

Cruel Optimism

Optimism and Its Objects

*W*hen we talk about an object of desire, we are really talking about a cluster of promises we want someone or something to make to us and make possible for us. This cluster of promises could be embedded in a person, a thing, an institution, a text, a norm, a bunch of cells, smells, a good idea—whatever. To phrase “the object of desire” as a cluster of promises is to allow us to encounter what is incoherent or enigmatic in our attachments, not as confirmation of our irrationality, but as an explanation for our sense of *our endurance in the object*, insofar as proximity to the object means proximity to the cluster of things that the object promises, some of which may be clear to us while others not so much. In other words, all attachments are optimistic. That does not mean that they all *feel* optimistic: one might dread, for example, returning to a scene of hunger or longing or the slapstick reiteration of a lover or parent’s typical misrecognition. But the surrender to the return to the scene where the object hovers in its potentialities is the operation of optimism as an affective form (see Ghent).

“Cruel optimism” names a relation of attachment to compromised conditions of possibility. What is cruel about these attachments, and not merely inconvenient or tragic, is that the subjects who have *x* in their lives might not well endure the loss of their object or scene of desire, even though its presence threatens their well-being, because whatever the *content* of the attachment, the continuity of the form of it provides something of the continuity of the subject’s sense of what it means to keep on living on and to look forward to being in the world. This phrase points to a condition different than that of melancholia, which is enacted in the subject’s desire to temporize an experience of the loss of an object/scene with which she has identified her ego continuity. Cruel optimism is the condition of maintaining an attachment to a problematic object *in advance* of its loss.

One might point out that all objects/scenes of desire are problematic, in that investments in them and projections onto them are less about them than about the cluster of desires and affects we manage to keep magnetized to them. I have indeed wondered whether all optimism is cruel, because the experience of loss of the conditions of its reproduction can be so breathtakingly bad. But some scenes of optimism are crueler than others: where cruel optimism operates, the very vitalizing or animating potency of an object/scene of desire contributes to the attrition of the very thriving that is supposed to be made possible in the work of attachment in the first place. This might point to something as banal as a scouring love, but it also opens out to obsessive appetites, patriotism, a career, all kinds of things. One makes affective bargains about the costliness of one’s attachments, usually unconscious ones, most of which keep one in proximity to the scene of desire/attrition.

To understand cruel optimism as an aesthetic of attachment requires embarking on an analysis of the modes of rhetorical indirection that manage the strange activity of projection into an enabling object that is also disabling. I learned how to do this from reading Barbara Johnson’s work on apostrophe and free indirect discourse. In her poetics of indirection, each of these rhetorical modes is shaped by the ways a writing subjectivity conjures other ones so that, in a performance of phantasmatic intersubjectivity, the writer gains superhuman observational authority, enabling a performance of being made possible by the proximity of the object. Because the dynamics of this scene are something like what I am describing in the optimism of attachment, I will describe the shape of my transference with her thought.

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

Apostrophe is thus an indirect, unstable, physically impossible but vitalizing movement of rhetorical animation that permits subjects to suspend themselves in the optimism of a potential occupation of the same psychic space of others, the objects of desire who make you possible (by having some promising qualities, but also by not being there). Of course psychoanalytically speaking, all intersubjectivity is impossible. But it isn’t impossible rhetorically. For Johnson, free indirect discourse offers a cognate kind of suspension but with less pernicious outcomes, at least when she reads Zora Neale Hurston’s practice of it. In a narrator’s part-merging with a character’s consciousness, free indirect discourse performs the impossibility of locating an observational intelligence in one or any body and therefore forces the reader to transact a different, more open relation of “unfolding” to what she is reading, thinking she understands, judging, and being (“Bringing” 8). In sum, Johnsonian projection is about the often ruthless optimism in attachment and is often itself optimistic about the transferential openness that rhetorical forms of suspended intersubjectivity demand from the reader.

What follows is not so buoyant: this essay politicizes Freud’s observation that “people never willingly abandon a libidinal position, not even, indeed, when a substitute is already beckoning to them” (244). It

comes from a longer project about the politics, aesthetics, and projections of political depression.¹ For this essay's purposes, the politically depressed position is manifested in the difficulty of detaching from life-building modalities that can no longer be said to be doing their work and that indeed become obstacles to the flourishing of the subjects whose optimism animates them (Sedgwick). My assumption is that the conditions of ordinary life in the contemporary world, even of relative wealth as in the U.S., are conditions of the attrition or the wearing out of the subject and that the irony—that the labor of reproducing life in the contemporary world is also the activity of being worn out by it—has specific implications for thinking about the ordinariness of suffering, the violence of normativity, and the “technologies of patience” or lag that keep these processes in place (Berlant, *Queen* 222). Cruel optimism about imminence thus grows from a perception about the reasons people are not Bartleby, do not prefer to interfere with varieties of immiseration, but choose to ride the wave of the system of attachment that they are used to. Or perhaps they move to normative form to get numb with the consensual promise and to misrecognize that promise as an achievement. From works by John Ashbery, Charles Johnson, and Geoff Ryman, this essay derives three episodes of the suspension of the reproduction of habituated or normative life. These suspensions open up the “impasse” as a name for the transitional moment between a habituated life and all of its others. What happens in this space of time helps to explain why exuberant attachments keep ticking, not like the time bomb they might be but like a white noise machine that provides assurance that what seems like threat or static really is, after all, a rhythm people can enter into while they're dithering, tottering, bargaining, testing, or otherwise being worn out by the promises that they have attached to in this world.

The Promise of the Object

A recent, untitled John Ashbery poem stages the most promising version of this scene of promises for us (see MacFarquhar). It phrases in terms of spatial lag the political economy of disavowal it is easy to drag around like a shadow, and then provides an experience of liveness in the object that is not only livable but at once *simplifying and revolutionary*—that bourgeois dream couplet:

*We were warned about spiders, and the
occasional famine.
We drove downtown to see our
neighbors. None of them were home.
We nestled in yards the municipality had
created,
reminisced about other, different places—
but were they? Hadn't we known it all
before?*

*In vineyards where the bee's hymn
drowns the monotony,
we slept for peace, joining in the great
run.
He came up to me.
It was all as it had been,
except for the weight of the present,
that scuttled the pact we made with
heaven.
In truth there was no cause for rejoicing,
nor need to turn around, either.
We were lost just by standing,
listening to the hum of the wires overhead.*

The opening frame is the scene of the American dream not realized, but almost. In this poem, home and hymn *almost* rhyme; but we are restless, no one is home, nature threatens our sense of plenitude; and then there is what the speaker calls “the weight of the present” that makes our politics quietist, involving sleeping for peace, deflating the symbolic into the somatic. How long have people thought about the present as having weight, being a thing disconnected from other things, an obstacle to living? Everything in this poem is very general, and yet, we can derive some contexts from within it.

In these suburbs, “We” have chosen to be deadened citizens, happy to be the color someone has placed inside of the lines. “We” live with a sense of looking forward to something, but not too much, composing ourselves patiently toward fulfilling the promise of living a version of the good life that Žižek might call decaffeinated (“Passion”). There is nothing especially original or profound in Ashbery’s send-up of suburban

“monotony.” The comforting and slightly dull rhythm of cliché performs exactly how much life one can bear to have there and what it means to have the means to drive freely within the “municipality” in a vaguely lateral way, three-quarters detached from a manicured zone of what had been a fantasy. “We” do not think about things like the workers noisily manicuring our estates and keeping the roads clear: we do not even want our “neighbor” to be much more than a friendly abstraction.

Despite the presenting face of it, as a poem voiced from within the community of faceless universal subjects of self-referentiality, the action of the poem is not bound up wholly in the vague attachment to an American dream that is actually lived as a series of missed encounters with disaster and human contact, cut to size in barely experienced episodes. The action of the poem is charted in the small movement between home, hymn, and hum. Most importantly, it builds to an event that breaks up the undramatic formalism of “our” life.

The event might be Christian, with all of Ashbery’s snarky citations of Eliot and Milton marking a break from religious lyric.² But what makes that break happen is this poem’s “Chloe liked Olivia” moment: “He came up to me” (Woolf). He came up to me and broke my “pact” with “heaven” not to be gay. I am not the subject of a hymn but of a hum, the thing that resonates around me, which might be heaven or bees or desire or electric wires, but whatever it is it involves being in proximity to someone and in becoming lost there, in a hum not where “we” stood but all around, not in the mapped space of drives and driving, but a space that is lost. Queerness substitutes itself for religious affect’s space of reverence: in the end, life is at the best imaginable of impasses. What intersubjectivity there is has no content but is made in the simultaneity of listening. Their intimacy is radically private and pretty uncoded. Life between home and hymn becomes interrupted by an um, an interruption, where the people are now lost but alive and unvanquished in their displacement. Life has been seized, as Badiou would say, by an event that demands fidelity.

This event, however, also has impact *despite* the autobiographical. The poem closes focusing on what happens when someone allows himself to be changed by an event of being-with the object, not in the semianonymous projected proximity of apostrophe or the we-did-this- and we-did-that sociality of the first stanza, and not in terms of a dramatics of an uncloseted sexual identity—indeed not in terms of biography at all. The poem says that “[i]n truth there was no cause for rejoicing”: there was no cause for rejoicing in truth, or objectivity. Instead, there is the expectation

of intimacy and a new sort of poetry. The seismic shift into the impasse takes place in yielding to the proximity of an intimacy undefined by talking, made by a gesture of approach that holds open a space between two people just standing there linked newly.

It might be thrilling to think about this poem as delineating a means of production of an impasse in the present that has not yet been absorbed in the bourgeois senses but takes one out to a space of sociality that listens, is receptive, and calls for theory. Be open to he who comes up to you. Be changed by an encounter. Become a poet of the episode, the elision, the ellipsis . . .

At the same time, one might note that it matters who wrote this poem: a confident person. He finds possibility in a moment of suspension and requires neither the logic of the market to secure his value nor the intimate recognition of anything municipally normal or domestic to assure that he has boundaries. He can hold a nonspace without being meaningful. This does not seem to threaten him. Yet, this instance of optimism might or might not be a part of cruel optimism: we don't know. The promise is everywhere, and the dissolution of the form of being that existed before the event is not cause for mourning or rejoicing: it is just a fact. Does the episodic nature of the interruption enable him, after the moment, to return to the diurnal rhythms refreshed? Will they go get a coffee, or get otherwise stimulated? Will they become different in a way that they can build a world on? Is the couple a stand-in for the collective that can now be awake for peace rather than somnambulant? Or does the aesthetic moment of the different autonomy they get when they exist together in reverie become a condition not for *detaching* from the market, but for living in it? Habermas would perhaps note that the fantasy of the lovers' apotheosis enables Market Man to drown out the news that he is also the exploiter of gardeners, an instrumental and instrumentalizing agent. John Ricco might argue that the men's outsideness and outsidership demonstrate the potential resource of all gayness to make a queer antinormativity that does not look back to domesticity wishfully. It is impossible to say how deep the break is.

Moving from home to hum, to *homme* to um, an interruption: it sounds Thoreauvian, this method of sounding out the space of a moment to measure its contours, to ask what is being stopped, who gets to do it, and what it would mean to be in this moment and then beyond it. It is always a risk to let someone in, to insist on a pacing different than the productivist pacing, say, of capitalist normativity. Then again, "he" is not *my* object, my cluster of promises: "he" came up to *me*. Even if *being* the object is more

secure than *having* one and risking disappointment, the poem stops before anyone gets too deep into the projecting and embedding. What happens next is the unfinished business of the poem: right now, the senses it stages are open to becoming what Marx would call “theoreticians,” emancipated from the stupidity of propertied sensual habituation and all that this has entailed (162).

The Promise of Exchange Value

Whatever it is, sounding the poem for the meaning of the impasse it portrays in an event that displaces and dissolves ordinary life does not confirm that all lyric or episodic interruptions are even potentially a condition of possibility for imagining a radically resensualized subject. Ashbery’s speaker is very lucky that he gets to dissolve and thrive in the collaborative unknowing initiated by the gesture, the encounter, and potentially the event that unbundle whatever it is that “he/me” can now rest in hearing. In Charles Johnson’s “Exchange Value,” a situation that might also have turned out that way does not, and the story’s enumeration of what else could happen to people caught up in a scene between one habituated life and another yet to be invented says something about why the phrase “political economy” must run alongside our analysis of cruel and usual optimism. Why do some people have the chops for improvising unknowing while others run out of breath, not humming but hoarding?

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

The story opens as two brothers conspire to rob their possibly dead neighbor, Miss Bailey. Who is Miss Bailey? Nobody knows: she is a neighbor, so one does not need to know her; her job is to be around, to be a “character,” which is what you call someone who performs a familiar set of iconoclastic actions around you but is not intimate with you. Miss

Bailey dresses in cast-off men's clothes; when Cooter gives her pocket change, she doesn't spend it, she eats it. This is what Cooter knows about her, deriving nothing more about her from her actions. The story takes place because she's always around and then she isn't. Cooter and Loftis think that perhaps she has died and determine to get the first pickings.

This kind of scavenging in other people's stuff is not characteristic of Cooter, but it doesn't violate his fundamental relation to the world either. Compared to his brother, he has always been branded a loser. "Mama used to say it was Loftis, not me, who'd go places [. . .]. Loftis, he graduated fifth at DuSable High School, had two gigs and, like Papa, he be always wanting the things white people had out in Hyde Park, where Mama did daywork sometimes." The children's parents are both dead: Papa from overwork and Mama because she was as "big as a Frigidaire." Having watched this, Cooter refuses to ride the wave of the American Dream. Remembering his parents "killing theyselves for chump change," he "get to thinking that even if I ain't had all I wanted, maybe I've had, you know, all I'm ever gonna get" and so organizes his life through the lateral enjoyments of fantasy. "I can't keep no job and sorta stay close to home, watching tv, or reading *World's Finest* comic books, or maybe just laying dead, listening to music, imagining I see faces or foreign places in water stains on the wallpaper" (28–29).

For Cooter, fantasy isn't a plan. It calibrates nothing about how to live. It is the *action* of living for him, his way of passing time, not trying to make something of himself in a system of exploitation and exchange that, in the political economy of his world, does not produce rest or waste, but slow death, the attrition of subjects by the exchange values of capital, which trade the worker's body for a deferred enjoyment that those on the bottom of the class structure won't likely survive long enough to enjoy, as his parents' fate demonstrates (Berlant, "Slow").

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

Miss Bailey's apartment is pitch dark and reeks of shit: a newspaper clipping from the *Chicago Defender* among the garbage reveals that

her former employer, Henry Connors, had left her his entire estate and that her performances of scavenging and weirdness masked her enormous wealth. It all makes sense in the dark. But when the light turns on, Cooter notes that “shapes come forward in the light and I thought for an instant like I’d slipped in space” (30). In this moment, Cooter enters an impasse: his talent at making out foreign shapes becomes applied to his own life, which he can no longer occupy.

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

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

But if riches change history, they also make it possible for history to be something other than a zone of barely or badly imagined possibility. Loftis returns to crazy reason and forces Cooter to catalog everything. Eventually,

that cranky old ninnyhammer's hoard adds up to \$879,543 in cash, thirty-two bank books [. . .] I wasn't sure I was dreaming or what, but I suddenly flashed on this feeling, once we left her flat, that all the fears Loftis and me had about the future be gone, 'cause Miss Bailey's property was the past—the power of that fella Henry Connors trapped like a bottle spirit—which we could live off, so it was the future too, pure potential: can do. Loftis got to talking on about how that piano we pushed home be equal to a thousand bills, jim, which equals, say, a bad TEAC A-3340 tape deck, or a down payment on a deuce-and-a-quarter. Its value be (Loftis say) that of a universal standard of measure, relational, unreal as number, so that tape deck could turn, magically, into two gold lame suits, a trip to Tijuana, or twenty-five blow jobs from a ho—we had \$879,543 worth of wishes, if you can deal with that. Be like Miss Bailey's stuff is raw energy, and Loftis and me, like wizards, could transform her stuff into anything else at will. All we had to do, it seemed to me, was decide exactly what to exchange it for. (34–35)

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

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

Notice how frequently Johnson reverts to the word “life”: can a person on the bottom survive living “life” stripped of the illusion of indefinite endurance via whatever kinds of phantasmatic practices he has been able to cobble together? How quickly can one dispense with the old bargains between defense and desire, adapting to a regime whose rules provide no felt comfort? “Exchange Value” demonstrates the proximity of two kinds of cruel optimism: with little cultural or economic capital, and bearing the history of a racial disinheritance from the norms of white supremacy, you work yourself to death or coast to nonexistence; or, with the ballast of capital, you hoard against death, deferring life, until you die. Cooter sees that there is no way out now, no living as if not in a relation to death, which is figured in all of the potential loss that precedes it.

The Promise of Being Taught

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

I have suggested that the particular ways in which identity and desire are articulated and lived sensually within capitalist culture produce such counterintuitive overlaps. But it would be reductive to read the preceding as a claim that anyone’s subjective transaction with the optimistic structure of value in capital *produces* the knotty entailments of cruel optimism as such. This essay focuses on artworks that explicitly remediate singularities into cases of nonuniversal but general abstraction, providing narrative scenarios of how people learn to identify, manage, and maintain the hazy luminosity of their attachment to being *x* and having *x*, given that their attachments were promises and not possessions after

all. Geoff Ryman's historical novel *Was* provides a different kind of limit case of cruel optimism. Linking agrarian labor, the culture industries, and therapy culture through four encounters with *The Wizard of Oz*, its pursuit of the affective continuity of trauma and optimism in self-unfolding excitement is neither comic, tragic, nor melodramatic, but metaformal: it absorbs all of these into a literary mode that validates fantasy (from absorption in pretty things to crazy delusion) as a life-affirming defense against the attritions of ordinary history.

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

Part 2 of *Was* tells the story of Judy Garland as the child Frances Gumm. On the *Wizard of Oz* set she plays Dorothy Gale as desexualized sweetheart, her breasts tightly bound so that she can remain a child and therefore have *her* childhood stolen from her. It is not stolen through rape, but by parents bound up in their own fantasies of living through children in terms of money and fame (Gumm's mother) or sex (Gumm's father, whose object choice was young boys). The third story in *Was* is about a fictional gay man, a minor Hollywood actor named Jonathan, whose fame comes from being the monster in serial killer movies titled *The Child Minder* and who, as the book begins, is offered a part in a touring *Wizard of Oz*

company while he is entering AIDS dementia. All of these stories are about the cruelty of optimism for people without control over the material conditions of their lives and whose relation to fantasy is all that protects them from being destroyed by other people and the nation. I cannot do justice here to the singularities of what optimism makes possible and impossible in this entire book but want to focus on a scene that makes the whole book possible. In this scene, Dorothy Gael encounters a substitute teacher, Frank Baum, in her rural Kansas elementary school.

“The children,” writes Ryman, “knew the Substitute was not a real teacher because he was so soft” (168). “Substitute” derives from the word “succeed,” and the sense of possibility around the changeover is deeply embedded in the word. A substitute brings optimism if he hasn’t yet been defeated—by life or by the students. He enters their lives as a new site for attachment, a dedramatized possibility. He is by definition a placeholder, a space of abeyance, an aleatory event. His coming is not personal—he is not there for anyone in particular. The amount of affect released around him says something about the intensity of the children’s available drive to be less dead, numb, neutralized, or crazy with habit; but it says nothing about what it would feel like to be in transit between the stale life and all its others, or whether that feeling would lead to something good.

Of course, often students are cruel to substitutes, out of excitement at the unpredictable and out of not having fear or transference to make them docile or even desiring of a recognition that has no time to be built. But this substitute is special to Dorothy: he is an actor, like her parents; he teaches them Turkish, and tells them about alternative histories lived right now and in the past (171). Dorothy fantasizes about Frank Baum not in a narrative way, but with a mixture of sheer pleasure and defense: “Frank, Frank, as her uncle put his hands on her” (169); then she berates herself for her “own unworthiness” (169) because she knows “how beautiful you are and I know how ugly I am and how you could never have anything to do with me” (174). She says his name, Frank, over and over: it “seemed to sum up everything that was missing from her life” (169). Yet, face to face she cannot bear the feeling of relief from her life that the substitute’s being near provides for her. She alternately bristles and melts at his deference, his undemanding kindness. She mocks him and disrupts class to drown out her tenderness, but obeys him when he asks her to leave the room to just write something, anything.

What she comes back with is a lie, a wish. Her dog, Toto, had been murdered by her aunt and uncle, who hated him and who had no food

to spare for him. But the story she hands in to the substitute is a substitute: it is about how happy she and Toto are. It includes sentences about how they play together and how exuberant he is, running around yelping “like he is saying hello to everything” (174). Imaginary Toto sits on her lap, licks her hand, has a cold nose, sleeps on her lap, and eats food that Auntie Em gives her to give him. The essay suggests a successful life, a life where love circulates and extends its sympathies, rather than the life she actually lives, where “[i]t was as if they had all stood back-to-back, shouting ‘love’ at the tops of their lungs, but in the wrong direction, away from each other” (221). It carries traces of all of the good experience Dorothy has ever had. The essay closes this way: “I did not call him Toto. That is the name my mother gave him when she was alive. It is the same as mine” (175).

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

In *Was*, Baum goes on to write *The Wizard of Oz* as a gift of alternativity to the person who can’t say or do anything to change her life materially and who has taken in so much that one moment of relief from herself produces a permanent crack in the available genres of her survival. In “What Is a Minor Literature?” Deleuze and Guattari exhort people to become minor in exactly that way, to deterritorialize from the normal by digging a hole in sense, like a dog or a mole. Creating an impasse, a space of internal displacement, in this view, shatters the normal hierarchies, clarities, tyrannies, and confusions of compliance with autonomous individuality. This strategy looks promising in the Ashbery poem. But in

“Exchange Value,” a moment of relief produces a psychotic defense against the risk of loss in optimism. For Dorothy Gael, in *Was*, the optimism of attachment to another living being is itself the cruelest slap of all.

From this cluster we can understand a bit more of the magnetic attraction to cruel optimism, with its suppression of the risks of attachment. A change of heart, a sensorial shift, intersubjectivity, or transference with a promising object cannot generate on its own the better good life: nor can the collaboration of a couple, brothers, or pedagogy. The vague futurities of normative optimism produce small self-interruptions as the utopias of structural inequality. The texts we have looked at here stage moments when it could become otherwise, but shifts in affective atmosphere are not equal to changing the world. They are, here, only pieces of an argument about the centrality of optimistic fantasy to reproducing and surviving in zones of compromised ordinariness. And that is one way to take the measure of the impasse of living in the overwhelmingly present moment.

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Notes

- 1 The phrase “political depression” emerges from discussions in a working group on Public Feelings. Special appreciation goes to Ann Cvetkovich, Katie Stewart, Debbie Gould, Rebecca Zorach, and Mary Patten.
- 2 Bradin Cormack has suggested to me that, in breaking with heaven, Ashbery breaks with Milton as well: see Milton’s poem “On His Blindness,” which closes with “They also serve who only stand and wait.” Ashbery is breaking with Milton’s account of standing: it is no longer God’s watch, but that of he who approaches. The waiting here, too, is now luscious and sensual, open and unhidden, having nothing to do with servitude. But in alignment with Milton, Ashbery does not privilege sight, but the hearing that becomes more intensified when one is not, as it were, constantly searching and driving. As for Eliot, the famous lines from *Ash Wednesday* speak here: “Because I do not hope to turn again / Because I do not hope / Because I do not hope to turn / Desiring this man’s gift and that man’s scope / I no longer strive to strive towards such things [. . .] Because I do not hope to know again [. . .].” One might also note the poem’s proximity to Theodore Roethke’s “I Knew a Woman”: “How well her wishes went! She stroked my chin / She taught me Turn, and Counter-turn, and stand [. . .].” All of Ashbery’s emendations tend toward a radical revision of what glorious impassivity might mean to someone not as an opposite to action, but as most opposite.

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