

11. Structures of the Impasse

Notes with and athwart Lauren Berlant's *Cruel Optimism* (2011)

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"These new aesthetic forms ... 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." (7)¹

Cruel optimism? For me it's those renderings you often see these days, the bright but just this side of indistinct promotional images rolled out to shill for a new urban development project—a mixed-use warehouse conversion or food hall or "luxury loft." Looming expanses of glass and undulating wood, reclaimed facades of distressed brick or concrete, carefully intricate plaza spaces dotted here and there with rigidly strolling figures, skin-toned in multi-hues from peach to brown, signage in Futura or Helvetica—COFFEE—bare, hanging clear-wire teardrop bulbs, swelling bio-swales: Olmsted meets Jacobs meets Jobs.

They shimmer there on the page or the screen, the promise of life remade, the city reconciled with its natural underpinnings, brought to its fullest civic and predictably diverse fulfillment. It's a kind of fever dream for our times—the developer's utopia as mirage of public life. I'm often seduced by these images anyway—longing overcoming better judgment—and sometimes by the places themselves, even when they take shape in a form that is always somehow just a tad less shimmery and just-so than they appeared in prospect. They are relentlessly pleasant, even as one cannot help but feel they are something of a swindle—"the good life's traditional fantasy bribe," Lauren Berlant might call them.

1 All parenthetical citations in the text refer to Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011).

They are cruel for the way they appear optimistic, a trick that's still possible, even fundamental.

"Given the multi- and trans-medial platforms that make contemporary political and intuitive disarray available to more people in diverse kinds of worlds, old structuralisms of the before and after are inadequate." (69)

To hear her tell it, the persistent desire for the always just withheld good life has displaced and overwhelmed the older wish for a public life through which a carefully delineated fraction of "everyone" was to be collected, cajoled, persuaded, even forced to participate with everyone else. The new ordinary, the new everyday, is not merely one of distraction, or mediation, or alienation that might dissolve those publics even as they form up, but one in which our shared "mass sensorium" swamps wishes for collectivity with constant hopes of a good life that themselves dissolve in the face of "newly proliferating pressures to scramble for modes of living on" (8).

"What is the good life when the world that was to have been delivered by upward mobility and collective uplift that national/capitalism promised goes awry in front of one?" (69)

There's a history here: an attempt to register the affective dimensions of the political and cultural moment emergent since the 1970s—the times after what historian Jefferson Cowie calls "the great exception" of the postwar boom years. Cruel optimism is the way we experience our times of perpetual crisis: we continue to produce fantasies of the "good life," even as our longing for that good life stands in the way of ever actually achieving the justice and pleasure it promises. With "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," the "fantasy bribe" of the good life displaces the welfare state—which itself traded the possibility of structural societal transformation for relative affluence and stability based on exclusion (3).

But the good life survives on fumes now, too, promising something that it can evermore rarely deliver, a state that, as it becomes increasingly precarious and further out of reach, results in an aesthetics not of future-oriented anticipation—of "growth," to use the term that structured politics, culture, and economics during the age of the great exception, but of perpetual repetition, of unfolding stasis, of "ongoingness."

“... the present moment increasingly imposes itself on consciousness as a moment in extended crisis, with one happening piling on another...” (7)

What does ongoingness feel like?

For me it appeared in soft fits and starts, and then all at once—in what now seems like a blur of headlines and ordinary crises, the usual shocks of adulthood and the decay that accompanies growth. Time’s relentless forward inch a mere blip in retrospect.

First, there were the hesitant alarm bells, stuttering to life: the false crisis of Y2K, apocalypse forestalled, and then the odd horror of an election that felt, well, stolen: lawyers, Florida, hanging chads.

Then: all at once, some months later, sometime in the first months of 2001. It came by phone, sudden and unexpected, as these things have to: my father on the phone—something like, “it’s about mom, we’ve just come back from the doctor, and she has a brain tumor, she’ll have an operation tomorrow.” Alright, his mom, my grandmother, at that point on the cusp of 95, so anything could happen. But no, it suddenly rushed over me, he meant my mother, just past sixty, and still a kind of adult abstraction for me just pulling up on thirty. She was not supposed to be near any kind of end. Six months later though that end arrived, and a new shadowy time arrived too, for me at least.

After that the shocks mounted up, slowly “piling on” with abrupt unexpected interruptions that feel now, in retrospect, like an onrushing smeary surge.

What used to feel like the big one: a bright clear New York mid-morning, late summer almost fall. A distant boom. In my head it was a sound from just outside, a block away: one of those huge unwieldy metal plates dropped suddenly from its swinging chain onto the street below. Minutes later, the swell of sirens suggested something else. With the TV on, then up on our roof looking out toward Manhattan, we watched the same “thing” everyone else did. But what was this improbable “thing” that we were watching. I’m still not sure. First one tower, then the next. No need to describe it—you all know.

The days after that return in montage: fighter jets circling in the eerie blue skies stained only by that tailing, wind-driven tan plume; Humvees and body

armor at the Brooklyn Bridge crossing; flags on the highways; eyes meeting and soft nods on the subway hurtling under closed streets and shuttered stops; the smell of burned cement and people coming unexpectedly around corners; a quivering red glow south amongst the spared towers from the rail of the Manhattan Bridge bike lane. One day on the Brooklyn Heights promenade we ran into a friend for the first time since the attack: you've had a hard year, he said.

A year became a decade, and then two, it seemed, all of it montage now:

Just get it over with, a friend sighed in exasperation, let the inevitable bombing begin. Get it over with, and then we can all fulfill our predetermined roles: nationalist bloodlust, pacifist protestors, two halves of the same expected coin. But then: Tora Bora. The agreed-upon malefactor disappeared, slipped away, the greatest military on earth apparently buffaloeed.

And then: the long slow idiotic roll towards catastrophe: WMDs; "shock and awe"; the rout of Baghdad; the oil ministry ringed with troops while the museum was sacked; the strange, giddy, pathetic release on the streets of Baghdad and screens everywhere, the toppling of a hollow sheet metal statue, strongman no more. "We're an empire now, and when we act, we create our own reality."

And then: life in the "reality-based community": a stack of naked prisoners, wires, a hooded man spread-eagle standing on a box. Something called waterboarding: a whole new vocabulary for imperial false innocence turned to dust. (Renewed, not so much as new, it turned out, from imperial adventures a century before, but forgotten, hidden from most of us, like so much else.)

And then: a few years later, standing in my office, finding myself screaming at the radio: reports of a whole city, just one more "reality-based community," caught beneath the storm surge, levees given way, whole families on rooftops looking up, mouthing words that must be help.

In between there were other floods, and wildfires, and mass shootings, and earthquakes, and landslides, the expected disasters, the ones that always seemed to happen elsewhere. But then: hurrying to get a train, the last one

north out of Manhattan it turned out, before the floodwaters rose there, too, and the “superstorm” sent the harbor into the subway tunnels.

Somewhere in there, too, a more gradual unraveling, marked here and there by signs: great rafts of foreclosures, falling financial institutions, bailouts and no bailouts, and new jargon: credit default swaps, collateralized debt obligations, tranches. One day, on a visit to Michigan, just outside Detroit, beyond Eight Mile, just off a blurry suburban strip, a whole street of brick and siding bungalows, almost every one with a “for sale” sign—the curbside scrim of quiet, all pervasive devastation. You can measure the decade-plus since by the occupations, the chokeholds and knees on necks, the always recurring litany of names, the tear-gassed plazas and stormed capitol buildings, each a surprise that was somehow also expected.

A succession of headlines, mostly, from where I sat, so many symptoms of larger crises, traumatic for those whose lives they laid to waste, but a collective shock because we’d been unevenly spared for so long, now just so many chickens coming home to roost, as they say. Welcome to the world, white man.

“... most of what we call events are not of the scale of memorable impact but rather are episodes, that is, occasions that frame experience while not changing much of anything ...” (101)

“The vague expectations of normative optimism produce small self-interruptions as the heterotopias of sovereignty amid structural inequality, political depression, and other intimate disappointments.” (49)

Each of these disturbances felt singular in the moment of their occurrence. They erupted, receded, and reverberated, and for a while they seemed to exist only for themselves—singular tragedies and catastrophes, each one ripping open all anew each time. In between something like regularity resumed, as if each shock could be contained, smoothed out by the “vague expectations of normative optimism.” Perhaps it should have occurred to me that each episode of restored “sovereignty”—of even-keeled course correction—was in fact a “heterotopia”—a frantic rush to restore untroubled momentum amidst an unfolding furrow in the roiling sea. In retrospect, of course, all of them seem of a piece, or at least connected and cumulative—a series of scenes that add up to one great, splitting rupture.

“... a moment on the verge of a post-normative phase, in which fantasmatic clarities about the conditions for enduring collectivity, historical continuity, and infrastructural stability have melted away, along with predictable relations between event and affect.” (225)

We might have told ourselves, though, that moments of crisis are also moments of possibility, when broken things might form up again in unexpected ways, reconfigured in shapes that combine otherwise from their normally enforced structure.

“It is a sign of how desperately overwhelming the infrastructural processes are now—from environmental to economic disparities and depletion—that localism and xenophobic are resurfacing in the political at the same time as more inclusive forms of popular imaginary emerge.” (262)

But then—symptom and shock all at once: another grim election season, surely a foregone conclusion. “It’s her turn,” they said, a new political dynasty in the making, until it wasn’t. Polling broken, conventional wisdom ruptured, the “popular imaginary” lurched hard the other way, the rupture seemingly swallowing all possibility.

Somewhere there must be a list of all the fresh outrages—or a Twitter thread more likely, constantly updating—every little always popping scandal, each one simultaneously petty and all-consuming, even as no list could capture the sheer engulfing totality of the new newsfeed life. Every moment now, if you let it, becomes like the past decade in miniature, compressed, multiplied, and constant.

All the Trump-clysms of course, but also the odd portents: the ones that arrive as absurdist horror: The Chinese government actually calls its AI-fueled surveillance system “Skynet.” Here in the US, when you get a new “Real ID” driver’s license, you know it’s “real” because it has a yellow-outlined star in the upper right corner. When will our Elie Wiesel arrive? Our Sarah Connor?

And finally: the cruelest answer. The great closing in swept across the globe over the course of a surprised winter, a vast ravening we all knew was coming but could never admit was on its way just yet. Now there are tons stacked on the lungs of the world, pressing the stretched breath out of each frail husk,

thinning out the already unraveling future. All hopes now like the dusty film of a convenience store plastic bag, second-generation downcycled to ward off the inevitable: it will end caught in a tree and blown to shreds or swept downstream to dissolve and settle, undying, in the stomachs of turtles, the gills of fish, and back again to line our own guts. Now there are retreats to already-stocked bunkers, hunkering down in the swell-calculated niche markets shaped by our own heedless patterns.

The plague will pass, of course, but not without having revealed with brutal clarity the truth on which it has preyed and lived: social distance was already the everyday algorithm of collective life. We are all in this together going it alone.

"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." (49)

All along, of course, has been the slow dawning of what we might call the cruelty of optimism—the stepwise, oblique, but steadily emerging unwinding of an old atmosphere of surety. Once we thought we could be sure that just making a way in the world, working and buying and spending, was part of a pact, an agreement to just keep making and buying more, to expand the stores of prosperity, to let growth eventually fill up the world with enough for all.

Somewhere along the way that began to unravel, to fray; now every act is a little wound in the flesh of the world, every thing, every box of stuff in the cupboard, is a *resource*, seemingly a frail, disappearing material in over-demand headed for depletion, or an over-processed product of some toxic assembly, one more tax on the world's tipped balance, tied eventually and inevitably, somehow, to the great procession of disasters: the glaciers sliding into the sea, the storms battering the cities, the floods and fires, the waters and mercury inching up again each year inexorably. Were we just doomed to kill ourselves and the planet, simply by the cruelty of our optimism, "in the first place"?

"... what thriving might entail amid a mounting sense of contingency ..." (11)

A conundrum: thriving is now disaster. But things continue, nonetheless:

“A situation is a state of things in which something that will perhaps matter is unfolding amid the usual activity of life.” (5)

Things as we know them, Berlant tells us, always remain “a genre of unforeclosed experience” (5). They are always in this sense in emergence, as Raymond Williams might have had it, always unfolding, always in a state of “ongoingness.” If nothing can quite fully cohere then neither can it be pinned down or defined, made the basis of a position or a surety, an action. Tarrying in this ongoingness, Berlant advises, means dithering in constant “impasse,” while all around demands, declarations, relentless positions are pitched on the mere pulse of fleeting but relentless sensation.

And yet:

“... the energy that generates this sustaining commitment to the work of undoing a world while making one requires fantasy to motor programs of action, to distort the present on behalf of what the present can become ... [A]ny action of making a claim on the present involves bruising processes of detachment from anchors in the world, along with optimistic projections of a world that is worth our attachment to it.” (263)

“Bruising processes of detachment” and “optimistic projections”: The usual utopia of critical theory remains undisturbed, at the end, clung to as stubbornly as to any other status quo. Has Berlant described not just the “impasse” of the current moment, but the impasse of critical theory too?

“... cruel optimism’s double bind: ... it is awkward and it is threatening to detach from what is already not working.” (263)

Old habits die hard. Has Berlant described the prevailing structure of feeling afresh but prescribed the same remedy? Cruel optimism, indeed. Once it was “the popular” in its wild state, repository of pleasure and jouissance that would disrupt rationality. Then it was “affect,” source of non-normative desire that would scramble the circuits of normativity. Theorized correctly, of course. Each, it’s now painfully clear, theory or no, will break left or right as a matter of course. And that resurfaced “localism and xenophobia” lays claim to unruly feeling without the benefit of theory at all.

But, along the way:

“... to understand collective attachments to fundamentally stressful conventional lives, we need to think about normativity as aspirational and as an evolving and incoherent cluster of hegemonic promises about the present and future experience of social belonging that can be entered into in a number of ways, in affective transactions that take place alongside the more instrumental ones.” (167)

Or:

“To see hegemony as domination and subordination is to disavow how much of dependable life relies on the sheerly optimistic formalism of attachment.” (185)

What if normativity is not, or not only, “authoritarian desire,” but also the “optimistic formalism of attachment”? (186)

To what extent is the wish for sociality, for attachment of all sorts always and inevitably, to some degree we can't necessarily predict, encompass, or ward off, an implicit, even unwilled plan also for normativity, even if only in its minimal form as shape or binding, the minor coercions constitutive of working to live together? Is to “tarry” with the impasse also to tarry with normativity, the expected *bête noire* of “theory”?

Perhaps it is folly, mere cruel optimism, to continually expect the sleek and designed spaces of contemporary social belonging—with their top-heavy wobble, carefully providing reassurance to the already assured—to deliver even the feeling of a just public life. No doubt. But has theory, too, reached its own state of cruel optimism?

How to convince those with “fundamentally stressful conventional lives” to imagine otherwise? (167) The world that once needed disruption—playful subversion, radical transgression—is now always in constant disruption, harnessed as business-class mantra or unleashed as sheer and constant threat of precarity. All bets are off, for some, left and right—and no tarrying will do. Fury has the hour and optimism results only in cruelty.

But can the road back to a just sociality keep running through disruption of the already disrupting? Somewhere along the way a new normativity will have to cohere—what new worlds can be made without the balm of some assembled form of “normative optimism?”

We are all at an impasse now.

