

Lauren Berlant **CRUEL OPTIMISM**



A relation of cruel optimism exists when something you desire is actually an obstacle to your flourishing. It might involve food, or a kind of love; it might be a fantasy of the good life, or a political project. It might rest on something simpler, too, like a new habit that promises to induce in you an improved way of being. These kinds of optimistic relation are not inherently cruel. They become cruel only when the object that draws your attachment actively impedes the aim that brought you to it initially.

All attachment is optimistic, if we describe optimism as the force that moves you out of yourself and into the world in order to bring closer the sat-

isfying something that you cannot generate on your own but sense in the wake of a person, a way of life, an object, project, concept, or scene. But optimism might not *feel* optimistic. Because optimism is ambitious, at any moment it might feel like anything, including nothing: dread, anxiety, hunger, curiosity, the whole gamut from the sly neutrality of browsing the aisles to excitement at the prospect of “the change that’s gonna come.” Or, the change that is *not* going to come: one of optimism’s ordinary pleasures is to induce conventionality, that place where appetites find a shape in the predictable comforts of the good-life genres that a person or a world has seen fit to formulate. But optimism doesn’t just manifest an aim to become stupid or simple—often the risk of attachment taken in its throes manifests an intelligence beyond rational calculation.

Whatever the *experience* of optimism is in particular, then, the *affective structure* of an optimistic attachment involves a sustaining inclination to return to the scene of fantasy that enables you to expect that *this time*, nearness to *this thing* will help you or a world to become different in just the right way. But, again, optimism is cruel when the object/scene that ignites a sense of possibility actually makes it impossible to attain the expansive transformation for which a person or a people risks striving; and, doubly, it is cruel insofar as the very pleasures of being inside a relation have become sustaining regardless of the content of the relation, such that a person or a world finds itself bound to a situation of profound threat that is, at the same time, profoundly confirming.

This book considers relations of cruel optimism ranging from objects or scenes of romantic love and upward mobility to the desire for the political itself. At the center of the project, though, is that moral-intimate-economic thing called “the good life.” Why do people stay attached to conventional good-life fantasies—say, of enduring reciprocity in couples, families, political systems, institutions, markets, and at work—when the evidence of their instability, fragility, and dear cost abounds? Fantasy is the means by which people hoard idealizing theories and tableaux about how they and the world “add up to something.” What happens when those fantasies start to fray—depression, dissociation, pragmatism, cynicism, optimism, activism, or an incoherent mash?

Readers of my national sentimentality trilogy—*The Anatomy of National Fantasy*, *The Female Complaint*, and *The Queen of America Goes to Washington City*—will recognize these questions as central to its investigation of U.S. aesthetics, erotics, and politics over the last two centuries. These works look at

the affective components of citizenship and the public sphere, focusing in particular on how intimate publics work in proximity to normative modes of love and the law. *Cruel Optimism* expands the concerns of that work transnationally and temporally, extending them to the contemporary moment. The archive of this project, straddling the United States and contemporary Europe, looks at precarious bodies, subjectivity, and fantasy in terms of citizenship, race, labor, class (dis)location, sexuality, and health. These cases are linked in relation to the retraction, during the last three decades, of the social democratic promise of the post-Second World War period in the United States and Europe.

Cruel Optimism does not cover the entire second half of the twentieth century into the twenty-first, though; nor is it a thorough exposé of the state's withdrawal from the uneven expansion of economic opportunity, social norms, and legal rights that motored so much postwar optimism for democratic access to the good life.¹ Instead, taking up mass media, literature, television, film, and video that appeared between 1990 and the present, it seeks out the historical sensorium that has developed belatedly since the fantasmatic part of the optimism about structural transformation realized less and less traction in the world. The fantasies that are fraying include, particularly, upward mobility, job security, political and social equality, and lively, durable intimacy. The set of dissolving assurances also includes meritocracy, the sense that liberal-capitalist society will reliably provide opportunities for individuals to carve out relations of reciprocity that seem fair and that foster life as a project of adding up to something and constructing cushions for enjoyment. The book is about what happens to fantasies of the good life when the ordinary becomes a landfill for overwhelming and impending crises of life-building and expectation whose sheer volume so threatens what it has meant to "have a life" that adjustment seems like an accomplishment. It tracks the emergence of a precarious public sphere, an intimate public of subjects who circulate scenarios of economic and intimate contingency and trade paradigms for how best to live on, considering.² Each chapter tells a story about the dissolution of optimistic objects/scenarios that had once held the space open for the good-life fantasy, and tracks dramas of adjustment to the transformation of what had seemed foundational into those binding kinds of optimistic relation we call "cruel."

But how can it be said that aesthetically mediated affective responses exemplify a shared *historical* sense? What follows sketches out the kinds of general conceptual shifts this book seeks to make in casting that question.

The historical sense with which *Cruel Optimism* is most concerned involves conceiving of a contemporary moment from within that moment. One of this book's central claims is that the present is perceived, first, affectively: the present is what makes itself present to us before it becomes anything else, such as an orchestrated collective event or an epoch on which we can look back. (Chapter 2, "Intuitionists," describes this way of thinking about "the affective present" in Marxist critical theory.) If the present is not at first an object but a mediated affect, it is also a thing that is sensed and under constant revision, a temporal genre whose conventions emerge from the personal and public filtering of the situations and events that are happening in an extended now whose very parameters (when did "the present" begin?) are also always there for debate.³

Discussions about the contours and contents of the shared historical present are therefore always profoundly political ones, insofar as they are about what forces should be considered responsible and what crises urgent in our adjudication of survival strategies and conceptions of a better life than what the metric of survival can supply. Focus on the present isn't invariably shallow presentism, or "the narcissism of the now," therefore—but even when it is, it involves anxiety about how to assess various knowledges and intuitions about what's happening and how to eke out a sense of what follows from those assessments.⁴ This book pays a lot of attention to different styles of managing simultaneous, incoherent narratives of what's going on and what seems possible and blocked in personal/collective life. We understand nothing about impasses of the political without having an account of the production of the present.

Accordingly, *Cruel Optimism* has a broad interest in amassing genres of historical duration that mark the unfolding activity of the contemporary moment. This book's main genre for tracking the sense of the present is the "impasse." (See especially chapter 6, "After the Good Life," for an elaboration of this concept.) Usually an "impasse" designates a time of dithering from which someone or some situation cannot move forward. In this book's adaptation, the impasse is a stretch of time in which one moves around with a sense that the world is at once intensely present and enigmatic, such that the activity of living demands both a wandering absorptive awareness and a hypervigilance that collects material that might help to clarify things, maintain one's sea legs, and coordinate the standard melodramatic crises with those processes that have not yet found their genre of event.⁵ Speaking of cruel optimism, it may be that, for many now, living in an impasse would

be an aspiration, as the traditional infrastructures for reproducing life—at work, in intimacy, politically—are crumbling at a threatening pace. The holding pattern implied in “impasse” suggests a temporary housing. This leads us to the other sense of “impasse” that moves throughout the book: impassivity. *Cruel Optimism* pays a lot of attention to diverse class, racial, sexual, and gendered styles of composure. What Jacques Rancière calls “the distribution of the sensible” appears here not only in the class-based positioning of sensibility, but also in gestural economies that register norms of self-management that differ according to what kinds of confidence people have enjoyed about the entitlements of their social location. The way the body slows down what’s going down helps to clarify the relation of living on to ongoing crisis and loss.

In addition to temporal genres of the stretched-out present, the book develops aesthetic ones for describing the activity of being reflexive about a contemporary historicity as one lives it. Many genres of the emerging event appear throughout the book, such as the situation, the episode, the interruption, the aside, the conversation, the travelogue, and the happening. For example, throughout I define the genre *situation* in terms of the situation comedy or the police procedural. The police conventionally say: “We have a situation here.” A situation is a state of things in which *something* that will perhaps matter is unfolding amid the usual activity of life. It is a state of animated and animating suspension that forces itself on consciousness, that produces a sense of the emergence of something in the present that may become an event. This definition of situation resonates with the concept’s appearance in Alain Badiou’s work with the “event,” but for Badiou the event is a drama that shocks being into radically open situations—the event constitutes the potential for a scene of ethical sociality.⁶ (People can’t have fidelity to a “situation” because they don’t know what it is or how to be in it: and so, if one follows Badiou’s idiom, the event is that element in the situation that elaborates the potential good in a radical break, and the antisovereign effect of the situation that undoes the subject and general sureties threatens ethical action.) Brian Massumi takes a similarly structural but more dialectical view, attending to the relation of the situation to the event by prioritizing “event” as that which *governs* the situation. But Massumi is also quite interested in the sense I value, seeing the situation as a genre of unforeclosed experience.⁷

In any case, the situation’s state of animated suspension provides a way of thinking about some conventions with which we develop a histori-

cal sense of the present affectively as immanence, emanation, atmosphere, or emergence. *Perturbation* is Deleuze's word for disturbances in the atmosphere that constitute situations whose shape can only be forged by continuous reaction and transversal movement, releasing subjects from the normativity of intuition and making them available for alternative ordinaries.⁸ The situation is therefore a genre of social time and practice in which a relation of persons and worlds is sensed to be changing but the rules for habitation and the genres of storytelling about it are unstable, in chaos. Chapter 5, "Nearly Utopian, Nearly Normal," argues that the precarious public sphere has generated a new popular variation, the "situation tragedy." In the situation comedy, the subject whose world is not too destabilized by a "situation" that arises performs a slapstick maladjustment that turns out absurdly and laughably, without destroying very much. In the situation tragedy, the subject's world is fragile beyond repair, one gesture away from losing all access to sustaining its fantasies: the situation threatens utter, abject unraveling. In the artwork or in response to other scenes, when an apprehending sensorium senses a potentially significant threat to the ordinary's ongoing atmosphere, it sparks the rhythms of situation tragedy, with its menacing new realism.

Yet while sometimes situations organize into world-shifting events or threaten the present with their devastating latency, mostly they do not. How do we learn to process *x* happening as an emerging event, and how do the conventional genres of event potentially foreclose the possibility of the event taking shape otherwise, as genres *y* and *z*, which might hover as possibilities but end up being bracketed and stored somewhere until repetitions call them back, if ever? This kind of attention to the becoming-event of something involves questions about ideology, normativity, affective adjustment, improvisation, and the conversion of singular to general or exemplary experience. This set of processes—the becoming historical of the affective event and the improvisation of genre amid pervasive uncertainty—organizes *Cruel Optimism*.

Thus rather than tracking the "waning of affect" as the mark of the present, I track the waning of genre, and in particular older realist genres (in which I include melodrama) whose conventions of relating fantasy to ordinary life and whose depictions of the good life now appear to mark archaic expectations about having and building a life.⁹ Genres provide an affective expectation of the experience of watching something unfold, whether that thing is in life or in art. The waning of genre frames different kinds of

potential openings within and beyond the impasse of adjustment that constant crisis creates. This project draws particularly from Giorgio Agamben's analysis of the class-related production of characteristic gestures that the cinema collects as they become archaic.¹⁰ It also emerges from a long engagement with Raymond Williams's incitement to think about the present as a process of emergence.¹¹ In the present from which I am writing about the present, conventions of reciprocity that ground how to live and imagine life are becoming undone in ways that force the gestures of ordinary improvisation within daily life into a greater explicitness affectively and aesthetically. Cinema and other recording forms not only archive what is being lost but track what happens in the time that we inhabit before new forms make it possible to relocate within conventions the fantasy of sovereign life unfolding from actions.

Throughout, to manifest the unbinding of subjects from their economic and intimate optimism, *Cruel Optimism* depicts the work of new genres, such as the situation tragedy (in relation to melodrama and situation comedy), and an emergent aesthetics, such as in the cinema of precarity, in which attention to a pervasive contemporary social precariousness marks a relation to older traditions of neorealism, while speaking as well to the new social movements that have organized under the rubrics of "precarity" and the "precarious." These new aesthetic forms, I argue, emerge during the 1990s to register a shift in how the older state-liberal-capitalist fantasies shape adjustments to the structural pressures of crisis and loss that are wearing out the power of the good life's traditional fantasy bribe without wearing out the need for a good life.¹² Along with locating the historically specific dynamics of its governing situation, each chapter tracks specific styles of the unraveling of normative social convention in relation to genre.

Implied in what precedes this is a claim that, across diverse geopolitical and biopolitical locations, the present moment increasingly imposes itself on consciousness as a moment in extended crisis, with one happening piling on another. The genre of crisis is itself a heightening interpretive genre, rhetorically turning an ongoing condition into an intensified situation in which extensive threats to survival are said to dominate the reproduction of life. At the same time, as chapter 3, "Slow Death," argues, the genre of crisis can distort something structural and ongoing within ordinariness into something that seems shocking and exceptional.

This brings us to the book's second aim in relation to developing ways to attend to the sensual registers of mass crisis as they impact the historical

sense of the present. Everyday life theory is one conventional framework for comprehending the contemporary world for which analysts of the historical present seek to provide new kinds of entry. But *Cruel Optimism* moves away from a recapitulation of everyday life theory as a vehicle for deriving an aesthetics of precarity from its archive in the contemporary United States and Europe. The Euro-modernist concern with the *shock* of urban anomie and mass society developed a rich sense of the sensorium of the early last century. This sense was exemplified by the milling crowd and the compensatory consciousness and practice of the flaneur and the flaneuse, whose modes of scanning and collecting the present are said to have relieved them of crisis, emancipated them from the private, but kept them mentally distant from the too-closeness of the world. But everyday life theory no longer describes how most people live. The short version of this argument is that the vast majority of the world's population now lives in cities and has access to mass culture via multiple technologies, and is therefore not under the same pressure to unlearn and adapt that their forebears might well have been. At the same time, as Nigel Thrift has argued, the reflexive scanning that provided relief for the flaneuse and the flaneur no longer does, but rather exemplifies the mass sensorium engendered by problems of survival that are public and that induce a variety of collective affective responses to the shapelessness of the present that constant threat wrecks.

In league with books like Thrift's *Non-Representational Theory*, Marc Augé's *Non-Places: Essays on Supermodernity*, Michael Taussig's *The Nervous System*, and Kathleen Stewart's *Ordinary Affects*, *Cruel Optimism* turns toward thinking about the ordinary as an impasse shaped by crisis in which people find themselves developing skills for adjusting to newly proliferating pressures to scramble for modes of living on. Observable lived relations in this work always have a backstory and induce a poetic of immanent world making. In this sense these scholars' mode of engaging the activity of affect articulates processes that are not ordinarily in academic conversation: history, phenomenology, trust in the potential exemplarity of any episode, and the ongoing work of storytelling (including criticism) in the making and mediation of worlds.

Instead of the vision of the everyday *organized* by capitalism that we find in Lefebvre and de Certeau, among others, I am interested in the overwhelming ordinary that is *disorganized* by it, and by many other forces besides. This is a matter of a different emphasis, not of a theoretical negation: the rhythms of ordinary existence in the present—Lefebvre's *dressage* as a model for subjec-

tivity in general—scramble the distinction between forced adaptation, pleasurable variation, and threatening dissolution of life-confirming norms.¹³ This ordinary is an intersecting space where many forces and histories circulate and become “ready to hand” in the ordinary, as Stanley Cavell would put it, for inventing new rhythms for living, rhythms that could, at any time, congeal into norms, forms, and institutions.¹⁴ Each chapter enters the ordinary from the vantage point of ongoing crisis, and the book as a whole tracks the “crisis ordinary” from multiple vantage points along many different vectors of privilege.

The key here is not to see what happens to aesthetically mediated characters as equivalent to what happens to people but to see that in the affective scenarios of these works and discourses we can discern claims about the situation of contemporary life.¹⁵ At times I use terms like “neoliberal” or “transnational” as heuristics for pointing to a set of delocalized processes that have played a huge role in transforming postwar political and economic norms of reciprocity and meritocracy since the 1970s. But I am not claiming that they constitute a world-homogenizing system whose forces are played out to the same effect, or affect, everywhere. The differences matter, as do the continuities. My method is to read patterns of adjustment in specific aesthetic and social contexts to derive what’s collective about specific modes of sensual activity toward and beyond survival. Each chapter focuses on dynamic relations of hypervigilance, unreliable agency, and dissipated subjectivity under contemporary capitalism; but what “capitalism” means varies a lot, as each case makes its own singular claim for staging the general forces that dominate the production of the historical sensorium that’s busy making sense of and staying attached to whatever there is to work with, for life.

This leads me to the book’s final conceptual aim. I have described its departure from modernist models of cognitive overload in the urban everyday, in order to engage a broader range of physical and aesthetic genres that mediate pressures of the present moment on the subject’s sensorium. *Cruel Optimism* argues, therefore, for moving away from the discourse of trauma—from Caruth to Agamben—when describing what happens to persons and populations as an effect of catastrophic impacts.¹⁶ Why does that follow? Given trauma’s primary location in describing severe transformations of physical health and life, it might be surprising to think about trauma as a genre for viewing the historical present. But in critical theory and mass society generally, “trauma” has become the primary genre of the last eighty

years for describing the historical present as the scene of an exception that has just shattered some ongoing, uneventful ordinary life that was supposed just to keep going on and with respect to which people felt solid and confident. This book thinks about the ordinary as a zone of convergence of many histories, where people manage the incoherence of lives that proceed in the face of threats to the good life they imagine. Catastrophic forces take shape in this zone and become events within history as it is lived. But trauma theory conventionally focuses on exceptional shock and data loss in the memory and experience of catastrophe, implicitly suggesting that subjects ordinarily archive the intensities neatly and efficiently with an eye toward easy access.

A traumatic event is simply an event that has the capacity to induce trauma. My claim is that most such happenings that force people to adapt to an unfolding change are better described by a notion of systemic crisis or “crisis ordinariness” and followed out with an eye to seeing how the affective impact takes form, becomes mediated. Crisis is not exceptional to history or consciousness but a process embedded in the ordinary that unfolds in stories about navigating what’s overwhelming. Each chapter narrates why a logic of adjustment within the historical scene makes more sense than a claim that merges the intense with the exceptional and the extraordinary. The extraordinary always turns out to be an amplification of something in the works, a labile boundary at best, not a slammed-door departure. In the impasse induced by crisis, being treads water; mainly, it does not drown. Even those whom you would think of as defeated are living beings figuring out how to stay attached to life from within it, and to protect what optimism they have for that, at least. Marcuse’s prophetic description of postwar U.S. society charts it out: while people comfort themselves with stories about beating the system or being defeated by it, they “continue the struggle for existence in painful, costly and obsolete forms.”¹⁷

I believe that these conceptual distinctions matter to how we view the ongoing activity of precariousness in the present, and each case points to how that mattering might open up the scenes we have delegated to the logic of trauma, with its fundamentally ahistoricizing logic. But some readers might respond to the questions I ask above by thinking that I’m overcomplicating things. They would call the fragilities and unpredictability of living the good-life fantasy and its systemic failures “bad luck” amid the general pattern of upward mobility, reliable intimacy, and political satisfaction that has graced liberal political/economic worlds since the end of the Second World

War. They might see collectively experienced disasters as a convergence of accidents in an imperfect system, and they wouldn't be wrong about that, either; there's a lot of contingency involved in localizing any process in a life, a scene, or an event. They might take the sense of trauma as equal to its claim to exceptionality. They might think that precarity is existential; they might argue that the focus on structural induction oversystematizes the world.

To this set of objections I would say that the current recession congeals decades of class bifurcation, downward mobility, and environmental, political, and social brittleness that have increased progressively since the Reagan era. The intensification of these processes, which reshapes conventions of racial, gendered, sexual, economic, and nation-based subordination, has also increased the probability that structural contingency will create manifest crisis situations in ordinary existence for more kinds of people.

One might also point out critically that this book's archive, which spans conventionally empirical and aesthetic kinds of knowledge, makes big claims on the backs of small objects about how people live now: claims derived from a variety of materials but from neither its own ethnography nor data from diaries, letters, or other primary materials of social history and autobiography. True enough! This book is not offering sociologically empirical cases about who beats the system and who succumbs to its systemic stresses, although it draws widely from an interdisciplinary body of secondary material on these matters. It is a book about the attrition of a fantasy, a collectively invested form of life, the good life. As that fantasy has become *more* fantasmatic, with less and less relation to how people can live—as the blueprint has faded—its attrition manifests itself in an emerging set of aesthetic conventions that make a claim to affective realism derived from embodied, affective rhythms of survival. I generate exemplary cases of adjustment to the loss of this fantasy of sustenance through the engaged construction of an archive of the impasse or transitional moment, and inquire into what thriving might entail amid a mounting sense of contingency. I don't, however, claim to be being comprehensive about all of the ways that an adjustment between life and fantasy can or has occurred amid the spreading anxiety about what's happened, happening, and potentially next in the relation of singular lives and translocal capitalist worlds. *Cruel Optimism* gives a name to a personal and collective kind of relation and sets its elaboration in a historical moment that is as transnational as the circulation of capital, state liberalism, and the heterofamilial, upwardly mobile good-life fantasy have become.

As my previous work on the case study makes explicit, I am extremely interested in generalization: how the singular becomes delaminated from its location in someone's story or some locale's irreducibly local history and circulated as evidence of something shared. This is part of my method, to track the becoming general of singular things, and to give those things materiality by tracking their resonances across many scenes, including the ones made by nonverbal but still linguistic activities, like gestures. Aesthetics is not only the place where we rehabilitate our sensorium by taking in new material and becoming more refined in relation to it. But it provides metrics for understanding how we pace and space our encounters with things, how we manage the too closeness of the world and also the desire to have an impact on it that has some relation to its impact on us.

The chapters that follow were written slowly, over the same seven-year period during which I began to teach courses on affect theory. They do not advance any orthodoxy about how the evidence and intelligence of affect should be derived—neurological, psychoanalytic, schizoanalytic, historical, or normative.¹⁸ They derive their concepts and genres of the sensorium of the present from patterns that mediate social forces and become exemplary of a scene of sociality. When it helps to go metatheoretical, to explain how a certain tradition of thought illuminates some particular style of activity within the stretched-out present moment, the essays detail that analytic too.

For example, during the writing of this book other discussions of hope, optimism, and happiness emerged within affect and queer theory. This is not the place to write a review essay about the relation of *Cruel Optimism* to these projects, but a few words are in order methodologically. Michael Snediker's beautiful and incisive *Queer Optimism*, which claims proleptic solidarity with this project, does share many presuppositions about the ways that optimism might manifest itself in affects, like shame, with which we do not normally associate the optimistic. We are also both interested in affective activity that makes beings bound to the present rather than to futures. But there are significant differences. His project conceptualizes queer optimism more than optimism as such (see Winnicott and Leibniz for that): he frames queer optimism as a reflexive site for meditations on the worldly conditions that would deserve optimism. Therefore his book is also drawn repeatedly to equating the optimism of attachment with the feeling of optimism itself, and optimism with happiness, feeling good, and the optimism about optimism. In this we diverge. His book's main interlocutor would be Sara Ahmed's *The Promise of Happiness*: like Snediker, she is not really working on affect, but

emotion; unlike him, she is skeptical about optimism, at least in its appearance in contemporary regimes of compelled, often dissent-repressive, happiness. She is also more positive about its others, such as grumpiness and melancholy.

Cruel Optimism is a more formalist work than either of these projects. Here, optimism manifests in attachments and the desire to sustain them: attachment is a *structure* of relationality. But the experience of affect and emotion that attaches to those relations is as extremely varied as the contexts of life in which they emerge. An optimistic attachment is invested in one's own or the world's continuity, but might *feel* any number of ways, from the romantic to the fatalistic to the numb to the nothing. I therefore make no claims about what specific experiential modes of emotional reflexivity, if any, are especially queer, cool, resistant, revolutionary, or not. I am seeking out the conditions under which certain attachments to what counts as life come to make sense or no longer make sense, yet remain powerful as they work against the flourishing of particular and collective beings. Nonetheless, I could have had none of these thoughts about the multiple modes of attachment, endurance, and attunement to the world and to the contemporary world of spreading precarity and normative dissolution 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) that derive concepts from tracking patterns, following out the coming-into-form of activity.

This book's argument about optimism more closely resonates with the arguments about hope made by Anna Potamianou, in *Hope: A Shield in the Economy of Borderline States*, and José Esteban Muñoz, in *Cruising Utopia*—with the important caveat that both works are future-oriented. Muñoz sees hope as pointing from the past's unfinished business to a future beyond the present to sustain the (queer) subject within it—he explicitly frames the present as a prison;¹⁹ Potamianou too mainly sees hope (in "borderline" patients) as a stuckness within a relation to futurity that constitutes a problematic defense against the contingencies of the present. In both Muñoz's and Potamianou's cases the present is more or less a problem to be solved by hope's temporal projection. There is also a component of passivity in much of Potamianou's case material: hope often involves waiting for something specific to happen, although she recognizes that it can sometimes bind people to a genuinely,

actively lived life as well. In this book optimism is not a map of pathology but a social relation involving attachments that organize the present. It is an orientation toward the pleasure that is bound up in the activity of world-making, which may be hooked on futures, or not. Like Potamianou, I am looking at the complexity of being bound to life. Even when it turns out to involve a cruel relation, it would be wrong to see optimism's negativity as a symptom of an error, a perversion, damage, or a dark truth: optimism is, instead, a scene of negotiated sustenance that makes life bearable as it presents itself ambivalently, unevenly, incoherently.

In contrast, Ghassan Hage's wonderful *Against Paranoid Nationalism* tracks the "availability, the circulation, and the exchange of hope" in Australian national culture, looking at unequal access to the affect as itself an emotional map of what it means to belong in the historical moment contemporary to its operation.²⁰ In work like this there is not much distinction between what he calls hope and what I call optimism. However, in his acute analysis of the class politics of worry (about internal others, like immigrants) versus care (a relation of general social dependency seen as an ethical and political obligation) the central actor is the state, and specific expectations of state agency within a neoliberal capitalist regime are what's at stake. While, in this book, optimism about the good life that I am tracking is related to crises in state participation in the economic and legal life of social actors and populations (see chapter 7), it usually takes other routes, through zones of labor, neighborhood, and intimacy that constitute the more immediate and manipulable material of good-life fantasy.

The suffusion of the ordinary with fantasy is what justifies this project's attempt to produce a materialist context for affect theory. On the face of it, affect theory has no place in the work of literary, or any, history. Gilles Deleuze writes, after all, that affects act in the nervous system not of persons but of worlds;²¹ Brian Massumi represents the nervous system as so autonomous that affective acts cannot be intended, in contrast to affective facts that political entities can manipulate to foreclose future capacities for consciousness.²² Positing the subject of history mainly as reactive and recessive, this sensorial construction of the historical field has engendered quite a bit of suspicion. Slavoj Žižek, for one, suspects that a Deleuzian politics, or something like a politics of affect, is an oxymoron or worse, a bourgeois mode of sensational self-involvement masquerading as a radically ungovernable activity of being.²³ Does this mean that to talk about the activity of affect historically or in political terms is mainly to be mired narcissistically, hys-

terically, or passively in the present? Massumi and Teresa Brennan—writing from a Lacanian tradition—argue, as I do, that affective atmospheres are shared, not solitary, and that bodies are continuously busy judging their environments and responding to the atmospheres in which they find themselves.²⁴ This refraction of Raymond Williams’s concept of the “structure of feeling” suggests that, whatever one argues about the subject as sovereign agent of history, affective responses may be said significantly to exemplify shared historical time.²⁵

What follows in this book moves with these critical traditions to demonstrate the contours of and potentiality in addressing the affective component of historical consciousness, especially when the problem at hand is apprehending the historical present. It observes forces of subjectivity laced through with structural causality, but tries to avoid the closures of symptomatic reading that would turn the objects of cruel optimism into bad and oppressive things and the subjects of cruel optimism into emblematic symptoms of economic, political, and cultural inequity. So, for example, I suggested that critics interested in the ways structural forces materialize locally often turn the heuristic “neoliberalism” into a world-homogenizing sovereign with coherent intentions that produces subjects who serve its interests, such that their singular actions only *seem* personal, effective, and freely intentional, while really being effects of powerful, impersonal forces.²⁶ Yet, at the same time, they posit a singularity so radical that, if persons are not fully sovereign, they are nonetheless caught up in navigating and reconstructing the world that cannot fully saturate them. This dialectical description does not describe well the messy dynamics of attachment, self-continuity, and the reproduction of life that are the material scenes of living on in the present, though, and this is where conceptualizing affectivity works illuminatingly. Likewise, I have described how, in gathering up scenes of affective adjustment to material that mediates the ongoing present across the recent, the now, and the next, *Cruel Optimism* tracks the fraying relation between post-Second World War state/economic practices and certain postwar fantasies of the good life endemic to liberal, social democratic, or relatively wealthy regions. But what a “region” or “locale” is varies: sometimes cities, sometimes nations, sometimes a transnational zone made by migratory patterns or capital flow, sometimes a bedroom, sometimes what is in someone’s head.

Affect enters the description of the dissolution of these good-life fantasies not as a symptom of any mode of production’s or ideology’s damaging

imprint on dignity, resilience, desire, or optimism. Its strength as a site of potential elucidation comes from the ways it registers the conditions of life that move across persons and worlds, play out in lived time, and energize attachments. As André Green argues, affect is a metapsychological category spanning what's internal and external to subjectivity. But it is more than this too. Its activity saturates the corporeal, intimate, and political performances of adjustment that make a shared atmosphere something palpable and, in its patterning, releases to view a poetics, a theory-in-practice of how a world works.

Affect's saturation of form can communicate the conditions under which a historical moment appears as a visceral moment, assessing the way a thing that is happening finds its genre, which is the same as finding its event. So in addition to the unlikely possibility of deriving the state of structural historical relations from patterns of affective response, I am claiming that the aesthetic or formal rendition of affective experience provides evidence of historical processes. How is it possible for affective traces in the aesthetic to provide evidence of anything, and not to amount simply to a record of writerly/readerly cleverness or ideology as such?

The following two chapters constitute one unit in answer to that question. The book proceeds then to enter the scene of neoliberal restructuring within the ordinary and tracks the fantasmatic, affective, and physical adjustments that organize each chapter's staging of survival in the impasse of the present, which includes telling stories that ask whether cruel optimism is better than none at all.

Chapter 1, "Cruel Optimism," introduces a model for encountering scenes where object loss appears to entail the loss of an entire world and therefore a loss of confidence about how to live on, even at the microlevel of bodily comportment. It pursues conceptually the question of how people maintain their binding to modes of life that threaten their well-being, and to do this it recasts the object of desire not as a thing (or even a relation) but as a cluster of promises magnetized by a thing that appears as an object but is really a scene in the psychoanalytic sense. This shift has two main purposes. One is to clarify how being incoherent in relation to desire does not impede the subject's capacity to live on, but might actually, at the same time, protect it. The other is to track what we learn about impediments to personal and social change from some attachments that become foundations for optimism even when they are damaging. The chapter looks at three scenes of object/

world loss, and tracks the relation between the loss of a singular thing (i.e., a way of being in the world in relation to objects) and the state of optimism as such. Works by John Ashbery (“Untitled”), Charles Johnson (“Exchange Value”), and Geoff Ryman (*Was*) play out the attachment to objects/worlds in the face of their failure and reveal the importance of taking into account the impact of sexual, racial, and class privilege on who can bear the loss of a way of (being in) life.

Chapter 2, “Intuitionists,” takes the affective-aesthetic work that re-mediate subjectivity in “Cruel Optimism” and extends it to the historical field. Here subjectivity is represented by the category of “intuition.” Intuition works as a kind of archiving mechanism for the affects that are expressed in habituated and spontaneous behavior that appears to manage the ongoing present. In this work “the ongoing present” is a place where pasts are spatialized among many elsewheres that converge in the sensorium of the people feeling out the conditions of their historical scene. The present is overdetermined by way of anachronism. The ongoing present is also the zone of convergence of the economic and political activity we call “structural,” insofar as it suffuses the ordinary with its normative demands for bodily and psychic organization. The chapter’s scenes are taken from artworks embedded in collective crisis: Gregg Bordowitz’s film *Habit* and Susan Sontag’s “The Way We Live Now” organize the chapter’s first segment. Both document the AIDS endemic as a crisis in the historical sensorium of the present. They catalogue the effect of the disease on the destruction of habit and consider the proliferation of domains in which habituation has to be reinvented, along with what it means to be in life itself. The second part engages an underengaged tradition of thought about affect derived from Marxist cultural theory; this section focuses on the aesthetic mediation of the historical present in the historical novel. The final segments engage historical novels of the present motored by two women protagonists deemed to have supersensitive intuition—*The Intuitionists* and *Pattern Recognition*. In these novels a catastrophe moves the intuitionist out of her comfort zone in a way that makes her reorganize racial and political memory and sensation into an ongoing present that has to be taken in, navigated, and then moved toward an opening that does not involve rehabilitation, the invention of new normativities, or working through and beyond trauma. In contrast to chapter 1, where the protagonists who were structurally unprivileged were harmed by the loss of their intuitive assurance when their worlds suddenly

transformed, the subjects of this chapter are not harmed but have optimism for reconstituting habits of flourishing in the wake of the loss of intuition's assurance.

Chapters 3 through 7 track the impact of neoliberal restructuring on fantasies of the good life in the contemporary world.

Chapter 3, "Slow Death," takes up the previous chapter's engagement with the activity of marking a historical present by casting it as a crisis. Specifically, it turns toward what has been called the "obesity epidemic." It challenges the presumption that subjectivity is either always, usually, or at best sovereign, and substitutes for the concept of sovereignty a model of agency without intention that it calls "lateral" agency, a mode of coasting consciousness within the ordinary that helps people survive the stress on their sensorium that comes from the difficulty of reproducing contemporary life.

Chapter 4, "Two Girls, Fat and Thin," is about the Mary Gaitskill novel, *Two Girls, Fat and Thin*, and also about the work of Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick. Its inclusion in this book derives from its focus on how subjects living amid crisis—personal trauma, social upheaval—seek relief from the compelled pseudosovereignty of personality through immersion in various appetites. Gaitskill's novel provides an archive of self-interruptive gestures that elaborate the food- and appetite-related meditation on lateral agency and interrupted sovereignty described in "Slow Death." It works within the conventional technicalities of subjectivity shaped by post-traumatic stress disorder but depicts subjects moving through life seeking a rest from the feedback loop of trauma and compensation that their histories seemed to dictate. The chapter's engagement with Sedgwick advances a desire to desubjectivize queerness and to see it in practices that feel out alternative routes for living without requiring personhood to be expressive of an internal orientation or a part of a political program advocating how to live.

Chapter 5, "Nearly Utopian, Nearly Normal: Post-Fordist Affect in *La Promesse* and *Rosetta*," takes up the previous chapter's closing question about whether there is any place for a subject to rest amid the chaos of intimate and economic upheaval. In this chapter that question gets played out in relation to kinship normativity (i.e., "the family"). As in the previous chapter, crisis circulates between singular personal stories and an overdetermined historical context. Here the crisis begins more in the world than in the subject. Given the centrality of children to analyses of globalization, migration, labor exploitation, post-Fordism, and the like, this piece uses two examples that focus on children (from the Dardenne brothers: *Rosetta* [1996] and *La*

Promesse [1999]) to develop a concept of post-Fordist affect. Post-Fordist affect here designates the sensorium making its way through a postindustrial present, the shrinkage of the welfare state, the expansion of grey (semi-formal) economies, and the escalation of transnational migration, with its attendant rise in racism and political cynicism. The chapter asks why the exhaustion and corruption of families in the brittle economy produces, nonetheless, a desire in these children for the “normal” life, “the good life.” It concludes with a meditation on the cruelty of normative optimism and the changing meanings of mobility in the global capitalist scene.

Chapter 6, “After the Good Life, an Impasse: *Time Out*, *Human Resources*, and the Precarious Present,” is about the fraying of the fantasy of “the good life” specifically attached to labor, the family wage, and upward mobility. Its cases are two films by Laurent Cantet (*Ressources humaines/Human Resources* [1999] and *L'Emploi du temps/Time Out* [2001]); its broader project is to engage the new affective languages of the contemporary global economy in Europe and the United States—languages of anxiety, contingency, and precarity—that take up the space that sacrifice, upward mobility, and meritocracy used to occupy. What happens to optimism when futurity splinters as a prop for getting through life? What happens when an older ambivalence about security (the Weberian prison of disenchanting labor) meets a newer detachment from it (everything is contingent)? How does one understand the emergence of this as an objective and *sensed* crisis? Focusing on comportment and manners at the end of an era of social obligation and belonging, the chapter tracks a variety of crises across class, gender, race, and nation: no longer is precarity delegated to the poor or the *sans-papiers*.

Chapter 7, “On the Desire for the Political,” has two foci. The big question the chapter asks is, “When is the desire for the political an instance of cruel optimism?” The archival context for pursuing this query involves the centrality of the sound(track) and voice to contemporary performances of political intimacy, authenticity, and resistance. Propped against the media “filter” of mainstream mass politics, the chapter looks at a variety of modernist-style and anarchist avant-garde artworks that aim to affect the contemporary political sensorium by refunctioning aural mediation. The art focuses on catastrophes that have bled into ordinary life and become part of the ongoing political field: Iraq (Cynthia Madansky’s *The PSA Project*) and contemporary U.S./Euro surveillance society (the *Surveillance Camera Players*); AIDS (*Organize the Silence* by the sound activist group *Ultra-Red*); Katrina (*South of Ten*, a film by Liza Johnson); and public mourning scenes around

9/11 and the death of JFK Jr. (Slater Bradley). Bradley's and Johnson's works place particular emphasis on the juxtapolitical domain of social immediacy. In *The Female Complaint* I describe the juxtapolitical as a world-building project of an intimate public that organizes life without threading through dominant political institutions. These works open up questions about political art whose aim is not a refunctioning of the political but a lateral exploration of an elsewhere that is first perceptible as atmosphere. The chapter's final section turns to contemporary anarchist antineoliberal activism, and asks what kinds of opening away from cruel optimism we can read in its forms of detaching from the nation/state as optimistic object.

From one vantage point, then, *Cruel Optimism* is a kind of proprioceptive history, a way of thinking about represented norms of bodily adjustment as key to grasping the circulation of the present as a historical and affective sense. As Fredric Jameson would argue, the activity of living within and beyond normative activity gets embedded in form, but I am less interested in the foreclosures of form and more in the ways the activity of being historical finds its genre, which is the same as finding its event. Adjustments to the present are manifest not just in what we conventionally call genre, therefore, but in more explicitly active habits, styles, and modes of responsiveness.²⁷ Tracking such adjustments will not reveal a collection of singularities. People's styles of response to crisis are powerfully related to the expectations of the world they had to reconfigure in the face of tattering formal and informal norms of social and institutional reciprocity. I refer here to statuses like class, race, nation, gender, and sexuality; I am interested in these as they operate amid the rich subjective lives of beings who navigate the world from many copresent arcs of history and experience. People born into unwelcoming worlds and unreliable environments have a different response to the new precarities than do people who presumed they would be protected. But it is not as though the normative affect management styles of any status saturate the whole of anyone's being, psychology, way of interacting with themselves and the world, or experience of the world as an affecting force.

Some say that the differences among traditional classes and populations are less important than emerging convergences and solidarities around singularity and precarity. I am interested in and skeptical about this view of political optimism, as I argue in chapter 6, "After the Good Life," and chapter 7, "On the Desire for the Political." The book attends to these variations of sensual situation and their attendant tensions in spaces as big as collec-

tive atmospheres of contingency and as small as the gesture a quivering lip makes when a person feels threatened with the loss of the conditions that have undergirded his good-life fantasy. And it looks at what it might mean politically that conflicting dreams of a reciprocal world to belong to remain a powerful binding motive to preserve normative habits of social reproduction. (See especially chapter 5, “Nearly Utopian, Nearly Normal.”)

The problem of detaching from the normal applies to writing criticism as much as it does to any object that coordinates intensities of projection into the historical present. Each of the chapters to follow is uncomfortable in its shape and length: is each a too-short little book, an overlong case study, or good-enough porridge? In relating animating events to analytic generalization, I become progressively less clear about how best rhetorically to manage the problems they crystallize, and more certain of the need to invent new genres for the kinds of speculative work we call “theory.” In the meantime, though, I hope you will find, in these scenarios of living on in the ordinary, where subjectivity is depicted as overwhelmed, forced to change, and yet also stuck, incitements toward your own analyses of the kinds of unraveled life to which *Cruel Optimism* points: impasses in zones of intimacy that hold out the often cruel promise of reciprocity and belonging to the people who seek them—who need them—in scenes of labor, of love, and of the political.



I. *Optimism and Its Objects*

All attachments are optimistic. When we talk about an object of desire, we are really talking about a cluster of promises we want someone or something to make to us and make possible for us. This cluster of promises could seem embedded in a person, a thing, an institution, a text, a norm, a bunch of cells, smells, a good idea—whatever. To phrase “the object of desire” as a cluster of promises is to allow us to encounter what’s incoherent or enigmatic in our attachments, not as confirmation of our irrationality but as an explanation of our sense of *our endurance in the object*, insofar as proximity to the object means proximity to the cluster of things that the object promises,

some of which may be clear to us and good for us while others, not so much. Thus attachments do not all *feel* optimistic: one might dread, for example, returning to a scene of hunger, or longing, or the slapstick reiteration of a lover's or parent's predictable distortions. But being drawn to return to the scene where the object hovers in its potentialities is the operation of optimism as an affective form. In optimism, the subject leans toward promises contained within the present moment of the encounter with her object.¹

In the introduction I described "cruel optimism" as a relation of attachment to compromised conditions of possibility whose realization is discovered either to be impossible, sheer fantasy, or *too* possible, and toxic. What's cruel about these attachments, and not merely inconvenient or tragic, is that the subjects who have *x* in their lives might not well endure the loss of their object/scene of desire, even though its presence threatens their well-being, because whatever the *content* of the attachment is, the continuity of its form provides something of the continuity of the subject's sense of what it means to keep on living on and to look forward to being in the world. This phrase points to a condition different from that of melancholia, which is enacted in the subject's desire to temporize an experience of the loss of an object/scene with which she has invested her ego continuity. Cruel optimism is the condition of maintaining an attachment to a significantly problematic object. One more thing: sometimes, the cruelty of an optimistic attachment is more easily perceived by an analyst who observes the cost of someone's or some group's attachment to *x*, since often persons and communities focus on some aspects of their relation to an object/world while disregarding others.² But if the cruelty of an attachment is experienced by someone/some group, even in a subtle fashion, the fear is that the loss of the promising object/scene itself will defeat the capacity to have any hope about anything. Often this fear of loss of a scene of optimism as such is unstated and only experienced in a sudden incapacity to manage startling situations, as we will see throughout this book.

One might point out that all objects/scenes of desire are problematic, in that investments in them and projections onto them are less about them than about what cluster of desires and affects we can manage to keep magnetized to them. I have indeed wondered whether all optimism is cruel, because the experience of loss of the conditions of its reproduction can be so breathtakingly bad, just as the threat of the loss of *x* in the scope of one's attachment drives can feel like a threat to living on itself. But some scenes of optimism are clearly crueler than others: where cruel optimism operates,

the very vitalizing or animating potency of an object/scene of desire contributes to the attrition of the very thriving that is supposed to be made possible in the work of attachment in the first place. This might point to something as banal as a scouring love, but it also opens out to obsessive appetites, working for a living, patriotism, all kinds of things. One makes affective bargains about the costliness of one's attachments, usually unconscious ones, most of which keep one in proximity to the scene of desire/attrition.

This means that a poetics of attachment always involves some splitting off of the *story* I can tell about wanting to be near *x* (as though *x* has autonomous qualities) from the *activity* of the emotional habitus I have constructed, as a function of having *x* in my life, in order to be able to project out my endurance in proximity to the complex of what *x* seems to offer and proffer. To understand cruel optimism, therefore, one must embark on an analysis of indirection, which provides a way to think about the strange temporalities of projection into an enabling object that is also disabling. I learned how to do this from reading Barbara Johnson's work on apostrophe and free indirect discourse. In her poetics of indirection, each of these two rhetorical modes is shaped by the ways a writing subjectivity conjures other ones so that, in a performance of fantasmatic intersubjectivity, the writer gains superhuman observational authority, enabling a performance of being that is made possible by the proximity of the object. Because this aesthetic process is something like what I am describing in the optimism of attachment, I'll describe a bit the shape of my transference with her thought.

In "Apostrophe, Animation, and Abortion," my key referent here, Johnson tracks the political consequences of apostrophe for what has become fetal personhood: a silent, affectively present but physically displaced interlocutor (a lover, a fetus) is animated in speech as distant enough for a conversation but close enough to be imaginable by the speaker in whose head the entire scene is happening.³ But the condition of projected possibility, of a hearing that cannot take place in the terms of its enunciation ("you" are not here, "you" are eternally belated to the conversation with you that I am imagining) creates a fake present moment of intersubjectivity in which, nonetheless, a performance of address can take place. The present moment is made possible by the fantasy of you, laden with the *x* qualities I can project onto you, given your convenient absence. Apostrophe therefore appears to be a reaching out to a you, a direct movement from place *x* to place *y*, but it is actually a turning back, an animating of a receiver on behalf of the desire to make something happen *now* that realizes something *in the speaker*, makes the

speaker more or differently possible, because she has admitted, in a sense, the importance of speaking for, as, and to, two — but only under the condition, and illusion, that the two are really (in) one.

Apostrophe is thus an indirect, unstable, physically impossible but phenomenologically vitalizing movement of rhetorical animation that permits subjects to suspend themselves in the optimism of a potential occupation of the same psychic space of others, the objects of desire who make you possible (by having some promising qualities, but also by not being there).⁴ Later work, such as in “Muteness Envy,” elaborates Johnson’s description of the gendered rhetorical politics of this projection of voluble intersubjectivity.⁵ The paradox remains that the lush submerging of one consciousness into another requires a double negation: of the speaker’s boundaries, so s/he can grow bigger in rhetorical proximity to the object of desire; and of the spoken of, who is more or less a powerful mute placeholder providing an opportunity for the speaker’s imagination of her/his/their flourishing.

Of course, existentially and psychoanalytically speaking, intersubjectivity is impossible. It is a wish, a desire, and a demand for an enduring sense of being with and in *x* and is related to that big knot that marks the indeterminate relation between a feeling of recognition and misrecognition. As chapter 4 argues at greater length, recognition is the misrecognition you can bear, a transaction that affirms you without, again, necessarily feeling good or being accurate (it might idealize, it might affirm your monstrosity, it might mirror your desire to be minimal enough to live under the radar, it might feel just right, and so on).⁶ To elaborate the tragicomedy of intersubjective misrecognition as a kind of realism, Johnson’s work on projection mines the projective, boundary-dissolving spaces of attachment to the object of address, who must be absent in order for the desiring subject of intersubjectivity to get some traction, to stabilize her proximity to the object/scene of promise.

When Johnson turns to free indirect discourse, with its circulation of merged and submerged observational subjectivity, the projection of the desire for intersubjectivity has even less pernicious outcomes.⁷ In a narrator’s partial-merging with a character’s consciousness, say, free indirect discourse performs the impossibility of locating an observational intelligence in one or any body, and therefore forces the reader to transact a different, more open relation of unfolding to what she is reading, judging, being, and thinking she understands. In Johnson’s work such a transformative trans-

action through reading/speaking “unfolds” the subject in a good way, despite whatever desires she may have not to become significantly different.⁸ In this, her work predicted the aesthetics of subjective interpenetration more recently advanced by Tim Dean’s Levinasian and Leo Bersani’s psychoanalytic optimism about the cognitive-ethical decision to become transformed by a project of limited intersubjectivity, a letting in of the Other’s being without any claim to knowledge of what the intimate Other is like.⁹ Like Johnson’s work on projection, their focus is on the optimism of attachment, and is often itself optimistic about the negations and extensions of personhood that forms of suspended intersubjectivity demand from the lover/reader.

What follows is not so buoyant: this chapter elaborates on and politicizes Freud’s observation that “people never willingly abandon a libidinal position, not even, indeed, when a substitute is already beckoning to them.”¹⁰ Eve Sedgwick describes Melanie Klein’s depressive position as an orientation toward inducing a circuit of repair for a broken relation to the world.¹¹ The politically depressed position exacerbates the classic posture by raising a problem of attachment style in relation to a conflict of aims. The political depressive might be cool, cynical, shut off, searingly rational, or averse, and yet, having adopted a mode that might be called detachment, may not really be detached at all, but navigating an ongoing and sustaining relation to the scene and circuit of optimism and disappointment. (The seeming detachment of rationality, for example, is not a detachment at all, but an emotional style associated normatively with a rhetorical practice.)

Then, there remains the question of the *direction* of the repair toward or away from reestablishing a relation to the political object/scene that has structured one’s relation to strangers, power, and the infrastructures of belonging. So, too, remains the question of who can bear to lose the world (the “libidinal position”), what happens when the loss of what’s not working is more unbearable than the having of it, and vice versa. *Cruel Optimism* attends to practices of self-interruption, self-suspension, and self-abeyance that indicate people’s struggles to change, but not traumatically, the terms of value in which their life-making activity has been cast.¹²

Cruel optimism is, then, like all phrases, a deictic—a phrase that points to a proximate location. As an analytic lever, it is an incitement to inhabit and to track the affective attachment to what we call “the good life,” which is for so many a bad life that wears out the subjects who nonetheless, and at the same time, find their conditions of possibility within it. This is not

just a psychological state. The conditions of ordinary life in the contemporary world even of relative wealth, as in the United States, are conditions of the attrition or the wearing out of the subject, and the irony that the labor of reproducing life in the contemporary world is also the activity of being worn out by it has specific implications for thinking about the ordinariness of suffering, the violence of normativity, and the “technologies of patience” that enable a concept of the *later* to suspend questions about the cruelty of the *now*.¹³ Cruel optimism is in this sense a concept pointing toward a mode of lived immanence, one that grows from a perception about the reasons people are not *Bartleby*, do not prefer to interfere with varieties of immiseration, but choose to ride the wave of the system of attachment that they are used to, to syncopate with it, or to be held in a relation of reciprocity, reconciliation, or resignation that does not mean defeat by it. Or perhaps they move toward the normative form to get numb with the consensual promise, and to misrecognize that promise as an achievement. Working from pieces by John Ashbery, Charles Johnson, and Geoff Ryman, this chapter traverses three episodes in which what constitutes the cruel bindings of cruel optimism is surprising and induces diverse dramas of adjustment to being post-genre, postnormative, and not knowing entirely how to live. In the middle of all that, we discover in the impasse a rhythm that people can enter into while they’re dithering, tottering, bargaining, testing, or otherwise being worn out by the promises that they have attached to in this world.

II. *The Promise of the Object*

A recent, untitled poem by John Ashbery stages the most promising version of this scene of promises for us, foregrounding the Doppler effect of knowledge, phrasing as a kind of spatial lag the political economy of disavowal we drag around like a shadow, and yet providing an experience of liveness in the object that’s not only livable, but at once *simplifying and revolutionary*—that bourgeois dream couplet:

We were warned about spiders, and the
occasional famine.
We drove downtown to see our
neighbors. None of them were home.
We nestled in yards the municipality had
created,

reminisced about other, different places—
but were they? Hadn't we known it all
before?

In vineyards where the bee's hymn
drowns the monotony,
we slept for peace, joining in the great
run.

He came up to me.
It was all as it had been,
except for the weight of the present,
that scuttled the pact we made with
heaven.

In truth there was no cause for rejoicing,
nor need to turn around, either.
We were lost just by standing,
listening to the hum of the wires overhead.¹⁴

The opening frame is the scene of the American dream not realized, but almost—or as Ashbery says in a contiguous poem, “Mirage control has sealed the borders/with light and the endless diffidence light begets.”¹⁵ Likewise, here, home and hymn *almost* rhyme; but we are restless, no one is home, nature threatens our sense of plenitude; and then there is what the speaker calls “the weight of the present” that makes our politics, therefore, quietist, involving sleeping for peace, deflating the symbolic into the somatic. How long have people thought about the present as having weight, as being a thing disconnected from other things, as an obstacle to living? Everything in this poem is very general, and yet we can derive some contexts from within it—imagining, for example, the weight of the default space of the poem, as it instantiates something of the American dream, suburb-style. The people who maintain the appearance of manicured space are not agents in the poem's “we”; they are actors, though, they make noise. Their sounds are the sounds of suburban leisure, not the workers' leisure. We know nothing of where they came from, the noises of their day beyond work, and their play. We know nothing about what any of the bodies look like, either: this is practical subjectivity manifesting personhood in action and rhetorical refraction. We can speculate, though, that the unmarked speaking people are probably white and American while their servants are probably not, but the

poem's idiom is so general and demographic so suppressed that its location in the normative iconicity of the unmarked forces realism into speculation.

This transition is part of its pedagogy of desire. These materialist concerns are not foregrounded in the poem's sense of its event or scene of prolific consciousness. It does not, however, violate the poem's aesthetic autonomy or singularity to think about the conditions of the production of autonomy in it. If anything, the explicit rhetoric of the neighbor shows it to be aware, after all, that the American dream does not allow a lot of time for curiosity about people it is not convenient or productive to have curiosity about. It is a space where the pleasure that one's neighbors give is in their proximity, their light availability to contact: in the American dream we see neighbors when we want to, when we're puttering outside or perhaps in a restaurant, and in any case the pleasure they provide is in their relative distance, their being parallel to, without being inside of, the narrator's "municipally" zoned property, where he hoards and enjoys his leisured pleasure, as though in a vineyard in the country, and where intrusions by the nosy neighbor, or superego, would interrupt his projections of happiness from the empire of the backyard.¹⁶ The buzz of other people's labor in the vineyards is the condition of the privilege of being bored with life and three-quarters detached, absorbed in a process of circulating, in a vaguely lateral way.

In short, in this untitled poem, "we" have chosen to be deadened citizens, happy to be the color someone has placed inside of the lines: "we" would be tickled if, after all, "we" were those characters in Donald Barthelme's short story "I Bought a Little City" who live simply in a housing complex that, seen from the sky, reproduces the *Mona Lisa* for anyone with the time and money to inhabit a certain perspective. "We" live our lives as works of formal beauty, if not art: "we" live with a sense of slight excitement, composing ourselves patiently toward fulfilling the promise of living not too intensely the good life of what Slavoj Žižek might call a decaffeinated sublime.¹⁷ There is nothing especially original or profound in Ashbery's send-up of suburban pleasures: the comforting sound and slightly dull rhythm of cliché performs exactly how much life one can bear to have there, and what it means to desire to move freely within the municipality, a manicured zone of what had been a fantasy.

Marx comments on the political economy of such a self-medicating and self-mediating subject orientation as an outcome of its relation to regimes of private property:

Private property has made us so stupid and one-sided that an object is only *ours* when we have it—when it exists for us as capital, or when it is directly possessed, eaten, drunk, worn, inhabited, etc.,—in short, when it is *used* by us. . . . In the place of all physical and mental senses there has therefore come the sheer estrangement of all these senses, into the sense of *having*. The human being had to be reduced to this absolute poverty in order that he might yield his inner wealth to the outer world. . . . The abolition of private property is therefore the complete *emancipation* of all human senses and qualities, but it is this emancipation precisely because these senses and attributes have become, subjectively and objectively, human. The eye has become a *human eye*, just as its *object* has become a social, human object—an object made by man for man. *The senses* have therefore become directly in their practice theoreticians. They relate themselves to the thing for the sake of the thing, but the thing itself is an *objective human relation* to itself and to man, [in practice I can relate myself to a thing humanly only if the thing relates itself humanly to the human being] and vice versa. Need or enjoyment have consequently lost its *egotistical* nature, and nature has lost its mere *utility* by use becoming *human use*.¹⁸

Marx's analysis of the senses resonates throughout Ashbery's poem. As Marx would predict, the "we" of this poem begins by owning what it sees and seeing what it owns, feeling nature as an impingement on his auto-referential world; but, then, "we" is haunted that its knowledge is a repetition of a something it can't quite remember, perhaps because, as subjects of productive and consumer capital, "we" were willing to have our memories rezoned by the constant tinkering required to maintain the machinery and appearance of dependable life. "We" were docile, compliant, good sports. "We" live in proximity to a desire now bound up in this version of the good life and can almost remember being alive in it, flooded by a sense of expectation that "we" knew was only pointed to by property and the dependable life we meant to make for it. Our cruel objects don't feel threatening, just tiring.

Our senses are not yet theoreticians because they are bound up by the rule, the map, the inherited fantasy, and the hum of worker bees that fertilize materially the life we're moving through. Then again, maybe we did not really want our senses to be theoreticians: because then we would see ourselves as an effect of an exchange with the world, beholden to it, useful for it, rather than sovereign, at the end of the day. What do we do for a living, after

all? “We” seem to be folks of leisure, of the endless weekend, of our own exploitation off-screen, where a consumer’s happy circulation in familiarity is almost all that matters: “Hadn’t we known it all before?”

But despite the presenting face of it, as a poem voiced from within the community of faceless universal subjects of self-referentiality, the action of the poem is not bound up wholly in the vague attachment to an American dream that is actually lived as a series of missed encounters with disaster and human contact, cut to size in barely experienced episodes. The action of the poem is charted in the small movement between Home, Hymn, and Hum. Most importantly, there is an event that breaks up the undramatic self-hoarding of the collective life, and it is not the vacation in the vineyards that the relief of suburban unproductivity suggests.

Ashbery might be having a Christian thought, in the space between reverie and reverence: the bees seem to echo the famous passage from Sir Thomas Browne’s *Religio Medici* that describes how the wisdom of bees is far in advance of what human reason understands about its condition.¹⁹ Relatedly, with all the Miltonic and Eliotic resonance of the poem’s tropes, he might be revising his relation to religious lyric.²⁰ We might even think that the point is to contrast the poem’s wittily ironic and vaguely sacred meditations with its key present and fleshly event, that scene of gayness in America embodied in the phrase: “He came up to me.” This moment recalls the sexual shock of Virginia Woolf’s “Chloe liked Olivia.”²¹ He came up to me and broke my contract with heaven not to be gay. Queerness and religious affect open up a space of resonance and reverence here: life is at the best imaginable of impasses. Life has been interrupted and, as Badiou would say, seized by an event that demands fidelity.²²

This event, however, also has impact *despite* the autobiographical. The poem closes by focusing on what happens when someone allows himself to continue to be changed by an event of being with the object, not in the semi-anonymous projected proximity of apostrophe or the we-did-this and we-did-that sociality of the first stanza and not in terms of a dramatics of an uncloseted sexual identity, indeed not in terms of biography at all. The aesthetic and sexual scenario induces a mode of impersonality that is fully felt and dispersed in relationality and in the world. The seismic shift takes place in yielding to the proximity of an intimacy undefined by talking, made by a gesture of approach that holds open a space between two people just standing there, linked newly.

This shift in registers, which relocates the speaker of the poem into a sus-

pended place, might be understood in a Habermasian way. In *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* Habermas talks about the public/private zoning of normative being in terms of a split within the man of modernity, who is a man of the house and a man of the market.²³ Habermas suggests that the problem of living capitalist modernity is in managing the relations between these spheres as a bourgeois and a subject of emotions. A bourgeois is someone who instrumentalizes his social relations in terms of the rules of the market, and who is zoned by the people who assign value to property as having value in proximity to his property and his being self-possessed. For the bourgeois there is property, there is home, and the man is a little leader in the home, and everyone recognizes his authority wherever he carries his propriety onto property. At the same time the man cultivates an image of himself as fundamentally shaped in transactions of feeling, not capital. The “homme” in the house who sees himself as effective in the world and an authority in all domains of activity is distinguished and made singular by participation in a community of love, among people who choose each other—who, one might say, can come up to each other. The poem says that “In truth there was no cause for rejoicing”: there was no cause for rejoicing in truth, or objectivity. Instead, there is the expectation of intimacy. And lyric poetry.

The event of live intimacy there is in this poem, though, happens outside of the home and the municipality, in an unzoned locale. The event of the poem is the thing that happens when he comes up to me and reminds me that 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 desire or electric wires, but whatever it is it involves getting lost in proximity to someone and in becoming lost there, in a lovely way. He and I together experience a hum not where “we” were but all around, and that hum is a temporizing, a hesitation in time that is not in time with the world of drives and driving; nor is it in a mapped space, but in a space that is lost. What intersubjectivity there is has no content but is made in the simultaneity of listening, a scene of subjective experience that can only be seen and not heard along with the poet and his “him.” Their intimacy is visible and radically private, and mostly uncoded. Life among *les hommes* between home and hymn becomes interrupted by an um, an interruption of truth, where the meaning of “we” shifts to the people who are now lost but alive and unvanquished in their displacement.

It might be kind of thrilling to think about this poem as delineating a means of production of the impasse of the present that hasn’t yet been absorbed in the bourgeois senses, but that takes one out to the space of soci-

ality and into the world whose encounters absorb one into an unpredicted difference. Be open to the one who comes up to you. Be changed by an encounter. Become a poet of the episode, the elision, the ellipsis . . .

At the same time, it matters who speaks in this poem: a confident person. He finds possibility in a moment of suspension and requires neither the logic of the market to secure his value nor the intimate recognition of anything municipally normal or domestic to assure that he has boundaries. He can hold a nonspace without being meaningful. This does not seem to threaten him. Thus this instance of optimism might or might not be a part of cruel optimism: we don't know. The promise is everywhere, and the dissolution of the form of being that existed before the event is not cause for mourning or rejoicing: it is just a fact. Does the episodic nature of the interruption enable him, after the moment, to return to the suburbs refreshed? Will they go to a high-end café and buy some intensified coffee supercharged by sugar and milk? Will they go get otherwise stimulated? Will they become different in a way on which they can build a world? Is the couple a stand-in for the collective that can now be awake for peace rather than somnambulant? Does the aesthetic moment of the different autonomy they get when they exist together in reverie become not a condition for *detaching* from the market but the condition of living in it, so that they can think that who they *really are* are people who can be lost in a moment? Habermas would perhaps note that the fantasy of the lovers' worlding power enables the speaker to disavow how otherwise he is constituted as a man of property and the market. John Ricco might argue that the men's outsideness and outsidership demonstrates the potential resource of gayness to make a queer antinormativity that does not look back to domesticity wishfully. It is impossible to say how deep the break is. By the end, the speaker thinks he *really* lives now, in a moment of suspension. He *really* is a lover, an intimate, no longer the user of gas and fertilizer and the delegator of labor to others. That was in another life, so it seems.

Or, perhaps we can read the scale of the shift in terms of the humming soundtrack. We hear the hum of the world, says Ashbery's optimist, and aspire to be in proximity to it. In melodrama, the soundtrack is the supreme genre of ineloquence, or eloquence beyond words: it's what tells you that you are really most at home in yourself when you are bathed by emotions you can always recognize, and that whatever dissonance you sense is not the real, but an accident that you have to clean up after, which will be more pleasant if you whistle while you work. The concept of "the soundtrack of

our lives” —to cite a cliché that is also the ironic name of a great postpunk neopsychedelic band and a growing category of niche marketing— is powerful because it accompanies one as a portable hoard that expresses one’s true inner taste and high value. It holds a place open for an optimistic rereading of the rhythms of living, and confirms everybody as a star. Your soundtrack is one place where you can be in love with yourself and express your fidelity to your own trueness in sublime conventionality, regardless of the particularity of the sounds. Our poem performs the situation of that potentially sustaining self-integration.

But that does not close the case of cruel optimism here, either, because the political context of the poem matters: it matters how much an instance of sentimental abstraction or emotional saturation costs, what labor fuels the shift from the concrete real to the soundtrack reel, and who’s in control of the meaning of the shift, the pacing of the shift, and the consequences of detaching, even for a moment, from the consensual mirage. The political context that is mutely present does not trump the pleasures and openings either: what’s irreconcilable measures the situation. Moving from home to hymn to hum, Ashbery’s poem makes an interruptive stillness that’s ineloquent and eloquent, meaningful and a placeholder for an unformed transitional experience. The soundtrack he hears is like lyric itself, comfortable with displacing realism about the material reproduction of life and the pain of intimacy and numbness to another time and space.

Moving from home to hum, to *homme* to um, an interruption: it sounds like punning, this Thoreauvian method of sounding out the space of a moment to measure its contours, to ask what is being stopped, who gets to do it, and what it would mean to be in this moment and then beyond it. It is always a risk to let someone in, to insist on a pacing different from the productivist pacing, say, of capitalist normativity. Of course “he” was not my object, my cluster of promises: “he” came up to *me*. Even if being the object is more secure than having one and risking disappointment, the poem stops before anyone gets too deep into the projecting and embedding. It’s a poem about being open to an encounter that’s potentially transformative, without having yet congealed into the couple form, a friendship, a quick sexual interlude, anything. It gestures toward being lost or suspended in a process of knowing nothing about how a scene of collaborative action will open up a space of potential liveness that is not a space on which anything can be built. In the space of lag between he and me something happens and the royal or sovereign we of the poem is no longer preoccupied. The encounter releases

the speaker to lose himself in the um of a singular sociality whose political economy we are asking questions of. If its happiness is cruel, requiring someone else's or some class's expenditure, we'll never know: the substitution of habituated indifference with a spreading pleasure might open up a wedge into an alternative ethics of living, or not. What happens next is the unfinished business of the poem: right now, the senses it stages are open to becoming theoreticians.

Sounding the poem for the meaning of the impasse it portrays in an event that displaces and dissolves ordinary life does not confirm that all lyric or episodic interruptions are even potentially a condition of possibility for imagining a radically resensualized post-neoliberal subject. But analytically this singular lyric opens up an opportunity to learn to pay attention to, have transference with, those moments of suspension in which the subject can no longer take his continuity in the material world and contemporary history for granted, because he feels full of a *something* ineloquently promising, a *something* that reveals, at the same time, a trenchant *nothing* about the general conditions of optimism and cruel optimism. Attending to the heterosonic and heterotemporal spaces within capital in which an event suspends ordinary time, sounds and senses can change, potentially, how we can understand what being historical means. Because Ashbery's speaker is confident, because he has the ballast of normative recognitions and modes of social belonging in the habit of his flesh, I believe, he can stand detaching from the promise of his habituated life and can thrive in the openness of desire to form, as heady as that might be. If it is to be any more than a story about his singularity, though, the new intersubjective scene of sense would have to be able to extend the moment to activity that would dissolve the legitimacy of the optimism embedded in the now displaced world, with its promising proprietary zones, scenes, scapes, and institutions. Otherwise this is not an event but an episode in an environment that can well absorb and even sanction a little spontaneous leisure.

III. *The Promise of Exchange Value*

Ashbery's speaker is very lucky that he gets to dissolve and thrive in the collaborative unknowing initiated by the gesture, the encounter, and potentially the event that unbottle whatever it is that "he/me" can now rest in hearing. In Charles Johnson's "Exchange Value" a situation that might also have turned out that way does not. The way the story plays out what happens

when a certain kind of person is defeated by being between one habituated life and another yet to be invented because something good turns out to be unbearable says something about why the phrase “political economy” must thread throughout our analysis of cruel and usual optimism. Why do some people have the chops for improvising the state of being unknowing while others run out of breath, not humming but hoarding?

As with Ashbery’s lyric, this story begins with a meditation on neighbors and neighborhoods. “Exchange Value” takes place during the 1970s on the South Side of Chicago, around 49th Street.²⁴ The protagonists, eighteen-year-old Cooter and his older brother, Loftis, are poor and African American. They do not drive downtown regularly to see their friends, or frequent other neighborhoods regularly: they do not have cars. Home and the ’hood are spaces of localized, personalized practices of encountering, wandering, and scrounging. But here, the intimacy of proximity has nothing to do with anyone’s lyric intersubjectivity, even though the story takes place in the meditative rhythms of Cooter’s way of parsing a new situation. The subjects of “Exchange Value” are expressive and opaque, but with quite different valences than in our previous example.

The story opens onto a plot: two brothers concoct a plan to rob their possibly dead neighbor, Miss Bailey. Who is Miss Bailey? Nobody knows: she is a neighbor, so one does not need to know her; her job is to be around, to be a “character,” which is what you call someone who performs a familiar set of actions around you but is not intimate with you. Miss Bailey dresses in cast-off men’s clothes; like Cooter and Loftis, she eats free meals that she begs off of a local Creole restaurant; when Cooter gives her pocket change, she doesn’t spend it, she puts it in her mouth and eats it. This is what Cooter knows about her, deducing nothing more about her from her actions. The story takes place because she’s always around and then she isn’t. Cooter and Loftis think that perhaps she’s died and determine to get the first pickings.

This kind of behavior, this scavenging in other people’s stuff, is not characteristic of Cooter, but it doesn’t violate his fundamental relation to the world either. Compared to his brother, he’s always been branded a loser. “Mama used to say it was Loftis, not me, who’d go places Loftis, he graduated fifth at DuSable High School, had two gigs and, like Papa, he be always wanting the things white people had out in Hyde Park, where Mama did daywork sometimes.” The children’s parents are both dead by this point in their lives: Papa from overwork and Mama because she was “big as a Frigidaire.”²⁵ Having watched this, Cooter refuses to ride the wave of the Ameri-

can dream: remembering his parents “killing themselves for chump change—a pitiful li'l bowl of porridge—I get to thinking that even if I ain't had all I wanted, maybe I've had, you know, all I'm ever gonna get” and so organizes his life through the lateral enjoyments of fantasy (29–30).²⁶ “I can't keep no job and sorta stay close to home, watching TV, or reading *World's Finest* comic books, or maybe just laying dead, listening to music, imagining I see faces or foreign places in water stains on the wallpaper” (29).

During the 1970s the *World's Finest* series paired Batman and Superman as a double crime-fighting team. But Cooter's fantasies aren't mimetic—they're aleatory and passive ways of inhabiting and making an environment in which attachments are not optimistically pointing toward a cluster of transcendent promises but toward something else, something bearable that holds off not just the imminence of loss but the loss that, inevitably, just happened. For Cooter fantasy isn't a plan. It calibrates nothing about how to live. It is the *action* of living for him, his way of passing time *not* trying to make something of himself in a system of exploitation and exchange. In the political economy of his world, that system does not produce rest or waste but slow death, the attrition of subjects by the situation in which capital determines value. In this story, that scene dedicates the worker's body to a deferred enjoyment that, if they're on the bottom of the class structure, they are not likely to be around to take pleasure in, as his parents' fate demonstrates.²⁷

In contrast, Loftis's relation to fantasy is realist. He inherited his parents' optimism toward his life by being ambitious. But his strategies are strictly formal. He takes classes from Black Nationalists at the “Black People's Topographical Library,” reads *Esquire* and *The Black Scholar*, and sews upscale labels onto his downscale clothes:²⁸ to him getting ahead is what counts, whether it is via power, labor, or the “hustle” (29). His opinion of Cooter is quite low, because the younger brother is dreamy and has no drive. Nonetheless, they decide to do the job together.

Miss Bailey's apartment is pitch dark and reeks of shit: a newspaper clipping from the *Chicago Defender* among the garbage reveals that her former employer, Henry Connors, had left her his entire estate, and that all of the years of scavenging and weirdness masked her possession of enormous wealth. It all makes sense in the dark. But when the light turns on, Cooter notes, “shapes come forward in the light and I thought for an instant like I'd slipped in space” (30). In this moment Cooter enters an impasse: his talent

at making out foreign shapes becomes applied to his own life, which he can no longer occupy.

Her living room, webbed in dust, be filled to the max with dollars of all denominations, stacks of stock in General Motors, Gulf Oil, and 3M company in old White Owl cigar boxes, battered purses, or bound in pink rubber bands. . . . [E]verything, like a world inside the world, you take it from me, so like picturebook scenes of plentifulness you could seal yourself off in here and settle forever. Loftis and me both drew breath suddenly. There be unopened cases of Jack Daniel's, three safes cemented to the floor, hundreds of matchbooks, unworn clothes, a fuel-burning stove, dozens of wedding rings, rubbish, World War II magazines, a carton of a hundred canned sardines, mink stoles, old rags, a birdcage, a bucket of silver dollars, thousands of books, paintings, quarters in tobacco cans, two pianos, glass jars of pennies, a set of bagpipes, an almost complete Model A Ford dappled with rust, and I swear, three sections of a dead tree. (30–31)

How do we understand this collection not only of things but of details? Cooter's verbal response is not to be a historian but a moralist: "A tree ain't normal" (31). But to my eye the story's main event, the scene of potential change, is somatic. Change is an impact lived on the body before anything is understood, and as such is simultaneously meaningful and ineloquent, engendering an atmosphere that they spend the rest of the story and their lives catching up to. It's like winning the lottery, getting a wash of money they haven't earned; being possessed by coming into possession of possessions, they are shocked into something impassive. This crack in the necessities of history makes Cooter's head get light—"My knees failed; then I did a Hollywood faint" (32); Loftis "pant[s] a little" and "for the first time . . . looked like he didn't know his next move" (31). Their bodies become suspended.

But if riches change history, they also make it possible for history to be something other than a zone of barely or badly imagined possibility. Loftis returns to crazy reason and puts the break on their adrenalin. He forces Cooter to catalogue everything. Eventually,

that cranky old ninnyhammer's hoard adds up to \$879,543 in cash, thirty-two bank books (some deposits be only \$5), and me, I wasn't sure I was dreaming or what, but I suddenly flashed on this feeling, once we left her flat, that all the fears Loftis and me had about the future be gone, 'cause

Miss Bailey's property was the past—the power of that fella Henry Conners trapped like a bottle spirit—which we could live off, so it was the future too, pure potential: can *do*. Loftis got to talking on about how that piano we pushed home be equal to a thousand bills, jim, which equals, say, a bad TEAC A-3340 tape deck, or a down payment on a deuce-and-a-quarter. Its value be (Loftis say) that of a universal standard of measure, relational, unreal as number, so that tape deck could turn, magically, into two gold lamé suits, a trip to Tijuana, or twenty-five blow jobs from a ho—we had \$879,543 worth of wishes, if you can deal with that. Be like Miss Bailey's stuff is raw energy, and Loftis and me, like wizards, could transform her stuff into anything else at will. All we had to do, it seemed to me, was decide exactly what to exchange it for. (34–35)

Cooter's senses, awakened to the promises clustered around things, have truly become theoreticians. Exchange value is not identical to the price of things, but marks a determination of what else a thing can get exchanged for, as though money were not involved, exactly, in the mediations. Your coat for a piano. Your money for your life.

The scene of shocking wealth changes the terms of the meaning of life, of the reproduction of life, and of exchange itself. Loftis gets very quiet. Cooter grabs a bunch of money and goes downtown to spend it. But though downtown Chicago is just a few miles away, it is like a foreign country to Cooter: he does not speak its economic language. Theory aside, in practice Cooter doesn't have a clue what to do with the money and realizes sickeningly, right away, that money cannot make you feel like you belong if you are not already privileged to feel that way. He buys ugly, badly made, expensive clothes that shame him right away. He eats meat until he gets sick. He takes cabs everywhere. When he gets home, his brother's gone psychotic. Loftis has built an elaborate trap, a vault to protect the money. He yells at Cooter for spending, because the only power is in hoarding. Loftis says, "As soon as you buy something you lose the power to buy something" (36). He cannot protect himself from Miss Bailey's fate: "suffering that special Negro fear of using up what little we get in this life" (37); inheritance "put her through changes, she be spellbound, possessed by the promise of life, panicky about depletion, and locked now in the past because *every* purchase, you know, has to be a poor buy: a loss of life" (37–38).

Notice how frequently Johnson reverts to the word "life." Can a person on the bottom survive living "life" stripped of the illusion of indefinite en-

duration via whatever kinds of fantasmatic practices he's been able to cobble together? How quickly can one dispense with the old bargains between defense and desire, adapting to a regime whose rules provide no felt comfort? "Exchange Value" demonstrates the proximity of two kinds of cruel optimism: with little cultural or economic capital and bearing the history of a racial disinheritance from the norms of white supremacist power, you work yourself to death, or coast to nonexistence; or, with the ballast of capital, you hoard against death, deferring life, until you die. Cooter is the realist; he can see that there's no way out, now, no living as if not in a relation to death, which is figured in all of the potential loss that precedes it.

This story is exquisitely tender toward the surrealism of survival in the context of poverty so extreme that riches can only confirm insecurity. On either side of the capital divide, human creativity, energy, and agency are all bound up in bargaining, strategizing: it only begins with the mother at the sink predicting which of her sons has the sense to ride the rhythms of remuneration in the system; the parents dying before the kids are of age because of having had to scavenge for what Cooter scathingly calls "chump change"; Cooter choosing to live to feed his passivity and capacity for fantasy; and Loftis living amorally among a variety of styles for gaining upward mobility. Before the windfall they all manifest the improvisatory opportunism of people on the bottom who, having little to lose, and living in an economy of pleading, sharing, and hiding, will go for something if the occasion permits (29).

But the inheritance the sons engineer produces a sensorial break for them, and whereas the earlier modes of optimism included a community and a meanwhile that meant being somewhere and knowing people no matter what style of living-on one chose, the later modes almost force privacy, hoarding, becoming pure potential itself. The inheritance becomes the promise of the promise, of a technical optimism; it sutures them both to life lived without risk, in proximity to plenitude without enjoyment. For Loftis it destroys the pleasure of the stress of getting through the day because the scale of potential loss is too huge. Cooter is more passive: he'll fold himself in to his brother's crypt because that's who he is, a person who does not make spaces but navigates the available ones.

At the same time, the withdrawal of the brothers from even vague participation in a life made from scheming mimes another aspect of the logic of capital. We have seen that they have always been the subjects of cruel

optimism and its modes of slow death, having inherited their parents' future-directed, life-building, do-it-so-your-kids-won't-have-to discipline of the respectable body and soul. Now, in this relation of life-building to life-expending, they induce new generational orientations toward exhaustion. From coasting to the activity of the hustle they embody styles of being that can seem anything from subcivilized and extralegal to entrepreneurial and ambitious, in the good sense. In this final logic, though, capitalist sensibility in "Exchange Value" manifests as crazy in the way that reason is crazy—not only crazy-dogged, crazy-compulsive, crazy-formalist, and crazy-habituated, but crazy from the activity of maintaining structural contradictions.

In this world the subject's confrontation with singularity is the most horrifying thing of all. Singularity is the part of one's sovereignty that cannot be handed off to a concept, object, or property. Under capitalism, money is power and if one has only surplus amounts of it, sovereignty is infinite and yet a weight that cannot be borne. Exchange value was supposed to leaven the subject through the handoff of value to another, who would return something in kind. The space of exchange would make breathing space, and breathing space is what the capitalist subject, in all of her ambition, is trying to attain—the good life, as in Ashbery's poem. But what usually gets returned in the exchange of desire embedded in things is merely, disappointingly, a brief episode, often with a *thing* as memento of the memory and not the actualization of desire. In "Exchange Value" the money form in particular reveals in-kind reciprocity as a mirage, the revelation of which destroys for the brothers, and Miss Bailey before them, the whole infrastructure of trust in the world that merges the credit with the affectional economy and keeps people attached to optimism of a particular kind.

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. Hoarding controls the promise of value against expenditure, as it performs the enjoyment of an infinite present of holding pure potential. The end, then, is the story's tableau of the structural contradiction that shakes, stuns, and paralyzes its protagonists. Under capitalism, being in circulation denotes being in life, while an inexhaustible hoard denotes being in fantasy, which is itself a hoarding station against a threatening real, and therefore *seems* like a better aspirational realism. But in fantasy one is stuck with one's singular sovereignty in an inex-

haustable nonrelationality. Therefore, an unquantifiable surplus of money—what any capitalist subject thought anyone would want—turns each brother into a walking contradiction, a being who has what everyone wants and yet who reveals that the want that had saturated the fantasy of the whole imaginable world is wanting, because sovereignty, while ideal, is a nightmarish burden, a psychotic loneliness, and just tainted.

This means that the object of cruel optimism here appears as the thing within any object to which one passes one's fantasy of sovereignty for safe-keeping. In cruel optimism the subject or community turns its treasured attachments into safety-deposit objects that make it possible to bear sovereignty through its distribution, the energy of feeling relational, general, reciprocal, and accumulative. In circulation one becomes happy in an ordinary, often lovely, way, because the weight of being in the world is being distributed into space, time, noise, and other beings. When one's sovereignty is delivered back into one's hands, though, its formerly distributed weight becomes apparent, and the subject becomes stilled in a perverse mimesis of its enormity. In a relation of cruel optimism our activity is revealed as a vehicle for attaining a kind of passivity, as evidence of the desire to find forms in relation to which we can sustain a coasting sentience, in response to being *too* alive.

IV. *The Promise of Being Taught*

Even amid the racial mediations entrenched in capitalist inequalities in the United States, optimism involves thinking that in exchange one can achieve recognition. But, one must always ask, recognition of what? One's self-idealization, one's style of ambivalence, one's tender bits, or one's longing for the event of recognition itself? For Ashbery, recognition's exchange value takes him out of personality, that cluster of familiar repetitions. It is pure potentiality in the good sense and provides a lovely experience of realizing that the flurry of activity that stood in for making a life was an impasse now passed by and replaced by another, slower one, where he experiences hanging around, letting something or someone come in the way a sound comes, without being defensive. For the men who still feel like boys at the close of "Exchange Value" the affect attached to optimism is either panic or numbness, not humming. While, as defenses, these modes of vibrating near-paralysis are cognate to the modes of getting by that preceded Miss Bailey's death, those earlier styles of floating beneath value while having

fantasies of it seem utopian compared to the crypt of shattered being that pecuniary optimism cruelly engenders.

It is striking that these moments of optimism, which mark a possibility that the habits of a history might not be reproduced, release an overwhelmingly negative force. One predicts such effects in traumatic scenes, but it is not usual to think about an optimistic event as having the same potential consequences. The conventional fantasy that a revolutionary lifting of being might happen in proximity to the new object/scene of promise would predict otherwise than that a person or a group might prefer, after all, to surf from episode to episode while leaning toward a cluster of vaguely phrased prospects. And yet: at a certain degree of abstraction both from trauma and optimism the sensual experience of self-dissolution, radically reshaped consciousness, new sensoria, and narrative rupture can look similar; the subject's grasping toward stabilizing form, too, in the face of dissolution, looks like classic compensation, in which the production of habits that signify predictability defends against losing emotional shape entirely.

I have suggested that the particular ways in which identity and desire are articulated and lived sensually within capitalist culture produce such counterintuitive overlaps. But it would be reductive to read the preceding as a claim that anyone's subjective transaction with the optimistic structure of value in capital produces the knotty entailments of cruel optimism as such. People are worn out by the activity of life-building, especially the poor and the nonnormative. But lives are singular; people make mistakes, are inconstant, cruel, and kind; and accidents happen. This essay's archive focuses on artworks that deliberately remediate singularities into cases of nonuniversal but general abstraction, providing narrative scenarios of how people learn to identify, manage, and maintain the hazy luminosity of their attachment to being *x* and having *x*, given that their attachments were promises and not possessions after all. Geoff Ryman's historical novel, *Was*, offers yet a different scenario for tracking the enduring charisma of the normative. Weaving highly subjective activities of fantasy-making through agrarian Kansas and the mass culture industry, *Was* uses four encounters with *The Wizard of Oz* to narrate the processes by which people hoard themselves in fear of dissolution and yet seek to dissolve their hoard in transformative experiences of attachment whose effects are frightening, exhilarating, the only thing that makes living worthwhile, and yet a threat to existence itself. *Was* provides a kind of limit case of cruel optimism, as its pursuit of the affective continuity of trauma and optimism in self-unfolding excitement is neither comic, nor

tragic, nor melodramatic—but metaformal. Mining self-loss in episodes ranging from absorption in pretty things to crazy delusion, it thinks about genre as *defense*. *Was* validates fantasy as a life-sustaining defense against the attritions of ordinary violent history.

In this novel as in our other examples, the affective feeling of normativity is expressed in the sense that one ought to be dealt with gently by the world and to live happily with strangers and intimates without being torn and worn out by the labor of disappointment and the disappointment of labor. Here, though, evidence of the possibility of enduring that way in one's object/scene is not embedded in the couple form, the love plot, the family, fame, work, wealth, or property. Those are the sites of cruel optimism, scenes of conventional desire that stand manifestly in the way of the subject's thriving. Instead, the novel offers a two-step of saturation in mass fantasy and history as solutions to the problem of surviving the brutality of trauma and optimism in the ordinary world. It sees leaving the singular for the general through embracing a range of stranger intimacy as the best resource for thriving, but in at least one case, even those encounters endanger the subject who is so worn out by the work of surviving the bad life that all she has left, in a sense, are her defenses.

Was constructs a post-traumatic drama that is held together, in the end, by the governing consciousness of Bill Davison, a mental health worker, a white heterosexual Midwesterner whose only previous personal brush with trauma had been ambivalence toward his fiancée, but whose professional capacity to enter into the impasse with his patients, and to let their impasses into him, makes him the novel's optimistic remainder, a rich witness. The first traumatic story told is about the real Dorothy Gale, spelled Gael, partly, I imagine, to link up the girl who's transported to Oz on a strong breeze to someone in prison, and also to link her to the Gaelic part of Scotland, home of the historical novel, the genre whose affective and political conventions shape explicitly Ryman's meditation on experiences and memories whose traces are in archives, landscapes, and bodies scattered throughout Kansas, Canada, and the United States. Like Cooter, this Dorothy Gael uses whatever fantasy she can scrape together to survive her scene of hopeless historical embeddedness. But her process is not to drift vaguely but intensely, by way of multigeneric invention: dreams, fantasies, private plays, psychotic projection, aggressive quiet, lying, being a loud bully and a frank truth-teller. Dorothy's creativity makes a wall of post-traumatic noise, as she has been abandoned by her parents, raped and shamed by her Uncle Henry Gulch,

shunned by children for being big, fat, and ineloquent. Part Two of *Was* tells the story of Judy Garland as the child Frances Gumm. On the *Wizard of Oz* set she plays Dorothy Gale as vaguely sexualized sweetheart, her breasts tightly bound so that she can remain a child and therefore have her childhood stolen from her. It is not stolen through rape but by parents bound up in their own fantasies of living through children in terms of money and fame (Gumm's mother) or sex (Gumm's father, whose object choice was young boys). The third story in *Was* is about a fictional gay man, a minor Hollywood actor named Jonathan, whose fame comes from being the monster in serial-killer movies titled *The Child Minder* and who, as the book begins, is offered a part in a touring *Wizard of Oz* company while he is entering AIDS dementia. All of these stories are about the cruelty of optimism revealed to people without control over the material conditions of their lives, or whose relation to fantasy is such that the perverse shuttling between fantasy and realism destroys, according to Ryman, people and the nation. I cannot do justice here to the singularities of what optimism makes possible and impossible in this entire book; instead, I want to focus on a scene that makes the whole book possible. In this scene Dorothy Gael encounters a substitute teacher, Frank Baum, in her rural Kansas elementary school.

"The children," writes Ryman, "knew the Substitute was not a real teacher because he was so soft."²⁹ "Substitute" derives from the word "succeed," and the sense of possibility around the changeover is deeply embedded in the word. A *Substitute* brings optimism if he hasn't yet been defeated—by life or by the students. He enters their lives as a new site for attachment, a de-dramatized possibility. He is by definition a placeholder, a space of abeyance, an aleatory event. His coming is not personal—he is not there for anyone in particular. The amount of affect released around him says something about the intensity of the children's available drive to be less dead, numb, neutralized, or crazy with habit; but it says nothing about what it would feel like to be in transit between the stale life and all its others, or whether that feeling would lead to something good.

Of course often students are cruel to substitutes, out of excitement at the unpredictable and out of not having fear or transference to make them docile or even desiring of a recognition that has no time to be built. But this substitute is special to Dorothy: he is an actor, like her parents; he teaches them Turkish and tells them about alternative histories lived right now and in the past (171). Dorothy fantasizes about Frank Baum not in a narrative way, but with a mixture of sheer pleasure and defense: "Frank, Frank, as

her uncle put his hands on her” (169); then she berates herself for her “own unworthiness” (169) because she knows “how beautiful you are and I know how ugly I am and how you could never have anything to do with me” (174). She says his name, Frank, over and over: it “seemed to sum up everything that was missing from her life” (169). Yet face-to-face she cannot bear the feeling of relief from her life that the substitute’s being near provides for her. She alternately bristles and melts at his deference, his undemanding kindness. She mocks him and disrupts class to drown out her tenderness, but obeys him when he asks her to leave the room to just write something, anything.

What she comes back with is a lie, a wish. Her dog, Toto, had been murdered by her aunt and uncle, who hated him and who had no food to spare for him. But the story she hands in to the substitute is a substitute: it is about how happy she and Toto are. It includes sentences about how they play together and how exuberant he is, running around yelping “like he is saying hello to everything” (174). Imaginary Toto sits on her lap, licks her hand, has a cold nose, sleeps on her lap, and eats food that Auntie Em gives her to give him. The essay suggests a successful life, a life where love circulates and extends its sympathies, rather than the life she actually lives, where “[i]t was as if they had all stood back-to-back, shouting ‘love’ at the tops of their lungs, but in the wrong direction, away from each other” (221). It carries traces of all of the good experience Dorothy has ever had. The essay closes this way: “I did not call him Toto. That is the name my mother gave him when she was alive. It is the same as mine” (175).

Toto, Dodo, Dorothy: the teacher sees that the child has opened up something in herself, let down a defense, and he is moved by the bravery of her admission of identification and attachment. But he makes the mistake of being mimetic in response, acting soft toward her in a way he might imagine that she seeks to be: “‘I’m very glad,’ he murmured, ‘that you have something to love as much as that little animal’” (175). Dorothy goes ballistic at this response and insults Baum, but goes on to blurt out all of the truths of her life, in public, in front of the other students. She talks nonstop about being raped and hungry all the time, about the murder of her dog, and about her ineloquence: “I can’t say anything,” she closes (176). That phrase means she can’t do anything to change anything. From here she regresses to yelping and tries to dig a hole in the ground, to become the size she feels, and also to become, in a sense, an embodiment of the last thing she loved. After that, Dorothy goes crazy. She lives in a fantasy world of her own, wandering

homeless and free, especially, of the capacity to reflect on loss in the modalities of realism, tragedy, or melodrama. To protect her last iota of optimism, she goes crazy.

In *Was* Baum goes on to write *The Wizard of Oz* as a gift of alternativity to the person who can't say or do anything to change her life materially, and who has taken in so much that one moment of relief from herself produces a permanent crack in the available genres of her survival. In "What is a Minor Literature?" Deleuze and Guattari exhort people to become minor in exactly that way, to deterritorialize from the normal by digging a hole in sense like a dog or a mole.³⁰ Creating an impasse, a space of internal displacement, in this view, shatters the normal hierarchies, clarities, tyrannies, and confusions of compliance with autonomous individuality. This strategy looks promising in the Ashbery poem. But in "Exchange Value," a moment of relief produces a psychotic defense against the risk of losing optimism. For Dorothy Gael, in *Was*, the optimism of attachment to another living being is itself the cruelest slap of all.

From this cluster we can understand a bit more of the magnetic attraction to cruel optimism. Any object of optimism promises to guarantee the endurance of something, the survival of something, the flourishing of something, and above all the protection of the desire that made this object or scene powerful enough to have magnetized an attachment to it. When these relations of proximity and approximate exchange happen, the hope is that what misses the mark and disappoints won't much threaten anything in the ongoing reproduction of life, but will allow zones of optimism a kind of compromised endurance. In these zones, the hope is that the labor of maintaining optimism will not be negated by the work of world-maintenance as such and will allow the flirtation with some good-life sweetness to continue. But so many of the normative and singular objects made available for investing in the world are themselves threats to both the energy and the fantasy of ongoingness, namely, that people/collectivities face daily the cruelty not just of potentially relinquishing their objects or changing their lives, but of losing the binding that fantasy itself has allowed to what's potentially there in the risky domains of the yet untested and un-lived life. The texts we have looked at stage moments when life could become otherwise, in the good sense. A substantive change of heart, a sensorial shift, intersubjectivity, or transference with a new promising object does not generate on its own the better good life, though, and never without an equally threatening experience of loss—and neither can a single collaboration, whether of a couple,

brothers, or in pedagogy. Fantasy is an opening and a defense. The vague expectations of normative optimism produce small self-interruptions as the heterotopias of sovereignty amid structural inequality, political depression, and other intimate disappointments. By staging the impasse in which breakdown does its work on suspending the rules and norms of the world, these works show us how to pay attention to the built and affective infrastructure of the ordinary, and how to encounter what happens when infrastructural stress produces a dramatic tableau. In scenarios of cruel optimism we are forced to suspend ordinary notions of repair and flourishing to ask whether the survival scenarios we attach to those affects weren't the problem in the first place. Knowing how to assess what's unraveling there is one way to measure the impasse of living in the overwhelmingly present moment.