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Reply: Responses to Public Feelings Salon with Lauren Berlant
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Cruel Optimism, Becoming Event: A Response

I have learned much from these generous engagements with the essay and project of "Cruel Optimism." I want especially to thank Janet Jakobsen and Catherine Sameh for putting it all together, and for inducing a scene that lives on in multiple media and extended encounter. Since attempting to respond fully to each claim, argument, and incitement would be cruel optimism indeed, my response will walk around a few scenes that my colleagues extended for consideration.

1. **On affect as an incitement for opening the possible world, and on criticism as a craft for inciting the world to be otherwise than it is**.

The panel and the writers are pretty clear, whether as theorists of the future or claimants on a better present: they are agents for what Adorno would call a committed criticism, a criticism whose mission is to incite the sense that *"it"* could be otherwise. "It" is the situation of the present that could be otherwise. "It" is the world as it presents itself but that could be a different world. "It" has a tendency to close down how it's possible to live or imagine living.

A committed critical art is a prospective realism. But is "the otherwise" a time, space, event, or relation? Thinkers vary in their emphases. To me, the question of temporality is a distraction, in a way: the pressure is on critical makers, and on beings, not to reproduce what doesn't work by dissolving what blocks flourishing. The "what" that blocks flourishing is in how we address whatever objects we make for symbolizing the intractable. Critics reorganize relations among objects heuristically, by attending to gestures in pattern that gather up archives and figurations. For some people critical making demands transcending obligations to normative objects; for some, criticality requires transference with history or memory—or both, anything to displace the terms of the world. For me criticality is more formal. The point is to move a problem somewhere, to make the problem different. It involves fidelity to all of the converging knowledges, incommensurate as they are. The difficulty of a problem requires encountering and reformulating the wild dynamic relation among its internal objects. It requires us to know more about the logic of that patterning,

and to produce accounts or stagings that shift, sometimes radically, sometimes gesturally, a way of encountering that relation.

So José Muñoz's aim in that beautiful work on Mark Morrisroe is to rescue the defaced past for a better life in an elsewhere that is affectively present but yet unmaterialized: this is what the best utopianism means in his work. His work is enmeshed in action but he is rethinking what the rhetoric of time or space does for him. Tavia Nyong'o's mission is to accept the virtual not as a plane of projected utopianism, because "the otherwise" of the virtual rides *alongside* his other desires, extending the inequalities and foreclosures of the immediate, embodied world; he seeks an affective realism that takes him beyond any model of the fetish—and here he resonates with Patricia Clough's speculation on our critical task to invest objects with an affectively realist and therefore transformative rhythm of allusion, musicality, haptic intensity. Ann Pellegrini insists on defacing resolution in a critical act that adopts a new staging of the drive to normativity. She insists on opening questions that narratives close: "This is not an ending and fuck the reality principle."

What does it mean to cultivate a realism of the virtual, involving disturbing the finish of a closing gesture or impulse through critical thought? A critic re-eventilizes the object. This is what Lyotard called "keeping the event open." This is why I insist that events are not self-present, but incidental, smaller dents that are always becoming-event. A rhizomatic relation to the historical in relation to the activity of the world gets the point that critical recontextualization is an opening in the direction and force of matter, mattering, and interrelating. This is what criticism can be for now, not just an archive of forces directed toward wisdom or a universal theory but also a performance of a virtual realism about living on, with all of its overdetermined constitutive antagonisms and attachments. That's why I do it: converting the object into a scene, then holding open the door.

2. **On the aesthetic as a scene, a training, a teaching.**

Not all of our critics use artworks as sources to accompany the mediation of what they see; but all of them are scenic in their relation to the object. What does that mean? As Clough and Pellegrini suggest, in a way that extends the psychoanalytic materialism of *Cruel Optimism*, objects are really relations anchored in a scene whose form emits the phantasm of stability. In psychoanalysis a *scene* is an encounter that produces, organizes, and disturbs affects beyond the manifest content of what's there. In the primal scene we experience unbearable knowledge; the crime scene is defined by enigmas that are not yet evidence; in a theatrical scene situations arise without assurance of their genres.

Once we see that an aesthetic encounter is a training in converting objects to scenes; once we see pedagogy and aesthetics as teachings in a kind of attention that transforms convergences and patternings by materializing them; we become queerly aestheticized, alive in curiosity about what had seemed a fateful object, and with political implications. I have pointed to Pellegrini's refusal of her object's conventional staging: she restages the restaging, and refuses precedent. Jill Casid's breathtaking reading of *Never Let Me Go* refuses to let the object's particular punctum let *her* go. That's another way to turn the object into a scene: to hyperfocus on one moment and force the world to attend to it, to the out-of-tuneness that inevitably emerges when one tries to bring everything one knows into some kind of contact. Hers is a style of reading way more radical than the Benjaminian dialectical image much beloved by critics: it is not a scene in suspension, but a noise aesthetics attached to dynamic figuration, as she reads for the demand of the incident that has dented her, the critic trying to think how to care for an attachment that traverses the proximate domains of life and art. She does this by allowing herself to be undone by what's coming apart at the seams, and then reconfiguring what she would need to attend to to proceed with it.

Does the training in the aesthetic, on caring for its impacts, increase our capacities to produce scenes in life for our objects? Casid's veering across different materialisms suggests as much. I can relate. The political, the aesthetic, the pedagogical, and any attachment-love: these are all trainings in absorbing and refracting the otherwise, a virtuality that, by way of the immanent affectivity of form itself, siphons energy from the desire to foreclose that always haunts anchors in meaning. Recontextualization opens foreclosure against its own promise of interpretive and affective rest. Aesthetic criticism here—criticism that reads with the affective impacts of form and object that hold up a critic's sense of the world—uses the encounter with art to perform what Latour would call "associology," changing not only what kinds of tone and relation criticism can have, but how the newly scenified object organizes concepts, becoming a pulsating question that produces speculation, historical narratives, explanations, and more questions.

Does that make the aesthetic the *opposite* of the commodity encounter? Nyong'o and Clough are worried about the commodity's promise of satisfaction; at the same time, because they can't get no satisfaction, not getting it *is* the satisfaction that demands no end to hunger/signification and the commodity's "creative juice." Clough moves back and forth between the inexhaustible transmission of affect and the commodity's moral propping of a rhythm of accumulation and debt. Those of us trained to track and make patterns, rhythms, scenes, and encounters in proximity to a sense of attunement (the affective recognition of form and its disturbances) are therefore at once archivists of conventionality and remediators, resource

creatives who make something else of what's there. The place of the mood swing in the both/and dialectics of queer criticality remains a topic. There are paradoxes to follow out here as we pursue the noise of attachment: for queer theorists, attunement often means a recognition of and/or a desire for out-of-tunement as well. See, for example, the articulations of queer and punk in Tavia's and José's work.

Kandace Chuh calls this queer style of multiplication "irony:" it names "a feeling that toggles between the public and personal, attachment and error, and structure and sensibility." One thing I love about Chuh's list is that "x and y" aren't opposites, but relations at an angle. So, therefore, "racial formation" isn't just negation, here, but the production of good and bad racialized object-investments in a white-supremacist world that produces queasy contradictions in its aspirational subjects. What does it mean to be a good investment while still being cast as exposed and on trial, she asks? If even the good is bad, the aspiration to belong to the world forces subjects into dramas of sincerity, or, if they're lucky, into irony. Second, her point is that along with making intimate encounters with our object/scenes, we are also disturbing the intractable and haunting ones and trying to *distance* them, to allow us to "jump tracks." Bringing our objects close and distancing them is another way of talking about the ambivalences of maintaining relation, and trying to stay optimistic about it. Her third point is that irony slows down criticality, even if some kinds of ironic eye-rolling enable insider assurance and foreclosure without exposure. I love the idea of a criticism that, as she says, "gives pause": it makes thought slow without stopping it.

Being with and inciting ironic noise releases from the background that which haunts our double-binding encounters with the world where we orchestrate positive and negative valences. It's worth saying, though, before we get too celebratory about critical sovereignty, that making objects strange, as we used to say, ought to include making ourselves strange in relation to the objects. Few critics do that; they're more likely to transmit their inner sense of assurance, and to generalize their own desire for a certain style of attunement. For example, the fantasy of "interdisciplinarity" in the humanities can be so banal: a fantasy in which interpretation serves to make facts interesting in new ways, or is propped on archives that give credence to speculative analytic "flights." All of this anchoring in seeks to erase conceptualization from the "mere," the affective, and the singular. We pretend that our objects have the qualities we see in them. But for the circulation of anything, for anything to become an object/scene, its singularity has to force criticism into a strange place as well. It cannot be, to pick up Patricia's argument, a transformational object *just for others.*

3. **On converting a rhetoric of power and domination to a discourse and practice of tenderness and care.**

We learned from Foucault to do this reframing move from power to care: it has had a huge impact on feminist and queer work seeking some ground for the affirmativity of intimate gestures and the worlds that can be built from them. See, in particular, Muñoz, Casid, and Jameh Wilson. The critics here are memorable in their stylization. Care is not only toward others: it involves a politics and aesthetics of the critical atmosphere, allowing for splitting hairs, moving contradictorily, wanting forms of intimate and impersonal solidarity that don't exist yet to stop the exhaustion of wielding unwieldy defenses.

All of our critics are wonderers, wanderers through rooms, scenes, and streets. They are interested in slowing down the political. If Pellegrini is interested in the musical number that disrupts the numbing narratives of the conventional world, Muñoz, Casid, and Wilson are into the close-up, the slow tracking shot. They attend to them in aesthetic, social, and rhetorical scenes; they make the whirl of the world slow down. They refuse to reproduce critical power as a form of sovereign theatricality. Wilson is particularly acute in the relation of thought—versions of "I don't need to reproduce or sign up for x"—to action, "so I will detach from *some* politics, to preserve my relation to the political." She is trying not to reproduce a cruel optimism, while protecting optimism. This is key to all of it. As Pellegrini notes, we must love in order not to die, but there is no reason to die from loving. What there is, is the energy—if we can find it—to keep pushing and making distinctions for lines of struggle and of flight.

But a slow, careful, caring pushing. Reticent affect is often dramatic because it *refuses* the abreactive mode of demand. People who yell all the time stop getting listened to; so do the quiet. So creativity gets caught up in making new idioms for feeling things out and for being found. Care, tenderness, stuckness: we see ourselves seeing the world emerging from gestures, and seeing the critical need for the present to be extended, held out there, walked around in, rested in—to honor what's tender. In this *style* of being in relation (in sex as in politics) to care for the world is to keep something of it close, not just to imagine displacements or futures. Casid and Wilson perform this so beautifully: refusal, attachment, a multiply voiced "don't let me go, don't be gone, don't let go, get out of here, leave, well, not completely, I just need to move from this impossible knot to a more possible one." What does it mean to have a sexuality when the world is so bad at it? When one's own very anchors in solidarity are so riven with blindness, stupidity, and insistence that good

intentions mean the achievement of virtue? What does it mean to fight for a life that includes realism about dying, and about the sociality of dying? AIDS work and Veena Das's work on the good death come to mind: the question of what life deserves and demands is made radiant in the transitional moments. As Janet Jakobsen said in her framing remarks, and as all the essays demonstrate, these questions are existential, political, creative, and, above all, require collective work so that the energy of one person can achieve rhythms of vitality along with rhythms of exhaustion, inattention, and impasse.

What is politics in all this? Is the idiom of care and the ambition to be tender toward one's objects and object-worlds a *refusal* of the massive violence of power, or a refusal to respond to power in its own idiom? To me the point of taking the risk of invention, of genuine experimentality, is not only to fail better, but to release my creativity from reproducing an absorbing repetition that goes nowhere apart from confirming that I am still who I was.

Then there's the problem of power's sentimentality, its liberal, trumping claim to be acting in one's own good, to preserve its world. No tone can solve the problem of the political: it's the long haul of a war of position, as Gramsci writes. But the body is overwhelmed too: maneuvers and positionings coexist as alternative routes to the beyond of survival on which I insist that criticism keep its eye. Casid's point, and mine in "Slow Death," is that survival includes dying, dying well: making good deaths that are a part of what it means to value life. When we care we have to think about what it means to value life, and to ask what it means to care about something, someone, some object/scene: it is to ask what we can learn from the relation of love and desperation, which is, after all, a political question.

Thinking politics affectively makes it possible to reinvest, to multiply, to enrich the political without producing the bad feeling, the ugly feelings of being always muddied up with incommensurate aims and attachments, without which there would be no worlding. Doing it together but non-normatively releases us from the isolation of reinventing the world minute by minute, time after time. Being alive beyond the conventions means not only helping each other improvise in the middle of demands to attend, attune, be right, and be good, but also symbolizing the alternative routes we might dig, collectively, not to reproduce the ruts in which, in a heavy rain, we might drown. The collaborative thought of this session has wrought one underrated form of affirmative criticality, and I'm grateful to have been in the room with it. It makes me optimistic.