Between Hope and Cynicism: A Dogged Call to Action

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"Quiet dog bites hard."
Mos Def

In the spring of 2010, I used an *ESC* Readers' Forum to publicly come out as a hopeful precariat.

Noam Chomsky has described the precariat as one of "those people who live a precarious existence at the periphery of society," although he is quick to point out that the periphery is a myth. Many of us are members of the precariat. We are the necessary abject: needed to provide a powerful state that will "bail out the plutonomy when it gets into trouble, but other than that [the members of the precariat] have no function" (np). Here in the academy this means, among other things, that courses are increasingly taught by sessional workers and tenure-track jobs are being replaced by limited term appointments. My 2010 paper, was, among other things, about hope: how it is important, how it is naïve, how it is necessary. Now, though, I'm not so sure.

Recently, I saw a mural by contemporary Australian artist Brad Buckley. The piece is from Buckley's larger *Slaughterhouse Project*, which curator Brett Levine describes as a suite of works "which calls into question the roles and responsibilities of cultures to consider and address diverse

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concerns" (np). The piece was comprised of the word "HOPE" hovering over a group of human silhouettes. Never mind that Levine is talking about contemporary art and I am talking about the academic institution: hope gets harnessed in service of *something*. "Doing something," in Sara Ahmed's estimation, is as an impossible demand often framed as a question ("What can I do?"). Impossible, but imperative. We need to ask impossible questions, she claims, because impossible questions are future-oriented ones (183). "The future is both a question mark and a mark of questioning," writes Ahmed. "The question of the future is an affective one; it is a question of hope for what we might yet be, as well as fear for what we could become" (184). Indeed, this forum considering cynicism as one of the affective by-products of contemporary academic work is itself a call *to do something*. But what can we do? What can I do? In 2010 my answer would have been cautiously hopeful.

As a member of the growing precariat I am no stranger to hope as a politically affective tool. Hope is what propels me forward into each graduate and undergraduate supervision I take on, each late night or weekend I spend working on my own research rather than whatever else it is that people do when they are not teaching or prepping or marking. I tell myself that it is hope that fuels the conference papers I submit, the service work I do that is beyond the job description in my contract, and the innumerable hours of emotional labour I (mostly) happily take on because I believe in the profession and, more so, I believe there will be a place for me in it. I hope, in other words, that the work I do is visible not just in the lines of my CV, but in its gaps as well. Hope is what sustains me through each blog post I write for *Hook & Eye: Fast Feminism, Slow Academe*. Hope plugs its fingers in my ears when I am sitting in a Council of Chairs meeting as the Program Director for Canadian Studies and hear that my institution is in an unofficial hiring freeze until 2015. Hope tells me not to worry. I have been compelled in my academic and public work by the outward-reaching characteristics of hope, what Ernst Bloch describes as a broadening out of the self (3). As I turned to Buckley's large-scale mural last fall, these senses of hope turned with me.

But guess what? Buckley's mural has a subtitle. "HOPE" I read, "is still a four-letter word." Cynicism, by contrast, is not a four-letter word, but it, too, is about the future. For the classical Cynics theirs was a path to "the life worth living"; walking that path meant embodying rather than extolling ethics. They were doers, the Cynics. They practised *askesis*—a root of asceticism—that prepared them for living in accordance with nature and upending convention, and upend convention they did. Take,

for example, Diogenes of Sinope (known in his time as Diogenes the Dog). He was said to have performed all of his daily activities—from shaving to shitting—in public as a means of upending conventional responses of shock and shame. Diogenes did not leave a textual archive behind him; his legacy is along the lines of what Diana Taylor has described as repertoire. For the Cynic philosophers, writing was one component of the ethical life, but Diogenes valued the immaterial over the archivable (Piering). The risk here, of course, is that of history. As Taylor argues, that which falls outside the archive runs the risk of falling outside the dominant narratives of history; it falls into the periphery, even if that periphery is in the centre. I have found myself wondering how a cynic like Diogenes would fare in the contemporary academic climate. Would his interventions into the impasse of the contemporary academic job market be viewed as service? As public intellectualism? Would his radical pedagogy be comprehensible on his *curriculum vitae*? Or would he be out of work because he has been too busy doing and not busy enough writing?

As a representative of the precariat I occupy a decidedly different space than did Diogenes. You see, as a homeless, penniless philosopher who did not seek entrance or citizenship in the society he spurned he had little but his life to lose. What hope has taught me, indeed what contingent employment has taught me, is that while I feel I have everything to lose, hoping—and all the work that goes with it—may actually be keeping me from moving forward, moving on. Anna Potamianou posits that hope can work as a kind of a roadblock, something that would get in the way of doing something. Diogenese would bark at hope.

But is what I am feeling actually hope? Or is it something more entropic? I suspect what I feel is, in fact, not hope in the classical sense but a new iteration of the affect gone wild, what Lauren Berlant terms "cruel optimism." Cruel optimism is a relational situation that exists when "something you desire is actually an obstacle to your flourishing." That thing you want might not be cruel in and of itself, but it becomes so when "the object that draws your attachment actively impedes the aim that brought you to it initially" (i). For Berlant, optimism does not always feel *good*, but it is an attachment with an affective structure. Whether it manifests in anxiety, stress, or hope, an optimistic attachment requires you to return again and again to the scene of the fantasy of what you desire with the belief that somehow, this time, it will be different and you will be better. The optimism is cruel, Berlant explains, when the object that lights you with the sense of hopeful possibility forecloses the very possibility that you will take the actions necessary to make attaining that desired thing a

So there I am.

real possibility (i). So there I am: working in hopes that the next line on my CV will be the one that matters, hoping that the next bit of service I do will render me invaluable. Or rather here "we" are, for cruel optimism is what unchecked hope actually creates in the precariat *and* the tenured faculty alike.

I keep thinking about Buckley's mural. Who are all those indistinguishable people at the bottom? They are us. All of us. Those of us with more power, and those of us with less. Those with the power to leverage hires, those without. So with careful cynicism, and in the name of doing, I want to close by offering a provisional response to the question "What can we do?" We can as a group and as individuals commit to making interventions on the level of the quotidian. Be a cynical dog and bark in the face of what displeases you! Do it on the record, and do it in the present for the future.

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