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## **Public Memory, Popular Culture, and the 1984–1985 Ethiopian Famine**

This research project examines the culture and politics of the ongoing affective appeal of the 1984 Ethiopian famine in the West. An event now more than 25 years old, the famine and the pop famine relief events of Band Aid and Live Aid remain curiously prominent in Western public memory through DVDs, CDs, T-shirts, posters and other memorabilia, published memoirs, celebrity figures, commemorative television and print media, Internet fan sites and referential events such as Live 8 and Live Earth.

My research examines the ongoing circulation of narratives, souvenirs, and celebrities related to the famine and Live Aid as a series of popular cultural events that show sustainable development to be located at an intersection of affective and political economies. Affect and emotion have been central to the analysis of nationalism, but the global feeling that tends to underwrite humanitarianism and environmentalism requires more critical attention. There is a growing concern across the social sciences and humanities with understanding how historically specific, but nevertheless transnational or cosmopolitan forms of belonging and identification might develop in relation or response to globalization. Scholars have critiqued the popular discourse of the global within environmentalism as a naïve universalism that obfuscates the postcolonial political economy, as well as significant differences of power and culture. Although important, this critique does not examine how the global comes to be a site of emotional investment and affective belonging at certain times and places. The African famine relief events of 1984-85 suggest a complex interplay of spectacle, capital and affect is at work in the constitution of global imaginaries.

I propose that the proliferating famine relief memorabilia and the initial media events surrounding the famine can be read not only for their representations of Africa and Africans, but also as aspects of a culture of sentimentality. The much-criticized mass media image of the “famine child” and its counterpoint in the pop music celebrity enable a feeling of global connectedness by enacting a sentimental narrative around which an intimate, though seemingly global, public was constituted.

Sentimentalism has received renewed attention by feminist and postcolonial scholars for its multiple and contradictory roles in creating affective spaces for bourgeois female culture and identity through the depiction of the suffering of others. Locating the representations and popular receptions of the 1984-85 Ethiopian famine within the social and aesthetic frameworks of celebrity and consumer culture and sentimentalism can help to illuminate 1) why it retains a powerful hold in the popular imagination, 2) the audiences for which it is significant, 3) the conceptions of environment, justice, and the global it mobilizes, and 4) how it contributes to the economic strength and political influence of what famine theorist Alex de Waal terms the “humanitarian international”—morally sanctioned, non-state actors like donor agencies, aid workers, academics, and journalists.