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## Affective Exchange: Performing Compassion and the Political Economy of Intimate Publics

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This paper employs an interdisciplinary approach to an investigation of the term “compassion” as an affect in constant social circulation, which is experienced through an affective exchange. The author draws upon the work of Slavoj Žižek, Guy Debord, Kathleen Stewart, and Lauren Berlant to examine the various levels at which compassion is exchanged and its initial affective impulse, from body to body (most commonly associated with compassion’s “emotional” potential) to the exchange between wallet and hand (compassion’s unwavering potential for capital). As a result, the author argues for a deeper understanding of compassion as an affective exchange with a common trajectory that aligns and reproduces similar performances on various stages. By putting in conversation the performances documented from a simple subway encounter, a concert dance performance, a video installation, and arguably America’s most watched stage at the time, the 2008 Presidential election, the author considers the performative potential of compassion and the repercussions it yields.

compassion | affect | performance |  
intimacy | politics | action

### Introduction

I begin with an account of how I start my day — the experience of stepping onto the 6-Train platform to be confronted by the young man with no legs, who balances on the palms of his hands at the bottom of the steps to the train bound for Downtown, a cup of money hanging by a chord around his neck. We lock eyes for a moment and something suddenly stirs inside my body causing me to reach down into my pocket and offer him money. Flaring in my mind is a memory from many years earlier of a time when I had broken my ankle and was forced to navigate through the city alone, unable to walk comfortably. My knowledge of the young man is visual — I understand him as a body that does not square with the normative standards and model representations I had long been taught to privilege in Western society.

I forge a relationship with him through an offer of money, attempting to “make better” his suffering, which I had no right to assume, by causing my own wallet to suffer a loss. I pull out the money on the condition that he has no legs and offer it to him before I can begin to think about the physical implications of not having legs could have on anatomical, sexual, and banal aspects of daily life. As the train moves away from the platform, I do not immediately put a word to this exchange or my actions, but I understand I would not have acted the way I had if his static presence had not assaulted my senses as I moved silently with my eyes open to get from point A to point B in my daily commute. I make eye contact with others on the train who had offered him money while waiting on the platform, and it is though we formed a little club of “carers.” We shared an experience without having to actually communicate, developing a

fictionally intimate public with intentions of “better world-making,” rooted in mass-mediated representations of normative standards for individual bodies and capital production. Upon reflection, I can give the name to what we each had and shared as compassion.

### To Begin, Again

Compassion, I argue, is a “gray” term that carries religious, moral, and political connotations. A survey of relevant definitions from the OED and MWD offer varying definitions from “sympathetic consciousness of others’ distress together with a desire to alleviate it”<sup>1</sup> to “fellow-feeling” and “sympathy,”<sup>2</sup> while also providing the etymology of compassion as a 14<sup>th</sup> century French word that comes from the late-Latin *compassio*, which means to “suffer with” and was once used as a verb, an action.<sup>3</sup>

From George W. Bush’s com-passionate conservative at the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century and Lauren Berlant’s concept of “withholding” as a result, compassion is often discussed or mentioned as a pedagogic instruction — something to be or do.<sup>4</sup> In the following discussion, I shall add to existing discourse on compassion, troubling this existence of actions or instructions that prompt the proclamation of “compassion” as a term. I want to think about it as an affect that is in a constant state of flux as it is passed or shared from body to body through a series of efforts that are given no name in the process. Compassion is not given meaning or verbalized until it is experienced and best understood through an affective exchange with the following trajectory:

Forming a relationship (temporally, very quick) between two bodies that is an unnamed sensation or intensity — achieving a shared experience that plays with memory — acting “for the better” under constraints of normativity — “showing” through contributing capital — locating other bodies in space who “show” in similar ways<sup>ii</sup>

The 6-Train experience serves as motivation for the above analysis of an affective exchange that is retroactively named compassion — something, as affect theorist Kathleen Stewart would say, that “catch[es] people up in something that feels like *something*”<sup>4</sup> and is later articulated. The insight into the trajectory of this exchange is formed from an ensemble of research into the genealogy of the term compassion in the fields of performance studies, political

<sup>1</sup> Merriam Webster. Springfield, MA: Encyclopedia Britannica, s.v. “Compassion.”

<sup>2</sup> Oxford English Dictionary. Oxford: Oxford University Press, s.v. “Compassion.”

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Kathleen Stewart, *Ordinary Affects* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007), 10.

science, sociology, criminal justice, and psychology, some of which will be explicated further.<sup>5</sup> Through such work, I posit that compassion is an affective *exchange* within an emotional economy that yields political insight and rapidly produces what Lauren Berlant calls intimate publics, “[imagined] alternative environments where authenticity trumps ideology, truths cannot be concealed, and communication feels intimate, face-to-face,”<sup>6</sup> through performance.

As an affective exchange, compassion affects and is performed in the way that is similar to Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s concept of performatives, which she suggests are in the neighborhood of J. L. Austin’s performative utterances, but “offer some new conceptual tools for moving back and forth between speech act theory and dramaturgical performance” by thinking of performativity as spatialized and local with rhetorical force.<sup>7</sup> The language and gestures that encourage the affective exchange of compassion will be discussed and analyzed in relation to Sedgwick’s work. This investigation argues that this thinking of compassion, informed by Guy Debord’s theory on performance and spectacles, Slavoj Žižek’s thoughts on consumerism and capitalism, Lauren Berlant’s writing on cruel optimism, and Sarah E. H. Moore’s writing on compassion and ribbon wearing, is most poignantly experienced in the political sphere (the world of U.S. national politics) and is the conduit through which the frenzied election process in the United States circulates and persists.

In an effort to articulate this idea, my own experience of and reaction to the 2008 election of President Barack Obama will be analyzed, retroactively, in relation to the affective exchange of a choreographed dance performance. Such a move attempts to make visible the performance of active spectatorship each election year and those moments in between — the theatrical and quotidian are practice for the political stage. The paper will build in this manner by locating this affective exchange in the following performance sites: Monica Bill Barnes’s “This Ain’t No Rodeo,” Barack Obama’s speech “Don’t Tell me Words Don’t Matter,” and will conclude with a site that puts the theatrically choreographed and politically choreographed in conversation — Liz Magic Laser’s “I Feel Your Pain,” to end with the question: what happens when this affective exchange is considered retroactively and presented directly to an audience as injurious sensations that align and re-generate?

<sup>5</sup> See note ii.

<sup>6</sup> Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011), Nook version, 227.

<sup>7</sup> “The perperformative is ordinary language under the Wordsworthian or Cavellian understanding that the most ordinary things for language to be are complex, heterogeneous, reflective, mobile, powerful, and even eloquent.” Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003), Nook version, 79 and 86.

## Notes on Primary Terms

My use of the term and theory of affect draws upon Brian Massumi’s concept elaborated in his introduction to Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari’s *A Thousand Plateaus*.<sup>8</sup> Since this paper locates these classifications in everyday, lived experience, my analysis of compassion as the particular affective exchange outlined above is driven by the work of Kathleen Stewart on ordinary affects.<sup>9</sup> Affect is a topic in academia with various key researchers that drive research within the fields of affect theory and performance studies.<sup>iii</sup> This investigation takes that into account and chooses to put in dialogue the works of Massumi and Stewart, to put forth my own understanding that affect is a pre-personal intensity, always circulating between bodies and invades to catch people up in “something”<sup>10</sup> those bodies cannot yet articulate. The term affective exchange is crafted from this understanding to posit compassion as an affect that exists in a public, social, and capitalist world in which interaction with others is un-avoidable.<sup>iv</sup>

## Why Compassion and Intimacy?

Lauren Berlant’s most recent text *Cruel Optimism* raises novel questions about affect, Americans’ ambient citizenship, and the current disgruntled state of the union among contemporary “mass mediated intimate publics.”<sup>11</sup> Most pertinent to Berlant’s analysis is her correlation between the formation of intimate publics within the United States of America and the collective desire for the political. She rightfully offers,

Intensely political seasons spawn reveries of a

<sup>8</sup> “Affect/Affectation. Neither word denotes a personal feeling (sentiment in Deleuze and Guattari). L’affect is an ability to affect and be affected. It is a prepersonal intensity corresponding to the passage from one experiential state of the body to another and implying an augmentation or diminution in that body’s capacity to act. L’affection is each such state considered as an encounter between the affected body and a second, affecting, body (with body taken in its broadest possible sense to include “mental” or ideal bodies).” Brian Massumi, “Notes on the Translation and Acknowledgments” in *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* by Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari (Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), xvi.

<sup>9</sup> “Ordinary affects are the varied, surging capacities to affect and to be affected that give everyday life the quality of a continual motion of relations, scenes, contingencies, and emergences. They’re things that happen. They happen in impulses, sensations, expectations, daydreams, encounters, and habits of relating, in strategies and their failures, in forms of persuasion, contagion, and compulsion, in modes of attention, attachment, and agency, and in publics and social worlds of all kinds that catch people up in something that feels like something.” Stewart, 10.

<sup>10</sup> See notes 4 and 9.

<sup>11</sup> Berlant, 232.

different immediacy. People imagine alternative environments where authenticity trumps ideology, truths cannot be concealed, and communication feels intimate, face-to-face . . . . In an intimate public one senses that matters of survival are at stake and that collective mediation through narration and audition might provide some routes out of the impasse and the struggle of the present, or at least some sense that there would be recognition were the participants in the room together . . . . You need just to perform audition, to listen and to be interested in the scene's visceral impact.<sup>12</sup>

The desire to imagine this space is, as Berlant, says, "cruel optimism," which allows civilians to find various ways to feel political on a horizontal plane.<sup>13</sup> She states, "Despite an awareness that the normative political sphere appears as a shrunken, broken, or distant place of activity among elites, members of the body politic return periodically to its recommitment ceremonies and scenes. *Voting is one thing; collective caring, listening, and scanning airways, are others.*"<sup>14</sup> She discusses this desire for the political and the creation of these intimate public spaces as ambient citizenship, in which community members can freely come and go.<sup>15</sup> Yet, Berlant acknowledges the repeated pull of a more "intimate sociality," in which engaging in the political is "never fundamentally passive or superficial."<sup>16</sup> This is true not only in the most basic political participation — the voting and collective caring — but all attempts to move through a social world in a way that feels less solitary.

In reflecting on my interaction on the 6 Train, the prospect of ambiance does not register because the trajectory of compassion — the affective exchange — can only be affirmed when the action produced (the giving of the money and the location of other "carers") is considered and ruminated over retroactively. There is nothing that is truly passive, which Berlant posits above. Putting the trajectory of compassion as an affective exchange in dialogue with Berlant's articulation of intimate publics attempts to locate the consequences of the affective exchange in American mass-mediated society. The desire to "show" compassion and locate others who "show" (the club of "carers") within capitalist society is a crucial component to the formation of these spaces of public intimacy entangled with notions of authenticity and meaning.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid, 227, 230, 231.

<sup>13</sup> Berlant defines cruel optimism as "a relation of attachment to compromised conditions of possibility whose realization is discovered either to be impossible, sheer fantasy, or too possible, and toxic." Ibid, 30.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid, 232. Emphasis added.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid, 231.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

## Spectacles

In a society whose key concepts and values are disseminated, consumed, and mediated through powerful mass media filters, modernity allows for various instances of sensation and impulse in which citizens are caught up in the trajectory described above that in the present feels like "something,"<sup>17</sup> and is later named compassion. As Guy Debord asserts in the opening thesis to *Society of the Spectacle*, "In societies where modern conditions of production prevail, all of life presents itself as an immense accumulation of spectacles. Everything that was directly lived has moved away into a representation . . . . The spectacle is not a collection of images, but a social relation among people, mediated by images."<sup>18</sup> Within this accumulation of spectacles, affect is constantly present. As Kathleen Stewart observes, "everyday life is a life lived on the level of surging affects, impacts suffered or barely avoided. It takes everything we have. But it also spawns a series of little somethings dreamed up in the course of things."<sup>19</sup> Using his spectacle as the setting in which to examine the sensations exchanged, the trajectory of compassion occurs within and because of a prescribed, normative ontology disseminated through the representations of which Debord describes.

Interactions such as the one described on the 6-Train platform partly occur in an effort, as Slavoj Žižek asserts, "to avoid becoming a passive observer."<sup>20</sup> Instead, according to Žižek, "We engage in obsessive activities, recycling paper, buying organic food, whatever, just so that we can be sure we are doing something, making our contribution."<sup>21</sup> This impulse to do something and make a contribution is active in regards to a "making better" substantiated by the spectacle's accumulation of images — representations that repeatedly affirm a normative standard: a *working* body with two arms and two legs, and the current push for a green planet where everyone buys locally grown produce.<sup>22</sup>

This drive to contribute is built into capitalist economy as Žižek explains in his "Starbucks Logic." The entrance of each Starbucks Coffee Shop boasts anecdotes about the company's investment (both fiscally and emotionally) in the growth of populations from foreign countries, most of which produce the coffee Starbucks sells.<sup>23</sup> In the images of bare-foot children holding Starbucks cups, the message disseminated is, "true our coffee is more expensive, but one

<sup>17</sup> see note 4.

<sup>18</sup> Guy Debord, *Society of the Spectacle* (Detroit: Black and Red, 1967, reprint 1983). thesis 1, thesis 4.

<sup>19</sup> Stewart, 14.

<sup>20</sup> "Slavoj Žižek: The Delusion of Green Capitalism," uploaded on April 20, 2011 by ForaTV, [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yzcfsq1\\_bt8](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yzcfsq1_bt8).

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> see note ii.

<sup>23</sup> "Slavoj Žižek: The Delusion of Green Capitalism."

cent from every coffee goes for Guatemala children, five cents goes for water, another amount goes for blah, blah, blah.”<sup>24</sup> This type of branding is a response to consumerists’ suffering — their “feeling bad” about consumerism and desperately trying to remain consumers while also masquerading as socially conscious and entirely ethical beings.<sup>25</sup>

Though the customers are largely contributing to a multi-million dollar American corporation, this branding makes the purchase, as Berlant says, feel authentic and removed from ideology,<sup>26</sup> reminding the customers of instances in which they have been “helped” and relishing in the opportunity to offer the same endowment. However, such a moment of seemed authenticity is still a relationship rooted in normative attempts to “make better;” imagined reciprocity that, such as on the 6 Train, is cultivated in order to *get through* the day.

“The Starbucks Logic,” according to Zizek, attempts to make life for ethical consumerists easy: “At Starbucks you can remain just a consumerist, because your altruistic solidarity is included in the price. The belief is that in buying we are no longer just consuming a product, we are simultaneously doing something meaningful. Demonstrating our capacity for care and global awareness, participating in a noble large collective project.”<sup>27</sup> Although appreciatively snide, Zizek’s assessment offers insight into the performative potential of compassion and the intersections between affect and capital in the United States.

By signifying an intention to care through a purchase, the cup of coffee is transformed from Western privilege and liberal guilt into an affective exchange. Not singular, the purchase initiates the buyer into a group of like-minded individuals, as well as Starbucks, that continues to inspire even more conscious consumers through each dollar accumulated. The coffee cup purchase and the dropping of a coin on the 6-Train are always mediated through representations that, as Stewart says, catch people up in that “something” and then cause action. These interactions may seem to be one-sided expressions of privilege and liberal guilt, but in that moment of being caught up, the relationship that is formed is reciprocal — as much as I was attending to the fiscal struggles of the man on the 6-Train platform, he was attending to my desire to engage in or encounter noble, “meaningful”<sup>28</sup> purchases, or interactions, that feel “intimate.”<sup>29</sup>

There is no more exemplary site of Debord’s spectacle — a life lived through representations — and Zizek’s notion of buying into this spectacle for personal relief than within a modern theater setting. In late 2009, my friend and roommate

enthusiastically recounted a prior experience of attending an evening-length performance choreographed by Monica Bill Barnes. Her exact words were “I felt as if this woman had lived my exact life and was fighting for me. I want to see everything done by her, take her classes, be a part of her work.”<sup>30</sup> I missed this particular performance (though I had seen Bill Barnes’s work on previous and then future occasions), so my friend’s account of the evening was intended to serve as a review, an attempt to re-capture in words the performance I’d missed and could never re-live. However, instead of providing a kind of play-by-play, expressed in a cluster of registers (i.e. standard English, classical ballet, modern dance, jazz . . .) what unfolded was my friend pledging her allegiance to Bill Barnes as a working artist through an abridged account of the choreography effortlessly intertwined with her own life story.

“This Ain’t No Rodeo”<sup>31</sup> is comprised of six solos (all performed by Bill Barnes) that run interference with or are presented by the performance of a very enthusiastic ballerina outfitted in a Romantic tutu, pointe-shoes, and white face make-up. Slightly to the left of center stage is a wooden stage in miniature with gold wings and red curtains from which both Bill Barnes and the ballerina exit and enter. The piece begins with the ballerina entering through the tiny stage and walking into the audience. She comments on their attire — “Everybody wore jeans mostly . . . Well, that’s ok! I just feel a bit over dressed . . .” — says hello, asks how they are doing, and is sure to make eye contact as she weaves through the seats, as well as when she stands center stage.<sup>32</sup>

She smiles wistfully and conveys her excitement through classic ballet pantomime until she gambols over to the mini-stage on the tips of her toes and executes a cambre that also functions to pull back the curtain and reveal Bill Barnes covering her face with a bouquet of flowers. As the opening chords of The Beatles “Why Don’t We Do It in the Road” fill the theater, Bill Barnes walks out of the miniature stage and onto the larger one. She stares down the audience and then abruptly turns left releasing the bouquet to the ground. She opens her arms to the side as if she was offering a hostile welcome and then erupts into movement that is equal parts angry, smug, and determined. Bill Barnes’s choreography includes gestures that mimic fist fighting, but her punches are jerky, her posture too hunched, and her face transforms into a lopsided smirk. It is as if she is committing to a Robert DeNiro impression she knows is going to be terrible.

<sup>30</sup> Olivia Anne Warren, interview by Amanda DiLodovico, March 12, 2012, original subject matter discussed in 2009. The reaction to Barnes belongs to Warren. Descriptions of the “This Ain’t No Rodeo and analysis in relation to Warren’s reaction belong to the author.

<sup>31</sup> “Monica Bill Barnes Dance Performance,” uploaded on Sep. 17, 2009, [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=\\_Qitetf7f8Q](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_Qitetf7f8Q). Portions of the performance I discuss can be watched here if desired.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> see note 6.

<sup>27</sup> “Slavoj Zizek: The Delusion of Green Capitalism.”

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

<sup>29</sup> see notes 6 and 12.

"This Ain't No Rodeo" operates as a character study of six different women — always fighting for something and receiving a laugh in return. The second solo is prompted by the ballerina arriving to place a crown atop Bill Barnes's head. Dwarfed by the ballerina's size, Bill Barnes is no longer liberated. Instead she takes on the demeanor of a tomboy being told to stop playing in the mud and put on a dress. The second phrase, in terms of steps, is identical to the first, but is performed as a foreign agent. The crown gives an instruction of how to move, and forcibly alters the audience's reaction to the ballerina and eventually the characters portrayed by Bill Barnes. The final solo sees Bill Barnes in a polka dot nightie and tube socks thrashing her body to the sounds of Janis Joplin as the ballerina struts around the stage carrying a large sign that reads "Sad Part."<sup>33</sup>

Bill Barnes's choreography is keenly aware that people are watching and intends to interact with them as much as possible — on several occasions the ballerina would strut around the stage on her toes, asking the audience to sing with her, applaud her, and laugh with her through gestures. Juxtaposed with Bill Barnes's constant fighting that, in the moment, can only be met with a laugh, the sensations are overwhelming. As a woman and a dancer, these instances of fighting — to be taken seriously, to be more than a perceived notion of myself — allow compassion to invade.

I am reminded of my own past experiences, from fighting moments to encounters with the music Bill Barnes moves to, and am compelled to write about all of it here, making her constant "fighting" worthwhile. For my friend, not only did she align herself with Bill Barnes by physically being in attendance, contributing to the funding of Bill Barnes choreography, finding camaraderie with other Bill Barnes supporters, and gaining leverage in a small dance community, but she produced an action through the above utterance and became, at least for the purposes of this project, a part of the work.<sup>34</sup> DeBord describes Western society as one that moves through representations, mediated images, and for the spectator, "his own gestures are no longer his but those of another who represents him."<sup>35</sup> For my friend, Bill Barnes's presence onstage represented her own story — making her plight visible and memories shared to such an extent that she could confidently profess Bill Barnes knew her, was her — a relationship so connected, lived experiences seemed shared.

The initial reaction of my friend borders on the line of empathy, as written about by dance scholar Susan Leigh Foster, but exceeds the exchange she posits in her text

*Choreographing Empathy: Kinesthesia in Performance.* Foster presents empathy as an experience felt in a theater, in which a bourgeoisie audience could not only sense, but also physically understand a population, explaining, "Empathy consisted in the act of reproducing in one's mind the kinesthetic images of the other, images that synthesized physical and emotional experience . . . . Instead of casting one's self into the position of the other, it became necessary to project one's three-dimensional structure into the energy and action of the other."<sup>36</sup>

This empathy was akin to knowledge production, aligning a necessary interaction with other bodies and advancement in the sciences that altered prior notions of what a body is and can do.<sup>37</sup> Foster's text describes kinesthetic experience that is confined to a theater space and is rooted in learning about an "other" within a fixed social stratum. Currently, in the Western society where the present investigation is occurring, the stratification is more horizontal, or at least it is believed to be. My friend's experience, as well as my own interaction on the 6-Train, was not about learning something new. Rather, those moments were reactions to representations with which we were already familiar, and locating ourselves within them to affirm the spectacle, but also make it feel authentic, achieving an intimacy that had futurity: return to the space, align with a choreographic idea, contribute and form a group of supporters.

The act of turning this something that caught her into a voiced acknowledgment and plan of action (she even moved to write a letter to Bill Barnes)<sup>38</sup> is the affective exchange of compassion — both women, my friend and Bill Barnes, gained opportunities for more meaningful and intimate interactions in a mass mediated intimate public for which Bill Barnes' music and costume choices resonated deeply with her audience. This exchange rests upon a performance precedence set by mother of modern dance, choreographer Martha Graham. *Lamentations*, a solo piece originally danced by Graham, displays the dancer, usually a woman, confined inside of a pliable fabric sack that resembles a cylindrical tube with openings at both ends.<sup>39</sup> The costume covers the dancer from head to ankle, and there are moments when the top opening of the sack is pulled forward and down by both arms so the dancer's face, neck, and chest are visible. Seated on a bench for the piece's entirety, the

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

<sup>34</sup> I read Sedgwick's crafting of periperformatives to include all utterances and words that surround the Austinian performative, such as "I do." I take my friend's utterance as a periperformative that exists locally around "I do." In her vocal response to Barnes, she became a part of the piece. Sedgwick, 77-80.

<sup>35</sup> DeBord, thesis 30.

<sup>36</sup> Susan Leigh Foster, *Choreographing Empathy: Kinesthesia in Performance* (London: Routledge, 2011), 128-9.

<sup>37</sup> Advances in science garnered "a new awareness of the experience of the observer, fueled by new discoveries of neuromuscular organization," which "promoted an introspective analysis of how the observer's physicality responded to objects... the observer's body was aroused and affected in its entirety by the dynamics of the other." Ibid, 155.

<sup>38</sup> Olivia Anne Warren.

<sup>39</sup> "Lamentation-Martha Graham," uploaded on Dec. 12, 2007, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xgf3xgbKYo>.

dancer's primary movement is that of the Graham contraction. With a somber expression on her face the dancer contracts her spine, as if a cannonball has just hit her stomach, and the result makes her upper and lower body extend up and outward. This action causes her feet to lift off the floor, allowing her body to resemble an elongated letter "C." She is both weighed down by grief and desperate to escape it.

When accessed through a YouTube search, *Lamentations* is accompanied by an anecdote Graham attached to one of the first performances of the work. Graham's account is as follows:

One of the first times I did it . . . A lady came back to me afterwards and looked at me, she had a very white face, and had obviously been crying. She said, "You will never know what you have done for me tonight. Thank you." And then she left. I asked about her later. It seemed that she had seen her child, a nine-year-old son, killed in front of her by a truck. They [other people in this woman's life?] had made every effort to make her cry, and she had not been able to cry, but when she saw *Lamentations*, she said she felt the grief was honorable, universal, and she need not be ashamed of crying for her son.<sup>40</sup>

Exclaiming that Graham "did something for her [the woman] that night" is an example of compassion as affective exchange — forming a relationship that is not vertical, but horizontal to the extent that it feels shared and for one another that it must be voiced or pledged. Both my friend and this woman were consumed (so to speak) by a relationship formed with the performer onstage that appeared to have futurity beyond the theater space, and "make better" their own respective lives under the auspices of contributing to the work/livelihood of the artist, to then locate others in those similarly inhabited spaces.

### The Economy of Compassion

The woman at Graham's performance, the "club of carers" formed on the subway, and my friend all located similar communities that both uplifted the self and the individual, or performer, which caused that self to act. Sarah E. H. Moore's recent text *Ribbon Culture: Charity, Compassion, and Public Awareness* discusses the complexity of these two ontological states of benefitting and suffering associated with the affective exchange retroactively named compassion, affirming:

We should note, for the sake of conceptual

clarity, that there is a distinction between manifesting a compassionate act and exhibiting one's compassion. In reality, of course, the two are intimately connected. Ribbon wearing, for example, requires a charitable donation, and therefore establishes a relationship — however tenuous — between donor and sufferer, but is also directed towards showing the wearer to be a com-passionate person.<sup>41</sup>

For others to see, the ribbon so often associated with the donation to a charitable organization is the tangible evidence of the affective exchange. From a sociological perspective the relationship between having compassion and being compassionate, is that the transmission of sensation between two sentient beings occurs in a space inhabited by other beings that have the same sensational potential. As the prior examples have shown, the relationality of compassion has no lone beneficiary, allowing the having and being to collude in the exchange later named compassion. The affective exchange does occur, but it does so in a way that is visible to other spectators, who have the potential to form similar relationships.

Taking a cue from Zizek, Moore insists the sensations that cause willingness to wear that ribbon within a collective group are facilitated through a monetary response. Ribbon wearing can be translated into a form of cultural capital that, to return to Berlant, develops "intimate public spaces" of concerned citizens,<sup>42</sup> all of which is generated from the injurious sensation we refer to as compassion. Moore's description of contemporary society as a "ribbon culture" speaks to the way we tend to call attention to, or visually mark the individual contributions that lead to a believed obsession with a collective "better world-making."

The proliferation of these ribbons (or the now-popular latex bracelet) is a spectacle that is constantly re-generating — a spectacle that asserts and affirms compassion as not a singular phenomenon, but an affective social exchange in continual circulation.<sup>v</sup> Its existence on the two planes discussed — the quotidian and the theatrical — are the praxis for the affective exchange retroactively named compassion performed on the most impactful stage, the political sphere. The voting and collective caring amount to more than just a desire toward the political; they are the injurious sensations, shared relationships, actions "for the better," and "showings" of support that move people into these intimate public spaces. Prominent in the everyday and the theatrical, compassion as an affective exchange acknowledged retro-actively is most importantly discovered in my own past exchange with the political realm.

I remember enthusiastically supporting Barack Obama

<sup>41</sup> Sarah E.H. Moore, *Ribbon Culture: Charity, Compassion, and Public Awareness* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 31-2.

<sup>42</sup> See note 12.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

during the 2008 Presidential election despite my scarcely understanding the larger politics that helped usher him onto the national stage. I was engrossed in the 2008 election in general because it was the first national election in which I could vote since turning eighteen years of age in late 2006. I could really watch, listen, and go to the polls, collectively moving towards “change” with my cohort of young, liberal, New York collegiate intellectuals. During the race for the 2008 Democratic Presidential nomination, Obama delivered a speech during a Democratic Party Dinner in Wisconsin that was retroactively titled “Don’t Tell Me Words Don’t Matter.”<sup>43</sup>

The speech was Obama’s opportunity to respond to criticism, primarily from opponent Hilary Clinton’s camp, that he was essentially “just words,” a shining example of “all talk and no action.” With allusions to the classical rhetorical tropes and schemes employed by Martin Luther King Jr. in his “I Have a Dream,” Franklin Delano Roosevelt in his “We have nothing to fear but fear itself,” and even to the authors of The Declaration of Independence, “We hold these truths to be self-evident,” Obama asked his audience, “Just Words? Just Words?” and then asserted, “Don’t tell me words don’t matter!” Obama’s borrowed figures were familiar to everyone. My own political and social sensibilities were also carefully cultivated by these words through the years and the various iterations and re-hearings at home and at school. They embodied how and why I came into being — as the product of a mix of ethnicities and religions passed along from parents who had worked hard to move up from their lower class upbringing.

Obama’s rhetorical devices, as Sedgwick would say, are periperformative, operating in a neighborhood around the performative utterance.<sup>44</sup> His words did not directly bring things into being, but my listening to those words brought about my action. The potential for listening is important to consider compassion as a sensation that, as Stewart says, can “pick up density and texture as [it] they move[s] through bodies, dreams, dramas, and social worldings of all kinds.”<sup>45</sup> Massumi, in his Introduction to *A Thousand Plateaus*, informs readers that Deleuze and Guattari’s text “is conceived as an open system,”<sup>46</sup> to be read as if one were going to play a record, repeating certain tracks, playing the entire album on loop, or out of order. Obama’s “Just Words” circulated in this way — I remember bits and pieces that may not correspond with the order in which they were first uttered, but I thought of

them constantly in 2008, allowing them to become more dense by my own interpretation and memory as the election progressed. With each utterance of “Don’t Tell Me Words Don’t Matter,” Obama was implicitly performing the explicit importance of those words.<sup>47</sup> In my response — pledges of support, donations to the campaign, and a vote — I too was performing that importance in agreement with Obama’s direction.

The Obama campaign resonated with many American citizens on various levels — race, gender, sexuality — in both positive and negative contexts, but I can only discuss my own experience. Raised in a middle class suburb the rhetoric of “you can do whatever you dream when you grow up no matter what, as long as you try” was standard on posters and billboards, usually accompanied by a photograph of a famous athlete. I listened to Obama as he stood at the lectern and thoughtfully returned to this blissful, idealized childhood space that was unconsciously optimistic and a place where anything was possible. His unprecedented presence and voice on a national stage made me operate under the auspices that he too believed in this phrase, hope, mantra, and space. His election and my support were going to make better a nation and fix a giant bandage over the social wounds of America’s past (slavery, segregation, racism and bigotry), a suffering that I understood historically because of the “Just Words!” Those words shaped my understanding of the country up until 2008, and by discovering a relationship with Obama (if remote), it was as if we were both shouting “Don’t Tell Me I Don’t Matter!”

As an Obama supporter, I became also a part of an in-group — wearing my HOPE button and talking about social change with other individuals of like mind.<sup>48</sup> Like Moore’s ribbons and Zizek’s coffee cup, the HOPE button was the tangible proof, the signifier of a meaningful purchase — buying into the Obama campaign and wearing a single word that encapsulated Obama’s entire platform. The display of HOPE buttons made the final part of compassionate exchange, the “showing,” easy and approachable as, what Berlant deems “an intimate public,” was formed.<sup>49</sup> In those moments of public intimacy, I can’t recall many instances in which specific critical discussions of Obama’s politics were undertaken.

If anything, we were responsible for too much action and not enough actual talk. What I gained through the promise of a vote was symbolic capital — recognition of my “better-world-making” without the exposure of tangible financial assets. My support was valuable, and it could be actualized into a monetary donation in support of the campaign; into

<sup>43</sup> “Don’t Tell Me Words Don’t Matter – Obama’s Best Speech Yet – YouTube,” uploaded Feb. 17, 2008, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=t6NS9unm-OQ>. Reference to the once live speech was made possible by this recording.

<sup>44</sup> “What is distinctive about them [periperformatives] is that they allude to explicit performative utterances...” Sedgwick, 79.

<sup>45</sup> Stewart, 10-11.

<sup>46</sup> Brian Massumi, “Foreword” in *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, but Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari (Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), xiv.

<sup>47</sup> See note 44.

<sup>48</sup> Shepard Fairey and Jennifer Gross, Ed. *Art For Obama: Designing Manifest Hope and the Campaign for Change* (New York: Abrams Image, 2009). More information on HOPE, the Obama 08 campaign’s official slogan and artwork can be found here.

<sup>49</sup> See note 12.

time volunteering to spread my own excitement; and eventually into a vote in support of a candidate. As the audience member aligned with Graham, my friend aligned with Bill Barnes, I too aligned with Barack Obama through a series of reciprocal efforts and actions on which I can only articulate a thoughtful reflection as a consequence of time and distance.

It is impossible to detect whether the individual performer intentionally cultivated the sensations of compassion that occurred in the affective exchanges discussed. However, in keeping with the work of Massumi and Stewart, the process that is retroactively named compassion, distinguished above, is an intense feeling constantly moving through and between bodies. Thus, a pre-meditated intention of compassion is not possible, yet these affective exchanges persist. Returning once again to Debord, it is useful to consider his thesis,

The externality of the spectacle in relation to the active man appears in the fact that his own gestures are no longer his but those of another who represents them to him. This is why the spectator feels at home nowhere, because the spectacle is everywhere.<sup>50</sup>

If spectacle is everywhere and individuals “feel” at home nowhere, then the potential to be affected by the injurious sensations, shared relationships, actions to “make better,” and “showing,” increases to negotiate a space within the “everywhere and nowhere” about which Debord writes. Debord further observes that

The world at once present and absent which the spectacle makes visible is the world of the commodity dominating all that is loved . . . . The spectacle does not sing the praises of men and their weapons but of commodities and their passions.<sup>51</sup>

Thus far, the inquiry into the spectacle that is compassion yields similar insight — the affective exchange is an exchange between two sentient bodies that often culminates in the exchange of actual money that initiates or identifies persons for/within a mass-mediated intimate public space. These experiences are part of Debord’s view of the commodity — moments of interaction and shared experiences that create collectives and provide meaning and purpose to the actions that follow and persist within the spectacle. Compassion, as a *say-able* term is not a commodity, but the moments of affective exchange later named compassion are. An economy of compassion develops in the candidate’s quest to obtain votes. In election years, the value of producing action through compassion is

priced higher than asking and taking questions, or spending the time to think about and work through a particular issue or concern. Regardless of post-election transgressions, the trajectory of compassion in exchange and the formation of intimate public spaces erupt within the following four years, sustaining compassion’s economy. The collection of votes keeps compassion in circulation, as do the social and theatrical opportunities for these sensations to invade the everyday, which allows the desire for action and the creation of intimate public spaces to remain in operation.

## Representations of Spectacle

If compassion were displayed as capital (cultural, monetary, or social), then perhaps a re-evaluation of the material with which said compassion is distributed and acquired is necessary, or the way we align and invest can be re-modeled, re-imagined. Looking at the trajectory of compassion as an affective exchange in theatrical and then political performance attempts to locate the ramifications of compassion’s reciprocity — the experience of the trajectory from start to finish, the individuals involved, and the consequences of forming a perceived relationship — and then consider useful ways to engage with this retroactive understanding. Such an attempt to re-evaluate past exchanges can and does exist, of course, in performance.

Liz Magic Laser’s piece “I Feel Your Pain” (2011) is a mixed media performance that was filmed and edited live with Laser acting as writer, director, and choreographer.<sup>52</sup> The script is a mix of scenes lifted from interviews and speeches delivered by political figures broadcast on television over the past twenty years, as well as excerpts from theoretical texts to offer brief editorializing between scenes. The live piece was performed over the course of two consecutive nights at a movie theater in downtown New York City.<sup>52</sup> The actors sat scattered around the theater in couples of two amidst the audience members.

During the performance, three cameramen moved throughout the theater to capture the actors and the audience on the movie theater’s large screen. Even when dialogue and action occurred in the seat next to certain audience members, their eyes remained trained on the large projected image above, creating a double representation or double vision: the audience seeing themselves as both an audience and a performer on the screen and the audience seeing a self in the scenes being enacted or re-enacted, remembering the first time they heard those words spoken or questions asked on news and television outlets.

Not only does Laser confront the audience members with their own past attachments to political movements, she takes

<sup>50</sup> Debord, thesis 30.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid, thesis 37 and thesis 66.

<sup>52</sup> Liz Magic Laser, *I Feel Your Pain*, directed by Liz Magic Laser, performed 11/14/2011, produced by Perfoma 11, DVD. All discussion and description of *I Feel Your Pain* is a result of multiple viewings both live and recorded, and can be accessed by this DVD.

the opportunity to bring in samples of high theory, though very briefly, to remind the audience that what is happening inside the theater and on the screen is more expansive than a political parody. In Act III, Scene III Laser informs the audience that part of this interaction is adapted from Sara Ahmed's text *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*. The scene centers on a young woman, about age thirty, speaking quotes written by Ahmed, such as,

What do emotions do? How do emotions circulate between bodies? Emotions work to shape the surfaces of individual and collective bodies. Can sensation and emotion part company? Feelings move, stick, and slide, and we move, stick, and slide with them. You become the *you* if you accept the invitation to align yourself with the nation and against the others who threaten to take the nation away.<sup>53</sup>

She recites them kneeling in the theater's aisle in revelation, as if she were discovering how a dishwasher works to make life easier for the first time. Laser does not open the space of this affective exchange disingenuously. She classifies this moment in the piece as a chance to editorialize,<sup>54</sup> but it is more than that. It is a useful pedagogy; it does not offer instruction on how to act or what to do, but rather informs the audience, as a metaphorical public, about the relationship that is forged between the viewer and the body delivering dialogue that emits "feelings that stick, slip, and slide"<sup>55</sup> for the duration of the performance.

"I Feel Your Pain" consists of four acts that present a unique political narrative in contemporary American history ranging from Ronald Reagan and Bill Clinton to John Boehner and Barack Obama. Laser introduces each scene by informing the audience from which interview or speech the ensuing dialogue is adapted via a title card frame on the movie theater's screen. For example, the introduction to Act IV, Scene I reads, "Text adapted from: Barack Obama interview with Bill O'Reilly, Fox Broadcast Network, February 6, 2011" placing the audience in a temporal space that can easily be recalled. However, Laser does not identify which actor is portraying which character, or if the actors are meant to embody the political figure mentioned in the disclaimer, if at all. Distinguishing which political figure belongs to the lines spoken is left to the audience, and primarily consists of remembering the first time the line was heard. This absence of characterization through naming (Laser removes all proper nouns and replaces them with pronouns) forces the audience to confront the attachment to the line's first utterance and its represented utterance in Laser's work.

<sup>53</sup> Liz Magic Laser, *I Feel Your Pain*, Act III, Scene III.

<sup>54</sup> Liz Magic Laser, interview by Amanda DiLodovico, Derek Eller Gallery, April 21, 2012.

<sup>55</sup> See note 53.

The scene, adapted from the interview between O'Reilly and Obama, is portrayed by one male and one female actor, both of whom appear to be in their fifties. They enter hurriedly through the theater's backdoors in mid-conversation and proceed to stumble through a fully occupied row, only stopping momentarily to say, "excuse me" to the audience members seated. Laser consistently utilizes this pedestrian choreography of maneuvering through the crowded theater throughout the piece. The actors never sit or stand in a position associated with a traditional interview between pundit and politician, nor do they embody the physicality of the individuals mentioned on the screen before each scene.

For the scene in question, it only becomes apparent that the male actor is speaking lines originally uttered by Obama when he exclaims, "We are focused on how to win the future!" — a line that feels similar to my initial mediated encounter with Obama at the ripe age of nineteen. However, this representation is not that of a smooth rhetorician with a booming voice ("Don't tell me words don't matter!") — he is actually just the words. The actor stumbles through the theater, and his voice lacks Obama's timbre. Instead, his voice is heard as more of a high-pitched whine as he responds to the woman's (or O'Reilly's) question as to why people may or may not hate him. His response, "Well, I think what is true, is that in this position, everything you say has an effect" resonates not only as true, but as a significant moment to pause and re-think the words and sensations, that once affected, emitted from a distanced representation.<sup>56</sup>

In addition to removing proper names, Laser tweaks, ever so slightly, the exact dialogue of all the excerpts she utilizes to create a more conversational and intimate tone. The result is mostly the addition of pronouns and pauses, which allows the content of each interview or speech to be recognizable by only small markers, such as dates, or keywords that trigger memory. Sitting amidst the actors, the interview/speeches-turned-conversations become fodder for ironic eavesdropping — locating personal gossip in public content. For example, a scene lifted from an interview between Obama and *60 Minutes* correspondent Steve Kroft from May 4, 2011 is recognized by the date displayed on the title card, which for those affected, was three days after the murder of Al Qaeda leader and 9/11 mastermind Osama bin Laden.<sup>57</sup>

Before the actors speak, the anticipation is that the conversation between the two men that come into focus on the movie theater screen will be in regard to that event. However, because of Laser's directorial and choreographic choices, the scene comes across as two sleazy men discussing a recent female conquest.<sup>vii</sup> Without the political titles and normative interview posture, the initial viewer reaction to the news on May 4, 2011 and Obama's involvement is re-examined. Because dialogue from the interview between Obama and Kroft is not significantly

<sup>56</sup> Liz Magic Laser, *I Feel Your Pain*, Act IV, Scene 1.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid*, Act I, Scene II.

altered, a new experience, or light, is literally shined on the exchange and the memory of reactions to it in May 2011, as the more current reaction to Laser's representation confronts the audience via the movie screen.

Laser refers to "I Feel Your Pain" as a private romance between politician and public, with the piece's live audience standing in for the public at each performance.<sup>58</sup> Asserting this intimacy, the actors perform in the seats and aisles, and are rarely presented in a space removed from the audience. The only scene in which the actors move to the front of the theater and directly address the audience members as a traditional audience is during a scene in which a choreographed fight erupts. Staged like a boxing match, two men, referred to by the fast-talking fight announcer as the "whistleblower" and "the man accused of betraying us all" face off. In slow motion, the actors move in relation to the ringmaster's description in a "fight to the finish" throwing punches that strike the air but intentionally miss the opponents physical body.

The "whistleblower" defeats "the man accused of betraying us all twice," but the decision made in both matches declares "the man accused of betraying us all" the victor, even when he lay limp on the ground with both eyes tightly shut. The fight takes place after dialogue is recited from an interview between George W. Bush and CNN journalist Candy Crowley, in which, as Laser includes, the topic of weapons of mass destruction is discussed.<sup>59</sup> Though the winner in the match is wrongfully declared, the cameras throughout the theater confirm the audience's persistent spectatorship, exposing those moments of listening and giving in to the trajectory of compassion to be as deceiving as wrongfully decided boxing matches.

Additionally, a distance is established between audience and the representations in the theater by the live filming process and audience projections. In filming the performance as it happens and putting the present and past audience reactions on a screen, Laser provides the representation of representation and makes compassion a spectacle. The exchange retroactively named "compassion" generates through the periperformatives that injure into participation. Laser captures, recalls, and exposes the intensity and call to action described, as well as experienced above, in a performance. In thinking of compassion as an affective exchange with a trajectory, a space is opened up, temporally in the time that is taken for action to commence, and the space between two bodies of which the exchange occurs. "I Feel Your Pain" puts that space on display. The complexity of compassion and the affective exchange is that it is identified only retroactively.

In this performance Laser allows audiences to re-think the sensations that occur in that space during the affective

exchange and question or re-consider the subsequent actions that give compassion futurity. Laser's piece does not just acknowledge compassion retroactively, such as the moments of lived compassion referenced in this writing, it opens up the possibility to be affected again with the confrontation of the original affective exchange. Laser's audience is not only a metaphorical American public, but also a room of repeated representations who locate themselves in their seats, on the screen, and in memories triggered by the dialogue of each scene.

## Conclusion

Laser collapses the theatrical and political in "I Feel Your Pain" as I also collapse the two above in moving from concert dance to a political speech, locating a similar affective exchange of compassion in the everyday, choreographic, and political spheres. Such a move positions compassion as an affect that appears everywhere, constantly in exchange, with an increasing value as it maneuvers throughout the capitalist economy to create intimacy in an increasingly estranged public. I, the man on the 6-Train platform, and the others in the subway car; I, my friend, Monica Bill Barnes, Barnes' company members, and Barnes' supporting patrons; I, Barack Obama, and Obama supporters. All of these were formed, or at least *felt* fully formed, in the exchange of compassion, that drop of change in the cup, that purchase of a ticket, that donation to a campaign and vote.

Money well spent to achieve, at least in the head that sits atop my shoulders, reciprocity between my actions and the actions of those that make the decisions for the world in which I occupy. In the collapsing conducted above, I expose the lack of thought in the space that is compassion; the sensations that injure the body and cause action and a futurity based in a momentary presence of a significant relation. The exchange of compassion — the action that follows the sensation — establishes swift relationships and agreements that when reconsidered in the multitude of moments that follow injure in a much less pleasing iteration.

In collapsing the political and theatrical, Laser puts the locations of compassion discussed above in conversation to not accuse but locate the affective exchange in performance. Her piece was free to the public and in 2012 was part of a gallery exhibit in lower Manhattan (also free) in which the film made at the live performance played in a small theater on loop — constantly representing the representation and enfolding the spectacle that is affective exchange. The political manifestation of the affective exchange that is compassion is important to re-consider through Laser's piece.

As compassion is recognized retroactively, Laser allows a remembering of that trajectory removed from the experience had with the source material. What she offers is distance and the opportunity to re-listen to the "somethings" that catch us, make us act, and instead question why. Those questions

<sup>58</sup> Liz Magic Laser, interview by Amanda DiLodovico, Derek Eller Gallery, April 21, 2012.

<sup>59</sup> Liz Magic Laser, *I Feel Your Pain*, Act IV, Scene II.

could be the re-considered impulse to form intimate publics, rather than the tangible evidences of affective exchange. Perhaps the desire to form a public and establish intimacy should persist in questions of discord instead of the sensations that seek agreement, reciprocity, and betterment. For, if on the level of the political, in the nation's heavily mediated political discourse and elections, the exchange of compassion were halted and no longer affected audiences with images and words that resonated and injured, moments to re-consider or re-think, would be unnecessary.

Arguably, I am once again moving toward yet another mediated intimate public space in my discussion of Laser's piece (Me, Laser, the audience, the actors). However, such an assertion makes the understanding of compassion as an affective exchange and the opening up of that small process, which was stated many pages ago, so thrilling. To be more aware of the economy of compassion and the space within which it operates, teasing the memory and expecting action under an ideological definition of "better," is the most vital success of this interrogation.

## Endnotes

<sup>i</sup> In *Compassion: The Culture and Politics of an Emotion* (New York: Routledge, 2004), Berlant's Introduction discusses the controversy surrounding the term "compassionate conservative" coined by the Republican party via the Bush administration in the early 2000s. The term was originally introduced into academic and public discourse by Professor of Journalism, Marvin Olasky in *The Tragedy of American Compassion* (Washington, D.C.: Regenery Gateway, 1995). Rooted in Christian doctrine, Olasky's compassionate conservative/conservatism asked for a return to 19<sup>th</sup> century ideology, in which religious institutions were solely responsible for providing charitable aid for Americans living within or below the poverty line. When George W. Bush employed compassionate conservatism during his political reign, and even campaigned on this platform, he brought Olasky's compassion into the personal and social, encouraging citizens to have compassion for one another. Explicitly putting compassion into the social as an emotion that *should* be circulating consciously caused problematic and debatable implications of race, class, and religion to adhere. Compassion should be considered as a sensation always circulating and experienced through affective exchange, not a pedagogical instruction. Berlant expresses her misgivings about compassion as a term floating within the American vernacular, stating "By insisting that society's poorest members can achieve the good life through work, family, community, participation, and faith, compassionate conservatives rephrase the embodied indignities of structural inequality as opportunities for individuals to reach out to each other, to build concrete human relations" (3-4). Reading Berlant's analysis of Olasky's term through the Bush campaign was inspiring for the creation of this investigation of the term compassion. In the sites I examine, compassion is not disseminated as a word or instruction to follow, but as an intangible thing that generates from interactions and exchanges. For more information on compassionate conservatism see my other work "Re-membering a Compassionate America/n: The Social Choreography of National Election Cycles"

(working paper for *Studies in Dance: Movement Theory*, Department of Performance Studies, New York University, New York, NY, 2012).

<sup>ii</sup> This is my own analysis based on the following interdisciplinary research: According to Peter Hoskings in *The Power of Compassion: An Exploration of the Psychology of Compassion in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*, ed. Marion Kostanski (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2007), 3-13, the definition of compassion expressed by and in human beings has two components: first, feeling for or with, a feeling of closeness to others (to feel compassion), coupled with a desire to help, a sense of responsibility for another's welfare (to show compassion)." From a psychological perspective, compassion is explained as a feeling that generates a reciprocal relationship between "feeling" and "showing." The response to certain intensities labeled as the feeling compassion erupts after a relationship between two bodies (in the abstract sense) occurs. The desired result of that relation is the experience (perhaps fictive) of a shared memory that requires subsequent action. Hoskings references a war anecdote in which Stalin ordered German soldiers to be paraded in the streets. However, when onlookers took in the soldiers' appearance, "thin, unshaven, wearing dirty bloodstained bandages..." women in the crowd went to help them – "the soldiers were no longer enemies." Hoskings's articulation of compassion is significant in the formation of the exchange that is articulated in this current writing. His explanation of "feeling" is wrapped up in memory, in his example of pain, hunger, war, etc., as the sensation that inspires action.

From an etymological standpoint, Merriam-Webster defines compassion as "sympathetic consciousness of others' distress together with a desire to alleviate it." The Oxford English Dictionary's definition states, "1. suffering together with another, participation in suffering; fellow-feeling, sympathy, 2. The feeling or emotion, when a person is moved by the suffering or distress of another, and by the desire to relieve it." The two dictionaries do not present identical definitions, but both present explanations littered with words that produce ambiguity when one attempts to articulate them. In addition, synonyms offered range from *commiseration* and *sympathy* to the vague, *feeling*.

In terms of critical theory and literary occurrences of compassion, Lauren Berlant writes about the term in relation to withholding, stating, "There is nothing clear about compassion except that it implies a social relation between spectators and sufferers, with the emphasis on the spectator's experience of feeling compassion and its subsequent relation to material practice" in *Compassion: The Cultural Politics of an Emotion* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 1. She discusses compassion as an emotion thrust into political culture via George W. Bush's campaign for compassionate conservative, and the resistance to then be compassionate when a feeling or emotion becomes that instructional. Her major gripe with the dissemination of compassion as a conservative ideal is that it strives for normative standards in regards to heterosexuality, stratifications of wealth in a capitalist society, and a religious dominance over American social values.

Martha Nussbaum in "Compassion: The Basic Social Emotion" (*Law and Ethics*, University of Chicago, 1996) argues for compassion as a rational process, using examples from Aristotle to analyze compassion as a sizable measure of pity and suffering within the context of the civil justice system. Suffering is measured in degrees and considered a main component of compassion in the

vernacular.

In addition, the work of Slavoj Žižek and Sarah E.H. Moore explicated in the content of this paper shaped the trajectory created. All of these texts were taken into consideration while operating as a performance studies scholar, observing the society in which my compassion occurs as a series of, as Guy Debord says in *The Society of the Spectacle* (1983), spectacles.

<sup>iii</sup> For example, Teresa Brennan's *The Transmission of Affect* (New York: Cornell University Press, 2004), Silvan S. Tomkins's *Affect Imagery Consciousness I-IV* (New York: Springer Publishing Company 2008), as well as the extensive works of Lauren Berlant, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, and Brian Massumi, who are mentioned in this writing, shaped affect as a theory and were integral in introducing the affective turn in academia. However, in my studies, there is no single researcher responsible for completely articulating all of the dimensions of affect and affect theory. It is collaborative.

<sup>iv</sup> The term affective exchange comes from reading and interpreting the work of Kathleen Stewart and Brian Massumi, documented in notes 8 and 9. The concept of exchange has a double meaning, referring to unavoidable interactions between sentient beings and the exchange as discussed in regard to consumerism through the work of Marxist thinker Slavoj Žižek on "The Delusion of Green Capitalism." For more on Žižek and his contribution to the writing, see notes 17, 18, 19, 20, and 21.

<sup>v</sup> Moore's text helps locate why it is even important to understand compassion as a part of the everyday that encourages the formation of mediated intimate public spaces. Moore gestures towards ribbon-wearing's history, which was rooted in the counter-culture movements of the 1960s and 1970s, primarily growing from the feminist and gay liberation movements, in which sporting a colored ribbon was "a faintly oppositional stance towards mainstream society." In an effort to not regurgitate a litany of counter movements through a bevy of artistic discourses, I will simply nod to the communal understanding that with time, the counter is almost always indoctrinated into the cultural normative. Moore, 75-99.

<sup>vi</sup> I have to thank Ethan Philbrick for suggesting this piece to me in the workshop / brainstorm process during the Spring 2012 course PERF-GT. 2000.01.002. Without his mention, this paper would be lacking a necessary component.

<sup>vii</sup> In a discussion with Laser, she mentioned the creation of a reference reel that was given to the actors in addition to the script's original material from political news sites. The reel contained cinematic scenes of the everyday to enhance the representations enacted in the movie theater. For the Obama and Kroft interview, the actors were shown a clip of two sleazy male characters chatting in a bar. Liz Magic Laser, interview by Amanda DiLodovico, Derek Eller Gallery, New York, April 21, 2012.

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