

Lauren Berlant and Elizabeth A. Povinelli

Holding Up the World, Part III: In the Event of Precarity ... A Conversation

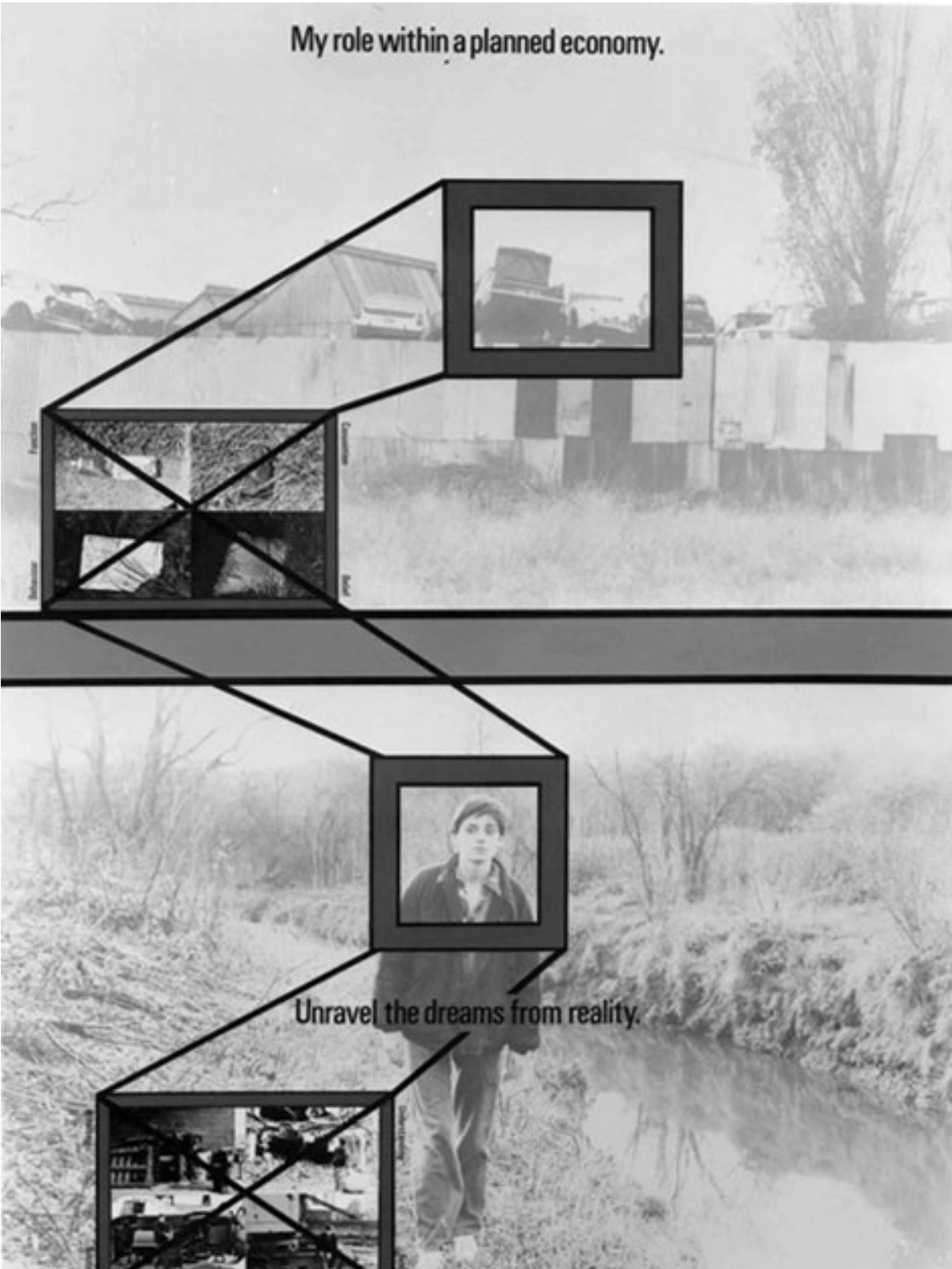
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Elizabeth Povinelli: I don't know about you but my colleagues often remark on the deep conversational possibilities of our recent work, especially where my thinking about the endurance and exhaustion of alternative social projects through the quasi-event overlaps with your thinking about cruel optimism around non-event-like events. I am not surprised, of course. We began talking in Chicago almost a decade ago about the social and affective forms that characterize Late Liberalism. And it's probably not surprising that I would end up focusing more on what I would call energetic aspects, and you on feelings. I always err on the side of what I think about as the problem of the "endurant" and its social antonym, exhaustion and the problem of the tensile nature of substantialized power. Internal to the concept of endurance is the tense, substance, and eventfulness of Late Liberalism: the problem of strength, hardiness, callousness; continuity through space; an ability to suffer and persist. The endurant allows me to absent the question of feeling-affect. But that's what I love about your work. You don't.

Lauren Berlant: A decade ago! More like fifteen years. In 1999 you stole the manuscript of "Love, a Queer Feeling" from my study and sent it to *Homosexuality and Psychoanalysis*.¹ (Thanks for that!) The previous year, we did a word-by-word edit of your "The State of Shame" for my *Critical Inquiry* special issue, "Intimacy." My computer tells me that in this same year we invented the concept of Late Liberalism for our working group at the University of Chicago, which grew out of conversations between you, me, and Candace Vogler about starting a project called "Monster Studies" (that was its nickname, from Jackie Stacey's *Teratologies*²). The aim of the project was to conceive of the world beyond models of liberal intentionalist subjectivity, and its refractions in a monocultural nation-state. That project eventuated in the conference we ran, *Violence and Redemption*, which became a *Public Culture* special issue edited by Vogler and Patchen Markell.³ (So it's funny and lovely to hear the return of the word "monster" in your current work on the anthropocene: we can't get away from it, the staging of a tragicomic alterity.) Then, in 2007, you heard about my article "Slow Death" from Michael Warner, and wrote to me to get it for inclusion in what became your article "The Child in the Basement: States of Killing and Letting Die," and from there we entered phase two of our collaboration.

So it's not surprising to me that resonances are heard in our work: we've been working together, in and out of conversation, for a long time; many of your now thickly and beautifully developed rubrics emerge from those working group days. What interests me so much is in your



Stephen Willats, *The Lurky Place*, 1978. Photographs, photographic dyes, Letraset, gouache and ink on card

ever more explicit insistence on the ethnographic test for theory: what you, in your recent keynote at an anthropocene conference, called a toggle between “on the table” and “on the ground,” as in: “when immanent critique occupies the world it claims its own ground.” I would love to hear you talk about that test – what constitutes the ground, what it means for you to say that, especially since you also, unlike many anthropologists, also mobilize the aesthetic.

But to get to your framing question. You and I share, for sure, an interest in “the enduring” and the exhausted: “Slow Death” was the first place I worked it out, but I’d long talked about politics as a war of attrition, riffing off Gramsci’s “War of Position” and “War of Manoeuvre” as well as his keen sense of how hypervigilance and compulsive strategizing can wear a body out. Even in your first book, your interest in exhaustion emerged from structural and symbolic notions of economy that crossed the structural and collective sensual life.

But we’re both also interested in how the ongoingness of life produces an *energetics* of endurance – through touch, proximity, and conversation that’s both narrative (against the state and for the collectivity’s self-adherence) and eruptive in particular moments of pleasure. I hadn’t thought that our difference was a difference between a practice-based tracking and an affect-based one, though, since I am also compelled by how people live and spend a lot of time tracking practices of the reproduction of life from within life. Of course, I have to rely on other people’s ethnographies for that, while also tracking their intensification and refinement as pattern in aesthetic mediations.

But you’re right, I’m interested in the affectivity of disturbance, the reproductive and inventive labor of the unsaids and atmospheres, the moods and repetitions that exist without being congealed into normative forms. Maybe it’s that you are more likely to track feedback loops of response and effect, and I am more likely to sit inside of the moment of disturbance before form provides an anchor? You are more likely to seek to capture a structure (of knowledge, power, expertise) in any of the exempla you offer, is that right?

EP: Yes, I think the concept of a feedback loop is a nice way of imaging what interests me, but with the caveat that the loop doesn’t loop so much as leak because of the superabundant varieties and variants of feedback crowding in the same space. A superabundance of the supervalent – to give a nod to the name of your blog where you define “supervalent” as a concept that generates all kinds of contradictions – can be magnified to induce an impact beyond what’s explicit or what’s

normative.⁴ Like Althusser’s concept of relative autonomy on crack: the feedbacks are far more than can be descriptively or experientially accounted for, in part because they include all the potentialities expressed by an actual feedback loop.

Leaving aside this caveat, I am indeed drawn, compelled perhaps, by aesthetic and argumentative artifacts that live at the precipice of the figured (normative, antinormative forms); the fog of becoming; something that might be something if the conditions of experiencing it or the conditions of supporting it are in place. And I am equally drawn to aesthetics and arguments that put two given figurations in play but then pause at the potentialities welling up at the moment they touch. In my own writing – and filmmaking and drawing – I struggle to convey the superabundance of feedback without quickly leaping over the moment before the fogs of becoming become dominant, or the moment before minority figures have clearly marked out the justice of their terrain.

This is why I have consistently thought with and within your writing. Of course, crawling around the interior of someone’s mind for such a long time – fifteen years – makes memory a meandering loop. I don’t remember making off with “Love, A Queer Feeling”; you’re so generous with your writing, I doubt I would have done so except for some perverse pleasure. But I was not the least surprised when we both wound up at a Pembroke Center conference in March 2004 and you were working on [the chapter] “Two Girls, Fat and Thin” for *Cruel Optimism* and I was working through [the chapter] “Rotten Worlds” for *Empire of Love*.

What I do remember are much earlier conversations we had around drafts of “Sex in Public,” [the essay you cowrote with Michael Warner]. I have always especially been drawn to the example that closes the essay. For anyone who hasn’t read this essay, it describes a performance at a now closed sex club in New York:

A boy, twentyish, very skateboard, comes on the low stage at one end of the bar, wearing lycra shorts and a dog collar. He sits loosely in a restraining chair. His partner comes out and tilts the bottom’s head up to the ceiling, stretching out his throat. Behind them is an array of foods. The top begins pouring milk down the boy’s throat, then food, then more milk. It spills over, down his chest and onto the floor. A dynamic is established between them in which they carefully keep at the threshold of gagging. The bottom struggles to keep taking in more than he really can. The top is

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Charles Burnett, *Killer of Sheep*, 1977. Film still

careful to give him just enough to stretch his capacities.

The cum shot eventually happens. And then a series of questions you wish you could have asked the young bottom who was, so rumor went, straight, including: What does “straight” mean in such a context? How did he discover that this is the form of public intimacy he wished to share? How did he find someone to do this with him? I love these questions, and of course think you were right that this was citing the money shot in porn. But when we talked about this essay, and when I teach it, I am drawn to all the things this performance was and might become – and in so doing, the way this performance might potentialize minoritization. What if the vomiting wasn’t already a figure of the sex and sexuality we know, but an insistence that sex could be a minor form and drama of spitting? What might be the forces that would allow this virtual other body to emerge and endure?

I think that’s why I don’t use the term “structure” – the capture of “structure” – and why I am trying to see what kind of conceptual work effort, embankment, and quasi-event can do rather than return to the discussions around structure and event, which, as you know, lead us to interesting but somewhat exhausted arguments. Your work on the labor of the uncongealed economies of unsaids, on dynamic and flat moods, on stifling and overrich atmospheres, is anathema or an antinomy to the overly semanticized approach to structure and event or structure and praxis. So I always start hyperventilating when I hear that I am interested in structure. And why, beginning maybe most explicitly in *Empire of Love*, I began to try to think about the enfleshed aspect of the fog of meaning and its coming into view. This is what I am exploring with the idea of an embankment rather than a bank of meaning and bodies and all the minor and quasi-events that hold these embankments in place.

And its what I love about [Charles Burnett’s 1977 film] *Killer of Sheep*, which is really what I was hoping we could think with and through.

LB: What questions remain for you in particular – you’ve worked with that text exhaustively, no?

EP: Well, yes that was lazy of me. I put *Killer of Sheep* to use in *Economies of Abandonment*, but in a fairly crude way, picking out the parts, and what I saw as a strategy of the whole, to exemplify the cinema of the non-event. But in *Cruel Optimism*, you talk about the cinema of precarity, yes? And I find that very, very intriguing, especially as my very old friends in Australia and I are drawn into making a series of

films about the conditions of agency and geography that characterize their ordinary lives under the auspices of the Karrabing Film Collective. I continually come back to our “Monster Studies” and your thinking around the aesthetics of precarity, and your thinking about film and media more generally. For me, this new endeavor forces me to think from two different but braided perspectives. On the one hand are questions that are text-internal or film-as-text: How to develop a compelling narrative form that breaks with presuppositions about the nature of the event? How to narrate the endurance outside liberal heroic tropes of the overcoming of all odds? What are the range of affects that typically track with the enduring and support what you call the forms of cruel optimism, and why?

On the other hand are questions external to the film-as-text. That is, the film from the point of view of its emergence: the group that scripts it, casts it, situates it in a specific location and then acts it out. And this is especially intriguing when, as in *Killer of Sheep*, or among the Karrabing Film Collective, the lives that are being acted out track the lives people are living. The conditions of life in which my friends find themselves radically attenuate agency – they “flatten people’s batteries,” in the local idiom. So the activity of formation, the activity of producing a life from within their own life, is a significant event-experience. It is also a mode of critique, since, as we script and cast and plot and act/direct, we ask, why this plot, why so-and-so in this role, why these events? What part of the narrative is likely to happen in our everyday lives – and what that is unlikely, surprising? And this is also an event happening from inside the activity of filmmaking. Of course, there’s no separating these insides and outside – their extimate relationship is clearly evidenced when it comes to moving the filmic effect of all this into an editing room and then across the various platforms of viewership.

So, I was wondering how your thinking about the cinema of precarity would apprehend *Killer of Sheep* as not merely my crude way of taking bits and pieces of a film and using it as exemplary of a reading of a formation of power and possibility, but as part of the cinema of precarity in a fuller sense – how different kinds of practices of self-scripting don’t merely represent the cinema of precarity, but also provide an embankment around the energy it takes to endure the conditions of precarity.

Or, how do you think about the makings you make on your blog?

LB: This morning on the way to the gym, I had a conversation with a friend about an ethnography of contemporary pleasure economies in which everyone tries to plan out an

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event that will be invariably disturbed by experience. We talked about the concept of “the bucket list,” with its desire that life should entail experiences that make monumental memories that one can know in advance and predict, but that still demand the risk of an immersion whose frisson induces delight in the sense that one has really lived. Tonight, I went to get new glasses and got buyer’s remorse, but they don’t let you return your own face. Then I went to dinner, and although it was vegan and organic, it made me itch. Then I went for a walk, and although it was night, it got warmer and warmer. There were others in all of these situations, and a lot of warm noise. I checked my phone a lot, and answered email in the interstices such action makes. By the time I reached home, it was too hot to bear my cat sitting on my lap while I was reading a Gayatri Spivak piece. It was a good day, but I had a hard time maintaining my good humor in the middle of the sheer energy of sustaining all of the relations I encountered and imagined, the work of holding up the world – not feeling alone in it, exactly, but never quite knowing who the other was in relation to the sustaining project of mutuality. I could not make the cat leave. But I cast him as a friend with whom I pass warmth back and forth.

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Some forms of relation feel simple even though they are unbearable, unscripted, and at some level unnecessary, except in every way. Other relations are organized by the embrace of the competitive, the aggressive, the prematurely disappointed, and assurance about who’s the victim and who’s the unjust threat. Other ones proceed through sheer will, without much reflection on their cost. Others are convenient, conventional, and not forgettable, but easy to file away. Your films, like *Killer of Sheep*, are fantastic documents of the relation between antagonism and jostling in the episode and solidarity within a creative and world-extensive structure. The kind of movement one makes to keep some things open and to deflate and shift the shape of the others is something like what you call the “embankment” around ordinary precarity.

The queer, the psychoanalytic, the ethnographic, the historicist relation to the event understands its relation to temporality to be not at all constituted by an immediate impact, but by what Shaka McGlotten calls the sensual “bleed,” mediated through practices of life-making and projection.⁵ This attitude grounds what engages us both: a skepticism, in the philosophical sense, that leads to attention to the bleed and the



Julie Mehretu, *Black City*, 2007. Ink and acrylic on canvas. Photo: Stephen White.

shape of the scar that keeps changing, fading, and becoming prominent over time, and reopening. Patterns emerge and converge and something is induced through their infrastructural mediation of the world to itself. Where we part a bit, I think, is on the question of the event. I prefer to say the “becoming-event” of an impact or situation rather than the “quasi-event,” because your phrase still signals to me an anchoring in the self-evidence of impact. I always prefer to dial back the sense that a determining action has occurred – seeing impact as more like a prompt – and track its appearance as circulation, transformation, and mediations – what I boringly call its way of “finding its genre.” From this perspective, precarity is ontological, the openness of the world to the relation among its structures and emerging patterns, our heuristic habitation of it all, and the forced openness we have to each other’s tenderness, historical trail, and need for things to go as well as we want (where desire meets aggression). Again, that could be a caption for your films, or *Killer of Sheep*.

But the cinema of precarity is also specific and materialist. It is all about what resources remain for generating life beyond the minima of survival; it is about the costly demand on

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precarious individuals and populations to practice affective and economic austerity. In the precarious aesthetic, docility, exhaustion, and the minor pleasures are revealed to be ways out of defeat, modes of stuckness, and what needs destruction. *Who* the precarious are is less objective than it sometimes seems, nonetheless: there are so many different kinds of structure involved with precarity’s fact and atmosphere. *Killer of Sheep* is an amazing demonstration of this: of the fragility among intimates, of being on the make as a way of refusing to be the sheep that one is killing, of understanding that violence and death are parts of the ordinary, are low-level attritions within it that also provide uneven kinds of nutrition. And then there is the precariousness of time for thought, of the capacity to experiment in life, of love. Those long, quiet shots. The importance of children playing without a plot, and improvising effects. The film asks the question: Which is worse, a fully developed consciousness, or the modes of dissociation that reduce suffering and allow for the expression of complex, contradictory, and counterintuitive motives and practices? I think the latter wins in the film: a consciousness from a biopolitical perspective that takes in everything and holds it in presence as a resource for living lives also with



Charles Burnett, *Killer of Sheep*, 1977. Film still

the threat of an affective collapse (see Fanon and Patricia Williams for more of *that*).⁶

So what I point to in the cinema of precarity is the operation of a structural state: a motile membrane of consistency absorbing many locales and lives into its logic – not the drama of antithesis to the affecto-practical place where intuitions are made from the visceral disturbances we share, but a structure of feeling like what you call fog. What an event is isn't the opposite, a non-event, but rather a developing scene in which *we pay attention* to what takes shape from within the disturbances of relationality. I worry about the language of the minor the way you worry about "structure" – it points so much to a reduced version of its opposite. But I guess in that sense we are both occupying and redistorting concepts that ought to be richer and inconvenient to the desire for efficient description.

Sometimes within spaces of poverty, people's pleasure in reproducing life allows suffering to pass through time and action like the momentarily good and aversive smells one walks through all day. Desperation is a taxing noise that gets more or less intense. Sometimes in the places of economic cushion, emotional austerity is the norm for virtue, and waste makes ordinary action toxic and the atmosphere cortisol-cranky. I always try to remember that what we call the structural reproduction of life is about the relation of concentrations of wealth to other forms of social value and not just of who has the money. Your films show that pretty wonderfully. People wander, make music, put off the state and the law, have conversations, are quiet, eat, hang together even when they're separate, tell stories, try to make sense of things in a way that will get them a mode of living they can look forward to reproducing.

At the same time, so much of their creativity is bound up by fighting for a place in and outside of the state, and it is *this* drama, the binding of social energy to reproduce the bad life, that gets me and is the basis for what I gather into the domain of precarity aesthetics. So much amazing life energy is bound up in our own affective, bodily, imaginative, and practical poisoning for life. I feel that when facing the convenient stranglings of heteronormativity, white supremacy, colonial nationalisms; the ratcheting up of all of those toxic magnets amid the global elite's project of biopolitical shaming and release from liberal citizenship's already thin norms has now added new logics to the double binding.

What we have always seen together is the rich resource in relationality, richer than family and hoarded money. We have always seen together that the worst suffering and the most

unbearable precarity is in the radical individuality sold as liberal freedom, where people imagine that competition is what's natural while relations that build worlds are exceptional, like dessert. We also reject the version of the family that stages as love the subordination of children to the parental fantasy that here, finally, sovereignty can organize everyday life. Who needs it? Well, lots of people think they do because that's how they learned love and learned to imagine belonging. Anarchists like Proudhon point out that it's cooperation that one can't live without, while competition is what threatens living.

You write that "the conditions of life in which my friends find themselves radically attenuate agency – they 'flatten people's batteries,' in the local idiom." But it is also true that batteries are flattened wherever the reproduction of life captures all of the creative energy of life, which is most places, no? Is that why you turn to art? Is that why you make figures to map transfers across time and space? Is that why you think of role-casting as counter-precious? Why you keep writing? Because these modes unbind attachment, make counter-histories possible, and affirm effort?

EP: Yes, I think their metaphor of subjectivity as a flattened battery is quite extendable – their analysis of the problem of maintaining a relation to life, place, each other, worlding should not be understood as a local cultural idiom in the anthropological sense, but a theory, a rapacious analysis of the conditions of Late Liberalism as they land in places like Indigenous Australia. "Like in ..." is of course more of a deflection of the problem than an answer to the question of what constitutes comparison, equivalence. In *Economies of Abandonment*, I discussed a washing machine lid that flew off the back of a rented truck as a group of us moved from a form of homelessness to a state regime of public housing. I used this as an example of the kinds of events that create the kinds of catastrophes that the state and the public tear their collective hair out over. How do we coordinate the snapping of a shoelace with the stubborn disadvantage of Indigenous social worlding? I also note that quasi-events are the general condition of all human social life. My shoestrings snap all the time. What my Indigenous colleagues are noting with the metaphor of the flat battery is the fact that quasi-events have a different kind of force depending on where they occur in the socially distributed world. The effort it takes to undo, reverse, move on from the trivia of derangements in their lives verses mine is not trivial. And here, that amazing rendition of the effort involved in procuring and then losing a motor engine in *Killer*

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of *Sheep* will never cease to haunt me. My colleagues insist that I understand that the effort it takes to recharge a battery in a context in which everywhere and everything is deranged is of a different order than recharging a battery where this is not the case. So the entire world might appear to consist of the same type of quasi-events, but because neither the event nor the quasi-event are transcendent to their immanent and actual conditions, what appears as a quasi-event in my New York world and what appears as a quasi-event in their, and their-and-my, Karrabing world, are not equivalent.

Maybe the phrasing “becoming-event” would help point to the way that forms of eventfulness can seem comparable across socially differentiated substance-space even as they are not of the same type or mode. But I think the phrase “becoming-event” actually points to the moment that obsessively compels us both, maybe; that is – and I don’t have any powerful or beautiful language to describe this, alas – how and why and the moment when peopled places gather whatever creative energies they have left to derange and arrange these kinds of flattening nothings into charging somethings. After all, as we both know intimately and theoretically, the transformation of nothing into something is a miracle as much as a manner of being. It was you who first said to me that the difference between zero and one is larger than any sum between one and infinity. And this difference is the difference that my Karrabing colleagues face. And thus, thinking about the cinema of precarity as a resource for generating life beyond the minima of survival is rich, crucial, and important.

And now I am going to say something truly sentimental and banal. Buddha supposedly said that there are many roads to enlightenment. But of course this is true only if we remember that the reason there is not *one* road to enlightenment is not because there are many roads to enlightenment, but because each way of approaching a problem reveals that the problem was not one problem in the first place. And this is indeed why I love thinking with you, whether, as in this case, our thinking together is via a Google document read and responded to across cafés, home offices, bush camps, or gyms, or whether our thinking happens via thumbed-through books and my pork fat and your veggie burgers in the interstices of talks and conferences. My road is never exactly your road, and so where we stand in the end is a shared place, an opening, but not a Heideggerian open. Ours is weirder, warped, shared but not the same. What could be better?

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This is the third of a four-part meditation in this issue on the problem of time, effort, and endurance in conditions of

precarity, and pragmatic efforts to embank an otherwise.

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Lauren Berlant teaches in English at the University of Chicago. Her most recent books are *Cruel Optimism* (2011), *Desire/Love* (2012), and, with Lee Edelman, *Sex, or the Unbearable* (2014). She has also edited a few books on affect and emotion – *Intimacy* (2000) and *Compassion* (2003), is Co-Editor of *Critical Inquiry*, and is series editor of TheoryQ (Duke UP) with Lee Edelman. She blogs at *Supervalent Thought*.

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Homosexuality and Psychoanalysis, eds. Tim Dean and Christopher Lane (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001).

2
Jackie Stacey, *Teratologies: A Cultural Study of Cancer* (New York: Routledge, 1997).

3
“Violence and Redemption,” eds. Candace Vogler and Patchen Markell, special issue, *Public Culture* vol. 15, no. 1 (2003).

4
Lauren Berlant’s blog is called “Supervalent Thought” <http://supervalentthought.com/>

5
Shaka McGlotten, “Ordinary Intersections: Speculations on Difference, Justice, and Utopia in Black Queer Life,” *Transforming Anthropology* vol. 20, no. 1 (2012): 45–66.

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In particular, Patricia Williams, *The Alchemy of Race and Rights* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Univ. Press, 1991) and Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, trans. Charles Lam Markmann (London: Pluto Press, 1986 [1952]).

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