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Tender Pessimism

Whenever someone uses the phrase "cruel optimism" to explain the paradox of self-sabotaging behavior, I think about a conference I attended in 2017, where a small group of critical theorists set out to teach a large audience of North American psychoanalysts about the challenges of contemporary subjectivity.[1] After a brief overview of capitalism, neoliberalism, and alienation, the theorists introduced Lauren Berlant's contention that "a relation of cruel optimism exists when something you desire is actually an obstacle to your flourishing" (*Cruel* 1) and then suggested that the reason people maintain these "cruel" relations in spite of their obvious cruelty is because of fantasy (an "idealizing" wish for how the world might be) and because "the very pleasures of being inside a relation have become sustaining regardless of the content of the relation" (2). The group of theorists (myself among them) felt satisfied with this account until one therapist after another raised their hand to express skepticism, even disbelief. How is "cruel optimism" different than regular attachment? Don't we already know that people form irrational attachments to things? Why single out the ways that fantasy can foster bad attachments when fantasy is inextricable from

Volume 33, Numbers 2–3 DOI 10.1215/10407391-10124788

good attachments, too? In other words, what makes optimism "cruel" that can't be said about the dynamics of attachment in general?

Watching this pedagogic encounter unfold, I thought about how Berlant would have likely been amused by this fraught and awkward exchange. They often saw the comedic aspects of misunderstanding and would, I think, have been particularly tickled that it involved their own work. After all, our objects are *destined* for misrecognition, which is why engaging with each other produces angles we had not imagined. It is in this spirit that I treat the momentary dissonance between theorists and clinicians as exemplary of the complicated relationship between critical theory and psychoanalysis, especially insofar as theory depends on applications of psychology but is otherwise unconcerned with how its formulations check out psychologically. As a queer theorist and psychoanalyst myself, it struck me that the problem wasn't only that critical theory and clinical psychoanalysis have different languages for describing psychological experience (true), or that psychoanalysts are unlikely to share the conceptual context of ideology critique (also true), but that what may feel like a radical claim for critical theorists—that people want bad things because they are attached to them—is fundamentally tautological for clinicians. This is because saying that people stay attached to bad things *because* they are attached to them does not explain *why* we attach to good/bad objects in the first place.

The preoccupation with adjudicating the good/bad qualities of our attachments has been a central feature of critical theory since its inception (see Horkheimer). Indeed, so indissociable does critique and object-judgement seem to be that recent efforts to soften the tone of "paranoid" reading have mostly resulted in calls to leave critique behind entirely.[2] That is, if Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's 2003 indictment of the field, "Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading, or, You're So Paranoid You Probably Think This Essay Is About You,"[3] first drew attention to the ways ideology critique inadvertently weaponized suspicion, then Rita Felski's more recent call for "postcritique" has radicalized Sedgwick's intervention by eschewing the hallowed link between criticism and negative judgment altogether.[4] As Felski has written, "[W]hat afflicts literary studies is not interpretation as such but the kudzu-like proliferation of a hypercritical style of analysis that has crowded out alternative forms of intellectual life" (10). Although Felski is sensitive to the attraction of this "macho" "hypercritical style" and wary of advancing another superficial trend, critics within and adjacent to literary theory are increasingly concerned with the damaging effects of our critical *Gestalt*. Moreover, while there is a range of views on what

caused this problem and what would constitute an appropriate remedy, an emerging consensus contends that our critical habits are overly invested in pathologizing people's object choices and that such routinized pathologization ultimately hinders our efforts at political solidarity.

I can think of few theorists as concerned with this problematic as Lauren Berlant,[5] whose phrase "cruel optimism" works on two levels simultaneously: to explain the enduring phenomenon of people's injurious attachments and to explain it *in such a way* that refrains from pathologizing people or their needs. As Berlant explains of the project, "cruel optimism" addresses "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" (15). In trying "to avoid the closures of symptomatic reading," Berlant makes clear that as an analytic tool "cruel optimism" intends to resist interpretations that "turn" beloved "objects" into "bad and oppressive things," and the people who use them into "symptoms" of "inequity," and it will do so by developing an alternative account of why people make self-sabotaging object choices. Perhaps nowhere is this polemical agenda of "cruel optimism" clearer than in Berlant's oft-quoted observation that, "even Adorno, the great belittler of popular pleasures, can be aghast at the ease with which intellectuals shit on people who hold to a dream" (123). In this one single sentence of biting and pithy prose, Berlant's prodigious perspicacity indicts entire generations of "intellectuals"—from Theodor Adorno through to the present—for derogating people who are simply trying to "hold to a dream." Indeed, the juxtaposition here between the mercilessness of intellectuals and the simplicity of people who are merely holding to a dream isn't incidental, but indicative of the broader diagnosis Berlant is making, which is that critics are bringing the entire weight of their fancy philosophical arsenal down on the heads of people who are simply trying to survive. According to Berlant, it isn't going nearly far enough to call for different/better interpretive strategies because it isn't the *style* of critique alone that hampers solidarity but the fact that critics routinely misconstrue the fundamental *reason* why people make misguided object choices in the first place.

Given the immense popularity of cruel optimism as an "analytic lever" (Berlant 27), this essay is interested in exploring whether, and to what extent, Berlant's account of people's behavior effectively conduces to a more

humane and empathic mode of critical theory. To facilitate such an assessment, I introduce "metapsychology" as a dimension of analysis that zeroes in on the underlying psychological assumptions that shape theoretical formulations. A word that was introduced by Freud but that has rarely been taken up outside clinical circles, *metapsychology* refers to "the aggregate of a priori principles that must be in place at the outset for the initiation of analytic interpretation as such" (Johnston 11)[6] and its unique value is in providing an interpretive plane for debating theoretical meanings of clinical ideas. An organizing tenet of my analysis is that certain limitations in our critical interpretations can be traced to limitations of the psychological schemas those interpretations employ. Taking cruel optimism as exemplary of recent attempts to integrate psychoanalysis and ideology critique, I focus on the psychological paradigm underlying Berlant's evocative phrase in order to demonstrate that even the most capacious interpretations of psychosocial experience are only ever as radical as their metapsychological foundations. As such, while Berlant's defense of people's bad attachments may seem compassionate compared to intellectuals who "shit" on dreams, a deeper analysis of cruel optimism's metapsychology reveals that this compassion is obtained through the inadvertent dismissal of psycho-sexuality. To wit, an analysis of the psychological precepts that cruel optimism operationalizes will demonstrate that Berlant's account of *emotional need* as the reason why "people stay attached to conventional good-life fantasies" (2) reproduces a flawed model of subjectivity that conforms to, rather than challenges, an alienated, instrumentalist, and *erotophobic* ideology.[7]

Drawing on Sedgwick, who argued that "for a long time now [. . .] skepticism has been deemed the only ethical position for the intellectual to take with respect to the subject's ordinary attachments" (qtd. in Berlant 123), Berlant accuses critics of using their skepticism to protect their ignorance. Instead of being curious about why people make erroneous or inappropriate or downright self-destructive object choices, critics repeatedly assume that people are stupid, weak, or don't know any better, to which Berlant responds by saying, "but wait, what if they just *need* to form those kinds of bonds in order to survive?" Berlant calls on critics to stop equating self-sabotaging behavior with irrationality, arguing instead that attachments are driven by optimism and "optimism is not a map of pathology but a social relation involving attachments that organize the present" (14). Moreover, "even when it involves 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" (14). In order to see how this account functions as an intervention in contemporary debates, it is important to bring out the presumptive norm that cruel optimism is positioning itself against.

As Berlant puts it in the book's introduction, ideology critique sets out to answer the question, "why do people stay attached to conventional good-life fantasies [. . .] when the evidence of their instability, fragility, and dear cost abounds?" (2), but no sooner has the question been posed than critics are faced with trying to explain the sheer stubbornness and durability of people's attachments. If people won't overthrow the source of their oppression, then critical theory finds itself with only two possible conclusions: either people are weak and stupid or people *like* to be oppressed. If "the great belittler" personifies the former interpretation and crude psychologization characterizes the latter, then cruel optimism names another possible explanation, which is that attachments—even to bad things—are about so much more than just the attachment to bad things. Berlant writes,

> *When we talk about an object of desire, we are really talking about a cluster of promises we want someone or something to make to us and make possible for us. This cluster of promises could seem embedded in a person, a thing, an institution, a text, a norm, a bunch of cells, smells, a good idea—whatever. To phrase "the object of desire" as a cluster of promises is to allow us to encounter what's incoherent or enigmatic in our attachments, not as confirmation of our irrationality but as an explanation of our sense of our endurance in the object, insofar as proximity to the object means proximity to the cluster of things that the object promises. (23)*

By their own account, the argument for a new reorientation to the object hinges on redefining the "object of desire" as a "cluster of promises," because once you see objects as promises then you can explain "proximity" to the object/promise as nourishing instead of merely damaging. Berlant doesn't really explain the theoretical resources that facilitate this reformulation, except to cite two psychoanalytic texts in the footnotes, one on submission/surrender (Ghent) and the other on infant development (Stern). But these citations of relatively minor clinical essays belie the broader conceptual shifts that undergird Berlant's argument, namely, the replacement of Freudian drive theory with contemporary object relations theory.

Emerging originally in postwar Britain and eventually in the United States, "object relations theory" marked a departure from the Freudian emphasis on "drive theory" as the cause of intrapsychic conflict, focusing instead on how relationships to other people shaped consciousness in myriad ways. Although theorists differ on how much of a departure from drive theory this new focus on object relations represents, in the United States a movement identified as "relational" has, since the 1980s, reshaped Anglo-American psychoanalysis from a Freudian preoccupation with love, death, and repression to a new interest in how people navigate the complexities of emotional attachment.[8] Therefore, while such a definition of the object may seem self-evident in the context of object relations theory, the characterization of this claim as merely a reminder, and therefore as no real conceptual shift at all, obscures the extent to which Berlant distinguishes cruel optimism from Adornian-style patronization by shifting the underlying metapsychology from a drive theory that focuses on internal conflict to an object relations theory that foregrounds people's attachment needs. Indeed, a deeper engagement with the metapsychological dimension of Berlant's argument reveals that one of the primary ways cruel optimism attempts to challenge conventional ideology critique is by replacing drive theory with object relations theory, as if to imply that problems in first-generation critical theory (Adorno) can be attributed to the limitations of first-generation psychoanalysis (Freud).

Importantly, Berlant never makes this dimension of their claims explicit, instead elaborating the contrast between cruel optimism and its Frankfurt School heirs in descriptive, rather than formally argumentative, terms. Therefore, one has the sense when reading *Cruel Optimism* that one of its defining innovations consists in trading the symptomatic, overly simplistic, formally conventional critical modalities of previous generations for newer, experimental genres of analysis that are supple enough to grasp the "overwhelming ordinary" of contemporary life under capitalism. Indeed, one way of reading their introduction is as a series of contrasts between older ways of conceptualizing social phenomena and the need for newer models that more accurately grasp the complexities of the present moment. In one example of this strategy, Berlant writes that

> *everyday life theory is one conventional framework for comprehending the contemporary world [. . .] 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 [. . .] but everyday life theory no longer describes how most people live. (8)*

Then, a few paragraphs later, in one of the most direct statements differentiating cruel optimism from earlier analytics, Berlant writes that

> *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. (9)*

Having "described its departure from modernist models of cognitive overload in the urban everyday," Berlant makes clear that cruel optimism wants to move away not only "from the discourse of trauma" but from "modernist" interpretive tendencies more generally, insofar as the language and temporal logics of things like "shock," "extraordinariness," and "crisis" are insufficiently sensitive to the "shapelessness of the present that constant threat wreaks" (8).[9] After swapping out trauma for "crisis ordinariness," everyday life theory for the impasse, classical aesthetic forms for new ones (such as the situation tragedy), the rational subject for the affective one, and conventional academic criticism for new kinds of speculative "theory," it follows that metapsychology must necessarily be updated as well (from nineteenth century drive theory to contemporary object relations), even though this particular conceptual upgrade has gone completely untheorized. In fact, even though Berlant does not discuss how cruel optimism depends on the metapsychological revolution of object relations theory, the book's affirmation of attachment tracks the trajectory of relational psychoanalysis so closely that it ends up reproducing its limitations as well.[10]

In the broader context of Berlant's project, the choice of object relations theory over drive theory rhymes with the book's stated determination to privilege complexity over conventionality, and affective fuzziness over the neat binarisms of conflict theory. As such, whereas Adornian

critique struggles to explain why people stubbornly maintain self-sabotaging attachments, Berlant's reformulation of the object as a vector for life-sustaining fantasy reveals that this paradox isn't really incoherent at all because "one makes affective bargains about the costliness of one's attachments, usually unconscious ones, most of which keep one in proximity to the scene of desire/attrition" (25). That is, "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,'" then of course "adjustment seems like an accomplishment" and attaching to whatever object enables one's survival is just another means for trying to adjust. According to Berlant, the conventional answer to why people stay attached to objects that threaten their well-being totally misses the fact that people need to stay attached to "objects of desire" because "proximity to the object means proximity to the cluster of things that the object promises, some of which may be clear to us and good for us while others, not so much" (24). Therefore, what Adorno "the great belittler" misses about people's "popular pleasures" is that *attaching to objects is a primary need*. If Adorno condescends to this human requirement, then it is because he is stuck in a simplistic, rationalist, autocentric view of subjectivity as driven by love/death forces alone when, in fact, as object relations has shown, social ties to external objects are not secondary to drive forces but constitutive of psychic life as such.[11]

Contrary to the standard depiction of Adornian-type critical theorists as ruthlessly austere—*so* "intellectual" that they couldn't even fathom basic emotional needs—members of the Frankfurt School were in fact consistently preoccupied with psychological questions, especially after the twin failures of traditional Marxism to start a revolution and civilized society to prevent the Holocaust (Jay 87).[12] Adorno, in particular, focused extensively on developing a type of critical theory that would be compatible with rigorous psychology, although *which* type of psychology to use was a topic of continual and substantive debate (Lee 311). Indeed, in much of contemporary critical theory—the branch of it that takes place in philosophy rather than literature departments[13]—debates about *which* psychological paradigm to use have continued from Adorno through Jürgen Habermas and into the present. For example, while Habermas initially dismissed psychoanalysis *tout court* (calling for the cognitivism of Piaget and Kohlberg instead), in the past decade, a considerable shift has taken place in which subsequent generations of theorists are calling for newer psychological paradigms that are better able to account for the complexity of "unhappy individual experiences" (Allen and O'Connor 5). As Amy Allen has persuasively shown,

"[O]nly by retaining a robust notion of the unconscious can critical theory provide itself with the resources needed to nourish its utopian imaginary" (*Critique* 18), which is why, for a growing number of thinkers, critical theory needs to reconnect to its Freudian "foundations."[14] For a newer generation of theorists, these limitations are not just conceptual but pragmatic as well, since without a way to meaningfully address the individual's complex relationship to society, critical theory loses one of its organizing principles. As Axel Honneth writes in an influential paper on the subject, "[A] critical theory of society is dependent on a concept of the human person that is as realistic and close to the phenomena as possible, one capable of also granting an appropriate place to the unconscious, non-rational binding forces of the subject" (103). Without a "realistic" concept of the subject,[15] a substantive critique of social relations is unmoored and superficial, susceptible to the grandiose rhetoric and hermetic idealism that Marxist methodology refuted.

Indeed, for many in critical theory today—especially queer and literary theory, working outside the ambit of Honneth and Habermas—we are already suffering the effects of hollow radicalism and "hypercritical" rhetoric. As Mari Ruti recently observed, "[Q]ueer theory's repeated efforts to reiterate its hatred of this subject generate the kinds of ethical dilemmas that the field has not been able to resolve, including the tendency to call for the downfall of subjects who are already leading overly precarious lives" (9). Not only does the attack on the egoistic subject pose irresolvable ethical dilemmas, but it also betrays the kind of uncritical reliance on antinormativity that forecloses a substantive engagement with what we mean by power and normativity. As Robyn Wiegman and Elizabeth Wilson have persuasively argued, "[B]y transmogrifying norms into rules and imperatives, antinormative stances dislodge a politics of motility and relationality in favor of a politics of insubordination" (14), the result of which is that crude oppositionality (to normativity and its representative, the ego) generates the very radicalism it purports to require.

In order to move past the easy equation of ego with repressive normativity[16]—an equation that Lacan amplified in an effort to distinguish his radical psychoanalysis from the conformism of Freudian ego psychology—it is necessary to develop an alternate source of psychological radicalism that does not hinge on merely abolishing the normativizing ego. In some ways, every theory has a different idea of what secures genuine radicalism. For example, for Adorno, the correct psychological framework "adheres to the nature of the socialization by staying just with the individual's atomistic existence persistently" ("Revisionist" 328); for Honneth, a "realistic" theory

needs an account of interpersonal dynamics; Whitebook wants any real account of subjectivity to have a "sting of negativity"; while for Allen, the dynamics of ambivalence must be at the center. Influenced by the advances of queer theory, I will suggest that sexuality is a vital source of radical potential, provided that we refine what sexuality means. Indeed, no sooner do we say *sexuality* than we are confronted with the requirement to specify what we mean by sexuality and how it can emblematize radicalism without falling back on familiar tropes.[17] That is, since relying on psychoanalysis as a stable guarantor of sexual radicalism belies the extent to which psychological ideas can be complicit with an *erotophobic* ideology, a careful use of psychological ideas requires a thorough process for determining what is radical, or not.

Jean Laplanche (1924–2012) is a singular resource for such a rigorous task because, among metapsychological thinkers, he is unique for noticing that psychoanalysis slipped into reactionary formulations in spite of itself and that securing radical foundations required something more than just abolishing the big bad ego of ego psychology. Therefore, rather than pitting a "good" (radical) psychoanalysis against a "bad" (conservative) one—as his teacher Lacan had so forcefully done—Laplanche may be more usefully thought of as a ruthless critic of psychoanalysis, whose "faithful infidelity" (*Freud* 285) showed that even the most radical formulations could reproduce conventionalist conclusions. To see how Laplanche arrives at this verdict, it is important to observe that Laplanche, first, puts a redefined, "enlarged" sexuality at the center of a radical psychoanalysis and, second, uses this new sexuality to identify specific moments when Freud (or Lacan, Klein, attachment theory)[18] moves *toward* or *away* from this essential discovery. Laplanche designates these competing tendencies "Copernican" (*toward* sexuality) and "Ptolemaic" (*away* from sexuality) in order to track the centering/recentering movement of psychoanalytic thought, and thus to convey that the threat to radicalism does not come from cowardly conformist types alone because, "if Freud is his own Copernicus, he is also his own Ptolemy" ("Unfinished" 60).

According to Laplanche, psychoanalysis is impelled by the "exigency" of "enlarged" sexuality, which he defines in the following way:

> *1. A sexuality that absolutely goes beyond genitality, and even beyond sexual difference; 2. A sexuality that is related to fantasy; 3. A sexuality that is extremely mobile as to its aim and object; and 4. [. . .] a sexuality that has its own "economic" regime in the Freudian sense of the term, its own principle of functioning,*

> *which is not a systematic tendency towards discharge, but a specific tendency towards the increase of tension and the pursuit of excitation. In short, it is a sexuality that exists before or beyond sex or the sexed, and which may perhaps encompass genitality but only under the very specific modality of the phallic. (*Freud *142)*

So far, Laplanche's definition of sexuality is consistent with how queer theorists have used the word, namely, to disrupt the presumptive link between sex and instinct/procreation. As Tim Dean and Christopher Lane have noted, queer theorists follow the tradition of psychoanalytic theorizing that views sexuality in noninstinctual terms: "Freud broke that conception by divorcing the instinct from natural functions and by claiming that the sexual drive emerges independently of any particular object of satisfaction to which it might subsequently become attached" (11). Hewing closely to this interpretation of sexuality, queer theory has often blamed "Freud's Americanization" for the continued difficulty of articulating "a radical antihomophobic politics" (17), but such a view perpetuates the fallacy that Freudian psychoanalysis is naturally radical, were it not for the homophobia of its "American" interlocutors. Laplanche strongly rejects such an assessment on the grounds that it externalizes the problem rather than acknowledging how deep it goes. In his own careful rereading of Freud and Lacan, Laplanche discovers that decentering the ego isn't actually the stumbling block that theorists say it is; the bigger problem lies in trying to acknowledge that *other* people are at the center of *our* erotic lives. Correspondingly, the radical innovation of psychoanalysis—the true equivalent to the Copernican breakthrough—is the discovery that we revolve around other people, and not the other way around.

For Laplanche, sexuality, in the abstract, is neither inherently revolutionary nor automatically scandalous, and if all psychoanalysis could be said to reveal was that sexuality is a repressed wish or forbidden act then its explanatory potential would be demonstrably narrow. It is only by putting sexuality in the context of an encounter with actual, other people that we can see what makes "enlarged" sexuality such a powerful concept—which is not the sensationalism of "shattering" sex, but how it shows the *other-in-us* to violate our every effort at "self-begetting." As such, for a radical psychoanalysis, it isn't the ego alone as a symbol of autonomy that needs to be abolished, but the delusion that our private sexual lives are entirely our own. This is why Laplanche insists on the "fundamental anthropological situation" as the foundation of a "Copernican" psychoanalysis, and why the

particular dynamics of "seduction" are at the center of any truly decentering agenda. As Laplanche explains,

> *[I]t is the adult who brings the breast, and not the milk, into the foreground—and does so due to her own desire, conscious and above all unconscious. For the breast is not only an organ for feeding children but a sexual organ, something which is utterly overlooked by Freud and has been since Freud. Not a single text, not even a single remark of Freud's takes account of the fact that the female breast is excitable, not only in feeding, but simply in the woman's sexual life. ("Unfinished" 78)*

Given the infant's profound and prolonged original helplessness (*hilflosigkeit*), we already know that the adult is responsible for meeting a range of infantile needs, but what we have so far refused to acknowledge is that in the process of meeting those needs, the adult's sexuality is provoked. This provocation of adult sexuality has immense consequences for the developing infant, essentially forcing the infant to "translate" these "enigmatic messages" into metabolizable content.[19]

Just as there is no such thing as an adult devoid of an unconscious, there is no such thing as an adult-infant interaction without an unconscious dimension. The inescapability of this scenario enables Laplanche to claim:

> *[S]eduction is not a relation that is contingent, pathological (even though it can be) and episodic. It is grounded in a situation from which no human being is exempt: the "fundamental anthropological situation," as I call it. This fundamental anthropological situation is the adult-infans relation. It consists of the* adult*, who has an unconscious that is essentially made up of infantile residues, an unconscious that is perverse in the sense defined in the* Three Essays*; and the* infant*, who is not equipped with any genetic sexual organization of any hormonal activators of sexuality. The idea of an endogenous infantile sexuality has been profoundly criticized, and not only be me. [. . .] The major danger, of course, is moving from a critique of* endogenous *infantile sexuality to a denial of infantile sexuality as such. As we know, infantile sexuality is what is most easily denied and Freud even made this point one of its characteristics: the fact that the adult does not want to see it. Might this be because it derives from the adult himself? (*Freud *102)*

Laplanche's reformulation of "enlarged" sexuality through the prism of the seductive adult-infant encounter brings us closer to grasping that sexuality's radical potential lies in its being understood as "exogenous, intersubjective and intrusive" ("Masochism" 198). As such, we can begin to think of *erotophobia* as the denial of enlarged sexuality, and to identify whether and how certain critical formulations—like cruel optimism, for example—unwittingly reproduce metapsychological schemas that are ultimately *erotophobic*.

Returning to our analysis of cruel optimism with Laplanche's redefinition of sexuality in mind, we can observe how Berlant's defense of people's damaging attachments—on the grounds that the *need* to attach outweighs the harm of attaching—reduces people to their *nonsexual* selves by arguing for an attachment that precedes, and is free from, a sexuality that is, by definition, exogenous and unfulfilling. In Berlant's framing, conventional ideology critique fails to appreciate the depth of people's need to attach to objects. This is because conventional critique relies on an overly rationalist and outdated drive theory of the mind that underestimates the role of objects in sustaining people's experience of survival, and this insensitivity to emotional need enables them to berate, belittle, and even "shit on people who hold to a dream." As against the callousness and emotional austerity of conventional critique, Berlant uses attachment theory to claim that people really *need* "the cluster of things that the object promises," and, what is more, "the subjects who have x in their lives might not well endure the loss of their object/scene of desire [. . .] because whatever the *content* of the attachment is, the continuity of its form provides something of the continuity of the subject's sense of what it means to keep on living on and to look forward to being in the world" (24). According to this interpretation, people's need for attachment is a need for "the continuity of form," and we can no more blame people for maintaining their attachment to form than we can shame them for wanting to survive in a hostile, crisis-ordinary world.

Berlant's account aims to generate compassion for the beleaguered contemporary subject, as against the rationalist and patriarchal condescension of conventional critique. And yet, the defense of bad attachments on the basis of desperate need totally misconstrues the role of sexuality in psychological development. That is, people do not form bad attachments because they need attachment (in either content or form); they are attached to objects because sexuality is fundamental to biopsychological life. As Laplanche's general theory of seduction illustrates, by virtue of the infant's intrinsic helplessness, he is dependent on the caretaking ministrations of an adult who is, in being an adult, suffused with a sexual unconscious. This

means that although the infant may only be trying to survive as a helpless being in a threatening world, the fact of his dependence on the adult means that he is destined to get more than he had bargained for, because all communication with the adult is "parasited" by the adult's sexuality, forcing the infant to manage the bombardment of "enigmatic messages" coming his way. According to Laplanche, we refuse to acknowledge that, contrary to the pastoral rhetoric around attachment, there is in fact nothing innocent about adult-infant interaction, even and especially in this earliest and most basic form. What is more, it is this foundational asymmetry that essentially compels the infant to develop his own sexuality out of the leftovers in this affective-symbolic exchange.[20] According to Laplanche's translational model of the unconscious, attachment is never just a straightforward transaction between infant and adult but is instead a provocative and overwhelming encounter with otherness that ensures the helpless infant *develops into* the sexual adult. As a sexual being, the individual is forever propelled by needs and wishes that do not entirely originate with him but that propel him nonetheless.

Just as Laplanche refuses to treat attachment as a sexual-free zone, so, too, might we push back against Berlant's characterization of object-need as merely an expression of survival. For while it is certainly the case that people want to be attached to things, this attachment is not free of sexuality. This means that "objects of desire" are not reducible to a "cluster of promises" that desperate people cannot live without, because even something as seemingly basic as survival is shot through with sexuality, which seeks something in excess of satisfaction. In a sense, then, Berlant's apologia for self-sabotaging attachments amounts to saying something like: "the spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak." That is, we shouldn't blame people for seeking their "endurance in the object" because after all, they are only human and trying to survive. Such a claim undoubtedly *seems* compassionate, especially compared to the supposed mean-spirited judgmentalism of today's "intellectuals"—but it secures this compassion by reducing psychic life to a basic, generalized, even "simple" need. In other words, although compared to heartless intellectuals it feels generous to justify people's bad attachments on the grounds that attachment—as a structure—is itself sustaining, such "generosity" deprives people of their complex sexuality by sentimentalizing their attachment needs. When we want terrible and destructive things, it isn't *just* because we're overwhelmed and need something to believe in, or because "the threat of the loss of x in the scope of one's attachment drives can feel like a threat to living itself" (24). While it's true that people *stay*

attached to things that harm them because the activity of staying attached can sometimes outweigh the object's content, the wish for continuity does not itself *produce* the object of desire.

We want things that are good *and* bad for us because we are riven and driven by a sexuality that operates outside the instinctual economy of need and gratification. To conflate attachment and sexuality as Berlant has done thus reinscribes the object of desire into the logic of a basic need, as though desire, like hunger, could *ever* be fulfilled.[21] This reduction of desire to survival isn't only psychologically incoherent but also a misguided effort at procuring solidarity by softening the tensions that comprise the sexual subject's relation to the social. In his attack on the "revisionists," Adorno writes, "[T]he possibility of change is not promoted by the falsehood that after all, we are all brothers but only by dealing with the existing antagonisms. [. . .] Maybe Freud's misanthropy is nothing else than hopeless love and the only expression of hope which still remains" ("Revisionist" 336). In a related vein, we might consider how efforts to procure empathy and solidarity with the subject on the grounds that he helplessly suffers from cruel optimism may not, ultimately, be the analytic breakthrough that we need. The call to pity people for merely wanting to survive deprives them of their complex sexuality, as though the only way to mitigate antipathy for others is by adopting a new mode of "tender pessimism" that offers reprieve from harsh and unfair judgment by reducing all desire to the operation self-management.

Political emancipation cannot be obtained by reducing erotic life to the structure of a basic need because such a maneuver to humanize the self-sabotaging subject doesn't actually sidestep the role of agonistic sexuality in structuring biopsychological life. While empathizing with people's damaging attachments *feels* like intellectual benevolence, it is not actually generous to reduce the dynamics of desire to the trajectory of survival because such a view ultimately flattens subjects into nonsexual beings chasing rudimentary forms. A truer solidarity emerges from recognizing that even when survival is a struggle, we are never *only* trying to get by.

This essay is dedicated to my extraordinary teacher, Lauren Berlant.

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Notes

1 See On Queer Theory. I participated as a facilitator at this conference.

2 By now, the critique of critique has become its own veritable subfield within literary theory, with a corresponding range of views as to what caused the problem (negativity, paranoia, suspicion, etc.) and what would fix it (surface reading, postcritique, posthumanism, ordinary language philosophy, etc.). For some of the most elaborate texts on this subject, see Anker and Felski; Best and Marcus; Latour; Love; Wiegman and Wilson.

3 I have written elsewhere about the problems in Sedgwick's diagnosis of the field (see "Misdiagnosis"). Sedgwick notes, "[G]iven that paranoia seems to have a peculiarly intimate relation to the phobic dynamics around homosexuality, then, it may have been structurally inevitable that the reading practices that became most available and fruitful in antihomophobic work would often in turn have been paranoid ones" (127).

4 Felski's more recent book puts attachment front and center. See *Hooked*.

5 In the immediate aftermath of Berlant's recent death at sixty-three, many obituaries focused on their unique commitment to undermining critical hierarchies that derive their power and prestige from smugly judging other people's insufficiencies. In one example, W. J. T. Mitchell writes,

> *For Lauren's contribution to human thought (as distinct from academic knowledge) was the unsettling of "normativity," the routine, normal unexamined habits that infect thinking in the mundane spaces of everyday life, the halls of academe, and the corridors of power. For Lauren, these infections (not just heterosexuality, but the entire panoply of normative differentiations—yours and mine, his and hers, private and public, us and them) generate destructive fantasies of purity and fulfilment, not to mention the slow death of routinized thought and behavior.*

6 In clinical discourse, metapsychology has a rather vexed history, with some wanting it to mean a separate sphere or analysis and others to equate all metapsychology with Freudian ideas. I discuss the genealogy of this term in clinical psychoanalysis chapter 1 of *Exigent Psychoanalysis*.

7 In this essay, I focus primarily on Berlant's relationship to Adorno and the Adornian lineage of critical theory, but Louis Althusser is a recurring figure in Berlant's work as well. I have written a critique of Althusser's psychoanalytic framework in my essay on Judith Butler's reliance on Althusser for a theory of subjectivity. See "Psychology as Ideology-Lite: Butler, and the Trouble with Gender Theory."

8 In *Object Relations*, a book that is often credited with launching the relational revolution, Jay Greenberg and Stephen Mitchell explain that "the term 'object relations theory,' in its broadest sense, refers to attempts within psychoanalysis [. . .] to confront the potentially confounding observation that people live simultaneously in an external and an internal world, and that the relationship between the two ranges from the most fluid intermingling to the most rigid separation. [. . .] Approaches to these problems constitute the major focus of psychoanalytic theorizing over the past several decades" (12).

9 Further in this paragraph, Berlant elaborates on this point: "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."

10 I am referring specifically to the problem of sexuality in contemporary relational theory, namely, that in making attachment the origin of psychic relationality, it becomes impossible to then account for the emergence of sexuality, except as some derivative of attachment, which then totally diminishes the meaning and function of sexuality. I address this in greater depth in my chapter on the unconscious. See ch. 2 of *Exigent Psychoanalysis*.

11 As Greenberg and Mitchell—architects of the relational revolution in psychoanalysis—have forcefully argued, in drive theory, "there is no inherent object, no preordained tie of the human environment. The object is 'created' by the individual out of the experience of drive satisfaction and frustration. For Freud the object must suit the impulse, while for theorists of the relational model the impulse is simply one way of relating to the object" (44).

12 Countering Jay, Fredric Jameson argued instead that the role of psychoanalysis for the Frankfurt School is overstated, although to substantiate this claim he has to perform a highly selective reading of Adorno. While psychology and sociology could not be harmoniously integrated, Adorno nevertheless maintained an ongoing commitment to using psychoanalysis, and drive theory, in particular (see "Sociology").

13 This is a distinction between two different discourses that both draw on Adorno, but whereas one track continues through philosophy into the work of Seyla Benhabib, Nancy Fraser, Jürgen Habermas, and Axel Honneth, the other track continues through literature into the work of Judith Butler, Wendy Brown, Gilles Deleuze, Michel Foucault, and Slavoj Žižek.

14 As Horkheimer writes in a letter to Leo Löwenthal, "We really are deeply indebted to Freud and his first collaborators. His thought is one of the *Bildungsmachte* [foundation stones] without which our own philosophy would not be what it is" (qtd. in Jay 102).

15 In some ways, this debate can be traced to Honneth's essay, "The Work of Negativity," in which he argued that critical theory needed a "realistic" psychoanalytic paradigm. He advocated for the use of Winnicott instead of Freud. In response, critics have either challenged his version of Winnicott (Whitebook) or argued for the merit of a different theorist instead, such as Melanie Klein (Amy Allen), Jacques Lacan (Benjamin Fong), or Freud/Hans Loewald (Whitebook). It should also be noted that even before Honneth's 2006 intervention, he and Whitebook were engaged in a decades-long debate about drive theory centered on questions about the infant's originary experience. Allen has written about what "realistic" means in this context. See *Critique on the Couch*.

16 This equation is extremely popular in queer theory, thanks in large part to how Lacan and Foucault position the ego as the enemy of desire and to those who have made the most of this notion, including Leo Bersani, Judith Butler, Tim Dean, Lee Edelman, and David Halperin. Many critics have challenged the

equation of the ego with repressive normativity, among them Habermas, Mari Ruti, and Joel Whitebook. In the realm of gender theory, we could think of the critique of Butlerian agency as related to this line of argumentation. See Allen, *Politics*. In critical theory, I think Whitebook's use of Loewald to critique this position is the most thorough and persuasive. See *Perversion*. Also, while Adorno also blamed the ego for being on the side of instrumental reason, he also (and paradoxically) blamed the "weak" ego for the rise of fascism (see *The Authoritarian Personality*). His conflicted relationship of the ego was the subject of Jessica Benjamin's critique, which Honneth developed further in "The Work of Negativity" as a justification for a new psychological paradigm.

17 Making sexuality the essence of a radical theoretical project is at the center of queer theory, and yet, in itself this is not entirely new but can be linked to arguments made earlier by Foucault and Herbert Marcuse.

18 To be clear, Laplanche rarely undertakes an explicit critique of Lacan or Klein or attachment theory, but instead focuses primarily on Freud, while also developing certain arguments against the general tendencies of other thinkers, sometimes mentioning them by name, but often not. I have tried to reconstruct these critiques in *Exigent Psychoanalysis*.

19 This is sometimes referred to as Laplanche's "translational model of the unconscious," which he discusses across his oeuvre.

20 I explain this model in greater depth on my chapter on the unconscious in *Exigent Psychoanalysis* (ch. 2).

21 I think Berlant tries to navigate this implication of cruel optimism in dialogue with Lee Edelman in *Sex. or the Unbearable*, where she tries to explain that her version of optimism is genuinely negative and not simplistic in its optimism.

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