

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Cruel Optimism is a more formalist work than either of these projects. Here, optimism manifests in attachments and the desire to sustain them: attachment is a structure of relationality. But the experience of affect and emotion that attaches to those relations is as extremely varied as the contexts of life in which they emerge. An optimistic attachment is invested in one's own or the world's continuity, but might feel any number of ways, from the romantic to the fatalistic to the numb to the nothing. I therefore make no claims about what specific experiential modes of emotional reflexivity, if any, are especially queer, cool, resistant, revolutionary, or not. I am seeking out the conditions under which certain attachments to what counts as life come to make sense or no longer make sense, yet remain powerful as they work against the flourishing of particular and collective beings. Nonetheless, I could have had none of these thoughts about the multiple modes of attachment, endurance, and attunement to the world and to the contemporary world of spreading precarity and normative dissolution without a training in multiple critical theories of what Adorno calls the "it could have been otherwise" of commitment: queer theory, psychoanalysis, deconstruction, antiracist theory, subaltern studies, and other radical ethnographic historiographies of the present (anthropological, sociological, and journalistic) that derive concepts from tracking patterns, following out the coming-into-form of activity.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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