

Kandice Chuh

Professor of English, CUNY Graduate Center

Response to Public Feelings Salon with Lauren Berlant

Event co-sponsored by The Barnard Center for Research on Women and The Center for Gender and Sexuality Studies at NYU; held on April 12, 2011 at Barnard College

Video available at: <http://bcrw.barnard.edu/videos/public-feelings-salon-with-lauren-berlant>

Response published December 10, 2012 at: <http://bcrw.barnard.edu/videos/public-feelings-salon-with-lauren-berlant>

The Irony of the Solution

I was not able to attend the event itself, but I have watched the video repeatedly and made note of a series of profoundly generative questions raised in this public feelings salon: *What kinds of optimism might we advocate? How do we identify or create resources for otherwise-ness? How do we inhabit and perhaps build in and from excess, from those occasions that are a gleeful departure from the ordinary? What new potentialities, new capacities, can we nurture and sustain? What other forms of “the good life” can we imagine? What imaginaries might we fight for—and be willing to lose for? How do we flourish? How can we flourish?* These are the kinds of questions I love; at once, they acknowledge the difficult work confronting us and they inspire and motivate. Like the salon participants, I am interested in how the political intersects with the cultural, and how ideas—how imaginaries—matter, both as frameworks made possible by historical conditions and as incitements to craft frameworks that might shape historical conditions. I’m especially interested in the relationships of aesthetic expression to politics and socialities, and in trying to understand how practices of knowledge production participate in illuminating and figuring those relationships. What follows is something of an exercise in thinking aloud from this vantage; they are remarks responding to a small part of the insights offered in the course of the salon but also in some of the intertextual documents invoked, and they are accompanied by my thanks to Janet Jakobsen for the opportunity to share this thinking.

So, to start: Lauren Berlant asks us to consider, in undertaking the work of crafting a new imaginary for “the good life”—in asking us whether we are prepared to undertake such work—to consider what versions, what imaginaries, for which we are not only willing to fight, but also to lose? I’m reminded of the fuller text of the article-interview in which she identifies the (un)bearability of such a task—the piece to which she refers in the salon.ⁱ She states in it:

I love the line Mark Fisher pulls from Jameson, that “it is easier to imagine the end of the world than it is to imagine the end of capitalism”: we have become affectively so saturated by attachment to the atrophied field of enjoyment that we are stymied trying to imagine another way of relating to others and to our own optimism. Developing symbolic practical infrastructures for alternativity is the task of progressive praxis, but it’s a daunting task. The collective settlement was that as long as the economy was expanding everyone would have a shot at creatively inventing their version of the good life, and not just assuming the position allotted to them by embedded class, racial, and gendered histories of devalued and unrecognized economic and social labor. The half century since the collective settlement was established embeds many generations in a binding fantasy.

It wasn’t cruel optimism to think that there would be give in the system, spreading opportunities for living beyond instrumental productivity, and yet we know that even in the

good times so many people didn't have enough hours in the day to look each other in the eye and relax. What expanded was fantasy, not time and not a cushion of real-time money. The expansion of the credit economy in Europe and the U.S. once the industrial growth had moved on took care of that, though, purchasing when it couldn't purchase ordinary time, and now that's being revoked too. Plus the revocation of educational democracy, a stand for a public investment in everyone who wanted a shot, is an admission that everyone didn't have a shot, and maybe shouldn't have wanted it. "How does it feel to be a bad investment?" has substituted itself for "How does it feel to be a problem?" It makes me speechless, for a minute, to face those blinking phrases, and to consider the whole history that has transpired between them.ⁱⁱ

Lauren Berlant had sent me a link to this piece a while before the salon; she knew of my interest in "cruel optimism," and more broadly, in trying to think beyond existent frameworks of knowledge. Since reading it, and in engaging with this salon, I've been struck by thoughts that intersect with Berlant's sharp reframing.

For one, I can't help but put Berlant's incisive observation together with Vijay Prashad's inversion of W.E.B. DuBois's own astute gambit, from "how does it feel to be a problem," to "how does it feel to be a solution?" Writing "about the feelings, the consciousness of being South Asian, of being *desi* (those people who claim ancestry of south Asia) in the United States," in *The Karma of Brown Folk*, Prashad explains that "this question asks us brown folk how we can live with ourselves as we are pledged and sometimes, in an act of bad faith, pledge ourselves, as a weapon against black folk."ⁱⁱⁱ

And, Prashad's thinking recalls for me George Lipsitz's arguments in *The Possessive Investment in Whiteness*, a formative text for me, and one that focuses critical inquiry on the advantages enjoyed by the disadvantaging of others. "Minority disadvantages craft advantages for others,"^{iv} Lipsitz powerfully observes, and makes note of the fact that "nonwhite people can become active agents of white supremacy as well as passive participants in its hierarchies and rewards. One way of becoming an insider is by participating in the exclusion of other outsiders."^v

With Prashad and Lipsitz in mind, I wonder, ought we not also to ask: how does it feel to be a good investment? Isn't that the analog that follows from Berlant's breathtaking critical insight? Isn't it a question necessary to ask in considering whether we are prepared, whether we are willing, whether we can bear to articulate alternative versions of "the good life"?

In some respects, perhaps especially for those of us whose work has focalized through Asiatic racialization in and in relation to the United States, these thoughts will resonate against the long-established critiques of model minority discourse. So, too, in a different register, will they resonate against critiques of the neoliberal celebration of individual success over structural transformation. Partly, then, articulating that "whole history" between "bad investment" and "problem" that Berlant invokes involves illuminating the processes of racialization that simultaneously deracinate and reproduce sharply inequitable life chances. The structures of policy and hegemony that produced the "problem" of racial difference are the same structures that produced the "solution" as (a different) racial difference. What Prashad particularizes to South Asianness translates through the history of U.S. racialization into a comment on the operations and

effects of the hegemonic, policy-supported investment in whiteness central to U.S. nation-formation. In some respects—and I think this is part of Berlant’s point as well—we have to live (with ourselves) within this system because opting out is not an option. Currently, the commonplace rhetoric of crisis bespeaks the truthfulness of the thought that it is easier to imagine the end of the world than to imagine an alternative politico-economic system. In academic terms, critique is easier than crafting, and experimental thought more difficult than reproducing knowledge. More generally, as Berlant suggests elsewhere, people live lives of “lateral sovereignty” in order simply to endure the demands of life under capitalism; willful choice and intentional decision-making appear as themselves fantasies of a kind of subjective autonomy that is simply and pervasively unavailable.^{vi} Race is one of a number of critical axes that illuminate the phantasmatic character of the kind of sovereignty promised by the modern nation-state: recent reports of the vast disparities among wealth distributed along racial lines offer a startling reminder of the uneven distribution of sovereignty expressed as wealth.^{vii}

Given such a history, it is not difficult to see those of us who have been advantaged by the disadvantaging of (other) others as embodiments of “good investments.” How does it feel to be a good investment? Not good. Or rather, that’s what the answer ought to be in a morally regulated universe and, I think, genuinely is for some. But, I think equally available is also some sense of satisfaction—of feeling good/satisfied/happy—at having demonstrated one’s investment value by virtue of professional or social success as normatively determined. On a cultural level, “liberal guilt” names the contradiction of feeling good in this way but knowing that that feeling is at the expense of others. (I think, by the by—and know that I am not alone in this thought—that expressions of such guilt should be met with nothing but responses of, “it’s not about you!”—though admittedly, I don’t think I’ve ever had the nerve/integrity actually to say that to anyone. Less socially awkwardly, let me simply invite us to remember that the activation of guilt can deter attention from structural conditions and plop all of us into a melodrama that reduces history to individual relations.)

But there is also a different effect of such contradiction, and one shared—I think—by the participants in this salon, which is irony. I don’t know that irony is a feeling so much as a condition that provokes a feeling, but I want for a moment to imagine it as such—as a feeling, I mean. What if the answer to “how does it feel to be a good/bad investment” is, it feels ironic? What if, that is, that question elicits a sense of the negation of one’s own evaluated position in the world? A sense of the tragicomic unfolding of history and our participation in it as inevitably ironic? Irony as a literary or rhetorical device is not without its problems: among them, it can be elitist in its double-voicedness; and it can, as critics of postmodernism have touted, fold in on itself and thus make both creation and critique impossible. But irony as a feeling...

Isn’t that a plausible name for the sensation that arises from the gleeful exuberance of breaking into song under stultifying conditions to which Ann Pellegrini points us? Or the affect that attaches to the gendered communalism of the digital world’s embrace of Steve Jobs as an embodiment of new potentialities that Tavia Nyong’o elucidates? Or the exquisite beauty of figures in the images José Muñoz shares? What if irony is the feeling that we’ve not sufficiently recognized as such, one that correlates with the kinds of alternative imaginaries—ways of being and feeling

and acting, and ways of being together and alone—of which Berlant speaks? What I think is potentially powerful about irony-as-feeling is that—understood in the philosophical tradition represented by Kierkegaard—it prioritizes structures over selves. The feeling of irony arises situationally, not willfully; it is non-normative and amorally so, neither good nor bad and instead always, I think, a felt commentary on the normative. It is simultaneously pleasurable and painful, full of laughter and tragedy, and, it seems to me, it allows us to regroup, to—in some fundamental way—live with ourselves *despite*...it is the condition, the aesthetic, the experience of and behind and within the blues, queerness.

I don't for a minute think that suffering can be alleviated simply by reveling in irony. I am moved by quantitative measures of intense suffering: the 9.1 percent unemployment rate in the United States; global hunger numbers at nearly 1 billion; millions incarcerated; other millions otherwise stateless, which means without access to services of most kinds; and so on. I don't think that irony can or really should subtend policy—though I think it probably often does; I think feigning ignorance has worked awfully well for decision makers in all kinds of ways to produce this kind of suffering. (Of course Eve Sedgwick's work on ignorance comes to mind in this regard.) At the same time, irony already has the capacity to produce socialities: think of how difficult it is to spend time with anyone who is more earnest than not and recognize, in contrast, how a shared sense/enjoyment of irony can make hard and fast bonds. So, if not in terms of policy, perhaps in terms of hegemony, irony works affectively, communally, and, perhaps, that is a ground upon which different publics may form/have already formed/are already forming? Or, to put it a different way, irony alone can't alleviate suffering, but some kinds of suffering might be made more bearable by allowing irony priority of sense.

Part of what appeals to me about irony is that it seems to me to be a pivot between the critical and the affective; that the feeling of irony gives pause, that it creates a space to reflect on our attachments, our investments, our objectives. I think a lot about this in terms of the academy, and specifically of the role of minority discourses in the academy. I think a lot about, in Roderick Ferguson's terms, the "strivings for normativity," or "will to institutionality" that describe the trajectories of minority difference in the U.S. academy, and what it is that we do as academicians, teachers, and advisers.^{viii} And I think a lot about this in terms of the potency and potentiality of the aesthetic realm to puncture the ordinary and give presence to otherwise-ness. Perhaps irony has the potential to mitigate vulnerability; but as I have that thought, I wonder also whether one's relationship to vulnerability already has to be sufficiently distant (whether in material or psychic or emotional terms) in order to feel irony as such. Irony cannot undo precariousness, but it might lay out a way of imagining our attachments—our investments, our selves—in ways that are not so strongly, so deeply tethered to a particular definition of "the good life" that we are unable to jump tracks as need or pain or pleasure demands; that allows us to see and feel ourselves not as protagonists of a straight narrative, but as readers who recognize the strictures of narrative and its difference from lives; as Berlant reminds us, lives are not novels. In maybe a surprising way, I think irony is kind in this fashion: it lets us make mistakes and not be felled by them, be wrong and not get stuck in that wrongness, endure and maybe even flourish.

I'm aware that I've been taking Berlant's observation of the contemporary moment and its difference from the past almost literally by taking seriously the proposition that we consider how it feels to be investments, good or bad. How can we bear to divest ourselves of the narrow definition of the good life that has led us to feeling the truth of Berlant's observation? How can we bear not to? Taking that literally too, what I'm wondering is whether an embrace of irony, refunctioned to name a feeling that toggles between the public and personal, attachment and error, and structure and sensibility, might be one way in which we address that "how."

ⁱGesa Helms, Marina Vishmidt, and Lauren Berlant, "Affect & the Politics of Austerity: An interview exchange with Lauren Berlant," 39/40 *Variant*, accessed 20 Nov. 2012.

http://www.variant.org.uk/39_40texts/berlant39_40.html

ⁱⁱ The Mark Fisher quotation is from *Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative?* (London: Zero, 2009) 1.

ⁱⁱⁱ Vijay Prashad, *The Karma of Brown Folk* (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 2000) viii.

^{iv} George Lipsitz, *The Possessive Investment in Whiteness* (Philadelphia: Temple UP, 1998) 12.

^v Lipsitz 1998: viii.

^{vi} See Lauren Berlant, "Slow Death (Sovereignty, Obesity, Lateral Agency)," 33.4 *Critical Inquiry* (2007): 754–80.

^{vii} See Pam Fessler, "Study Shows Racial Wealth Gap Grows Wider," *Morning Edition*, Natl. Public Radio, 26 July 2011. <http://www.npr.org/2011/07/26/138688135/study-shows-racial-wealth-gap-grows-wider>.

^{viii} Roderick A. Ferguson, *The Reorder of Things: the university and its pedagogies of minority difference* (U Minnesota P, 2012).