

# Why do I have to dance like that? ACCUTE and the Performance of Optimism

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I saw the best minds of my generation dancing at a conference, self-consciously drunk happy fools even though they are unlikely to find permanent work in the profession in which they have trained, who gave papers, who went to book launches, offering to fix up a plate of hot *hors d'oeuvres* for someone who might be on a hiring committee somewhere, sometime in the next decade, writing two papers: one on Atwood, Ondaatje, Munro, or Wah in order to prove that they can teach the canon, the other featuring their power-pointed-multi-media-collaborative-hyper-meta-counter-canonical interdisciplinary research that the profession professes to prefer these days, saying “fuck it ” and then changing their minds and submitting another conference abstract, meeting the November 15<sup>th</sup> deadline, planning what they will wear to the dance this year.

*Anonymous*

## Dancing with Myself

IT IS CLEAR TO ME that the most relevant thing to say in an article about the Association of Canadian College and University Teachers of English at this particular historical moment is that we *dance*. For those of you not in the know, a brief update: in May 2007, fueled by a University of Saskatchewan bar that remained open for business and a playlist engineered by then-ACCUTE president Steven Bruhm, the first annual ACCUTE dance

party was successfully inaugurated with much shaking and shimmying. Since 2007, the dance party has become the social anchor of the annual ACCUTE conference and, while it serves the important function of making us English-teaching folk more interesting than those wine-and-cheese-hosting learned societies, I've come to think that it also functions as a site where a prominent contemporary "structure of feeling" is performed en masse and writ large.

### Paradise by the Dashboard Lights

In the context of the current academic job market (or lack thereof), it strikes me that the ACCUTE conference as a whole—and the dance party expressly so—is a collective performance of what Lauren Berlant has identified as "cruel optimism." In Berlant's terms, cruel optimism is "a relation of attachment to compromised conditions of possibility whose realisation is discovered either to be impossible, sheer fantasy, or *too* possible, and toxic." She goes on to specify that what is "cruel about these attachments, and not merely inconvenient or tragic, is that the subjects who have *x* in their lives might not well endure the loss of their object or scene of desire, even though its presence threatens their well-being, because whatever the *content* of the attachment is, the continuity of the form of it provides something of the continuity of the subject's sense of what it means to keep on living on and to look forward to being in the world" (33). Thus, for example, the relation of attachment to a tenure-track job, which is ultimately a relation of attachment to a middle-class income, stable employment, health and retirement benefits, and time to do one's "own work," at this point might be understood to be "sheer fantasy" and even "toxic," since the pursuit of this attachment can happen at the expense of other careers or, even more cruel, at the risk of driving one's self mad with the perpetual fantasy-disappointment cycle of the job application process. However, continued participation in the ACCUTE conference—which might be understood as the "object/scene of desire" (34) because it functions as a gathering of possibility: of making connections, of showing off one's good work—demonstrates a refusal to give up hope, even in the face of diminishing employment odds in the humanities, specifically, and the troubling corporatization of universities, more generally.

### I Will Survive

Participation in the ACCUTE conference, and in particular the dance party, performs an optimistic practice (even if one does not *feel optimistic*) of what Berlant calls "keep[ing] one in proximity to the scene of desire/

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attrition” (34). This desire/attrition configuration is the cruel aspect of these attachments, since, in cruel optimism, the “animating potency of an object/scene of desire contributes to the attrition of the very thriving that is supposed to be made possible in the work of the attachment in the first place” (34). I suggest, then, that the ACCUTE dance party functions as a site in which to perform an *all is not lost* approach to the current moment; to dance is to perform a (cruelly) optimistic attachment to the hope that things will get better, a performance of *not giving up* or, as Berlant calls it, of *keeping on living on*.

### We’re Not Going to Take It

Why dance? Why now? I propose that in 2010 the performance of optimism is both increasingly delusional (and therefore cruel) and increasingly necessary (as a mode of imagining that institutional change is possible), since not only are new tenure-track positions almost non-existent, but even contractually limited and sessional positions have been axed in the interest of budget conformation. While certainly this lack of jobs is more devastating for those scholars seeking permanent positions, I think that the collective performance of optimism that we stage at the ACCUTE dance reveals an attempt by the association as a whole to stave off pessimism and despair (or what Berlant calls “political depression”). Furthermore, I wonder if we might characterize the ACCUTE dance as both an exemplification of the politics of hope as a shared value of the association and simultaneously a potentially ideologically problematic morale-booster. In the current moment, when the performance of optimism is arguably what one might call “extra cruel,” it seems ironic that we have conventionalized a hyperbolic expression of optimism, and not only optimism for the future but also optimism for the enduring value of hope itself. While this performance of optimism might stave off despair while we are on the dance floor, my hope is that it does not function as a safety valve, releasing pressure and reducing the likelihood of mass revolt. In order to ensure that this is not the case, I suggest that we unite our performance of optimism with a commitment to radical institutional change by hosting not just a dance but a Dance Dance Revolution!

### Works Cited

Berlant, Lauren. “Cruel Optimism: On Marx, Loss, and the Senses.” *New Formations* 63 (Winter 2007–08): 33–51.