

Spring 3-14-2018

Liberal Cynicism, Its Dangers, and a Cure

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LIBERAL CYNICISM, ITS DANGERS, & A CURE

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DISSERTATION

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements for the Degree of

**Doctor of Philosophy
Philosophy**

The University of New Mexico
Albuquerque, New Mexico

May, 2018

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Dedication

For everyone trying to make good out of bad situations.

Liberal Cynicism, Its Dangers, & a Cure

By

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ABSTRACT

Extreme Liberal Cynicism is a product of mourning, guilt, and the experience of powerlessness stemming from the trauma of holding liberal investments in a world in which they rarely flourish, in which they are perceived to have failed, and in which they are vulnerable to ideology critique. Consequently, the cynic is torn between liberal ideals and the obstacles to their success. This can compel the Liberal Cynic to extremes, fantasizing invulnerability through disavowing the efficacy of its constitutive ideals. This is achieved via a reified hopelessness which eclipses trauma, guilt, and disempowerment. Despite serving an immediately ameliorative purpose this leaves the cynic unhappy, alienated, hostile, obstinate, delusional, and desperate. Thus, this is a failing self-defense mechanism. At these extremes, Liberal Cynicism can be rationally unjustifiable as well as intrinsically and instrumentally harmful. It is rationally unjustifiable if it reifies the inefficacy of its constitutive idealism, if it assumes itself post-idealistic, the logical conclusion of enlightenment, or of intellectual activity, and if it refuses to engage in self-critique. It is intrinsically harmful because it is self-

destructive and painful. It is instrumentally harmful in virtue of enabling the problems that compel it. Nevertheless, cynical painfulness also provides the impetus and evinces the resources for Extreme Liberal Cynicism to avoid or overcome these extremes. A Critique of Extreme Cynicism coupled with the libidinal release of *Neokynical* cheekiness, a Butlerian reckoning with grief, and the skillful reappropriations of its complex desires and losses could compel the extreme cynic to maintain a moderate critical liberal cynicism committed to critiquing and reinvigorating its constitutive ideals.

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Introduction

Refusing to wear clothes, performing intimate acts in public, sleeping rough, barking at strangers, begging for bones, and urinating on passersby may not be everyone's idea of practicing philosophy, but the Kynics were far from conventional.¹ Coupling this exaggerated eccentricity with face-to-face argumentation, belittlement, and mockery, the "dogs" sought to expose the meaninglessness, hypocrisy, and arrogance of civil life. When the Kynical archetype Diogenes, who Plato described as 'Socrates gone mad,'² was given an audience with Alexander, he famously asked the living god to get out of his sun.³ Impressed, the emperor later said that if he could be anyone else he would be the tub-dwelling renunciate, appreciating that while he had conquered much of the known world, Diogenes' was closer to a true sovereignty than the dependence and fragility of political rule.⁴ Operating within the boundaries of social life yet openly flaunting propriety, the Kynic was not outcast but outside caste, defiantly disquieting conformists with an unmasking glare and biting satire. Unsurprisingly Kynicism attracted a mixed response, and after transforming into a form more amenable to Roman civility was absorbed into Stoicism and eventually relegated to the cultural periphery. Capturing a familiar mood Hegel said that 'there is nothing

¹ Following Sloterdijk, Žižek and Foucault, I will refer to Greek Kynicism and the appropriations thereof mentioned in this dissertation with a "K" and refer to contemporary cynicism with a "C."

² Per Diogenes Laertius in *Lives of Eminent Philosophers*. Book 6, Chapter 54. Trans. Robert Drew Hicks. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1950.

³ Laertius, Diogenes, and Tiziano Dorandi. *Lives of Eminent Philosophers*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2013. 6.38

⁴ Ibid 6.32

particular to say of the Kynics' that 'they possess but little philosophy,'⁵ and that they were 'swinish beggars [...] worthy of no further consideration.'⁶ Although attracting some weighty admirers in the Renaissance, Enlightenment, and Post-Enlightenment eras,⁷ this admiration was highly qualified and from the fringes of mainstream philosophy defying the general view that after its demise in antiquity Kynicism has descended to historical artifact.

This low status is attested to by the crude anecdotes which remain in the popular consciousness and by cynicism's contemporary usage meaning both the view, and the embodiment of the view, that outwardly selfless or honorable people are ultimately self-interested and immoral. Indeed, contemporary cynicism is a very different creature, sharing little with its namesake. When Kynicism criticized conventional values, it presupposed that happiness could be achieved through natural virtues typically obscured by civilized life. By contrast, cynicism merely criticizes. Gone is the call for self-discipline, critical self-reflection, moral self-regulation, and harmonizing speech and act. Gone too, is the hope. From unscrupulous bankers and their nannied children to the rappers who sell them music, from presidents and politicians to the poor and unemployed, and from jaded social workers to welfare abusers, cynicism is "common sense," a collective, democratic, "realistic" view of things.

⁵ Hegel, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich, and J. Sibree. "Book I." *The Philosophy of History*. New York: Dover Publications, 1956. 479-81. about Antisthenes, Diogenes' main influence; that 'it is ... superfluous to say anything further about him' Ibid. 479-81.

⁶ Ibid. 486-87

⁷ Plutarch, Erasmus, Montaigne, D'Alembert, Diderot, Rousseau, the Marquis De Sade, and Nietzsche. The latter famously said: 'the highest one can reach on earth [is] Cynicism' Nietzsche, Friedrich Wilhelm. *The Anti-Christ, Ecce Homo, Twilight of the Idols, and Other Writings*. Trans. Aaron Ridley and Judith Norman. New York: Cambridge UP, 2005 and that 'before one seeks men one must have found the lantern' "The Wanderer and his Shadow", §18 Nietzsche, Friedrich Wilhelm, and Walter Arnold. Kaufmann. *The Portable Nietzsche*. New York: Penguin, 1976.

Having gained anonymity through conventionality the cynic disappeared into the crowd and submitted to late capitalism. As Peter Sloterdijk, the prominent philosopher of cynicism, claimed: 'where Diogenes expressed the wish "Stop blocking my sun" modern cynics strive for a place in it.'⁸ Today there are few Kynics, more cynicism, and the optimists have become the pariahs.

That we live in cynical times is a familiar charge, and the bitter cynic cuts a familiar figure but here we risk being cynical about cynicism. It is not necessarily toxic, it is not exhaustive of subjectivity, and it is not the opposite of moralism.⁹ Indeed, moralism and cynicism are two sides of the same pessimistic coin. Both offer armor against despair in a fallen world but while moralists seek to impose ideals, cynicism counsels complicity. Furthermore, Cynicism, in nearly all its forms, is ambivalent. To condemn the corrupt, cynicism remains within the conventions of purity and corruption. Therefore, when the cynic calls out purity as sham, she remains invested in the very values she professes to dismiss. Even if the cynic resigns from the world it is a resignation compelled by persistent engagements, ideals, and values which relate to a belief in how the world should be but isn't. Assuming with William Chaloupka that 'telling a cynic to stop being cynical is like telling rain to stop falling'¹⁰ this dependence on persistent investments suggests the possibility of a more productive response than moralizing condemnations,¹¹ smug endorsements, or broken submission. This

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ In *The French Enlightenment and the Emergence of Modern Cynicism*. Sharon Stanley argues that we should 'conceive of cynicism as tactic rather than an exhaustive identity'. (Stanley, 17-18)

¹⁰ Chaloupka, William *Everybody Knows: Cynicism in America* University of Minnesota Press, 1999. P. xv.

¹¹ The following from Paul Tillich captures the essence of many a moralizing dismissal: cynics 'have no belief in reason, no criterion of truth, no set of values, no answer to the question of meaning.' (Tillich, Paul "Courage to Be" in *Main Works/Hauptwerke*, 5:2II). Similaloiroy moralizing response include:

dissertation attempts such a response. It does so by clarifying the ambivalent structure of cynicism and responds to a form associated with the ideals of freedom, justice, and equality broadly conceived. I chose to call this “Liberal Cynicism” to speak to cynicisms which, although hailing from different contemporary political designations, and in varying degrees of depth and specificity claim, or remain committed to, despite protestations to the contrary, these ideals, both within and beyond the academy. This breadth includes both the differences in theoretical conceptions and the more colloquial ways in which people may identify “liberal.”

Liberal Cynicism is a product of guilt and powerlessness stemming from the trauma of holding liberal investments in a world in which they rarely flourish, in which they are perceived to have failed, and in which they are vulnerable to critique. Consequently, the cynic is torn, and because of this, suffers. This pain can compel the Liberal Cynic to repress the efficiency of its ideals through a reification of hopelessness. This “Extreme Liberal Cynicism” is often rationally unjustifiable as well as intrinsically and instrumentally harmful. It is rationally unjustifiable if it denies dependency on, or reifies the inefficacy of, its constitutive idealism, if it assumes itself post-ideological, post-idealistic, the end of enlightenment or a natural conclusion of intellectual activity, and if it refuses self-critique. It is intrinsically harmful because it is painful. It is instrumentally harmful in virtue of self-perpetuation and enabling the problems that

Goldfarb, Jeffrey C. *The Cynical Society: The Culture of Politics and the Politics of Culture in American Life*. Chicago: U of Chicago, 1991. Stivers, Richard. *The Culture of Cynicism: American Morality in Decline*. Oxford, UK: Blackwell, 1994. Lerner, Michael. *The Politics of Meaning: Restoring Hope and Possibility in an Age of Cynicism*. Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley, 1996. Arnett, Ronald C., and Pat Arneson. *Dialogic Civility in a Cynical Age: Community, Hope, and Interpersonal Relationships*. Albany, NY: State U of New York, 1999. Giroux, Henry A. *Public Spaces, Private Lives: Beyond the Culture of Cynicism*. Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2001. Caldwell, Wilber W. *Cynicism and the Evolution of the American Dream*. Washington, D.C.: Potomac, 2006.

compel it as well as being both ill-equipped to oppose, and vulnerable to succumbing to, “Master Cynicism”: a condition which couples a conscience-free disavowal of all ideals in the pursuit of power.

A philosophical treatment of Liberal Cynicism is a desideratum because prominent figures in 20th/21st century Continental Philosophy and postmodern theory have identified cynicism as a ubiquitous and uniquely contemporary problem¹² and because although there are numerous works on the subject few go beyond diagnosing or moralizing and of the few that address its ambivalence even fewer propose effective solutions.¹³ This dissertation attempts to fill these gaps by distinguishing, and prescribing a skillful appropriation of, Extreme Liberal Cynicism.

¹² Peter Sloterdijk, Slavoj Žižek, Michel Foucault, David Mazella, Louisa Shea, William Chaloupka, Timothy Bewes, Sharon Stanley, D.S. Mayfield.

¹³ For historical analyses of Kynicism see Navia, Luis E. *Classical Cynicism: A Critical Study*. Westport, CT: Greenwood, 1996, and Dudley, Donald Reynolds. *A History of Cynicism from Diogenes to the 6th Century A.D.* London: Methuen, 1937. For a collection of on the Kynical legacy see *The Cynics: The Cynic Movement in Antiquity and its Legacy*, ed. R. Bracht Branham and Marie-Odile Goulet-Cazé (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996). Three excellent modern genealogical studies of contemporary cynicism (Mazella, Shea, Stanley, Bewes' and Chaloupka) appreciate the ambivalence of cynicism. Mazella is wary of moralistic responses to cynicism that dismisses legitimate feelings of alienation, he also lauds this 'invaluable critical concept [...] because it complicates some of modernity's most cherished self-images, its myths of rationality, dynamism, and progress.' (Mazella, 7) However, Mazella only points to a mobilization of this ambivalence, says little of its pain, and nothing of its fecund latent idealism. Louisa Shea argues that the positive elements of an ambivalent cynicism were purged by the enlightener's attempt to do the opposite, causing a branching-off in the 18th century of the respectable cynics, those answering Diderot and D-Alembert's call for a "Diogenes of the Letters," and the reckless sociopathic element typified by De Sade who 'paved the way for the contemporary cynic.' (Shea) Thus, although holding Kynicism to be ambivalent, Shea rejects that contemporary cynicism is ambivalent. Shea also focuses on the origins of contemporary cynicism and not theorizing a response. For Chaloupka 'cynicism is not uniformly an affliction or injury,' (Chaloupka, xv) repeating the familiar critique that cynicism mobilizes the least scrupulous and must be overcome by a commitment to partake in the messy business of malleable political discourse, but that it nevertheless carries vital critical insights. But Chaloupka too fails to mobilize this promise. While for the most part Bewes' work is levelled against postmodernism as an ally of de-politicization he recognizes it is a diverse concept and speaks for a "critical postmodernism." Since Bewes defines cynicism as a variety of postmodernism, or at least inextricably linked with postmodernity he too appreciates something of its ambivalence. But while Bewes' notion of policing cynical decadence with a critical postmodernism in its aim to challenge the current realities by bringing out the invisible, the unrepresentable, and opening space for transformation falls short of articulating a

I will be looking primarily at the work of Peter Sloterdijk and Judith Butler, both together and independently. Liberal Cynicism is defined in part in contrast to Sloterdijk's model. I use Judith Butler in three ways, as resembling Liberal Cynicism, as an example of an effective overcoming, and for providing grounds for theorizing a generally applicable heuristic for fruitfully engaging Extreme Liberal Cynicism, for which I also appeal to Sloterdijk. The primary purpose of this dissertation is to provide a critique of Liberal Cynicism as a valuable condition within which lie the motivations and resources for overcoming its pernicious extremes, theorizing this overcoming, and showing how this overcoming may contribute positively to politics. Finally, given Liberal Cynicism finds sure footing in a contemporary academia all-too-often reductive and overly dismissive of enlightenment liberalism, this dissertation is also devoted to contesting this disavowal.

specific and politically viable normative aspiration. Sharon Stanley promises, but does not provide, a form of democracy equipped to incorporate and benefit from cynicism.

Part 1: Two Cynicisms

We can destroy ourselves by cynicism, just as effectively as by bombs.

- Sir. Kenneth Clarke ¹⁴

Where there is danger, a saving power also grows.

- Friedrich Hölderlin¹⁵

Part 1 defines “Master” and “Liberal” Cynicism by engaging the existing theoretical literature and some illuminating literary examples. The primary purpose of focusing on literary examples is to signpost the phenomenology of a complex experience without claiming to capture it.¹⁶ The purpose of part 1 is to clarify the phenomenology, causes, and dangers of Liberal Cynicism and argue that it contains the motivation, impetus, and resources for overcoming its pernicious extremes. Chapter 2 defines “Master Cynicism,” a post-ideological “enlightened” consciousness which takes advantage of naivety, ideals, ideology critique, and enlightenment in the pursuit of power. It also explains why Extreme Liberal Cynicism is both poised to succumb to, and ill-equipped to oppose, Master Cynicism.

¹⁴ Clarke, Kenneth. "Civilization." Prod. Peter Montagnon. Dir. Michael Gill. BBC2. London, 1969. Television. Book version: Clarke, Kenneth. *Civilization*. New York: Harper & Row, 1969.

¹⁵ Hölderlin, Friedrich *Selected Poems and Fragments* Penguin Classics, London 1998

¹⁶ Part of the purpose of focusing on literary phenomenologies rather than psychoanalytic and psychological studies was for several connected reasons. Firstly, there are no existing phenomenologies or psychological studies of Liberal Cynicism to draw from. Secondly, first-personal experience may be theoretically insufficient. Through a literary phenomenology I hoped to imagine relatively simple cases analogous enough to forms of cynicism which the reader could attest to, and to provide a partly extra-phenomenological theory to explain it. And while a further reason to remain in the realm of literature was to avoid the mistake of attempting to psychoanalyze a general condition without psychoanalytic training beyond theory, I want to nevertheless propose forms potentially amenable to psychological, psychoanalytic, and psychiatric models. Footnote 518 on page 178 goes into more detail about the relationship between psychoanalysis and cynicism.

Chapter 1: Liberal Cynicism, the Dangers, and the Promise

Introduction

Liberal Cynicism is a cynical consciousness traceable to investments in justice, freedom, and equality. It is distinct from Peter Sloterdijk's notion of Enlightened False Consciousness and a model following Slavoj Žižek which I call Cynical Liberalism. While Sloterdijk's cynic disavows ideals due to the legacy of critique and the Cynical Liberal veils a commitment to capitalist excess beneath a phony liberalism, Liberal Cynicism remains genuinely invested in liberal ideals and experiences pain because of the cognitive dissonance between ideology critique, persistent investments, and the perceived failures of liberalism. At its extremes, this painfulness can compel Liberal Cynicism to repress its constitutive ideals, a process which can manifest as Extreme Liberal Cynicism. Extreme Liberal Cynicism is inherently harmful because while providing short term amelioration it results in a longer lasting and self-perpetuating melancholy. It is instrumentally harmful due to enabling the conditions that compel it. Despite these dangers, Liberal cynicism contains both the motivation and resources for avoiding extremes and for contributing positively to progressive politics.

Enlightened False Consciousness:

The discontent in our culture has assumed a new quality: it appears as a universal, diffuse cynicism [...] defined by its ubiquity.¹⁷

In the *Critique of Cynical Reason* Peter Sloterdijk defines cynicism as 'Enlightened False Consciousness' a state 'that follows after naïve ideologies.'¹⁸ Sloterdijk understands ideology as a pernicious normativity functioning on and within the

¹⁷ Sloterdijk, 3

¹⁸ Ibid, 5

individual yet also constituted by the community and wider institutional context. Ideology is pernicious because it compels a false understanding justifying both the agents' position within oppressive superstructure and the superstructures themselves. To refer to this ideological self-deception Sloterdijk develops Engel's notion of "false consciousness."¹⁹ On this view, ideology critique exposes the deception, irrationality, and injustice of the dominant ideology to destabilize its normative grip for the sake of emancipation from oppressive, unreasonable, or unjust norms. In this register, Enlightenment includes the process of figuring out the limits of ideology and the possibility of a more truthful, just, and reasonable world in light of critique. Per Sloterdijk, ideology critique paved the way for cynicism; a complex characterized by melancholy and desperate self-preservation undermining its investments in truth and justice,²⁰ that cynicism is the enlightenment turned on itself, and turned sour.²¹

Sloterdijk locates the origin of this degeneration in the response to aggressive attacks by anti-enlightenment forces coalescing in violent opposition to rational

¹⁹ 'Ideology is a process accomplished by the so-called thinker. Consciously, it is true, but with a false consciousness. The real motive forces impelling him remain unknown; otherwise it simply would not be an ideological process. Hence he imagines false or apparent motives.' Friedrich Engels in: Marx, Karl, Friedrich Engels, and Fritz J. Raddatz. "Engels' Letter to Mehring." *The Marx-Engels Correspondence: The Personal Letters, 1844-1877: A Selection*. London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1981.

²⁰ For Sloterdijk the enlightenment is essentially the pursuit of a more just world through reason: 'Something different does exist; at the same time, it is better. What is reasonable can thus also become real. That is all enlightenment is trying to say.' Sloterdijk, 55.

²¹ For an explanation of how cynicism originates in the enlightenment prior to the opposing forces, see Stanley, Sharon A. *The French Enlightenment and the Emergence of Modern Cynicism*. New York: Cambridge UP, 2012. Stanley argues that Enlightenment criticism of religion, "system Building", nature, and morality, coupled with its preference materialism and empiricism paved the way for cynicism at its inception, by reducing human motivations to self-interest, morality to utilitarianism, sociability to pretense. For Stanley, complicity is a logical next step.

dialogue.²² In this context of disensus ideology critique was compelled to adopt extra-rational strategies.²³ For Sloterdijk, this propelled a (d)evolution of enlightened consciousness which was further catalysed by ill-supported, absolutist, and hypocritical features within the foetal ideologies of the early “enlighteners.” Which is to say, while the original enlighteners of the 17th and 18th centuries exposed religious ideology, they were not free of pernicious dogmatic commitments and remained unaware of how certain material and institutional processes associated with the enlightenment, as well as remaining vulnerable to further critique misled, misinformed, and mistreated. Per Sloterdijk, the Marxists, the French moralists, Rousseau, Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, Freud, and Heidegger unmasked aspects of this enlightenment naiveté and in so doing extended the lineage of enlightening ideology critique in revealing motivational mechanisms at or below the foundations of conscious life for the sake of certain emancipatory goals. For Sloterdijk though, this group and their intellectual progeny also suffered from false consciousness. This pattern was repeated with each generation of “unmaskers” and while the unmaskings of previous false consciousness at each stage remained persuasive the therapeutic, revolutionary, and ameliorative responses did not. A consequence was that the ideological superstructures critique revealed were increasingly deemed universal and inescapable. The final stage, “Enlightened False Consciousness” is enlightened to the necessity of false consciousness. We will call this negative dialectical process “Cynicalization.”

²² ‘Enlightenment wants to talk about things hegemonic powers and traditions prefer to keep quiet about: reason, justice, equality, freedom, truth.’ Sloterdijk, Peter. *Critique of Cynical Reason*. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota, 1987. P. 14.

²³ Degenerating into ‘the polemic continuation of miscarried dialogue by other means’ Sloterdijk, 14.

Sloterdijk's notion of "Reflexive buffering"²⁴ is the consequence of cynicalization, a self-implicating pre-emptive affirmation of falseness standing between the cynic and fidelity to ideals. Because cynicism presupposes its own ideological fallibility it is uniquely impenetrable to critique. While this acceptance of folly buffers against criticism, it allows for knowingly embodying a false consciousness and therefore, when compelled by pragmatic concerns capitulates to the dominant ideology, which given it is also the off shoot of the enlightenment, is late capitalism.²⁵ For Sloterdijk, knowingly perpetuating the system he bemoans the resigned cynic becomes schizoid, exhausted, and miserable, suffering from a dissonance stemming from a disparity between how he lives - a rote capitulation to the tyranny of mammon, what he pretends to believe - liberalism, and what he actually believes - transcendental falseness:

Psychologically, the contemporary cynic is a functional melancholic, able to abate the depressive symptoms to remain in a degree of comfort, to work. This is perhaps the key aspect of contemporary cynicism, the fact that it is actually an ideal comportment for professional success in a system where suspension of the ethical is so often the requisite for "progress."²⁶

To be stupid and have a job, that's happiness. Only the converse of the sentence reveals its full content: to be intelligent and to perform one's work in spite of it, that is unhappy consciousness in its modern form, ill with enlightenment.²⁷

For Sloterdijk, this unhappy enlightenment finds its surest footing in a contemporary critique once invested in exposing injustice and pursuing truth is now

²⁴ 'This consciousness no longer feels affected by any critique of ideology; its falseness is already reflexively buffered'. Sloterdijk, 331.

²⁵ 'Cynical egos [...] obey the rules of the game in the capitalist world without resistance.' Ibid. p. 479.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Sloterdijk, 153.

content to find ‘extra rational mechanisms of opinion: interests, passions, fixations, [and] illusions’²⁸ beneath the professed positions of its opponents, reducing opponents’ subjectivity to ‘necessarily deluded epiphenomena’²⁹ and assuming superiority over others in virtue of adopting ‘the correct false consciousness.’³⁰ For Sloterdijk, by reducing debate to the avoidance of folly and attacking the opponent, ideology critique fails its guiding normative aspiration of contesting injustice and untruth, in effect abandoning its constitutive hopes.³¹

This is the point where enlightenment, as cynicism, turns on *its self*. Through ideology critique enlightenment deconstructed the notions of a God made soul, rational autonomy, creative self-constitution, as well as a free, true, “authentic,” or even transparent self.³² A consequence was that coupled with the exponential proliferation of anti-enlightenment criticisms by the mid-20th century implementing political change based on the moral dignity, autonomy, and integrity of the individual was no longer a unifying aspiration. In this context, Sloterdijk argues, a fraught view of subjectivity as a

²⁸ Ibid

²⁹ Sloterdijk, 15

³⁰ Sloterdijk, Peter. Eldred, Michael. and Adelson, Leslie A. “Cynicism: The Twilight of False Consciousness” *New German Critique*, No. 33, *Modernity and Postmodernity* (Autumn, 1984), pp. 190 – 206, p. 206.

³¹ ‘In the Feuilleton of the Zeit, the culture critics argue about the right way to be pessimistic’ Sloterdijk, 98 – 99. While Sloterdijk was writing in response to the wave of disillusionment that followed the ‘68 revolts, we can speak about a lack of solidarity across the theoretical humanities, and the “left,” and also, the status of polemic oppositional rhetorical currently dominating political discourse: ‘the religious criticize the areligious and vice versa, whereby each side has in its repertoire a metacritique of the ideology critique used by the opposing side: the moves in the dialogue between the Marxists and liberals are to a large extent fixed, likewise those between Marxists and anarchists, as well as those between anarchists and liberals [and] one knows pretty well what natural scientists and representatives of the humanities will accuse each other of’. Sloterdijk, 20. ‘Any sociological system theory that treats “truth” functionalistically - I say this in advance — carries an immense potential for cynicism. And since every contemporary intellect is caught up in the process of such sociological theories, it inevitably is implicated in the latent or overt master cynicism of these forms of thinking’ Ibid.

³² ‘Reason sits, so to speak, behind a grating through which it believes it gains metaphysical insights, but what at first seems like knowledge (Erkenntnis) proves to be self-deception under the light of critique.’ Ibid. p. 35

chaotic warzone of competing interests and arbitrary material forces mirroring a cynical vision of social life propagated. This vision was fraught because the consciousness that housed such a view wrestled with an unwillingness to reject the possibility of a unified self yet felt increasingly compelled to do so. According to Sloterdijk, these anxious effects of critique manifested in crude and destructive forms of material and psychic self-preservation: 'What is called a subject in modern times is, in fact, that self-preservation ego that withdraws step by step [...] to the summit of paranoia.'³³ This includes the view that the advancements of industrialised war compounded the critique-induced existential angst with a sense of profound material vulnerability that left a fearfully self-defensive bleeding into culture: sad, critical, hostile, and haunted by a sense of existential and economic precariousness.³⁴ In short,

³³ 51 'The Bomb is not one bit more evil than reality and not one bit more destructive than we are' *ibid*, 131. 'The ego without metaphysics to be sure, presents itself as cognitively modest [but] slides into an explosive self-expansion, because from this denial onwards, it stands absolutely alone vis-à-vis the universe. Only with this does the modern self-preserving and knowing ego achieve world dimensions' *Ibid* 355.

³³ *Ibid*, 131.

³⁴ In *The French Enlightenment and the Emergence of Modern Cynicism*. New York: Cambridge UP, 2012. Sharon Stanley shows how advanced consumer capitalism has produced postmodern cynics independent of initiation or familiarity with critique, explaining that 'a postmodern sensibility is the perfect complement of a stage of capitalism marked by a flexible technique of production and consumption, whether it is carefully theorized by academics or naturally adopted by consumers' (174). 'The cynicism of postmodernity emerges in a self-aware surrender to the perceived total victory of the empty spectacle of consumer society,' (175) 'in the contemporary era, there is a mutual reinforcement between the logics of postmodern theory and advanced capitalism, which might account for the special virulence and ubiquity of postmodern cynicism'. (177) The 'encounter with the thoroughly commodified, mediated, spectacular world of late capitalism may encourage the growth of a generally skeptical demeanor that appears to manifest, in a less self-conscious manner, theoretical principles routinely attacked by critics of academic postmodernism [...] 'A postmodern sensibility is the perfect complement of a stage of capitalism marked by a flexible technique of production and consumption, whether it is carefully theorized by academics or naturally adopted by consumers' (174). 'Cynicism of postmodernity emerges – in a self-aware surrender to the perceived total victory of the empty spectacle of consumer society'. (175).

while Socrates' conscience led him to conclude that the unexamined life was not worth living, the cynic concludes that neither is the examined.³⁵

Cynical liberalism

The formula of cynicism is no longer the classic Marxian 'they do not know it, but they are doing it' it is: 'They know very well what they are doing, yet they are doing it anyway.'³⁶

Describing cynicism as 'contemporary ideology's dominant mode of functioning'³⁷ Slavoj Žižek shifts the critique of cynical reason into a Marxist psychoanalytic context. Žižek adopts Sloterdijk's notion of Enlightened False Consciousness and that it results from an exhaustion of ideology critique culminating in the realization that removing the glasses of ideology is impossible. Žižek also shares Sloterdijk's view that this realization renders 'impossible the classic critical-ideological procedure.'³⁸ But while for Sloterdijk the cynical consciousness pragmatically defaults to the status quo, Žižek raises the possibility of a more complex relationship between cynicism, late capitalism, and liberalism. Per Žižek, cynicism is not a relationship to ideology, it is ideology, a false consciousness belying an unconscious ritually internalized submission to the capitalist super-structure: "This very cynical denial is a

³⁵ Cooper, John M., and D. S. Hutchinson (eds.). "The Apology" in *Plato Complete Works*. Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Pub., 1997.

³⁶ Žižek, Slavoj, "The Specter of Ideology" in *The Žižek Reader*, Eds. Wright, Elizabeth and Wright, Edmond Blackwell, 1999. P. 61-62 Žižek here cites, Marx, Karl. "Chapter 1: The Commodity." *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*. The version I referred to: Trans. Ben Fowkes. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1992 (1867), pp. 125-56.

³⁷ Žižek, Slavoj. *The Sublime Object of Ideology* Verso 1989 p. 28.

³⁸ Žižek, Slavoj. *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, Verso, 1989, pp. 29 – 30. Cynicism is invulnerable to critique because it is 'not subject to a symptomatic reading or to a confrontation with its blank spots.' Ibid. 'That is why we must avoid the simple metaphors of de-masking, of throwing away the veils which are supposed to hide the naked reality' - Žižek, p. 28-29.

³⁸ Žižek, Slavoj, "The Specter of Ideology" in the *Žižek Reader*, Eds. Wright, Elizabeth and Wright, Edmond Blackwell, 1999, p. 73.

way we mask, we obfuscate, and conceal.’³⁹ By reflecting on Žižek we can come up with a persuasive account of a function of cynicism which explains better than Sloterdijk how the cynic embraces capitalism even while “knowing” it to be flawed.

For Žižek, while professing disdain at the ills of capitalism the cynic behaves “as if” it holds absolute authority,⁴⁰ an acquiescence sustained by a tripartite psychic structure of concealing fantasies: 1) ideology critique of capitalism, 2) cynical distance, and 3) “commodity fetishism.”⁴¹ While the cynic criticizes capitalist injustices they resign to the impossibility of alternatives through a combination of Enlightened False Consciousness and a reification of capitalism as necessary. The third fantasy – money’s promise of infinite commodities – ameliorates the cost of this denial.⁴² These beliefs function to conceal the guilt of willful complicity within a system the cynic “knows” is both corrupt and contingent:

this logic of ‘putting the blame on the circumstances’ [...] leads to the unforgettable – and no less ideological – cynicism of Brecht’s famous lines from his Threepenny Opera: ‘Wir Wären gut anstatt so roh, doch die

³⁹ This cynical position is effectively an impossible one [...] What is repressed is not our non-belief, but our belief. People publicly pretend, I’m cynical, I don’t believe, and so on, but secretly you believe. [...] So why is this important? Because if it were as simple as that we live in a cynical age, then the critique of ideology would be effectively impossible. [...] In a totally cynical attitude, your answer would have been: So what? I know this. It’s not serious. Are you kidding? We all know this, and so on. I claim that real life mechanisms are much more refined. This very cynical denial is a way we mask, we obfuscate, we conceal from ourselves that we take our ideological premises much more seriously than we pretend to.’

⁴⁰ ‘It may be that the ‘official’ ideology of our society is Christian spirituality, but its actual foundation is none the less the idolatry of the Golden Calf, money.’ Žižek, Slavoj, “The Specter of Ideology” in *The Žižek Reader*, Eds. Wright, Elizabeth and Wright, Edmond Blackwell, 1999. P. 73

⁴¹ Žižek argues people know that money has value only because of the embedded socio-economic relations, but their actions betray their true unconscious beliefs; that money is value. Žižek follows Marx’ view that this is an illusion perpetuated by advanced capitalism “the very process of production functions as the fetish which conceals the crucial dimension of the form”. Marx, Karl *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy, Volume One – The Process of Capitalist Production*. Moore, S., Aveling, E. (trans), New York: The Modern Library. 1906 pp 81–82, 83.

⁴² For Žižek this enables the cynic ‘to accept the way things effectively are – since they have their fetish to which they can cling in order to cancel the full impact of reality.’ Žižek, Slavoj. *On Belief*. New York: Routledge. 2001 p 14.

Verhältnisse, sie sind nicht so! (we would be good instead of being so rude, if only the circumstances were not of this kind).⁴³

Through this triad of psychic operations the inadmissible guilt⁴⁴ of acting in accordance with late capitalism's ethos of brute self-interest is eclipsed.⁴⁵ Furthermore, along with the internalized submission to capitalism, through ritualized practical reinforcement and absolutizing narrative cynics performatively reify the illusion of its necessity.⁴⁶ In this way, cynics aid and abet an unjust and destructive paradigm by assuming themselves post-ideological jaded enlightened pragmatists, consciously critical of, but unconsciously obedient to the demands of capitalism.⁴⁷ We will call this "Cynical Liberalism." While Sloterdijk's cynic is genuinely ideologically exhausted, the Cynical Liberal unconsciously pretends to be, and while Sloterdijk's cynic is unhappy,

⁴³ Žižek, Slavoj, "The Specter of Ideology" in *The Žižek Reader*, Eds. Wright, Elizabeth and Wright, Edmond Blackwell, 1999. P. 58.

⁴⁴ 'Cynical distance and full reliance on fantasy are strictly co-dependent: the typical subject today is the one who, while displaying cynical distrust of any public ideology, indulges without restraint in paranoid fantasies about conspiracies, threats, and excessive forms of enjoyment' Žižek, Slavoj, "Re-visioning 'Lacanian' Social Criticism: The Law and its Obscene Double" in Slavoj Žižek: *Interrogating the Real*, Eds Butler, Rex and Stephens, Scott, Continuum, London 2005. P. 305. This is also explained in Žižek, Slavoj, *The Sublime Object of Ideology*. London: Verso. 1989, p 18; Žižek, Slavoj. *The Indivisible Remainder: An Essay on Schelling and Related Matters*. London: Verso. 1996, p 4; Žižek, Slavoj, *The Plague of Fantasies*. London: Verso. 1997, p 105, 120; Žižek, Slavoj (2001b). *The Fright of Real Tears: Krzysztof Kieslowski between Theory and Post-Theory*. London: The British Film Institute 2001, p 166.

⁴⁵ As Adrian Johnston, the pre-eminent Žižek scholar explains on his behalf; capitalist liberal-democratic ideology allows 'for individuals to be as dismissive as they desire, precisely so that they find their conformity bearable as something depersonalized, disowned, and thereby held at arm's length.' Johnston, Adrian "The Cynic's Fetish: Slavoj Žižek and the Dynamics of Belief" in *Psychoanalysis, Culture & Society* Vol 9 issue 3, 2004, p. 264.

⁴⁶ On this picture, subjectivities within the "Big Other" of late capitalism's Symbolic Order - the system of mores, customs, laws, and norms that uphold the material and immaterial structures of social life - are formed in response to that which they simultaneously performatively reinforce, compelled by the pursuit of psychic homeostasis within an order erroneously deemed absolute. "The Institution exists only when subjects believe in it, or, rather, act (in their social interactivity) AS IF they believe in it." Žižek, Slavoj "The Art of the Ridiculous Sublime: On David Lynch's *Lost Highway*." Seattle: University of Washington Press. 2000, p. 26.

⁴⁷ "the modern subject explicitly claims not to believe, while in his unconscious he does so." Žižek, Slavoj. *For they know not what they do: Enjoyment as a Political Factor*, second edition. London: Verso, 2002, p ciii 'we perform our symbolic mandates without assuming them and "taking them seriously" Žižek, Slavoj *On Belief*. New York: Routledge. 2001 p 70.

the Cynical Liberal, rather than submitting to the materialism and self-preservation of advanced capitalism out of sadness, fear, and exhaustion, enjoys it, protected from guilt, sadness, and critique by the fantasies of moral and intellectual superiority and limitless potential consumption.⁴⁸ Furthermore, unlike Sloterdijk's cynic uncomfortably and knowingly pretending to be liberal, the Cynical Liberal believes himself liberal indeed, he 'insists upon the mask.'⁴⁹

A literary-phenomenology

Through a literary-phenomenology of examples from Jess Row's *American Cynicism and its Cure*⁵⁰ we see that Enlightened False Consciousness and Cynical Liberalism cannot account for solid examples of cynicism. An analysis of these examples enables us to hypothesize an alternative cynicism more ideologically fraught than Sloterdijk's resigned consumer and which suffers more than the Cynical Liberal, a cynicism painfully torn between liberal hopes and pessimism.

Like Sloterdijk, Row's "mature"⁵¹ cynicism germinates in exhaustive and exhausted ideology critique which, assuming the necessity and falseness of value

⁴⁸ Within this context we have a framework to understand Žižek's description of cynicism as both ideologically exhausted and ideological. Since it provides a framework for meaning, cynicism is an ideology in the descriptive sense. Since it is self-deceptive - permitting a pragmatic rejection of liberalism while still publicly "believing" it - it is an ideology in the pejorative sense familiar to critique. In this way, the purpose of demythologizing the view of cynicism as value-barren is to show how it functions as ideology: the idea that we live in a post-ideological society proceeds a little too quickly: cynical reason [...] leaves untouched [...] the level on which ideology structures the social reality itself Žižek, Slavoj. *The Sublime Object of Ideology* Verso 1989 p. 30.

⁴⁹ Žižek, Slavoj. *The Sublime Object of Ideology* Verso 1989 pgs. 29 - 30.

⁵⁰ Row, Jess. "'American Cynicism and its Cure'." Home. Boston Review, 18 May 2015. Web. 10 Dec. 2015.

⁵¹ Row distinguishes between adolescent and mature cynicism. The signature example of the former is from Hal Ashby's *Harold and Maude* (*Harold and Maude*. Dir. Hal Ashby. Perf. Bud Court and Ruth Golden. Paramount Home Entertainment (UK), 1971. Film.) Where Harold's petulant adolescent cynicism is transformed into a life-affirming joy by the eccentric holocaust survivor. This movie is an example of the romanticized opposition between Kynicism and cynicism and how the vitality of life can overcome many

paradigms pollutes any ameliorative encounter with a self-fulfilling presupposition of its inevitable failure. Row also adds a psychoanalytic layer to Sloterdijk's picture, but while the Cynical Liberal successfully eclipses suffering, Row's melancholy cynic fantasizes "solutions" which fail. This failed fantasizing condemns the cynic to oscillate between false hopes and disillusion, all the while slipping deeper into a perpetual traumatizing re-fortification.

Per Row, cynicism stems from guilty-privilege: 'the cynicism of today is a product of intense yet diffuse guilt.'⁵² Row's notion of cynical guilt relates to Sloterdijk's "status cynicism," the embarrassment through which heirs of the enlightenment look back at its naivety. From this analysis Row adds a vague consciousness of complicity with these failures as a valence of cynical guilt. Row calls cynicism a 'guilty, white sadness,'⁵³ the "dominant value of white America" definitive of contemporary "normative whiteness"⁵⁴ but this racializing is hugely problematic.⁵⁵ Row draws examples exclusively from what he calls "'authentic" liberal art,'⁵⁶ which means independent cinema, indie-rock, and "leftist"

cynicisms. This is distinct to mature cynicism which, having gone through cycles of fortification is invulnerable to Maude like solutions. This dissertation deals with a mature cynicism.

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ Row's introduction of race is misleading because while he is right that Liberal Cynicism occupies the consciousness of a predominantly white American demographic, he overlooks that this demographic is dominated by a social/economic/intellectual middle class, and is absent in the kind of normativity behind the rise of Donald Trump, the political (pseudo) Christian right, and the Tea Party, such that identifying Liberal Cynicism with normative whiteness is partial and problematically simplistic. This is important for more than just clarifying Row's nuanced position, because the non-recognition or aggressive disavowal of guilt in white American conservatism – both at the "top" and the "bottom" (what we will shortly call "Master" and "Mastered cynicism") – is a disaster, the scope of which is amplified in the absence of robust opposition, an inertia amplified by the encroachment of Liberal Cynicism.

⁵⁶ "It is not difficult to imagine Harold reappearing as Andy Kaufman, Christopher Walken, Wes Anderson, or a disembodied voice in the work of Don DeLillo, David Foster Wallace, or Sam Lipsyte. Which is

literature.⁵⁷ Although takes this to be associated with being white, this condition is representative of a portion of the liberally educated American middle-classes which combine a higher-education-born and uncomfortable disavowal of ideals and a sense of failed responsibility with the economic and existential precarity of being nearer the very poor than the rich.

Row cites characters in Lorrie Moore's *Anagrams*⁵⁸ and *The Gate at the Stairs* as examples of this guilty white cynicism.⁵⁹ The protagonists are both poor and well-educated and claim to reject the conservatism of their working-class backgrounds for its ignorance and complicity in injustice, and the hyper-privilege, superficiality, and hypocrisy of progressive alternatives. Both sustain their alienation, choosing "exotic" lovers either through eyes they superimpose onto others, or wrongly assume to be their own. Both drift ghost-like through the world quietly enduring trauma, and responding with childlike fantasizing, barely managing to stay afloat through detached ironic observations levelling the profane and the profound in a trans-idealistic somnambular equanimity. Moore's characters are very modern and very cynical. The following quotes capture their crudest extremes:

another way of saying that Harold's disposition - the frozen, catatonic expression; the flat, measured words; the unswerving bleakness of his voice; the feigned nonchalance or childlike mock-innocence - is everywhere in contemporary American culture."

⁵⁷ Row cites *The Lost Weekend* (1945), *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* (1962), *The Feminine Mystique* (1963) Adding to the list doesn't require much effort, *Easy Rider* (1969), *Vanishing point* (1971), *A Clockwork Orange* (1971), *American Psycho* (2000), *Dancer In The Dark* (2000), *House Of Sand And Fog* (2003), *Revolutionary Road* (2008), *Whatever Works* (2012), *Leaving Las Vegas* (1995), *Happiness* (1998), *Shame* (2011) etc. etc. Sylvia Plath, Ally Sheedy, Ian Curtis. Row also cites eating disorders, addiction, co-dependencies, self-abuse, depression, anxiety, attention deficit disorder, dysfunction, and suicide in white America as evidence.

⁵⁸ Moore, Lorrie. *Anagrams: A Novel*. New York: Knopf, 1986.

⁵⁹ Moore, Lorrie. *A Gate at the Stairs*: Alfred A Knopf, New York, 2009.

There was this to be said for sedatives: They help you adjust to death better.⁶⁰

Love is the cultural exchange program of futility and eroticism.

Meaning, if it existed at all, was unstable and could not survive.⁶¹

Life is unendurable, and yet everywhere it is endured.⁶²

Moore's admittedly exaggerated characters nevertheless approximate reality, and their cynicism is united by a traumatized, vulnerable, and detached negativity, and perhaps uniquely, a degree of maturity in that its painfulness, and on occasions even the cause of this painfulness is transparent. Row uses Lauren Berlant's notion of 'cruel optimism'⁶³ to argue that these examples reduce to a state in which, although alleviation is sought, 'the object/scene that ignites the sense of possibility, actually makes it impossible to attain.'⁶⁴ In making this connection Row invokes Berlant's diagnosis of our "neo-liberal" present as structured through 'crisis ordinariness':⁶⁵ an everydayness prefaced on a 'sociality traumatized'⁶⁶ by a postmodern existential and material precarity which has 'shattered' the dreams of an 'ongoing, uneventful ordinary life'⁶⁷ and left behind a battle-worn, trauma-born cynicism. Cruel optimism is the consequence, a desperate panicked attachment to fantasies which inhibit flourishing but allow

⁶⁰ "There was this to be said for sedatives: They help you adjust to death better. [...] Sedate as a mint, a woman could place a happy hand on the shoulder of death and rasp out "Waddy say, buddy, wanna dance?" Also, you could get chores done, you could get groceries bought. You could do laundry and fold.' Ibid, 12.

⁶¹ Moore, Lorrie. *Anagrams: A Novel*. New York: Knopf, 1986. P. 130.

⁶² Ibid. P. 303.

⁶³ Berlant, Lauren. *Cruel Optimism*. Durham, NC: Duke UP, 2011. P. 2.

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ Ibid. pgs. 1-10.

people to make it through the day through minimally motivating yet tragically unattainable hopes. The cruelty is that this optimism sustains rather than alleviates cynical melancholy.

We can distinguish two ways whereby cruel optimism curses cynicism which suit the terms of our analysis hitherto. The first mirrors Sloterdijk's functional melancholic suffering in a 'depressive stasis that could be called "coping" faux-moral, selfish, and opportunistic, seeking material betterment as a shield from the radical disengagement of full-blown pessimism, perpetuating an unhappy getting-by, superficially optimistic about the next indulgence.'⁶⁸ In Berlant's parlance such cynics have promised themselves to a barely sustaining hedonism so as to avoid having to face up to what Sloterdijk defined as the 'abyssal meaninglessness with which the deeply intelligent contemporary cynic is familiar.'⁶⁹ The second is more deeply pained, seeing through superficial consumerism and restricting potential sources of escape to that which its guilt-ridden critique permits, but tragically, simultaneously prohibits. Row's first example, the protagonist from *Anagrams* – Benna Carpenter – rejects both the conservatism of her family and the liberal progressivism of her adoptive community for incoherency, hypocrisy, and insincerity.⁷⁰ Manic, ungrateful, aggressive, and plagued by an isolating intellectual faux-depression, Benna is desperate for a reason to live.⁷¹ Out of this desperation Benna seeks a lover capable of providing a salvation compatible with her ideology

⁶⁸ Sloterdijk, Sloterdijk, Peter. *Critique of Cynical Reason*. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota, 1987. 460.

⁶⁹ Sloterdijk, Peter. *Critique of Cynical Reason*. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota, 1987.

⁷⁰ 'Despite our various ways of resembling yuppies [...] we hated yuppies.' Ibid. 29.

⁷¹ 'I run downstairs and out into the street with my pajamas on, gasping, waiting for something – a car? An Angel? – to come rescue or kill me, but there was nothing, only streetlights and a cat [...] "There must be things that can save us!" I wanted to shout. But they are just not here' Ibid. 23 and 38 respectively.

critique. Thus, she rejects her white wannabe opera singer boyfriend and pursues a black Vietnam veteran upon whom she superimposes qualities that suit her fantasy of an authentic post idealistic hero.⁷² The fantasy frays and Benna leaves the relationship thoroughly disappointed because Darrel “just” wants to be a dentist.⁷³ As Row explains:

For her, Darrel is not just an emblem of psychological health and sexual healing; he represents an entirely different order of redemption as well. Darrel, on the other hand, can take a joke, but he can't ironize away his desire for a solid income, a professional career, the terminally uncool, unexceptional, bourgeois life Benna has mocked so relentlessly [...] Darrel is this fiction's fiction, or, more precisely, this fiction's fantasy, its object of cruel optimism.⁷⁴

Benna believes herself to be anti-bourgeois, post-naïve, and post-ideological, and that thanks to the enlightenment she provides Darrell should escape his “false consciousness” but her critique and attraction is self-deceptive and distorting. The consequence is that while hoping to embrace alternative ideals through the love of the other Benna fails to recognize the other at all.⁷⁵ The conditions of her hope prohibit it. When Benna begins to wake up to her self-deception, this trauma compels a deepened cynicism pushing hope further into inaccessible regions of the psyche. Moore portrays this in truly tragic form with

⁷² Fantasizing that Darrell is capable of ‘such moral anger’, ‘astonishing gestures’ and ‘huge moments’ when actually he is an aspiring dentist and a bad poet. Moore, Lorrie. *Anagrams*. New York: Knopf, 1986. P. 89.

⁷³ Ibid. 191 – 194.

⁷⁴ Row, Jess. “American Cynicism and its Cure”. Home. Boston Review, 18 May 2015. Web. 10 Dec. 2015.

⁷⁵ Darrel, more of a realist than a fantasist, calls out Benna remarkably unreflective hypocrisy ‘You Benna, are the most Bourgeois person I know’ p. 192 A tragic moment of potential and dashed intersectionality, and surely one of the largest obstacles in overcoming the disaster of race relations in contemporary America, where two systems of oppression – in this case, poverty, and racism – descend into comparison and competition, root causes of segregation. This opportunity lost, is to oppose the primary means of oppression: ignorance and the tyranny of mammon.

Benna imagining herself the mother of a sweet 5-year-old girl, ending the book with a heart-breaking descent into trauma-born delusion:

Life is sad. Here is someone [...] a gift I have given myself, a lozenge of pretend.⁷⁶

Row also cites Moore's *A Gate at the Stairs* wherein Susan who, living under a false name to hide from an accidentally infanticidal past, adopts a mix-raced girl and outsources her upbringing, simultaneously facing up to, and hiding from, the past. Susan organizes a weekly support group for multiracial families in a Midwestern college town wherein resigned angry fatalism is thrown around with no solutions or hope offered in response:

The Jews got reparations from the Nazis, but who actually got the money? Well-to-do Jewish grandchildren who hardly need it at all.⁷⁷

School is white. And school is female. So it's the boys of color who have the hardest time, and if they're not into sports the gangs will lure them in. I guess we already knew that.⁷⁸

Row develops Moore's implication that this hopeless indignation is prefaced on a combination of insecurity and immovability concerning ideals and investments and exposes the "colorful" range of characters as from the same bubble of relative privilege. As Susan's put-upon nanny remarks: 'it had all begun to sound like a spiritually gated community of liberal chat.'⁷⁹ Susan's cynicism is similarly driven by guilt and in assuming liberalism's inefficacy also results in a

⁷⁶ Moore, Lorrie. *Anagrams*. New York: Knopf, 1986. P. 225. Benna cynicism is tragic for missing the opportunities for joy right in front of her, in contrast to this lozenge of pretend Gerard loved her and loved kids, 'sometimes I think that without children we remain beasts or dust. That we are like something lost at sea' p. 6.

⁷⁷ Ibid. P. 156.

⁷⁸ Moore, Lorrie. *Anagrams: A Novel*. New York: Knopf, 1986. P. 155. my italics.

⁷⁹ Ibid. P. 188.

practical disavowal of liberal ideals.⁸⁰ While Benna's optimism is cruel, Susan's group has abandoned it altogether. The cruelty here is the hopelessness. Row's account captures Sloterdijk's description:

In the new cynicism, we see a detached negativity which scarcely allows itself any hope, at most a little irony and self-pity.⁸¹

This guilty cynicism plagues those who having floated above the bottom of societies' echelons and see themselves as among the scum on polluted waters, insecure about complicity in injustice, educated in critique, invested in justice and equality, and pained by their scarcity. Tragically, this pain is felt so deeply that it compels denial and fails the ideals upon which it depends. While this guilty cynicism may seek catharsis, immunized against hope by the universalization of despair it nevertheless remains trapped, experiencing temporary alleviation through indignant rage, ironic pseudo-levity, a neurotic hostility towards the world, and a special hatred for the idealistic and "naively" liberal. This condemns Susan's group to a self-perpetuating cycle, leaving the cynics cynical and the world unchanged, as Row concludes:

[This] can be summed up in Sloterdijk's phrase: "reflexively buffered." Whether we call it cynicism, melancholy, depression, or simply sadness, we are talking about a state that maintains itself.⁸²

On this picture, a reason cynicism sustains itself is that whenever it verges on the self-awareness which would reveal its fantasy and reification, because it would also

⁸⁰ Susan's group characterizes Timothy Bewes' notion of cynicism as postmodernity reified; a 'disabled critique that mistakes its own absence for a kind of universalized rigor' Bewes, Timothy. *Cynicism and Postmodernity*. London: Verso, 1997. P. 41.

⁸¹ Sloterdijk, Peter. Eldred, Michael. and Adelson, Leslie A. "Cynicism: The Twilight of False Consciousness" *New German Critique*, No. 33, *Modernity and Postmodernity* (Autumn, 1984), pp. 190 - 206, p. 194

⁸² Row, Jess. "American Cynicism and its Cure". Home. Boston Review, 18 May 2015. Web. 10 Dec. 2015.

reveal its complicity in the forces its ideals oppose, it risks an inadmissible guilt. This guilt and powerlessness is eclipsed by reifying hopelessness, replacing the trauma of seeing what is wrong and knowing it could and should be different with the insurmountability of illiberal forces. This is how, while it seems so unpleasant to the outsider, extreme cynical hopelessness plays an ameliorative role. Crucially, this process is never fully successful and the inevitable return of the repressed compels a panicked, irrational, and hostile refusal to auto-critique, ideals, idealism, and hopes, as well as calls for action. This picture fits Žižek's notion of cynicism as ideology and Sloterdijk's account of cynicism's predilection for fantasy, a condition where 'a hard sense for the facts slides over into the fictional, the histrionic, and bluff.'⁸³ This cynical hopelessness is maintained by a fantasized vision of the irredeemability of man, a coping mechanism for avoiding pain which tragically only creates a deeper pain, and adds self-deception, obstinacy, hostility, and irrationality, and worse still, perpetuates the causes of the pain it seeks to alleviate, trapping itself in a cycle of largely self-inflicted melancholy precluding imaginative sources of contestation.⁸⁴ While Susan's group laments the ills of late-capitalism they nevertheless continue to live within it, unable or unwilling to imagine a society that is not plagued with the same problems. Susan's group is overwhelmed by the world's problems and assumes an identity of hopelessness to eclipse the unbearable feeling of powerlessness. This also enables Susan's extremely cynical community to assume both moral and intellectual

⁸³ Ibid. p. 473.

⁸⁴ We see this predilection for fantasy both in Benna and Susan's doomed and delusional relationships, in Benna's assumption of enlightened consciousness, and in Susan's fraught commitment to the superiority and inefficacy of liberal ideals.

superiority. The moral superiority comes from assuming an association with the “correct ideals,” and intellectual superiority from “knowing” their inefficacy. Benna is overwhelmed by the falseness of ideology and fails to overcome it by fantasizing impossible alternatives. Both strategies are adopted to defend against future disappointment and by not having to doubt itself. By presuming the worst, the cynical consciousness never feels let down, fooled, or deceived and takes solace in having its suspicions validated. As Sloterdijk put it: ‘it is the universally widespread way in which enlightened people see to it that they are not taken for suckers.’⁸⁵ In this way, this painful delusion tragically sustains itself. In a rare moment of clarity, when *A Gate at the Stairs*’ protagonist breaks up with her Muslim boyfriend, she initiates an argument about the problems with Islam and while she drifts off into a day dream where he is a terrorist he pithily diagnoses her cynicism:

You feel you have a kind of wisdom, very mistaken, but a mistake of some power to you, and you sadly treasure it and grow it.⁸⁶

While characterizing familiar cynicisms, neither Enlightened False Consciousness or Cynical Liberalism adequately explain these examples. Both lack the self-transparency of Sloterdijk’s cynic, neither disavows liberalism, and both suffer more than the Cynical Liberal. In calling out the hypocrisy and sham of attempted liberalisms, while critical of liberal ideals as ideology, Benna struggles with and ultimately fails a naïve liberalism she nevertheless remains invested. Susan’s righteous indignation also belies persistent liberal investments albethey immunized against hope. Because neither is post-ideological they are not Enlightened False

⁸⁵ Sloterdijk. p. 473.

⁸⁶ Moore, Lorrie. *Anagrams: A Novel*. New York: Knopf, 1986. P. 206.

Consciousness. Because both are genuinely invested in liberal ideals neither are they Cynical Liberalism. Due to critique, Sloterdijkian cynicism suffers total ideological exhaustion and knowingly capitulates to consumerism, and Cynical Liberalism is comfortably numb to the failings of liberalism. By contrast, although suffering a reflexively buffered universalization of liberalism's inevitable failure, or merely failing it, in both our examples the abandonment of liberalism is based on perceiving it as a failure as well as doubting its truth, and crucially, perceiving this failure as a tragedy.⁸⁷ While Benna and Susan suffer from guilt, powerlessness, fantasy, conflict, denial, defeatism, rage,⁸⁸ despair, and cruel optimism, Sloterdijk's cynic is merely pragmatically resigned. The cynicism our examples signpost is hostile, pseudo-realistic, worryingly self-reflexive, in a fraught relationship with ideals, and crucially, painful.

Liberal cynicism: Cynical pain

On Sloterdijk's account cynicism suffers from a persistent niggling melancholy traced to an alienating discrepancy between its deeds and the values it once held but has now rejected: between pragmatic ideological affiliation and enlightened falseness. But can a disparity between practical reason and (un)belief account for cynical obstinacy, insecurity, self-destructiveness, obliviousness, defensiveness, rage, and

⁸⁷ Benna gives up on Darrel, and love, assuming the failure to be more the world's than hers, and retreats into delusions, and Susan, after the failure of her fantastical solution – Mary – embraces the hopelessness of her support group, after the system has failed her.

⁸⁸ Benna Carpenter is prone to self-pitying, sarcasm, and pathological neuroses, given to flashes of mordant humor and manic, (self) righteous anger' thinly veiling the trauma of losing her lover and best friend beneath a hip intellectual ennui, and the tragic creation of an imaginary child. Benna is an ideal candidate of the cynic as traumatized romantic, traumatized idealist, mourning for lost ideals. In a moment of perhaps enlightened falseness, Benna describes her own cynicism: 'the function of disguise is to convince the world you're not there, or that if you are, you should not be eaten. You camouflage yourself as imperious [...] simply to hang on and survive' P. 194.

despair? If cynicism merely feigns pragmatism and idealism, the tension between practical reason and conscious belief wouldn't compel the painful dissonance of a schizoid and miserable cynic. If our analyses signpost real cynicisms, then there is reason to seek an alternative model to an account for this phenomenological and psychological complexity. My thesis is that these familiar varieties of cynicism are better explained as originating in a tension between equally authoritative but incompatible impulses, specifically between ideals, ideology critique, and deep disappointments.⁸⁹ Given this view of cynical grief emanating from a dependence on

⁸⁹ Characters in Christopher Nolan's "Dark Knight Trilogy" (Dir. Christopher Nolan. Warner Bros. Pictures) can serve as helpfully simplified and dramatic examples for explaining a liberally invested cynicism. At first glance one might regard the Joker as prime example of a Master Cynic. He has the familiar Hobbesian, Machiavellian view of human nature: "When the chips are down, these civilized people, they'll eat each other." Indeed, the Joker's cynicism is deeper, for while Hobbes supported absolute sovereign power to avert the sufferings of a reversion to the state of nature, the Joker by contrast professes to revel in the "truth" of metaphysical chaos and man's essential barbarism and opposes the imposition of civility, echoing the philosophy of his spiritual father the Marquise that says: if man struggles to contain his savagery, then unleash the beast. The first key difference between the Joker's and Master Cynicism, and indeed, also the way in which the Joker is akin to Diogenes, is his complete rejection of conventional value, symbolized so beautifully as he sits atop a burning pile of mobsters' millions and in his disengagement with politics and power. The second key difference concerns cognitive dissonance, for the Joker can be seen to exhibit something of that Lucian-like discomfort belying a repressed trauma, a discomfort that may place him within the unhappier consciousness of the inhibited schizoid cynic. That the Joker is dissatisfied with merely being 'ahead of the curve' (Their morals, their code; it's a bad joke. Dropped at the first sign of trouble. They're only as good as the world allows them to be. You'll see- I'll show you. When the chips are down these, uh, civilized people? They'll eat each other. See I'm not a monster, I'm just ahead of the curve') can be seen in his needs for others to submit to his ideology. The Joker, rather than being an agent of chaos, is tied to a universalist morality of good and evil, and that the good life is achieved by embracing our true nature. This resembles a virtue theory familiar to romantic and Greek schools of thought. It is precisely this twisted hope for humanity that motivates the Joker's need to persuade and to convert and which belies a latent dissatisfaction with the status quo and an unstable belief in his ethics. The Joker struggles between rejecting and embracing values, as can be seen in his need to expose the naiveté of others and to validate his extremely cynical views. The motivation to convert emanates from a latent inability to disregard doubt. This is why the Joker wants to subject Gotham to madness and anarchy; it's why he targets Harvey Dent, not to kill him, for his martyrdom could not satiate his needs, but if he can expose the highest symbol of hope as a chaotic brutal madman, he can thereby universalize his cynicism, eradicating the doubts sown by a latent idealism. This is why he doesn't try to kill Batman, but instead to get him to abandon his code of ethics: The Joker seeks validation through proselytization because he is still an idealist, and inauthentically anti-ideological, both in his failure to accept his idealism, and in his disability to embrace the chaos he proposes as the truth. That is to say, when the Joker states that 'the only sensible way to live in this world is without rules' he reveals his true ideology, indeed a universal rationalism and system of ethical virtue; beneath the mask of

genuine commitments to liberal ideals is the pivot around which the arguments in this dissertation move, we need to establish further why to suppose it.

Firstly, it better explains both Sloterdijk and Row's analyses and our model of Cynical Liberalism. This idea is inchoate in Sloterdijk who, although defining cynicism as post-ideological, speaks to its liberal investments. This can be seen where he describes the cynic as burdened by rather than insisting on the dominant ideology, and that the cynic's melancholy includes mourning a prohibited innocence which results from seeing its idealistic hopes crushed under the weight of perceived material, economic, and existential precariousness: 'Within this unhappy consciousness, there remain the echoes of ideals quite distinct.'⁹⁰ Sloterdijk also describes cynicism as

the absurdist clown's embrace of chaos, he champions violence and mayhem as the universal route to the best, if not the good life. A truly morally chaotic agency would be as likely to commit profound acts of kindness as it would murder. The Joker then, rather than being an agent of chaos, is tied to a universalist morality of good and evil. This inchoate belief that human happiness is achieved by embracing its true nature resembles a virtue theory familiar to Christian, romantic, and Greek schools of thought. The "happiness" he has discovered and his "authentic alternative" to what he takes himself to be destroying: the decaying fragments of once vivid ideals a hypocritical culture vainly clings onto, to reveal that people, deep down inside, are nasty and cruel, but wear masks of civility to hide it. In seeing the "slave morality" of the herd as a cosmic joke lies a hope for humanity that motivates the Joker's need to persuade and to convert, and which belies a latent dissatisfaction with the status quo, a belief in truth, as well as repressed, unacknowledged ideals and the cognitive dissonance lamenting the failure of them. In this way when the A Joker announces, 'Kill you? I don't wanna kill you. What would I do without you? Go back to ripping off mob dealers? No. No. No! No you – you complete me' by personifying an alternative belief in the good, the Batman offers the promise of completion in the sense of the romantic unification of self, if he can successfully convince Batman that his is the superior ideology, which would enable him to overcome his own doubts, and avoid cognitive dissonance. This condition of needing to destroy outward manifestations of what has been internalized and foreclosed indicates both the fraught "schizoid" constitution and the impossibility of such foreclosure.

⁹⁰ 'Within this unhappy consciousness, there remain the echoes of ideals quite distinct [...] but the tendency is to assume, if I don't act, someone else will, and I will lose my place, the place into which I am so unknowingly habitually ingrained that I cannot envisage an alternative. In this sense, the cynic feels simultaneously as victim and as martyr – behind the façade of collaboration there is a vulnerable unhappiness and the need to cry for lost innocence, for the haunting dreams of a radically improved situation'. Sloterdijk, Peter. *Critique of Cynical Reason*. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota, 1987. Later, Sloterdijk again gestures towards a notion of cynicism not ideologically exhausted, more tormented than the bored hedon of chapter 1, describing cynicism as a 'perversely complicated structure [...] more melancholy than false; it is a consciousness that, under the compulsions of self-preservation continues to

knowingly going against its better knowledge: "To act against better knowledge is today the global situation in the superstructure; it [cynicism] knows itself to be without illusions and yet to have been dragged down by the "power of things."⁹¹ A good way to make sense of these "echoes," "dreams," "better knowledge" and subordination to the "power of things" is to posit a cynicism composed of persistent ideals struggling in a world which refuses to embrace them. Put simply, we are not nostalgic about what we don't value. Furthermore, when Sloterdijk claims that cynics "struggle to live with the plurality of ideologies,"⁹² and reduces debate and critique to hostile competition in defence of the "correct falseness" we should ask why would Enlightened False Consciousness have opponents? Let alone feel compelled to attack specific ideals/ideologies? And if cynicism is "post-ideological" merely feigning investment why feign liberalism? Sloterdijk claims that cynicism belies an equal distaste for all ideologies but if this were true the cynic would have no intellectual motivation to "take a side." In the examples Sloterdijk provides of debates between cynical Marxists, Liberals, and Anarchists⁹³ he claims that they reduce to 'arguments about the right way to be pessimistic'⁹⁴ but why would a consciousness exhausted of commitments

run itself, though run down, in a permanent moral self-denial'. But this is inconsistent with Sloterdijk's definition of cynicism as both false and enlightened to that falseness.

⁹¹ Sloterdijk, Peter. *Critique of Cynical Reason*. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota, 1987. Chapter 1.

⁹² Sloterdijk, Peter. *Critique of Cynical Reason*. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota, 1987.

⁹³ 'the religious criticize the areligious and vice versa, whereby each side has in its repertoire a metacritique of the ideology critique used by the opposing side: the moves in the dialogue between the Marxists and liberals are to a large extent fixed, likewise those between Marxists and anarchists, as well as those between anarchists and liberals [and] one knows pretty well what natural scientists and representatives of the humanities will accuse each other of'. Sloterdijk, Peter. *Critique of Cynical Reason*. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota, 1987. P. 20.

⁹⁴ Sloterdijk, 98 – 99.

recognize a right way? The notion of an invested cynicism better explains this behaviour.⁹⁵

There are also reasons internal to Cynical Liberalism to prefer this model. For Cynical Liberalism, Enlightened False Consciousness functions only at the level of conscious self-identification and belies an unconscious ritually internalized commitment to capitalism. A key element in this picture is the assumption of a constitutive and inadmissible guilt or discomfort with the ills of capitalism, for it is the repression of which that manifests in the tripartite psychic structure of professed criticisms of capitalism, cynical resignation in response, and commodity fetishism. Therefore, the guilt and/or discomfort must remain an energetic source. But if there were not genuine commitments at its heart, this guilt would be incapable of fuelling repression and fantasy.⁹⁶ The account of Cynical Liberalism has the cynic secretly enjoying the failures of liberalism, feigning commitment to alleviate guilt but if not at some level committed why would it insist on that mask? surely there are other sources to alleviate capitalist guilt. Supposing idealistic cynicisms, torn between ideals, critique,

⁹⁵ In Sloterdijk, the competition to expose and refute the “opponent” is prefaced on a latent valuation of specific ideals, whereas for truly ideologically exhausted cynicism such desire would be absent. For example, while the “Marxist cynic” is suspicious of its own claims to be beyond false consciousness it nevertheless regards this false consciousness as superior to alternatives. The same would be true for any cynic desperate to refute its opponents. So, not only does the cynic value intellectual superiority it values a specific theoretical framework. The hostility then comes from combining this sustained commitment with highly tuned critical faculties, a fraught combination of superiority and vulnerability. This is the kind of dissonance likely to manifest in panic when its “affiliations” are challenged, prefaced on the fragile hope of being the least naïve.

⁹⁶ It could be objected here that the social pressure to identify with liberalism could provide the libidinal energy through a super-egoic prohibition of illiberalism diverting its disavowal into an inadmissible guilt capable of fueling this pattern of repression and fantasy. This could function however successfully the population responsible for upholding this normative pressure acts in accordance with it. My reply is twofold. Firstly, again, why pick liberalism? It is not the only possibility within normative culture. Secondly, even conceding this possibility, among the guilty cynics there are surely some, and I would wager most, whose guilt traces back to genuine “liberal” investments.

and trauma in various degrees of transparency in relation to their commitments better accounts for this condition. This account also benefits from explaining Lorrie Moore's characters, and since they speak to definitive features of cynicism we can surely attest to – hopelessness, rage against idealism, a peculiar hostility towards liberal idealism, proselytization, self-assertion, and a refusal to self-criticism – we can also suggest that it better accounts for real cynicisms.⁹⁷

Our picture of a genuinely invested but torn cynicism involves a pain compelled repression of hope. In repression the subject bars trauma from entering conscious experience. But there are certain symptoms of repression, experiences or behaviors resulting from the repressed investment exerting continued influence upon the agent. Due to the censorship of repression the agent remains largely unaware of the return of the repressed and is compelled to preemptively disavow it. Within Extreme Liberal Cynicism this manifests in an inability to disregard and eradicate doubts sown by a latent idealism. In Benna's case the repression refers to her liberal commitments and returns in a manic refusal of, and hostility towards, bourgeoisie liberalism. In Susan's case, the repression refers to the efficacy of liberal ideals, and its returns is preemptively disavowed by a reified and hostile hopelessness. In both cases repression

⁹⁷ Perhaps we should pause to substantiate some of these claims, firstly, that invested cynicism reserved a peculiar vitriol for its own ideology. As well as in our literary phenomenology - Benna's startlingly hypocritical mocking of bourgeois ideals, and Susan's savvy ironicizing of liberal naïveté - examples are easy to find in popular contemporary Western culture: From call out culture, the hip mocking of the hipster, the dark critique of liberalism in popular visual media from Black Mirror to Get Out, and 4channers' ironically endorsing Trump in protest of "Tumblr liberalism," to the criticisms of traditional ethical theory in philosophy classrooms and conferences, or the ostracization of philosophers who remain committed to "traditional" ethical models (Singer, Nussbaum, Chomsky, Rawls, etc.), the twisted delight in pointing out the gulf between societal values and practices, and the mocking and bringing down of those who fail in their attempt to live up to liberal ideals. Concerning the obstinate refusal to self-criticism again, the hostile defensiveness of cynical attitudes is often as apparent as is the bankruptcy of its promise of intellectual superiority. This obstinacy is surely a common feature of cynicism.

is enabled by universal and aggressive cynical critique, the assumption of intellectual superiority, and the refusal to auto-critique, and has the consequence of failing the investments that compel it.

This model better explains why, for the cynic, hopelessness may be preferable to hope. The grief associated with the lack of justice, equality, and freedom in the world and vulnerability of these ideals to critique compounded by the fact that their achievement requires global cooperation, culminates in an unbearable grief. Hopelessness is the manifestation of the repression of this trauma. When overwhelmed by the inhumanity of man and the critical instability of ideals, left feeling unable or incapable of intervening in a meaningful way, or helplessly dependent on the unlikelihood of cooperation, liberal hopes are unbearable. The reification of hopelessness validates and alleviates feelings of guilt, pain, and powerlessness. In this contest extreme cynical hopelessness provides a preferable option, a fantasy achieved by absolutizing the powers it opposes. Just as for the Cynical Liberal, this condition fantasizes its courage-to-truth, its ability to see things “as they are” for the commitment to truth demands the belief that its fatalism is realistic and therefore superior to hope. At extremes, this results in a subjectivity void of responsibility and commitment to the structural conditions of the world. In this way, the cynic feels victim to its vision of a brutal world which Sloterdijk calls its ‘cancer-ridden consciousness of reality’⁹⁸ and a martyr for the optimism denied by it. In this way cynicism’s sense of victimhood and

⁹⁸ (Sloterdijk, Peter. Eldred, Michael. and Adelson, Leslie A. “Cynicism: The Twilight of False Consciousness” *New German Critique*, No. 33, *Modernity and Postmodernity* (Autumn, 1984), pp. 190 – 206).

martyrdom are products of an unconscious wish-fulfilling reification of fantasies through which the cynic is immunized against the painfulness of hope.

This model also allows us to make good sense of Extreme Liberal Cynicism's narcissism, hostile obstinacy, and arrogant dismissiveness. If part of the trauma that compels cynical repression is the realization that the possibility of its own fulfilment is in the hands of a global community over which it has little control, then the short-term "solution" to this trauma works in part through disassociating itself from others. On our model, the failure of Liberal Cynicism's disempowerment is compounded by the realization that solutions require cooperation it deems unlikely. Which is to say, liberal hopes are radically dependent on, indeed vulnerable to, others. The reification of hopelessness then, enables a refusal and disavowal of vulnerable inter-dependency. It is unsurprising that this disavowal of dependency would manifest in the assumption of intellectual superiority. This picture of a smug retreat into the comforts of fabricated independence also makes better sense of Sloterdijk's claim that in cynical 'self-preservation' the ego 'withdraws' into a 'worldless inwardness' and that it 'leaves reality behind.'⁹⁹

This picture also explains Extreme Cynicism's lust for attacking ideologies, ideals, and idealisms as emanating from a latent inability to fully disregard the vulnerability and failures of its own commitments. Idealism is a threatening reminder of the liberal cynic's repression and this threat is met with a panicked hostility reflex targeting that which is repressed. Concerning why cynicisms prevalent within liberal

⁹⁹ (Sloterdijk, Peter. Eldred, Michael. and Adelson, Leslie A. "Cynicism: The Twilight of False Consciousness" *New German Critique*, No. 33, Modernity and Postmodernity (Autumn, 1984), pp. 190 - 206).

culture reserve such vitriol for liberal ideals, on this model, because it is the consequence of an impossible repression of liberalism, liberal ideals pose a unique threat to cynical denial. In this way, cynical vitriol stems from a panicked refusal of the returning repressed. Concerning the need to proselytize, self-assert, and refuse auto-critique, a cynicism suffering from fear and traumatized pessimism and reifying the forces that compel it so as to eclipse pain needs to validate a hopelessness in which it doesn't full believe, it is not surprising that this manifests as a panicked and desperate obstinacy.¹⁰⁰

This triad of symptoms speaks to another feature of cynicism's ill-eclipsed pain, the fear of that enlightenment will render, or has rendered even the limited human agency of cynical refusal and resignation, in an unregulated or "free" sense, no longer

¹⁰⁰ This complex mixture of fear of further enlightenment, refusal to auto-critique, and hostility for "its own" ideals can be measured by cynicism's association with irony which, from Benna's and Susan's sarcasm to the sardonic irony of "left" satirical comedy, and the Tumblr vs. 4chan online culture wars etc., is an easy association to spot. (Sloterdijk notices cynicism's penchant for irony: 'if one is talking about cynical "reason," then initially this formula completely takes cover behind [...] cynical irony'. (Sloterdijk, Peter. *Critique of Cynical Reason*. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota, 1987. P. 401) 'In the new cynicism, a detached negativity comes through that scarcely allows itself any hope, at most a little irony and pity' (Ibid Pg7.) despite drawing out this connection Sloterdijk does not psychoanalyze the emotional purpose cynical irony plays, and Žižek assumes it a tool whereby the unconsciously subservient cynic furthers the ends of late capitalism.) Our model can explain irony as a mechanism through which cynicism may attempt to alleviate cognitive dissonance. Irony suits a condition torn between avowal and disavowal and exhibiting a panicked contempt for idealism. This association also suits a liberally invested cynicism as a failed response to suffering. Just as irony offers an escape from the risks of commitment, cynicism offers an escape from the pain of unrealizable hope. To ironicize hope, is to arm against the pain of its failure. This is a negative freedom; from the grief, which belief in justice, non-violence, and equality etc. can provoke in a world where such ideals struggle. But this is a false promise, a fantasy, an object of cruel optimism, because of a crucial difference between irony and cynicism. Invested cynicism never breaks free from their constitutive ideals. It may repress or deny them, but it cannot escape their pull. That which Liberal Cynicism seeks to be free from, is necessarily constitutive of it, and so it finds itself in a bind, attempting but failing to detach from itself. Because invested cynicism is a traumatized response to failed hope, hope is therefore its necessary condition. Thus, cynicism, by attacking the very values on which it depends, cannot provide the freedom it promises, from the pain of hope in a world it deems corrupt. For a prolonged discussion on cynical irony see: Barnes, Will. "The Rise of Cynical Irony," in *Distributing Worlds Through Aesthetic Encounters* Eds. Josh Stoll and Brandon Underwood, Cambridge Scholars Press, Newcastle upon Tyne, UK, 2017.

viable.¹⁰¹ While assuming itself enlightened Liberal Cynicism resists auto-critique out of a fear which emanates from its reification of hopelessness, an intuition that even cynical agency is a myth. For Sloterdijk, cynical indulgence averts a frightening encounter with an abyssal meaninglessness. Extreme cynical obstinacy then, incorporates a libidinal investment in avoiding this nihilism, sustaining itself through thinking: “I am right, therefore I am.” This conviction though is panicked by the fear that auto-critique will destroy the cynic’s sense of intellectual superiority, forcing a loss of that to which the cynic desperately clings: itself. In addition to a depressed sigh exclaiming that critique has gone too far, the cynic suffers a deeper angst, that it could go even further. Thus, a self-loving need to preserve its ego is panicked by an inadmissible fear that this is critically unstable. The response is that even with all its criticisms of naiveté, cynicism is arrogant, requires validation, and furiously resists self-interrogation. Afraid of full self-enlightenment, unknowingly holding on to its remaining naiveté, the cynic manically and unknowingly preserves a confused sense of self-worth through obstinacy, self-assertion, and proselytization.¹⁰²

Conclusion: A critique of liberal cynicism

For Sloterdijk and Žižek, cynicism is a temporally unfolded consequence of the Enlightenment built into the contemporary liberal paradigm.¹⁰³ It is the result of the

¹⁰¹ See Bewes, 199.

¹⁰² It may be objected that this condition of egoistic self-defensiveness in the face of intuiting the vulnerability of the ego is enough of a libidinal investment to account for the cynical hostility, proselytization, and desperate self-assertion, the question would remain, why the specific relationship with Liberal belief. My model allows for alternative cynicisms, I think that a liberal cynicism plagued by this critique born fear, is not possible, but familiar.

¹⁰³ ‘Enlightenment does not penetrate into social consciousness simply as an unproblematic bringer of light. Where it has its effect, a twilight arises, a deep ambivalence. We will characterize this ambivalence as the atmosphere in which, in the middle of a snarl of factual self-preservation with moral self-denial,

legacy of critique yielding to the tides of capitalism beneath a façade of liberalism. For both, the cynical consciousness discloses a universal dishonesty and remains in a hypocritical relationship with liberal ideals, acting as if they are false, yet professing belief therein. While for Sloterdijk the consequent complex is “schizoid and miserable,” for the Cynical Liberal pain is avoided through critiquing illiberalism, feigning cynical resignation, and commodity fetishism. On both accounts cynicism is both invested and not invested in liberal ideals. Although in practice its ideals are that of brute capitalist self-interest, Cynical Liberalism is compelled by a guilt that traces back to contrary investments. And while Sloterdijk’s cynic is ideologically exhausted, it mourns for “lost” liberal ideals crushed under the weight of a crude view of contemporary life. Reflection on this tension helped us distinguish a cynicism torn between liberal ideals and their perceived failures, beleaguered and in pain. This picture benefits from rendering Sloterdijk’s picture and Liberal Cynicism consistent, fitting our examples, and better accounting for cynicism’s hopelessness, rage against ideals, and peculiar hatred for naïve liberalism, as well as its need for validation, its need to proselytize, and its refusal to auto-critique.¹⁰⁴ The inverse of Cynical Liberalism, this cynicism acts as if liberalism were false while believing it to be true, suffering from a painful cognitive dissonance as

cynicism crystallizes.’ Sloterdijk, Peter. *Critique of Cynical Reason*. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota, 1987, p. 22. ‘Enlightenment is a process in time, a form of evolution. [...] Analogous to a flame, its energy is most intense at the center and dies down at the periphery. Starting from the pioneers and masters of reflective intelligence in philosophy and the arts [...] and is finally reflected back by pure misery that can no longer be enlightened.’ Ibid 83. Sharon Stanley captures this historical claim: ‘Žižek contrasts today’s form of ideology with a “pre-cynical” ideology, implying a temporal dimension to the triumph of cynicism. Indeed, as Sloterdijk tells the story, cynicism emerges wholesale after critique has performed its final unmasking’.

Stanley, Sharon. “Retreat from Politics: The Cynic in Modern Times.” *Polity* 39.3 (2007): 384-407.

¹⁰⁴ One quick example would be that paradigmatic example of liberal cynicism, Charlie Brooker’s *Black Mirror*, viciously attacking the liberal value of artistic freedom in the admittedly hyperbolic, but unforgettably crude and brilliant pilot. Brooker, Charlie. “National Anthem.” *Black Mirror*. Dir. Otto Bathurst. Channel 4. London, 4 Dec. 2011. Television.

a consequence. While it hurts, the causes of this pain are repressed. As such they are likely to manifest in superiority complexes, ennui, indignance, rage, despair, self-assertion, irrationality, reification, and aggressive anti-idealism. While professing to be anti-idealistic and post-ideological, it is not; its painfulness and insecurity evince persistent liberal investments manifest in self-deceptive forms. We call this Extreme Liberal Cynicism. In our first example, torn between ideals and critique, Benna Carpenter regards positive individual and political transformation in line with liberal ideals as desirable but fails them due to insincerity, critique, and trauma. In this form, Extreme Liberal Cynicism fantasizes a post-idealistic and post-ideological status. In the second example, while assuming liberalism's superiority, Susan absolutizes its inefficacy, more explicitly abandoning it. Both cynicisms then, as well as invested in ideals, are hypocritical and insufficiently self-critical. In the first case, in failing to recognize dependency on ideals and failing to apply the same degree of criticism it applies to others to its own. In the second, in its "secret commitment" – concealed by a self-confident pseudo-realism – to the superiority of liberalism and its absolute inefficacy. We will hereafter associate Extreme Liberal Cynicism with hypocritically insufficient self-critique as well as the failed avowal and/or abandonment of its constitutive idealism, labelling these forms of "Inauthentic Ideology Critique."¹⁰⁵ This inauthenticity is a manifestation of repression. In Benna's case the repression refers to her liberal commitments and returns in a manic refusal of, and hostility towards,

¹⁰⁵ Taking "inauthentic" to refer to this combination of ideology critique and emotionally compelled denial, this charged language is appropriate as it represses the fear of vulnerability to critique and the appearance of naiveté, a vulnerability which compels hostility, a self-sustaining obstinacy, and a neurotic delight in exposing the folly of idealists, particularly "naïve" liberals, and for normalizing their pariah status.

bourgeoise liberalism. In Susan's case, the repression refers to the efficacy of liberal ideals, and its returns is preemptively disavowed by a reified and hostile hopelessness. In both cases repression is enabled by universal and aggressive cynical critique, hopelessness, assumption of intellectual superiority and the refusal to auto-critique, and has the consequence of failing to serve the investments that compel it.

Our analysis revealed pain as the inherent problem of extreme cynicism, and evidence of a constellation of ideals persisting within it. This structure may have positive consequences for mounting a response. Firstly, if Liberal Cynicism were as it professes post-idealistic or indeed post-ideological, then immanent critique would be effectively impossible, but it isn't, therefore the possibility remains. If its constitutive idealism and unsuccessfully pain-relieving fantasy were made apparent, so too may the motivations for an overcoming which, coupled with cynicism's critical will-to-truth, could drive a transformative self-interrogation. Liberal Cynicism then, may contain both the motivation and resources for avoiding its pernicious extremes.

Chapter 2: Master Cynicism

the best lack all conviction,
while the worst are full of passionate intensity.¹⁰⁶

[at] the height of conscious statesmanship, serious thinking is invaded by signals attesting to a radical ironicization of ethics and of social convention. It is as if the general laws were only meant for the stupid, while those in the know smile with fatal cleverness. More precisely: the powerful smile this way [...] no longer imbued with communal loyalty or sympathetic to any recognizable code of conduct, we have exemplars looking down at the ants from the glass palaces of the financial elite, in the courtrooms, in parliament, even the palace [...] The French moralists called it self-love (*amour-propre*); Nietzsche called it the will to power. If Marxism spoke in psychological terms [...] it would call its original motive the striving for profit.¹⁰⁷

“Master Cynicism” is uninhibited by guilt, fear, or pain, it is *more successfully* post-idealistic than Liberal Cynicism, and takes advantage of ideals, naivety, ideology, and cynicism in the pursuit of power. On the Sloterdijkian model, at the emergence of cynicism at the enlightenment one group attempted to abandon dogma and perpetuate reason and justice, and another used the truths and illusions revealed by the enlightenment for retaining power. For us, the former is the forefather of Liberal Cynicism and the latter, of Master Cynicism, which we take up from Sloterdijk’s mention of a ‘modern, self-reflective master’s cynicism, [...] the manipulative tendencies of those in power.’¹⁰⁸

¹⁰⁶ Yeats, W. B. “The Second Coming”, in *The Collected Poems of W.B. Yeats*. New York: Macmillan, 1956. (my italics).

¹⁰⁷ Sloterdijk, Peter. *Critique of Cynical Reason*. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota, 1987. P. 20.

¹⁰⁸ Sloterdijk, Peter. *Critique of Cynical Reason*. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota, 1987. The term “Master cynicism” was first used by Alan Keenan “The Twilight of the Political? A Contribution to the Democratic Critique of Cynicism.” *Theory & Event*. The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998. This was adopted by William Chaloupka and David Mazella. The moves in this chapter benefit from Keenan’s tripartite distinction between 1) the power wielding “master cynic” 2) the “cynical insider” who benefits from their participation, and 3) the “outsider” whose cynicism stems from powerlessness. This roughly fits onto my distinction of Master, Mastered, and Extreme Liberal Cynicism. Per Keenan, “Insider cynicism” mimics the

A literary-genealogy: Lucian

By developing and adding to Sloterdijk's literary genealogy we can distinguish Master Cynicism as structurally distinct from Liberal Cynicism and begin to explain the unique threat it poses. In *The Passing of Peregrinus*¹⁰⁹ Lucian responds to the Kynic martyr throwing himself on a pyre at the climax of the Olympic Games arguing that Peregrinus uprooted Greek Kynicism's parodic exposé of false idols and adherence to bucolic ethics. The *Passing* marks the split from ascetic counter-cultural Kynicism into forms prefiguring both Liberal and Master Cynicism. Concerning Liberal Cynicism, we see here the internalized repression of guilt manifesting in vitriol, typical of its extremes.¹¹⁰ As Sloterdijk remarks 'Lucian's laughter reveals more hate than sovereignty. In it there is the sarcasm of someone who feels himself put on the spot.'¹¹¹ That this cold diatribe was on behalf of a powerful elite also signposts Master Cynicism,

powerful due to a mixture of fear of economic precariousness and hopes to enjoy the riches the powerful may bestow upon them, this is one variety of what we are calling "Mastered Cynicism." The "cynical outsiders" are victim to the whims of the powerful and succumb to an apathetic resignation upon realizing their status. While Keenan, Chaloupka, and Mazella's taxonomy favors a distinction between the culpability of the rulers and the petit bourgeoisie in contrast to the victimhood of the proletariat, my presentation of Mastered cynicism contains the possibility of comparable culpability across these divides.

¹⁰⁹ Samosate, Lucien De. "The Passing Of Peregrinus." Trans. A. M. Harmon. Lucian. London: William Heinemann, 1962. Sloterdijk's analysis *Critique of Cynical Reason* pgs. – 169 – 174.

¹¹⁰ On this reading, the thirst for fame, status, and glory Lucian exposes and ridicules in Peregrinus, is carried out with such ferocity because a similar pragmatism motivated Lucian's career from self-proclaimed Barbarian to royal bureaucrat, and that this unacknowledged hypocrisy comes through in Lucian's vitriol. This potential for latent cognitive dissonance and the unhappy consciousness of Sloterdijk's cynic was a constant possibility in Lucian, who, later in life, became a public servant of the Empire in Egypt, exhibiting the torn schizoid consciousness of living in accordance with what one ethically opposes. In utilizing his talents to enforce his masters' power, Lucian sold his "authenticity" for a secure salary and domiciled stability then repressed the pain of this act, like Liberal Cynicism. As a career rhetorician Lucian mastered the methods of manipulation, exploitation, and deception, as well as materialism and social climbing, "qualities" he perhaps superimposed onto Peregrinus' comparably courageous asceticism. In this sense, this is a proto-Liberal Cynicism due its unsuccessfully veiled dissonance.

¹¹¹ Sloterdijk, Peter. *Critique of Cynical Reason*. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota, 1987.

using ideals and ideology critique in the service of power,¹¹² and “Mastered Cynicism,” the condition of being seduced by the promise of gain, bowing to the authority of the masters, and reducing its own agency to objective causes, thereby excusing disengagement with alternative ideals.

Mephistopheles

Sloterdijk’s ‘first model of modern master’s cynicism’¹¹³ is Goethe’s Mephistopheles.¹¹⁴ Therein, the Devil’s representative uses ideology critique to manipulate his victim into surrendering power. Appealing to a relativism which Sloterdijk calls ‘knowledge cynicism’¹¹⁵ Mephistopheles promises escape from confusion, uncertainty, and despair by persuading Faust that his conscience is a remnant of an archaic, irrational, and superstitious worldview and by selling hedonism as the solution. Faust represents our Liberal Cynic, torn between the competing impulses of enlightened ideals and ideology critique, while Mephistopheles is the Master Cynic, concealing sense-materialism and brutal self-interest behind opportunistic intellectualism and other fashionable and socially acceptable masks. He is exploitative, cultivated, and happy. Appearing at the peak of Faust’s suicidal despair,

¹¹² It is a cold, joyless laughter, far from the Menippean lineage, with which Lucian exhorts an entire sect to commit mass suicide, grotesquely pre-figuring the forthcoming holocaust whereby hundreds of thousands of dissidents perished in the arenas and on the pyres of the Roman Empire. Lucian’s disinhibition is astounding, using both the hypocritical affiliation with “true” Kynicism and the cold-hearted cruelty and intelligence of the powerful, as well as mocking unsophisticated and hypocritical attempts at exposing power as a “justification” for participation in power. ‘Is it truly not a charming sight to view a fried-up old manikin and, in doing so, to breathe in the foul fat-vapors?’ Samosate, Lucian De. *The Passing of Peregrinus*. Trans. A. M. Harmon. Lucian. London: William Heinemann, 1962.

¹¹³ Sloterdijk, Peter. *Critique of Cynical Reason*. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota, 1987. P. 364. Sloterdijk does not refer to master cynicism as a distinct variety, just an expression of the ubiquitous cynicism by the powerful, hence master’s not master cynicism.

¹¹⁴ Goethe, Johann Wolfgang Von, and David Luke. *Faust*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1994.

¹¹⁵ ‘If his horns and claws are taken away, there remains of Mephistopheles nothing more than a bourgeois philosopher.’ Sloterdijk, Peter *Critique of Cynical Reason*. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota, 1987. 187, 175.

Mephistopheles is the inversion of Clarence to George Bailey¹¹⁶ - an “angel” offering a perspective upon which life is made possible. Only here a hell’s angel who entices the despairing enlightener by offering to pacify his tortured soul with the promise of morally unrestricted experience. But, of course, like cynicism, the sacrifice is not worth the rewards, and Faust’s tortured soul while freed from indecision, is condemned to despair:

[Faust] would gladly banish the Devil back into the shape of the Kynical dog, or still further, into that of the snake. But all paths back to naivety are closed to him.¹¹⁷

The Marquise De Sade

In The Marquise De Sade’s *Philosophy in the Bedroom*¹¹⁸ the “cynic Domancé” shamelessly veils a philosophy of sexually depraved brutal dehumanization and despicable cruelty beneath a skillfully perverted liberalism. In his manifesto for a new French revolution De Sade mounts a deconstruction of liberty as part of a deeply disturbing brutalization of a child. By seducing and contorting Eugene’s vulnerable and naïve lust for freedom into a grotesque cruelty, like Mephistopheles did Faust, Domancé erodes the remaining humanity from his victim and replaces relativistic confusion and uncertainty with sociopathic single-mindedness.¹¹⁹ In a strategic exculpation of

¹¹⁶ *It's a Wonderful Life*. Dir. Frank Capra. Perf. James Stewart, Donna Reed, Lionel Barrymore. RKO, 1946. Film.

¹¹⁷ Sloterdijk, Peter. *Critique of Cynical Reason*. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota, 1987.

¹¹⁸ Sade, Marquise De. *Philosophy in the Boudoir, Or, The Immoral Mentors*. Trans. Joachim Neugroschel. New York: Penguin, 2006.

¹¹⁹ The argument is skillfully structured, beginning from acceptable premises to increasingly radical conclusions in a gradual excitation and deconstruction of liberal ideals. By dismissing the possibility that corrupt religious institutions could be reformed, arguing instead that liberty requires that religion be violently extinguished. Since the refusal to admit the possibility of religion co-existing with freedom is a very attractive position to many revolutionaries, this line of argument aims at seducing liberalism into the glamor of violence, calling for “authenticity” and “sincerity” through the “completion” of the enlightenment project, a completion amounting to the violent destruction of all which opposes it,

unyielding and barbaric self-interest Domancé appeals to the morality of anti-egoism to deconstruct the rule of law, liberty, and property.¹²⁰ Provoking a compassionate sensibility in order to corrupt it, De Sade extends his critique of property in terms familiar to feminism. The seduction begins with a persuasive premise that ownership of people is immoral either in the form of slavery or marriage.¹²¹ Then, in a cynical rhetorical transfiguration De Sade argues that on the same logic rape is justifiable. The “argument” is that once women have been freed from the bondage of marriage males are freed from the bondage of restraining the drives for which marriage provided a legitimized outlet. Instead of lauding the emancipation from institutionalized misogyny, Domancé defends rape as the authentic form of a natural impulse which our institutions and conventions crudely cover over.¹²² The hyper-privileged hate criminal dons the mask of Diderot, Voltaire, and Rousseau, deconstructing virtue, modesty, chastity,

specifically, to extend critique from libertory protest to iconoclasm, and ultimately, annihilation: ‘O you who have axes ready to hand, deal the final blow to the tree of superstition; be not content to prune its branches: uproot entirely a plant whose effects are so contagious [...] Let the total extermination of cults and denominations therefore enter into the principles we broadcast throughout all Europe. Let us not be content with breaking scepters; we will pulverize the idols forever’ De Sade, Marquise. *Philosophy in the Boudoir, Or, The Immoral Mentors*. Trans. Joachim Neugroschel. New York: Penguin, 2006.

¹²⁰ For example, in bearing out the hypocrisy of a state where everyone is born equal, yet are rendered unequal by the rules of commerce, nepotism, inheritance, and prohibiting theft, Domancé performs the dangerous seduction whereby positive intentions and convictions, in a context of confusion of discomfort, can be warped through deceptive intellectual bewitchment into dehumanizing fundamentalism. In this vein, De Sade inverts his challenge that the state is essentially immoral, by smuggling in an argument for embracing egoism as the best model for virtue within such a state, building an argument that survival requires identification with the dominant value of self-preservation. This consciously concealed inconsistency belies the shameless self-interest of a fundamentalist argumentative rhetoric, where any ideal is utilized under the domination of an unopposed impulse, in this case the impulse for cruel power, fueled by an inalienable self-righteousness invulnerable to experiential learning or logical elucidation.

¹²¹ ‘Never may an act of possession be exercised upon a free being; the possession of a woman is no less unjust than the possession of slaves; [...] all the ties which can bind a woman to a man are quite as unjust as illusory’ Sade, Marquise De. *Philosophy in the Boudoir, Or, The Immoral Mentors*. Trans. Joachim Neugroschel. New York: Penguin, 2006.

¹²² ‘What objections have you to the ravisher? What will you say, when he replies to you that, as a matter of fact, the injury he has committed is trifling indeed, since he has done no more than place a little sooner the object he has abused in the very state in which she would soon have been put by marriage and love’. Ibid.

beneficence, charity, and sensibility, and yet, while the Philosophes wore a will-to-truth and egalitarianism beneath their masks, De Sade's conceals only ugliness and brutality. Unfettered by guilt, Domancé has no qualms about concealing his savage cynicism behind the pretense of conformity to popular virtue and will appeal to any ideals, argument, or rhetorical strategy to do so. For example, he persuades Eugene to indulge in the basest betrayal of a sexually weaponized matricide while preserving the outward appearance of virtue. In this harrowing example we see the crudest example of Master Cynicism: the abandonment of all ideals except pure domination. This is not the extremity of cynicisms which resign in despair, this is Goethe's Devil among us, exacerbating and delighting in the demise of the least fortunate and conducting unimaginable dehumanizations. Domancé is a grotesque extreme of the comfortably hypocritical cynic gleefully swapping disguises at the masquerade ball in celebration of brute self-interest. As Louisa Shea's generous description begins to explain, through Domancé De Sade represents enlightened liberalism destroying itself and releasing a deep potential for barbaric inhumanity as the result:

Cynicism emerges in Sade as a philosophy of moral nihilism and self-seeking gratification that strongly presages our modern use of the term. [De Sade] has learnt the lessons of the enlightenment [...] but rather than seek to build a better society on the rubble of the old, he retreats into an attitude of pragmatic opportunism.¹²³

The Grand Inquisitor

The state must know the truth, before it can sensor it.¹²⁴

¹²³ Shea, Louisa. *The Cynic Enlightenment: Diogenes in the Salon*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 2010.

¹²⁴ Sloterdijk, Peter. *Critique of Cynical Reason*. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota p. 78.

Sloterdijk cites Dostoevsky's *Grand Inquisitor*¹²⁵ as primary example of a 'new cynical political conservatism.'¹²⁶ The story, as Karamazov tells it, the Cardinal of Seville witnesses the return of Christ, but instead of paying homage to the returned Lord burns him as a heretic. Unrepentant, he explains that Jesus' ideological naiveté poses unacceptable social dangers, arguing that civilization requires institutional domination based in deception. For Sloterdijk, this provides a thought experiment through which neo-conservatism can be investigated.¹²⁷ Therein, power figures push back against freedom, tolerance, compassion, forgiveness, equality, and the institutions that serve justice and the people from the perspective of anthropological arguments that

¹²⁵ Dostoyevsky, Fyodor, Charles B. Guignon, and Constance Garnett. *The Grand Inquisitor: With Related Chapters from the Brothers Karamazov*. Indianapolis: Hackett Pub., 1993.

¹²⁶ Ibid. p. 182. 18. For quick contemporary examples, the Bill O'Reilly's, Anne Coulter's, Rush Limbaugh's, and Donald Trump's preaching the neo-conservative virtues of crude selfishness, and practicing as if economic slavery and warfare are required for a progressive civilization, all the while facilitating the expansion of those monstrous dehumanizing fruits of industrial materialism, under a wafer-thin veil of social conscience.

¹²⁷ While there is no necessary link between Master Cynicism and conservatism, nevertheless, conservative ideologies are more susceptible to it. This is because the sole ideal of Master Cynicism, power, appeals to conservatism's valorized notions of hierarchy and authority. Of course, Master Cynicism merely wants power, but this pursuit is compatible with the humble conservative ideals of duty, social immobility, obedience, and inequality. There are also crucial differences between conservatism and liberal progressivism that render the former more vulnerable to Master Cynicism. Today, that one's ideology may be contingent and subjected to critique occupies a privileged position within the collective imaginary. This is more threatening to conservative than progressive ideologies. Ideologies desirous of change are less threatened by their contested status, and critique has "more to say" against conservative traditions. We saw in our psychology of cynicism that Master Cynicism succeeds by placating anxiety, confusion, and fear. Thus, while there is no necessary link between conservatism and Master Cynicism, it is no surprise that Master Cynicism successfully targets, and exploits traumatized, impoverished, and disenfranchised conservatives, specifically, their identity insecurity and economic precariousness. As Mazella argues 'The public impatience or disenchantment with the messiness of genuine discussion can only lead to them to embrace the one political actor able to act unilaterally in this system, the master cynic untroubled by others' scruples. This may be the reason why popular discontent and cynicism often do not lead in the direction of progressive reforms, as one might expect, but toward a still more conservative embrace of those who already project power and authority.' Mazella, David. *The Making of Modern Cynicism* University of Virginia Press, Charlottesville: 2007, pg. 224.

humanity is essentially weak and self-destructive and needs an ordered framework of habit, certainty, and tradition to limit the natural tendency to barbarism: ¹²⁸

Those invested with power can, in all ages, confidently assume that the great majority have a horror of freedom and know no deeper urge than to surrender their freedom, to erect prisons around themselves, and to subjugate themselves to idols old and new.¹²⁹

The picture we are being drawn of Lucian's concealed self-beratement, the force compelling Faust's capitulation, and Mephistopheles's and Domancé's desire for domination are of the nature and appeal of a strategically conformist power cynicism.¹³⁰ And while this Master Cynical consciousness is split, it is not torn. Neither

¹²⁸ 'The Grand Inquisitor [...] is a prototype of modern (political) cynics. His bitter anthropology prompts him to believe that human beings must be and want to be deceived. Human beings require order, which in turn requires domination, and domination requires lies. Those who want to rule must accordingly make conscious use of religion, ideals, seduction, and (if necessary) violence. For them, everything, even the sphere of ends, becomes a means; modern grand politicians are total "instrumentalists" and disposers of values' Sloterdijk, Peter. *Critique of Cynical Reason*. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota, 1987. 'neo-conservatism benefits from exploiting the naivety it knows too well, that its minions must internalize certain fictions to carry genuine political influence, to mobilize the naïve will-to-work, just as in dogmatic religious communities, don't allow the danger of critical reflection to turn on yourself, double the efforts to turn it onto others, concerning "us" stop reflecting, preserve your values! [...] Its strength lies in the fact that people have, in addition to a realistic fear of war and crisis, a fear of freedom, a fear of themselves and their own possibilities'. Ibid.

¹²⁹ Ibid.

¹³⁰ Christopher Nolan's Batman is also helpful for defining Master Cynicism and in highlighting the spectrum of comportments between moderate and extreme Liberal and Master Cynicism. An example of a Master Cynic from the Dark Knight Trilogy is Bane. Bane's candidacy amounts to his conscious exploitation of both naiveté and Liberal Cynicism for purely selfish aims. Bane's comfortable disinhibited duplicity and appeal to naiveté and cynicism is seen in the "undue" process of his public courts; a strategic attempt to inoculate his tyrannical rule against protest under the guise of transparency, accountability, and equal distribution of juridical power. The appeal can be seen in Bane's speeches at a football stadium and outside a prison, where he excites naïve cynical liberalism into the basest revolutionary zeal to stir up the violence that would justify his damnation of humanity: 'We come here not as conquerors, but as liberators to return control of this city to the people. Tomorrow you claim what is rightfully yours'. *A Trump for Liberal Cynics*, Bane feeds on the cynical consolation - the belief that all humanity is corrupt - exciting indignation as a smokescreen for manipulation. Bane appeals to those who refuse to recognize the subtlety of the contemporary situation, and hunger for a simple leader with a simple narrative, which will cover over the many-sided truth and the existential discomfort the pluralism on which cohabitation depends. Bane willfully and adroitly exploits many features of an essentially self-assertive "slave" morality; the non-self-implicating condemnation of privilege, a repressed egoistic desire for dominance dangerously clothed in the (self) righteous indignation where egoistic vengeance and retribution are transfigured as justified violence, aspects of the complex ideological blind sidedness whereby individual so frustrated with a "system" overlook the atrocious deficiencies in the proposed

Domancé, Mephistopheles, nor The Inquisitor recoil from cruelty, infamy, or deception. When the old Cardinal confesses that the church in the time of Charlemagne took the sword of worldly power into its own hands and sealed a pact with the Devil, the mood is one of pride and defiance rather than the cathartic release of therapeutic beginnings. This dangerous self-righteousness serves as solution to the schizoid painfulness of cynical consciousness; the idea that the rulers' exercising cynical domination is a sacrifice for the greater good, ameliorating dissonance by masking cruelty under a martyr's hood.¹³¹

For we who guard the mystery, we alone shall be unhappy. There will be thousands of millions of happy infants and one hundred thousand sufferers who have taken upon themselves the curse of knowledge of good and evil.¹³²

alternatives: symbolizing the politics of negativity and hate that have so marred contemporary American and European Politics. 'Harvey Dent was held up to you as a shining example of justice. You have been supplied with a false idol, a straw man, to placate, to stop you tearing down this corrupt city [...] We take Gotham from the corrupt, the rich. The oppressors of generations who've kept you down with the myth of opportunity. And we give it back to you, the people. Gotham is yours, none shall interfere. Do as you please. But start by storming Blackgate and freeing the oppressed! ... Step forward, those who would serve, for an army will be raised. The powerful will be ripped from their decadent nests and cast into the cold world the rest of us have known and endured. Courts will be convened. Spoils will be enjoyed. Blood will be shed. The police will survive, until they are ready to serve true justice. This great city will endure. Gotham will survive'. What marks Bane's attitude as definitive of Master Cynicism is that there is no ideology beneath this appeal and no ideology to which he will not appeal. There is no desire to include the people of Gotham in the elite he represents, indeed they are to be killed, and whatever ideology it suits them to project in order to seduce the people into subservience, they will utilize, be it socialism, communism, libertarianism, justice, etc. etc. Master Cynicism then, is the pure pursuit of power under the auspices of an "enlightened" post-ideological consciousness.

¹³¹ Where Jesus' supernatural compassion and love rose above the base destructive forces of tribalism and retribution, the Master Cynics' self-imposed martyrdom enables them to feel as if they have transcended "basic" "unsophisticated" human compassion. With this analysis, Sloterdijk shows how the rise of institutionalized righteous indignation sealed the split of the religion of Jesus from the religion of ecclesia, and the danger a compassionate community poses to the masters: 'It is the spirit of these institutions that is abhorred by any recollection of the magnificent primitive Christian freedom [...] It is not religion as religion that has to burn the returned Christ, but religion as Church, as analogue of the state, as institution; it is the state that fears the civil disobedience the religious are capable of; it is the army that condemns the spirit of Christian pacifism; it is the masters of the world of work who have a horror of people who place love, celebration of life, and creativity higher than slaving for the state, the rich, the army, etc.' Ibid.

¹³² Dostoyevsky, Fyodor, and Constance Garnett. *The Brothers Karamazov*. New York: Modern Library, 1929. p. 304.

For such a ruler, ideals can be made an instrument of politics, useful intellectual apparatuses to be used in the pursuit of power. This leads to a vast ideological schism between the ruled - the unenlightened false consciousness of the manipulated – and the rulers – the reflecting elites who have overcome yet camouflage themselves under the nation’s professed ideals. As the perfect spokesmen for Master Cynical power Machiavelli puts it: ‘There is nothing more important than appearing religious.’¹³³ Sloterdijk captures this well, defining this breed of cynicism as ‘without any illusions’ yet realizing ‘the functional necessity of illusions for the status quo. This is the way enlightenment works in the minds of those who have discovered the origins of power.’¹³⁴

A Critique of Master Cynicism

knowledge is power; being virtuous is seeming virtuous; essence is appearance; discovery is justification; peace is war; freedom is slavery; ignorance is strength.¹³⁵

Master Cynicism is a strategic appeal to ideology critique and ideals in pursuit of power.¹³⁶ While it may express allegiance to liberalism, Master Cynicism is cynical any-ism, comfortably donning whatever mask is required to serve its desire for domination. As we saw, the Liberal Cynic is miserable due to an unresolved and painful struggle

¹³³ Machiavelli, Niccolò, and Peter E. Bondanella. *The Prince*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2005.

¹³⁴ Sloterdijk, Peter. *Critique of Cynical Reason*. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota p. 32.

¹³⁵ Sloterdijk, Peter. *Critique of Cynical Reason*. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota, 1987.

¹³⁶ Although brought to fruition in institutionalized religion, Sloterdijk locates contemporary Master Cynicism’s apotheosis in the cleavage of church and state, the revolutionary years from French republicanism to Soviet communism, in the hands of ideology parasites callously exploiting the ideals behind those movements: ‘the more malicious aspects of the illusion of freedom are those beliefs the rulers are happy to see in the people who commit to austerities out of ideological commitment, while their leaders enjoy all they can – only those who lived before the revolution, or stay at its head, get the taste of the sweetness of life’ Ibid.

between ideals, ideology critique, and the world. Master Cynicism, by contrast, although split and hypocritical, replaces cognitive dissonance and psychological pain with disinhibited duplicity. Master Cynicism is rationalized and enjoyed without guilt.

Master Cynical shamelessness benefits from the history of ideology critique championed by the French moralists and Nietzsche, after whom the life-affirming liberative purport once accompanying the critique of a worn-out, hypocritical, and imperialistic morality was disastrously purged. As Sloterdijk explains ‘the resonance Nietzsche enjoyed among the imperialism had its moral foundation in the cynicism of self-disinhibition’¹³⁷ a willful duplicity that prefigures fascism and the totalitarianism of the left, right, and center: ‘this cynicism makes a continuum between a subtle philosophy and a brutal politics possible for the first time.’¹³⁸ On this understanding, once the hypocrisy of altruism and profound uncertainty were mainstream hypotheses the elite no longer need to appear moral or pay attention to facts. The previously inhibited duplicity has ‘shaken off existential ambiguities of all morality’¹³⁹ and enjoys a new nakedness. As a consequence, rather than struggle with the vulnerability of ideals Master Cynicism exploits it, securing rule and support not by its truth-value but by the promise of gain. While Liberal Cynicism retains a melancholic disappointment with falseness, the failure of its ideals, and the atrocities of advanced capitalism Master Cynicism embraces the status quo to which the Liberal Cynic begrudgingly defers, counsels complicity, and relishes the disinhibition ideology critique permits, capitalizing on moral, metaphysical, and epistemological decadence to seduce support.

¹³⁷ Ibid.

¹³⁸ Ibid.

¹³⁹ Ibid. P. 45

As Sloterdijk puts it 'when confronted with illegal enrichment, with robbery, the [master] cynical reaction consists in saying that legal enrichment is a lot more effective and, moreover, protected by the law. As Brecht puts it in his Three-penny Opera: 'what is the robbery of a bank compared to the founding of a new one?'¹⁴⁰

Cynicism & fascism: A totalitarian seduction

Extreme Liberal Cynicism enables Master Cynicism to reach such heights/depths by failing to successfully oppose the unscrupulousness the masters have pioneered¹⁴¹ and, as we saw in the cases of Faust and Eugene, lies in a precarious relation to its distant, disinhibited, and happier cousin, its painfulness leaving it vulnerable to Master Cynicism's seductive power. There are several ways in which this can occur, the first

¹⁴⁰ Sloterdijk, Peter. *Critique of Cynical Reason*. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota, 1987. pgs. 29-30 citing Brecht, Bertolt, Desmond Ivo. Vesey, and Eric Bentley. *The Three Penny Opera*. New York: Grove Weidenfeld, 1964.

¹⁴¹ This is a context we can all find ourselves in, where employees turn off the moral/ethical socio-political norms which govern their choices outside work, (relating to their families, to the common good, to basic human compassion, decency, and mutual respect) and defer to the governing norm of the profession, which in commerce, and increasingly health care, education, and politics, is to shift a product. This workplace pragmatism sheds responsibility by accepting as permissible governing norms which have been allowed to evolve independently of registers tethered to the necessities of interdependent human community. Without intervention, and when collected together into corporations, this "teleological suspension of the ethical" produces forces way beyond the sum of their parts, which more often than not, in influential sections of society, develop into formidable destructive power. Within these domains, parameters of acceptable behavior change considerably, yet remain bolstered by a sense of corporate duty. As Rudy Baylor in *The Rainmaker* sways 'Every lawyer, at least once in every case, feels himself crossing a line that he doesn't really mean to cross... it just happens... And if you cross it enough times it disappears forever. And then you're nothin but another lawyer joke. Just another shark in the dirty water.' The term "mob-mentality" is particularly fitting for the resemblances both to the mutually exculpating powers of collective violence and organized crime. Where the governing norms in a professional register serve to dictate behavior, the short cuts, minor discretions, and suspensions of the ethical multiply through time, - blamed on the "system," the next guy, or simply shirked - can produce a cavalcade of evil completely unexpected even by the few genuinely callous American Psychos in the conference rooms who happily benefit from systematic inhumanity. In short, extremer forms of Liberal Cynicism are ill-equipped to deal with this disinhibited ruling cynicism which has perpetuated and benefited from the current surge in "authenticity," militarism, glory, the undisputable evil of a foreign enemy, reclamation of national character, or empowerment of ethnic or national identity, conservatism, nationalism, tribalism, anti-humanitarianism, provincialism, and isolationism. As for Rudy Baylor, seeing this inherent vice, he drops out and resigns completely to preserve his innocence, giving up on the genuine good a career as a civil rights lawyer could achieve, an example again of the abandonment of liberal values through a trauma born reification of its absolute impracticality.

relates to how subjects under Master Cynicism are seduced by its promise of assuaging the painfulness of hope within totalizing narratives foreclosing the vulnerability of commitment:

The fascist state, with its stifling confusion of capital and folk ideology, idealism and brutalities deserves a unique philosophical predicate; the cynicism of cynicisms.¹⁴²

As well as lauding his emancipatory commitments, theory of embodied vitality, and the courage-to-truth, Sloterdijk also places a great deal of blame at the feet of Nietzsche for paving the way from enlightenment to fascism.¹⁴³ A similar ambivalence is found in Sloterdijk's reading of Martin Heidegger. While Sloterdijk welcomes Heidegger's critique of technological distraction and the somnambular of cynical conformism he warns that early Heidegger's solution – authenticity – is extremely dangerous. From Sloterdijk's warning we can account for Liberal Cynicism's unique vulnerability to the seductive and disastrous power of Master Cynicism.

This danger is best laid out in Sloterdijk's analysis of the Weimar Republic as an example of a culture analogous to our own.¹⁴⁴ The most urgent feature of the analogy is that cynicism rendered the traumatized German spirit susceptible to the lunacy of National Socialism precisely because it offered a solution to its pain based on a denial of vulnerability. For Sloterdijk, Heidegger's notion of *Das Man*¹⁴⁵ represents the contemporary cynic and was 'inconceivable without the precondition of the Weimar

¹⁴² Sloterdijk, Peter. *Critique of Cynical Reason*. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota, 1987. P. 243.

¹⁴³ 'With Diogenes, under the slogan Remint the Coins, there begins what will be called by the neokynic Nietzsche "the revaluating of all values," the cultural revolution of the "naked truth." Nietzsche, of course, ruins the point. His revaluation turns the Kynical rejection of power into a will to power; with this he changes sides and provides the powerful with a philosophy of disinhibition.' Ibid, P. 211 note 17.

¹⁴⁴ More specifically, Germany in the 80s, but the analogy stands.

¹⁴⁵ Heidegger, Martin. *Being and Time*. Trans. Macquarrie, John and Robinson, Edward. New York: Harper & Row Pubs., 1962, 2008.

Republic.¹⁴⁶ On this reading, Germany's loss of World War I and the humiliation of Versailles compelled a collective encounter with meaninglessness compounding the effects of the critique of traditional ideology on traditional values and identity per se. In response the call rose for the "authentic" self, a fantasy which laid the road to totalitarianism.¹⁴⁷

Only in the cynical, demoralized, and demoralizing climate of a postwar society [...] can an impulse be diverted out of the "Zeitgeist" into philosophy to observe existence "existentially" and to place everydayness in opposition to "authentic," consciously decided existence.¹⁴⁸

This downtrodden and confused cynicism was uniquely vulnerable to the seductively restorative narrative of authoritarianism because of its promise to recrystallize a fractured identity, silence the voices of guilt, and close off the door to nihilism. On Sloterdijk's reading, the will-to-authenticity – the hallmark of Heidegger's romantic existentialism – captured a collective yearning and contained 'the seeds of a demonic fascism':¹⁴⁹ 'the politically naive Heidegger believed he had found in fascism a "politics of authenticity"' and, along with the German public, was 'deluded by the active, decisive, and heroic slogans of the Hitler movement.'¹⁵⁰ With this analysis Sloterdijk lays out how a genuinely invested cynicism, traumatized and torn, can reach a point of despair and groundlessness rendering the need for salvation so great that it would

¹⁴⁶ Sloterdijk, Peter. *Critique of Cynical Reason*. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota, 1987.

¹⁴⁷ Timothy Bewes locates a specific point to where Sloterdijk's alarming comparison of the Weimar Republic with our "cynical age." Bewes compares Tony Blair's New Labor movement's opposition to ideology and ideals to Himmler's demands for a new birth for 1930s Germany – namely that overemphasizing the futility of ideals, and calling for an individual moral rebirth results in a cynical retreat, because it promises an impossible metaphysical retrieval of political objectivity.

¹⁴⁸ "After the "disintegration of values," [...] where "good" and "evil" dispatch each other into the "beyond" such a critical "reflection" on "authentic being" become possible'. Sloterdijk, Peter. *Critique of Cynical Reason*. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota, 1987.

¹⁴⁹ Ibid.

¹⁵⁰ Ibid.

swap its values for subservience to the seductive powers of heinous masters. Given we are seeing the reemergence of fascistic and totalitarian thinking and increasingly disinhibited duplicity in mainstream conservative politics and in social media politics across the spectrum, this analysis holds a timely warning. By turning to a cinematic phenomenology, we can lay out one way this seduction occurs.

A cinematic phenomenology

Adam McKay's 'The Big Short' can be seen to dramatize how moderate Liberal Cynicisms in a world of Master Cynicism risks being subsumed by it. The movie tells the story of Morgan Stanley trader Steve Eisman, (in the movie Mark Baum) capitalizing on hedge fund manager Michael Burry and trader Greg Lippman's unearthing of the complex conditions that caused the 2008 financial crash. Eisman is an Extreme Liberal Cynic par excellence, veiling trauma and guilt beneath the critique of a system in which he fully participates, raging against Wall Street with all the hypocrisy, obliviousness, and anger of self-righteous denial.¹⁵¹ The subplot follows Eisman's transformation from a functional melancholic into a resigned fatalist bereft of the energy even for vitriol, succumbing to a disinhibited duplicity and knowingly benefitting from the suffering of others. At the beginning Eisman is angry at capitalistic parasitism and laments how the crash will hit the most vulnerable the hardest - 'people are going to be doing what they always do when the economy tanks. They will be blaming immigrants and poor people'.

¹⁵¹ And I'm getting madder and madder and I ask this guy how he sleeps at night knowing he's ripping off working people and he just leaves. He doesn't say a word. He just walks away from the lunch. So am I fucked up or is he? [...] The banks have given us 25% interest rates on credit cards. They have screwed us on student loans that we can never get out from under. Then this guy walks into my office and says those same banks got greedy, they lost track of the market, and I can profit off of their stupidity? Fuck, yeah, I want him to be right! [...] We're going to wait and we're going to wait and we're going to wait until they feel the pain, until they start to bleed.

But in his final capitulation, Eisman enacts descends from troubled liberal into Mastered and maybe even Master Cynicism. Eisman's realization is that the crash was not just the consequence of ignorance and ineptitude but that many of the masters knew what they were doing and gambled that the government would bail them out.¹⁵² And they did. After which they paid themselves huge bonuses and lobbied successfully against reforms. This cuts through Eisman's hostility and reveals his anger as the externalization of unprocessed trauma. But Eisman's anger served the cathartic purpose as it was facilitated by a belief in the possibility of justice and the possibility that the financial system had not yet rendered it impossible. And when the catastrophe he has hitherto fetishized happens, this angry cynicism is revealed as futile, and the pained values out of which it was born return to the surface. For Eisman this is the love for his lost brother, and his patient, caring, and loyal wife. Tragically, once Eismman's cynicism is revealed as a consoling carapace, rather than take responsibility Eisman submits to a darker illusion; that his complicity was not reprehensible but an inevitable reflection of unavoidable systematic corruption -- he reifies his powerlessness and reduces his agency to the inevitable consequence of objective circumstances. Consequently, Eisman sees no problem in benefitting from doomsday and, exculpated by his own *cancerous vision of the world* takes the money and runs. One imagines

¹⁵² This descent is caused by the "realization" that things are worse than his phony critique could imagine: 'Wall Street took a good idea and made it into an atomic bomb of fraud and stupidity that's on its way to decimating the world's economy. We live in an era of fraud in America [...] What bothers me isn't that fraud is not nice. Or that fraud is mean. For fifteen thousand years, fraud and short-sighted thinking have never, ever worked. Not once. Eventually you get caught, things go south. When the hell did we forget all that? I thought we were better than this. I really did. And the fact that we're not doesn't make me feel alright, it makes me feel sad, and as fun as it is to watch pompous dumb wall streeters be wildly wrong, I just know at the end of the day that average people are going to be the ones who are going to have to pay for all of this, because they always do.'

Eisman reiterating this performance – benefitting from the suffering of others sustained by an enlightenment to the irredeemability of humanity – until his cynicism is virtually indistinguishable from the disinhibited duplicity of the masters. Giving speeches on the ills of the financial system while benefitting from it.

Mastered cynicism

In a sense, Eisman’s cynicism is mastered, subsumed under the ideology of the masters. To distinguish it from the preemptive knowing exploitation of those who foresaw and guiltlessly profited from the crash, we can call this “Mastered Cynicism.” And there is another variety, similarly seduced by the promise of gain and bowing to the authority of the masters, but here it *feigns* the reduction of its subjectivity to objective causes to exculpate disengagement with positive ideals, and falsely *thinks itself free*. We can investigate this Mastered Cynicism through Žižek’s analysis of the Jet’s courting Officer Krupke’s sympathy in *West Side Story*. Žižek explains that in this example a comfortably dishonest adherence to left liberalism is enjoyed by parasitic beneficiaries: ‘Our mothers all are junkies, our fathers all are drunks, Golly Moses, naturally we’re punks.’¹⁵³ Žižek’s analysis the UK Riots of 2011 is a helpful means to reveal this condition. Therein Žižek argues that the liberal explanation for the destructive and brutally self-interested behavior – as protesting injustice and inequality – is not just a lie, but a lie concealing an important truth. For Žižek, the riots were a crude expression of the consequences of interpellation with the dominant ideology – the tyranny of mammon, self-assertion, and materialism.

¹⁵³ *West Side Story*. Dir. Robert Wise and Jerome Robbins. United Artists, 1961.

There was no ideological justification, they were totally caught in the dominant ideology, with no ways to realize what this ideology demands, it's a wild acting out within this ideological space of consumerism. Even if we are dealing with an apparently totally non-ideological brutality to burn houses, to get objects, it is the result of a very specific social and ideological constellation, where big ideology striving for justice equality etc. disintegrates.¹⁵⁴

The "liberal" explanation which the Mastered Cynic happily affirms is a diversion tactic serving to downplay liberal guilt at the radical subjectivating effects of neo-liberal capitalism. By contrast, in the hopes of enjoying the riches the powerful may bestow, Mastered Cynicism mimics the powerful as far as they can, excusing an abandonment of social responsibility by reducing their subjectivity to objective causes. However, by embracing the dominant ideology from a position of relative insignificance, Mastered Cynics are ideal subjects for the masters: angry, poor, and disenfranchised, but ultimately subservient to the dominant ideology which keeps them there. Paradoxically this reinforces the claim that the Mastered Cynical agency is indeed reducible to external forces, becoming what it pretends to be. While thinking itself free this cynicism is mastered.¹⁵⁵

¹⁵⁴ https://www.youtube.com/watch?time_continue=238&v=9TB52h6c2Ts Standard YouTube license.

¹⁵⁵ That the rioters included those exculpating themselves via functionalistic reductions of their own subjectivity can be laid out in two examples. Firstly, the infamous incident during the riots when two men robbed a Malaysian student who had been attacked and had his jaw broken by other rioters. Feigning sympathy they offered to help the bleeding victim to his feet. But this was not a moment of tenderness amid the waves of violence, for as the dazed young man staggered to his feet, the apparent good Samaritans leaned in, opened his rucksack, and took his belongings. The victim was 20-year-old Malaysian student Ashraf Hazier Rossli, his first attacker, Beau Isagba, 17, broke his jaw in two places and stole his bicycle. As he sat dazed and in a pool of blood Reece Donovan, 22, and John Kafunda, 22, took his mobile phone, wallet, games console, and games. Although caught red-handed on CCTV, Donovan and Kafunda denied wrongdoing; Kafunda told police he was "a million percent sure" he was not the man in the film, and that "If that was me I would physically stop them but that isn't me there." The second example, from my own experience was just a stones-throw from the police station where the "protests" began. After the reckless shooting of gangster Mark Duggan, a crowd had gathered nearby with television crews scanning for the loudest most angry individuals. A local I knew was standing proudly with his manic drooling dogs, yanking their necks on crude link chains till their eye balls nearly popped out of the

Conclusion

Master Cynicism is uninhibited by guilt, fear, or pain, it is more successfully post-idealistic than Liberal Cynicism, and takes advantage of ideals, naivety, ideology, and cynicism in the pursuit of power. This account suggests that it is beyond any form of suffering and ideals and therefore, unlike Liberal cynicism, beyond critique, but this is too hasty. Master Cynicism is brittle, hostile, insatiable in its pursuit of power, narcissistic, megalomaniacal, and reduces to a morality trumping desire for domination over others. Much like Liberal Cynicism this condition belies persistent investment, but here the investment is autonomy. The Master Cynic, represses an inchoately skepticism about the reality of autonomy, manifests in a manic and irrational pursuit of domination, avoids that which threatens it, and aggressively disavows any reminder of the repression. This includes the guiltless refusal of social responsibility, ethics, virtue,

skulls, shouting at assembled T.V. cameras searching for the loudest and most angry: "Remember Mark Lawrenson." Stephen Lawrence (13 September 1974 – 22 April 1993) was murdered in a racially motivated attack in 1993. A public inquiry in 1998 concluded that the original MET investigation was "institutionally racist." Mark Lawrenson is a white soccer television celebrity. Mark Duggan was in possession of a handgun and thought to be on his way to assassinate a gang rival when unlawfully killed. The individual in question represented the angry, ignorant, self-assertive, materialistic portion of the rioters, using the liberal sympathy with institutional racism to justify violent materialism, from conditions that do not cause it. Just as many who pretended to have informed grievance, with total disregard for actual victims. This feigning of liberalism is different from the "Trump-est" of Tea-Partiers only in that they don't have membership to the clubhouse: Just as fascism united the rulers with those in the proletariat claiming to be "the people," Master Cynicism unites those whose ignorance is so disastrous that it blurs the distinction between stupidity and malice, with those who revel in it. I am more optimistic than Žižek, and believe that these rioters, are a minority who have succumbed to the seductions of master cynicism, among a larger minority benefitting from and participating uncritically in their perpetuation, and their "Slave Cynicism" is the result of the dominance of the master cynical late capitalist ideology, which one of the ongoing obstacles to those who remain practically invested in liberalism, who still occupy a large portion of society (In Europe at least). Kafunda and Donovan were convicted of robbery and violent disorder and Isagba of grievous bodily harm and theft. Mr Rossli was taken to the Royal London Hospital and after treatment for his injuries. The magnanimity of what he had to say appeared a world away from the actions of his mean-spirited attackers. The shaken finance student told reporters at a press conference: "I feel very sorry for the people who did this. It was really sad because among them were children." The majority of family members of Duggan and community leaders throughout the riots called for non-violence.

morality, compassion, sympathy, empathy, duty etc. which we have seen in every instantiation of Master Cynicism. This explains Master Cynicism's megalomania, its insatiable hunger for money and power, as well as the tendency towards patriarchy, misogyny, sexual misconduct, and violence as a panicked refusal of the restrictions unavoidably placed on an idealized vision of autonomy and how vast wealth, celebrity, power, and other entitlements could allow such a pathological delusion to persist without satisfying it.

Like Extreme Liberal Cynicism, this internal structure may too pose the possibility of a transformative critique. If Master Cynicism can be exposed as prefaced on denial, it may be contested. The more formidable task for Master Cynicism is bringing about the motivation for a self-overcoming. For, unlike Extreme Liberal Cynicism, if Master Cynicism can feed its addiction enough to avoid a reckoning, then its suffering would be less than the mature liberal cynic, and therefore it would therefore be less inclined to seek an escape. Possible means to encourage openness to critique would be to highlight the insatiability, mania, and panic associated with this incessant and impossible pursuit. For Mastered Cynicism there is more reason for optimism. The "poor megalomaniacs" – exculpating themselves from the barriers to domination via feigning the reduction of their own agency to action to objective causes – the inability to satiate its needs may entail an experience of powerlessness which could urge a re-conception of its unrealistic notion of freedom. Alternatively, the cavalcade of unhealthy situations into which the injunction to dominate would entail would surely lead to painful cycles of psychological and material violence leaving the mastered cynic susceptible to critique revealing that its pursuit of autonomy and that its idolizing

mimicry of the powerful subordinates rather than frees itself. This is a project for another time. For now, we are primarily interested in the relationship between Liberal and Master Cynicism. Buying into enlightenment critique, super-structural theory, and false consciousness, Master Cynicism manipulates this enlightenment in the pursuit of power. Once Liberal Cynicism reaches extremes it is susceptible to Master Cynical seductions offering to assuage confusion, guilt, and fear. Which is to say, Extreme Liberal Cynicism which buys into the reduction of its own consciousness to deluded epiphenomena within power, not only enables Master Cynicism, but risks becoming it.

Part 1: Conclusion

When consciousness feels violence, its anxiety may well make it retreat from the truth and strive to hold on to what it is in danger of losing. But it can find no peace. If it wished to remain in a state of unthinking inertia then thought troubles its thoughtlessness, and its own unrest disturbs its inertia. [...] its fear may lead consciousness to hide, from itself and others, behind the pretension that it's cleverer than any thoughts that one gets by oneself or from others. This conceit which understands how to belittle every truth, in order to turn back into itself and gloat over its own understanding, [...] and always find the same barren ego instead of any content – this is a satisfaction which we must leave to itself, for it seeks only itself. – Hegel¹⁵⁶

There is a shrewdness which, almost with pride, presumes to have special elemental knowledge of the shabby side of existence, that everything finally ends in wretchedness. - Kierkegaard¹⁵⁷

As Enlightened False Consciousness, cynicism concludes that ideology is transcendental and false. The Cynical Liberal consciously resigns to the impossibility of liberalism while unconsciously maintaining allegiance to capitalism. Enlightened False Consciousness is rare, Cynical Liberalism is hardly ubiquitous, and neither does full justice to our literary-phenomenology of familiar cynicisms. Jess Row misdiagnoses as collective what is a provincial variety; the cynicism of arthouse Hollywood is not, as Row claims 'everywhere in American culture,'¹⁵⁸ and even the Liberal Cynicism we extracted from these analyses is more of a luxury than a pandemic. Nevertheless, it finds footing in academia and liberal culture. This Liberal Cynicism shares Enlightened False Consciousness' familiarity with ideology critique which targeted forces opposed to equality, justice, non-violence, and freedom. However, by contrast,

¹⁵⁶ Hegel, G. W. F. *The Phenomenology of Spirit*. Trans. A. V. Miller and J. N. Findlay. Oxford: Oxford U, 2013. §80 pgs. 51-52.

¹⁵⁷ Kierkegaard, Søren *Works of Love* New York: Harper & Row, 1964 p.240.

¹⁵⁸ Row, Jess. "American Cynicism." *Home*. Boston Review, 18 May 2015. Web. 10 Dec. 2015.

Liberal Cynicism remains genuinely invested, pained by the perceived failures of liberalism, and through resignation and inertia enables the problems that compel it. This fraught relationship can result in an extreme variety which, while highly critical of ideals and ideology, commits Inauthentic Ideology Critique, either as a refusal or inability to acknowledge its dependency on ideals or through reifying their inefficacy. In either form Liberal cynicism effectively abandons its constitutive ideals and suffers for it. In an unsuccessful attempt to overcome this pain, Extreme Liberal Cynicism represses its constitutive ideals by fantasizing the impossibility what it desires. Extreme Liberal Cynicism is rationally unjustifiable when it fails to acknowledge its own idealism, when it absolutizes, and reifies the inefficacy of, its constitutive idealism, and when it refuses to engage in the same degree of critique it relishes applying elsewhere. It is intrinsically harmful because it hurts. It is instrumentally harmful in virtue of enabling the problems that compel it. This enablement can be seen in that while criticizing injustice etc. within liberal capitalism, on the level of action, the Extreme Cynic participates in the system it bemoans, and through ritualized practical reinforcement and absolutizing narrative performatively reifies the illusion of its necessity. Extreme Liberal Cynicism is also instrumentally harmful because it is both ill-equipped to oppose, and vulnerable to succumbing to, Master Cynicism. Crucially, since Liberal Cynicism's exaggerated pessimism belies a persistent idealism, it remains open to a more productive response. To begin developing this response and to contextualize this problem in the context of contemporary philosophy, in part 2 we must indulge a considerable digression into the works of contemporary philosopher Judith Butler.

Part 2: Judith Butler & Extreme Liberal Cynicism

Judith Butler's work is relatively representative of popular trends in the theoretical humanities especially those indebted to both Continental Philosophy and progressive liberal politics. This is the academic corner of the culture prone to Extreme Liberal Cynicism. The purpose of focusing on Butler is that while taken as a whole her work does not exemplify Liberal Cynicism, features of her "middle period"¹⁵⁹ mark a "liberal-cynical" moment overcome in the later work. Part 3 argues that this later work provides resources for theorizing a heuristic for overcoming Extreme Liberal Cynicism more generally. The purpose of part 2 is to ground this later move. To this end, chapter 3 explains why we might consider Butler invested in liberal ideals at all, and chapter 4 argues that key texts in middle Butler bears resemblances to features of Extreme Liberal Cynicism, specifically Inauthentic Ideology Critique; Cynicalization, and Cruel Optimism.

¹⁵⁹ For the purposes of this dissertation we are classifying Butler's work in three phases based on their thematic differences which map onto general preoccupations during works published in certain time frames. Early Butler refers to the work focuses around the performativity of gender and materialization spans from 1987 – 1990. The "middle phase" which focuses on the psychic machinations which prefigure performativity and materialization runs from Butler, Judith "Imitation and Gender Insubordination" in 1991. *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "sex"* 1993 and culminates with *The Psychic Life of Power* in 1997. The "later phase" runs from 2001 onwards. I will also refer to the early and middle phase collectively under the designation pre-9/11, and the later as post 9/11 as this period, and event, marks the most significant change of focus in Butler's career thus far.

Chapter 3: Judith Butler & Liberalism

Introduction

The arguments hereon take Butler's work as invested in ideals familiar to liberalism in the intentionally broad conception of this dissertation specifically, equality, tolerance, human rights, justice, democracy, freedom, and non-violence. It is therefore crucial at the outset to address Butler's own opposition to classic liberalism and objections to her work from within that paradigm.

Butler's anti-liberal humanism

As well as rejecting the classic liberal notion of property Butler is a consistent and deep critic of individualism and autonomy describing the 'classical liberal humanist formulation of agency'¹⁶⁰ as central to 'naïve forms of political optimism.'¹⁶¹ Butler asks us to resist 'the hyper-agency (perhaps manic) of liberal individualism'¹⁶² and questions the tradition of locating rights within the individual.¹⁶³ Butler also laments having to function politically 'within a legal framework ensconced in liberal versions of human ontology,'¹⁶⁴ and resists classic liberalism's imperialistic imposition of "civilization" as limited to 'hegemonic forms of western rationality,'¹⁶⁵ and that 'liberal freedom' functions as 'the cultural bias for sanctioning forms of cultural and religious hatred and

¹⁶⁰ Dumm, Thomas. "Giving Away, Giving Over: A Conversation with Judith Butler." *The Massachusetts Review* 49.1/2 (2008): 95-105. JSTOR. Web.

¹⁶¹ Dumm, Thomas. "Giving Away, Giving Over: A Conversation with Judith Butler." *The Massachusetts Review* 49.1/2 (2008): 95-105. JSTOR. Web.

¹⁶² Dumm, Thomas. "Giving Away, Giving Over: A Conversation with Judith Butler." *The Massachusetts Review* 49.1/2 (2008): 95-105. JSTOR. Web.

¹⁶³ 'the "I" is bound up with the other and with temporality in a way that resists the language of individual rights.' Dumm, Thomas. "Giving Away, Giving Over: A Conversation with Judith Butler." *The Massachusetts Review* 49.1/2 (2008): 95-105. JSTOR. Web.

¹⁶⁴ Butler, Judith: *Precarious Life*, Verso, London, UK 2004 p. 25.

¹⁶⁵ Butler, Judith: *Precarious Life*, Verso, London, UK 2004 p. 72.

abjection.’¹⁶⁶ Given this deep criticism we must explain why to consider Butler invested in liberal ideals. My claim is not that Butler’s work is liberal in the classical sense; rather that in her later works as well as maintaining the indispensability of autonomy, integrity, human rights, and individual freedom,¹⁶⁷ Butler redefines, upholds, and serves the ideals of justice, freedom, and equality. We can begin to ground this claim by rebutting a classic criticism charging Butler with abandoning these paradigmatic liberal enlightenment ideals. If we can show Butler’s work to withstand this objection we have gone some way to justify our reading. After this we can outline further reasons to identify Butler’s work as committed to justice, freedom, and equality.

Illiberalism in Butler: Nussbaum contra Butler

In *The Professor of Parody*¹⁶⁸ Martha Nussbaum famously charged Butler with breaking from the liberal tradition. Nussbaum worried that Butler reduces freedom to an illusion by deconstructing pre-cultural agency and a biologically/ontologically robust notion of sex. For Nussbaum, these deconstructions amount to an ‘unwarranted metaphysical speculation’¹⁶⁹ which effectively disinherit the commitment to freedom, non-violence, human rights, and equality, an abandonment that both stands Butler’s feminism apart from its predecessors and renders it inert. Nussbaum argues that the denial of autonomous agency and sex as a pre-discursive ontological corporeality are

¹⁶⁶ Butler, Judith. *Frames of War: When Is Life Grievable?* London: Verso, 2009. P. 109 Butler even famously extended Foucault’s criticism of liberation to challenge the emancipatory value of “coming out.” Butler, Judith. *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "sex"* New York: Routledge, 1993. introduction arguing that all gender identification is an unstable performance, incapable of providing full emancipation from oppressive norms.

¹⁶⁷ Individual rights, bodily integrity, property, autonomy, and self-determination, etc.

¹⁶⁸ Nussbaum, Martha C. "The Professor of Parody." *Reviews 1986-2011 Philosophical Interventions* (2012): 198-222. Web.

¹⁶⁹ Ibid.

obstacles to feminism because critiquing the category of women problematizes the emancipation of women, and critiquing autonomous agency leaves us powerless in response to social and political problems both on the level of defining injustice and for activism aimed at contesting it. For example, it might be argued that the fight against female genital mutilation requires notions of biological integrity, individual autonomy, and the right to sexual pleasure, and therefore an account of the ontological reality of women as separable from cultural discursivity is required to ground an internationally applicable justification for outlawing this cruel custom. Another case could be the fight for women's right to education. In line with Nussbaum's worry we might argue that this requires the notion of an inherent moral dignity realized through the achievement of autonomy which requires education, thus providing an argumentative platform to settle in international as well as domestic disputes, the right to education as resting on a robust notion of human rights. We have already seen Butler antipathy to classic liberal accounts of autonomy, and the idea of sex as inseparable from the constructed category of gender is indeed a key Butlerian theme: 'it is not possible to know sex as distinct from gender.'¹⁷⁰ That Nussbaum's worry is a valid one is further evidenced by the

¹⁷⁰ Butler, Judith. "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory." *Theatre Journal* 40.4 (1988): 519. Web. 'The category sex is from the start normative, it is what Foucault has called a regulatory ideal, in this sense then sex not only functions as a norm, but part of a regulatory practice that produces the body it governs, that is whose regulatory forces make clear, as a kind a kind of productive power, the power to produce, demarcate, circulate, and differentiate the bodies it controls' Butler, Judith. *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "sex"* New York: Routledge, 1993. 'if gender is the social construction of sex and there is no access to the sex accept by means of its construction, then it appears not only that sex is absorbed by gender, but that sex becomes something like a fiction perhaps a fantasy, retroactively installed at a pre-linguistic site to which is there no direct access' Butler, Judith. *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "sex"* New York: Routledge, 1993, pg. 5.

following quote also from *Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory*:

feminist discourse has often relied upon the category of woman as a universal presupposition of cultural experience which, in its universal status, provides a false ontological promise of eventual political solidarity [...] There is nothing about femaleness that is waiting to be expressed.¹⁷¹

Nussbaum also claims that Butler's deconstruction of sex is tethered to narcissistic and anti-social individualism increasingly definitive of contemporary America¹⁷² reflecting an unthinking and narrow conformity to an epoch of cynicism against liberalism defined by self-assertion and anti-solidarity.¹⁷³

The great tragedy in the new feminist theory in America is the loss of a sense of public commitment. In this sense, Butler's self-involved feminism is extremely American, and it is not surprising that it has caught on here, where successful middle-class people prefer to focus on cultivating the

¹⁷¹ Butler, Judith. "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory." *Theatre Journal* 40.4 (1988): 519. Web.

¹⁷² Support for this objection comes if we consider Butler's embryonic pre-Psychic life of Power theory of the generation of sexual desire in *Imitation and Gender Insubordination*: 'it is precisely pleasure produced by the instability of those categories, namely gay and lesbian, which sustains the various erotic practices that make me a candidate for the category to begin with.' This psychoanalytic theory of her own desire generation processes implicit here has them generated by virtue of the taboo of gayness, the very desirability caused by the fact they fall outside of the dominant regulative normative categories. This is a likely candidate for the kind of feature that Nussbaum implies evidence a narcissistic megalomania in Butler which extrapolates her individual desires to serve as a general explanatory model for others. More troubling is the suggested lack of moral concern for others, for when while prescribing a subversion she is free to enjoy, there are many people for whom such subversion is dangerous, terrifying, or impossible. The recognition that norms require repetition to gain credence and the recognition that pleasures that come with being able to unfaithfully repeat are surely true, but there are "categories" of the subject for whom that kind of discourse between subversion and pleasure seem highly indulgent and in some cases simply offensive. It is a privileged subject that has various kinds of safety to be able to say that it gives a kind of jubilation or pleasure to poke fun at these norms.

¹⁷³ A point to charge Butler with anti-solidarity may be in her refusal to allow for the identifications whereby any group may collectively identify as a "we": 'are there not discursive conditions for the articulation of any we?' Butler, Judith. *The Psychic Life of Power: Theories in Subjection*. Stanford, CA: Stanford UP, 1997. P. 2 Every time that specificity is articulated, there is resistance and factionalization within the very constituency that is supposed to be unified by the articulation of its common element' Butler, Judith. "Contingent Foundations: Feminism and the Question of the "Postmodernism"." Ed. Seyla Benhabib. *Feminist Contentions: A Philosophical Exchange*. New York: Routledge, 1995. N.

self rather than thinking in a way that helps the material condition of others.¹⁷⁴

Nussbaum also argues that in the absence of any clearly defined theory of justice or the good, the subversion of identity categories and binary value distinctions can be extended to dissolve dichotomies such as just and unjust, cruel and kind, violent and non-violent, etc. On this argument, since Butler offers nothing by way of argumentative recourse to distinguish between beneficial and harmful subversion she promotes a line of thought whereby atrocities become theoretically permissible:

Butler cannot explain in any purely structural or procedural way why the subversion of gender norms is a social good while the subversion of justice norms is a social bad [...] In this way, her pessimistic erotic anthropology offers support to an amoral anarchist politics [because] for every friend of Butler, eager to engage in subversive performances that proclaim the repressiveness of heterosexual gender norms, there are dozens who would like to engage in subversive performances that flout the norms [...] of non-discrimination, of decent treatment of one's fellow citizens. To such people we should say, you cannot simply resist as you please, for there are norms of fairness, decency, and dignity that entail that this is bad behavior. But then we have to articulate those norms - and this Butler refuses to do.¹⁷⁵

Finally, Nussbaum worries that Butler ignores the empowering effects of sexual identification and reduces the process of gender identification and sexual "liberation" to a necessary re-imprisonment under delimiting categories.¹⁷⁶ For these reasons, Nussbaum reduces Butler's theories to an "ironic hopefulness"¹⁷⁷ a hopeless hope,

¹⁷⁴ Nussbaum, Martha C. "The Professor of Parody." *Reviews 1986-2011 Philosophical Interventions* (2012): 198-222. Web.

¹⁷⁵ Ibid.

¹⁷⁶ Support for such a reading is not too hard to find in Butler: 'sex is] retroactively installed at a pre-linguistic site to which is there no direct access [...] a fiction [...] within whose necessities we live, without which life itself would be unlivable, [... it ...] constitutes the very terrain of cultural intelligibility' Butler, Judith. *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "sex"* New York: Routledge, 1993 introduction.

¹⁷⁷ Nussbaum, Martha C. "The Professor of Parody." *Reviews 1986-2011 Philosophical Interventions* (2012): 198-222. Web.

defined not by actuality but by possibility, and one which has effectively disinherited liberal values:

The big hope, the hope for a world of real justice, where laws and institutions protect the equality and the dignity of all citizens, has been banished.¹⁷⁸

A reply to Nussbaum¹⁷⁹

The criticisms that Butler's feminism swaps equality, justice, human rights, solidarity, and freedom for narcissistic individualism ignores the radical sociality performativity entails, and the communal role of both its policing and the collective commitment required for its overcoming.¹⁸⁰ Despite Nussbaum's claims we see a radical notion of solidarity in Butler, specifically in the co-constitution of identity: 'my

¹⁷⁸ Ibid.

¹⁷⁹ A general response comes from the fact that Nussbaum veers close to a universalism which swims against a current where the standards from which to prescribe ethics have been called into question both by the extension of the enlightenment's suspiciously critical eye to itself and the effects of opening up the theoretical humanities to underrepresented perspectives. This opening up brought with it the dawning realization that the liberal enlightenment's vision of rational utopia universalized a provincial value system complicit with colonial and imperial violence and oppression. Considering its sensitivity to this legacy, Butler's work and its popularity may reflect a timeliness absent in Nussbaum.

¹⁸⁰ Concerning the alleged fetishization of taboo; one would be hard pressed to find accounts of sexual pleasure that deny the erotic appeal of the prohibited, or against the rationale of a system that publicly maintains privately permitted taboos. But the conviction that Butler's personal sexuality prohibits her from sincerely speaking out against normative injustice is straightforwardly ad hominem, and frankly inadmissible in a genuinely argumentative context. Furthermore, and more importantly, Nussbaum's claim that for Butler the 'act of subversion is so riveting, so sexy, that it is a bad dream to think that the world will actually get better' is problematized where Butler outlines political reasons to subvert gender, and specifically warns against the political and ethical ills risked by certain forms of non-politically guided subversion. Butler is aiming for a more inclusive less violent future, and explicitly warns against the distraction erotic pleasure may form in pursuit of this political desideratum. Butler uses the example of "butch" and "femme" role-playing in lesbianism, referring to the way in which the pleasure associated with a lesbian identifying as a butch female, assuming the roles traditionally given to men as provider of financial, psychical and emotional support, risks a condition 'whereby that "providingness" turns into self-sacrifice, which implicates her in the most ancient trap of self-abnegation'. ("Imitation and Gender Insubordination" (1990) From Diana Fuss (ed.), *Inside Out: Lesbian Theories, Gay Theories*, pp. 12-31. New York: Routledge, 1991. Butler warns that this erotic role playing risks reinforcing oppressive gender ideals by valorizing female self-sacrifice. The danger is that that such performances resemble one of the most pernicious features of patriarchal heteronormativity: the sacrifice of female civic-political agency, self-constitutive agency etc. etc. Butler also warns against the adoption of "femme" example too: '[the femme] may well eroticize a certain dependency only to learn that the very power to orchestrate that dependency exposes her own incontrovertible power, at which point she inverts a butch or becomes caught up in the specter of that inversion, or perhaps delights in it.' *ibid.*

pain or my silence or my anger or my perception is finally not mine alone.’¹⁸¹ Further grounds to counter the anti-solidarity charge can be found in *Against Proper Objects*¹⁸² where Butler deconstructs the sex/gender categories at play in the certain methodologies of race theory, feminism, and queer theory complicit in restricting sex to the purview of queer theory and gender to feminism, categorizations that problematize the production of a coherent account of their mutuality and shared goals and which have fueled hostility and defensiveness between disciplines purportedly united in support of civil rights and social justice:

There can be no viable feminism that fails to account for its complicity in forms of oppression, whether they be colonial, class-based, racist, or homophobic. And there can be no viable lesbian and gay studies paradigm that does not examine its own complicitous investments in misogyny and other forms of oppression [...] I mean to open up another possibility for feminist thought, one that would overcome its complicity in heterosexist presuppositions, and mark an alliance with lesbian and gay struggles.¹⁸³

To the alleged denial of pre-cultural ontological/biological sex and/or gender: Firstly, Butler does not usher in some linguistic idealism, nor in any way deny the role of a given corporality, and therefore remains theoretically sensitive to the significance of ontological embodiment. Butler’s position is simply, and rightly, that our access to the real is necessarily mediated by discourse. The following quote from *Bodies that Matter* makes this clear:

¹⁸¹ Butler, Judith. "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory." *Theatre Journal* 40.4 (1988): 519. Web.

¹⁸² Butler, Judith. "Against Proper Objects." Ed. Elizabeth Weed and Naomi Schor. *Feminism Meets Queer Theory*. Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 1997. Butler also argues here against the condemnation of pornography based on a ‘feminism in which the positions of gender are strictly correlated with positions of domination or subordination within sexuality,’ Butler also criticizes defining *all* sexual practice as inherently misogynistic, for assimilating ‘feminist politics to the discourse on victimization. Nussbaum’s objections concerning this issue then, are unfounded.

¹⁸³ *Ibid.* P. 2.

To claim that discourse is formative is not to claim that it originates causes or exhaustively composes that which it concedes, rather it is to claim that there is no reference to a pure body which is not at the same a further formation of that body.¹⁸⁴

Concerning the refusal of identity labels such as “lesbian” or “woman,” far from betraying women, Butler warns that without attesting to the socio-historical genealogy of the category in question, heightens the risk that acts of intended emancipation might reinforce a damaging illusion. Butler simply asks if we haven’t worked out how we are “doing” gender, then how can we be sure that the idea of womanhood we are promoting isn’t also delimiting the concept to the detriment of real women? This consideration of under-represented embodiments represents a radically democratic compassionate and anti-colonial aspiration both firmly in line with the tradition Nussbaum charges Butler with abandoning and at the center of feminism in all its waves:

In this effort to combat the invisibility of women as a category, feminists run the risk of rendering visible a category which may or may not be representative of the concrete lives of women [...] The cultural construction of “women” constitutes the effacement of women, and those who take the construction of women to be the “truth” of women close the critical gap that it is feminism’s task to keep open.¹⁸⁵

Butler also explicitly endorses the strategic employment of these categories. At the beginning of her career Butler claimed that the argument about using classic liberal humanist terms and identity categories is ‘a quarrel that feminists must put to bed’¹⁸⁶ and that lobbying demonstrations and legislative efforts are ‘virtually impossible

¹⁸⁴ Butler, Judith. *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "sex"* New York: Routledge, 1993. P. 10.

¹⁸⁵ Both: Butler, Judith. "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory." *Theatre Journal* 40.4 (1988): 519.

¹⁸⁶ *Ibid.*

without recourse to identity politics.’¹⁸⁷ When Butler warns that such strategic applications should be carried out with the utmost care, the reason is that using even provisional definitions risks assuming the emancipation of some “true” femininity potentially perniciously exclusive of some “false” femininity, and that this can be an obstacle to expanding the rights and freedoms of actual women. Therefore Butler allows for “frontline feminism” to use identity categories while avoiding prescribing the right thing to think of as “gender” “female,” “sex” etc. all firmly in the service of individually and politically emancipatory ideals.¹⁸⁸ Indeed, Butler’s refusal to sanction the unchecked strategic application of identity is to resist reinforcing regulative ideals of gender, sexuality, and womanhood typical of oppressive regimes, a refusal which belies a consistent commitment to further regulative ideals such as justice, equality, and freedom:

Although it is quite clear that there are strict punishments for contesting the script by performing out of turn or through unwarranted improvisations, gender is not passively scripted on the body, and neither is it determined by nature, language, the symbolic, or the overwhelming history of patriarchy. Gender is what is put on, invariably, under constraint, daily and incessantly, with anxiety and pleasure, but if this continuous act is mistaken for a natural or linguistic given, power is relinquished to expand the cultural field bodily through subversive performances of various kinds.¹⁸⁹

¹⁸⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸⁸ Butler explains how damaging the attempts to define womanhood have been for the project of feminism: ‘Every time that specificity is articulated, there is resistance and factionalization within the very constituency that is supposed to be unified by the articulation of its common element. In the 1980s the feminist “we” rightly came under attack by women of color who claimed that the “we” was invariably white, and that the “we” that was meant to solidify the movement was the very source of a painful factionalization. The effort to categorize the specificity of feminism through recourse to maternity, whether biological or social produced a similar factionalization and even a disavowal of feminism altogether;’ Butler, Judith. “Imitation and Gender Insubordination.” *Inside/out: Lesbian Theories, Gay Theories*. Ed. Diana Fuss. New York: Routledge, 1991.

¹⁸⁹ Ibid.

While defending the utility of rational autonomous agency, realizing and exercising a notion of freedom within constraints is at the heart of Butler's work up to the present. While conceding that performativity shows us how gender 'delimits me in a shared cultural situation' Butler theorizes how this 'enables and empowers in certain unanticipated ways.'¹⁹⁰ Butler also explains that such deconstructions are conditions for understanding the reality which the notion of a transparent autonomous subject and agency cannot capture:

To recast the referent as the signified, and to authorize or safeguard the category of women as a site of possible resignifications is to expand the possibilities of what it means to be a woman and in this sense to condition and enable an enhanced sense of agency.¹⁹¹

Butler argues that far from eliminating the political being fought for in social justice movements, the conception of freedom understood as necessarily within the radical sociality of a poststructuralist frame contributes to mobilizing against oppression and persecution more effectively than identity category discourse.¹⁹² Indeed, Butler's aim of expanding "the cultural field" in the name of freedom may be a more realistic aspiration than many autonomy-based perspectives. This is because the assumption of an unmediated origin of self-determination is untenable and removes the responsibility and duty to consider the limiting effects certain socio-political and psycho-physical conditions place on the will:

¹⁹⁰ Ibid.

¹⁹¹ Butler, Judith. "Contingent Foundations: Feminism and the Question of the "Postmodernism"." Ed. Seyla Benhabib. *Feminist Contentions: A Philosophical Exchange*. New York: Routledge, 1995.

¹⁹² 'If a deconstruction of materiality of bodies suspends and problematizes the traditional ontological referent of the term, it does not freeze, banish, render useless, or deplete of meaning the usage of the term. On the contrary it provides the conditions to mobilize the signifier in the service of an alternative.' Ibid.

The recourse to a position, hypothetical, counterfactual, or imaginary, that places itself beyond the play of power, and which seeks to establish the meta-political basis for a negotiation of power relations, is perhaps the most insidious ruse of power.¹⁹³

Not only does Butler avoid problematically assuming the epistemic power to capture identity from outside the context of social intelligibility, her theories also explore the perimeters in which a viable and coherent notion of agency may be carved out. Despite Nussbaum's objection, the question for Butler is not whether we have agency but how agency is constructed and where does political agency emerge within an accurate picture of psychic, corporeal, and socio-cultural constraints.¹⁹⁴ A theory capable of answering these questions is better equipped to deal with the insights of Hegel, Nietzsche, Marx, Freud, Levi-Strauss, Saussure, Lacan, Foucault, Derrida as well as Darwinism, physics, and neuroscience which have collectively and irreversibly problematized the notion of a free autonomous agency interjecting from outside the causal/material and social realms based on rational deliberation. To look beyond this model is not to dismiss the tenets of liberalism nor is denying autonomous agency to look for the determining forces that spell defeatism. To put it simply accepting our vulnerability to determining forces is requisite for discovering what agency really is:

We may be tempted to think that to assume the subject in advance is necessary in order to safeguard the agency of the subject, but to claim that the subject is constituted is not to claim that it is determined, on the

¹⁹³ Ibid.

¹⁹⁴ 'My purpose is neither to enumerate nor to resolve the contemporary instances of this debate. Rather, I propose to take account of how a paradox recurrently structures the debate, leading it almost always to culminate in displays of ambivalence. How can it be that the subject, taken to be the condition for and instrument of agency, is at the same time the effect of subordination, understood as the deprivation of agency? If subordination is the condition of possibility for agency, how might agency be thought in opposition to the forces of subordination?' Butler, Judith. *The Psychic Life of Power: Theories in Subjection*. Stanford, CA: Stanford UP, 1997. p. 10.

contrary the constituted character of the subject is the very precondition of its agency.¹⁹⁵

Agency is to be found, paradoxically, in the possibilities opened up in and by that constrained appropriation of the regulatory law, by the materialization of that law, the compulsory appropriation and identification with those normative demands.¹⁹⁶

Butler's liberalism

Having addressed the major thrust of Nussbaum's arguments and taking the broad definition of liberal as invested in freedom, equality, justice, we can now turn to Butler's politicizations of her own work which, I argue, lends further credence to describing butlers work as invested in liberal ideals. In *Performative Acts* Butler sought to contest the pernicious effects of hetero-normativity on marginalized forms of gender and sexual identification, proposing 'a politics of performative gender acts [...] to expand the cultural field'.¹⁹⁷ Butler calls for the envisaging of a future social world where the punitive consequences of gender insubordination are abated, and in which socially sanctioned existential comportmental perimeters become wider and likelier to permit conventionally attacked embodiments greater freedoms and security:

A critical genealogy needs to be supplemented by a politics of performative gender acts, one which both redescribes existing gender identities and *offers a prescriptive view about the kind of gender reality there ought to be*.¹⁹⁸

¹⁹⁵ Ibid. Butler continues, 'For what is it that enables a purposive and significant reconsideration of cultural and political relations if not a relation that can be turned against itself, if we were to resist it, do we need to assume theoretically from the start a subject with agency before we can articulate the terms of the significant social and political task of transformation, resistance, radical democratization? If we don't offer in advance a theoretical guarantee of that agency are we doomed to give up transformation and meaningful political practice?'

¹⁹⁶ Butler, Judith. *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "sex"* New York: Routledge, 1993.

¹⁹⁷ Butler, Judith. "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory", *Theatre Journal* 40.4 (1988): 519.

¹⁹⁸ Ibid. [My italics]

In *Imitation and Gender Insubordination* Butler outlines performative subversion as 'a form of affirmative resistance to a certain regulatory operation of homophobia'¹⁹⁹ and Butler has publicly associated with movements indebted to liberal humanism as her speech at an Occupy Wall Street rally suggests:

We object to the monopolization of wealth. We object to making working populations disposable. We object to the privatization of education. We believe that education must be a public good and a public value. We oppose the expanding numbers of the poor. We rage against the banks that push people from their homes, and the lack of health care for unfathomable numbers. We object to economic racism and call for its end. [...] we are here, time and again, persisting, imagining the phrase, "we the people."²⁰⁰

Liberal political ideals also animate Butler's work on materialization: the means through which discursive regimes render the material of the body intelligible.²⁰¹ The normalizing and naturalization of a discursively realized figure has ethical, social, and political consequences because in labeling "natural" sex it illegitimately attaches a pre-discursive origin to post-discursive phenomena. In *Bodies that Matter* Butler describes her work contesting this naturalization as 'undertaken with the aim to expand and enhance the field of possibilities for bodily life.'²⁰²

¹⁹⁹ "Imitation and Gender Insubordination: (1990) From Diana Fuss (ed.), *Inside Out: Lesbian Theories, Gay Theories*, pp. 12-31. New York: Routledge, 1991.

²⁰⁰ Transcript made and published in a comment on <http://feministing.com/2011/10/24/judith-butler-joins-occupy/> by username: William.

²⁰¹ 'What I would propose in place of these conceptions of construction is a return to the notion of matter, not as a site or surface but as a process of materialization that stabilizes over time to produce the effect of boundary, fixity, and surface that we call matter.' Butler, Judith. *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "sex"* New York: Routledge, 1993, p. 9.

²⁰² "How bodies come to matter: An interview with Judith Butler, Irene Costera Major, and Braujke Prins" *Signs*, Vol. 23, No. 2 (Winter 1998), pp. 275 -286, University of Chicago Press.

The Psychic Life of Power serves a similar aspiration. For example, Butler proposes a ‘psychic resistance to normalization’²⁰³ that marks the path toward a ‘more ethical kind of being.’²⁰⁴ Crucially, Butler allows for a “remainder” within agency beyond the scope of delimiting intelligibility or possible embodiment, something yet to be, some vitality potentially revealed in the refusal to reify, considerable grounds for freedom:

the purposes of power are not always the purposes of agency. To the extent that the latter diverge from the former agency is the assumption of a purpose unintended by power, one that cannot have been derived logically or historically that operates in a relation of contingency and reversal to the power that makes it possible to which it nevertheless belongs, this is, as it were, the ambivalence in agency constrained by no teleological necessity.²⁰⁵

The Psychic Life of Power then, can be viewed as working from this theory of the subject to mark out the psychic space for political freedom within constraints placed on subjectivation at the co-constitutive social/psychic levels. While the work on performativity included an analysis of the punishment dished out to those who deviate from the norms, *The Psychic Life of Power* theorizes its origination in the discourse of psychoanalysis, explaining how the heteronormative script is necessarily unsuccessfully realized and consequently perpetuates a panicked performativity which compels the aggressive mistreatment of non-gender-sexual-conformity as the re-emergence of repressed libidinal investments. Because of these commitments to non-violence, justice, equality, freedom, human rights, and protecting marginalized

²⁰³ All from Butler, Judith. *The Psychic Life of Power: Theories in Subjection*. Stanford, CA: Stanford UP, 1997. p. 131.

²⁰⁴ All from Butler, Judith. *The Psychic Life of Power: Theories in Subjection*. Stanford, CA: Stanford UP, 1997. p. 131.

²⁰⁵ Ibid. p. 15.

communities we can regard *The Psychic Life of Power* as collectable under the broad umbrella of liberalism.

Chapter 4: Judith Butler and Liberal Cynicism

Introduction

Because of commitments to non-violence, democracy, justice, equality, freedom, and protecting marginalized communities we can regard Butler's work as collectable under the broad umbrella of liberalism. We can now turn to the claim that despite these guiding ideals middle Butler can be seen to fail them. This includes the claim that middle Butler bear hallmarks analogous to Inauthentic Ideology Critique both in the sense of reifying their inefficacy of the liberal values on which it depends exhibiting a reluctance to admit to these values, as well as Cynicalization; the deepening of an inherited cynicism, and cruel optimism; raising and simultaneously prohibiting hope.

Inauthentic Ideology Critique as abandonment

By elaborating on the problem of violence, specifically Butler's structuralist view of its constitutive depth, we can locate the Inauthentic Ideology Critique typical of Liberal Cynicism in her work specifically that, while although allegiant to liberal ideals, in absolutizing their inefficacy effectively abandons them. The worry revolves around violence in the Butlerian framework. Although the idea of a normatively violent "othering" required for conscious subjectivity is not new within the Continental lineage, whether in Derrida, in the Levinasian frame, or in Kristeva's psychoanalytic account of abjection, normative violence is not political and ethical.²⁰⁶ By contrast, Butler places

²⁰⁶ Derrida's account of normative violence has it as 'an original transcendental violence, previous to any ethical choice' [...] a preethical violence.' *Writing and Difference*, University of Chicago Press, 1978. P. 125. For Levinas, the exclusory violence in the encounter with alterity is prior to norms of ethics and morality,

epistemic, normative, symbolic, linguistic, concrete, and conscious hateful violence on a spectrum.

In *Bodies that Matter* Butler claims that although “unreal,” sex and gender are conditions for the possibility of conscious subjectivity, describing sex as ‘a fiction, perhaps a fantasy [...] without which life itself would be unlivable’ and that it ‘constitutes the very terrain of cultural intelligibility.’²⁰⁷ In *Imitation and Gender Insubordination* Butler claims that even in the context of jubilant and liberating identifications and political gains for traditionally legally marginalized sexualities, identity categories are both necessary and necessarily perpetuate the oppressive workings of hegemonic power, ‘whether as the normalizing category of oppressive structures or as the rallying points of a liberatory contestation.’²⁰⁸ Crucially, Butler claims that ‘this kind of categorization can be called a violent one, a forceful one’²⁰⁹ and that the ‘discursive ordering and production of bodies in accordance with the category of sex is itself a material violence.’²¹⁰ This nominates material violence as a transcendental figure in Butler’s middle work, the most troublesome aspect of which is Butler’s politicization thereof:

The violence of the letter, the violence of the mark which signifies what will and will not be included within the intelligible takes on a political

and for Kristeva normative “abjection” relates to a subjectivity enabled through repeated patterns of expulsion, but it too, is not trafficking on the level of the political.

²⁰⁷ Butler, Judith. *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of “sex”* New York: Routledge, 1993, p. 5.

²⁰⁸ Butler, Judith. “Imitation and Gender Insubordination.” *Inside/out: Lesbian Theories, Gay Theories*. Ed. Diana Fuss. New York: Routledge, 1991.

²⁰⁹ Butler, Judith. “Imitation and Gender Insubordination.” *Inside/out: Lesbian Theories, Gay Theories*. Ed. Diana Fuss. New York: Routledge, 1991.

²¹⁰ Butler, Judith. “Contingent Foundations: Feminism and the Question of the “Postmodernism”.” Ed. Seyla Benhabib. *Feminist Contentions: A Philosophical Exchange*. New York: Routledge, 1995. N. p. 51 – 52.

significance when the letter is the law or the authoritative legislation for what will be.²¹¹

The worry is not just that Butler is making a category mistake or being insufficiently sympathetic with victims of violence, it's that she renders as necessary what is itself a material violence, and which prefigures violence from the level of intelligibility all the way to hate crime.²¹²

The Psychic Life of Power (1997) deepens this view. Therein, Butler develops Foucauldian subjectivation by theorizing the psychic processes which prefigure embodied performativity, appealing to a formal symmetry between Hegel's dialectic up to unhappy consciousness,²¹³ Nietzsche's notion of sublimation,²¹⁴ Freud's theories of narcissism and melancholia,²¹⁵ and Althusserian interpellation.²¹⁶ This culminates in a bleak picture of the psychic operations on which subjectivity depends; passionately

²¹¹ Ibid.

²¹² "This delimitation which often is enacted as an untheorized presupposition in any act of description marks a boundary that includes and excludes that decides as it were, what will and what will not be the stuff of the object to which we then refer, this marking off will have some normative force and indeed some violence for it can construct only through erasing, it can bound a thing only through enforcing a certain criterion, a certain principle of selectivity' Butler, Judith. "Contingent Foundations: Feminism and the Question of the "Postmodernism"." Ed. Seyla Benhabib. *Feminist Contentions: A Philosophical Exchange*. New York: Routledge, 1995. P. 11. If we must identify within existing gender possibilities and these possibilities are necessarily tethered to violent politically relevant repressive norms, then we are all unavoidably constrained by and constraining others through the performance of sexed and gendered identity.

²¹³ Hegel, G. W. F. *Phenomenology of Spirit*. Trans. A. V. Miller and J. N. Findlay. Oxford: Oxford U, 2013.

²¹⁴ Nietzsche, Friedrich Wilhelm and Walter Arnold. Kaufmann "The Wanderer and his Shadow" §18, *The Portable Nietzsche*. New York: Penguin, 1976. Nietzsche, Friedrich. *The Anti-Christ, Ecce Homo, Twilight of the Idols, and Other Writings*. Trans. Aaron Ridley and Judith Norman. New York: Cambridge UP, 2005. Nietzsche, Friedrich. *On the Genealogy of Morality: A Polemic*. Trans. Maudemarie Clark and Alan J. Swensen. N.p.: Hackett, 1998. . Nietzsche, Friedrich Wilhelm. *Daybreak: Thoughts on the Prejudices of Morality*. Ed. Maudemarie Clark and Brian Leiter. Trans. R.J. Hollingdale. Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge UP, 1997.

²¹⁵ Freud, Sigmund. *Civilization and Its Discontents*. Trans. James Strachey. New York: Norton, 1962. . Freud, Sigmund. "Mourning and Melancholia" and "Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality" Ed. Peter Gay. *The Freud Reader*. New York: Norton, 1999. 584-89. Freud, Sigmund. *Freud's On Narcissism: An Introduction*. Ed. Joseph Sandler, Ethel Person, and Peter Fonagy. New Haven: Yale UP, 1991.

²¹⁶ Althusser, Louis. "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses (notes towards an Investigation)." Trans. Ben Brewster. *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays*. New York: Monthly Review, 1971. 127-88.

attached to necessary forces of self-inflicted normative violence and subordination often compelling identitarian violence in the sociopolitical realm:

the subject is passionately attached to his or her own subordination [...] the attachment to subjection is produced through the workings of power.²¹⁷

The melancholic aggression and the desire to vanquish [...] characterizes the public response to the death of many of those considered "socially dead," who die from AIDS [...] Gay people, prostitutes, drug users, among others.²¹⁸

We can extract from this a threefold violence of necessary, unavoidable, and pre-conscious power to add to the violence of policed performativity and regulatory materialization from the earlier work:²¹⁹ of identity formation, self against self,²²⁰ and self against other. Crucially, this threefold violence germinates prior to conscious agency 'always prior, outside of itself and operative from the start.'²²¹ Butler concludes that 'the subject's vulnerability to violence is unavoidable,'²²² and that 'the price of existence is subordination.'²²³ While Butler's early phase has the violence in discursive materialization as transcendental, here Butler transcendentalizes the violence at play in the psychic formation of the subject necessarily beyond the reach of conscious

²¹⁷ Butler, Judith. *The Psychic Life of Power: Theories in Subjection*. Stanford, CA: Stanford UP, 1997. p.3.

²¹⁸ *Ibid.* 27.

²¹⁹ 'The notion of power at work in subjection, thus appears in two incommensurable modalities, first as what is for the subject is always prior outside of itself and operative from the start, [1] the second modality carries at least two sets of meanings, as the willed effect of the subject subjection is a subordination that the subject brings on itself, [2a] the other subjection produces the subject, and a subject is the precondition of the agency, then subjection is the account by which a subject becomes the guarantor of its resistance and opposition.[2b]' *Ibid.* 14.

²²⁰ 'The subject is initiated through a primary submission to power [...] The form this power takes is relentlessly marked by a figure of turning, of turning back upon oneself or even a turning on oneself' Butler, Judith. *The Psychic Life of Power: Theories in Subjection*. Stanford, CA: Stanford UP, 1997. P. 3 'production of the subject in the formation of that will is the consequence of a primary subordination' *Ibid.* P. 20.

²²¹ *Ibid.* P. 14.

²²² *Ibid.* p. 20.

²²³ *Ibid.* p. 20.

contestation. This reification of necessary pre-performative violence suits our definition of extreme Liberal Cynicism's rejecting the efficacy of liberal ideals – in this case non-violence – while at the same time valuing them. For while Butler's work is invested in contesting violence, in theorizing its absolute necessity it leaves us incapable of doing so.

violence founds the subject [...] the subject who would oppose violence, even violence to itself, is itself the effect of a prior violence without which the subject could not have emerged.²²⁴

Inauthentic Ideology Critique as failed avowal

We have seen how Butler can be reasonably described as invested in liberal ideals/commitments broadly construed. We can suggest that Butler refuses to avow these ideals by focusing on a tension in *Bodies That Matter* specifically, Butler's theory of materialization, the mechanisms through which discursive regimes render the material of the body intelligible. The following quote lays out the problem:

the exclusionary matrix by which subjects are formed requires the simultaneous production of a domain of abject beings, those who are not yet subjects but who form the constitutive outside to the domain of the subject. The abject designates here precisely those unlivable and uninhabitable zones of social life which are nevertheless densely populated by those who do not enjoy the status of the subject.²²⁵

The tension revolves around what we are we supposed to think of abjection and abject beings who are "not yet subjects" but nevertheless inhabit social life, and what to make of Butler's politicization of this theory. Butler claims that 'abjected or delegitimated bodies fail to count as "bodies,"'²²⁶ and describes abjection as

²²⁴ Ibid. P. 63.

²²⁵ Butler, Judith. *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "sex"* New York: Routledge, 1993. p. 3.

²²⁶ Butler, Judith. *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "sex"* New York: Routledge, 1993. P. 16.

'inadmissibility to codes of intelligibility'²²⁷ signaling 'what is left outside binary oppositions'²²⁸ and as the 'the unthinkable, the unlivable, the unintelligible' which 'live as the radically uninterrogated and as the shadowy contentless figure of something that is not yet made real.'²²⁹ The problem can be put in the form of the question is Butler talking of hypothetical beings beyond intelligibility, perhaps potential future materialized embodiments, or as actual people struggling for recognition and acceptance within dominant social norms? The attempt to answer this question can compel three readings, the "transcendental," "existential" and "Kynical." My thesis is that these heuristics are reasonable responses to independent and ultimately inconsistent moves within a simultaneously phenomenological, metaphysical, epistemological, ethical, political framework subordinate to a straightforward but concealed principled commitment to justice, equality, freedom, and non-violence. This is not to claim that Butler is wrong or misguided, far from it, it is rather to suggest that there is a stronger normative position here than Butler's theory can allow, and that this concealment is due to a fraught relationship between ideals and critique which, as we have seen, is a hallmark of Liberal Cynicism.

On the existential reading,²³⁰ Butler is critiquing the discourses which normatively erect and sustain the perimeters delimiting which humans are deemed

²²⁷ Costera Major, Irene. Prins, Braujke "How bodies come to matter: An interview with Judith Butler" *Signs*, Vol. 23, No. 2 (Winter 1998), pp. 275 -286, University of Chicago Press p. 277.

²²⁸ Costera Major, Irene. Prins, Braujke "How bodies come to matter: An interview with Judith Butler" *Signs*, Vol. 23, No. 2 (Winter 1998), pp. 275 -286, University of Chicago Press p. 284.

²²⁹ Costera Major, Irene. Prins, Braujke "How bodies come to matter: An interview with Judith Butler" *Signs*, Vol. 23, No. 2 (Winter 1998), pp. 275 -286, University of Chicago Press p. 277.

²³⁰ What we mean here by an 'existential' relates specifically to Kierkegaard, for whom the "existentially existing individual" is a subject who has self-actualized through passionate commitment to a chosen set of "subjective truths," principles by which to live and die. This idea we are adopting is that we are not

worthy of dignity and respect. Abjection here refers to individuals denied the treatment which participation in the category human should entail. The existential reading has Butler aiming to contest the mechanisms through which the loss of human lives can appear more or less grievable due to explicit and implicit cultural biases, normative and concrete discrimination, prejudice, ignorance, unthinking conformity, explicit hatred etc. There are many instances where *Bodies That Matter* seems to endorse this reading. For example where Butler cites psychosis as one of the consequences of abjection,²³¹ and when she refers to abject “beings,” “subjects,” and “bodies” as failing to qualify as ‘fully human’²³² and ‘critical matters of concern.’²³³ More support for the existential reading comes when Butler gives examples of the abject as women, lesbians,²³⁴ refugees, “the Arab,” aids victims, alleged terrorists, portions of the Muslima, and Guantanamo detainees. This connecting of abjection with mental conditions, qualifications for moral concern, and Butler chosen examples combine to suggest that we are talking about actual mistreated humans and the existential notion of humanity as “enjoyed” in degrees:

discourse [...] orchestrates, delimits, and sustains that which qualifies as the human. We see this most clearly in those abjected beings who do not appear ‘properly gendered.’ It is their very humanness that comes into

born human in the full sense of what that means, our humanness is bestowed on us by a community and through discourse and relates to our perceived moral worth rather than our being alive.

²³¹ Butler, Judith. *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "sex"* New York: Routledge, 1993. P. 15.

²³² Butler, Judith. *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "sex"* New York: Routledge, 1993. P. 16.

²³³ Butler, Judith. *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "sex"* New York: Routledge, 1993. P. 4.

²³⁴ Grounds for the transcendental reading can be found where Butler talks of the “ontology of expulsion” at play in the invisibility of lesbianism versus the despicability of male gayness, how male and female homosexuality occupy different realms in cultural legibility as set by the symbolic imaginary. Butler claims that while male homosexuality is hyper-visible and vulnerable to specific kinds of violence precisely because it is despised, and while male gayness is ‘awarded’ a greater ontological reality, by contrast ‘Lesbianism is not explicitly prohibited in part because it has not even made its way into the thinkable, the imaginable, that grid of cultural intelligibility that regulates the real and namable, [...] the political is a context in which the lesbian doesn’t exist’. (p. 126.) This is of course absurd.

question [...] a differential operation that produces the more or less "human."²³⁵

The existential reading allows us to make clear sense of how Butler politicizes the processes of identity formation. On this view, the "humanness that comes into question" is to be understood as within the purview of a conscious, exclusive, and regulative normativity, and would therefore be exposable and revisable from within this domain. Unfortunately, Butler distances herself from the existential reading:

you could say, oh yes, certain kinds of beings have more fully ontological being than others, etcetera, etcetera. Then you would remain within a certain kind of philosophical framework that could be conceptually satisfying.²³⁶

This apparently pejorative use of "conceptually satisfying" most likely stems from the desire to avoid simplifying and superficializing the depth of discursive construction, as well as avoiding the naivety of assumptions potentially guiding the existential reading. Perhaps that it overlooks the inaccessibility to reflexive self-consciousness of the internalization of norms through discourse and performative reinforcement, deeply problematizing the assumption that the contestation of abjection is a task of conscious re-classification. This reading is in line with Butler's persistent refusal of 'classical liberal humanist formulations' as 'naïve forms of political optimism.'²³⁷ The point crucially missed on that model is that the discursive realms of intelligibility which dictates whose lives matter as well as the freedom to contest this regulatory normativity operate within the perimeters dictated by normative violence

²³⁵ Butler, Judith. *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "sex"* New York: Routledge, 1993. P. 8.

²³⁶ Butler, Judith. "Imitation and Gender Insubordination." *The Lesbian and Gay Studies Reader*. Ed. Henry Abelove, Michèle Aina. Barale, and David M. Halperin. New York: Routledge, 1993.

²³⁷ Dumm, Thomas. "Giving Away, Giving Over: A Conversation with Judith Butler." *The Massachusetts Review* 49.1/2 (2008): 95-105. JSTOR. Web.

and are therefore within that which Butler seeks to contest. On this view, the existential reading assumes the impossible: a purview beyond discursivity.

The transcendental reading may avoid this problem.²³⁸ Upon which, abjection occurs where the discursively initiated psychic internalization of norms influences the perceptual apparatuses which render humanity intelligible and restricts certain possibilities to unintelligibility. On this reading Butler is critiquing the discourses which normatively erect and sustain what counts as human; a pre-conscious discursively realized psychic/cognitive function responsible for the possibility of experiencing sensory input as human.²³⁹ There is considerable support for reading Butler this way. *Bodies That Matter* asks how subjects 'count or qualify as real' and answers that the discursively realized 'distribution of ontological effects' functions 'for producing domains of unthinkability,'²⁴⁰ an 'excluded and eligible domain.'²⁴¹ Therein Butler claims that 'bodies only appear, only endure, only live within the productive constraints of [...] regulatory schema,' describing the 'domain of abjection' as 'a repudiation without which the subject cannot emerge,' 'prior to the emergence of the "human."' ²⁴²

As the above quotations and analysis show, Butler invites both the existential reading and the transcendental reading. If there were an explanation of how these two different levels interact then this may be the end of the problem, but Butler's politicizations of normative violence do not restrict themselves to the existential realm.

²³⁸ Transcendental here refers to the Foucauldian "de-universalized" Kantian view that our experience depends on historically contingent a priori "knowledge."

²³⁹ In explaining materialization as 'somewhat different form Foucault' Butler 'aligns with the Kantian tradition.' Costera Major, Irene. Prins, Braujke "How bodies come to matter: An interview with Judith Butler" *Signs*, Vol. 23, No. 2 (Winter 1998), pp. 275 -286, University of Chicago Press p. 279.

²⁴⁰ Butler, Judith. *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "sex"* New York: Routledge, 1993.

²⁴¹ Butler, Judith. *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "sex"* New York: Routledge, 1993. P. x.

²⁴² Butler, Judith. *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "sex"* New York: Routledge, 1993. P. 3.

Butler describes the regulatory normativity which dictates the conditions of intelligibility as an instrument of power instrumentalized for purposes of hierarchy, subordination, and exclusion. This politicization of identity formation is much harder to defend on the transcendental than on the existential reading because here the claim is that certain persons occupy realms outside any current possible understanding of personhood. But this could not be mobilized for defending subjugated groups because their intelligibility is surely required for both their mistreatment and its contestation. The problem can be made clearer by asking: if it is true that sex and gender are transcendental conditions for intelligibility as human does this mean those whose “humanness is called into question” are imperceptible? On the transcendental reading the answer would be yes. This is hugely problematic, for even while there are those who struggle to understand or empathize with certain sexed and gendered and/or not sexed and gendered individuals, even to the extent of denying their moral status, such dehumanizations still recognize a human. Put simply, only a human can be dehumanized. A potential way to address this issue is to read Butler’s work as aiming to produce a future in which subjects come to occupy a less rigidly regulated normative environment. On this view, inaugurating or opening the possibility of a new intelligibility is a necessarily futural project and the humans we are saving from abjection are those who could be subjectivated differently in the future. This would suit Butler’s goal of ‘initiating new possibilities, new ways for bodies to matter.’²⁴³ The problem is that nobody will benefit. No future being can be saved from abjection because in the Butlerian frame ‘the subject is constituted through the forces of

²⁴³ Butler, Judith. *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "sex"* New York: Routledge, 1993. P. 30.

exclusion and abjection, one which produces a constitutive outside to the subject, an abjected outside which is after all inside the subject as its own founding repudiation.’²⁴⁴ On this view, while the intelligible subject determines the abject state as the subject’s “constitutive outside” it does so as a reflection of the perimeters of intelligibility, the constitutive “inside.” Abjection operates internally to subjectivation, within the psyche if not the ego. There is no further outside. The subject and the abject exert equal exclusionary/creative power over one another within the psyche. Therefore, there is no potential being which is barred from existence by subjectivation. Indeed, there are no abject beings at all. Therefore, there is no way on the transcendental reading of Butler’s theory to bring the abjected into the subjective, not now, not ever. ²⁴⁵

The “Kynical” reading may avoid the naiveté of the existential reading and the problematic commitments of the transcendental and explain why Butler has not distinguished between the two levels. On the Kynical reading, Butler adopts a disruptive insubordination akin to Diogenes, deconstructing and de-legitimizing the dominant logic from within its symbolic paradigm, both implying and refusing the “tainted” categories of transcendental or existential, as well as logical, rational, material, discursive, metaphysical, or philosophical. On the Kynical reading Butler aims to destabilize the power at play in laying claim to traditional categories, problematizing these basic delimiting concepts as pernicious and unthought commitments in the

²⁴⁴ Ibid. P. 3.

²⁴⁵ Potentially some recourse to the radical sociality of the psyche could help here, but Butler doesn’t offer one.

dominant logic.²⁴⁶ Here though, instead of defending a bucolic ethics, “Kynical Butler’s” goal is realize freedom through resisting the dominant paradigm of intelligibility. There is considerable reason to read Butler this way: “This whole domain of ontology that the good, the conceptually pure, philosopher takes for granted is profoundly tainted from the start.”²⁴⁷ Butler describes herself as ‘willing to commit a sort of rhetorical excess’²⁴⁸ and deconstructive writing as ‘one way of reconfiguring what will count as the world’.²⁴⁹ *How Bodies Come to Matter* questions ‘the necessity of the mechanisms through which the ontological fields are constituted,’²⁵⁰ and intends ‘to confound the conceptually proper philosopher,’²⁵¹ so as to ‘resignify the ontological operators,’ and ‘produce ontology itself as a contested field,’²⁵² ‘recirculating the “there is” in order to

²⁴⁶ Support for this reading can be found in Butler’s explanation of the purpose of the resignification of terms; to capture the unavoidable embedded status of thought and language within historical cultural socio-political limits which ‘makes the ontology of the body a social ontology’ and ‘normative production of ontology’ necessarily implicated in discussions over what “life” is: “The domain of ontology is a regulated domain: what gets produced inside of it, what gets excluded from it in order for the domain to be constituted is itself an effect of power. And the performative can be one of the ways in which discourse operationalizes power’ Ibid.

²⁴⁷ How bodies come to matter: An interview with Judith Butler, Irene Costera Major, and Braujke Prins, *Signs*, Vol. 23, No. 2 (Winter 1998), pp. 275 -286, University of Chicago press, P. 279-280 On this reading, Butler intends to be impossible to pin down, to defy conventions, without supposing to fully extend beyond their influence; to beguile, to confuse and even to inaugurate a new relationship to ontology: ‘Even if I say, “there are abject bodies that do not enjoy a certain kind of ontological status,” I perform that contradiction on purpose. And I am doing that precisely to confound the conceptually proper philosopher and to pose a question about the secondary and derivative status of ontology. I am doing that precisely to fly in the face of those who would say, “but aren't you presupposing ...?” No! My speech does not necessarily have to presuppose. ... Or, if it does, fine! Perhaps it's producing the effect of a presupposition through its performance, OK? And that's fine! Get used to it! But it is to roundly inaugurate an ontology, it is not to presuppose an already given one. It is discursively to institute one’ Ibid.

²⁴⁸ Costera Major, Irene. Prins, Braujke “How bodies come to matter: An interview with Judith Butler” *Signs*, Vol. 23, No. 2 (Winter 1998), pp. 275-286, University of Chicago Press p. 284.

²⁴⁹ Butler, Judith. *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "sex"* New York: Routledge, 1993. P. 19.

²⁵⁰ Butler, Judith *Frames of War* Verso, UK, 2009, p.7.

²⁵¹ “How bodies come to matter: An interview with Judith Butler, Irene Costera Major, and Braujke Prins” *Signs*, Vol. 23, No. 2 (Winter 1998), pp. 275 -286, University of Chicago Press, P. 279-280.

²⁵² Ibid.

produce a counter imaginary to the dominant metaphysics.²⁵³ On this register, Butler's use of overlapping and even inconsistent ethical, epistemological, ontological, and metaphysical frames which compel our distinct readings, alongside pejorative normative language is employed to target complex pre-conscious psychic and discursive functions to encourage a self-reflective analysis of our visceral response to provocation with the goal of shifting perspectives concerning the depth of normative violence.

I could say "there are abject bodies," and that could be a performative in which I endow ontology. I endow ontology to precisely that which has been systematically deprived of the privilege of ontology [...] I am performing a performative contradiction, on purpose. And I am doing that precisely to confound the conceptually proper philosopher and to pose a question about the secondary and derivative status of ontology. Even if say, "there are abject bodies that do not enjoy a certain kind of ontological status," I perform that contradiction on purpose.²⁵⁴

Unfortunately, the Kynical reading is also deeply problematic. While Butler's theoretical commitments allow for the distance from norms requisite for critique, full distance is rendered impossible by their constitutive depth. On Butler's model we must be within the functioning of norms to subvert them. A consequence of this view is that imagining the power to step outside the grip of norms would contradict the very need to subvert them. The following articulates this Butlerian refrain:

I see opposition working from within the very terms by which power is elaborated.²⁵⁵

²⁵³ Costera Major, Irene. Prins, Braujke "How bodies come to matter: An interview with Judith Butler" *Signs*, Vol. 23, No. 2 (Winter 1998), pp. 275 -286, University of Chicago Press p. 279.

²⁵⁴ How bodies come to matter: An interview with Judith Butler, Irene Costera Major, and Braujke Prins, *Signs*, Vol. 23, No. 2 (Winter 1998), pp. 275 -286, University of Chicago Press, P. 279-280.

²⁵⁵ "How bodies come to matter: An interview with Judith Butler, Irene Costera Major, and Braujke Prins" *Signs*, Vol. 23, No. 2 (Winter 1998), pp. 275 -286, University of Chicago Press, P. 279-28.

For this reason, one would expect Butler's deconstructions to remain on recognizable terms with that which they purport to subvert, but Butler refuses to critique/engage traditional categories such as ontology on their own terms, and as such the subversion loses its thrust. For example, in lamenting lesbianism's "exclusion from ontology,"²⁵⁶ talking about changing "the distribution of ontological effects," "recirculating" and "re-signifying" ontological "operators," and most of all when "endowing with" or "inaugurating" ontology, Butler does not do enough justice to the concept to claim to subvert it. Refusal is not subversion. Furthermore, claiming the power to "inaugurate a new ontology" whilst simultaneously calling the very concept "profoundly tainted from the start" is paradoxical to the point of meaninglessness.

This problematic also leaves unanswered how we are to judge the effects of ontology discourse, upon what foundation we could justify subversion, and how we could "change" ontology. If the pernicious biases functioning at the level where discursive structures constitute experience are contingent and contestable, then surely the commitments that motivate such contestation are equally vulnerable, and even if we did have such power, what right have we to prefer these biases over others? While Butler resists traditional concepts of sex and gender, discourse, logic, ontology, and identity as such, she upholds subversive freedom, justice, non-violence, and equality. Perhaps there is an explanation for why these ideals survive deconstruction while the very structure of language, reasoning, and brute experiential reality do not, but Butler does not offer one. This can leave the reader wondering why to apply Butler's critique

²⁵⁶ Butler, Judith "Imitation and Gender Insubordination: (1990) From Diana Fuss (ed.), *Inside Out: Lesbian Theories, Gay Theories*, pp. 12-31. New York: Routledge, 1991. P. 20.

precisely where she does and not where she doesn't, at which point the voice of Martha Nussbaum is impossible to ignore: 'you cannot simply resist as you please.'²⁵⁷

If we read Butler as critiquing the discourses which normatively erect and sustain the perimeters delimiting which humans are deemed worthy of dignity and respect the project intends to improve the situation for the currently marginalized. If we read Butler's project as deconstructing normalizing discourse at the deepest levels of intelligibility it is intended to help render visible instances and varieties of violent abjection we may otherwise be blind to and even recalibrate discriminatory consciousness in response. And if we read Butler as utilizing paradox and performative contradictions to deconstruct norms embedded in the very structures of inference Butler's aim is to break down the forces which discursively enclose the horizons of embodied life, so as to carve out a future in which new "unimaginable" freedoms can emerge. Whichever heuristic we adopt, Butler is encouraging us to interrogate how prejudices and biases place limits we can potentially transcend. Butler describes this "normative" dimension of her work'²⁵⁸ as expanding 'the very meaning of what counts as a valued and valuable body.'²⁵⁹ The rationale for supposing our heuristics then stems not from if but how we are to ground such a project. Therefore, if these are legitimate heuristics, we can claim an underlying aspiration to curtail violence, increase freedom,

²⁵⁷ Nussbaum, Martha C. "The Professor of Parody." *Reviews 1986-2011 Philosophical Interventions* (2012): 198-222.

²⁵⁸ Butler, Judith. *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "sex"* New York: Routledge, 1993. P. 21.

²⁵⁹ Butler, Judith. *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "sex"* New York: Routledge, 1993. P. 22.

to contribute to realizing justice, and equality, all of which are, broadly speaking, liberal ideals.²⁶⁰

But, as Butler's own placing of "normative" in scare-quotes suggests, this is problematic. On the Kynical and transcendental readings the project fails its guiding aspiration, and a straightforward articulation of existential reading – the only option upon which it is realizable – is prohibited by Butler's commitments. As we saw, this is because for Butler, the discursive realms of intelligibility which dictates whose lives matter as well as the freedom to contest this regulatory normativity operate within the perimeters dictated by normative violence. This is why Butler cannot claim these ideals. To do so would be to commit normative violence, the very power Butler aims to contest. This marks the impasse many poststructuralisms interested in equality, justice, freedom, non-violence, and human rights are prone to encounter. The will-to-deconstruction is a consequence of ideology critique predicated on the observation of implicit bias, the absence of canonical interpretations of experience, stability of viewpoint of value, or overarching truths and the consequent commitment that value systems risk potentially oppressive discrimination, a worry that Butler makes very clear: "To assume a substantive notion of the universal is of necessity to impose a culturally hegemonic notion."²⁶¹ For this reason, although the existential reading is the

²⁶⁰ It may be objected that there are other heuristics than these three, indeed, that I am superimposing ideals onto Butler's middle work, then criticizes the places where those ideals are not supported. I would respond in two ways. Firstly, I would point to the arguments in chapter 3. Secondly, I would add, that even if we do not see progressive liberalism within Butler's theory, the general uptake of her theories have been from that diaspora of leanings, and therefore, that even if there is a case to be made that my reading superimposes, (I strongly resist this), the exegetical tensions my reading highlights would antagonize similar readers of which there are many.

²⁶¹ Butler, Judith. "Contingent Foundations: Feminism and the Question of the "Postmodern"." Ed. Seyla Benhabib. *Feminist Contentions: A Philosophical Exchange*. New York: Routledge, 1995.

most useful for those invested contesting normative violence, Butler nevertheless resists it. The impasse is that the language popular in such projects, certainly in Butler, of violence and abjection, discrimination, exclusion, expulsion, obliteration, subjection, oppression, etc. invariably invoke categorical structures indebted to overarching narratives and value systems.²⁶² When describing her “performative contradictions” flying in the face of those who would say “but aren't you presupposing?” Butler replies to her imagined interlocutors: ‘No! My speech does not necessarily have to presuppose. ... Or, if it does, fine! Deal with it.’ My thesis is that she presupposes liberal ideals and that the reluctance to announce them stems from a tension within a normative aspiration at pains to avoid normative violence or, put another way, from the tension between ideals and ideology critique. This is roughly analogous, albeit in a highly intellectualized form, to the liberal cynic – portrayed in our reading of Benna Carpenter – compelled to self-designate as “post-ideological” while remaining in a fraught relationship with liberal ideals and ideology critique. We called this “Inauthentic Ideology Critique as failed avowal;” a condition combining the critical appreciation of the vulnerability of ideals with concealed or unacknowledged commitments. It seems then, that we a form of Inauthentic Ideology Critique in Butler.

Cynicalization and “Cruel Optimism”

The Psychic Life of Power evidences fidelity to, and/or a deepening of, the pessimistic/problematic features of its critical inheritance and both raises and prohibits

²⁶² Another classical form this impasse takes concerns the prospect of political solidarity: The compassionate and open eyed postmodernism which yearns to purge ourselves of imperialistic colonialist universalized notions of reason and man so as to develop a genuine non-violent pluralism, struggles against the prospect of irreconcilable differences the same yearning implies.

hope. This relates to the notion of “cynicalization” and “cruel optimism” in our literary phenomenology. Cynicalization was our term for the process diagnosed in Sloterdijk’s genealogy of enlightenment ideology critique into cynicism whereby the legacy of revelatory critiques ruled out the emancipatory features in the inherited theoretical lineage. Cruel Optimism was the emotionally fraught phenomenologically complex feature of Liberal Cynicism where the cynic seeks cause for hope but limits potential candidates for amelioration or catharsis to that which its constitutive and exhausted ideology-critique purports to, but cannot, permit. We find analogs for both here. In addition to problematizing the emancipatory within its intellectual inheritance, *The Psychic Life of Power* promises and simultaneously prohibits hope. We can see this in Butler’s use of Nietzsche’s notion of sublimation, Freud’s theories of narcissism and melancholia, and Althusser’s theory of interpellation, and Foucault’s theories of subjectivation respectively.

Butler inherits and entrenches the negative elements in her Nietzscheanism, specifically the mechanism by which morality creates bad conscience.²⁶³ By locating a passionate attachment to a self-beratement -- which Nietzsche locates within the purview of the critical consciousness -- in the unconscious and rejecting that a pre-

²⁶³ Butler inherits Nietzsche’s diagnosis of a normatively violent morality which, through bad conscience and existential guilt, carves out the psychic interiority constitutive of modern self-reflexive subjects and compels a passionate attachment to self-subjection. (Specifically, from Nietzsche, Friedrich Wilhelm. *Daybreak: Thoughts on the Prejudices of Morality*. Ed. Maudemarie Clark and Brian Leiter. Trans. R.J. Hollingdale. Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge UP, 1997. Nietzsche, Friedrich. *On the Genealogy of Morality: A Polemic*. Trans. Maudemarie Clark and Alan J. Swensen: Hackett, 1998.) ‘A prohibition on action or expression is said to turn the “drive” back on itself, fabricating an internal sphere, the condition for self-inspection and reflexivity. The drive turning back on itself becomes the precipitating condition of subject formation, a primary longing in recoil’ ‘Morality performs violence again and again in cultivating the subject as a reflexive being’ ‘the subject engages in its own self-thwarting, accomplishes its own subjection, desires and crafts its own shackles’ Butler, Judith. *The Psychic Life of Power: Theories in Subjection*. Stanford, CA: Stanford UP, 1997. P. 22, P. 64, P. 24 respectively.

socialized vitality violently foreclosed in moral subjection can be liberated from this pernicious normativity Butler immobilizes contesting normative violence. While Nietzsche regarded guilt and bad conscience as conditions that can be consciously appropriated for emancipatory ends for Butler, this masochistic requirement is necessary, leaving the subject unavoidably vulnerable 'to a power not of its own making.'²⁶⁴

That morality is predicated on a certain kind of violence is already familiar, but more surprising is that such violence founds the subject.²⁶⁵

It might be argued that by portraying the depth with which our discriminative capacities make us vulnerable to both suffering and committing violent abuse on the social and political level that Butler's psychic entrenching of normative violence may function to mobilize sympathy with concrete situations of exploitation. To explain, that while we are all vulnerable to normative violence, vulnerability "manifests" differently concerning one's relations to the norm in question. For example, a homosexual is likely victim to harsher concrete consequences of functions associated with normative violence than the heterosexual, even though on this psychic level the violence is similar (the exclusion of the otherwise sexed). The unique vulnerability then is that the normative violence produces beings intelligible as more or less worthy of hate/violence/persecution than others. The unique sympathy could emanate from realizing that both this corporeal vulnerability of sexual non-conformism, and the likelihood of persecution is a consequence of deep psychic functions: 'that subjects are

²⁶⁴ Ibid. p. 20

²⁶⁵ 'the subject engages in its own self-thwarting, accomplishes its own subjection, desires, and crafts its own shackles' Butler, Judith. *The Psychic Life of Power: Theories in Subjection*. Stanford, CA: Stanford UP, 1997. P. 64, P. 24.

constituted in primary vulnerability does not exonerate the abuses they suffer, on the contrary it makes all the more clear how fundamental the vulnerability can be'. Indeed, Butler's normative language then of "abuse", "exploitation", "subjection", "abjection," "obliteration," may function to excite their contestation. However, it remains impossible to mobilize any kind of social or political action based on a theory of a priori vulnerability which 'qualifies the subject as an exploitable kind of being.'²⁶⁶ Therefore, while going some way to make finer distinctions among cases of violence, as well as linking "inaugural" violence to actual states of abuse and exploitation and by theorizing the mechanisms of normative subject formation as they relate to subjugation and exploitation, Butler nevertheless fails to ground contesting abuse and exploitation, the unequal distribution of vulnerability at the societal/political and biological level, and the mechanisms of normative subject formation as they relate to subjugation and exploitation.

Following *On Narcissism: An Introduction*,²⁶⁷ *Mourning and Melancholia*,²⁶⁸ *Civilization and its Discontents*,²⁶⁹ *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality*,²⁷⁰ and *The Ego and the Id*²⁷¹ Butler uses Freud's theories to describe the psychic working of heteronormative power claiming that a self-destructive psychic circuitry prefiguring

²⁶⁶ Butler, Judith. *The Psychic Life of Power: Theories in Subjection*. Stanford, CA: Stanford UP, 1997. P. 64.

²⁶⁷ Freud, Sigmund. *Freud's On Narcissism: An Introduction*. Ed. Joseph Sandler, Ethel Person, and Peter Fonagy. New Haven: Yale UP, 1991.

²⁶⁸ Freud, Sigmund. "Mourning and Melancholia," and "Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality" from; Ed. Peter Gay. *The Freud Reader*. New York: Norton, 1999. 584-89.

²⁶⁹ Freud, Sigmund. *Civilization and Its Discontents*. Trans. James Strachey. New York: Norton, 1962.

²⁷⁰ Freud, Sigmund. " Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality." Ed. Peter Gay. *The Freud Reader*. New York: Norton, 1999. 239-293.

²⁷¹ Freud, Sigmund. "The Ego and the Id." Ed. Peter Gay. *The Freud Reader*. New York: Norton, 1999. 239-293.

normative masochism is a universal socially instantiated condition.²⁷² On Freud's account of the processes of melancholy foreclosure a love object once known to the analyzant is later repressed.²⁷³ For Butler, the narcissistic internalization typical of melancholia is a feature of subject formation and thus the love object was disavowed prior to the formation of the ego. Because Butler designates the narcissistic self-beratement typical of melancholia as a creator of subjectivity, and not as does Freud a contingent affliction, it is no longer a psychopathology which therapy can ameliorate.²⁷⁴ Therefore, Freud's ameliorative purport is compromised in Butler.²⁷⁵

The cruel optimism here also begins with a feature that distinguishes Butler's account of melancholia from Freud's. While in *Mourning and Melancholia* Freud argued that melancholia begins with the loss of a loved person, for Butler, melancholia involves the internalization of a prohibited desire and the disavowed grief concerning its unavailability. On the back of this innovation Butler promises a new focus for contesting the disastrous effects of heterosexual melancholia: 'in the social foreclosure of grief we

²⁷² 'I come into social being, and because I have a certain inevitable attachment to my existence [...] because a certain narcissism takes hold of any term that confers existence, I am led to embrace the terms that injure me because they constitute me socially' Butler, Judith. *The Psychic Life of Power: Theories in Subjection*. Stanford, CA: Stanford UP, 1997. p. 104 Compare with Freud's description of patients suffering 'during the course of melancholia' and the condition as essentially a regression caused by conscious failed love. Freud, Sigmund. "Mourning and Melancholia," and "Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality" from; Ed. Peter Gay. *The Freud Reader*. New York: Norton, 1999. 584-89.

²⁷³ It may be relatively plausibly objected that *The Ego and the Id* supports Butler's reading. This is not straightforward and would simply shift the consequent problematic onto Freud as well as Butler.

²⁷⁴ For Butler 'the foreclosure of homosexuality appears to be foundational to a certain heterosexual formation of the subject' (23). The result is that whereas for Freud the loss which compels melancholia was once known, on this image, it was never known, instead forming the very boundary of the heterosexual subject such that 'that loss inaugurates the subject and threatens it with dissolution'. Butler, Judith. *The Psychic Life of Power: Theories in Subjection*. Stanford, CA: Stanford UP, 1997. P. 23.

²⁷⁵ While the Freudian picture admits to action-determining forces of which we are unaware many of these forces relate to neuroses which are contingent and traceable to local personal experiences which, if analytically revealed, can be ameliorated. Here, although not causally deterministic, the forces which form subjects are necessarily beyond the reach of those subjects and the effect of therapy (assuming the maintenance of subjectivity is a basic therapeutic demand).

might find what fuels the internal violence of conscience.'²⁷⁶ The problem is that this is impossible given the role Butler gives the repudiation of desire in the coming into being of a self-conscious subject. Nevertheless, after laboriously laying out the necessity of foreclosure for consciousness, Butler states at the very end of the argument, that 'there is no necessary reason for identification to oppose desire.'²⁷⁷ Butler even proposes 'developing a typology of "refusal" and "exclusion" that might help us distinguish between what is rigorously repudiated and foreclosed, and what happens to be less rigidly or permanently declined,'²⁷⁸ suggesting that after locating the points whereby punitive norms compel the internalization of prohibited desire in the emergence of psychic interiority we could imagine processes to retroactively destabilize the formative grip of foreclosures poised to manifest in identitarian hatred. This excites the hope that we can contest how subject formation internalizes necessarily delimiting social norms through the foreclosure of desire. But Butler's account of subject formation entails the foreclosure of grief and the repudiation of desire. If the claim is that a volatilization of social norms at the level of critique enables us to loosen ourselves from their normative grip at the level of the preconscious then why not just say that and explain how? If the processes prefiguring subject formation could be constructively directed to correct certain pernicious downstream effects, or to bring about the possibility of new future inaugurations then this account would pose a potentially revolutionary possibility, but without prolonged elaboration on both how her theory

²⁷⁶ Butler, Judith. *The Psychic Life of Power: Theories in Subjection*. Stanford, CA: Stanford UP, 1997. P. 183.

²⁷⁷ Ibid. p. 149.

²⁷⁸ Ibid. p. 163.

allows for this and what actions in the conscious arena could direct these processes this hope remains a fantasy.

Butler inherits a restricted version of interpellation – Althusser’s model of subject formation via submission to ideological categories initiated through language²⁷⁹ – arguing that subjects motivated by a “guilty” recognition of the necessity of the laws under which identity categories within a specific ideological paradigm are sustained through an unconscious ‘submission to the rules of the dominant ideology’²⁸⁰ ‘constituted within sociality by virtue of this submission.’²⁸¹ The idea is that the cost of subject formation – the foreclosure of certain psychic possibilities – is “chosen” by the subject in its inauguration. Again, while for Althusser subject formation functions within existing subjects for Butler, it is a priori and unconscious:

The possibility of a critical view of the law is limited by what might be understood as a prior desire for the law, a passionate complicity with law, *without which no subject can exist.*²⁸²

Concerning cruel optimism, Butler’s Althusserian account of psychic resistance cites that because the act of hailing in interpellation can miss, its demands are therefore not absolute. In other words, that interpellation is ‘neither unilaterally or exhaustively’²⁸³ determined. From this indeterminacy Butler promises an alternative

²⁷⁹ Althusser, Louis. "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses (notes towards an Investigation)." Trans. Ben Brewster. *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays*. New York: Monthly Review, 1971. 127-88.

²⁸⁰ Ibid. 116. ‘the law is broken prior to any possibility of having access to the law, and so "guilt" is prior to knowledge of the law’ ‘In "Ideology," guilt and conscience operate implicitly in relation to an ideological demand, an animating reprimand, in the account of subject formation’ Ibid. 108.

²⁸¹ Ibid. 116. Also - ‘the law is broken prior to any possibility of having access to the law, and so "guilt" is prior to knowledge of the law’ ‘In "Ideology," guilt and conscience operate implicitly in relation to an ideological demand, an animating reprimand, in the account of subject formation’ Ibid. 108.

²⁸² Butler, Judith. *The Psychic Life of Power: Theories in Subjection*. Stanford, CA: Stanford UP, 1997.

²⁸³ Ibid. p. 107.

variety of "being"²⁸⁴ potentially inaugurated contra the guilty complicity with oppressive norms going as far as offering a new 'direction for rethinking ethics'²⁸⁵ on the back of this promise:

we might reread "being" as precisely the potentiality that remains unexhausted by any particular interpellation. Such a failure of interpellation may well undermine the capacity of the subject to "be" in a self-identical sense, but it may also mark the path toward a more open, even more ethical kind of being, one of, or for, the future'²⁸⁶

If answering the call is a condition for the possibility of being a subject then utilizing this resource would require the improbable ability to hover between realms of unrealized and realized unconscious identification. Furthermore, because missing "the call" of interpellation remains an event necessarily outside of the subjective domain, even if it were possible, it is surely impossible to bring such volatilization into consciousness, let alone the socio-political realm.²⁸⁷ The cruel optimism here then stems from the fact that refusing to submit to the law of interpellation must operate in a space necessarily post-interpellation, but it cannot. Thus, when Butler promises some preconscious ontological resource that exceeds interpellation coexisting alongside but

²⁸⁴ Is there a possibility of being elsewhere or otherwise, without denying our complicity in the law that we oppose? Such possibility would require a different kind of turn, one that, enabled by the law, turns away from the law, resisting its lure of identity, an agency that outruns and counters the conditions of its emergence' Ibid. p. 130.

²⁸⁵ Ibid. pg 131.

²⁸⁶ Ibid. 'Such a turn demands a willingness not to be - a critical desubjectivation - in order to expose the law as less powerful than it seems. What forms might linguistic survival take in this desubjectivized domain? How would one know one's existence? Through what terms would it be recognized and recognizable?' Ibid. p. 130.

²⁸⁷ Furthermore, it is hard to imagine in a psychoanalytically internalized account of interpellation what "forms of linguistic survival" taking place in a "de-subjectivized domain" would amount to.

independent of the formed subject to be utilized in producing a more expansive “ethical” subjectivity, this beautiful idea is hoisted by its own petard.²⁸⁸

The Psychic Life of Power also adopts and deepens the problems of mobilizing Michel Foucault’s theories for ethical and political ends.²⁸⁹ For Foucault, the critique of power might be politically mobilized²⁹⁰ because critique reveals that there is no necessity for power to *express itself*²⁹¹ in specific oppressive social and political norms. As elaborated in *The History of Sexuality*,²⁹² *The Subject and Power*,²⁹³ and *Discipline and Punish*²⁹⁴ this realization can be utilized for political ends.²⁹⁵ An issue with Foucault’s

²⁸⁸ Perhaps Butler is committed to our capacity to “be” without a self, to “be” beyond the realm of subjective being if there is any “path” marked out at all here it is not a path towards any recognizable application in service of allowing for the creation of a more ethical kind of human than one constituted by grief, guilt, fear, denial, repression, and disavowal.

²⁸⁹ Foucault revealed ruptures in the evolution of power as fundamentally unpredictable, contrary to traditions which highlight shifts in power as logical, consciously directed, *or direct-able* including the enlightenment’s juridical model, Hegelian dialectics, the existentialist’s notion of power possessed by certain constellations of committed subjectivity, or the Marxist idea of economic power as unfairly distributed. Opposed to these, Foucault’s disruptive “strategical” model of power sees “it” as immanent, omnipresent, and relational, ‘not acquired seized or shared,’ ‘not what one holds onto or allows to slip away,’ ‘exercised from innumerable points’ ‘from below not above,’ ‘non-subjective’, from which ‘there is no escaping.’ Butler also shares Foucault’s theory of subjectivation as a contingent and incomplete working of power: ‘subjectivation is a kind of power that not only unilaterally acts on a given individual as a form of domination, but also activates or forms the subject. Hence subjectivation is neither simply the domination of a subject nor its production, but designates a certain kind of restriction in production, a restriction without which the production of the subject cannot take place’. Foucault quotes from Foucault, Michel, and Robert J. Hurley. *The History of Sexuality*. New York: Vintage, 1990. vol. 1.

²⁹⁰ ‘I would like to suggest another way to go further toward a new economy of power relations, a way which is more empirical, more directly related to our present situation, and which implies more relations between theory and practice. It consists of taking the forms of resistance against different forms of power as a starting point. To use another metaphor, it consists of using this resistance as a chemical catalyst so as to bring to light power relations, locate their position, and find out their point of application and the methods used’ *The Subject and Power* Author(s): Michel Foucault Source: *Critical Inquiry*, Vol. 8, No. 4, (Summer, 1982), pp. 777-795 Published by: The University of Chicago Press p. 780

²⁹¹ ‘even though consensus and violence are the instruments or the results, they do not constitute the principle or the basic nature of power.’ *Ibid.* 789.

²⁹² A Foucault, Michel, and Robert J. Hurley. *The History of Sexuality*. New York: Vintage, 1990. vol. 1.

²⁹³ *The Subject and Power* Author(s): Michel Foucault Source: *Critical Inquiry*, Vol. 8, No. 4, (Summer, 1982), pp. 777-795 Published by: The University of Chicago Press.

²⁹⁴ Foucault, Michel. *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*. New York: Vintage, 1995.

²⁹⁵ Coupled with over-determining the particular forms it takes, for Foucault power has a tendency to self-subvert, and therefore carries with it the resources and potential for contesting its current instantiations relevant to those pursuing freedoms from certain machinations of power: At the very heart

view is that given we cannot escape its dominion resistance amounts to refusing to operate under the current conditions of power's more pernicious machinations.²⁹⁶ Because socio-political efforts based on theories, anticipations, or desires which necessarily operate within the scripts of various regulatory and disciplinary regimes offered up in the current constellation of power, its ateleological ruptures and discontinuities are essentially random and chaotic in relation to human ends whose very intelligibility remains tethered to this context. As such we have no right to think of radical shifts in power relations as possibly directed by our efforts. Consequently, there is no justification for thinking that a rupture will, can, *or should* happen in a certain direction.²⁹⁷ Nor could we have any epistemic foundation for thinking so, for we could only ever attest to a 'new' paradigm from within the scripts allowable by the current one.²⁹⁸ We can merely refuse the full governance of the norm at the empirical level.

of the power relationship, and constantly provoking it, are the recalcitrance of the will and the intransigence of freedom [...] The relationship between power and freedom's refusal to submit cannot, therefore, be separated Ibid. 790.

²⁹⁶ This refusal could stall, or short circuit the unnecessarily and undesirably delimiting, yet contingent manner in which subjects are currently formed. As Foucault explained: 'the target nowadays is not to discover what we are, but to refuse what we are. We have to imagine and to build up what we could be to get rid of this kind of political "double bind," which is the simultaneous individualization and totalization of modern power structure. The conclusion would be that the political, ethical, social, philosophical problem of our days is not to try to liberate the individual from the state and from the state's institutions but to liberate us both from the state and from the type of individualization which is linked to the state. We have to promote new forms of subjectivity through the refusal of this kind of individuality which has been imposed on us for several centuries. *The Subject and Power* Author(s): Michel Foucault Source: *Critical Inquiry*, Vol. 8, No. 4, (Summer, 1982), pp. 777-795 Published by: The University of Chicago Press pg 785.

²⁹⁷ There is no single locus of great refusal, no soul of revolt, no source of all rebellions, or pure law of the revolutionary, instead there is a plurality of resistances, each of them a special case. They are possible necessary and probable, others are spontaneous, savage, solitary, concerted, rampant or violent; some of those are quick to compromise, interested or sacrificial. *By definition they can only exist in the strategic field of power relations* Foucault, Michel. *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*. New York: Vintage, 1995. (My italics)

²⁹⁸ Although there may be room in Foucault for activism designed to contest the conditions under which certain nefarious forms of subject formation occur, because it places agency entirely within the purview of contingent disinterested power, Foucault's theory is tricky for mobilizing significant socio-political resistance. Because the realm of hitherto unrealized psychic possibilities for subjectivity and

In Butler's innovative project of supplementing Foucauldianism with Psychoanalysis, these already scant grounds for optimism are further problematized. This problem stems from a moment of infidelity. While for Foucault subjection/subjectivation functions on the body²⁹⁹ subjectivation in Butler occurs at the point of intersection between the conscious and the unconscious.³⁰⁰ When Butler promises that 'what is enacted by the subject is enabled but not finally constrained by the prior working of power' and that agency 'is constrained by no teleological necessity'³⁰¹ the freedom this promises is dashed: 'whatever resists the normative demand by which subjects are instituted remains unconscious.'³⁰² When Butler raises the hope of a "psychic resistance" to power's more pernicious machinations³⁰³ in relation to a psyche which 'exceeds the imprisoning effects of the discursive demand to inhabit a coherent identity' and which resists 'regularization' and 'normalizing

embodiment, are "re-materializable" only in relation to power's unpredictable and undirectable tendency to self-subvert.

²⁹⁹ Butler even quotes Foucault saying as such for the epigraphy of *Psychic Life* 'We should try to grasp subjection in its material instance as a constitution of subjects.' In Butler, Judith. *The Psychic Life of Power: Theories in Subjection*. Stanford, CA: Stanford UP, 1997. p. 1.

³⁰⁰ Recall Foucault's project of resisting what we are, speaks of 'a new economy of power relations,' 'which is more empirical, more directly related to our present situation,' and 'implies more relations between theory and practice'. *The Subject and Power* Author(s): Michel Foucault Source: *Critical Inquiry*, Vol. 8, No. 4, (Summer, 1982), pp. 777-795 Published by: The University of Chicago Press p. 780.

³⁰¹ Both from Butler, Judith. *The Psychic Life of Power: Theories in Subjection*. Stanford, CA: Stanford UP, 1997. P. 15.

³⁰² Ibid pgs. 86-87.

³⁰³ Furthermore, when Butler offers a potential route out of this mess, introduces the notion of a "remainder" in the psyche beyond the constructed subjectivity, some space within which we may contest the cookie cutter effect of norms on the psychic "reservoir" the Lacanian real, "imagination" and "fantasy" at various stages in the book, (pg 86-87, 94 - 98, 122) these are insufficient categories to carry out such a function. (Although claiming in footnote 6 chapter 3 p. 206 of *Psychic Life*, that 'in this analysis' 'psychoanalysis is only to be represented by these two figures' Freud and Lacan, there are no direct references to Lacan in the book. And in the footnotes there are only two: Lacan, Jacques. *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*. Ed. Jacques-Alain Miller. Trans. Alan Sheridan. New York: W. W. Norton, 1978. . And Lacan, Jacques. *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan*. Ed. Jacques-Alain Miller. Trans. Sylvania Tomaselli. New York: W.W. Norton, 1991).

discourses'³⁰⁴ since she fails to account for the reciprocity whereby conscious activity could somehow retroactively influence these pre-conscious functions this is a cruel optimism.³⁰⁵ The claim appears to be that the norm-governed perimeters which delimit the enactment of performative actions do not map onto the perimeters of human agency. On this understanding, agency is the psychic potential which is materialized through performative acts in the accomplishment of identity, a theory which leaves “wiggle” room for contesting harmfully normalizing discourse.³⁰⁶ Tragically though, this is a freedom at the cost of subjectivity - ‘the subject pursues subordination as the promise of existence.’³⁰⁷

Conclusion

Despite its guiding “liberal” ideals middle Butler fails them. A representative selection of Butler’s work on Materialization and the psychic mechanisms which prefigure it bear hallmarks analogous to Liberal Cynicism. In the work on materialization we find Inauthentic Ideology Critique as failed avowal; a reluctance to admit to the liberal values on which it depends. We also find in this work, and in *The Psychic Life of Power* “Inauthentic Ideology Critique as abandonment”; reifying the inefficacy of the liberal values on which it depends. Because Butler entrenches

³⁰⁴ Ibid p. 86.

³⁰⁵ If we compare the possible applications of Foucault’s to Butler’s account – for example how the barbaric punitive practices which produce radically dehumanized subjects such as the docility of panoptical prisoners or the somnambular of those confined to solitude as locations for contestation by removing this cruel punishment once we have located the machinations of subjectivation within the unconscious, without an account of how such concrete practices relate to the unconscious preconditions for experience – the possibility of coming up with similarly applicable solutions seems painfully remote.

³⁰⁶ What is enacted by the subject is enabled but not finally constrained by the prior working of power, agency exceeds the power by which it is enabled, one might say that the purposes of power are not always the purposes of agency Ibid. p. 15.

³⁰⁷ Ibid.

and deepens the ideology critique of her lineage without upholding or replacing its emancipatory purport, we find features resembling cynicalization in *The Psychic Life of Power*. Butler's efforts to imagine against the comportmental imperialism of social norms can leave sympathetic readers further bereft of hope about the prospect of mobilizing the ideals of non-violence, justice, and equality. Because of this, a "cruel optimism" plagues a broadly liberal socio-political invested reading of middle Butler where we find the possibility of resisting oppressive power thwarted by the conditions of its own emergence, thereby perpetuating cynicism in relation to the ideals that attract the liberal reader to her work.

Part 2: Conclusion

While invested in liberal ideals Judith Butler's middle work inherits a legacy of ideology critique which problematizes their explicit adoption and through reifying oppressive power structures precludes their efficacy. It is for these reasons that we can read middle Butler as sharing Liberal Cynicism's Inauthentic Ideology Critique both as failed avowal and abandonment. *The Psychic Life of Power* observes a cynical fidelity to and a deepening of negative features of its inheritance, raising hopes prohibited by, or by prohibiting hopes raised by this inheritance, and therefore can be said to resemble Cynicalization. Finally, while exciting hopes its own theoretical frame prohibits Butler also exhibits signs of Cruel Optimism. For these reasons Butler's "middle phase" resembles Liberal Cynicism. Later Butler offers a resource for overcoming both the cynicism we diagnosed in her work and along with more positive contributions from Butler's theoretical framework, for overcoming Liberal Cynicism. We turn now in part 3 to grounding and theorizing this overcoming.

Part 3: The Promise

If the cynic is a figure of disenchantment, he or she is not a figure of terminal disenchantment, and the possibility of reenchantment always lurks on the horizon.³⁰⁸

Why not continue the attempt to clean up our game? Why not think the Enlightenment through once again? Why not make a garden out of all that dirt?³⁰⁹

Part 1 explained how for Extreme Liberal Cynicism the repression of its constitutive and fraught hopes manifests in the reduction of critique to criticism, a lack of self-transparency, an anger at idealism and idealists, and even taking delight in exposing folly. It also explained how Liberal Cynicism is susceptible to the radicalization of “fantastical” fascistic master narratives due to their offer of assuaging painfulness. A goal of Part 1 was to show that Extreme Liberal Cynicism contains the motivational impulses for overcoming its repressive extremes and the resources for doing so. The primary goal of part 3 is to theorize this overcoming; to provide an inoculation for cynicism’s self-imposed hopelessness taking its constitutive hope as its starting point. To this end, chapter 5 returns to Sloterdijk, specifically to the successes and failures of his proposed solution to cynicism. This analysis will enable us to outline conditions which a response to Liberal Cynicism must meet. This will provide the foundation for our study in Chapter 6 of how “later” Butler can be seen to exemplify and be used to theorize a model for Extreme Liberal Cynicism overcoming its pernicious

³⁰⁸ (Stanley, 195).

³⁰⁹ *Punching out the Enlightenment: A Discussion of Peter Sloterdijk's Kritik der zynischen Vernunft* Neil Wilson, *New German Critique*, No. 41, Special Issue on the Critiques of the Enlightenment (Spring - Summer, 1987), pp. 53-70, Duke University Press.

extremes grounding the heuristic for addressing Liberal Cynicism via a synthesis of Sloterdijk and Butler with which this dissertation concludes.

Chapter 5: Cheekiness

Whatever cannot stand satire is false.³¹⁰

Introduction

For Sloterdijk, cynicism is what survives from within the enlightenment after its abandonment of ideals under the weight of critique. Given the scarcity of Enlightened False Consciousness we need not over-emphasize Sloterdijk's diagnosis but because Sloterdijkian cynicism shares crucial features with Liberal Cynicism and because he proposes a solution, a continued analysis may furnish solutions here too.

Cheekiness

Arguing that cynicism is genealogically entrenched in modern western consciousness and 'because consciousness raising is irreversible'³¹¹ Sloterdijk contends that cynicism cannot simply be abandoned, instead for any response to cynicism to persuade it must remain faithful to cynicism. The proposed solution is to overcome cynicism from within. For Sloterdijk, features of Kynicism – the critique of naivety, the pursuit of truth, irony as a form of critique, and a degree of autarky – have remained within the enlightenment lineage and its descent into cynicism. However, since cynicism does not share these features to the same degree, reinvigorating cynicism's waning Kynical virtues could mount an immanent critique targeting that which it does not share with its ancestor; a panicked egoism, neediness, insufficient self-criticism, and joylessness. In this way, Kynicism represents 'a source of enlightenment in which

³¹⁰ 'Truth is a matter that can stand mockery, that is freshened by ironic gesture directed at it. Whatever cannot stand satire is false' Sloterdijk, Peter. *Critique of Cynical Reason*. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota, 1987. P. 288.

³¹¹ 'Always a bit unsettled and irritable, collaborating consciousness looks around for its lost naïveté, to which there is no way back, because consciousness raising is irreversible.' Ibid. P. 6.

[cynicism's] secret vitality is hidden'³¹² promising a 'Kynical re-enlightenment'³¹³ of Enlightened False Consciousness. For Sloterdijk, this critique must use the spirit lifting and joyfully disruptive power of satirical insubordination, or 'cheekiness.'³¹⁴ Importantly, on Sloterdijk's reading, cynicism's problems are reducible to egoism. In pursuit of this primary target Sloterdijk proposes that satirical critique be employed for 'liquefying'³¹⁵ the "hardened" cynical ego.'³¹⁶

Sloterdijk also cites early Heidegger and invokes a 'crypto-Buddhist'³¹⁷ model to mount this critique. For Sloterdijk, the Heideggerian critique of Dasman which deconstructed the psychic and sociocultural forces that compel blind conformity is simultaneously a critique of contemporary cynicism. Sloterdijk's reappropriation rests on his critique of Being and Time, that a desperate unwillingness to let go of the ego left Heidegger vulnerable on the spiritual side to the panicked, fearful, and anxious pursuit of self-creation, and on the political to the seductive restorative narrative of national socialism. However, for Sloterdijk, Heideggerian angst and guilt also provide the opportunity to deconstruct the ego. While Sloterdijk describes Heidegger's Kierkegaardian notion of throwing oneself into a particular existential possibility – being-unto-death – as 'the philosophical key word in the age of imperialist and fascist

³¹² Ibid. 99.

³¹³ Ibid. 99.

³¹⁴ Ibid. 99.

³¹⁵ 'Verflüssigung' - Ibid. 379.

³¹⁶ This is as extreme as it sounds, for Sloterdijk's dramatic Nietzschean pursuit of 'overhumanism' (Ibid.) calls for a dissolution of the human as we know it: 'Humanity cannot be enlightened because it itself was the false premise of enlightenment. Humanity does not come up to scratch [...] where its ego appears there cannot shine what was promised by all enlightenments' Ibid. 355.

³¹⁷ Ibid.

world wars'³¹⁸ he nevertheless prescribes using angst to deconstruct the ego and develop conscience from ontological guilt into an awareness of the precariousness of all life. Heideggerian anxiety – which Sloterdijk calls the ‘experience of the meaninglessness of life,’ and ‘the crystallization point around which a philosophy of Kynicism can develop,’³¹⁹ is the means to overcome cynicism. Per Sloterdijk, existential guilt can initiate a reverse dialectic to that from enlightenment to enlightened-false-consciousness. On this suggestion, instead of preemptively mourning what I might have been, anxiety could instead turn us to who we all might be.³²⁰ Rather than the rugged individualism of self-constitution this "call to be guilty" leads to ‘the realization of an exuberant life’³²¹ ‘taking off from the ‘melancholy nimbus’³²² of Heidegger’s ‘self-obsessed, narcissistic, and megalomaniacal authenticity by reclaiming an ecstatic other-love.’³²³ With this deconstruction Neo-Kynicism counters cynical melancholy by discouraging its material neediness through pushing towards a radical autarky inchoate in contemporary cynicism, freeing it from the illusion of perpetual precariousness which advanced capitalist consumerism breeds, and which compels the cynic’s

³¹⁸ Ibid. P. 202. Sloterdijk also described a proto form of cynicism in the Weimar Republic as “matter-of-factness unto death” Ibid p. 521.

³¹⁹ Ibid.

³²⁰ Sloterdijk, Peter. *Critique of Cynical Reason*. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota, 1987. Chapter 7 *The cabinet of cynics chapter entitled Anyone, or: The Most Real Subject of Modern Diffuse Cynicism*.

³²¹ Ibid.

³²² Ibid.

³²³ “Authenticity,” if the expression is to have any meaning at all, is experienced in love and sexual intoxication, in irony and laughter, creativity and responsibility, meditation and ecstasy. In this release, that existential individual (Einzige) who believes its most intimately genuine (eigenst) possession is its own death disappears. At the summit of potentiality we experience not only the end of the world in lonely death, but even more the demise of the ego in its surrender to the most communal world’ Ibid. Chapter 7 *The Cabinet of Cynics chapter entitled Anyone, or: The Most Real Subject of Modern Diffuse Cynicism*. ‘Ecstasy, the dissolution of the ego, is recognized as the precondition for cosmic communication. At the same time, it provides a presentiment of the reconciliation of human beings with one another”. Ibid. p. 467.

'suspension of the ethical' which it deems 'requisite for "progress."' ³²⁴ Neo-Kynical critique also attacks and therefore frees cynicism from the emotional/intellectual neediness and fraught sense of self-worth which compel cynical pain. Through Socratic humility the Kynic evades the need for intellectual superiority: 'the Kynical sublation of theory stems from a conscious not-knowing, not from a knowing better.'³²⁵ The Kynic embraces its own ignorance as the yard stick for all human knowledge, refusing the false consolation of seeing things as they are instead favouring a relentless ironicization of all claims to knowledge: *A Socrates gone mad.*³²⁶ This greater fidelity to truth and critique broken free from limiting restraints enables a greater degree of self-awareness and a critique of cynical-egoism. Finally, through non-cooperation with the discursive forces of materialization, objectification, and identification, Kynical agency frees itself from the constraints of a panicked need to uptake constructed identity categories which, in a cynical age, is to be freed from cynicism. By saying 'no to weakness and neediness'³²⁷ the Kynical revitalization releases dormant libidinal energies from within cynicism sustained inchoate from Diogenes,' 'a "secret" and vital agency'³²⁸ the alternative to cynical egoism, a self-generating agentless agency which Sloterdijk calls a "yesbody":

original Nobodiness remains in this world buried under taboo and panic. The self-conscious nobody in us - who acquires names and identities only through its "social birth" - remains the living source of freedom. The living Nobody, in spite of the horror of socialisation, remembers the

³²⁴ Ibid. Chapter 1.

³²⁵ Ibid. 293.

³²⁶ Plato's alleged description of Diogenes in Diogenes Laertius, *Lives of Eminent Philosophers*. Book 6, Chapter 54. Trans. Robert Drew Hicks. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1950.

³²⁷ Ibid p. 468.

³²⁸ Ibid p. 468.

energetic paradises beneath the personalities [...] which we should not call *nobody* but *yesbody*.³²⁹

Concerning the will-to-truth, the Kynical revitalization embraces cynicism's fatalism concerning the enlightenment's hopes for a universally applicable reason taking this to be an implicit and hidden truth of cynical reason, what Sloterdijk calls 'knowledge cynicism'.³³⁰ However, adopting a 'satirical resistance, an uncivil enlightenment, [a] *non-Platonic dialogue* [...] against the rigged game of "discourse"³³¹ Kynicism no longer pretends to conform to this universalized picture of rational dialogue, a move which could make cynicism honest and counter the inertia of argumentative stalemate. Also related to the pursuit of truth, Sloterdijk combines mindfulness 'that which restricts itself to alertly seeing what is the case,'³³² compassion, and a more Socratic than Kynical irony as the means to realize genuinely universal truths from within the cynical constitution:

Only through forbearance and tranquillity would subjective reason be capable of hearing an objective reason within itself [...] rooted in the

³²⁹ Ibid. 73–7. To explain this empty neo-Kynical agency Sloterdijk rewrites Adorno's famous analysis of Odysseus and the Cyclops (Horkheimer, Max, and Theodor Adorno W. *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments*. Trans. Gunzelin Schmid Noerr. Stanford, CA: Stanford UP, 2002. First published 1944) In Homer's epic, Odysseus lands on an island and, together with his men, enters a cave filled with provisions. After six of his men are eaten, Odysseus offers wine to the culprit, the Cyclops Polyphemus, who responds by asking his name to which Odysseus replies: nobody. (οὐτις and Οὐτις, as translated in Autenrieth, Georg, and Robert Keep P. *An Homeric Dictionary: For Use in Schools and Colleges*. London: MacMillan, 1902.) After the monster falls into a drunken sleep, Odysseus drives a wooden stake into the monster's eye and when he cries out for help against "nobody," his fellow giants think him possessed and recommend prayer. Odysseus and his men escape. Adorno uses the story to allegorize the failure of the enlightenment, reading Odysseus as denying his identity under threat of death, and through his cruelty to the monster, descending into comparable depths of inhumanity, symbolizing the enlightenment's capitulation into what it opposed. By contrast, Sloterdijk's Odysseus transcends the weakness of ego-perseveration, escaping the violence of raw power and selfishness symbolized by the cyclops - who can only see things one way - by elevating himself beyond the need to identify.

³³⁰ 'the secularization, naturalization, and objectification of our understanding of the world,' Ibid. 'The story of Doctor Faustus can be understood as a document for the unsettling of the older metaphysical dualism through the new empiricism' Ibid. p. 362.

³³¹ Ibid.

³³² Ibid.

experience of enthusiastic tranquillity when, on the summit of having-thought, the thinker steps aside and let himself be permeated by the “self-revelation” of truth.³³³

For Sloterdijk then, the choice cynicism faces is ‘between the false self-experience in collective suicide’ of functional melancholia or to give up on the cynical ego, a ‘suicide of false subjectivity in real life experience,’ warning that if ‘the heirs of the enlightenment’ choose the first they will remain ‘on the way to a global cynicism.’³³⁴ On this view, western intellectual history compels a choice choose between cynicism or Kynicism, between the self-imposed curse of modernity and the emancipated spirit of its ancestor. Through cheeky insubordination of the status quo, as custodian of vital embodied energies that have not been appropriated by material and immaterial forces governing the psyche, Kynical satire³³⁵ overcomes cynicism’s hardened egoism and releases an oceanic reserve of emancipatory libidinal energy disrupting the cynical world order to create a more joyful and free society, carrying on the ‘struggle for the

³³³ Ibid. p. 541.

³³⁴ all ibid.

³³⁵ Exemplified in the Menippean tradition of Kynicism. Menippean satire is characterized by attacking mental attitudes rather than specific individuals or entities. Other features found in Menippean satire are different forms of parody and mythological burlesque, a critique of the myths inherited from traditional culture, a rhapsodic nature, a fragmented narrative, the combination of many different targets, and the rapid moving between styles and points of view. The form is named after the Greek Kynic parodist and polemicist Menippus (third century BC). His works, now lost, influenced the works of Lucian, Seneca the Younger and was revived during the Renaissance by Erasmus, by Voltaire and Diderot in the enlightenment, and significantly influenced Rabelais, Swift, Voltaire, Blake, Carroll, Huxley, Joyce, Vonnegut. Indeed, ever since Mikhail Bakhtin's defined Menippean satire as one of the classical "serio-comic" genres, alongside Socratic dialogue, philosophers of the Carnavalesque have elevated it above the more misanthropic methodologies of the other Kynics. For Bakhtin, Dostoevsky represents the highest point in the genre. In a series of articles, Edward Milowicki and Robert Rawdon Wilson, have argued that Menippean is a term for discursive analysis characterized by a mixed, discontinuous way of writing that draws upon distinct, multiple traditions. It is normally highly intellectual and typically embodies an idea, or an ideology, or a mind-set in the figure of a grotesque, even disgusting, comic character. Critic Northrop Frye observed; ‘the novelist sees evil and folly as social diseases, but the Menippean satirist sees them as diseases of the intellect’ Frye, Northrop, and Robert Dayton Denham. *Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays*. Toronto: U of Toronto, 2006. See footnote 292 on this legacy of selective reappropriating Kynicism.

greatest ideals [...] justice, reason, heroic courage, the legitimacy of power, love, the medical sciences' to continue 'to dare to know.'³³⁶

Objections

The Critique of Cynical Reason remains a good account of the apathy and disillusionment that can thwart critique and offers to instill a new vitality and energy in a tradition that can stagnate. But while in the rare and rarefied context of ideology critique's ossified dialectic a biting honesty and disinhibited forthrightness is surely welcome, Sloterdijk's solution is not only limited in its possible application it is also beset by difficulties. It hypostasizes a Kynicism perfectly suited to oppose Enlightened False Consciousness, and yet is unfaithful to both. It maintains a fraught relationship with truth and rests on a wildly speculative theory of human agency. Rather than a solution Sloterdijk's Critique is in an intellectual example of Liberal Cynicism. And worst of all, it advertises a dangerously amoral and apolitical agency while failing to police against its harmfulness.

Concerning hypostatization, in *Punching out the Enlightenment*,³³⁷ Neil Wilson charges Sloterdijk with warping cynicism into a 'spiritual totalitarianism'³³⁸ expressed in his description of our age as characterized by the subjection of every action, emotion, or thought to instrumental rationality. This is both argumentatively ill-supported and conveniently constructed such that Sloterdijk's model of Kynicism is perfectly equipped

³³⁶ "Sapere aude." P. 306 citing Kant, Immanuel, and H.B Nisbett. *An Answer to the Question: "What Is Enlightenment"?* London: Penguin, 2009. Print.

³³⁷ *Punching out the Enlightenment: A Discussion of Peter Sloterdijk's Kritik der zynischen Vernunft* Neil Wilson, *New German Critique*, No. 41, Special Issue on the Critiques of the Enlightenment (Spring - Summer, 1987), pp. 53-70 Duke University Press.

³³⁸ Ibid.

to counter it.³³⁹ This hypostatization can also be seen in Sloterdijk's infidelity to both cynicism and Kynicism. The suggestion that cheekiness is a deconstructive process which reveals the objective truth of the 'highest ideals'³⁴⁰ would have Kynics from Diogenes and Menippus turning in their graves. On the classic Kynical view, the evidence for the value of following animal impulse is indulgence not intellectual analysis, and the evidence for the value of self-discipline is the limits of this indulgence.

Furthermore, the primary vehicle of Sloterdijk's neo-Kynical insubordination is irony which seems far closer to an achievement of culture than a natural impulse. This infidelity continues, as the "truths" which Sloterdijk claims this neo-Kynical enlightenment would embrace are so questionable to both traditions that to assume self-discipline, critique, mediation, and irony would somehow render them plausible is a stretch. The cynic has given up on, and the Kynic never embraced, such ideals. The hypostatization can also be measured by improper historicizing, for although framed within an historical analysis Sloterdijk constructs cynicism and Kynicism as 'constants in our history'³⁴¹ and eschews the task of locating the duo within a network of power relations. Sloterdijk's praise of gestural insubordination also neglects the extent to which bodies are inscribed within dominant discourses by relying on an essentializing discourse of the body separable from intellect magically interjecting from outside and

³³⁹ Timothy Bewes regards the call for neo-Kynicism 'nothing more radical or challenging than yet another flank in a pervasive rearguard action against postmodern 'inauthenticity,' which is to say, it is both dangerously apolitical, and deeply cynical in its false reification of postmodernity' (Bewes, 29).

³⁴⁰ Ibid. 545.

³⁴¹ Ibid: 'Kynicism and cynicism are constants in our history, typical forms of a polemical consciousness "from below" and "from above" Ibid. Cynicism 'forms a basic figure of the revocation of values in the historical process. In "it" ideologies awaken to themselves. Ostentatiously, they scintillate in malevolent ineluctability.' P. 384.

into the field of discursive subjectivation.³⁴² This depends on a crude dualism between mind and body and a magical interaction between the two, with Neo-Kynical satire functioning at the level of embodiment as opposed to the purely intellectual cynicism. As well as contradicting his professed non-dualism Sloterdijk unargumentatively asserts the persistence of this miraculous accessible pre-cultural agency capable of enacting a new Enlightenment revealed by a bodily irony.

Most potently, Sloterdijk argues that cynical egoism conceals objective reason from itself and that it can be reclaimed by applying meditation and Kynical critique but Sloterdijk has simply not done enough to explain how a tradition which questioned objective truth could reveal objective truth to a condition which rejects objective truth. Without establishing this post-dialectic non-universalist conception of truth, Sloterdijk's belief that adopting a 'satirical resistance, an uncivil enlightenment, [a] *non-Platonic dialogue* [...] against the rigged game of "discourse"³⁴³ could counter argumentative stalemate remains fanciful.

Concerning Sloterdijk's Liberal Cynicism, his analysis assumes that relentless and suspicious unmasking of an increasingly un-invested reason, ethics, equality, and justice is an inevitable consequence of enlightenment critique. In laying out the futility of liberal politics and its alternatives and the complete exhaustion of critical theory

³⁴² Andreas Huyssen asks the pointed question in his forward to Sloterdijk's seminal work: 'How would Sloterdijk counter a Foucaultian claim that the resistance of the self-conscious body is produced by the culture of cynicism itself as a regenerating and legitimating device?' Sloterdijk, Peter. *Critique of Cynical Reason*. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota, 1987. Forward. In fairness the same question may be legitimately asked of Foucault who in his lectures on Kynicism makes the body the privileged site for contesting existing relations of power. And the great (eventual) enlightenment defender answers by taking the body as the site of practices of self-fashioning that concretely redefine the subject's position within the social games that fashion our "souls".

³⁴³ Ibid.

Sloterdijk concludes from frustrations at the pace of liberal progress that it has no efficacy, in effect announcing the total victory of an 'explosive and unassailable' cynicism.³⁴⁴ Therefore, Sloterdijk succumbs to Liberal Cynicism's Inauthentic Ideology Critique as abandonment of its constitutive idealism. Sloterdijk dismisses communicative rationality, the possibility that law and morality can be rationally justified, that rational self-governance and virtue are possible and relate to the achievement of happiness, and that knowledge requires an intellectual struggle that can be worth it. But these ideals *are* the enlightenment. In denying any truth to enlightenment claims and neglecting enlightenment ideals' positive legacy and persistent emancipatory potential Sloterdijk's attempt to embrace a surviving notion of the enlightenment ends up reinforcing what it sought to oppose.³⁴⁵ Sloterdijk's is not the correct diagnose of corruption at the heart of enlightenment liberalism it is the logical conclusion of his cynicism. As Neil Wilson concludes, 'the work is self-cancelling':³⁴⁶

the author locates himself in the Kynic's corner to fight off his own cynicism. He relieves his frustrations with activism and reveals his hopes [...] but he ends up in the same cynical place where he began. The work is parasitic upon the very strategies and tactics the author appears to be trying to defeat.

³⁴⁴Ibid. P. 3. 'Does not everything speak for the view that the Grand Inquisitor's logic has triumphed, according to which a returned Jesus would be burned on the pyre of the Holy Inquisition, a returned Nietzsche perish in the gas chambers, a returned Marx rot alive in a Siberian labor camp? Is there a law that regulates as such?' Sloterdijk, Peter. *Critique of Cynical Reason*. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota, 1987.

³⁴⁵ Sloterdijk even intimates a such 'We wanted to learn something about cynicism and discovered in doing so that it long since brought us under its domination'. Ibid. p. 217.

³⁴⁶ *Punching out the Enlightenment: A Discussion of Peter Sloterdijk's Kritik der zynischen Vernunft* Neil Wilson, New German Critique, No. 41, Special Issue on the Critiques of the Enlightenment (Spring - Summer, 1987), pp. 53-70 Duke University Press.

Much like the Liberal Cynic, Sloterdijk seems torn between the impulse to reject the enlightenment due to its failings and to maintain fidelity to its ideals, between the self-confident snigger of the ruthlessly critical satirist and the romantic dreamer, between extreme pessimism and naïve optimism. Sloterdijk also suffers from Cruel Optimism. Which is to say, as well as recapitulating the legacy of German romantic anti-intellectualism in abandoning the enlightenment by offering up a naïve alternative Sloterdijk also reproduces its utopian anachronism. Calling the enlightenment an unrealized 'utopian archaic scene' and persuasive argument 'an epistemological idyll' and 'a beautiful and academic vision' upholding 'the healing fiction of a free dialogue'³⁴⁷ Sloterdijk prohibits his enlightenment aspirations and in fantasizing an idealized alternative to the insufficiencies of his tradition and heritage both raises and prohibits hope:

I have a dream to see the dying tree of philosophy bloom again, to flourish, without disappointment, saturated with bizarre flowers of thought red, blue and white, in original unfaded colors from which sprouts a fantastic, ironic magic tree with thoughts, treasures, singing nightingales and swinging monkeys.³⁴⁸

There are also huge problems concerning the practice and methodology of Neo-Kynical cheekiness. While the Kynic scoffs at cynical hypocrisy and dishonesty, it replaces fidelity to rational dialectic with a laughter unpolluted by ideals. But Sloterdijk charged the extra-rationality of an enlightenment forced to branch out from dialectic and detach from its noble goals to satire as both symptomatic of and perpetuating contemporary cynicism. His solution proposes the same. Furthermore, Sloterdijk values

³⁴⁷ Ibid. P. 14.

³⁴⁸ Sloterdijk, Peter. *Critique of Cynical Reason*. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota, 1987. (p. 28-29).

sarcasm precisely because it is just and truth-revealing but again, justice and truth are enlightenment ideals. It appears we are in a bind: if Kynical satire is beyond ideals then it cannot continue the enlightenment, but if it remains invested, then it isn't Kynicism.

More worryingly, in freeing cynicism from ideals Neo-Kynicism veers dangerously close to Master Cynicism. Sloterdijk appears as did Mephistopheles to Faust, promising escape from the "needs" of morality, law, or duty. Stripped of guilt, doubt, and conscience, Kynicism risks a wanton immoralism. Sloterdijk acknowledges this risk describing Kynicism as 'the profound idea of world extermination on which a gay science is based'³⁴⁹and although insisting on compassion in his Buddhistic model of ego-transcendence and emphasizing the Kynic's harmony of act, nature, and cosmos as it grounds, Sloterdijk fails to provide a convincing theory of Kynical benevolence.³⁵⁰ Even if we accept the picture of Kynical kindness, while Sloterdijk warns that cheekiness is likely to be 'answered from the side of the attacked' by 'outrage' that could 'go as far as extermination'³⁵¹ he never develops a defense strategy against the backlash on those who practice Kynicism nor does he ask how such a backlash would

³⁴⁹ Sloterdijk, Peter. *Critique of Cynical Reason*. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota, 1987. Pgs. 28-29.

³⁵⁰ Andreas Huyssen notes: '[Kynicism] depends on a logic of hostility that the new reality principle of a softened, flexible subjectivity is supposed to overcome. It is difficult to imagine a nonhostile, nonobjectifying satirical laughter, and Sloterdijk never really addresses the question of what kynics actually do to the persons they laugh at.' Ibid. Introduction. Sloterdijk's attempt to legislate the border between an ideal Kynicism and its corrupt counterpart and neutralize Kynical misanthropy relies on the harmony of life doctrine, and the mental peace of a disinhibited "non-schizoid" consciousness. But these criteria, even if liveable, do not guarantee nonviolence or civility. This is an attempt which belongs to a longstanding tradition from Julian, Epictetus, St. Augustine, all the way to D'Alembert and Diderot. that attempts to rid Kynicism of its potential for destructive social violence and to make it into a universal philosophy. All of these methods of disambiguating Kynicism are unable to deal successfully with the tensions and ambiguities that mark its concrete expression. For example, the famous anecdote where Diogenes saw three women hanging from a tree and remarked "I wish every tree bore similar fruit" exemplifies an often vitriolic and brutal misanthropy bleached out in the renaissance and the enlightenment's selective reappropriation. Louisa Shea details this legacy of partial infidelity to cynicism as the chief cause of the emergence of the category in its contemporary form in Shea, Louisa. *The Cynic Enlightenment: Diogenes in the Salon*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 2010.

³⁵¹ Ibid. P. 103.

limit its success. However attractive this romantic vision of egoless authenticity, when it is presented as a substitute to political theory and praxis based on a defensible normative aspiration, it must account for the chaos it is likely to unleash.³⁵² In disinhibiting cynicism from ideals, it advertises and releases a dangerously amoral and apolitical agency and fails to police against its harmfulness. In sum, Neo-Kynicism is an unacceptable solution to Liberal Cynicism.³⁵³

Return to Row

By turning to Jess Row, we can explain how despite these critical errors Kynical satire may aid the project of addressing Extreme Liberal Cynicism. Row argues that Sloterdijkian Kynicism has a role to play in countering the painful fatalism around the issue of race relations in America. As we saw in our literary phenomenology the reification of inequality is both a condition and symptom of Liberal Cynicism's self-perpetuation and political inertia,³⁵⁴ a fatalism which Row thinks Kynical satire can overcome. Cynical fatalism is a libidinally motivated psychic move adopted unconsciously to ameliorate the feeling of powerlessness and/or guilt concerning the failures of liberalism. On this view, by reifying forces which render these failures insurmountable this powerlessness and guilty complicity is eclipsed by hopelessness which while unpleasant is nevertheless preferable. Therefore, if

³⁵² This section paraphrases an argument made by Leslie A. Adelson and Michael Bernstein from: "The Bomb and I: Peter Sloterdijk, Botho Strauß, and Christa Wolf," *Monatshefte*, Vol. 78, No. 4 (Winter, 1986), pp. 500-513, University of Wisconsin Press. And "The Poetics of Ressentiment." In Ed. Gary Saul Morson and Caryl, Emerson. *Rethinking Bakhtin: Extensions and Challenges*. Evanston, IL: Northwestern UP, 1989.

³⁵³As Luis Navia explains in response to the misanthropy of Greek-Kynicism, which better understood its role as serving Athenian ideology than Sloterdijk's does liberalism, 'a remarkable passion for virtue and moral freedom' is required to police the violent risks of disinhibited post-ideological cheerfulness. Navia, Luis E. *Classical Cynicism: A Critical Study*. Westport, CT: Greenwood, 1996.

³⁵⁴ Specifically, in the sense of segregation and fantasy concerning Benna doomed attraction to Darrell, and in Susan's groups cynical take on the irredeemability of institutional racism.

Row's application of Neo-Kynical Cheekiness can subvert extremely cynical fatalism, it may also thwart the mechanisms of Extreme Cynical repression.

In the context of race relations in America a psychic cause for fatalism is that acknowledging the scarcity of realizable justice is more painful than the presupposition of its impossibility. Thus, Extreme Liberal Cynical hopelessness may incorporate a reification of inequality. In this way anger and inertia are preferred to working towards equality. This delusional absolutism allows the Liberal Cynic to maintain moral self-respect without taking individual responsibility or engaging in self-critique and for letting a situation they abhor persist. For Row, the 'taboo-breaking, cringe-inducing, uneasy laughter of [...] radical racial satire produced by comedians of color stretching back to blackface and minstrelsy'³⁵⁵ is uniquely equipped for overcoming this disastrous and painful delusion. This stems firstly from a feature satire shares with all comedy; that its inability to age well is the flipside of an ability to engage a unique socio-historic context. In addition, satire has a special capacity for "double entendre;" an ability to simultaneously engage various evaluative stances under a mutually welcoming and challenging critical gaze. Through this capacity, racial satire addresses trauma, realism, joy, catharsis, difference, guilt, insecurity, denial, anger, optimism, despair, and hope simultaneously. Crucially, this coalescence is not intended to harmonize or rank differences, rather this disorienting, self-implicating, and equal-opportunity mockery "disarms" lazy identifications and juxtaposes realism, guilt, humor, and hope in discombobulating simultaneity, achieving an 'intimacy and

³⁵⁵ Row, Jess. "American Cynicism and its Cure". Home. Boston Review, 18 May 2015. Web. 10 Dec. 2015.

plasticity' and a 'refusal to remain within one tradition or sensibility, or to stay within bunkers.'³⁵⁶ Row argues that this carves open a space for remembrance, acknowledgement, and therapeutic release, allowing for a calmer appreciation of terrible truths which may in turn ground the pursuit of a united response:

does comedy affirm what we already think we know, and who we already think we are, or can it enlarge what we know, and who we think we are? [...] The joke, and the violence it describes, are inseparable, but somehow still worth laughing about because we are all implicated in it. How much misery have we experienced maintaining this way of life? How can we be reconciled to it? The alternative - which we all practice, every day, sometimes passively, sometimes as principle - is to go on pretending [...] that we speak private languages that never overlap [...] that there is no way of describing [...] how we suffer together.'³⁵⁷

But how does this relate to Extreme Liberal Cynicism? Kynical satire can mobilize liberal goals in a manner uniquely equipped to appeal to liberalism's vulnerable to cynicism by embracing cynical critique without refusing hope. This mutually implicating critique disarming egotistic identifications could condition a more realistic view on the failing of our ideals, and our failings of them. Buffered by the carapace of ironic distance this universally critical and inclusive comic exposure while validating cynicism's mockery of naiveté and its willingness to face up to man's folly could allow for the cynic's pain and vulnerability to reach consciousness, and thereby contest repression. In relation to our taxonomy, satire could be utilized to address Cynicalization by ironicizing the canon's authority thereby challenging its negative legacy. Concerning Inauthentic Critique as failed avowal, through a minimally

³⁵⁶ Row, Jess. "American Cynicism." Home. Boston Review, 18 May 2015. Web. 10 Dec. 2015. <<http://www.bostonreview.net/books-ideas/jess-row-american-cynicism>>.

³⁵⁷ Ibid.

antagonist ridicule of the failure and contingency of all ideals self-implicating cheekiness has a chance of rendering the Liberal Cynic's values transparent, fallible, and valuable. Concerning Inauthentic Critique as abandonment, a minimally antagonistic disarming self-implicating satire could compel an owning up to vulnerability born of the painful re-witnessing of the challenges to liberalism. This could make possible a realization of its own assumptions, fantasies, delusions, insecurities, ideals, guilt, privilege, anger, and despair thereby therapeutically weakening their grip. Ideally this would expose Liberal Cynicism's absolutizing of hopelessness as adopted to ameliorate the inadmissible powerlessness and guilt, exposing extreme cynicism's absolute pessimism as emotionally driven rather than the intellectual martyrdom of a rigorous realism, and thereby thwart this delusional fatalism.

Before endorsing this ambitious appropriation, we must draw again from Row to clarify how to overcome the risks we outlined in our objections to Sloterdijk. Row is well aware of the risks, giving as examples of applied Neo-Kynical cheekiness 'a cartoon of the Prophet Mohammed published in the face of death threats that are [...] likely to be carried out' and 'a movie about the assassination of a North Korean dictator that names the actual dictator in question,' and describes it as a 'thoroughly serious artistic rage' and as a 'weaponized comedy.'³⁵⁸ Crucially though, Row's application of Sloterdijkian Kynicism remains subordinate to a normative

³⁵⁸ Ibid. Arguments about freedom of expression, necessary as they are, tend to obscure another aspect of these works: by taking comedy to its furthest extreme, to the point where the work provokes not only adversarial violence but state violence in response - what we might call weaponized comedy - these artists engender a kind of solidarity, the catharsis, cohesion, and elation of a mass audience, that they could find no other way. As Morrissey put it: if it's not love, then it's the bomb that will bring us together. Ibid.

aspiration based on non-violence, human rights, justice, democracy, and equality. With such policing in place, satire could be used to deconstruct the cynical ego and productively release repressed cynical libidinal energies, and in directing its self-implicating attacks at the liberal insecurity, both mourns our failures and allows for some hope in response. In this sense, satire could play a positive role in the general project of overcoming extreme cynicism, the call to remain between Extreme Liberal Cynicism and naivety, to sustain competing impulses of trauma-born despair and hope.

Conclusion: Lessons from cheekiness

Our look at cheekiness allows us to produce some conditions which a successful response to Extreme Liberal Cynicism would have to meet. We can take from the failure of Sloterdijk's romantic utopian reappropriation of Kynicism that solutions to cynicism must remain faithful only to what is within it, that a persuasive critique of Extreme Liberal Cynicism cannot invoke some secret agency to remain immanent. Such a critique must draw from resources within cynicism which could be used in resisting its own pernicious extremes. From Sloterdijk we can take this to include the mockery of naivety, consolation, and irrationalism belying a respect for truth. In addition to chapter 2 warning about assuaging cynical pain our look at Row and Sloterdijk helped us clarify this worry and claim that any response must remain subordinate to a normative aspiration. Of course, this too must draw from within or at least remain plausible to cynicism to be persuasive. Within our qualified appropriation of satire, we took that a response to Liberal Cynicism would benefit from employing a self-implicating critique designed to disarm egoistic identifications

such that its ideals and emotional relationship to those ideals are acknowledged and acknowledged as vulnerable. A chief component is the radical Socratic humility of the Kynic who embraces its own ignorance as the yard stick for all human knowledge, maintaining its right to a radical ironicization of knowledge without assuming intellectual superiority.

From Row's appropriation, we saw that by targeting all as potentially complicit in the problems it seeks to overcome and by acquiring an openness to diverse solutions, policed cheekiness could disrupt the inertia of argumentative stalemate by avoiding the reduction of opposing views to "false consciousness."³⁵⁹ We should also retain the insight that the critique of cynicism would be wise to target its's deepest attachment; the ego. Sloterdijk located cynicism's self-defensive and self-aggrandizing behaviour as emanating from a desperate clinging to a confused sense of self-worth. We developed this as including the fear of enlightenment persisting within a cynicism resisting self-critique due to an inchoate feeling that it would lead to a loss of self: to death-in-life. But while Sloterdijk's alternative demand is that cynicism push through this obstacle and deconstruct its hardened ego to release a new source of extra-ideological vitality, this is dangerous. Nevertheless, as in Row, this neo-Kynical immanent ego-critique can be mobilized under the policing of a clearly articulated normative aspiration. Thankfully, we know that Liberal Cynicism, unlike Enlightened False Consciousness, is not beyond ideals. This raised the possibility of a critique furnishing us with policing ideals from within Liberal Cynicism. Furthermore, the goal of Neo-Kynical ego

³⁵⁹ and anti-solidarity both in the "left" and between the "left" and those it's supposed to serve and once incorporated, the working class.

critique would be different for Liberal Cynicism than Enlightened False Consciousness, because its traumatized self-preservation and fear has not “clouded from view” the inchoate energies of a magical neo-Kynical yesbody, but the value, efficacy, and responsibilities entailed by its constitutive idealism. A critique which reveals that hopelessness impedes escape as well as belying fear, guilt, and its ideals, may provoke a reassessment of these ideals. At our most ambitious we could hypothesize that Kynical satire could encourage the genuine autarky of accepting uncertainty and taking responsibility for the success of its values.

To remain immanent and therefore persuasive this reassessment has to be made compatible with the cynical conscience,³⁶⁰ with its will-to-truth, and its historical geopolitical consciousness.³⁶¹ What we are proposing is an immanent critique of Liberal Cynicism that revitalizes liberal ideals while retaining something of the rationale behind their disavowal. As Neil Wilson asks: ‘Why is it necessary to find a natural starting point that is independent of our enlightenment traditions? [...] Why not continue the attempt to clean up our game? Why not think the Enlightenment through once again? Why not make a garden out of all that dirt?’³⁶² To make this garden, instead of Sloterdijk’s *plot* to replace the ‘dying tree of philosophy’ with an ‘ironic magic tree’³⁶³

³⁶⁰ Cleaned here means purged of its emotionally driven irrational, absolutizing, and fantasizing tendencies.

³⁶¹ This is a point where Sloterdijk’s instance on the linear direction of cynicalization is legitimate. Sloterdijk’s conviction that certain values are forever lost to ideology critique was let down by his romantic resurrection of an antediluvian ethic, but his attempt to utilize the cynical critical impulse against its remaining naiveté - egoism - was more faithful to this insight. This insight reduces to the claim that romanticizing post-ideological solutions to cynicism are unlikely to succeed.

³⁶² *Punching out the Enlightenment: A Discussion of Peter Sloterdijk’s Kritik der zynischen Vernunft* Neil Wilson, *New German Critique*, No. 41, Special Issue on the Critiques of the Enlightenment (Spring - Summer, 1987), pp. 53-70 Duke University Press. “Making a garden out of all of that dirt” will be the guiding aspiration of the later sections of this dissertation.

³⁶³ Sloterdijk, Peter. *Critique of Cynical Reason*. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota, 1987. Pgs. 28-29

we should cultivate liberal ideals by subjecting them to rigorous critique. While it may be too ambitious to assume this would follow merely from a Neo-Kynical critique of Liberal Cynicism, a deeper reflection on the resources within Liberal Cynicism and reflection on Judith Butler can help us explain both why and how Liberal Cynicism might swap the easiness of painful fatalism for the deep challenges of upholding an ambivalent and critical commitment to reinvigorating and working for the success of its constitutive ideals.

Chapter 6: “Later” Butler and Overcoming Liberal Cynicism

Introduction

We saw in chapter 3 that “middle Butler” struggled to engage with its guiding broadly liberal normative aspirations. Butler’s post-9/11 works mobilize a theory which explicates and grounds the optimism previously posed in self-defeating forms. This new theoretical frame also retains fidelity to the insights from the previous work and fortifies their guiding ideals. As such Butler’s “later” work provides an example of overcoming Liberal Cynicism’s extremes by utilizing its saving power.

In the post-9/11 works Butler’s career-long project of lessening the punitive restrictions and expanding the perimeters of life imposed by social norms de-emphasizes the discursive and psychic pre-conditions for subjectivation in a Psychoanalytic Foucauldian frame and re-emphasizes the contestability in a more experiential frame. Therein Butler overcomes the failed avowal in the work on materialization and realizes the hopes excited and unfulfilled there and in *The Psychic Life of Power* by following a clear ethical imperative to show where, how, and why harmful norms may be disrupted at the level of action.

Overcoming the cynical “impasse”

1. Overcoming Inauthentic Ideology Critique as abandonment

As we have seen, while invested in contesting it Butler’s view of the constitutive depth of normative violence problematized this aspiration. The problem stemmed from a failure to successfully distinguish between necessary normative violence and political and ethical violence. Contrary to the transcendental reading which failed to theorize the contestation of necessary normative violence at the pre-experiential level of perceptual

categorization, the existential reading had Butler critiquing the conscious domain in which the practices and discourse responsible for erecting and sustaining the normative perimeters delimiting what solicits grief. In the later material Butler continues the move begun in *Psychic Life* from “liveability” to “grievability” and endorses the existential reading. In *Frames of War* Butler explicitly refuses the ‘transcendental thesis’:³⁶⁴ ‘I would caution against a generalization of the thesis that all normativity is founded in violence’ ‘this kind of claim can function as a transcendental argument [which would] make violence essential to any and all subject formation.’³⁶⁵ Supporting the existential reading, also from *Frames of War*, Butler addresses how discursive regimes withhold the designation of humanity to those accused of terrorism: ‘The lives of those at Guantánamo do not count as the kind of “human lives” protected by human-rights discourse.’³⁶⁶ While Butler previously seems to reject the notion of humanity in degrees here she describes discursively mobilized dehumanization as when ‘specific lives’ although ‘apprehended as “living,”’ are not ‘apprehended as living

³⁶⁴ Butler, Judith *Frames of War* Verso, UK, 2009, p. 169.

³⁶⁵ ‘I would caution against a generalization of the thesis that all normativity is founded in violence. This kind of claim can function as a transcendental argument and so fail to distinguish those social instances when norms operate for other reasons, or when the term “violence” does not quite describe the power or force by which they operate. There are, to be sure, regimes of power that produce and constrain certain ways of being, but I am not at all sure about affirming or denying a transcendental thesis that would dismiss power from the equation and make violence essential to any and all subject formation.’ Butler, Judith *Frames of War* Verso, UK, 2009, p. 169.

³⁶⁶ That “later” Butler “owns-up” generally to the existential reading requires us to clarify some classifications Butler uses, albeit inconsistently, in *Frames of War*: Butler uses a range of terms such as “subjects” “life worlds” “life-forms” “lives” “living beings” “specific lives” “persons,” “figure” albeit inconstantly to refer to “that” which can be dehumanized by contingent socio-politically regimented normativity operating at the level of discourse: “The forms the subject takes as well as the life worlds that do not conform to available categories of the subject emerge in light of historical and geopolitical movements.’ Butler, Judith *Frames of War* Verso, UK, 2009, p. 58. This language settles the debate as to whether we are referring to actual or hypothetical beings, and avoids the cavalcade of problems that flowed from the latter possibility in the previous work. ‘there at least two sense of life, the one, which refers to the minimum biological form of living, and another which intervenes at the start, which establishes minimum conditions for a liveable life’. Butler, Judith *Undoing Gender* Routledge, Taylor & Francis group, Abington, UK, 2004, p. 226.

[...] *in the full sense.*³⁶⁷ Finally, Butler also seems to separate the existential and transcendental registers by distinguishing between apprehension and recognition.³⁶⁸ While all subjects are apprehended, recognition is the discursively mediated faculty responsible for ‘crafting a living being’ into ‘shape’ suitable for normative judgments:³⁶⁹

What we are able to apprehend is surely facilitated by norms of recognition, but it would be a mistake to say that we are utterly limited by existing norms when we apprehend a life.³⁷⁰

2. Overcoming Inauthentic Ideology Critique as failed avowal

In the later work then, Butler avoids the absurd consequence of the transcendental reading that we do not apprehend the dehumanized.³⁷¹ This move goes some way to overcoming Inauthentic Ideology Critique as failed avowal, the condition whereby the extent of critique prohibits avowing a nevertheless guiding normative position. In critiquing the violence of norms which dictate the basest of moral status – grievability – Butler not only maintains the critical project but clarifies who she is fighting for: ‘Norms operate to produce certain subjects as “recognizable” persons and to make others decidedly more difficult to recognize.’³⁷² We have an answer to the perplexing question from *Bodies That Matter* whether or not there are actual victims of

³⁶⁷ Butler, Judith *Frames of War* Verso, UK, 2009, p. 1. My italics.

³⁶⁸ Butler, Judith *Frames of War* Verso, UK, 2009, p.5.

³⁶⁹ The notion of grievability clarifies the notions referred to interchangeably by, intelligibility, livability, and recognizability: ‘Grievability makes possible the apprehension of the living being.’ All Butler, Judith *Frames of War* Verso, UK, 2009, p.5.

³⁷⁰ Butler, Judith *Frames of War* Verso, UK, 2009, p. 5.

³⁷¹ ‘We have ongoing debates about whether the fetus is a human life [...] about what constitutes death [...] The fact that these debates exist, and continue to exist, does not imply that life and death are direct consequences of discourse (an absurd conclusion if taken literally.)’ Butler, Judith *Frames of War* Verso, UK, 2009, p.6. And with this subtle distinction, Butler enables us make sense of the following familiar claim: ‘The very terms that confer “humanness” on some individuals are those that deprive certain other individuals of the possibility of achieving that status.’ Butler, Judith *Undoing Gender* Routledge, Taylor & Francis group, Abington, UK, 2004, p.2.

³⁷² Butler, Judith *Frames of War* Verso, UK, 2009, p. 15.

the violence Butler would have us contest. While this concept of recognition still functions at the depth of experientially constitutive intelligibility, because of this distinction between apprehendability and grievability, its role at conscious and socio-political levels is clearer: 'The question is not whether a given being is living or not, [...] it is, rather, whether the social conditions of persistence and flourishing are or are not possible.'³⁷³

Undoing Gender also overcomes a critical problem from within *The Psychic Life of Power* and the earlier work which problematized the avowal of the guiding normative aspiration, specifically the refusal to explain the partial applications of radical deconstruction. Performativity implied a politics where subjects formed on the basis of norms could resist the disciplining effects of these prescriptions by emphasizing the norms' contingent and performative nature. The reliance of norms on repeated performances over time grants subjects an opportunity to redraft disciplinary prescriptions and open new pathways for political and cultural life. However, there was an issue concerning the standard from which we should adjudicate between helpful and harmful subversion. This problem persisted in *Bodies That Matter* and *Psychic Life* with its radical subversion of language, logic, and intelligibility which, as well as relegating subversion to a pre-conscious realm, again called the justification of subversion into question. *Undoing Gender* puts this concern to bed by clarifying the role of critique as employed at the socio-political level to allow for marginalized forms of life the opportunity to flourish. Therein Butler advertises subversion 'not to celebrate difference as such but to establish more inclusive conditions for sheltering and

³⁷³ Butler, Judith *Frames of War* Verso, UK, 2009, p. 20.

maintaining life.’³⁷⁴ Here, Butler both asks ‘which innovation has value, and which does not?’³⁷⁵ and appreciates that the standpoint from which to answer this question must be from within the existing context of norms: ‘The norms that we would consult to answer this question cannot themselves be derived from resignification,’³⁷⁶ and Butler is very clear about which norms we must commit to:

One must make substantive decisions about what will be a less violent future, what will be a more inclusive population, what will help to fulfill, in substantive terms, the claims of universality and justice that we seek to understand in their cultural specificity and social meaning. [ultimately] A call to extend the norms that sustain life.³⁷⁷

Cynicalization and “Cruel Optimism”

As well as clarifying varieties of violence and articulating a clear normative aspiration Butler theorizes the space and power for critiquing and contesting harmful formative norms, thereby realizing optimisms hitherto posed in self-defeating forms. Previously, where Butler argued that the processes pre-figuring the performative sedimentation of pernicious social norms in the unconscious formation of the ego the explanation for how to contest them was insufficient. By contrast, *Undoing Gender* lays out plans for contestation which work on the newly developed account of the relationship between the concrete realm of political life, the intelligible realm of social norms, and the unintelligible realm where subjects are formed in relation to them. The problem was three-fold; what opens the space within subjectivation to mobilize it for alternative inaugurations? what could power such contestation? and what could justify

³⁷⁴ Butler, Judith *Undoing Gender* Routledge, Taylor & Francis group, Abington, UK, 2004, p. 4.

³⁷⁵ Butler, Judith *Undoing Gender* Routledge, Taylor & Francis group, Abington, UK, 2004, p. 225.

³⁷⁶ Butler, Judith *Undoing Gender* Routledge, Taylor & Francis group, Abington, UK, 2004, p. 225.

³⁷⁷ Butler, Judith *Undoing Gender* Routledge, Taylor & Francis group, Abington, UK, 2004, p. 225.

it? While such a critical space was presupposed in Butler's work on performativity and in *Psychic life* where the processes of gendered subject consolidation/formation entailed that subjectivating norms are within the purview of critical consciousness, Butler provided insufficient grounds for locating this space and for explaining why and how to use it for contestation. Here, we have a theory of where, why, and how to subvert norms. Firstly, the where; *Undoing Gender* theorizes how the 'critical relation' always occupies a 'distance from norms' and this space not wholly scripted by dominant norms might be subjected to immanent critique:

the "I" that I am finds itself at once constituted by norms and dependent on them but also [...] maintains a critical and transformative relation to them [...] This is the juncture from where critique emerges, [...] as an interrogation of the terms by which life is constrained in order to open up the possibility of different modes of living.³⁷⁸

In this way, we can make better sense of the cryptic disclaimer at the end of Chapter 5 of *The Psychic life of Power*: 'The logic of repudiation that I've charted here is in some ways a hyperbolic theory, a logic in drag, as it were, which overstates the case, but overstates it for a reason.'³⁷⁹ This include the idea that firstly, critical analysis of restrictive normativity affords a psychoanalytically therapeutic bringing into consciousness of that which binds us if left uninterrogated and secondly, that exaggerating the severity of libidinally invested normative violence through hyperbolic critique is particularly effective in loosening the bonds of pernicious norms. This reading is also supported in *Frames of War* where Butler claims not only that critique

³⁷⁸ Butler, Judith *Undoing Gender* Routledge, Taylor & Francis group, Abington, UK, 2004, p. 3 – 4 my italics.

³⁷⁹ Butler, Judith, *The Psychic Life of Power* p. 148,9,50.

'focuses on the violence affected by the normative framework itself' but that critique itself promises 'an alternative normativity'.³⁸⁰

Undoing Gender also provides the why – “sheltering and maintaining life” – and in referring to a collective capacity ‘to articulate an alternative minority version of sustaining norms’ begins to lay out how. Butler argues that ‘If my doing is dependent on what is done to me, rather the ways in which I am done by norms, the possibility of my persistence as an “I” depends upon my being able to do something with what is done to me.’³⁸¹ Heretofore, by locating the space for contestation within pre-conscious psychic machinations over which we have no conscious control Butler deeply problematized resistance. Here the power to offer an alternative account of normativity to sustain alternative norms or ideals and the electrifying Sartrean³⁸² capacity to do something with what is done to us, Butler goes further in explaining how ‘improvisation within a scene of constraint’³⁸³ is actionable for socio-political ends.

For a fuller account of the how we can actively contest pernicious norms and to see how Butler fulfilled hitherto unfulfilled hopes we have to turn to *Precarious Life* and firstly, the problem as we had it in *The Psychic Life of Power*. The diagnosis of cruel optimism in *The Psychic Life of Power* – that it simultaneously promises and prohibits the means to realize its hopes – rested on the cryptic upturn at the end of Chapter 5 where Butler claimed that ‘there is no necessary reason for identification to

³⁸⁰ Butler, Judith *Frames of War* Verso, UK, 2009, p. 150.

³⁸¹ Butler, Judith *Undoing Gender* Routledge, Taylor & Francis group, Abington, UK, 2004, p. 3.

³⁸² This sounds very Sartrean: ‘I have never ceased to believe that one is and one makes oneself of whatever is made of one’ Sartre, Jean-Paul. *Existentialism Is a Humanism (L'Existentialisme Est Un Humanisme); Including, a Commentary on The Stranger (Explication De L'Étranger)*. Trans. John Kulka, Arlette Elkaïm-Sartre, Annie Cohen-Solal, and Carol Macomber. N.p.: n.p., n.d.

³⁸³ Butler, Judith *Undoing Gender* Routledge, Taylor & Francis group, Abington, UK, 2004 P. 1.

oppose desire, or for desire to be fueled by repudiation.’³⁸⁴ The problem was that Butler did not provide an account. *Precarious Life* does. Therein, Butler asks how the experience of grief motivates destructive political action and how it can be redirected to target pernicious narcissistic mechanisms and ground a generally applicable political ethics.

The theory of melancholy and mourning in *Precarious Life* works from that which compels the panicked performative reinforcement of pernicious norms, the causes of normative material violence, and the psychic cause of identitarian violence - the loss of prohibited desire. The new theory marks loss as a universal human experience: ‘loss has made a tenuous we of us all’³⁸⁵ one that exposes our vulnerability to, and dependence on, others, be they the loved ones, those who took them away or, other attachments reducible to primary desire. On this understanding, loss always involves more than just the relationship with the “love object” for this trauma is compounded by a loss of desire for self-identity, security, autonomy, invulnerability, and independence. In Butler’s analysis the mechanisms of mourning are surprising, unpredictable, and partially inaccessible and since loss is always traceable to an unsatisfied desire it follows that desire itself is at least partially inaccessible. In this way, the opacity of grief and loss reflect the opacity of desire. Loss also involves then, the thwarting of the desire for a coherent and transparent identity.

In Butler, just as in Freud, there are healthy and unhealthy responses to loss. For both, mourning is the healthy response and melancholy the unhealthy. In Freud,

³⁸⁴ Ibid. p. 149.

³⁸⁵ Butler, Judith: *Precarious Life*, Verso, London, UK 2004 p. 20.

melancholia marks a refusal of loss and grief via an internalization of the lost love object within the ego in the form of an idealized representation. Along with this idealized substitute the initial love for it and the hate at its departure from the real are also internalized compelling a self-destructive narcissistic combination of self-love and self-hate. In Freud the healthy response to loss is a conscious mourning which is eventually replaced by the ability to substitute the lost object, to love again. Butler, sensitive to the cold mathematical logic of substitution prefers an account of the healthy response to loss as 'submitting to a transformation':³⁸⁶ 'one mourns when one accepts that by the loss one undergoes one will be changed, possibly forever.'³⁸⁷ The alternative – melancholy – incorporates the desires thwarted by loss into the ego. Rather than accept vulnerability, interdependence, and the opacity and incoherence of the self the desire for security, invulnerability, transparency, and coherence are internalized and idealized. Just as in Butler's analysis of homophobia, this ungrieved loss manifests externally as a pre-emptive hatred for the disavowed. Therefore, the unhealthy response to loss is the refusal to allow anything threatening the fantasy: anything suggesting vulnerability, insecurity, dependence, incoherence, self-doubt, and self-criticism.

With this theoretical foundation *Precarious Life* psychoanalyzes how America's failure to grieve 9/11 motivated a betrayal of human rights, the suppression of criticism, and the resurgence of sovereign power. The suppression of criticism involved a refusal to contextualize Islamic terrorism in the history of U.S. foreign intervention or

³⁸⁶ Butler, Judith: *Precarious Life*, Verso, London, UK 2004 p. 21.

³⁸⁷ Butler, Judith: *Precarious Life*, Verso, London, UK 2004 p. 21.

global patterns of poverty and religiosity. Such attempts were delegitimized as exculpations, a context within which any political criticism of American foreign policy was immediately and uncritically defined as complicit such that a critical self-reflective liberalism's credibility withdrew from the media shaped collective consciousness. Instead media coverage focused on the attackers' personal histories and on shadowy Al Qaeda "masterminds" like Osama bin Laden. On Butler's understanding, this was largely an effort to make sense of the events by situating them within a recognizable frame of subjective agency and charismatic leadership. As Butler put it, 'isolating the individuals involved absolves us of the necessity of coming up with a broader explanation for events,'³⁸⁸ and in "monumental" public commemoration critical modes of questioning are drowned out and overwhelmed by rituals of 'spectacular public grief.'³⁸⁹ On the Butlerian analysis, that the national reckoning with vulnerability was followed by misplaced retributive violence, racism, and islamophobia, and the reemergence of a conservative authoritarianism was a result of refusing the aforementioned losses and incorporating the fantasies into the collective imaginary. Although problematized by this monumentality, the melancholic refusal to grieve related not primarily to the victims of 9/11, but to the totalizable nature of the American identity, the omnipotence of America, and the superiority of its "way of life." These then are the desires which are internalized and fantasized and which compel an urge to destroy that which threatens the fantasy. Due to the super-egoic internalization of normative discourse mobilizing melancholic denial, Islamic terror, Islamism and indirectly Islam itself became idealized

³⁸⁸ Butler, Judith: *Precarious Life*, Verso, London, UK 2004 p.5

³⁸⁹ Butler, Judith: *Precarious Life*, Verso, London, UK 2004 p.5

as a threat which much be destroyed. Tragically, this idealization required another layer of melancholic foreclosure, the refusal to grieve the loss of life which ensued. The non-American lives which were lost in the name of shoring up the illusion of American invulnerability were inadmissible because to acknowledge such losses would challenge the fantasy of American moral superiority. However, this guilt could remain outside consciousness if normative discourse enacted a thorough dehumanization of what was lost *so it never had to be lost at all*. According to Butler this process was reinforced by refusing humanization of those responsible for terrorism or those non-American innocents who died in the attempts to eradicate it. In this way the “ungrievability” of those who have died and continue to die because of American and allied military interventions in the Middle East can be traceable back, in part, to the inability to grieve the complex losses which the tragedy of 9/11 unleashed. This explains how the rash and reckless military interventions in Iraq and Afghanistan and the many violence acts that comprise the “War on Terror” rest on insufficient analysis of the conditions that compel terrorism and unleash a cavalcade of violence that tragically, but unsurprisingly, in the effort to repress American vulnerability, have made America, and everywhere else, less safe.

Thankfully, Butler’s new theory includes the view that grief can be used to thwart its own foreclosure before it enters inaccessible regions of the psyche. This is because for Butler grief discombobulates the ego and forces a deconstruction of the illusion of an autonomous, independent, and coherent self, an experience which can either compel a panicked even manic melancholic incorporation and foreclosure or be used to short circuit its narcissistic circuitry. In the context of the “War on Terror,” the

radically deconstructive effects of grief make possible a different response, that this 'dislocation of First World privilege'³⁹⁰ could be met with a submission to a permanent transformation, forgoing the illusions of American value superiority, omnipotence, and invulnerability and instead realizing the dependence and vulnerability of all Americans – as all people – on the non-violence of unknown others, a realization which connects Americans to the victims of terrorism all over the world and could usher in an appreciation of radical precariousness and the call to swap assuring mutual destruction which the refusal of vulnerability compels for the rational ethic of minimizing violence.

This theory makes good on the hope in *The Psychic Life of Power* that 'there is no necessary reason for identification to oppose desire, or for desire to be fueled by repudiation'³⁹¹ for grief becomes the point where this possibility is actionable. The breaking apart of the ego, the rendering our sense of self opaque, and laying bare the sustaining but imperfectable illusions of power, mark the point where performative freedom is most fecund. In the vulnerable undermining 'the capacity of the subject to "be" in a self-identical sense' which grief makes possible, lies the way towards imagining processes to retroactively destabilize the formative grip of foreclosures poised to manifest as identitarian hatred, correcting pernicious downstream effects of social foreclosure and marking out a new 'direction for rethinking ethics'³⁹² toward inaugurations of 'a more open, even more ethical kind of being.'³⁹³ While this optimism is tempered by the consequent truth that the most powerful psychic urge in the face of

³⁹⁰ Butler, Judith: *Precarious Life*, Verso, London, UK 2004 p. xii.

³⁹¹ *Ibid.* p. 149.

³⁹² *Ibid.* p. 131.

³⁹³ *Ibid.*

grief is denial, by promising gradual cultivation of skillful grieving, coupled with the targeted critique of discourse which disempowers it we have an actionable goal for minimizing reactionary violence.

In *Giving an Account of Oneself* as well as *Precarious Life*, Butler develops the humanistic possibilities of apprehending our constitutive “exposed” sociality through grief, namely that this primal exposure whereby we are always and already in an ethical relationship and where the desire for continued life is potentially at risk can be used to develop a heightened sense of ethical responsibility. Adopting elements from Emmanuel Levinas, Butler theorizes how our primary availability to the others is the possibility for a new direction in ethics:

What binds us morally has to do with how we are addressed by others in ways that we cannot avert or avoid; this impingement is against our will or, perhaps put more appropriately, prior to the formation of our will.³⁹⁴

Grief contains within it the possibility of apprehending the fundamental sociality of embodied life, the ways in which we are from the start, and by virtue of being a bodily being, already given over, beyond ourselves, implicated in lives that are not our own.³⁹⁵

This focuses on a feature of melancholia, the foreclosure of interdependence. The ethical challenge is to accept rather than deny or “overcome” this ‘unwilled susceptibility.’³⁹⁶ By using this knowledge of interdependence, incoherence, and vulnerability afforded by grief one can become more responsive to the vulnerability of others. On this view, respect for the inexhaustible unknown in the intersubjective encounter, both of the “I” and the “Other,” prepares an ‘ethics based on our shared,

³⁹⁴ Butler, Judith: *Precarious Life*, Verso, London, UK 2004 chapter 5.

³⁹⁵ Butler, Judith *Undoing Gender* Routledge, Taylor & Francis group, Abington, UK, 2004, p. 22.

³⁹⁶ Ibid.

invariable, and partial blindness to ourselves,³⁹⁷ by revealing definitive incompleteness and vulnerability as loci for human rights and instigating an experiential foundation for inaugurating a normative culture sensitive to diverse and distinct forms of human life.³⁹⁸

If the narcissistic preoccupation of melancholia can be moved into a consideration of the vulnerability of others, then we might critically evaluate and oppose the conditions under which certain human lives are more vulnerable than others.³⁹⁹

This recognition provides a constant reminder of our constitutive sociality and an avowal of a heretofore unspeakable vulnerability⁴⁰⁰ that our lives and deaths are granted by biological, psychic, and socio-cultural powers over which we have little influence. This will in turn, Butler hopes, lead us to reflect on "precarity":⁴⁰¹ the 'politically induced condition in which certain populations [...] become differentially

³⁹⁷ Butler, Judith. *Giving an Account of Oneself*. New York: Fordham UP, 2005.

³⁹⁸ Through "bringing ourselves to grief" we acknowledge: 'that the 'I,' first comes into being as a 'me' through being acted upon by another, and this primary impingement is already and from the start an ethical interpellation.' Butler, Judith. *Giving an Account of Oneself*. New York: Fordham UP, 2005.

³⁹⁹ Butler, Judith: *Precarious Life*, Verso, London, UK 2004 p. 30.

⁴⁰⁰ Butler utilizes this theory to explain the processes producing the paucity of available means for the public expression of certain losses and the inability of the marginalized to make their grief visible because the full acknowledgement of their loss is prohibited by social stigma. For example, As Butler argued, the losses from Aids could not rise above the stigma attached to homosexual desire, just as the deaths of Muslim civilians caught up in the global war on terror had difficulty breaking through the dominant administrative and media frames of the conflict. In these instances, melancholia is less an individual pathology than a political and cultural phenomenon. As Butler put it, 'where there is no public recognition or discourse through which such [losses] might be named and mourned, then melancholia takes on cultural dimensions'. Butler, Judith: *Precarious Life*, Verso, London, 2004. The prohibition of public mourning, in effect, doubles the trauma of loss, and generates through the repression of foreclosed possibilities collective social psychopathologies of discursively grounded dehumanizations deflecting the libidinal energies channeled by prohibition into identitarian hatred. To confront these cultural prohibitions Butler draws attention to the discursive frames by which experience is organized specifically in a psychic explanation for how the internalization of heteronormativity compels homophobic hatred. As she puts it: 'a frame for understanding violence emerges in tandem with the experience, and that frame works... to preclude certain kinds of questions.' Ibid.

⁴⁰¹ "The more or less existential condition of "precariousness" is thus linked with a more specifically political notion of "precarity.'" Butler, Judith *Frames of War* Verso, UK, 2009, p.3.

exposed to injury, violence, and death'⁴⁰² generating presumptive empathy for the marginalized and persecuted.

Although the dominant mode in the United States has been to shore up sovereignty and security, to minimize or indeed foreclose this vulnerability, it can serve another function and another ideal. The fact that our lives are dependent on others, can become the basis for claims for non-militaristic political solutions, one which we cannot will away, one which we must attend to, even abide by, as we begin to think about what politics might be implied by staying with the thought of corporeal vulnerability itself.⁴⁰³

Retaining fidelity to the “cynical” inheritance

Butler's turn to ethics incorporates Freudian melancholy, the psychoanalysis of sexed and gendered identity, and the theoretical innovations from performativity. The elements thereof which ground the later theories include: 1) that the dominance of social norms require performative iterations which sediment values through repeated embodied endorsement. 2) That this “performative accomplishment” is always accompanied by an acknowledged or unacknowledged panic which bears reliable testimony to the contingency of norms. 3) That since mourning becomes melancholia through socially compelled disavowal; melancholic narcissism is unintelligible without reference to sociality. And 4), that melancholic foreclosure is contingent and incomplete.

The reciprocity of mourning and melancholia presupposes that conscious mourning ushers in the descent into the unconscious and its consequent psychic and concrete effects. Furthermore, given that subjectivation is based on a panicked performatively reified incomplete foreclosure of prohibited norms it is without

⁴⁰² Butler, Judith. *Giving an Account of Oneself*. New York: Fordham UP, 2005.

⁴⁰³ Butler, Judith *Undoing Gender* Routledge, Taylor & Francis group, Abington, UK, 2004, p. 22-23.

absolute grip. If it is without absolute grip, then the formation of the ego is never finished, and the mechanisms compelling performativity are contestable. Finally, if certain practices reinforce the contingent social norms which prefigure conscious and unconscious foreclosures, it follows that we may influence the ways in which mourning becomes melancholia by critiquing, imagining, and committing to different norms. Thus, these later theories work out the transformative implications within the earlier insights.⁴⁰⁴ The work on performativity explained how iterative behavior retroactively imbues prohibitive norms with a phenomenologically attestable but philosophically unsound necessity. *Bodies That Matter* explained how this process functions both as discourse and corporeally. *Gender Trouble* theorized how an original experience of loss predates and inaugurates the ego, a loss which cannot be experienced but which subsists at the unconscious level and haunts the subject it formed, and how melancholy designates a failure to grieve in which loss is refused and internalized. And *The Psychic Life of Power* theorized the passionate attachments compelling certain performative commitments. In this way, the post-9/11 works complete the earlier projects to mobilize a new direction for ethics and politics, via thwarting social and culturally germinated prohibitions through a skillful appropriation of grief. This reading fits with comments Butler made in an interview with Thomas Dunn:

The sections on performativity are not fully thought together with the sections on melancholy, and so one might reflect upon a certain gap there, one that I have been trying to attend to ever since. If grieving is refused through a certain manic action, one that seeks to deny or magically overcome the loss one has endured or, simultaneously, the blow to one's

⁴⁰⁴ Without the psychoanalytic architecture of pre-conscious subjectivation, the machinations whereby unconscious withdrawal falls into the psychic reserve would be an untouchable part of the process of inaugurating norms through iterative sedimentation.

efficacy that loss entails, then maybe one must undergo the deprivation and the humility that loss require.⁴⁰⁵

As well as maintaining fidelity to this theoretical background, Butler's later work maintains and engages more positively with its "most cynical" moments.⁴⁰⁶ For example, in the work on abjection and materialization the commitment to the depth of discursive constraints on intelligibility which dictates whose lives matter remains, as does the politicization, and the critique thereof, even the goal of deconstructing dominant logic from within its symbolic paradigm. Only here, once the shift has been made to norms of recognition not apprehension, and guided by a very clear normative aspiration, this radical deconstruction once purged of its problems, remain fruitful,

⁴⁰⁵ Dumm, Thomas. "Giving Away, Giving Over: A Conversation with Judith Butler." *The Massachusetts Review* 49.1/2 (2008): 95-105. JSTOR. Web.

⁴⁰⁶ An objection to this view may be mounted that Butler contradicts a commitment from the most crucial of her theoretical influences, the Foucauldian warning that the search for transcendental backing for politics inevitably fails. The objection would be that since the search necessarily operates within and is constituted by historical norms discerning any ultimate foundation from which to assess those norms cannot work and in claiming the category of grievability as a given Butler appeals to a historically invariant transcendental universalism about the structure of human vulnerability. Furthermore, that vulnerability, grievability, and livability are only intelligible in the context Butler mounts her theory to contest. We may reply firstly by saying that the vulnerability of life is neither culturally contingent or need be transcendently deduced. Secondly, we can reply that in our context of an increasingly global interdependent intelligibility vulnerability, while a profoundly historically saturated contingent phenomenon, is nevertheless ethically vital. A third response is that Foucault's epistemic limitations on universal claims don't rule out the possibility of their being features of the human condition relatively stable across time. Fourth; Butler accounts for the Foucauldian explicitly stating that vulnerability can change its meaning and structure - 'when a vulnerability is recognized, that recognition has the power to change the meaning and structure of the vulnerability itself.' (Butler, Judith: *Precarious Life*, Verso, London, UK 2004 p. 43) Fifthly, Butler doesn't nominate vulnerability as a transcendental, rather as 'one precondition for humanization' (Butler, Judith: *Precarious Life*, Verso, London, UK 2004 p. 43) amongst many, and accepts that both norms and that which is foreclosed in their internalization are contingent. Butler's Levinasian developments in *Precarious Life* enable a sixth reply within which grief, along with a variety of other dispossessive experiences, such as anger or desire sensitizes the subject to its own stubborn opacity - its internal "unknowingness" - and this becomes the basis for tenuous claims of commonality that can stitch together new communities and ways of life. Therefore, given that a fundamental feature of the structure of interdependence is the essential unknowability of vulnerability, Butler evades the Foucauldian objection that her theory assumes transcendental access to the human condition as such. Furthermore, given the account whereby grief re-ignites our essential ethical interdependence does not assume a substantive sympathetic connection to cross contingent cultural boundaries, it also resists Foucault's objection in that it does not require a problematic moral universalism.

limiting itself to the critique of that which features in dehumanizations and other means to oppose sheltering and maintaining life.

The post-9/11 work also retains fidelity to the poststructuralist commitments that normative violence and vulnerability are ontological truisms and that any ethics or politics trying to negate, argue around, or remove it risks a dangerous denial.⁴⁰⁷ However, the later works propose a skillful navigation of ubiquitous violence. In the new account, the possibility for performative sedimentations of norms ushering in alternative inaugurations of the subject is established through an appeal to the ‘psychic mechanisms ordained in hominoid hostility’, employing destructive qualities in the service of enlightened alternatives. This account also involves ‘marshalling the desire to kill [...] to kill one’s own aggression.’ In this way, the picture of the self from *Psychic Life* persists – caught interminably turning back on itself to sustain the ego, driven by a violent self-destructive passionate subordination to nevertheless unachievable demands, compelled into a panicked reification of pernicious norms – but unlike previously this passionate psychic self-berating can be consciously adopted, and “done” in a manner less likely to manifest in hostility, aggression, and violence. In this way, Later Butler does not propose a new theory which rejects and abandons that which compelled our diagnoses instead, she maintains qualified fidelity to even its most “cynical” moments.

⁴⁰⁷ ‘the attempt to foreclose vulnerability, to banish it, to make ourselves secure at the expense of every other human consideration, is surely also to eradicate one of the most important resources from which we must take our bearings and find our way’. Butler, Judith *Undoing Gender* Routledge, Taylor & Francis group, Abington, UK, 2004, p. 23.

Reinvigorating liberal ideals

As well overcoming the problems that permitted our association of her work with Extreme Liberal Cynicism and retaining fidelity to the load bearing argumentative claims of the “cynical moment,” Butler’s later work also reinvigorates the ideals which guide the entire project. As we have seen, for Butler, appreciation of precarity and the inexhaustibility of the human could enable us to develop radically open cosmopolitan democratic politics.⁴⁰⁸ ‘I want to ask how we might rethink [this] “we” in global terms:’⁴⁰⁹

Any radically democratic self-understanding will have to come to terms with the heterogeneity [...] it is the condition by which a concrete and expansive conception of the human will be articulated, the way in which parochial and implicitly racially and religiously bound conceptions of human will be made to yield to a wider conception of how we consider who we are as a global community. We do not yet understand all these ways, and in this sense human rights law has yet to understand the full meaning of the human. It is, we might say, an ongoing task of human rights to reconceive the human when it finds its putative universality does not have universal reach.⁴¹⁰

Butler’s later work on agency and freedom repeats this pattern of detailing political applications of reinvigorated progressive liberal ideals both respectful of the liberal traditions and adopting a policed “cynical” critique of their potential naivety in the service of ‘non-violent cooperative egalitarian international relations.’ While critical of the liberal ideal of rational autonomy Butler recaptures and reinvigorates the notion of freedom problematized in the earlier work by finding a place for it in a complex psychological and socio-political picture. Butler has always understood that there is no

⁴⁰⁸ ‘the category “human” [...] is not captured once and for all,’ Butler, Judith *Undoing Gender* Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, Abington, UK, 2004, p. 13.

⁴⁰⁹ Butler, Judith *Frames of War* Verso, UK, 2009, p. 38.

⁴¹⁰ Butler, Judith: *Precarious Life*, Verso, London, UK 2004, p. 90.

way of imagining a social landscape without limiting norms so, she argues for a freedom in the form of escaping our exaggerated dependency on them.⁴¹¹ Butler thus reinvigorates the classic liberal notion both in terms of removing the cruel optimism of aspiring to a utopian vision of total self-governance and exposing naïve liberation as a rouse and in allowing a glimpse from within a field of constraints enabling the possibility of real freedoms.⁴¹² Indeed, while Butler inherits the rejection of rational

⁴¹¹ A benefit of theorizing in light of the inevitable constraints within an existing context of intelligibility is that the grounds for contestation are not located in some future realm we have to wait for or violently create, for the resources for overcoming the more pernicious locutions of power are to be drawn from within those very locutions, giving us hope with every injustice, and thus again, retaining fidelity to the here and now; a sentiment Butler expressed in the Dumm interview: 'I'm certainly not in favor of those forms of radicalism that claim that any participation in existing structures is crude reformism and, hence, to be resisted' Dumm, Thomas. "Giving Away, Giving Over: A Conversation with Judith Butler." *The Massachusetts Review* 49.1/2 (2008): 95-105. JSTOR. Web.

⁴¹² Butler's discussion of the illusions of "coming out" highlight the emancipatory power of restricting the notion of freedom. This reinvigorated notion of freedom is a resurrected form of that condemned in the *Psychic Life of Power*, a form best articulated in "Imitation and Gender Insubordination" where Butler warns that notion of coming out of "feigned heterosexuality" into "true homosexuality" risks perpetuating the reification of sex and gender upon which homophobia depends. If understood as coming out from a "false" identity into its "true" self the danger is that this blinds us to the truth that the experience of sexuality cannot be reduced to the categories we use to describe it, that 'the "I" exceeds its determination.' (Ibid). According to Butler, that there is some fixed identity category waiting to *give us a home*, to dissolve our anxieties and provide completeness is an illusion perpetuated by the popular narratives: 'so we are out of the closet, but into what? What new unbounded spatiality? The room, the den, the basement, the house, the bar, the university, some new enclosure whose door, like Kafka's door, produces the expectation of a fresh air and a light of illumination that never arrives.' For Butler 'being "out" must produce the closet again and again in order to maintain itself as "out" [...] the promise of a disclosure that can, by definition, never come.' Put simply "'coming out" [...] is a return to the closet under the guise of an escape'. (Ibid p. 123) The danger is that a romanticized notion of freedom when proved false can be deeply psychologically damaging. A second danger of naïve liberation discourse is that it forecloses the opportunity to do a therapeutic self-psychoanalysis of the panicked nature of all identity the groundlessness of such a "transformation" reveals, and crucially, the freedom this realization makes possible: 'Is this infinite postponement of the disclosure of "gayness" produced by the very act of "coming out" to be lamented? Or is this very deferral of the signified to be valued as a site for the production of values, precisely because the term now takes on a life that cannot be, can never be, permanently controlled?' (Ibid p. 123) To realize this is to see the genuine freedom posed by the incompleteness within the constraints placed on identity. A third danger is that this understanding of "coming out" may fail to address this key issue that the possibility of gender change shows us that total gender identification is itself impossible, and this essence-less-ness is a realization that can be used to expose in homophobia both what it fears - the contingency or non-naturalness of heterosexuality - and the impossibility of this fear being fixed through prohibition or foreclosure. To realize this, enables us to envisage means to overcome the illusions that compel homophobia: 'There is a political imperative to use these necessary errors or category mistakes [...] to rally and represent an oppressed political constituency [...] rallying points for a certain resistance to classification and to identity as such.' (ibid) 'To

autonomy she develops a reinvigorated theory of agency compatible with the cutting edge of psychological, neuroscientific, evolutionary biology and other disciplines sensitive to the many forces that predispose action. While traditional liberalisms often explicitly or implicitly ground solidarity and tolerance on accounts of chosen co-operation between distinct agents recognizing either selfish or selfless reasons to coexist and employing their autonomy in response, Butler's model entails a radical, necessary, and participatory inclusivity resting on a recognition of radical interdependence which transforms the question of whether to co-exist into the always and already ethical question of how to coexist. Consequently, Butler's theory grounds solidarity in more helpful ways than classical liberalism.⁴¹³

That my agency is [...] constituted in a sociality I do not fully author does not spell the end to my political claims. It only means that when one makes those claims, one makes them for much more than oneself.⁴¹⁴

This reinvigoration of solidarity is achieved while retaining the critical insights of deconstruction. Therein Butler warns against the dangers of identitarianism from the

reveal the equal ephemerality of heterosexuality, that is by showing its apparently rigid status as weak and mutually derivative of homosexuality, to panic gender norms by cofounding the origin-to-copy/heterosexual-to-lesbian line of causation, thereby exposing heterosexual claims to originality as illusory'. (ibid) 'To turn the homophobic construction of the bad copy against the framework that privileges heterosexuality as origin and so "derive" the former from the latter' (Ibid p. 123). This reading also realizes theories from early works such as Butler, Judith. "Contingent Foundations: Feminism and the Question of the "Postmodern"." Ed. Seyla Benhabib. *Feminist Contentions: A Philosophical Exchange*. New York: Routledge, 1995. 'If we agree that politics and power exist already at the level at which the subject and its legacy are articulated and made possible, then agency can be presumed only at the cost of refusing to inquire into its constitution [...] the epistemological model that offers us a pregiven subject or agent is one that refuses to acknowledge that agency is always and only a political prerogative [...] The subject is neither a ground nor a product, but the permanent possibility of a certain resignifying process, one which gets detoured and stalled through other mechanisms of power, but which is power's own possibility of being reworked.'

⁴¹³ This move also calls for a rethinking of tolerance, 'the injunction of tolerance, orders identity according to its requirements [...] recognition is a more robust and affirmative alternative.' Butler, Judith *Frames of War* Verso, UK, 2009, p. 141.

⁴¹⁴ Butler, Judith *Undoing Gender* Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, Abington, UK, 2004, p. 16.

perspective of a prescribed subversion policed by the call 'for a renewal of the value of life.'⁴¹⁵

The task [...] seems to me to be about distinguishing among the norms and conventions that permit people to breathe, to desire, to love, and to live, and those norms and conventions that restrict and eviscerate the conditions of life itself [...] What is most important is to cease legislating for all lives what is livable only for some, and similarly, to refrain proscribing for all lives what is unlivable for some [...] guided by the question of what maximizes the possibilities for a livable life, what minimizes the possibility of unbearable life or, indeed, social, or literal death.⁴¹⁶

This pattern continues throughout *Undoing Gender*; its central argument – that gender, rather than expressing identity is a “mode of dispossession”⁴¹⁷ – evidences commitment to both the recognizable liberal ideals and the critical insights of her earlier work. We can for example return to a quote which we used in part 2 as provisional evidence of Butler’s illiberalism. In a conversation published well into the post 9/11 period Butler labelled liberal individualism’s agency “manic” and tied up with an obsession with ‘the ego and its mastery’⁴¹⁸ and questioned the idea of selfhood that locates rights within the individual: ‘the “I” is bound up with the other and with temporality in a way that resists the language of individual rights and the modes of individualization that such a language entails.’⁴¹⁹ Reading on we find the deeply egalitarian motivation for such critique; ‘once we accept that we are called upon by

⁴¹⁵ Butler, Judith *Undoing Gender* Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, Abington, UK, 2004, p. 12.

⁴¹⁶ Ibid. p. 8.

⁴¹⁷ ‘when we speak about my sexuality or my gender, [...] both are to be understood as modes of being dispossessed, ways of being for another or in deed by critique of another’ Butler, Judith *Undoing Gender* Routledge, Taylor & Francis group, Abington, UK, 2004, p. 1.

⁴¹⁸ Dumm, Thomas. "Giving Away, Giving Over: A Conversation with Judith Butler." *The Massachusetts Review* 49.1/2 (2008): 95-105. JSTOR. Web.

⁴¹⁹ Ibid.

others, we are bound ethically.⁴²⁰ Furthermore, in rejecting atomic autonomous individualism Butler rejects liberalism's least plausible tenet while I argue, retaining its most valuable core components. For example, where Butler seems to be arguing against the liberal paradigm on closer inspection the theory of dispossession rests on a deconstruction of liberalism that can revitalize it. For Butler, gender norms do not give us individuality, rather they render us available to others: 'The terms that make up one's own gender are, from the start, outside oneself, beyond oneself in a sociality that has no single author'.⁴²¹ In virtue of a shift towards letting go of possession and identity this theory of dispossession critiques a key feature of the liberal approach to sexual liberation; the notion of sexuality as property, as integral. For Butler, to have a body is not to have a possession that you exercise sovereignty over but to be made available in a particular way. This move is repeated in *Frames of War*: 'the body does not belong to itself'.⁴²² This is a radical move to identity discourses including traditional liberalism, because for many, civil rights movements autonomy, integrity, and identity are sacrosanct. But Butler couples this radical move with a more robust defense of the necessity of political applications of autonomy than in the early work.⁴²³ The emphasis

⁴²⁰ Ibid.

⁴²¹ Butler, Judith *Undoing Gender* Routledge, Taylor & Francis group, Abington, UK, 2004, p. 1.

⁴²² Butler, Judith *Frames of War* Verso, UK, 2009, p. 53 'War works to undermine a sensate democracy, restricting what we can feel, disposing us to feel shock and outrage in the face of one expression of violence and righteous coldness in the face of another' Ibid. 52.

⁴²³ Whereas previously Butler described such utility as strategic, in *Undoing Gender*, Butler's adoption is more committed: 'We ask that the state keep its laws off our bodies, and we call for principles of bodily self-defense and bodily integrity to be accepted as political goods, yet it is through the body that gender and sexuality become exposed to others, implicated in social process inscribed by cultural norms, and apprehended in our social meanings. In a sense to be a body is to be given over to others even as a body is emphatically, one's own, that over which we must claim rights of autonomy. This is as true for the claims made by lesbians gays and bisexuals, in favor of sexual freedom, as it is for transsexual and transgender claims to self-determination, as it is for intersex claims to be free of coerced medical, surgical and psychiatric interventions, as it is for all claims to be free from racist attack, physical and psychical, as it is

on dispossession then does not entail dismissing liberal ideals for Butler's critique stakes out ground for a normative theory which appeals to and buttresses key liberal themes. Butler appreciates that a robust normative theory useful in buttressing human rights movements must take their insufficiencies into account and aims for an expansion of the notion of the human and for the creation of an inclusive and representative normativity based on the decidedly liberal ideals of democracy, freedom, equality, human rights, justice, and non-violence.⁴²⁴ That this aspiration is liberal can be seen in the further elaborations for political applications grounded in considerations of vulnerability and dispossession. Contra the veiled adherence to ideals in the late middle period Butler articulates precisely the way in which this application should function and that its goal is genuinely inclusive ethical geopolitics:

To grieve and to make grief itself into a resource for politics, is not to be resigned to a simple passivity or powerlessness. It is, rather to allow oneself to extrapolate from this experience of vulnerability to the vulnerability that others suffer through military incursions, occupations suddenly declared wars, and police brutality. That our survival can be determined by those we do not know and over whom there is no final control means that life is precarious and the politics must consider what forms of social and political organization seek best to sustain precarious lives across the globe.⁴²⁵

for claims to reproductive freedom. It is difficult if not impossible to make these claims without recourse to autonomy, and specifically to a sense of bodily autonomy, but bodily autonomy is a lively paradox. I am not suggesting though we cease to make these claims, we have to, we must, *and I'm not saying that we have to make these claims reluctantly or strategically*, they are part of the normative aspiration of any movement that seeks to maximize the protection of freedoms of sexual and gender minorities and women, defined with the broadest possible compass or racial and ethnic minorities especially as they cut across all other categories.' Butler, Judith *Undoing Gender* Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, Abington, UK, 2004, p. 20. [my italics]

⁴²⁴ 'War works to undermine a sensate democracy, restricting what we can feel, disposing us to feel shock and outrage in the face of one expression of violence and righteous coldness in the face of another.' Butler, Judith *Frames of War* Verso, UK, 2009, p. 52.

⁴²⁵ *Ibid.* p. 23.

Here Butler extends the discussions from the oppression of gender norms to the “justified violence” of war via pernicious norms of national, religious, and ethnic identity and expands the radically interconnected social family beyond national, gender, or ethnic boundaries in a skillful development of a compassionate non-invasive globalism and internationalism which, while invoking the sheltering of life on a global scale, doesn’t impose an ethical universalism and thus avoids value imperialism.⁴²⁶ This ‘yields the radical potential for new modes of sociality and politics beyond the avid and wretched bonds formed through settler colonialism and expulsion.’⁴²⁷

In developing a model of super-egoic cruelty *Frames of War* provides a “cynical fortification” of equality and non-violence. Butler explicates a theory of non-violence that works from within its psychic and discursive ubiquity arguing for ‘an ethical prescription against the waging of violence’ which ‘does not disavow or refuse that violence that may be at work in the production of the subject.’⁴²⁸ What follows is a recognition that the impulse to violence is most likely a consequence of the injunction to suppress one’s radical dependence on others. From our position ‘mired in violence’⁴²⁹ we can nevertheless develop an ‘aggressive vigilance over aggression’s tendency to emerge as violence.’⁴³⁰ Through a critical relationship to the ‘epistemic inequality’ whereby norms render some human lives more grievable than others

⁴²⁶ ‘It is crucial to understand the workings of gender in global contexts, in transnational formations, not only to see what problems are posed for the term ‘gender’ but to combat false forms of universalism that service a tacit or explicit cultural imperialism’ Butler, Judith *Undoing Gender* Routledge, Taylor & Francis group, Abington, UK, 2004, p. 9.

⁴²⁷ Butler, Judith “Precarious Life, Vulnerability, and the Ethics of Cohabitation” *The Journal of Speculative Philosophy*, Vol. 26, No. 2, SPECIAL ISSUE WITH THE SOCIETY FOR PHENOMENOLOGY AND EXISTENTIAL PHILOSOPHY Penn State University Press, 2012, pp. 134-151.

⁴²⁸ Butler, Judith *Frames of War* Verso, UK, 2009, p. 170.

⁴²⁹ Butler, Judith *Frames of War* Verso, UK, 2009, p. 171.

⁴³⁰ Ibid. 170.

we may embrace the “ethical task”⁴³¹ of ‘the defenders of egalitarianism;’⁴³² to apprehend a ‘vicissitude of equality that is enormously difficult to affirm’⁴³³ that all lives always matter: ‘Non-violence is derived from the apprehension of equality in the midst of precariousness.’⁴³⁴ Thus, from within the constraints of near ubiquitous normative violence in moves consistent with the cynical moment Butler not only overcomes the cynical impasse but does so in such a way that draws from the depths of an open-eyed analysis of psychic, normative, and political power a radically aspirational “critical humanism” based on a deeply fortified manifesto for an ethics of non-violence.

“Critical Liberal Humanism”

I would like to start, and end, with the question of the human.⁴³⁵

Calling Butler’s post-9/11 position critical humanism is useful because it highlights that she inherits the critique of naïve and ideologically compromised humanism and that she nevertheless attaches prime importance to the category of the human.⁴³⁶ Butler’s usage rests on understanding the nature and necessity of incorporating complex psychological and behavioral tendencies and needs into any theory of human agency; a “new-humanism” or a “critical liberalism” which nominates a redefinition that can survive the critical insights postmodern intellectual culture has encountered and more importantly, better serve those considered peripheral to the

⁴³¹ Ibid. 170.

⁴³² Butler, Judith *Frames of War* Verso, UK, 2009, p. 184.

⁴³³ Ibid. 184.

⁴³⁴ Ibid. 184.

⁴³⁵ Butler, Judith *Undoing Gender* Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, Abington, UK, 2004, p. 17.

⁴³⁶ For a discussion on the re-emergence of humanism in contemporary feminist philosophy of embodiment and the most up to date elucidation of Butler’s alleged humanism see Murphy, Ann V. “Corporeal Vulnerability and the New Humanism.” *Hypatia* 26.3 (2011): 575-90.

jurisdiction of fair and humane treatment.⁴³⁷ On this reading post-9/11 Butler “owns up” to critically informed liberal humanism without relinquishing the commitments

⁴³⁷ There will undoubtedly be objections to this characterization. Objectors may simply cite Butler’s reluctance to identify with liberal humanism. ‘By insisting on a “common” corporeal vulnerability, I may seem to be positing a new basis for humanism. That might be true, but I’m prone to consider it differently.’ Butler, *Judith: Precarious Life*, Verso, London, UK 2004 p. 43. ‘The rethinking of the human in these terms does not entail a return to humanism’ Butler, *Judith Undoing Gender* Routledge, Taylor & Francis group, Abington, UK, 2004, p. 13. In response, we have distinguished “new humanism” as “new” partly in opposition to the naïve liberal humanism Butler is rightly suspicious of. Objections may also rise from within the terms of this dissertation, that reading Butler as a humanist may come from quarters charging that the avowal of the “existential reading” alleged in this dissertation is problematic. There is some support for this objection. While in the later work Butler explicitly critiques the transcendental reading (see the first section of this chapter) she does not straightforwardly claim the existential reading. Passages like the following for example, still seem incompatible with the existential reading. “To be called unreal and have as it were institutionalized as a form of differential treatment, is to become the other against whom (or against which) the human is made. It is the inhuman, the beyond the human, the less than human, the border that secures the human in its ostensible reality, to be called a copy to be called unreal is one way to be oppressed, but consider that it is more fundamental than that, to be oppressed means that you already exist as a subject of some kind, you are there as the visible and oppressed other for the master subject, as a possible or potential subject, but to be unreal is to something else gain. To be oppressed you must first become intelligible. To find that you are fundamentally unintelligible indeed, that the laws of culture and of language find you to be an impossibility, is to find that you have not achieved access to the human, to find yourself speaking only and always as if you were human, but with the sense that you are not, to find that your language is hollow, that no recognition is forthcoming because the norms by which recognition takes place are not in your favor.’ Butler, *Judith Undoing Gender* Routledge, Taylor & Francis group, Abington, UK, 2004, p. 30. It seems then that the problematic slippage between legibility and illegibility, intelligibility and unintelligibly, between the visible and invisible, the grievable and ungrievable, and the taxonomical obsession with ranking the violence of epistemic and concrete exclusion remains in later Butler. In response, I would say that, overall in the later work the existential reading makes more and more sense to account for the more explicitly articulated ethical commitments, and the refusal to settle these issues is due to a critical perspective that doesn’t allow us the intellectual plateau of explanatory completeness emanating from the key Butlerian commitment that follows from the linguistic structuralist view of discourse as fundamental and contingent, namely the performativity of philosophy and the responsibility of the philosopher to resist the reification of categories potentially complicit in pernicious varieties of normative violence. It is because of this profound epistemic humility that if not the transcendental, the Kynical vein remains in later Butler, who problematically sustains the radical openness of her later normative aspirations partly through retaining fidelity to the dynamic argumentative strategy performatively contesting the assumptions of traditional epistemologies and ontologies and subverting the foundations of language, reason, and intelligibility. For this reason, a version of the tension that compelled our distinct heuristics remains. This is totally consistent with the aspirations that discourse useful for democratic politics and human rights must remain open to its most fundamental assumptions, the question, I suppose, is how persuasive this methodology becomes, but I feel later Butler is, as I am doing in this dissertation, is speaking to an audience deeply committed to the progressive political ideals I have labelled “critical liberalism” and that because of these commitments, this willingness to push on the limits of intelligibility and to destabilize its own foundations, will reinvigorate, improve, and keep open rather than erode these commitments. This of course raises the question as to how to teach and disseminate this material for the sake of furthering social justice. If reading Butler makes a teacher ask this question, I would hazard the guess that this too probably has a positive effect. however I contest that Butler, working at the vanguard of a tradition at pains to resist the ossification of normative structures and inauguration of alternative oppressive

that norms are necessarily violent, ubiquitous, requisite, and intractable. Here, instead of lamenting the ubiquity of normative violence or reifying oppressive forces Butler adopts a preferred normative stance within this framework of constraints. While this may appear perplexing and complicated – the most famous philosopher of normative violence engaging it – it shouldn't be, for throughout her career Butler has remained committed to both the ubiquity of normative violence its necessary but insufficient causal link with concrete identitarian hatred and violence and its contingency and potential for self-subversion.⁴³⁸ Indeed, if we read *The Psychic life of Power* as a prolegomena to this “new humanist” critical liberal normative theory we can accept both the necessary violence of norms commit norms which minimize the psychic foreclosures which manifest in persecution, hatred, and violence.

One must make substantive decisions about what will be a less violent future, what will be a more inclusive population, what will help to fulfill, in substantive terms, the claims of universality and justice that we seek to understand in their cultural specificity and social meaning.⁴³⁹

through fidelity to modern or “postmodern” categories retains a degree of rhetorical illusiveness precisely in service of resisting normative violence, and that nevertheless, alongside appreciating this refrain, the existential humanist reading serves as a useful heuristic which captures Butler's aspiration of expanding the field of permitted embodiments, and the preoccupation with livability and grievability.

⁴³⁸ “The “being” of life is itself constituted through selective means; as a result, we cannot refer to this “being” outside of the operations of power’ Butler, Judith *Frames of War* Verso, UK, 2009, p. 1. ‘The operation of state power takes place within an ontological horizon saturated by power that precedes and exceeds state power’ Ibid. p. 149.

⁴³⁹ Butler, Judith *Undoing Gender* Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, Abington, UK, 2004, p. 225.

Conclusion

Butler's post-9/11 work maintains her commitment to the necessary violence within materialization and performativity and punitive melancholic subjugation within structurally melancholic subjectivity and addressed the problems therein. But as well as overcoming these problems and retaining fidelity to the load bearing argumentative claims of the "cynical moment," Butler's later work also reinvigorates the ideals which guide the entire project. In this way, Butler's post-9/11 serve as an analog for a solution to Extreme Liberal Cynicism which meets our conditions laid out in chapter 5: that it must be immanent, revitalize the constitutive ideals, and retain the rationale behind their disavowal. It is immanent, it follows a clearly articulated normative aspiration in line with its constitutive ideals, which it both reinvigorates and remains critical of,⁴⁴⁰ sustaining the 'tension between (a) expanding existing normative concepts [...] and (b) the call for alternative vocabularies' an antagonism which 'keeps the alliance open and suspends the idea of reconciliation as a goal.'⁴⁴¹ This qualified optimism can be seen in *Frames of War*, where Butler analyses the discursive exacerbations of violent predispositions:

The point is not to conclude that cynicism is the only option, but to [...] make better judgements.⁴⁴²

⁴⁴⁰ It cautions against certain liberal values as naïve (individualism and autonomy) yet retains the primary belief in political freedom justice, equality, human rights, and above all non-violence.

⁴⁴¹ Butler, Judith *Frames of War* Verso, UK, 2009, p. 148

⁴⁴² Ibid. 159

Conclusion

The higher man must listen closely to every coarse or subtle cynicism

- Nietzsche⁴⁴³

Liberal Cynicism is torn between liberal ideals and the obstacles to their success. These obstacles include critique of liberalism, our failure to realize its ideals, and the necessary collective commitment required for realizing them. Because of this, it suffers. This pain can compel the Liberal Cynic to extremes, fantasizing invulnerability through disavowing the efficacy of its constitutive ideals. This pain can compel extremes which fantasize invulnerability through repressively disavowing the efficacy of its ideals which eclipses cynical pain.⁴⁴⁴ This is supported by fantasies including absolutizing the

⁴⁴³ Nietzsche, Friedrich, *Beyond Good and Evil* #26 p. 38 Translated by Walter Kauffman, New York: Vintage, 1966.

⁴⁴⁴ This relates to what something of a contentious issue running through this work, the question as to whether and how Psychoanalysis can be applied to cynicism. Sloterdijk deals with this issue, perhaps intuiting a concern I share, defending against the objection that he, as perhaps I, mistakenly offer a non-psychoanalytic analysis of a condition that requires one. In a discussion on pages 404 - 408 Sloterdijk references January-February and March April 1933 issues of the journal *Psychoanalytische Bewegung*, specifically the article in two parts, *Zur Psychoanalyse des Zynikers* (I and II) by Edmund Bergler. Bergler defines cynicism as unconscious in all but 4 of its sixty-four varieties, and as a "grave neuroses". Per Sloterdijk, cynicism, for Bergler, is a means by which people with extremely strong emotional ambivalences psychically discharge and thus stands on the same level as classic neurotic mechanisms such as hysteria, melancholy, and paranoia. For Bergler, through hostility to both itself and others as well as through humor, cynicism escapes the world it feels it must hate and acts out infantile tendencies. For Bergler, in Sloterdijk's description, 'cynicism belongs to the dynamic of cultural liberation struggles and the social dialectics of values' and 'is one the most important methods of working through ambivalences in a culture' Sloterdijk, Peter. *Critique of Cynical Reason*. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota, 1987. p. 407. Sloterdijk criticizes the notion of cynicism as unconscious. Specifically, Sloterdijk argues that the 'mechanisms of the cynic' are transparent to the cynic, this is the enlightened part of Enlightened False Consciousness, (their contradictory statements are done so ironically, in full knowing of the condition they sooth, and that the cynical choices are the result of a broken, but conscious compromise between practical reason and hope) such that 'the unconscious scarcely has to make any effort.' Ibid. I find myself between these views. As my analysis in chapter 1 hopefully showed, I disagree with Sloterdijk that cynicism is entirely transparent and that it must function above the veil of unconscious mechanism. However, I agree with three key claims Sloterdijk makes on Bergler's behalf. 1, that cynicism attacks itself and the world to solve an inner conflict and attempts an escape through humor. 2, that in its adolescent form with which this dissertation does not deal it 'acts out its infantile tendencies' and most crucially 3, that through hostility and masochism cynicism functions as a means by which people with extremely strong emotional ambivalences psychically discharge. However, I agree with Sloterdijk that 'the

powers it opposes via reification of hopelessness, by assuming intellectual superiority, and by refusing auto-critique. On this picture, cynicism's need to attack ideologies, ideals, and idealisms emanates from a latent inability to fully disregard its own hopes.

conscious participation of the ego is objective immoralism, and the obvious fragmentation of morals explain the matter much more effectively than does the depth-psychological theory.' I also believe that the structure of cynicism can be made transparent to the cynic instead of/as well as the qualified analyst (407) 'the "ice-dogs" still have the energy to bark and still possess enough bite to want to make things clear.' (408) This belief requires justification: Although adopting terms and moves informed by Butler's Freudianism my conception of liberal melancholy needn't extend to the neurotic depths of Butler's Freudian melancholia (i.e. beyond the reach of self-therapy) for 3 reasons. 1, because cynicism is rarely central to one's identity, certainly not as central as gender or ethnicity are, at least for Butler. This is evinced by that fact that cynicism is an intermittent state of consciousness, it can take specific referents, and is compatible with non-cynical attitudes (one can be cynical about politics but not love, or visa-versa etc. Therefore, cynicism needn't be the kind of psychic structure constitutive of subjectivity which is often the condition for the obliviousness to pathologies that render people incapable of self-help. Because of the consequent ability for the cynic to "over stand" their cynicism it need not exclude self-analysis. There may well be cases where cynicism is constitutive of identity and therefore beyond the scope of conscious transparency (I imagine this is more likely to be associated with Master Cynicism, whose duplicity, through repression, manifests in the comfort of pathological lie.) 2, because the transparency of Liberal Cynical pain is sign both of its complicity in psychic mechanisms related to the unconscious and to mechanisms accessible to the consciousness and therefore, also its susceptibility to the ameliorative efforts of the "host". For a very crude but hopefully helpful analogy the stereotypical homophobe does not experience grief concerning the lost homosexual desire let alone the cause of the grief, nor do they tend to self-identify as homophobic. This is because on Butler's model, they suffer from a melancholia which is the result of unspeakable loss manifesting in unethical disregard or violent hostility. Although panicked by those embracing its disavowed desires the suffering is not conscious. By contrast even while the cause of cynical pain may remain hidden the pain is not. Furthermore, the cynic is usually comfortable diagnosing themselves as cynical and is often aware of its harmfulness. It is for this distinct phenomenological difference that this "condition" need not require psychoanalysis. 3. A further reason to regard liberal cynicism as accessible to at least a philosophically informed self-consciousness if not consciousness in general is the nature of the trauma that I argue compels it. Although I argue against Sloterdijk's solely intellectual cynicism caused by the legacy of critique and instead hold that worldly disappointments are crucial, I still hold that liberal cynical grief is distinct to more immediate pain. To put it another way, the Palestinian father who lost children to both Israeli military and Hamas attacks is cynical about politics in a way beyond the scope of my analysis. That trauma is profound and immediate and if it compels pathological complexes these are to be dealt with by highly psychoanalytically, psychologically, and neuro-psychologically trained medical professionals. By contrast, for the liberal cynics their trauma is less direct. The trauma of being invested in generally failing ideals tends to be indirect and mediated from embodied existence. Indeed, as we have tried to make clear, Liberal Cynicism is conditioned by ideology critique, a privilege of the highly educated and therefore Liberal Cynics are less likely to have the "depth-cynicism" of our mourning Palestinian father. Since the trauma of Liberal Cynicism is indirect the requirements for its alleviation are similarly superficial and accessible to the consciousness whose repression of liberal ideals operates comparatively superficially. This picture allows both for cynicisms functioning at depths requiring professional psychiatric care and the kinds of adolescent cynicisms functioning at such superficial levels of trauma that a change in weather could be sufficient for their "overcoming." This dissertation aims somewhere between these poles, at a condition which I argue, is nevertheless prevalent among the academically inclined liberals whom, I hope, will find this this analysis interesting and maybe even a positive influence.

Despite serving an immediately ameliorative purpose this leaves the cynic unhappy, alienated, hostile, obstinate, and delusional. Thus, it is a failing self-defense mechanism. Extreme Liberal Cynicism, itself on a spectrum, is signposted by failing to avow its ideals, reifying their inefficacy, and restricting itself to unsatisfactory or impossible solutions to its pain, while vehemently criticizing invested perspectives. This is the hypocrisy and inauthenticity at the heart of Extreme Liberal Cynicism.

At these extremes, Liberal Cynicism is also rationally unjustifiable, as well as intrinsically, and instrumentally harmful. The reification of hopelessness, assumption of trans-idealism, the cynicalization of ideology critique, (the partial and negative reification in the history of ideology critique,) and the refusal to engage in self-criticism is irrational. It is intrinsically harmful because it is self-destructive and painful. It is instrumentally harmful in virtue of enabling the problems that compel it, and enablement which can be seen on the level of action, where the Extreme Cynic tends to participate in the very system it bemoans, which through ritualized practical reinforcement and absolutizing narrative performatively reifies the illusion of its necessity. It is also instrumentally harmful in virtue of being both ill-equipped to oppose, and vulnerable to succumbing to, Master Cynicism, a condition which couples a disregard for liberal ideals with a disinhibited embrace of power, and an offer to assuage cynical pain. For these reasons, a response is a desideratum. The dangers of Liberal Cynicism then, are its painfulness, the extremes this pain can lead to, failing its ideals, and either succumbing to, or enabling, Master Cynicism. However, cynical painfulness also provides the impetus and evinces the resources for Liberal Cynicism to avoid or overcome these extremes.

To theorize this overcoming, we can turn to Peter Sloterdijk and Judith Butler. Butler's later work stays true to its critical inheritance and reinvigorates the constitutive values of the earlier material while retaining the tension between ideals and critique. In so doing Butler's later work in relation to the middle and earlier work meets our conditions for overcoming Extreme Liberal Cynicism. Further reflection shows that within the theoretical frame in which this overcoming consisted, lies a model for contesting the pernicious extremes of Liberal Cynicism in general.

Per Butler, subjectivation requires a libidinally invested repression through which the energies once directed towards that which is prohibited provides the impetus for an energetic disavowal. This involves an internalized loss which haunts the ego through a failure to grieve. Butler develops a theory for "staying with grief,"⁴⁴⁵ to thwart this foreclosure and its harmful consequences. Liberal Cynicism also internalized a loss, and underwent a libidinally invested repression through which the energies once directed towards that which is lost compels a passionate disavowal. Therefore, Butler's theory of breaking the narcissistic circuitry of melancholia may translate to Liberal Cynicism, specifically for short circuiting the structures whereby liberal pain compels repression. If so, a reckoning with "liberal cynical grief" could bring to the fore the loss: the value and efficacy of its ideals. If it is indeed a psychic defense mechanism whereby a painful powerlessness, guilt, and vulnerability are eclipsed by the fantasy of hopelessness, then staying with liberal grief might disengage this

⁴⁴⁵ Butler, Judith *Undoing Gender* Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, Abington, UK, 2004, p. 20.

function.⁴⁴⁶ Also for Butler, the overwhelming immensity of an original unbearable loss triggered the thwarting mechanism. In the analysis of 9/11 this was the infinite loss of innocent life. By analogy, for Liberal Cynicism the compulsion to repress also reflects the profundity of the loss, the scope of the original investment. In this way, dwelling in cynical grief could allow for an empowering re-affirmation of its constitutive ideals.

Secondly, from Sloterdijk. Our analysis of the structure of Liberal cynicism and the failure of Sloterdijk's romantic moralizing solution let us to conclude that if it is to be persuasive any solution must draw from, and remain faithful to, cynicism's critical and emotional constitution. We can develop then, Sloterdijk's proposal to use features immanent to cynicism, against its pernicious extremes. By embracing its own ignorance as the yard stick from which to mock human knowledge, Sloterdijk's Neo-Kynicism invites a self-implicating critique maintaining the ironicization of knowledge but extending it to its assumed intellectual superiority. This could also destabilize the legacy of cynicalization and encourage cynicism's purported refusal of naiveté to be used against its own. Cynical naivety includes unrealistic expectations for the coherence, superiority, and success of its values. This contributes to the unbearability of Liberal Cynical grief. The repeated and traumatic witnessing of the failures of an absolutized idealism compels the further naivety of absolute hopelessness. A self-directed Neo-Kynical critique of cynical naiveté then could both ameliorate the causes

⁴⁴⁶ If master Cynicism is the result of a melancholic foreclosure prefaced in the failure to grieve for a loss, then our Butlerian solution may also apply here. If somehow the Master Cynic's lack of autonomy could be brought into consciousness and grieved, then this foreclosure might reveal ideals contrary to those feeding its megalomania. Possible means to encourage openness to critique would be to highlight the insatiability, mania, and panic associated with this incessant and impossible pursuit. The Butlerian injunction that we deconstruct discourses mobilizing these pathological denials would call for challenging the valorization of money and power.

of trauma which compelled and enabled the reification of hopelessness and expose it as an emotionally driven response to trauma.

Also from Row's appropriation, we saw that by targeting all as potentially complicit in the problems it seeks to overcome and by acquiring an openness to diverse solutions, policed cheekiness could disrupt the inertia of argumentative stalemate by avoiding the reduction of opposing views to "false consciousness." This possibility of rescinding on the necessity of agreement and focusing cross-ideological attention on solving the problems the cynic laments may increase the possibility of a return to dialectic and even of glimpsing the hallmarks of the united vision of justice for which it desperately yearns.⁴⁴⁷ Further grounds for adopting elements within Sloterdijk's solution are that while we concluded that without the policing influence of a normative aspiration satirical insubordination was a dangerous response to Enlightened False Consciousness, because Liberal Cynicism remains invested in ideals it contains the resources for policing this libidinal release while remaining immanent.

Thirdly, from Sloterdijk and Butler. Both advocate "turning on" the ego. Butler analyzed foreclosures which allow a sense of security to remain during experiences of vulnerability as reducible to a harmful form of ego-preservation. To challenge this dangerous narcissism the ego must be subjected to "super-egoic cruelty."⁴⁴⁸ Sloterdijk's cynic wrestled with an unwillingness to reject the notion of a unified self, identified

⁴⁴⁷ As Row warns: "The alternative - which we all practice, every day, sometimes passively, sometimes as principle - is to go on pretending [...] that we speak private languages that never overlap [...] that there is no way of describing [...] how we suffer together.' Row, Jess. "American Cynicism." Home. Boston Review, 18 May 2015. Web. 10 Dec. 2015. <<http://www.bostonreview.net/books-ideas/jess-row-american-cynicism>>.

⁴⁴⁸ Butler, Judith: *Prearious Life*, Verso, London, UK, 2004, p. 138.

with anti-idealism, and erred on the side of late capitalism; a complex manifest in crude forms of material and psychic self-preservation, reducible to an obstinate egoism. Sloterdijk thus called for a “liquidation”⁴⁴⁹ of the cynical ego. Similarly, there is a withdrawal into and desperate clinging onto the Liberal Cynical ego compelled by a desire for self-preservation in the face of vulnerability. It stands to reason then, both that the Liberal Cynical ego could benefit from critique, and that Sloterdijk and Butler’s theories could be useful in detailing a methodology for mounting one.

Sloterdijk’s ego-critique proposes using the insights of existential angst and deconstruction, both common companions to the cynic, to reveal the truth of egolessness, an awareness of the precariousness of all life, and the unknown possibilities for the future. Sloterdijk also proposes that satirical self-implicating ego critique and deconstruction amounts to non-cooperation with the discursive forces of materialization, objectification, and identification which can free the cynic from the constraints of a panicked need to uptake constructed identity categories and idealistic self-designations. All of which contribute to the trauma which compel cynical repression. But Neo-Kynical ego critique would be different for Liberal Cynicism than Enlightened False Consciousness because its traumatized self-preservation and fear has not clouded from view the inchoate energies of a magical neo-Kynical yesbody, but the value, efficacy, and responsibilities entailed by its constitutive idealism. Therefore, Neo-Kynical critique could reveal the efficacy of its ideals.

On later Butler’s account of mourning and melancholia, in addition to the desire for the lost love object, a range of desires associated with the ego are also thwarted by

⁴⁴⁹ ‘Verflüssigung’ - Ibid. 379.

loss, specifically, the desires for security, autonomy, invulnerability, independence, and the desire for the coherence and transparency of identity. Butler proposed thwarting narcissistic withdrawal by cultivating vulnerability through acknowledging the source of grief, submitting to being transformed by it, and allowing the ideals to be transformed as well. This involves submitting to insecurity, dependency, vulnerability, and uncertainty to respond more healthily to loss. Given that a similar range of desires are also thwarted by Liberal Cynicism's loss, then cultivating vulnerability could release the pressure to identify with an absolute conception of ideals in a reality in which they flounder, and thereby contribute to weakening the demand for repression.⁴⁵⁰ Furthermore, given that Extreme Liberal Cynicisms reification of hopelessness is compelled by the weight of hope's inter-dependence, a grief induced acceptance of necessary sociality could further dilute the force to deny and repress, and possibly affirm the necessity of collaboration, compromise, and also the management of expectations. This realization could also help sustain the difficult balance between idealism and ideology critique by submitting to the reality that liberal ideals while useful, are fallible, incomplete, and dependent. This in turn could further mitigate the painfulness of the sociality of hope through conditioning a greater openness to pluralism and diversity. This openness to an equally fallible other could problematize the traumatizing conclusion of liberalism's inefficacy, for the failure of "this" understanding of liberal ideals could be compatible with the potential success of alternative routes to its ends. Therefore, as well as contesting ego-withdrawal and

⁴⁵⁰ On this reading, once cynicism is associated with identity its perceived failure poses a threat to the sense of self and is firmly resisted for psycho-emotional rather than intellectual reasons.

reasserting the value of its ideals, dwelling in cynical grief could ground a collective and inclusive dialectical critical commitment to equality, freedom, and justice.

We have begun to theorize why the cynic might want to overcome extremes and what needs to happen for a successful overcoming. Put simply, pain is the motivation for an overcoming achieved by grieving in the way liberal hope demands. But perhaps we should say more about what could motivate the Liberal Cynic to swap the easiness of hopelessness for the painfulness of hope. Since cynical trauma compelled a repression our theory for thwarting it must include a way to make this pain bearable. There is a level at which a willingness to endure the painfulness of idealistic commitments is beyond argumentation, a feature of disposition, perhaps maturity, maybe even strength, but my contention is that not only does Liberal Cynicism contains these virtues, but that there are compelling reasons for the cynically inclined to submit to such transformation, avoidance, and revitalization, and methods for making this pain bearable.⁴⁵¹

The first set of reasons revolves around the fact that the value and efficacy of liberal ideals was never successfully foreclosed, and in removing the failed attempts to do so, these investments would again become motivating. Furthermore, critiquing the contributions the cynic makes to their beleaguered condition destabilize them, and revealing its delusions and germinations in a psycho-emotional imperative, its

⁴⁵¹ This would defuse cynicism's hostility towards idealism and, no longer a painful reminder of a lost innocence, the critical liberal would appreciate liberal naivety as capable of contributing positively. Indeed, a measure of the critical liberal's successful self-discipline would be its ability to value as well as critique liberal naivety.

commitments to truth and independence from false consolation could also motivate the avoidance of extremes.

On a more economical self-interested level, critique may reveal the calmer sincerity of pained liberalism as preferable to the manic desperate melancholy of unsuccessful foreclosure. Although the causes of cynical pain are non-transparent, it suffers greatly. The Extreme Liberal Cynic is often joyless, insatiably hateful, isolated through narcissistic withdrawal, bitter, pressured by precariousness, and gnawed at by inadmissible guilt. The promise of a preferable pain may be sufficient to provoke agentive participation in overcoming and/or avoiding cynical extremes.

Another way our response could abate the unbearability of Liberal Cynical pain relates to Sloterdijk's demand that cynicism deconstruct its refusal to self-critique. Our analysis of cynical pain revealed fear as a condition for this obstinacy, traceable to the fear that auto-critique would lead to losing the only thing of worth of in the cynic's baron ontology, itself. We developed this as including the fear of enlightenment, an inchoate feeling that it would lead to a loss of self: to death-in-life. As well as removing a cause of the cynical trauma potentially compelling repression, a critique which reveals that cynical self-interrogation does not lead to impasse or abyss could remove this obstacle to auto-critique.

Furthermore, this model also proposes a useful and empowering revitalization of cynicism's ideals and virtues. The ability to claim the willingness to face up to man's inhumanity without the false consolation of naïve hopes, and the nativity of hopelessness, could further motivate forgoing hopelessness for the painfulness or realistic hope, a pain with which the cynical ego could proudly identify, thus not just

offering an alternative pain, but an amelioration through ennoblement. This ennoblement could be aided by validating, valorizing, and proposing the redeployment of cynical guilt and conscience. As we saw, both our development of Žižek, Sloterdijk, and Row diagnose an inadmissible guilt compelling the repressive functions of Extreme Liberal Cynicism. Row developed Sloterdijk's notion of shame with which postmodern subjects view their enlightenment inheritance and its complicity in injustice. The validation and valorization of guilt is simple: The guilt around enlightenment liberalism's complicity with colonial and imperialism is simultaneously a call to rethink the enlightenment, to see how we have failed tolerance, equality, democracy, dignity, and human rights. The cynical conscience which casts doubt on all ideals is simultaneously a call to retain a critical distance concerning the totality and actionability of any ideals, and to adopt an open-minded dialectic concerning their future. And the perennial guilt that my actions and my ideals don't always matchup is obviously a call to correct this. Concerning redeploying cynical guilt, the repressed desire for the realization of liberal ideals is reserved in the guilt which features in liberal cynical pain, which is to say, the pain compelling the repression of liberal ideals is simultaneously a reminder of their potential efficacy.⁴⁵² Valorizing cynical guilt,

⁴⁵² This model of guilt draws from both Sloterdijk and Butler who, albeit within very different projects, propose a productive use of guilt. Both develop guilt into recognition of shared precariousness and vulnerability – both conditions for cynical repression – into an invitation to apprehend the suffering of all. Such an appropriation can be theorized in relation to psychoanalytic themes familiar to this dissertation. In our comparison of Freud and Butler's accounts of mourning and melancholia we saw that while for Freud guilt is a manifestation of desire thwarted by social prohibitions internalized into the super-ego manifest in the form of conscience punishing the ego, we saw that for Butler, guilt preserves the desire as well as the prohibition, and as such is ambivalent. Our redeployment of cynical liberal guilt adopts Butler's approach.

might aid its entrance into consciousness, and thereby provide additional impetus for overcoming its extremes.⁴⁵³

Perhaps we need to still need to say more about how to get the Extreme Cynic to mourn. To this end we can call on cynical irony. In simultaneously appealing to cynicism's mockery of naiveté and gritty realism and as well as providing cathartic release, in turning minimally hostile critique inwards satirical humor could enable cynicism's vulnerability and grief to enter immediate consciousness. Neokynical Satire's willingness to face the world's ills and endure mockery of hope and disarm the

⁴⁵³ We may also validate, valorize, and redeploy cynical fantasy. Compelled by an inability to disregard and eradicate pain sown by latent ideals, cynical fantasy is the mean through which the cynic absolutizes the superiority and inefficacy of its constitutive idealism and other doomed solutions to its own melancholy. We saw that at extremes, cynical fantasy contributes to sustaining a subjectivity void of responsibility and commitment to the structural conditions of the world. Firstly, the validation, our critique has revealed that there is a logic and compulsion within Extreme Liberal Cynical fantasy which shows that the Extreme Cynic is not exclusively irresponsible or even unhealthy, this respect could soften the blow to the ego our critique demands. Concerning the valorization and redeployment, fantasy can play a vital role in overcoming the problems in which it is complicit. Resources again come from Butler for whom fantasy signposts 'what reality forecloses.' Butler, Judith *Undoing Gender* Routledge, Taylor & Francis group, Abington, UK, 2004, p. 29. Following Butler, an employment requires rejecting where fantasy has content - Benna's naïve love, Susan's negative reifications, and Sloterdijk's romantic utopia – and retaining it as a space holder for the bare possibility of a radically improved situation: 'Fantasy is what establishes the possible in excess of the real; it points elsewhere, and when it is embodied, it brings the elsewhere home.' Butler, Judith *Undoing Gender* Routledge, Taylor & Francis group, Abington, UK, 2004, p. 217. For the Liberal Cynic, the elsewhere yearning to come home is a world in which a qualified liberalism succeeds. A "decynicalized liberal cynical fantasy" would amount to the courage to imagine an improved global political situation guided by its critically open ideals and policed by the constant reminder that our knowledge is incomplete and that this vision is merely a signpost of a reality it cannot foresee. Fantasy would function then as cynical conscience, reminding us to be epistemically humble in our aims to realize liberal ideals, while imagining their increased influence; and to remain open to exactly what they amount to. Butler explains that fantasy as epistemic humility is 'essential to the project of international human rights discourse and politics' Butler, Judith *Undoing Gender* Routledge, Taylor & Francis group, Abington, UK, 2004, p. 36 and part of the 'task of a radical democratic theory.' Butler, Judith *Undoing Gender* Routledge, Taylor & Francis group, Abington, UK, 2004, p. 225. In contrast to the liberal cynical fantasy of the necessarily failure of liberalism, critical liberal fantasy would hold the space open for its possible success: "That we cannot predict or control [...] does not mean that we cannot struggle for the realization of certain values, democratic, and nonviolent, international, and anti-racist. The point is only that to struggle for those values is precisely to avow that one's own position is not sufficient to elaborate the spectrum of the human, that one must enter into a collective work in which one's own status as subject must, for democratic reasons, become disorientated, and exposed to what it does not know.' Butler, Judith *Undoing Gender* Routledge, Taylor & Francis group, Abington, UK, 2004, p. 3.

need to evaluate and identify would simultaneously appeal to and challenge cynicism, creating a space for welcoming grief, coupling is open-eyed realism with auto-critique and world weary and wise willingness to laugh.

The Critique of Extreme Cynicism coupled with the libidinal release of Neokynical cheekiness, a Butlerian reckoning with grief, and the skillful reappropriations of its complex desires and losses could compel the cynically inclined to resist fatalism and embrace an ennobling self-transformation upholding a critical commitment to, reinvigorating, and working for its constitutive ideals. This could transform a condition beset by painful, destructive, and isolating delusions into the warm-hearted and heartbroken honesty of a critical liberalism in a world that really needs it. The painfulness of Liberal Cynicism evinces the failure of illiberalism and contains the resource to develop an inclusive evolving conception of a better alternative, it is a gift, a source of dignity in the face of and emancipatory resistance to that which compels it. Within Liberal Cynicism then, a saving power grows.

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