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Lauren Berlant  
Jordan Greenwald

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# Affect in the End Times

*A Conversation with Lauren Berlant*

LAUREN BERLANT AND JORDAN GREENWALD

Lauren Berlant, George M. Pullman Professor of English at the University of Chicago, is renowned for her work on collective affect, sentimentality, fantasies of citizenship, and feminist and queer theory. In honor of her new book, *Cruel Optimism*, I asked her to help us make sense of a number of artifacts from the contemporary archive, all of which attempt to mark, in *some* way, the end of an era—historical, political, theoretical, or otherwise. What follows is a conversation that foregrounds not only the affective dimensions of the contemporary moment but also the circumscription of forms of togetherness by what she calls the “austere imaginary” of the American political sphere. Finally, it probes the question of what role affect theory might play in the re-imagination of social and political life.

JORDAN GREENWALD: Here is an image that registers the affective aftermath of Osama bin Laden’s death on May 2, 2011: the May 14 cover of the *New York Post* addressing the discovery of pornographic materials in bin Laden’s hideout.<sup>1</sup> The event of bin Laden’s death elicited an upsurge in public emotions, most of them positive—elation, vindication, “closure,” relief—despite the common acknowledgment that this victory was largely, if not com-

pletely, symbolic. What do you make of the affects expressed in images like this one, and the countless others that accompanied it in media across the nation?

LAUREN BERLANT: This is a really complex question, as it presumes some things I wouldn't presume about what an event is, how we know what normative shape collective political affect has taken, if any (and its difference from media- or propaganda-orchestrated political emotion), and what it means to characterize something as "largely symbolic."

So here are a few thoughts. One: rather than launch into a lecture about all of the different things contemporary theorists mean by "event," I will just offer a heuristic here from *Cruel Optimism*. An *episode* is a perturbation in the ordinary's ongoingness that raises to consciousness a *situation* that follows from something without bringing with it conventions or prophecies about what its ultimate shape as event will be. Episodes are defined first by causality, but their affective charge derives from confronting the enigma of their ultimate shape. Something has an impact: What will happen? I call this process the becoming-event of the situation. A situation usually gets its shape from the way that it resonates strongly with previous episodes, such as, in the case you offer, state-induced assassination, state- and media-orchestrated collective experience, popular imperialist revenge/repair fantasies, politicized erotophobia and so on. Insofar as it can be read through these other frames, the episode becomes part of a series and its danger to normative epistemology and affective habits (intuitions) is diminished, and people don't have to be too anxious or creative in their processing of it. In contrast, if a situation arises that feels like a massively genre-breaking one, then the situation can become the kind of event whose enigmatic shape repels being governed by the foreclosure of what has happened before. But there are genres of the unprecedented too, which is why the Badiouian visceralization of the event (we know a break when we feel it) probably involves a wishful relation to affective knowledge.

So, you are asking me, What is the event of bin Laden's assassination as seen through these media spectacles? How does the intensity of the spectacle and the violence/pleasure nexus of that

intensity provide a situation for the body politic that requires scrounging around for genres in the mass media and in the archive of politically saturated iconography? How does the national symbolic, with its flags and bromides, turn history into “symbolic event” in a way that protects the (affective) fantasy of the nation as a powerful anchor?

I keep thinking about Benjamin’s observation, in “A Short History of Photography,” that the real work of commentary and politics after photography is not the image itself but the process of captioning. I note that the newspapers fold captions into the image, the protesters wave flags and sloganize. It is as though the aim of a collective political event has to involve converging on a caption that converts a historical moment into an iconic event preserved from history’s contingencies, people’s memories, and ambivalence. (The counter-example could be Bush’s “Mission Accomplished” caption, which became a laughably failed attempt to convert a situation from vulnerability to historical dynamics into an event with “largely symbolic” status.) To become symbolic doesn’t mean to become “merely academic,” but rather to become explicitly saturated by fantasy as though the situation is autopoetic, naturally exemplary and self-evidently powerful.

Elsewhere I’ve called the war on terror the first war on an emotion.<sup>2</sup> This emotion (terror) has no shape and induces the paranoid style: there is a threat out there of which Americans should be terrified, and any exemplary embodiment of that threat in a person or a thing is only the tip of the iceberg, which has a potential underground range beyond imagination. The popular media–orchestrated pleasure in bin Laden as a figure at the head of power then brings us back to Foucault’s observations about our authoritarian longings, our desire for satisfaction in an image of sovereignty that, congealed in a person, can be intelligible and countered by an act of negating heroic agency. At the same time it was always clear that the retributive justice against bin Laden was not going to vanquish the movement he led and embodied. (Obama’s diffusive governing style, by the way, also induces in all kinds of people the desire for an authoritarian. I find that drive incredibly interesting. This points us once again to Theweleit.)<sup>3</sup>

So one thing is just to note how often the political sphere and the mass media act as though they have the power to make performative utterances about collective affect through phrases that claim already to express a new collectively held normative sense of the event. They reduce history to an episode in a patriotic situation comedy.

The second thing, clearly, that you're interested in, is the infantile reduction of power to appetite, to the scene of kill or be killed. The porn discovery had them dancing like elves. The discovery that bin Laden was an ordinary wizard after all, an ordinary man with sexual drives, produced so much virtue strutting! They hate us for our freedoms and we hate them for their pleasures. I was entirely unsurprised by the emergence of erotophobia as another diminishing tactic against the phantasmatic secretive monster that "Islamic terrorism" has become in the media. The widespread sarcastic discourse on heavenly virgins already predicted that. If it turns out that he has appetites at the seat of his programs and principles, then he's left the liberal realm of rights and the (civilized) human and deserves the murderous fate of the inhuman/all-too-human.

But it seems to me that there's another thing to open up here. I was surprised that your first question about political affect involved bin Laden's assassination, because it's had such little staying power—I know that was your point in part! It was an episode that arose, raised some poll numbers that then sank, and evaporated like Voldemort once the Horcruxes were destroyed. It will be available in the election season when Obama is reminding us that he was an authoritarian sovereign after all while he was also presiding over the intensified chaos of economic and culture wars. So its becoming-event remains open. That's in the nature of all events: they become dormant but remain resources in potential. Bin Laden's assassination had a place on a checklist of delayed retributive satisfactions that is now checked off, and we have moved on to other anti-authoritarian spectacles, from Qaddafi to Murdoch. But there will be sequels. Did you ask me to talk about this because you feel seasick from the trivializing ups and downs of mediated events that magnetize affect and orchestrate emotion while not getting at what's systemic about power? Or . . . ?

JG: Yes, in part, the succession of media-orchestrated events certainly has me reeling—most recently, I’d say, the rapid mediated transition from the disgust and Francophobia aroused by the DSK affair to the populist outrage against the “American justice system” inspired by the Casey Anthony verdict. It occurs to me as I write this that, by the time this interview is published, readers’ memory of these events will very likely be no more than a faint glimmer—but I suppose that further proves the point.

I think, however, that there is something special about the bin Laden assassination in that, to use your terms, one could *feel* the extent to which this “episode” was becoming an “event”—and in a very forced way. In part, I speak from personal experience—I remember having many a conversation about how one could and should react, critically, to bin Laden’s death without being unwillingly complicit in the construction of its event-hood. What was so interesting (and perhaps disturbing) about those conversations was the implication behind them: the imperative to adopt an affective stance, whatever it might be, that seems appropriate to the situation. Even among those more or less desensitized to media spectacle and relatively attuned to the conditions of possibility of media-orchestrated event-hood, it seemed like this imperative to react still had a firm grip.

One can see this, I think, in the affective backlash that occurred in the days following the news of his death. For example, the rapid circulation on *Facebook* of a (partially apocryphal) Martin Luther King Jr. quote condemning the hatred of one’s enemy and the celebration of his death.<sup>4</sup> Or the bevy of op-eds and blog posts debating whether it was morally justified and/or psychologically healthy to celebrate bin Laden’s death.<sup>5</sup> Again, certainly a mediated and perhaps orchestrated reaction, but also, I think, one that attests to the “enigma of [an episode’s] ultimate shape” that lends it its affective charge. How should we feel? Should we celebrate or should we mourn? Few seemed to be posing the question of whether we should care, or to what extent.

What do you make of these counter-reactions? Do they qualify as a kind of affective meta-discourse? Are they something akin to what you describe in *The Queen of America Goes to Washington*

*City* as a “national pedagogy” which seeks to figure out “how to represent what counts as patriotism and what counts as criticism to the public sphere”?<sup>6</sup>

My initial thought is that such reactions not only serve to catalyze the “becoming-event” of the situation but also constitute a “diminishing tactic” riddled with *ressentiment*. The media-orchestrated celebration, while generating the fantasy of retribution for physical vulnerability, also demonstrated the nation’s *affective* vulnerability and foregrounded, as you put it, the “violence/pleasure nexus” inherent in such a retributive fantasy. The war on terror, after all, has from its start not been short of its own erotics.<sup>7</sup> The risk of such jubilation is that it offers the nation a reflection of itself that is painfully close to the uncivilized, desiring body depicted in the “Osama bin Wankin” cover page. All the more need, then, to challenge the rhetoric of revenge with recourse to the decidedly *Christian* figure of MLK Jr. The desired result is to recuperate virtue and reinforce the image of a Christian nation, free from revenge fantasies, over against the violence- and pleasure-seeking body of the Islamic terrorist.

LB: You answered your own question beautifully. One really big difference between political institutions and people is that people are able to manage ordinary affective incoherence and disorganization with much grace as long as their anchors in the ongoing world or the ordinary feel sufficiently stable (my political translation of Klein’s good-enough mother: the good-enough anchor). We can bear a lot of wobble, but when the media and state-interested institutions orchestrate all kinds of situations as crises and as threats to the infrastructures that organize nextness and vague senses of the projected out future, anxiety levels rise that are not just about the singular situation but about ongoingness itself.

In the *Queen* I talk about this as the national production of collective screen memories—memories of an unbearable affect that get distorted into taking shape as memories of events that didn’t quite happen that or any other way. So it’s not just manifest patriotic ideology we’re talking about here, but also the ways in which what’s consoling at one level (deciding what to say about X or Y) does not necessarily put to rest the anxieties at the other level.

Massumi talks about this as the politics of fear, but it's hard because even for him the manifest event that organizes fear becomes the "fact" that organizes subjects itself. What I'm getting at is that being in discussion about how and whether to "care" about an event manifests already caring about something else, the *sense*, the affectivity of being-in-common.

The shaping of collective affect is therefore quite a different process than the orchestration of political emotion, with lots of convergences and parallel tracks at the same time. This raises other questions for us too, I think, about the formation of structures of feeling (the unstated residue of collective life, what I would call the affective commons) and the historicity of collective affect. Your interest really seems to be in how mainstream politics clogs the consciousness with situations that raise and shape anxiety levels by offering up the consolation of having an image captioned by an opinion. Your sense is that one becomes-citizen these days by exhausting (and therefore building) the muscle of opinion.

JG: That would certainly explain why mainstream news increasingly seems to be borrowing its calisthenics, if you will, from the world of talk shows. As a phenomenon which attempts to exhaust opinion in a public forum, the talk show seems to be a more "personal," and perhaps thus more effective, citizenship workshop. This leads me to the next bit from the archive, which refers to one particular "good-enough anchor," Oprah Winfrey.

The following video, an excerpt from *Good Morning America* entitled "Oprah's Last Show: Will Fans Become Depressed?" addresses the problem of "Empty Oprah Syndrome," the destabilizing effect of the loss of one such anchor.<sup>8</sup> This video evokes an observation you make in *The Female Complaint* in reference to the novels of Olive Higgins Prouty: "[W]hat makes women special and singularly women is the burden they bear of producing emotional clarity for others and protecting everyone's optimism for intimacy's potentially lifting effects"<sup>9</sup> Oprah, or at least her trademarked image, has carried the burden of both "producing emotional clarity" and maintaining a certain optimism among her national audience. The video glorifies this role through its deployment of a national trauma montage: "The Queen of Talk has outlasted four presi-



dents, played a critical role in electing a fifth, and has been a daytime constant through 9/11, a pair of wars, and a deep recession.” If Oprah can outlast the violence of history, the video seems to be saying, then so can we, her viewers.

It seems to me that Oprah has found her place in the national imaginary by cultivating an intimate public, by harnessing the power of what you just described as “the affectivity of being-in-common.” The video attests to that power by mimicking Oprah’s role and attempting to construct and then appeal to an Oprah-mourning public, even offering the caption-like consolation of “Empty Oprah Syndrome”: you are not alone in your loss—there’s even a label for what you are feeling! What’s more, viewers are invited to converge in public spaces to watch the final show, an opportunity to replicate (or even transcend) the feeling of virtual intimacy they have heretofore experienced watching the show in the privacy of their own homes.

My questions for you are the following: What is it about Oprah™ that makes her such a powerful anchoring force—at least among the viewership this video interpellates? In what ways does she serve as a contrast to the archive of violence the video evokes? If the video is correct in asserting that Oprah is “part of the national conversation,” what kind of conversation are we looking at in this example?

LB: This is a postmortem, because (perhaps in contrast to you) I think Oprah has diminished her brand: this says something about how situational are the local concentrations of any broader intimate public. Platforms for maintaining public intimacy are shifting all the time. The intimacy remains more content as it expands topics and expels inconveniences. Oprah thought she could port people over to her network and magazine, but both are failing, just as the film of *Beloved* failed, because she could not see that she was a convenience, a habit, the most recent vehicle for a platform of gendered intimacy that started in the 1830s. Now she’s just another sentimentalist. She’s Sara Josepha Hale, she’s Catherine Beecher. (If you don’t know who they are, that’s my point.) She seems to have forgotten that she was a commodity in an intimate public, a *maître d’* for that public, an orchestrator of an atmosphere, and not

really a revolutionary adviser—as bin Laden was. “Empty Oprah Syndrome” was an attempt to drum up an event that Oprah was orchestrating to say good-bye to herself.

The incoherence of the video you showed me says a lot about that—she’s called “our” ultimate girlfriend, a role model, an inspiration for living one’s best life, a visionary for the individual; she is hailed for expanding middlebrow taste practices to a formerly page-turner reading public by marketing more aesthetically demanding work that, for the most part, could always be read as sentimental. Her expansion of the sentimental to the middlebrow was a huge boost to literature and to women’s culture; this is why her brand threatened some of the authors it also sanctified. Oprah made everyone who identified her not only feel like a survivor, but like a sacred survivor. She blessed her subjects and their objects.

I imagine someone has made a claim that she contested the privatizing practices of neoliberalism by insisting that publics were necessary in order to repair the world. But I see her volunteer army (of many celebrity Scientologists, by the way, along with ordinary civilians) as precisely the Bushian safety net of private citizens volunteering for the social and gaining virtue points for it. Oprah’s sentimentality always abjures the political: always sees change as coming from within; always sees obstacles to change as internal wounds and not structural blockages. Seeing her own ascension as an allegory of what it’s possible for anyone to do—not seeing her story as an effect of civil rights and feminist struggles, as part of the media history of reality TV—she embodies the dark side of the intimate public, the side that wants to draw a hard line between the public and the political, between optimism and what happens with power. Her embrace of Obama was a risk that, I’ve read, didn’t pay off much: it was part of his own marketing as the Oprah of politics, the guy embodying what Paul Krugman calls “the cult that is destroying America,” the cult of the center that claims to be above, outside of, or not compromised by power.<sup>10</sup> Her reparativity merged with his . . .

JG: I find the parallels you’re drawing between Oprah’s and Obama’s brands of sentimentality really fascinating. Could you elaborate on that more?

LB: I think Obama deployed standard populist charisma tactics (a “bring it on” of fantasy projection) that sought to sublimate the antagonism between ordinary US class and kinship stories while possessing the superheroic courage to embody an optimistic vision that refuses to give in to realism—into what’s exhausting, broken, or seemingly impossible. But, like Oprah, he was Christian-reparative. He wanted to believe that through him we could dissolve affectively what’s antagonistic structurally and then bring politics to make structural what had been achieved in the “true feeling” knowledges, which makes him a classic sentimentalist. People who think Bill Clinton was and Barack Obama isn’t don’t know a thing about sentimentality or sentimental politics.

JG: And has Obama’s brand diminished in the same way as Oprah’s? Has the “local concentration” of affect, intimacy, and/or optimism completely shifted since the wave of vaguely conjured “hope” that (in part, at least) brought him into office?

LB: Now he’s about a politics of the less bad, just like ordinary Democrats. He’s lost magic the way anyone would who’s split differences in public and no longer were protected by the seductive enigma of potentiality, but of course as I type this I think of the myriad essays written daily that are trying to figure him out, trying to figure out whether he’s really liberal but playing with a poker face or really neoliberal and excited to blame his own conservatism on the Republicans. So he’s still enigmatic, because in the end people are just catching up to how toxic and self-canceling the concept of neoliberalism is and they sense that he embodies that self-cancellation. You *can’t be* a social liberal and an economic conservative: libertarian-like on the social issues but engineering the market to favor the entrepreneurial subject and calling those relations equally “free.” I think Obama always had merely the ordinary contradictions of a Clintonian third-way Democrat—and a pox on all that.

Americans, I believe, generally don’t know what to think about capitalism’s reparative capacity, or what else to think about it, so there’s rampant gaming the system, which in the end is the form of neoliberal sovereignty in which freedom comes to look like pragmatic desperation. That action of getting what one can because the other people are getting theirs, that action of thinking that

“fairness” in democracy equals no one having a cushion (and so claims on economic justice become special-interest claims rather than the claims any member of the body politic might make)—this kind of dark relationality comes out of political depression and an incapacity to think otherwise. Some are, never having been fully enfranchised, appropriately politically detached. Others, the politically depressed, thought that the exceptional expansion of proletarian, pink, and lower-white-collar incomes along with rights between 1950 and 1972 was really modernity at its core, and they can’t believe it was a blip in how capitalism extracts value from its subjects. Suffering from disbelief is a prime affect of the contemporary moment.

Miranda July’s *The Future* is all about this, as are many of the films discussed in *Cruel Optimism*: the impasse of the present presented as witnessing the end of a fantasy of the good life. The film was pretty underwhelming in its conception of character, but quite acute as a staging of the fact that it might not matter what individuals do, as conventions of meritocracy or intimate reciprocity have become exhausted. It doesn’t matter if we fix computers, buy trees, or teach little girls to dance: work has been destroyed and there’s nothing left to do but make signs pointing in some direction. It’s very hard to produce a satisfying aesthetic event about the drama of not mattering where not mattering is a general historical condition: it closes with a crying clown shrug, saying, we can’t save the world but we can find a waiting room in proximity to each other. The new Victorianism meets the new apocalypticism!

There’s a great scene in the film where the male lead says that we are in the moment between the building hit by the wrecking ball and the collapse of the building; the lovers’ resolution of the overwhelming aporia of this phase is to wait together in the present. They end not intersubjectively together, not sexually together, not really as lovers, even, but beings in the same room. Not building a life or relationality or pretending to build these, they are actively passive.

JG: If suffering from disbelief, together, is a prime affect of our times, how does this fit into the genealogy of the sentimental figure of the pained body/suffering citizen you have traced in your work? Has its status changed since you wrote *The Queen*? It seems to

still be in full swing on the right—we see plenty of it in Tea Party propaganda—but does it hold any effective place at all on the left?

LB: I would say that we still live in a trauma culture, but it's really a crisis culture borrowing trauma's genres to describe what isn't exceptional at all in the continuous production and breakdown of life. The people in *The Future* are having a historically general psychotic break. Outside of the film, watching people respond to the end of the good life fantasy, it's like being in my apartment on July 4, as I see fantasies bursting in this space and that, leaving people to wrestle with coming to terms, which in my work means coming to genres. Some people on the left especially, but also people who were never economically privileged or optimistic, insist that they never bought into the liberal vision that linked intimate and economic liveness and durability. They might not buy in, but they keep talking about others' investment (Žižek) . . . why? Because it matters to float magnets connecting the pragmatic to the phantasmatic, to create a dense enough collective subject that takes and imagines life in a new shape, a fairer one. So I would say that the booty in contemporary politics is still about whose suffering matters more, and, relatedly, what forms of repair the representation of such suffering would intend.

JG: I've sent you Justin Vivian Bond's song "The New Economy" (from the album *Dendrophile*), which, it's interesting to note, is actually a newly titled version of a previous song "The New Depression" from V's Pink Slip EP.<sup>11</sup> I wanted you to have a listen to this song, because, as one that calls out "bring on fantasy!" I think it recognizes this need to connect the pragmatic and the phantasmatic. You stated in a recent interview that you think that "the battle to be thought through and won is at the level of the imaginary," so I'm wondering what you make of the song's desire to think up "a new economy"—one that seems pretty based on sexual connection and not just vague proximity—in the context of the new normal.<sup>12</sup>

Along with that, the song raises some more questions for us about eventality, crisis genres, and political affect. I invite you to tease out whatever piques your interest about the song, but one thing that really strikes me about it is that it seems to be challeng-

ing not only how one is “supposed” to be feeling but also what one is supposed to be feeling *about*.

For one thing, an ambivalence of feeling manifests itself between the cynical *Schadenfreude* that brings about “glee” and the euphoric sense of revolutionary opportunity inherent in a world that comes “crashing down”; they create a unique blend that I think might best be described as a perverse apocalyptic optimism. This reminds me of a quote from a recent interview with Justin Vivian Bond, in which Bond recounts a conversation V had with Antony (of Antony and the Johnsons) and Tilda Swinton: “We were talking about how so much of the art in the nineties was apocalyptic. Kiki was very apocalyptic: Everyone was dying, our world was ending. Now everyone knows the world is ending—to do apocalyptic art just seems a little redundant. So Antony said the idea is to do art where we acknowledge that we’re standing on the precipice of hope. That really inspired me.”<sup>13</sup> In relation to this song, I have to ask: What would an optimism that is not cruel look like?

I think it’s also interesting that the song’s affects are generated, or generate themselves, out of the wake of an apocalyptic event or “crisis” that, at its heart, the song is also skeptical about. After all, as V says, “they never checked on me before.” In the quote above, Bond challenges the novelty of this “crisis,” drawing an eschatological genealogy back to the nineties. In addition, the song’s name change downgrades economic turmoil from exceptionality to the ordinary, to the “new normal.” So the song also prompts me to wonder how Left thought can find potential in crisis genres such as the financial crisis (“seize the moment” political rhetoric, for example) while also remaining appropriately dubious given eventhood’s propensity to function as, or be deployed as, a distraction from ordinary and ongoing violence.

LB: You’re asking lots of different things here. One thing has to do with the place of the seemingly exceptional event in the ongoing unraveling of “the new normal” (or: what’s the difference between a radical historical break and a perturbation?); another is about whether any optimism, including “perverse apocalyptic optimism,” is cruel (no, but you never know); a third is to riff on the

inevitably articulated relation of fantasy and action, especially in a transitional moment. I'm not that into close reading song lyrics as political theory, and you do a great job in re-creating the song as a form of revolt against this crisis moment, so I'm not sure what else to say. But why not, what's wrong with me?

They say it's the new depression, so why am I filled with glee?  
Everybody's coming down quickly:  
Now they can all join me. . . .  
Take what you need and give a little back, that's the new  
economy.<sup>14</sup>

In contrast to your enthusiasm for the song's realism about fantasy, I offer a different view, which is that its comic dirge holds out a pernicious pleasure. How do we distinguish between what Bond offers and what's offered as democracy in the emerging austere imaginary: the image of "new normal" democracy in which not only is everyone being *exposed* to the same economic and intimate volatility, but a being brought down to the same hard ground? What does it mean to take pleasure and comfort in a democracy of exposure and suffering, of contingency and bleakness? A democracy of loss in which "bring on fantasy!" produces the present as a comic version of a tragic political abandonment? Even if it's Justin Vivian Bond's hard ground—a better one than most, no doubt, because it doesn't hate sex, and people are smiling when they hit the ground—in the end this instance of the austere imaginary reproduces the very kinds of generosity deficit that come also from the populist right wing. I'm not saying they're the *same*, but I am seeing a trope emerge.

Bond's is an "enjoy your *ressentiment*" call to hands (not arms); it's *Schadenfreude*, as you say, but not really routed toward an image of mutual flourishing beyond the collection of self-pleasuring singularities: the "multitude" that's central to so much autonomist/neoliberal thought in the present emerges here in a strokefest. Just because someone in whom we take pleasure is saying it, is imagining V's own body as indexical rather than the erotophobic/disciplined body of the old normal, the substitution of jerking off as a

placeholder for social action marks the place where a political limit in conceiving collectivity is hit head/hard on.

So when V says “Give out just about everything; My body’s my economy. . . . So bring on some flight of fancy, being on a magic decree, bring on a high heeled tranny, bring on fantasy,” when V’s having a fantasy of bringing on V’s self, when the hard-on ground is really a ground, it’s funny and lovely, but I don’t see a satisfying new relationality here as you do. I see a snacktime moment where we look around and count the bodies. The words “Take what you need and give a little back, that’s the new economy” feel too like neoliberalism to me, even if it is ironic, or—whatever. Too close for comfort. Like the (over)present.

Now, having said that: of course, one purpose of political comedy in a transitional time is to make what’s unbearable bearable—bearable enough to think about it. Another reason is to laugh from within the spectacle of collective suffering to deny the beings in power satisfaction at their poisonous victory. So Bond refuses to allow the new economy, the new depression to rest as a tragic story. The rerouting of affect matters. One way to think about new genres is that they’re openings for making possible new kinds of affective collective ground: the motive to turn the disaster of state-capital-labor collapse into a comic convergence has even engendered our own conversation about how disaster so folds its way through the ordinary that it is impossible to distinguish the reproduction of life from the ways it wears out people and worlds. And yet that doesn’t mean that all production is “merely” tragic destruction, either.

One reason that this is a hard time is because the urgencies are short-term and long-term and the work of getting through the day (for humans) and the quarter (for capital) and the fiscal year (for states) takes up so much energy and creativity that it’s hard to find a reservoir in which to float and think big. It’s a time for the paradox of work: a prospect of a life of endless work (no retirement) and no work (no jobs). The absence of work expands the pressure of the terrain of labor (of the reproduction of life). Comic modes can provide a pleasure space for engaging and rerouting these prospects—this explains Žižek’s career as a theory-comedian. Such



floating of the absurd and the chronically distorted provides openings for new social imaginaries and new infrastructural trajectories. Comedy can, of course, also provide a space for foreclosing alternative imaginaries when its sarcastic purpose is to hand off shame and induce paralysis in the face of an unpragmatic desire. Bond's is a generous comedy. But one has to experience the stunning risk of the "now what?" And in these stark ages, a self-stroking not-quite-*jouissance* provides an interruption that can probably only point to the pleasure of other non-sovereignities to come that are not as bleak as the present one, even in its sexual adumbration.

JG: Your evocation of the "emerging normative austere imaginary" in our current context of recession brings to mind an observation that Sedgwick made in "Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading": "A disturbingly large amount of theory seems explicitly to undertake the proliferation of only one affect, or maybe two, of whatever kind—whether ecstasy, sublimity, self-shattering, *jouissance*, suspicions, abjection, knowingness, horror, grim satisfaction, or righteous indignation" (146).<sup>15</sup> Sedgwick formulated the idea of reparative reading as an antidote to a "generosity deficit" (to use your phrase) within queer theory and within the humanities as a whole. It seems to me that this lack of affective imagination in "theory" translates into or parallels the lack of a social-affective imaginary within the current recessionary public *esprit*, a lack that you also espy in Bond's song.

So, for my final question, I'm wondering what role you conceive affect theory playing in the face of an increasingly austere imaginary? Is the idea to identify and/or to proliferate a diversity of new affects that don't fit neatly into the same old boxes (e.g., *ressentiment*) or produce the same old outcomes? What role might affect theory play in the cultivation of "new kinds of affective collective ground"—especially without recourse to sentimentalist reparative fantasies?

LB: I don't think that Sedgwick would have equated reparativity with sentimentality. She saw sentimentality as tending toward foreclosure and homogenized attunement. In contrast, I always see the potential in sentimental attention in the way it does not require substantive *likeness* to repair a broken world but instead counts

on our fidelity to affective convergence, to returning to the situation at hand and cultivating an ethical practice with respect to that situation, a practice of attentive care against the world that engenders the destruction of its vital subjects. So I am not afraid of sentimentality—I don't think there's a successful politics devoid of its seduction to produce attachments before there is trust grounded in history. This is why sentimentality is a main historical artery for making affect worlds, worlds organized by the unsaid whose open secret pulsations allow tender gesture, glances, and what all else goes without saying to suffuse and destabilize the ordinary, to make new social arrangements, even when it's not being really revolutionary. Often it doesn't go beyond that ethics of return, which is tiring and disappointing; but I never take my modeling from the damaged versions of a good aspiration.

There is nothing austere about sentimentality. This is why we politically motivated agents are so attached, sentimentally, to solidarity, because solidarity is organized by a recognition of a problem that does not require us to line up affectively in relation to each other or to ourselves. Bound in the structure of solidarity, we need minimal affective likeness—we are free to be ambivalent about whole sets of things while attending to the transformation of the thing/scene/problem that has *brought us together*.<sup>16</sup> For us to cultivate new kinds of affective collective ground we have to embrace the sheer formalism of solidarity, the affective freedom to be different but mutual amid the risk-taking of changing structure through practice; because we, as workers for social change, have to fight the scary fight over what we'd be willing to lose in order to take the leap into the new social formations we want to bring into being.

But you were asking about what affect theory can do. At the moment of this interview, all over Europe and the United States, people are revolting against more loss in the face of the unequal distribution of vulnerability and exposure throughout capitalist class society. But they hit the wall, over and over, on imagining and being willing to risk making alternatives to the forms of flourishing that are normative within capitalism. Work and pleasure need reinvention. Crisis induces a need for a kind of radical life experimen-

tality, therefore, that also threatens the loss of even more material and fantasmatic ground. So we'll see if the counter-authoritarian affective motor can remain juiced while the bottom struggles to converge on what kinds of fairness and reciprocity ought to govern ordinary life, whether managed by the state or not.

Since affect is about *affectus*, about being affected and affecting, and therefore about relationality and reciprocity as such, affect theory is inevitably concerned with the analysis of collective atmospheres. It's not always enough (for my taste) about the kinds of structure that create biopolitical, class, and imperial misery, though, but not everyone has to have the same project. What kinds of world for mass thriving affect theory, or any theory, can *induce* is another question. The reason so many queer theorists are interested in it, I think, is because while one can't intend an affect, one can become attentive to the nimbus of affects whose dynamics move along and make worlds, situations, and environments. In attending to, representing, and standing for these alternative modes of being, we seek to provide new infrastructures for extending their potential to new planes of convergence. I hope!

## Notes

1. The cover can be viewed at <http://newyorkpost/archives/covers>; the *Post* declined permission for *Qui Parle* to reprint the image here.
2. Lauren Berlant, "The Epistemology of State Emotion," in *Dissent in Dangerous Times*, ed. Austin Sarat (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2005), 46–78.
3. Klaus Theweleit, *Male Fantasies*, 2 vols., trans. Stephen Conway and Erica Carter with Chris Turner (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989).
4. Megan McArdle, "Out of Osama's Death, a Fake Quotation Is Born," *Atlantic*, May 2, 2011, <http://www.theatlantic.com/national/archive/2011/05/out-of-osamas-death-a-fake-quotation-is-born/238220>.
5. Linton Weeks, "Is It Wrong to Celebrate bin Laden's Death?" May 2, 2011, <http://www.npr.org/2011/05/03/135927693/is-it-wrong-to-celebrate-bin-ladens-death>. See also John Blake, "Is It Morally Right to Celebrate bin Laden's death?" CNN's *Belief Blog*, May 2, 2011, accessed September

- ber 23, 2011, <http://religion.blogs.cnn.com/2011/05/02/is-it-morally-right-to-celebrate-bin-ladens-death>.
6. Lauren Berlant, *The Queen of America Goes to Washington City: Essays on Sex and Citizenship* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1997), 30.
  7. See Jasbir Puar, *Terrorist Assemblages: Homonationalism in Queer Times* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007).
  8. "Oprah's Last Show: Will Fans Become Depressed?" May 16, 2011, <http://abcnews.go.com/GMA/video/oprahs-show-fans-depressed-13612028>.
  9. Lauren Berlant, *The Female Complaint: The Unfinished Business of Sentimentality in American Culture* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008), 174.
  10. Paul Krugman, "The Cult That Is Destroying America," *New York Times*, July 26, 2011, <http://krugman.blogs.nytimes.com/2011/07/26/the-cult-that-is-destroying-america/>.
  11. To listen to the "New Depression," see Mx. Justin Vivian Bond's website, *Justin Bond Is Living*, at [http://justinbond.com/?page\\_id=5](http://justinbond.com/?page_id=5).
  12. Lauren Berlant, Gesa Helms, and Marina Vishmidt, "Affect and the Politics of Austerity," *Variant* 39–40 (Winter 2010): 3–6: 4.
  13. Carl Swanson, "The Story of V," *New York*, May 8, 2011, <http://nymag.com/arts/popmusic/features/justin-bond-2011-5/>.
  14. Justin Vivian Bond, "The New Economy," on *Dendrophile* (Whimsy Music BMI, 2011).
  15. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, "Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading, or, You're so Paranoid, You Probably Think This Essay Is about You," in *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003), 123–53, quotation on 146.
  16. See The Smiths, "Ask," on *Louder Than Bombs* (Sire, 1987).

