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'With Love from Band Aid': Sentimental exchange, affective economies, and popular globalism

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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses affective attachments to popular global imaginaries by examining the place of love in the popular humanitarianism associated with the 1984–85 music charity events Band Aid and Live Aid.

The paper offers a materialist reading of the charity spectacles that situates them within a popular culture of sentimentality engaged in making and imagining forms of global community through social practices of exchange. It draws on the feminist scholarship on sentimental cultures and their imbrication with social reform movements and commodity capitalism to show how Band Aid can be understood as part of a popular culture of sentimental exchange, in which famine relief images, stories, tears, money and goods were passed along in affective exchanges that also involved sentimental stories and personalized commodities and capital such as wedding rings, household furniture and allowances. The circulation of feeling, concretized in the exchange of goods and money, confirmed the social fantasy of global community, imagined through the terms of intimate love and familial gift exchange. When combined with local, national and international commodity markets that allowed information, goods and images to travel among strangers, global gift giving appeared to replace geopolitical alliances and financial interests with an open, barrier-free, affective economy of love and cooperation.

'With Love from Band Aid' was imprinted on ship bows, vehicle doors, bags of grain, and boxes of Oxfam biscuits sent to Ethiopia and Sudan in 1985 with the funds raised by the 1984–85 sales of the charity record of the British mega-group Band Aid, a collaboration of leading British pop stars, and the donations generated during the British, American and auxiliary performances at Live Aid, a globally televised, transnational concert.[1] As a generic slogan by affluent celebrities stamped on mass-produced commodities, Band Aid's declaration of love can appear empty and trite from the standpoint of critical distance. It seems to exemplify the hollowness of commodity culture, converting genuine feeling into banal sentiment, engaging in a self-indulgent politics of pity for stereotyped others, and exploiting death and disaster as yet another marketing opportunity.[2] These charity mega-events have been vigorously condemned for their role in promoting racialized representations of Africans as passive and needy victims needing to be saved by caring white development workers (van der Gaag and Nash, 1987; Benthall, 1993; de Waal, 1997; VSO, 2002). And yet they function as cultural touchstones within the Anglo-American world for the potent possibilities that might be found in the politicization of popular music and global cooperation, as shown by their regular commemoration in events such as Live 8 in 2005 and Live Earth in 2007 and in annual Christmas-time radio play of Band Aid's single 'Feed the World.'[3] Given the role Band Aid seems to have played in launching the present-day deep involvement of the culture and celebrity industries with charity, humanitarianism and development (see King, 2006; Littler, 2008; Brockington, 2009;

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[1] As a focal point and distinguishing mark, the 'With Love from Band Aid' slogan figures prominently in the television reports of Band Aid's relief contribution. Vehicles, grain bags and other aid objects with the slogan are featured in these UK television programs: 'Food and Trucks and Rock 'n' Roll' [1985], included in Disc 4, Live Aid, (2004) [DVD]. Toronto: Warner Music Canada; 'And Tonight Thank God It's Them Instead of You: A Tube Special Report,' *The Tube*, Channel Four, 27 Dec 1985; 'Band-aid Relief,' *News At Ten*, *ITV Late Evening News*, ITV, 26 April 1985: 20:00; and 'Band Aid Story (The),' Channel Four. 19 December 2004.

[2] See Boltanski (1999) and Chouliaraki (2006) on the politics of pity.

[3] Robertson (2010: 76), for example, notes how Band Aid's globalist single was played widely during the humanitarian response to the 2006 Asian tsunami, which occurred during the Christmas season.

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Kapoor, 2013), closer attention to the particular nature of its imbrication of humanitarian sentiment, globalism, and commodity culture is warranted.

I propose here that new insights into this globalism–humanitarianism-commodity nexus can be gained by attending to the place of love in this popular culture phenomenon. To take seriously Band Aid's 'with love' slogan is to recognize how the music charity—and associated events—situated itself within the realm of sentimental gift exchange, an affective social practice and genre associated with familial and romantic intimacy, as a means to address the world. My purpose is not to offer some new, more palatable version of cosmopolitanism, nor to use the label sentimentalism to dismiss popular movements. Rather I attend closely to the affective narratives of Band Aid humanitarianism by drawing on the rich feminist scholarship on sentimental cultures and their imbrication with social reform movements and commodity capitalism. Following a feminist cultural studies methodology, I offer a materialist reading of the charity spectacles by situating them within a popular culture of sentimentality engaged in making and imagining forms of global community through social practices of exchange.

1. Imagined worlds of love

In his classic text on the nation as imagined community, Benedict Anderson (2006) emphasizes the place of love in national identifications. To understand national belonging, he argues, it is not enough to examine the externalization of others; it is also important to 'explain the *attachment* that peoples feel for the inventions of their imaginations' (141, italics in original). In her trilogy on national sentiment, feminist literary critic Lauren Berlant (1991, 1997, 2008) examines in detail the affective attachments subjects develop for the American nation, pointing to how collective political existence is organized around desire and fantasy, much like—and often *through*—the mass-market cultures of soap opera, sentimental film, and romance fiction, all of which operate in the register of love. She argues that 'citizens formulate the nation as an object of idealized love—this is one of Benedict Anderson's main aims, to reestablish the genuineness of the utopian promise that characterizes the experience of the national' (1991: 28). An affective attachment to the nation is not guaranteed by citizenship alone; rather, nationality comes to be felt, internalized, and understood by way of aesthetic and affective modes and practices: 'national subjects…share not just a history, or a political allegiance, but a set of forms and the affect that makes these forms meaningful' (Berlant, 1991: 4). To understand and contest the appeal of populist visions of the nation, Berlant suggests, we should study the cultural forms through which national love is cultivated and shared.

The extensive scholarship on national imaginaries has been complemented by attention to transnational attachments and identities (Appadurai, 1996; Robbins, 1999; Honig, 2001; Gandhi, 2006). However, there is still relatively little analysis of the affective modes and practices of globalist imaginaries, and, hence, what their role might be in buttressing and legitimizing various forms of transnational politics, governance and action.[4] As Bruce Robbins (1999) explores in *Feeling Global*, the possibility that the world might act as a site of passionate attachment and identification remains in doubt, even though the nineteenth century print capitalism which Anderson (2006) associated with the emergence of nations as imagined communities has globalized into twenty-first century digital and electronic capitalism. Unlike cosmopolitanism, which has ethical connotations, feeling 'global' remains suspect because the hubris to presume to know, speak for, or access 'the globe' as if a monolithic unity obscures the partialness of the perspective (Haraway, 1991: 183–201; Robbins, 1999: 3; Breckenridge et al. 2002). Anna Tsing (2005), however, argues for an understanding of globalism as the social, affective or financial investment in acting and belonging at the scale of a globe, an imagined scale of heterogeneous and contested action that is materialized in localized sites through supporting institutions, much like the nation-state. The imagining, or 'conjuring', of the global as a fantasy or 'dream space,' Tsing (2005: 57, 86) suggests, is a crucial component of many kinds of transnational projects: a means by which local environmental struggles piece together counter-hegemonic narratives as well as the way transnational corporations attract capital investment in localized extraction projects. To understand how global dreams conjure various actions into existence, it is important to grasp the appeal and meanings of popular globalisms. Robbins (1999: 16) insists that 'global culture is ordinary,' and I complement his analysis by taking up the case of Band Aid to examine how global *love*, too, is ordinary. Indeed, it is its ordinariness—its articulation in sentimental terms by way of commodity culture—that masks the significance of its ubiquitous presence, since this genre (like the charity rock ballad) is disparaged as a marker of feminized, middlebrow taste (see Bourdieu, 1984; Wilson, 2007; Berlant, 2008).

Band Aid scholarship largely oscillates between two positions, both well reflected in a 2005 discussion by leading music critics, musicians and activists on its legacy and the type of mega-event charity concerts it spawned (see Garofalo, 2005). On one side is the condemnation of the commodification of compassion and depoliticization of famine in its generic commercialized sound and celebrity marketing (Frith, 1985; Garofalo, 1992; Hague et al. 2008; Kooijman, 2008); on the other side is the effort to grasp and emulate its popularization strategies. Neal Ullstead (1987) and Stuart Hall (1988), for example, saw in Band Aid, Live Aid, and Sport Aid (a transnational charity run held in 1986), the political potential latent within youth and popular music cultures. For Hall (1988), Band Aid's ability to 'mobilize new constituencies' not traditionally associated with either the political left or with aid, development or charity, its confrontation with a complacent British conservative government, and its cosmopolitan focus during a period of heightened British nationalism demonstrated the possibility for a broad-based social commitment to global equality and justice (253). Although skeptical of its 'hype, glitter' and universalist claims, Garofalo (1992: 29) similarly suggests Band Aid is significant as a participatory mass cultural phenomenon that created new audiences and modes of music activism. Seth Hague et al. (2008), on the other hand, contrast Band Aid with the 1970s punk-era Rock Against Racism to argue that Band Aid was 'antipolitical,' 'individualist,' and 'entrepreneurial' in its musical sensibilities, subsuming music to its marketability (9). Louise Davis (2010) condemns Live Aid and Live 8 as forms of 'celebrity profiteering through activism' that trade in imperialist stereotypes of Africa, but concedes that they provide a means to 'participate as members of a global community' (115).

Priyamvada Gopal (2006), in a more nuanced historical materialist analysis, traces in the lead-up to the 2005 Live 8 concert the re-emergence of a Victorian discourse of moral empire about Africa, coupled with a neo-liberal agenda to reduce barriers to capital, in the convergence of state, media, cultural institutions and activist interests, with overlapping audiences constructed by way of television specials, coffee table books, policy announcements, NGO campaigns, arts events, and live event media coverage. In pointing to the resonances with Victorian imperialist charity endeavours, Gopal (2006) casts doubt on the rhetoric of 'justice' used by Live 8

[4] I follow Robbins (1999) and Tsing (2005) in using the term global, rather than cosmopolitan, precisely to denote a universalist rather than comparative sentiment.