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ARTICLE
Special Section: Encountering Berlant

Encountering Berlant part two: Cruel and other optimisms

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Abstract

Part 2 of Encountering Berlant amplifies the promise of Lauren Berlant's influential concept of 'cruel optimism'. Cruel optimism names a double-bind in which attachment to an 'object' holds out the promise of sustaining/flourishing, whilst simultaneously harming. The lines between harming, sustaining, damaging and flourishing blur, sometimes collapsing entirely. By holding together opposites the concept exemplifies and performs the centrality of ambivalence to Berlant's thought, as well as their orientation to overdetermination and incoherence. Geographers and others have found in the concept a way of understanding the intersection between affective and political economies in the crisis-present following the 2008 financial crisis. Together with Berlant's linked concepts such as 'crisis ordinariness' and 'impasse', cruel optimism has offered a way of understanding why detachment can be so difficult and how damaging conditions endure. Contributors begin from these starting points, amplifying the concept's promise: a new way of researching and writing about the reproduction of ordinary damage and harm. By writing from diverse encounters with

Berlant's work, they move the concept in multiple directions, juxtaposing it with other optimisms across a variety of empirical scenes and locations. The result is a repository of what cruel optimism, and Berlant's mode of thinking-feeling more broadly, offer geographers and others.

A relation of cruel optimism exists when something you desire is actually an obstacle to your flourishing.

(Berlant, 2011, p. 1)

1 | INTRODUCTION: WHAT KIND OF THING IS CRUEL OPTIMISM?

Ben Anderson

'Cruel optimism' is now Lauren Berlant's most influential concept.[1] Having first appeared in a 2006 issue of *Differences* (Berlant, 2006), it went on to become central to their status in the USA as a public intellectual for the crisis-prone present (Hsu, 2019). The tension that Berlant confidently defined in the above quote—the opening line of *Cruel Optimism* (Berlant, 2011)—offers geographers and others a way into the perplexing question of why detachment from harmful lives can be so difficult, if not impossible. In particular, the concept has become a key resource for understanding the configurations of the affective and political economies that compose the impasse that followed the 2008 financial crisis, offering a way of staying with the double-binds that subjects inhabit as they try and make a life in worlds that are failing and falling apart (e.g., Addie & Fraser, 2019; Anderson & Secor, 2022; Bissell, 2022; Brickell, 2020; Cockayne, 2016; Pettit, 2019; Raynor, 2021).

All good concepts are promises. Cruel optimism promises a new way of researching and writing about everyday cruelty. The idea of cruel optimism is deceptively simple: that being attached to an object/scene can hold out the promise of flourishing, and be sustaining in itself, whilst being *simultaneously* harmful or damaging. It is unclear whether the person/people that are in such relations know this or not: Berlant left that open. Rather, their concern was with how the relation with an object/scene affected flourishing. Such a relation is *cruel* because it brings harm whether one remains in it or exits it.

Geographers and others find promise in the concept because it allows a new answer to the longstanding question of why people stay in relations and worlds that harm them, or put differently, why and how worlds persist through their cruelties. Rather than persistence being a matter of ideologies or other signifying systems, or the repetition of everyday practices become habitual, Berlant's answer begins from apprehending worlds as held together by alluring and regulatory fantasies, as set out in the introduction to Part 1. People stay attached because those fantasies and their associated promises offer resources for organising their lives, including rendering the present more habitable, and bringing a sense of the good life closer. A relation of cruel optimism is one where the object/scene has become 'significantly problematic' (Berlant, 2011, p. 24), as infrastructural and other supports for once sustaining fantasies slowly wear out, and fantasies begin to fray and unravel. In this situation, the lines between sustaining, flourishing and harm blur, and yet the subject or subjects stay in relation, as exiting also threatens harm and brings loss. What promises flourishing thus produces its opposite. Optimism becomes cruel. Berlant's explication of this double-bind across scenes of adjustment to newly precarious presents is another iteration of their career-long concern with attachment to normative fantasises and convention, although it is more orientated to the attrition of fantasy than their past work, where normativity becomes aspirational, and fantasy '*more* fantasmatic' (Berlant, 2011, p. 11, emphasis in original; compare with Berlant, 1991; Berlant & Warner, 1998). In *Cruel Optimism* we also see the various influences that are outlined in the introduction to Part 1 (Anderson et al., 2022); the intimacy and indistinction of the positive and negative from psychoanalysis; the questioning of attachment and the desire to induce detachments from Feminist and queer theory, whilst holding a position that is not simply anti-normative; and the emphasis on the (dis)organisation of the historical sensorium and affective present from Marxist critical theory.

The contributors in Part 2 encounter cruel optimism as a proposition for understanding how cruelties and the worlds that generate them persist. Contributors stage a relation between Berlant's articulation of the concept and a range of sites

and scenes, in doing so creating new juxtapositions and moving the concept in unexpected directions as different cruelties are apprehended. Many begin, like Berlant, from a concern with the cruelties of a particular world—the political and affective economy in North America and Northern Europe, which preceded the 2008 global financial crisis and has characterised its wake. This is an affect-world characterised by all kinds of improvised adjustments to both the dissolution of post-War good-life fantasies and the loss of neoliberalisms' promissory legitimacy (see Beckart, 2020). Cruel optimism is a concept for the impasse that happens as those post-War good life fantasies fray and consent for neoliberal logics comes, at best, to be based on forms of disaffection (see Gilbert, 2015). The concept offers an understanding of the historical sensorium and cluster of fantasies which accompanies 'fraying' (Berlant, 2011, p. 3) fantasies and 'dissolving assurances' (p. 3) as a precarious public sphere emerges. But contributors to Part 2 also move the concept into other situations where double-binds hold subjects, loosening the relation between the concept and the diagnosis of the slow unravelling of fantasies and thinking with cruel optimism to stay with the unsettling problem of how everyday cruelties are produced through our attachments.

Across the collection, cruel optimism exists as a multiplicity, echoing the overlapping, but distinct kinds of things that the term embodies in Berlant's work. Sometimes it serves as the name for a particular historical sensorium, one where the scarcity of attachable promises means that subjects cling to fraying promises inherited from past social-spatial formations. In these moments, cruel optimism, as a way of giving name to a 'shared historical sense' (Berlant, 2011, p. 3) or 'shared historical present' (ibid. p. 4), becomes close to a structure of feeling (Williams, 1977), in the sense of a shared affective quality through which the present is rendered sensible and apprehended. In the background to the collection is the problem of what the concept of cruel optimism offers once it moves from this affective present, including to others where fantasies do not unravel or fray but disappear fast or never existed. What are the boundaries and limits of a 'shared historical sense' or an 'affective present'? Most often, though, cruel optimism is used to name a particular 'affect structure' or 'structure of relationality', one that, in the terms of Berlant's definition cited above, 'exists'. Whilst Berlant leaves open the question of whether all optimism is cruel, and remains ambivalent as to whether this is the case, Berlant is clear that a cruelly optimistic relation is one *kind* among others. Their description of its cruelty is typically precise:

> … 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 world finds itself bound to a situation of profound threat that is, *at the same time*, profoundly confirming.
>
> (Berlant, 2011, p. 2, emphasis added)

The insistence on simultaneity—'*at the same time*'—is critical to interrupting any tendency to assume that all optimisms are cruel. It also opens up some questions: Do cruelly optimistic relations exist in contexts where conditions for the realisation of good life fantasies are not 'significantly problematic'? Do they exist where new objects/scenes of optimism are emerging or once residual scenes/objects are returning? Whom or what can be the subject of cruel optimism? The careful reference to 'person or a people' and 'a person or world' in the above quote leaves this question open. And does the harm of cruel optimism relate only to those inside the relation?

These questions are in the background to the contributions. Cruel optimism is not just a descriptor, though, not only a name for the affective present and a kind of relation. It's also a question. Thinking with the concept begins with being curious about the relation between attachments and cruelty, affirming the necessity of attachments but refusing to simply celebrate or condemn them. Perhaps our attachments harm as they promise flourishing. They may simply be cruel, or they may only sustain and allow us to flourish. We do not know. And we do not know how a cruelly optimistic relation might feel. Berlant reminds us that 'Because optimism is ambitious, at any moment it might feel like anything, including nothing … the whole gamut from the sly neutrality of browsing the aisles to excitement at the prospect of the 'the change that's gonna come' (Berlant, 2011, p. 2). Put simply, we cannot know in advance, all we can do is try and stay with the incoherence and overdetermination of life as it unfolds, as set out in Part 1.

But the concept is also a provocation, and it is this provocation that might be lost if the concept becomes a little too ready to hand, or a little too easily applied. It provokes geographers to ask difficult questions about the distribution and operation of cruelty, and how we write about cruel relations. It rests on an account of society and culture that refuses a melodramatic narrative in which the cause of harm is conveniently and safely located solely with an external actor or soulless abstraction. Cruel optimism is a provocation because it troubles how harm, to the self, to others, to the world, happens. It interrupts any simple dividing of the world up into unambiguously good and bad objects/scenes. And it calls

on us to reconsider the modes of inquiry we practice in relation to cruelties which might not feel or be initially perceived as cruelties. Berlant is fiercely critical of some objects/scenes of attachment, but they remain 'on the side of people's optimism' (Berlant, 2019a, n.p.). They write about cruelty without judging optimists. But this is not easy. How can one be 'on the side of people's optimism' but not on the side of their 'inadequate' or 'ridiculous' (ibid.) or simply harmful objects? How can one be 'on the side of people's optimism', that is, affirm the necessity of attachment, but not on the side of cruel optimisms? When is fierce judgement necessary and urgent?

It is in this spirit of cruel optimism as descriptor and incessant question and provocation that the contributors move with the concept. In around 1000 words, they juxtapose cruel optimism with a range of global empirical sites, in doing so refracting and distorting it, speculating about the other kinds of optimism it might coexist with as they diagnose various affective presents and their cruelties. The subtitle of Part 2—'Cruel and other optimisms'—is designed to keep open the question of what attachments do? How do they make worlds? How do they render the present habitable and organise living? What cruelties persist through them? The collection is bookended by two contributions which connect back to Part 1, and go to the heart of what has made the concept of cruel optimism so alluring: on ambivalence and on Berlant's mode of inhabiting the present. Our hope is that as well as provoking questions about cruelties, the collection performs the way of encountering the world that Berlant described when reflecting on their own practice:

> I aim for the scene I'm describing to open up a question for you. If the questions become more vital and interesting in the reading, then I've done my job. If readers then encounter these questions in the world, they might have a different way to think and act in relation to them.
>
> (Berlant, 2012, n.p.)

2 | LAUREN BERLANT AND THE 'CONUNDRUM OF AMBIVALENCE'

Daniel Cockayne and Derek Ruez

There are few thinkers who appreciate the tense possibilities and constraints of ambivalence more than Lauren Berlant. We trace Berlant's attunement to ambivalence and its conundrums across *The Female Complaint* (Berlant, 2008) and *Cruel Optimism* (Berlant, 2011) to show how their work offers not a unified theory of ambivalence, but modes of analysis for opening up attention to the complex, messy unfoldings of affect and attachment within the power relations of heteronormative racial capitalism.

In *The Female Complaint*, Berlant (2008) uses ambivalence to describe the tension between the learned commitment toward conventionality and the often thwarted desire to break from that conventionality through a literary analysis of a commodified 'women's culture' in the United States. Ambivalence describes the continued attachment (however unwilling) to structures that might lead to complaint in the first place—a kind of disappointment without disenchantment. In this framing, through which Berlant (pp. 4–5) shows how 'middlebrow popular genres are about the management of ambivalence, and not the destruction of pleasures or power', ambivalence can be understood, at least in part, as a conservative tendency epitomising the hesitant convictions of white American liberalism. Ambivalence describes how people remain attached to violent structures even when they may also want to reject them.

Berlant also presents a kind of ambivalence that is less about a continued commitment to normative sentimentality. Rather than approaches to counterpublics that have 'wanted to make transgression and resistance the values against which the data are measured' by their 'convertibility to politics', Berlant takes 'survival' and 'disappointment' as their starting point for analysing intimate publics, pointing to everyday realities in which the presumed active political positions of resistance or refusal may not be desired or possible (Berlant, 2008, p. 24). Here 'ordinary restlessness appears as a symptom of ambivalence about aspirational normativity and not a pointer toward unrealized revolution' (p. 25). Berlant follows this line not because they are opposed to transgression or resistance but to show how attention to ambivalence can respond to the question of 'why things do not change' in ways unaccounted for by sometimes individualistic theories of personal agency that often characterise analyses of resistance and refusal (p. 24). In this sense, Berlant enacts what they refer to as the 'conundrum of ambivalence': a 'pulling apart or antithetical attraction, an impossibility that cannot be overcome with synthesis, will, or better reason' (p. 261). In doing so, they offer a critical position that holds together an attraction to the ambivalent and the appeal of politics.

In *Cruel Optimism*, Berlant (2011) presents ambivalence in a more social theoretic register. Here Berlant describes ambivalence as the multiple sets of attachments that the subject could form toward an object—an undecided state prior

to the selection of both an object to attach to and the mode such an attachment takes. Fantasy here is a psychic process that helps the subject to select an object and mode of relation, though not necessarily in a straightforward or pre-given way. Often this process results in misrecognition, which is not a description of falsity as such, but a way for the subject to project their desires onto an object. This provides a relation that the subject needs, rather than one that adequately represents the reality of the object for itself. Berlant writes:

> Fantasy is what imagines the ambivalence and itinerancy of attachment. It provides representations to make the subject appear intelligible to herself and to others throughout the career of desire's unruly attentiveness. That is, fantasy parses ambivalence in such a way that the subject is not defeated by it.
>
> (p. 122)

If stuck in the indeterminacy and undecidability of this psychic holding pattern indefinitely, the subject might risk being 'defeated by' ambivalence, that is, unable to move forward with any attachment to an object at all. Those fantasised relations, once and if they do form, can often be characterised as a 'good enough' relation, a form of misrecognition, and/or by their cruel optimism: the continued attachment to circumstances that provide satisfaction through their repetition as habit, but also contribute to the subject's wearing away. Acknowledging the absence of conscious control we may have over these processes, we nevertheless wonder whether it's possible to cultivate circumstances where this psychic ambivalence is held on to a little longer—especially regarding objects with which we commonly form cruelly optimistic relationships—without being 'defeated by' it, in the hope that different relations might be possible.

While the emphasis can vary across their projects, Berlant's approach holds together how multiple kinds of fantasies, attachments and objects exist with attention to the power-laden dynamics by which some kinds of relations come to prevail through fitting into the material, affective, and psychic grooves of contemporary racial capitalism. There also remains a sense that ambivalent attachments and the fantasies through which we live and relate can be worked with, stretched, shaken up—not toward some neat resolution that would solve the subject's problems on their terms, but collectively and necessarily incompletely and ambivalently (Berlant, 2016a). Further, Berlant's focus most often turns to fantasies and attachments in a specific, contextual and plural sense, rather than relying on generalised theories of attachment and fantasy that can flatten real difference in analyses of psychic worlds. Berlant's analysis of the conundrum of ambivalence, whether in a literary-cultural or social theoretic register, offers an analysis that takes the differences endemic in a given situation or event as its starting point through a holding together of multiplicity and power relations.

It is precisely this holding together of multiplicity and power—and of the different critical imperatives that follow from them—that leads to the productively ambivalent conundrum in much of Berlant's work: the tension between 'the productivity of never-mere-description beyond the fantasy of tying things down' (Berlant, 2019b, p. 291) and the need for critical analyses of and alternatives to (extra)ordinary violence and precarity. Different people and projects will be differently drawn toward these imperatives; for us, it is appealing to remain with the questions that the conundrum of ambivalence open up rather than seeking their resolution, to stay a little longer in the realm of undecidability so as to not delimit a given affective relationship to an object, or not arrive at a settled point of (mis)recognition too early (Ruez & Cockayne, 2021). However, rather than inaction or indifference, maintaining such a position requires careful and uncertain work. This work is important precisely because of its (im)possibilities: we are never fully in control of our own psychic processes, the 'we' at work here is differentially and unevenly precarious, and the contingency of thinking and acting in common necessarily entails ambivalence. All of which are lessons that Berlant's work can help us (un)learn.

3 | ENCOUNTERING BERLANT IN CAIRO

Aya Nassar

> What does it mean to live in the ongoing present among piles of cases where things don't work out or seem to make sense.
>
> (Berlant, 2011, p. 225)

2021: I am on a writing session call on Microsoft Teams with three other Egyptian early career academics. Today is the turn of my draft, in which I am working with Berlant's notion of the glitch. Our usual practice is to ask the big 'so what?' question of each draft. Nadine[2] whose copy of 'Cruel Optimism', like mine, appears in her background shelf, pushes me: why the glitch, what does it do for your paper? Why Berlant? I rant about the answer and then stare at the four of us scattered across time-zones, and variable bandwidths, and I suddenly say: 'Do you remember that some of us were talking about *Cruel*

Optimism during the revolution? Did this really happen, or I am imagining it …? I am not sure anything got written with Berlant and instead we were bombarded with Agamben and states of exceptions. Nothing really materialised from these conversations, right?' Randa interrupts: 'a lot got aborted afterwards, you know, the revolution as such didn't work out'.

A version of this conversation happened a few months after Berlant passed away, and when this call for papers was circulating. In this short piece, I try to recollect this encounter with *Cruel Optimism* 10 years ago, in Cairo, in the middle of its revolution as well as in the aftermaths of this revolution's hope. I want to attend to the theoretical companionship of Berlant while navigating the years of attachment to the possibilities of a revolt. What did it mean to think through this particular theoretical language while hanging on to revolutionary promise?

My first encounter with Berlant's work was during the 'Arab Spring'. This was after 2011 and *Cruel Optimism*—the book (Berlant, 2011)—was just out and not really in circulation in Egypt. Nevertheless, it had already started to reverberate in conversations. In the early 2010s, Berlant's work was one that you could catch through murmurs, short references over coffees, terms and words that were thrown up and that tugged at something new but at the same time so familiar…

You know, in the US, there is a conversation now about c rrrr uuu ee l op tii miism …

The title slips and the intonations roll and the idea floats. There is a complicit silence that follows while we stare at that presence of cruelty hanging over our coffee cups. As if we had anticipated what kind of cruelty is entailed. As if we acknowledge that we should be wary of our optimism. As if we agree. 'Cruel optimism' springs up as a warning, during an attempt at making sense of hope and the immediate melancholia (see Bayat, 2015) that started to set in as soon as it became clear things were not going along the way anyone wanted.

This encounter (my encounter) was over the seasonal academic and political conversations when students scattered across the globe visited Cairo over the break or over a fieldtrip. Some of those flocked back home, only to be dispersed again a few years later (see Ali, 2019; Mossallam, 2021). The 'event' of our generation was unfolding. This was a generation that never saw a transition of power in Egypt (peaceful or not), and who knew that something radically new was emerging. The revolution stretched beyond the 'event' that captivated the world and played hide and seek with us, tricked our sense of time and space, and folded senses of temporality. By 2016, this generation was deemed old, nostalgic and melancholic, and until the present day—and as this piece and many others testify—are beholden to a moment that did not work out and that passed a decade ago.

I speculate about why cruel optimism floated about during that time and had this ghostly presence. I suggest that Berlant at the time, as ever, gave us some language through which we could accept that our necessary attachments to the revolt (and to the city in which is being staged, and to the temporal horizon of its unfolding) were going to hurt. Instead of regarding the affective experience of the revolts as a high of exhilaration followed by disenchantment, recalling this encounter with cruelty traces the complex affective life that many powered through those years.

As far as I know, Berlant did not become the revolution's main theoretical interlocutor. Many flocked to states of exception, where the state performs its mastery of time, space and meaning, where the state structures and holds hostage daily life and everyday space. However, Berlant thought of patterns of objects of desire and attachment, and interrogated the ways in which subjectivity is constituted in, precisely, the ambivalent navigation of hope, fantasy and disappointment, rather than only at triumphalist moments during constitutive beginnings. I think this is more important now, because the language of beginnings creates an arch of endings, successes and failures. The latter is the one we find ourselves locked in at the current moment, whereas their thinking about ambivalences, the attachments that operate in 'circuits of optimism and disappointment' (Berlant, 2011, p. 225), runs against equating hope with naivety.

It is precisely this ambivalence that I think we knew, anticipated and feared. It is one that we still experience now, among the 'piles' of 'things that didn't work out' wondering how to make a sense of how we arrived here. Despite many attempts to trace its archives of feeling we now inhabit in its wake (see Salem, 2021), the revolution in Egypt has an affective story that continues to be evasive to write despite the volumes written, careers made and theories designed to explain it (away). I'd like to think of Berlant's thinking as doing more than the role of capturing a mood or explaining the world, rather as bearing witness to the banal and everyday attachments to revolutionary promise.

4 | AMBIVALENT OPTIMISMS

Aelwyn Williams

So you are sitting in a conference centre-cum-religious building, in a market town near a border. You register some change in this pastel-tinted hall because of the radical self-exposure everyone has just witnessed, a series of dramatised stories

about being with dementia organised by a radical theatre company. All around, people trying to get things done in the teeth of depleted state provision, deteriorating infrastructures. Doctors and social workers hang their heads; volunteers, and those who would organise them, sit alert. Then someone steps up to the podium and says 'We're all in this together'. Hairs stand up on the back of your neck. Such are the forces which make you shift a little in the world.

A few months later, you find yourself in a formerly religious building-cum-arts centre, some 12 miles down the road, a Wesleyan neo-gothic confessional space carved from the surrounding redundant coalscapes. A man stands up and explains his predicament, a 'consultation exercise'. Relatively young, with dementia, he's been helping out, been turning up to voice his thoughts in attempts to 'co-produce services' or 'make *x* more dementia friendly', to give perspective, as requested—but now, he faces losing already meagre benefits ('Personal Independence Payments'), the ones that keep both him and his wife going, because he's *too active*. He looks crumpled by the strain of it, as he sits down. Looking on are the clipboard, flipchart and tickbox classes, of which I have become one, though we also cry and clap and hear yet more confessions, tales of dilapidated services, indignation.

What does it mean to 'keep on living on and to look forward to being in the world' (Berlant, 2011, p. 24) under such circumstances? A flicker of thoughts here looking back at those scenes, and the ensuing itch which brought years of following such circuits of encounter and meaning, activist refusals, a constant chase for fleeting glimpses of something called 'dementia friendly communities'. The uneven-ness of state demands in this time ('be active, but not too active or punishment awaits') brought to mind how such contradictions surely means control by overwhelming, by exhausting the subject. And yet there we all were, 'working towards dementia friendly communities', in our different ways.

At this point, I was a jobbing researcher who had stumbled into gerontology, with a background of working in the field of drugs and alcohol research, and as a volunteer and trustee in such services, among other things. This hinterland had taken in ideas around biopolitics, pastoral power, governmentality—all very applicable concepts for populations with dementia or 'substance abuse issues'—but this tangled thought-space was beginning to be felt like 'the gorgeous narrative work ... by the Foucauldian paranoid, transforming the simultaneous chaoses of institutions into a consecutive, drop-dead-elegant diagram of spiralling escapes and recaptures' (Sedgwick, 1986, p. xi). For me, a knot of involuntary memories had begun to accumulate around this particular research journey, clinging as I was to ready-made explanations. Then I began to read Berlant, Kathleen Stewart and others, a revelation.

Not long after the above two scenes and further months of plugging myself into such situations, literatures and feelings of bonding with others who grimaced through meetings, my own slow attempts at self-realisation, I begin to find the words, begin to see how events become a case, a 'perturbation of the normative' (Berlant, 2007, p. 670). I teased out from hours spent in and around the place where I'd heard 'we're all in this together' uttered, how that '*sensed* crisis' (Berlant, 2011, p. 19) seemed to seep under conversations about ageing populations, dominated by two stories: one with an active, sprightly citizenry, full of self-care, the other mired in terminal decline. Slowing or aberrant cognition in hyper-cognitive times had been commodified with the petty dispersal of the state, the siphoned affective energies of volunteers. Through patience, good instruction, lively talks with colleagues, I unlearn some things and open to others, and the scenes of a PhD are gradually unpicked in the most unexpected ways. This includes a spectral picture of post-war avant-garde writer William Burroughs passing through this market town in 1960, setting me on paths which help grip things more lightly—ironic, perhaps, given his status as the paranoid's paranoiac—and how to be beside things, experiment with perception through cut-ups and collage. Such paranoia becomes ordinary (Barnwell, 2020).

Sure, thoughts of a control society remained, but also pockets of 'hopeful pessimism' (Coleman, 2016), ways in which, building on Berlant's framing of optimism as ambivalent, as a process that is neither positive nor negative, it can also be productive analytically. Contrasting the temporal qualities of both affective states, Coleman has argued that pessimism as an analytic device is both flattening (we are unable to imagine the future) and enlivening (we are aware of the present, however painful), and concludes that through a type of 'hopeful pessimism', we can construct 'a politics of the present' (p. 100). Hope itself is not without its contestable features (Anderson, 2017; Petersen, 2015), but here I took comfort from the idea that understanding that present would give us a clearer idea of what change needs to happen. But it's also a space in which maybe we momentarily escape the exhaustion and weary endurance (Wilkinson & Ortega-Alcázar, 2018) brought about by that unending dispersal of the state, its attendant conducting of conduct. Disco dancing in daylight, shared jokes, sound baths, eating cricket teas together, missing those who passed on; over the years, these moments built the work for me as I tried to understand aspects of this market town, its people, and others beyond involved with 'dementia' or 'community'.

Fast forward then, some five years later from that initial 'we're all in this together', the intervening burned-out politics of austerity, Brexit and the rest. Maybe the world should be giving better objects to attach to, as Berlant said in one of their last talks (Coalition Margins, 2020); 'dementia friendly communities' and its attendant energies did not save any of the

populations evidently deemed inconvenient during the pandemic. I sit here now and think of the bitter irony that such 'letting die' through cruel COVID blundering, deliberate or otherwise, has happened when dementia has never been so celebrated.

5 | BERLANT'S GIFT: ATTENDING TO LOSS

Akanksha Awal

> Queer phenomenology is involved...with following the tracks of longing and belonging to create new openings for how to live, and to offer the wild living or outside belonging ... to re-imagine the practice of making and building lives.
>
> (Berlant, 2011, pp. 197–198)

A major crossroads in Ghaziabad, where one turns to Delhi, is a site of urban fantasies. Billboards of Bollywood-style weddings, luxury flats and retail malls sit atop street vendors and constant traffic. At these crossroads, I met Priyanka, a 28-year-old interlocutor, to discuss her upcoming engagement. Her parents had an arranged marriage with a civil servant, whom she barely knew. Yet, on phone calls, he frequently discussed his sexual desires, and particularly that he expected Priyanka to be a 'virgin'. He was 35, and likely not a 'virgin' himself, but expected chastity from her, Priyanka told me part in anger and part in worry. She had 'enjoyed' her time with her boyfriend and was brainstorming ideas on how to 'seal' the vagina for the wedding. The failure of bleeding on the wedding night, she worried, would lead to a breakdown of her marriage. She would then have to stay with someone who would punish her for a perceived lack of loyalty or return to her parents.

When Priyanka entered college, the first one in her family to study for a MBA, she expected that she would marry a man of her choosing. A man who would be liberal and 'let' her work. Her postgraduate institution had found her a placement as a hotel receptionist. The job paid well and offered air-conditioned accommodation, but Priyanka's family forced her to quit only after a couple of months, arguing that the job was akin to prostitution. Yet years later, Priyanka was stuck trying to save a doomed marriage proposal suggested by her parents. She pointed out that to say no to the proposal could amount to the loss of the possibility of a secure middle-class life, after she had already endured a loss of *her* life dreams of working at a hotel or marrying her boyfriend. Priyanka, like many others I met in Ghaziabad, were schooled in the losses women might endure if they strayed off normative paths of heterosexuality and marriage. From a young age, they were taught to avoid losses that might jeopardise their and their family's futures. The loss, first of virginity; then of innocence; of virtue; of reputation. Women feared how these losses might compound? A delay in finding a suitable match? That alone could lead to the loss of time itself, to get married or have children. Women feared becoming 'left behind' women. The fear, therefore, of loss of families, friends and money, and the fear, then, of a march toward a shrinking space of possibility of what could be home. These losses together, for them, could lead to a loss of *the* world.

What's cruel about these attachments is that their loss 'can entail the loss of an entire world', (Berlant, 2011, p. 16) says Berlant in *Cruel Optimism* so that people lose the 'confidence about how to live on' (ibid.). Berlant's influential work can be read as a text dedicated to studying how people cope with the fear of loss of ways of being, aspirations, and the loss of the possibility of having dreams. In the face of adversity, people develop habits and gestures, Berlant explains, to remain close to the objects of their desires—jobs, lovers, or experiences. Such loss of middle-class ideals of marriage and secure jobs are a common feature of both late capitalist Euro-American worlds, argues Berlant, and, as I argue, Indian realities. Loss in 'cruel optimism' is not melancholia or trauma, which happens after the loss. In 'cruel optimism', the losses are diffused, but come into a subject's view suddenly. The subject then engages in conjuring new imaginations, in what Berlant calls the 'scenes of shifting and adjustment' (p. 52) to new realities. But these practices exact a cost. So, by the time the subject realises that that she would never fulfil her dreams, she is overwhelmed by the loss of her world carefully imagined and reimagined over time. The subject starts to lose belief even in the possibility of an imagined future, focusing instead on the present.

My respondents were acutely aware of the significance of marriage in having safety in their lives. Yet, they could not ignore the plights of their divorced and abandoned sisters at home, nor could they forget about the suicides of housewives in their localities (see also Pinto, 2014). They did not believe that a future marriage with pleasure and companionship would ever come to fruition for them. Yet, they adapted to the present by forming new fantasies of singlehood and imaginations of independence from the men—be it their fathers, husbands or brothers. They learnt to navigate the city's

new malls, cinema halls and parks, drawing pleasure along the way. 'The haunting question is how much of one's creativity and hypervigilant energy the situation will absorb before it destroys its subjects or finds a way to appear as merely a steady hum of liveable crisis ordinariness' (p. 196). The present, for Berlant, however pleasurable, bears a 'weight' on the subject (p. 30)—a sense that Politics cannot change one's future. And yet for young women in Ghaziabad the present was a site of politics, a politics of pleasure. Priyanka was alert to the losses she would endure; therefore, she broke off her engagement with the man who sought chastity. Priyanka's family was unsupportive, and she became estranged from them for a while. But instead of being dominated by a fear of loss of a long-term future, young women like Priyanka sought pleasures through small acts of revelry, such as mocking middle-class uncles in the malls, trying make-up with friends, or reciting film dialogues over and over to the point of ridicule. The present offered the possibility of the moment turning out to be otherwise.

'There's nothing now but the present and whatever sweetness he can squeeze into it, and he seems at *peace* with that' (Berlant, 2011, p. 212) says Berlant when discussing how people live with the losses they endure. On the contrary, in Ghaziabad, the present was a source of intense anxiety and reworking—it was a time to pack in pleasure, but also worry about the loss of the moment. In these moments, my interlocutors experimented with new social forms, such as queer relationships outside of marriage and monogamy. Doing so, allowed young women like Priyanka to 'gain' a viable future. In this future, friends gave a sense of belonging to the city. Love was found and then lost, again and again, but women learnt a deeper understanding of what it means to live, always with the losses. Some found the life partners they were seeking, after five years of searching. Attending to loss, then, was not an exception, but part of the human condition.

Berlant's (2011) work teaches us how *not* to live with loss; that is, by cruelly repeating activities that do not lead to change. Their work reminds us that loss is a part of life, and that it is possible to weave new forms of life by giving up habits and gestures that keep us cruelly invested in life projects that do not lead to imagined futures, but the possibility of thriving while attending to losses is underexplored in their work—but young women in Ghaziabad show this us through their everyday practices.

6 | CRUDE OPTIMISM

Mónica Salas Landa

> 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.
>
> (Berlant, 2011, p. 1)

As soon the bus entered the city, the smell of rotten eggs and industrial filth was overwhelming. I covered my nose and mouth to protect myself from the putrid odour and noxious fumes that I was breathing, noticing that everyone else on the bus had made the same futile gesture—as if we could avoid the air that surrounded us. In classic anthropological fashion, a shared experience, here a sensuous disruption, marked my entry into the field. I now belonged in Poza Rica, an emblematic oil-producing centre in the lowlands of northern Veracruz in Mexico, in a way that I had not when I was doing background research in my pre-field days.

From my window seat, I made as many mental notes as I could about the paradoxical imprints of the oil industry, which soon presented themselves. Stores, one after the other, displayed boots, tools, supplies and colourful jumpers, some with the logo of Pemex, the state-owned oil corporation, and others with the logos of transnational companies, like Waterford or Gulf. Despite the questionable air quality, these jumpers hung freshly laundered on clotheslines that were so ubiquitous atop rooftops that they inhered as a dominant feature of the urban skyline (Salas Landa, 2016, p. 721). Along the streets, I noted the white and yellow hard hats of workers walking to and from work at the numerous oil wells dispersed throughout the city—spaces all marked with bright yellow Pemex posters painted with a black skull-and-crossbones, warning of PELIGRO (danger). 'The goal is zero accidents' (*La meta es cero incidents*) read one sign delimiting the area of the gas complex. But the value of these safety measures and warnings, like covering my mouth moments ago, seemed to stand in tension with the red hue of the sky, a visible effect of the excessive burning of gas (Salas Landa, 2016, p. 721). The dangers warned about, it seemed, were already interwoven into life itself.

Curiously, these revolting and threatening experiences upon entering Poza Rica did not fill me with dread so much as a comforting sense of confidence and intellectual reassurance: the smell promised that I would find ample evidence of the violence at the centre of my research. I had come to Poza Rica to gather evidence on the long-term, delayed

destruction and environmental violence associated with the oil industry (Nixon, 2011, p. 2). Relevant scholarship had led me to anticipate numerous claims of bodily harm associated with the consequences of oil extraction (Allen, 2003; Auyero & Swistun, 2009; Cepek, 2018; Davies, 2018; Fiske, 2018; Langston, 2010; Lora-Wainwright, 2017; Sawyer, 2004). I was likewise prepared to account for efforts to seek redress through diverse forms of environmental engagement and even to account for those instances where toxic hazards, ubiquitous and all-pervasive as they are, remain largely internalised.

Although much of my experience in the field indeed resonated with existing scholarship on issues surrounding the oil industry, I found it difficult to account for the optimistic attachment that my interlocutors felt toward an industry that otherwise appeared to have worn them out. Instead, it appeared to have provided them with the basis for carrying on. Retired oil workers, for example, spend their days sharing their memories of the times spent in the oilfields and calling attention to the enduring social bonds that emerged among themselves and between them and the once-principled management of Pemex. Rather than people being resigned to a fate that they did not choose, I found that many of those most closely affected found in the oil industry the very conditions for possibility: '... what happens when the loss of what's not working is more unbearable than the having of it ...' (Berlant, 2011, p. 24).

Over the course of my fieldwork, I met Rubén, Adolfo, and other retired oil workers for their weekly gatherings at Café Manolo. The first thing I noticed when I met Rubén was the way he proudly wore his button-up blue shirt with an embroidered Pemex logo. 'Working for Pemex', he explained, 'has been a great satisfaction and a source of pride (Salas Landa, 2016, p. 730). It hurts to see what is happening now'. He was referring to a handful of points of contention that have arisen lately: a corruption scandal involving Pemex-North Region, which ultimately ended in the shutdown of most of the oil wells in the city, demonstrations outside the regional headquarters by workers of subcontracting companies who were starting to organise, and the construction of the city's ring road, which was suspended despite sponsorship from Pemex (Salas Landa, 2016, p. 730).

According to this group of retired oil workers, this time of crisis for Pemex was the result of the neoliberal regulations put forward by the Mexican state that started to transform Pemex management beginning in the 1990s. As Adolfo explained to me, 'We started to get regional directors who came from Mexico City, directors who did not know anything about oil and who only encountered it when they were filling up their gas tanks at the gas station' (Salas Landa, 2016, p. 730). These technocratic managers, according to Adolfo, never served as apprentices, never rotated through all the areas involved in oil exploration and production, never had to 'sweat blood' or risked their lives. In short, unlike this group of oil workers, the technocrats now directing Pemex did not make themselves *in the field*, as Rubén and Adolfo pointed out.

Adolfo looked particularly upset during that meeting at Manolo's. Later that day, I discovered that Adolfo had visited his brother before attending the weekly reunion with other retired workers. His brother, also an oil worker, was at a local hospital where he was being treated for cancer:

> The hospital, as usual, ran out of medicine. Yet, you see the excessive expenditure of the management, the ridiculous benefits that they have. But us oil workers have to beg today for basic medical care. Despite all this—and this is the irony of the situation—now that we are facing the stoppage, I would not mind going to the drilling site to take my very last breath of air there. After all, I have already spent my life around those fields.
>
> (Salas Landa, 2016, p. 730)

Adolfo's inclination to return to the oilfield to trade his last breath in order to keep the industry going was not only ironic but also cruel. What's cruel about such attachments to problematic objects of desire, Berlant argues, is that the subject might not well endure its loss even though its presence threatens his well-being (Berlant, 2011, p. 24). It is this affective structure, which organises Adolfo's present, that can help explain why, despite the industry's moral and technical failure, workers like him cling to it so tenaciously. As optimism turns to despair, trust gives way to distress, and strength devolves into disease, these retired workers continue finding in oil and the world its extraction has created conditions of possibility: notions of justice, solidarity, duty and camaraderie (Salas Landa, 2016, p. 730). The oil industry, in other words, allowed my interlocutors 'to keep on living on and to look forward to being in the world' (Berlant, 2011, p. 24).

This injurious attachment to the industry is rarely foregrounded in the literature on oil emerging from human geography, anthropology and allied disciplines, in part, due to our own intellectual commitments which predispose us to accentuate less ambivalent responses to the noxious conditions and messy reality of late-industrialism (Fortun, 2014). Yet, Berlant's call to attend to optimistic relations—no matter how cruel—can help us better apprehend the ordinary, overwhelming and impending crisis of life-building under present conditions. Recognising and understanding the sense of possibility and assurance—the optimism—that oil *still* ignites in those mostly hurt by it, therefore matters. It matters

because without this recognition or understanding, we can hardly begin to apprehend and create alternative conditions for 'living otherwise'—that is, for living less crudely (Berlant, 2011, p. 3).

7 | THE ETHNOGRAPHIC AMBIVALENCES OF CRUEL OPTIMISM

Harry Petit

In November 2016 I attended a talk by Lauren Berlant at NYU's Gallatin Center. Afterwards I summoned the courage to ask why Lauren had used the word 'optimism' instead of 'hope' in their work. At the time I was writing up my PhD thesis on how young educated underemployed men in Egypt sustain hope amidst the troubled pursuit of a stable career and durable intimacy and struggling to explain why I favoured hope given the overlap in our work. Lauren flippantly replied something to the effect of 'oh it doesn't matter, does it?'—before we went on to talk for a few minutes about my research. After my initial embarrassment, I began to appreciate the simplicity of this response—especially coming from somebody who took so much care over their writing and conceptual articulations. It certainly released some anxiety within me about being picked apart for semiotics. It also provided a—albeit very brief—powerful lasting memory of Lauren.

There was something else that stayed with me that evening. Lauren used the talk to introduce an update to cruel optimism. With typical poetic grace, they presented the emergence of a dissociative stance beyond an optimistic attachment to good life fantasies. This is a state of 'being in life without wanting the world' (Berlant, 2016b). It is materially signified by a bodily 'shrug'—and describes how people turn away from a world of injury, negation and contingency, letting go of the normative aspirational markers they have been chasing in favour of life in the durative present. The idea opens up important questions about the temporal undulation of optimistic attachments. In this piece, I want to stay with these questions to consider how attending to the ethnographic rhythms—and ambivalences—of cruel optimism can deepen our understanding of its experience in the world.

My research followed the lives of young Egyptian men in their mid-20s as they forged an attachment to places, objects and narratives—for example, self-help quotes, Islamic proverbs, Hollywood movies, training courses, employment fairs—which extend the hopeful but cruel meritocratic logic that success in life depends on the individual. During 13 months of ethnographic fieldwork stretched over four years, I observed the intricate ripples of this attachment. Men did not experience a consistent relationship to objects which extended meritocratic ideas. They oscillated between expressing frustration against a nepotistic, stagnant, and segmented Egyptian labour market which was stacked against them in response to disappointment (and even expressing doubt about God's existence), and returning again and again to stories, metaphors, quotes, memories which switched their attention back to the possibility of success through giving primacy to opaque, replicable individual characteristics such as perseverance and belief.

In practice cruel optimism is not experienced as a continuous, unequivocal attachment. During the mundane rhythms of daily life people constantly flip in and out of it, even within a conversation. They wrestle with doubt and cynicism— and can express acute awareness of the barriers which inhibit the realisation of individual desires. This awareness though demonstrates the affective power of meritocratic objects because people keep overcoming doubts and reattaching themselves to them because, as Berlant (2011, p. 24) articulated, they provide 'continuity of the subject's sense of what it means to keep on living on and to look forward to being in the world'. In other words, they provide an essential presence for the continuation of life within contemporary capitalist regimes.

But by following the tragic pursuit of desirable jobs among Egyptian men over several years, further ambivalent aspects of the relation to meritocratic objects revealed themselves. First was the emergence of a cruelly optimistic attachment acutely aware of its superfluity. Maintaining the attachment for some became a conscious activity of pretence designed to shift their mood rather than a product of belief. It was a case of 'I know it's useless, but I do it anyway because it feels good'. This opens up questions about how we understand both the power and frailty of hopeful attachments. People invest in objects because of their affective pull, however the existence of a pessimistic stance reveals the imminent potential for critical positioning and alternative orientation.

It was not until the summer of 2020, when I conducted follow-up fieldwork with men who had by this point experienced years of failed plans and shattered dreams, that I began to understand Berlant's articulation of a more dissociative stance to life. The men to whom I was speaking no longer exuded a restless vigour to chase dreams. They still engaged in the pursuit of a normative future: getting married, having children and securing better lives for them, building houses, getting promoted, buying cars, saving for holidays. But they did so with less urgency and conviction, and with a hollowed out emotional attachment which accepted imperfection and adaptation. As one man said: 'I am happy because I do not

care about being happy any longer, I am no longer chasing anything … I have no goals right now, that gives freedom'. Faith also began to play a more intensive role in their lives, with the promise of God's reward aiding an existential shift away from an instrumental stance toward engagement in the world.

What has made Lauren Berlant's writings so powerful during my academic life is that, just as the ambivalence of cruelly optimistic attachments revealed itself in my research, it revealed itself to me and those around me. I have lost count of the number of times people have commented how they feel similarly trapped in cycles of disillusionment and re-engagement with the hopeful chase of future goals—job stability, durable intimacy or lifestyle satisfaction. Strategies of escaping the pain of these pursuits differ: some construct a 'knowing' stance of acknowledging the cruelty while engaging, some go through periods of withdrawing, and some attempt to find more secure, abstracted forms of valida-tion. What these strategies show, as Berlant articulated back in 2016, is that the attachment to cruel optimism is powerful but not inevitable. People develop more critical or dissociative stances which reveal the frailties of their attachment to the world. Recognising this, I think, opens up important questions and even potentials regarding the mission that Berlant left us with to disrupt the objects and structures that prevent us from living well.

8 | LAYER OF FACE, AND OTHER OPTIMISMS OF PLATFORM WORK

Anurag Mazumdar

In *Cruel Optimism*, Lauren Berlant (2011) tracks the intimate transactions that suture the disintegrated remains of capital-ism as erstwhile psychically and economically protected classes witness the unravelling of the sustained disavowals that held together, especially in dark times, the fantasy of the good life. A 'layer of face' produces a 'space of delay' as subjects and their worlds cope with a persistent gap between the mythical 'good life' and ever-precarious present that refuses to be drowned by the optimism about being optimistic (Berlant, 2011, p. 196). Drawing on my fieldwork with Uber and Ola taxi drivers in Delhi and the National Capital Region (NCR), I speculate what it means to think with Berlant about an emerging(?) 'layer of face' among my research interlocutors whose contingent expressions of 'ordinary affective states' (p. 197) appear not to be guided by the fraying ingredients that make possible, even in a vestigial sense, the goodness of the good life. Rather, their words and bodily expressions indicated a lingering suspicion of the taken-for-granted means to the good life—a stable job, fixed salary and retirement benefits, even as the ongoing *impasse* wore them out.

As I reflected on my ethnographic interviews with ride-hailing taxi drivers, I began to read their 'layer of face' as a shapeless struggle to cope with 'glitches' (198)—frequent COVID-19 lockdowns, highly flexibilised venture capital, shifting state priorities—that denied them full membership into the world of risk-taking entrepreneurs. That is not to say that their mask, much like Berlant's subjects, did not appear to be, in part, producing an affective environment to nego-tiate the precarity and contingencies precipitated by the bottoming out of gig economy fortunes. But what seemed more immediate in their (non)-expressions was a 'provisional pessimism', for material attributes, moral values and affective states that they identified with 'stability'. Provisional pessimism—the word 'provisional' draws attention to its inherent flux—allowed taxi drivers to abhor the temptations of the nebulous and vaunted goal of middle-class stability. Their mask tended to create a breathing space in which they could continue holding on to their bets against 'stability'—a priv-ilege they never enjoyed and have not had the means to aspire to. Going against their own interest at times, their mask was a thoughtful provocation directed toward people who, despite careful planning, were experiencing precarity. If their 'precarious visage' betrayed an anxiety, it was not as much about showing up to 're-earn' their jobs—being perfectly aware of their vulnerability, exhausted drivers understood that taxi driving with digital ride-hailing platforms could not be a long-term proposition—as it was about the gaps between the promises and perils of entrepreneurial optimism. As the structural and institutional support for this fantasy frayed and disintegrated, drivers renegotiated the affective states that would allow them to inhabit this gap, what I see as a defining characteristic of the current impasse.

I am thinking with Berlant as I attempt to make sense of the disturbances and its corresponding adaptations that animate what-appeared-to-me-as confusing, somewhat self-contradictory responses to a disarmingly simple question— if platform work was wearing them out financially and emotionally, was it worth it? In times of crisis, finding oneself amid interruptions in transitive phases (*glitches*) is neither uniform nor coherent, as bodies 'absorb, register, reenact, refigure, and make possible a political understanding of shifts' (Berlant, 2011, p. 198). As it were, I witnessed two patterns of the 'layer(s) of face' that may seem incongruent but are not irreconcilable. In my interviews, drivers routinely criticised ride-hailing platforms with a detached anger and simultaneously expressed an *affection*(?) for taking bigger risks because they were not convinced that the received wisdom of stability made sense in this shapeless present. Their

adaptation to the 'adaptive imperative' surely resonates with obligatory affective mechanisms that helped them navigate a long-standing, brutal informal economy in India (as also elsewhere in the South), what Berlant (2011, p. 198) would call 'continuities of institutionalized history'. Similarly, it is not impossible to see that this way of being draws from a vigorous entrepreneurial discourse circulated by the Hindu right-wing, nationalist government in India, most famously endorsed by Prime Minister Narendra Modi when he suggested on a television show that *pakora* (oil fritters) sellers earning 200 rupees a day (less than $3) should be considered 'employed' as they were home-grown entrepreneurs (Kazmin, 2018). But few, if any, of my research interlocutors uncritically accepted this vacuous, celebratory logic of the state's entrepreneurship discourse. Their bodily comportments to adapt to a 'flexibilised' persona, that was less perturbed by risks than economically protected individuals, were more nuanced—they seemed optimistic about their future in the world because of their *own* risk appetite and were reluctant to conform to an older, conservative model of upward mobility. As one taxi driver told me, calling on a certain urgency of action, '*Naukri mein woh baat nahi rehti hai … is mein azaadi hai aur usmein bandh jate hai*' ('A job just does not have the same ring to it, this [a tourist taxi business he wanted to start once his stint with Uber was over] has freedom and a job means getting tied down'). It is tempting to interpret this statement as delusional support for the autonomous meritocracy and state withdrawal undergirding dominant models of free market capitalism, but that is not the case. The state was not necessarily shunned; calls for hyper-individualised neoliberal persona sat uncomfortably with political movements to guarantee state intervention. Most of my interlocutors were vocal about state benefits and protections but did not feel particularly betrayed by state withdrawal; what seemed like a bigger betrayal was the problem of living in the pressing 'thick present', of states and corporates pulling the rug from under their feet by going back on their promises of supporting entrepreneurial aspirations after stoking a risk-taking mindset. In other words, states and corporate (platforms) had left them high and dry after pledging hedges against entrepreneurial risks, those that make risk-taking achievable. If their layer of face allowed them to continue taking positions against stability, it also allowed them to contend with this betrayal, wherein they paid the price individually for what was a collective failure to satisfy the conditions of a good, albeit 'risky', life.

My fieldwork with taxi drivers in Delhi echoed existing geographic concerns of algorithmic exploitation in platform work (Attoh et al., 2019). But what was equally true, if somewhat confusing to me as a researcher, was their hesitance in calling the underlying logic behind the 'gig/platform model' flawed. This has been an area that seems to have escaped the critical attention of scholarship—where one can ask with Berlant: why do everyday forms of violence seem desirable and why do intimate attachments to normalcy have such a hold, despite obvious pitfalls? While a definite answer is beyond the scope of this inquiry (and neither my intention), I read this *situation*—per Berlant, a transitive zone that is only as ontologically stable as proximate imaginations and adjustments may permit—as one where a considered affinity for risks mediates possible uncertain or (non)-futures. The dread of an ominous present does not overpower the desires to explore the meaning of what it means to 'gig', to take risks and to immerse oneself in abrasive global market mechanisms, all of which are at best ways of being, not 'internal states', to adapt to a shapeless ongoingness without boundaries (p. 200).

9 | CRUEL OPTIMISM AND AFFECTIVE REALISM IN ANIMAL RESEARCH

Beth Greenhough and Emma Roe

What happens when we shift the focus of cruel optimism from the analysis of post-Fordist, post-industrial fiction and film, and instead apply it to a different kind of subject? In our research within UK animal research facilities, we focus on animal technologists (ATs). ATs are not those who design and lead animal experiments, although they may provide assistance with them; their day-to-day work is husbandry focused, providing everyday care and supporting good animal welfare. They are often called upon to kill animals they care for in order to alleviate animal suffering, because the experiment is coming to an end or because the animals are surplus to experimental demand. Levina (2018) suggests that cruel optimism epitomises the world of animal research, 'where the distant hope for a cure is set against the cruelty, immediate suffering, lasting harm and death imposed on research animals' (Roe & Greenhough, 2021, p. 3). In this piece we ask if the animal care technicians we studied evidenced this form of cruel optimism. In the process we also identify a second form of cruel optimism, through our exploration of how animal technicians deploy what Berlant terms 'affective realism'. Affective realism, we argue, is what allows ATs to continue in their working role, providing deep, attentive care for the individual (in this case animal), or even the collective, whilst also experiencing that animal's pain, loss, suffering and sacrifice as personal harm (Roe & Greenhough, 2021).

In society more widely, attachment to the expectation that if animals are used, it is done so in a humane way, does considerable affective work in seeking to allay the discomfort many (if not all) feel when confronted with the fact of animal research (Vanderslott et al., 2021). Reassurances about the high standards of animal welfare, which can deliver a good life

for research animals, is an affective and material performance of governance that the British populace have been trained to pay attention to and trust in. We suggest the dream of 'good animal welfare' in animal research, for wider society, serves to allay anxieties and temper anger, bridging the gap between a belief that the UK is a nation of animal lovers and the everyday realities of animal use as pets, food sources, entertainment, resources for conservation and as experimental subjects. But this dream, as Levina (2018) suggests, can take on a form of cruel optimism for those involved in practical animal care.

In a recent interview, Berlant (2019c, n.p.) describes how some people turn to their pets, after work, love and life failed to produce 'the kind of loyalty that dogs are bred for'. Berlant argues pet-keeping fulfils an affective need, a desired attachment which affords rewarding, loyal relations that perhaps are absent or disappointing in other aspects of life. But human–animal relations can be complicated too. As children, laboratory animal care technicians told of their loyal, positive, affectionate attachment to animals, but equally the disappointment felt from their experiences of caring for or working with animals (in petting zoos or animal shelters) when they failed to be able to provide the level of animal care they felt was needed, or lacked the opportunity to develop the positive relationships with animals Berlant described. To an extent these past attachments to animals provided them with a degree of what Berlant terms 'affective realism' when proximal to animal harm and suffering; they know animals can be loyal and affectionate, whilst also experiencing pain and suffering (sometimes at the same time). For these animal carers, when moving to a career in animal research, this affective realism serves to temper expectations. ATs learn to hold in tension: (1) the conviction they can provide good standards of animal welfare in the present, and the hope that their work will support the research for new medicines or techniques in the future; and (2) the affective burden of caring for, comforting and nursing harmed animals back to better health before humanely killing them. Scientific and animal welfare dreams motivate animal technicians to take on a career in animal technology; but cruel optimism shapes the emotional burden of doing so. They are confronted with the deliberate infliction of harm and suffering (even if limited and permitted by experimental protocols), alongside the cruel optimisms of both a failure to always provide a good life for the animal and a failure to see the benefits of those experiments when they are less tangible or poorly communicated. This in turn can lead to compassion fatigue and burnout (Davies & Lewis, 2010; Newsome et al., 2019).

In neoliberal society cruel optimisms are both affective and effective, simultaneously driving us forwards (toward the promise of a good life) and holding us back (rendering us unable to imagine a good life otherwise). Berlant suggests we sustain ourselves by adopting a position of affective realism; we become—in effect—resigned to cognitive dissonance; knowing 'this is going to hurt' and developing emotional pedagogies as a way of dealing with this (Roe & Greenhough, 2021). Yet, in coming to terms with this version of 'the good life' society risks ceding imaginative and rhetorical ground; it limits imagination and the capacity to envision other kinds of good life.

For those of us working on human–animal relations, as Eva Giraud (2019, p. 131) suggests, relational thinking (not unlike neoliberalism) comes with the risk of carrying everything in its wake. Drawing on van Dooren (van Dooren, 2014), Giraud describes how in being wedded to one version of the good life for humans and animals—for example, the 'welfarist' vision of humane animal research described above—we foreclose other forms of attachment. As Berlant (writing with Kathleen Stewart) (Berlant & Stewart, 2019, p. 131) argues, writing is a process through which to force affect. Her work, and we hope our writing here, then opens up new spaces or territories for intervening in the world, in ways analogous with Haraway's (2014) speculative fabulation, in that both hold up visions of future worlds (and the hopes and dreams they embody) as important spaces for intervention and resistance in the present. At a recent conference we saw the field of animal research challenged by visions of research with animals which is collaborative, where animals are invited to (as opposed to constrained to) participate, where the use of animals is entirely replaced, or where the focus is as much on what animals are curious about as it is on human questions. Many animal technologists tell us, for example, that they dream of a future where they are out-of-a-job; when the use of animals has been entirely replaced by alternatives, even though such a world seems a long way off at present.

10 | POET OF THE EPISODE

Anna Secor and Jess Linz

We are in a humourless situation. 'Crisis ordinariness' is how Lauren Berlant talked about the collective traumas of the unfolding historical moment to which we have no choice but to adapt (Berlant, 2011, p. 81). Writing from the US and the UK, decades of neo-liberal governance have worn deep grooves of stagnation, precarity and inequality. It appears that the conditions for democracy are eroding, perhaps irreversibly, while reactionary forces of right-wing populism and authoritarianism gather strength (Berardi, 2017). The colossal disaster of the COVID-19 pandemic in both the US and the

UK has deepened division and inequality. This is a contracting situation, in which the predominant mode of ordinary life is adjustment in the hope of survival. Crisis ordinariness inserts us into a historical present that feels both momentous and dull: a humourless situation that cramps our affective and political options.

This is a lot of pressure. We adjust (arranging our faces and backgrounds on Zoom is just one of the minor, self-serious adjustments we perform). The 'pressure of humorlessness', Berlant explains, is its 'radical cramping of mobility at the heart of the encounter, whether the encounter is with oneself or with another person, object, or world' (2017, p. 308). The humourless situation, like the humourless subject of Berlant's (2017) brilliant essay, is committed to its own sovereignty, to controlling the logics of encounter, time and event so that *nothing else erupts*. The forced sovereignty of the situation—the rigidity with which it imposes its own fantasy of itself—is expressed in many ways. For example, in the context of increasingly unaffordable home ownership, statements circulate about how young people could afford to buy a house if only they 'gave up luxuries' such as avocado toast, Netflix or gym memberships (Blankson, 2022; Levin, 2017). Wrapped up in its own implausible self-idealisation, the humourless situation 'would rather take down itself and the world rather than give up some ground within the encounter' (Berlant, 2017, p. 313).

And yet, with a small movement, the pressure of humourlessness can give way to something comic: the combover flops in the breeze. Lauren Berlant's work gives voice to the cramped spaces and reduced capacities of our crisis ordinariness, but also shows us how, on nimble feet, one can transform a situation that is quite stuck and humourless into a situation that breathes, shifts and becomes agitated. As Berlant writes, 'My interest is in flooding: the way a scene of disturbance lets into the room multiple logics …' (2017, p. 313). Unamused, in Texas a lawyer on Zoom assures the judge he is not a cat, despite appearances (Guardian News, 2021). Across the world in the Suez, an overloaded cargo ship gets blown askew and blocks the canal after tracing a penis-shaped route in the Red Sea. After six days, it is dislodged by what appears to be a tiny bulldozer (Sullivan, 2021). The humourless situation is always but one gesture away from erupting into comedy: 'the unbinding that happens in the face of rigidity' (Berlant, 2017, p. 313).

If the situation has become blocked, this is not due to any inherent qualities, but because of a stubborn vision of its parameters. The opportunity, difficult as it may be to face, is for the humourless subject to recognise what is rigid about their relationship to the humourless situation, and how their insistence on maintaining this fantasy impedes change. Berlant's work reminds us that the situation that feels so persistent can be disrupted by difference, a veer away from expectation, a shift in genre. Deflating the self-seriousness of the situation, Berlant shows how an impasse opens onto new affiliations. 'Comedy', Berlant and Sianne Ngai write, 'helps us test or figure out what it means to say "us"' (2017, p. 235). The surprise of laughter grants us the uncommon feeling that a connection happened: we somehow managed to reach each other! The aesthetic and affective enjoyment of this moment creates an inside and an outside before it all goes greyscale again. This is as much a theory of poetry as of humour.

Early in *Cruel Optimism*, Berlant turns to an untitled poem by John Ashbery. In the poem, the speaker's observations about the deadened spacetime of bourgeois life are interrupted by the approach of another. The poem illustrates, for Berlant, how something can be set in motion in an impasse: 'The seismic shift takes place in yielding to the proximity of an intimacy undefined by talking, made by a gesture of approach …' (2011, p. 32). There is a rhythm to be discovered in the impasse, in the humourless situation where we dither and become worn out by our flagging attachments: '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 …' (2011, p. 34). Berlant acknowledges that thinking of the poem in this way, while it 'may be kind of thrilling', depends on a certain confidence, one that is unthreatened by what happens next: 'Will they go to a high-end café and buy some intensified coffee supercharged by sugar and milk?' or 'Will they become different in a way in which they can build a world?' (2011, p. 34). The episodic interruption may do more to sustain our tolerance for a dreary continuation of the humourless situation than to disrupt it. And yet in this ambivalence to 'bourgeois senses' (2011, p. 33), becoming the poet of the episode is a step toward the otherwise.

Berlant is our poet of the episode. Their thought reveals the dynamism of what seem like blockages and the stability of what seems to be in motion. To engage Berlant's work is to take the opportunity to be changed by an encounter: to 'set something in motion' on the premise of 'rhythm and resonance' (2011, p. 86). In sorrow that the tap of their thought has been turned tight, we nonetheless have already soaked in what Berlant taught us to sense: the ephemeral affiliation, the appearance of the glitch, the wobble, the incipient disturbance that is the downfall of whatever attempts the sovereign closure of humourlessness.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

There are no data associated with this submission.

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ENDNOTE

[1] For an introduction to Berlant's work and the aim of the two Encountering Berlant pieces, see the companion piece *Encountering Berlant Part 1: Concepts Otherwise* (Anderson et al., 2022). As with the companion piece, contributors to Part 2 responded to an open call circulated through social media and list servs.

[2] All names here are pseudonyms.

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