

The Promise of Affect: The Politics of the Event in Ahmed's *The Promise of Happiness* and Berlant's *Cruel Optimism*

Ahmed, Sara. *The Promise of Happiness*.

Berlant, Lauren. *Cruel Optimism*.

At a recent talk at the University of Pennsylvania, Lauren Berlant was asked a question about the relationship between her work—she had just finished a lecture on the theme of flat affect in Gregg Araki's 2004 film *Mysterious Skin*—and the political. “Because I work on affect,” she responded, “I think everything is realism.” (Berlant: 2012) Like the dense introductory segments of each of her chapters—thick but fast-moving genealogical waterslides—I think that unpacking statements like this from Berlant is best repaid by taking them in a low gear. When Berlant maps her method as affect theory, she is suggesting that the works she examines in her capacity as a scholar of literature cannot be divorced from the political-material contexts out of which they emerge, but at the same time must be recognized as incarnations of a *particular* embodied iteration within this field. Texts are produced by bodies that are both enmeshed in their political worlds and trying to negotiate those worlds in their own distinct way. Everything we do is realism: Berlant's textual objects of study are mediations, attempts to work something out, exhibitions of tensed, embodied, affective realities.¹

This is the promise of affect theory, the possibility of sliding together analytical tools used to pick apart *both* highly individuated and highly social contact zones—bodies and histories—as incarnated realities. Affect theory wants to maintain the insights of high theory, the doctrinaire approach that says “historicize everything,” while at the same time thinking of how bodies inject their own materiality into spaces. This means using language that enters the orbit of the biological. In the introduction to their 1995 edited volume *Shame and Its Sisters: A Silvan Tomkins Reader* (later reprinted in Sedgwick's *Touching Feeling*)—one of the earliest manifestoes of contemporary affect theory—Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick and Adam Frank acerbically catalog what theory “knows today,” first and foremost that

1: “The distance of [an] account from a biological basis is assumed to correlate near precisely with its potential for doing justice to difference (individual, historical, and cross-cultural), to contingency, to performative force, and to the possibility of change.” (Sedgwick: 2003, 93)

And

2: “Human language is assumed to offer the most productive, if not the only possible, model for understanding representation.” (Sedgwick: 2003, 93)

Affect theory in this vision is designed to explore the “crucial knowledges” of bodies outside a purely theoretical determination, outside the traditional domains of humanist scholarship—reason, cognition, and language. (Sedgwick: 2003, 114) Affect, for Lauren Berlant, is thus understandable as “sensual matter that is elsewhere to sovereign consciousness but that has

¹ Although it is unusual to offer acknowledgments in a review essay, I can't fail to credit the 15 students of my “Religion, Emotion, and Global Cinema” class at Haverford College for many stimulating and joyful discussions on these two books and many others, out of which the contours of this essay emerged.

historical significance in domains of subjectivity” (Berlant: 2011, 53). Affect theory is about how systems of forces circulating within bodies—forces not necessarily subsumable or describable by language—interface with histories. It is about how discourses form ligatures with pulsing flesh-and-blood creatures.

Two recent texts, Sara Ahmed’s *The Promise of Happiness* (2010) and Berlant’s *Cruel Optimism* (2011), can be seen as developing this strand, and in particular, of indicating new ways of feeling out politics through the membrane of affect theory. Both of these authors suggest that the repertoire of the analytics of power (Foucault: 1990) must be supplemented with resources from the affective turn. Recent critiques of affect theory² have focused on a branch of affect theory heavily informed by Gilles Deleuze’s reading of Spinoza. In this strand, affect is rendered as a set of ontological properties, as an ensemble of mutable attributes.³ Contemporary Deleuzians such as Brian Massumi⁴ and William Connolly⁵ have been targeted by these critics for their attempts at absorbing scientific research into the Spinozistic discourse of affect. But Spinoza and Deleuze are second-tier characters in Ahmed and Berlant’s work—which is perhaps why Ahmed situates herself in a lineage—stretching back to Sedgwick—that she calls “feminist cultural studies of affect.”⁶ (Ahmed: 2010, 13) Where the Deleuzian strands focuses on affect as the raw material of becoming, as the play of substances, Ahmed and Berlant locate affect theory as a phenomenological, rather than ontological enterprise. It is in the *phenomenology of the political* that Ahmed and Berlant ground their projects.

For Ahmed, this comes in the form of a new attention to happiness as an object of analysis. This does not mean a circumscribed exploration of happiness as a thing, but rather programmatically asking the question “what does happiness do?” (Ahmed: 2010, 2) Happiness is not autonomous, Ahmed argues, but a relationship of evaluation that creates the horizon of the self. For Ahmed, the “near sphere” of the self is constituted by a perimeter studded with “happy objects.” This cluster of objects is what gives the field of mobile operations of the self its shape. In this “drama of contingency,” we “come to have our likes, which might even establish *what we are like*.” (Ahmed: 2010, 24)

But for Ahmed, happiness as an affective field settling in proximity to bodies is not necessarily transparent in its shape or its function to the self. Happiness often takes the form, she suggests, of a promise, of a deferred possibility. Taking the phenomenological tradition of Edmund Husserl as a springboard for a discussion of time-consciousness, she suggests that happiness as a promise—from the Latin verb *promittere*, “to let go or send forth”—is an anticipation rather than a felt presence. (Ahmed: 2010, 38) Rather than simply an affect that circulates between bodies and objects, happiness is also a *promise* that is passed around.

² See Papoulias and Callard: 2010, Leys: 2011, Reber: 2012.

³ For Deleuze, Spinoza’s project opens us up to an “ethological method” in which bodies “are defined less by the abstract notions of genus and species than by a capacity for being affected, by the affections of which they are ‘capable,’ by the excitations to which they react within the limits of their capability.” (Deleuze: 1988, 27)

⁴ See, for instance, Massumi, Brian. *Parables for the Virtual: Movement, Affect, Sensation*. Durham, NC, and London: Duke University Press, 2002.

⁵ See, for instance, Connolly, William E. *Capitalism and Christianity, American Style*. Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2008.

⁶ This lineage includes Berlant, Ahmed’s colleague in the affect theory laboratory known as the Public Feelings Project, but excludes other theorists working with affect such as Connolly, Massumi, and Patricia Ticineto Clough.

This analysis of the promise of happiness underpins the genealogy Ahmed organizes in the opening chapter of the book: an exploration of the contemporary “happiness turn” in scholarship and the “happiness industry” emerging in parallel in popular media marketplaces. This discourse, she suggests, moves happiness further away from its etymological origin point—in the Middle English *hap* or fortune, cognate with “perhaps” and “happenstance”—suggesting chance to a sense of happiness as a scheme, a program that, if followed, leads to ultimate good. (Ahmed: 2010, 6) This sense of the *promise* of happiness is the elimination of contingency by guaranteeing the futurity of happiness: “The promise of happiness takes this form: if you have this or have that, or if you do this or do that, then happiness is what follows.” (Ahmed: 2010, 29)

Happiness as a guarantee—a promise that circulates through power-knowledge regimes—but one that defers happiness rather than making happiness present, is one of the mechanisms by which happiness is translated into the skin of a political organism, an “affective community”—such as a family or a society. Through the promise of happiness, bodies are brought together by a shared expectation of future comfort. But because this is a promise rather than immediate happiness, an interstice is formed between this promise and individual experiencing bodies—an interstice that can either be full and complete or disconnected. The family, for instance, does not share a happiness, but a happiness deferred, a promise or image of happiness to-come. (Ahmed: 2010, 46)

It is in this interstice, either blockaded or fluid, that Ahmed articulates the need for a politics of killing joy, of breaking down the promise of happiness as a regime that demands fidelity without recourse. For Ahmed, the discourse of happiness is performative: it produces a politics of promise (or nostalgia) that suffocates alternative promises and alternative explorations. Here Ahmed produces biographies of a range of “affect aliens,” bodies that are called on to be silent and accept the happiness that has been promised, while their actual desires and hopes are out of joint with the world around them: feminist killjoys, unhappy queers, melancholic migrants. The promise of happiness, Ahmed suggests, must be interrupted to make room for emancipatory politics. “I am not saying that we have an obligation to be unhappy,” she writes, “I am simply suggesting that we need to think about unhappiness *as more than a feeling that should be overcome.*” (Ahmed: 2010, 217) In the closing passage of the book she writes that since “the desire for happiness can cover signs of its negation, a revolutionary politics has to work hard to stay proximate to unhappiness.” (Ahmed: 2010, 223) Political change, Ahmed contends, is paralyzed by the imperative to be happy, to stay within the narrow guidelines of happiness’s promise.

Where Ahmed’s background is in a western philosophical lineage that leads up to contemporary questions of affect, the immediate theoretical precursor of Lauren Berlant’s *Cruel Optimism* is Kathleen Stewart’s *Ordinary Affects* (2007), which develops the notion of the “ordinary” as a felt reality. “Ordinary affects,” Stewart writes, “are the varied, surging capacities to affect and to be affected that give everyday life the quality of a continual motion of relations, scenes, contingencies, and emergencies.” (Stewart: 2007, 1f) Berlant is interested in particular in how the ordinary comes to take the form of a sort of affective impasse, a set of felt relationships that cannot be moved through.

Cruel Optimism is a focused study of a particular category of impasse, what she calls “cruel optimism.” Cruel optimism, she explains at the book’s outset, refers to a relation that emerges “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.” (Berlant: 2011, 1) Berlant explores a range of situations where these attachments emerge, as a response to trauma or out of the ongoing pressures of the ordinary, in particular through the parameters of what she calls “genres of precarity,” a range of aesthetic practices and styles—“mass media, literature, television, film, and video”—that

“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.” (Berlant: 2011, 7)

Realism: texts always reflect an affective situation, a force field of desires, a labile contact zone between bodies and intersecting historical frames.

Framing literary criticism (broadly construed) as a practice of tracing the connective tissue between bodies and situations is what lets Berlant speak to the political uses of affect. She suggests that affect theory is a “another phase in the history of ideology theory,” that it “brings us back to the encounter of what is sensed with what is known and what has impact in a new but also recognizable way.” (Berlant: 2011, 53) Affect—especially ordinary affect—is the missing link between discursive regimes and bodies, the arterial linkages through which power is disseminated. “The present” is not an assemblage of texts and knowledges, bloodless discursive inscriptions on the body, but a felt sense out of which political circumstances emerge. “We understand nothing about impasses of the political,” she writes, “without having an account of the production of the present.” (Berlant: 2011, 4) Cruel optimism as a byproduct of political situations colliding with bodies plays out in ongoing, semistable routines, in ordinariness.

This focus on the ordinary frames Berlant’s conception of the political as a slow-motion reaction rather than a series of staccato punctuations. This comes out, for instance, in her exhortation to move away from trauma theory as a way of “describing what happens to persons and populations as an effect of catastrophic impacts.” (Berlant: 2011, 9) Rather, Berlant suggests that trauma is only one facet of the ordinary, a precursory event that yields new historical trajectories lived out in slow-motion. “Trauma,” she writes,

“forces its subjects not into mere stuckness but into crisis mode, where they develop some broad, enduring intuitions about the way we live in a now that’s emerging without unfolding, and imagining a historicism from within a discontinuous present and ways of being that were never sovereign.” (Berlant: 2011, 93)

Rather than the instantiating event, Berlant is interested in the fallout of politics, the long-running reverberations.

It is in these interwoven aftermaths following in the wake of bodies that Berlant locates the tropic of cruel optimism. Optimism, she is careful to point out, can “feel” any number of

different ways, can come clothed in any number of affective orientations. “Because optimism is ambitious,” she writes, “at any moment it might not 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.’” (Berlant: 2011, 2) Rather than a singularly identifiable feeling, optimism takes the phenomenological form of a “knotty tethering to objects, scenes, and modes of life that generate so much overwhelming yet sustaining negation.” (Berlant: 2011, 52) Optimism binds bodies to “fantasies of the good life,” to horizons of possibility that may or may not be defeated by the conditions of their own emergence.

Cruel optimism is the outcome of this circumstance of tethering confused by itself, of Möbius-strip cycles of ambition and frustration. The ordinary, precisely because of its complexity, can contain the intransigent contradictions of cruel optimism. (Berlant: 2011, 53) It is the space of the rubble, the hovering dust, the shockwaves that follow the event rather than the piercing clarity of the punctum itself. Berlant is interested in the ways that habits form out of situations of impossibility—for instance, in her reading of Gregg Bordowitz’s documentary film *Habit* (2001), about the body rituals that structure the daily lives of a gay man living with AIDS and his partner in New York City in the 1990s. Bordowitz’s work maps a crisis that reflects Berlant’s delineation of the field of the political: with the new availability of anti-retroviral drugs in the 1990s, AIDS ceased to be “a death sentence,” and thus “turned fated life back into an ellipsis, a time marked by pill- and test-taking, and other things, the usual.” (Berlant: 2011, 58) For Berlant, the event is a rarity, and is only secondarily the zone of the political, which is itself constituted by ongoing patterns of response and desire—slow-motion echoes producing new forms as they cross-cut and interfere with one another. (Berlant: 2011, 6)

In this sense, Berlant explains, her work meshes with Sedgwick’s queer reading of affect as the histories that make us desire in unexpected, perverse ways. “The queer tendency of this method,” Berlant writes, “is to put one’s attachments back into play and into pleasure, into knowledge, into worlds. It is to admit that they matter.” (Berlant: 2011, 123) Berlant sees the terrain of the political emerging out of this tissue of affectively-embroidered histories.

Although both Ahmed and Berlant write about the uses of affect as a phenomenological bridge to the political, and the slipperiness of happiness or the good life—the way that pleasure can be wrapped up with a strain of unease—there is a distinction between their respective scopes of inquiry. Where Ahmed’s book is about frustration/promise/deferral, Berlant’s is about addiction.

When I asked my students to come up with examples of cruel optimism, they brainstormed the following list: heroin, abusive relationships, candy, horcruxes. Each of these instances suggests a vital but destructive need, an ambivalent compulsion—an addiction, where the tectonic plates of the body’s affects shift in friction with one another. Cruel optimism indexes these moments where a body desires and needs an arrangement of the world that is also frustrating or corrosive.

Politics is one of these zones of fractious attraction. Berlant writes, for instance, that

“Intensely political seasons spawn reveries of a different immediacy. People imagine alternative environments where authenticity trumps ideology, truths cannot be concealed, and communication feels intimate, face-to-face.” (Berlant: 2011, 223)

Politics produces fantasies, tethers that draw us forward to particular attachments in the form of images, narratives, bodily practices. But these fantasies also contain the elements of their own frustration or refusal. President George W. Bush, for example, is able to use the affective elements of statecraft (a practice which, Berlant assures us, is decidedly non-partisan (226)) to create a façade that diverts attention from his flailing foreign and economic policies. (Berlant: 2011, 226)

Berlant's focus in *Cruel Optimism* is on politics as a field of attachments, a skein of affectively pulsing tissues linking bodies together. "*Pace Žižek*," she writes,

"the energy that generates this sustaining commitment to the work of undoing a world while making one *requires* fantasy to motor programs of action, to distort the present on behalf of what the present can become. It requires a surrealist affectsphere to counter the one that already exists, enabling a confrontation with the fact that any action of making a claim on the present involves bruising processes of detachment from anchors in the world, along with optimistic projections of a world that is worth our attachment to it." (Berlant: 2011, 263)

Berlant looks at how politics pulls on bodies using the ligaments of affect, how politics becomes irresistible, even when it is self-frustrating.

Ahmed's focus is very different: she is interested in thinking through politics as the space of unhappiness and deferment. In a section of Chapter 5 entitled "The Freedom to Be Unhappy," Ahmed writes that revolutionary practices may need to follow from the willingness to suspend happiness, to dissolve the imbricated promises of happiness that produce hermetically sealed political systems. Affect aliens are forged in the pressure of unfulfilled or unfulfillable promises of happiness, sealed in a relationship of anticipation pinned to the guarantee of ultimate good. Thus Ahmed writes that "any politics of justice will involve causing unhappiness even if that is not the point of our action. So much happiness is premised on, and promised by, the concealment of suffering, the freedom to look away from what compromises one's happiness." (Ahmed: 2010, 196) The revolutionary politics Ahmed wants to advance is willing to put happiness at risk, to dissolve promises of happiness.

Ahmed is clear, though, that this is not to make politics about unhappiness:

"It is not that unhappiness becomes our telos: rather, if we no longer presume happiness is our telos, unhappiness would register as more than what gets in the way. When we are no longer sure of what gets in the way, then 'the way' itself becomes a question." (Ahmed: 2010, 195)

Neither happiness nor unhappiness is the telos of revolutionary politics. Rather, Ahmed wants to connect the political back to the "hap" of happiness. Rather than a critique of happiness, I would suggest that the broader channel of her project is best understood as a critique of *promise*. Thus she ends Chapter 5 with the later work of Jacques Derrida, indicating the need to keep politics open to the event, to the unexpected possibilities to-come. She proposes a vision of happiness that "would be alive to chance, to chance arrivals, to the perhaps of a happening." (Ahmed: 2010,

198) Where for Berlant the event is in the past, the ancestor of our tensed bodily habits today, for Ahmed, the event is ahead, the always-anticipated but radically unknown future.

There is also a complementarity to these books, a sense in which both come at the relationship between affect and the political from different sides of the problem, but are nonetheless hurtling towards a common point of impact. Is Ahmed describing scenes where cruel optimism unravels under the internal pressure of a frustrated promise? Is cruel optimism the deferral of happiness implicit in the temporal structure of the promise? These are not fully resolved or resolvable questions, in part because Ahmed and Berlant roll their theoretical lens over such a wide range of circumstances.

I would suggest that deepening the conversation between these approaches will hinge in part on exploring the relationship between affect and time—a question that is surfaced by both of these texts but not resolved. Ahmed wants to play inside the deconstructive thematics of the promise that allows us to view affect as a state of deferral. But Ahmed comes closest to Berlant when she writes that “[i]f we hope for happiness, then we might be happy as long as we can retain this hope (a happiness that paradoxically allows us to be happy with unhappiness).” (Ahmed: 2010, 181) Is deferred happiness really divided from happiness? What if fantasies—what Silvan Tomkins calls “images”⁷—are so crucial to the production of affect that to save and savor fantasies in one’s near sphere is “worth” their eventual frustration? What if a promise deferred is itself a form of happiness—even if the deferral turns out, in retrospect, to have been endless? What happens while we wait? This is in no way to acquiesce to those situations, sketched by Ahmed in the inner chapters of the book, where promises are made that produce affect aliens—investment in a community of promise that will never materialize as happiness. But it is to suggest that the economic flows of affect are more complex than a simple binary of presence/deferment.

There may be a clearer divergence in Berlant and Ahmed’s respective emphases on the felt temporality of politics. Ahmed suggests that political transformation happens by orienting us to the perhaps, towards an eventual horizon constituted by uncertainty, rather than promise. Berlant seems more skeptical about the possibility of untethering ourselves from an orientation to future happiness. As in her response to Žižek, she emphasizes the intransigence of fantasy, especially as a conduit that can produce political energy. I wonder if Berlant’s answer here points to a different way of resolving the problem of temporality hovering over Ahmed’s work: what if the dissolution of *promise* did not leave us at the mercy of a pure politics of hap, of chance, but opened us up to new horizons of hope—neither guaranteed nor radically accidental?

This dynamic interfaces with an equally provocative question lodged early on and left unresolved in Berlant’s book: “I have indeed wondered,” she writes in her Introduction, “whether all optimism is cruel, because the experience of loss of the conditions of its reproduction can be so breathtakingly bad, just as the threat of the loss of *x* in the scope of one’s attachment drives can feel like a threat to living on itself.” (Berlant: 2011, 24) In mapping affectively mediated politics, how do we assess the cruelty of hope? What are the singular psychic costs of disappointment that must be risked or countenanced in the production of a politics without promise?

⁷ See Tomkins 2008, p. 10.

These books are profoundly important contributions advancing the still-new and in some ways still-tentative field of affect theory. They open up two distinct but interrelated methodological templates for thinking through issues of globalization, race, gender and sexuality, media, philosophy, and religion: the thematics of frustration and of addiction in the moving affectsphere of the political. What both Ahmed and Berlant demonstrate is that affect theory offers a crucial set of resources for thinking through the relationship between bodies and discourses. The enterprise of thinking politics, of mapping the enfolding of bodies by power, cannot move forward without affect.

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