is usually not conducive to, say, detailed literature reports.

> To be in crisis is not to have the privilege of the taken-for-granted: it is to bear an extended burden of vulnerability for an undetermined duration. To be in goes-without-saying ordinariness can only be an aspiration for those whose other option is to be overmastered by the moment of the event that began at a time that only retroactively leads one to diagnosis. (62)

Declaratory sentences dominated by the verb "to be" come naturally to the ontological mind, as Adorno has pointed out.[22] As a style of writing, modernist ontology is deeply invested in *identification*, but identification not of material objects or living creatures—this would mean to apprehend the merely "ontic"—but identification as the bringing-to-language of ontological truth, that is, life itself as revealed within or underneath social reality and physical matter.[23] Granted, what Heidegger, the most influential writer in this tradition, called "Being" can be translated into many different names. But what all these translations have in common is their principled disdain for referentiality. As identifications that refuse to identify, their highest ambition is to name that which is said to exist prior to the sociality of language: affect irreducible to emotion, the event out of history, the flesh before the body, the thing that is no mere object, etc. Concepts of this kind result not so much from performative contradictions as they call something into existence: a secularized mysticism, conjuring a "deeper" materialism, transcendence grounded in immanence. Grammatically, therefore, ontological writing has always been preoccupied with the conceit of *definition*, reproducing its linguistic features while denouncing its linguistic possibility. This style keeps returning to the syntax of "*x* is *y*" like a dog returns to its vomit, because *y* never simply concretizes *x* nor does it abstract from it. Rather, the mutual identification of two abstractions, each claiming to denote supreme concreteness, performs a moment of aphoristic truth. "No 'something,' only sentences could ever be ontological," says Adorno.[24]

Berlant often writes within this tradition. In the sentences quoted above, the near-tautological sequence of "the moment of the event," emphasizing its

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22 See Theodor W. Adorno, *Negative Dialektik* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, [1966] 1992). In the short passage above, "to be" / "is" occurs seven times.

23 On the "ontological difference," setting Being apart from beings, see Martin Heidegger, *Sein und Zeit* (Tübingen: Max Niemeyer, [1926] 1986).

24 Adorno, *Negative Dialektik*, 131 (my translation). E.B. Ashton translates: "nothing but propositions could be ontological," in Adorno, *Negative Dialectics* (London: Routledge, 1973), 125.

own need for emphasis, demonstrates as much. But gone are existentialism's claims for a philosophy that heroically "struggles" with "the unspeakable." Instead of the "jargon of authenticity" that Adorno found in Heidegger, *Cruel Optimism* offers ontology as a worried coping strategy, always distrustful of its own charisma, but also too prized, possibly too familiar, to be given up.[25] Avoiding anything that might resemble a transcendental signifier ("Being," "Capital," "Phallus," etc.), Berlant keeps converting critical vocabularies into each other, as if all of them intuited something important about the current world but none of them could exorcise what has befallen it. Sentences dread their ending because no promise of conclusion holds up. And yet the text pushes forward, stacking relative clauses onto each other, where earlier—or more doctrinaire—theorists would have put a full stop. Definitions are paradoxically serialized (*a* is *b*, which is *c*, because all *aa* are like some *d* that resembles *e*, or as X would call it, *f*), not because the writer cannot make up her mind, but because she senses that commitment to any one philosophical lexicon might imply the impossible claim of speaking from a position outside the mess of neoliberal living. Almost resignedly, then, but with the force of a temporary eye-opener, this style keeps falling back on that most common—that least imposing—of words: "something":

> If consumption promises satisfaction in substitution and then denies it because all objects are rest stops amid the process of remaining unsatisfied that counts for being alive under capitalism, in the impasse of desire, then hoarding seems like a solution to something. (42)

An American-type pragmatism of *"whatever, wherever"* (63) guides this sentence, but its intellectual point really comes with the anticlimactic ending. As a stylistic choice, to opt for shifting re-descriptions rather than settle into analytic closure fully accords with Berlant's theoretical gambit, when she characterizes the trajectory of postwar liberalism as a movement toward normalized precarity. Accordingly, the form of the sentence just quoted (substituting the word "consumption" with a series of conceptual replacements that decline to culminate in any satisfying explanation) mirrors its content (about the failing promises of substitution). The rest stops of the market are analogous here to the rest stops of the mind reflecting on them: the work of promise and disappointment occurs both at the level of the political economy and at the

25 Adorno, *Jargon der Eigentlichkeit: Zur deutschen Ideologie* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1964).

level of its intellection. In fact, "hoarding"—the main clause's long-delayed subject—is not a bad term for Berlant's own theory with its huge archive of promising ideas and words, such as "impasse" or "desire." Not letting go of concepts that suggest, somehow, the possibility of reliable sense-making, this style nonetheless knows itself to be engaged in a cognitive "process of remaining unsatisfied" that counts for thinking under capitalism.

The high quotability of *Cruel Optimism* has everything to do with these "rest stops" of the critical mind, the hoarded-up self-reflections of a damaged and damaging modernity. We witness explanations that do not even claim to provide solutions, only momentary relief. When quoted, they are usually reproduced as expressions rather than propositions, because what impresses about them—and what satisfies for a while—is precisely what they perform: the wealth and ingenuity of a vocabulary. At least we have *that*, Berlant seems to suggest: a treasure trove of words—*ein Wortschatz*.

At times, this highly elaborate style even approaches classical effects of beauty, or a kind of word magic that can resemble poetry. Berlant is extremely fond of alliterations and puns. Expressions such as "being possessed by coming into possession of possessions" (39) abound. And before you know it, things start to rhyme: meaning unfolds "between Home, Hymn, and Hum" (32) when "the bourgeois … carries his propriety onto property" (33). Meanwhile "labor fuels the shift from the concrete real to the soundtrack reel" (35) and "I am not the subject of a hymn but of a hum, the thing that resonates around me, which might be heaven or bees or labor or desires or electric wires" (33). Clearly, this writing aspires to be more than prose. Insights are literally *sounded out*, "between reverie and reverence," between "resonance and reverence" (32).

The lyricism of *Cruel Optimism* is fundamental to its rhetorical project—and this in a threefold sense. *Affectively*, it marks this style as reaching for epiphanic alleviation when nothing else seems trustworthy anymore. *Intellectually*, such lyricism points, again, to Berlant's deep investment in the onto-ideological tradition, with its affinity for etymology (be it Emersonian or Heideggerian).[26] About her own "punning," for instance, Berlant says that it constitutes a "Thoreauvian method" (35). This statement half-divulges, half-asserts the transcendentalism at the heart of Berlant's philosophy of immanence. It also illustrates how carefully this rhetoric-as-poetics incorporates its own self-intellection, or critique. And it does so—the third function

26 Sometimes etymology even alliterates: "ambit … is akin to ambition" (230).

of such lyricism—*performatively*, that is, without dogmatic consequences. Almost like the subjectivities described, Berlant's text keeps holding on to illusions that it knows to be illusory—and then tells us that it is doing so. In this, it recalls modernism's faith in the saving grace of self-reference (think of Wallace Stevens's "supreme fiction"), but with all modernist confidence now re-routed into a much bleaker, much more distressed understanding of what it means to "believe in a fiction, which you know to be a fiction."[27]

Another way of putting this is to say that cruel optimism's "promise of the promise" is complemented by *Cruel Optimism*'s attachment to attachment. In her choice of material, Berlant is often drawn to stories and images about something that arrives or someone "who comes up to you" (34) and changes everything. True, the romanticism of "being open to an encounter that's potentially transformative" (35) is described as what it is—cruel, perhaps even prompting cruelty when finding itself disappointed—but *optimism*, in these narratives, typically means hope for the advent of a redeeming force: that extraordinary instant "when someone allows himself to be changed by an event of being with the object" (32). Both in the heteronormative psychology of object choice and the Judeo-Christian theologies that precede it, this hope to be "changed by an encounter" (34) is hope for *salvation* whenever the moment of ontological transformation promises to put all ontic transformations to rest. "Satisfaction" in these scenarios is essentially imagined as a change that ends all change, at least for a while. Hope, therefore, is not just hope for a better tomorrow but for a tomorrow that arises as an eternal today—what Reinhart Koselleck has called the "futureless future" of nineteenth-century European *Geschichtsphilosophie*, which has found a queer(ed) home in some of the most anti-bourgeois quarters of contemporary cultural studies.[28]

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27 Wallace Stevens: "The final belief is to believe in a fiction, which you know to be a fiction, there being nothing else. The exquisite truth is to know that it is a fiction and that you believe in it willingly"; see *Collected Poetry and Prose* (New York: Library of America, 1997), 903.

28 Reinhart Koselleck, *Futures Past: On the Semantics of Historical Time*, trans. Keith Tribe (New York: Columbia University Press, [1979] 2004), 19. — Riffing on *Cruel Optimism*'s self-positioning toward queer theory, one might say that there is something odd, if historically intriguing, about reducing the idea of optimism to the mere presence of a rhetoric of futurity. To promote change as valuable in itself, one has to ignore a large number of credible versions of it: the unlucky, tragic, catastrophic ones. Thus, skepticism toward "change we can believe in" is not necessarily a sign of conservative attach-

Historically, the real-world cruelty of this soteriological desire has always resulted from its veiled imperative to *allow* oneself to be transformed: the soft coerciveness that asks people to *open* themselves to their own becoming ("Be open to the one who comes up to you," 34). My point is that all these fantasies, which Berlant characterizes as such, are not universal but particular. This is the dilemma of their theoretical disclosure: any language of disillusion prolongs the illusion if philosophy reinforces the existential charisma of situations that are really historical contingencies. Berlant's performative self-awareness reacts to this dilemma by making a move and then questioning it. It upholds a metaphysic of "the event," but only in cruelly optimistic quotations, collapsing the singularity of salvation into everyday attachments to "anything" (35), as if the falseness of the promise could be compensated by the universalism of its ordinariness.

5.

Analysis, philosophy, and self-reflection: these theoretical registers *take turn* in Berlant's writing. They exist side by side in *Cruel Optimism*—hoarded up, one might say—but their conjunctive presence produces an overall effect, a solution to something. To no small degree, this "something" is a professional crisis. Berlant says her aim is to "resist idealizing, even implicitly, any program of better thought or reading" (124). Reminiscent of Bruno Latour's suspicion that "powerful explanations" reveal the explainer's "lust for power," this mind–set—hyper-critical to the point of postcritique—conveys rather specific anxieties of institutional practice.[29] In Berlant's words, people who write within the genre of theory ("those of us who think for a living") are "too well-positioned to characterize certain acts of virtuous thought as dramatically powerful" (124). What *Cruel Optimism* offers in place of such virtuous thought is, ultimately, virtuosa thought: an intellectual style that reassures by the very skillfulness with which it disturbs "us." One feels that there is something extraordinary about the way this text keeps integrating "us," when any criticism "we" are disposed to bring up against it has already been included within it.

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ment to the status quo; it can also express the perceived likelihood of things getting even worse.

29 Bruno Latour, *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 85.

"We"? The first person plural is of central importance in *Cruel Optimism*. "We are set up to overestimate the proper clarity and destiny of an idea's effects and appropriate affects" (124), Berlant says. But who exactly is "set up" here, who is "too well-positioned"? If Berlant's study of neoliberal life performs affective work, it does so for a distinct subset of neoliberal subjects, namely, humanities scholars, and among them especially those who are attached to modernist philosophies of immanence (phenomenology, psychoanalysis, "new" materialisms, etc.) while feeling disenchanted by the failures, or bored by the routines, or exhausted by the demands, of materialist historical research. Again there is a strong correlation between these dispositions and the Americanness—or, at least, the Westernness—of the institutional frameworks called up in *Cruel Optimism*. Accordingly, I have put the word "we" in inverted commas above: it quotes Berlant's standard quotation of the generalized subject of phenomenological inquiry, which, outside this rhetorical field, always refers to particular populations and their contingent situations—in this case, as Berlant calls it, "a U.S. world" (69).

This is not a question of which scholar carries which passport. Rather, *Cruel Optimism* does its work of elucidation and consolation, agitation and reproduction, within and for an intellectual ecosystem that consists of professionals who interface with the world largely through American or Anglophone products of entertainment and learning—who convene around the globe to exchange second-order observations of mass-produced stories and songs—who watch films in order to "teach" them (and theory "through" them)—who have learned to experience poetry as a key to life, if not always living. Like any ecosystem, this one looks like the world to those who inhabit it. But never so thoughtlessly as not to require defense or justification: Social awareness runs high in the humanities, often expressed in the everyday (and social media) genre of rhetorically acknowledging one's privilege. Berlant is both more careful and more pointed in her critique of "the devastating failure of white, middle-class American subjectivity, whether feminist or not" (155), which I take to be her way of saying liberalism. Fully conscious that she is speaking about—and from within—a special demographic, she recognizes the danger of self-awareness turning rhetorical. Some anxiety of elitism remains. Perhaps this runs in the DNA of Western intellectualism: so many philosophies trying to get beyond philosophy, but never by way of ignoring it, rarely by way of deflating it. Berlant's juxtaposition of competing idioms feels like a timely strategy of relativization in this regard. Still her tools and their deployment are, by necessity, highly situated within the catastrophe of

the contemporary, i.e., no longer ratified by expressivist acknowledgments of positionality, because these, too, are dependent now on increasingly pressured infrastructures and their (counter)norms of reproduction.

This raises the question of Berlant's own object of desire and its probable turn into a precarious object of disappointment. I suggest that in its widest designation, this object—postclassical theory's impossible love interest—is "ordinary life." Granted, this romance is as old as the institutionalization of thought itself. But in its neoliberal American version, as Berlant knows and demonstrates, the age-old dream of "intellection as the guardian of the bruised and disappointed self" (145) runs up against a global history of crimes carried out in the name—and often with the help of—grand intellectual systems of historiography and macro-analysis. Pragmatism and love of the ordinary are intuitive responses to this disturbing heritage in a social environment that is marked to equal degrees by populist dread of snobbery and liberal fear of "impasses" (a thoroughly negative term in *Cruel Optimism*, as far as I can see).[30] Under such circumstances, theory's desire for immanence is essentially the desire for immanent theory: a theory that would emerge directly from life as it is lived, with the subjectivity of self-present bodies offering a political solution in itself.

Against this background, the remarkable achievement of *Cruel Optimism* is to register from within American liberalism—and rehearsing some of its favorite vocabularies, including an entire lexicon of (lifestyle) "choice"—the manifold exhaustions and misrecognitions of this style of thought. Doing so in 2011, as a US intellectual, Berlant may be forgiven for largely sidelining a form of cruelty that is even more damaging than the cruelty of liberal disappointment, if one of its consequences. Since the publication of *Cruel Optimism* ten years ago, it has become increasingly clear that adjustment to infrastructural stress includes *ressentiments* that are "cruel" in a more literal, often lethal sense of the term. The rise of neofascism—this signature development of Western societies in the twenty-first century—is difficult (though not impossible) to reconcile with populist romances of the ordinary, even in the self-

30 Though not in other queer theories, including receptions of Berlant that aim to rethink "impasse" as a turning point or paradoxical opening; see Käthe von Bose et al., eds., *I Is for Impasse* (Berlin: b_books, 2015). I thank Simon Strick for discussing this point with me.

conflicted and disillusioned versions that Lauren Berlant works out so skillfully in the third year of the Obama presidency.[31]

Is this reading a critique of *Cruel Optimism*? I hope not in the sense of proposing a more virtuous way of theorizing. Perhaps the important question, in terms of critique, is to reconstruct and recognize what *Cruel Optimism* is doing for its readers and its time. I have tried to trace how Berlant's attachment to liberal notions of individual agency and to transcendental philosophies of affective immanence is tested by her simultaneous recognition of the cruelty inherent in these optimisms. The result, as far as I can see, is twofold. On the one hand, *Cruel Optimism* tries to *complement* phenomenological and ontological styles of thought—which Berlant mainly calls up in their already heterodox feminist and queer adaptations—with the sometimes conflicting but increasingly urgent observational modes of Marxian or generally materialist-historical analysis, trying to do justice both to "the labor of disappointment and the disappointment of labor" (45). On the other hand, Berlant keeps *displacing* her disapproval of the more metaphysical—or vitalist—aspects of affect theory (most obviously in her dazzling critique of trauma discourse) into the still onto-phenomenological notions of subjectivized "interruption" and "intuition," which arguably serve to save rather than dispel many of the cruel deceptions encapsulated in canonized high-theoretical concepts of "being," "experience," "encounter," "immanence," "the ordinary," "life," and "the event."[32]

As a style under stress, however, Berlant's method offers guarded promises of its own. Maybe these are more realistic than the righteous utopias of earlier critical genres, including many that have habitually subscribed to "historical materialism." No doubt, *Cruel Optimism* is saturated with the political worries of its time; so much in Berlant's book makes sense right now, but who knows how attachment to *these* attachments will look

31 See Frank Kelleter, "Hegemoronic Vistas: The Pseudo-Gramscian Right from the Powell Memorandum to the 'Flight 93 Election,'" in *Trump's America: Political Culture and National Identity*, ed. Liam Kennedy (Edinburgh: University of Edinburgh Press, 2020), 72–106.

32 For a similar argument, see Clare Hemmings's (explicitly feminist) critique of ontological affect theory's celebration of "the unexpected, the singular, or indeed the quirky, over the generally applicable, where the latter becomes associated with the pessimism of social determinist perspectives, and the former with the hope of freedom from social constraint" ("Invoking Affect: Cultural Theory and the Ontological Turn," *Cultural Studies* 19, no. 5 (2005): 548-567, here 550).

like during the next war, or after it. And yet such style enables a wider perspective. This reader, at least, felt that Berlant's writing resembles an intellectual mode almost archived today as obsolete: the helpfully unhelpful, inconsolable but not even nihilistic reflection on "damaged life." Approaching this term from another quarter of the politico-philosophical field than Adorno, who coined it, *Cruel Optimism* gives a darkly Marxian inflection to many contemporary phenomenologies, essentially retro-aligning "queer theory, … antiracist theory, subaltern studies, and other radical ethnographic historiographies of the present" (13) with a project that *Minima Moralia* in 1951 defined as social theory's unavoidable return to the always slippery concept of "individual experience," precisely because "the large historical categories" of Hegelian critique "are no longer above suspicion of fraud."[33] Out of this grew *Negative Dialektik* (1967), switching critical perspective once more (and again and again), arguing for "micrological" inquiry while dismissing any transcendently immanent lingo of subjectivity. My reservations about some of Berlant's theoretical commitments aside, I cannot help but read *Cruel Optimism* as the *Negative Dialektik* of our time, Western modernity's prewar present to its postwar past. The similarities between these texts are just too numerous. They share a sense of intellectual integrity premised on extreme self-awareness. Their ethics is one of minimizing status-quo morality. In the end, philosophy is all they have.

And so, almost uniquely among literary scholars today, Berlant, even when she critiques critique, does not claim to be practicing anything other than critique. In fact, her writing is at its most compelling when it demonstrates the necessity of not agreeing to a broken world—and not because such attitude would mend much, but because in a world without it, all agreement risks becoming false agreement. What is most productive, then, or most valuable, about *Cruel Optimism*'s interest in the positivity of attachment is precisely the inherent negativity of a style that never settles for, or with, its own conclusions—a style that always counters every move it makes. It is almost dialectics. But without devastating hope for synthesis. Or as Lauren Berlant puts it:

"And one might be wrong about everything." (158)

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33 Theodor W. Adorno, *Minima Moralia: Reflexionen aus dem beschädigten Leben* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, [1951] 1991), 10; translation by E.F.N. Jephcott in *Minima Moralia: Reflections on a Damaged Life* (London: Verso, 2005), 17.