

Worlds Different: Baez–Dylan, Occupying Washington, and Our Crises in “Sentimental Political Storytelling”

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This article considers the precarious place of sentimentality in the contemporary historical moment. In light of the algorithmicization of everyday life, the possibility to make claims of fundamental connection—especially motivated by liberatory politics—has been imperiled. Building on Lauren Berlant’s analysis of sentimentality in American politics, I consider the present stalemate. I analyze a case study of two musicians—Joan Baez and Bob Dylan—by comparing two performances in Washington, D.C.: the 1963 March on Washington and a 2010 concert at the Obama White House honoring the former event. Seen comparatively, the political vulnerabilities of sentimentality come clear. And yet, in the case of Baez, we see also the potential of sentimentality—especially in the algorithmic present—to be used as productive political tactic toward collective reimaginings of the popular.

Intro: Populations or Publics? Or, New Crises in Sentimentality

Charlie Kirk said that Martin Luther King, Jr., was an “awful” person (Turton 2024). After his assassination, Kirk has been hailed by columnists, including Ezra Klein for *The New York Times*, as an ideal democrat “practicing politics in exactly the right way,” bridging two supposedly equally legitimate sides “on the same side of a larger project” (Klein 2025). An incredibly unlikely candidate for a hero of a mythological middle—logical only for those who think the problem of American politics is in two-way “polarity,” in not being able to hear each other and not in the second fascist transformation of society—Kirk has been hailed by the Trump regime and beyond as a national leader and lost martyr, a new kind of civil rights leader. All this formulated from a Washington, D.C., under literal military occupation.

Fifteen years earlier, in a White House event hurried twenty-four hours ahead of schedule, with the news of an impending February blizzard—“Snowmageddon”—a forty-eight year-old Barack Obama welcomes an intimate crowd at the White House for an event: “In Performance at the White House: A Celebration of Music from the Civil Rights Movement.” In solemn introductory remarks, Obama claims that “the Civil Rights Movement was a movement sustained by music” and was “lifted by spirituals inspired by the Bible” and “sharpened by protest songs about wrongs that needed righting” (Obama 2010, 1:31–1:44). Referring to Joan Baez and Bob Dylan, Obama remembers the movement as “broadened by folk artists like a New York-born daughter of immigrants and a young story-teller from Minnesota.” Together, this charming, iconoclastic duo “captured the hardships and hopes of people who were worlds different from them, in ways that only song can do” (Obama 2010, 1:45–2:01). Yes, people *worlds different*. This miraculous jump—central to his formula for an American millennialism—was afforded, for Obama, by music alone.

While Obama-era politics operated in violent American hegemony and late capitalism running on fumes—dressed neatly as possible in polite liberal garb, as exemplified in the considered event—of course a new epoch is arising now out of these ashes: blending outright abandonment of appeals to democracy, nearly total privatization, the strategic and selective hollowing-out of the state apparatus, the demonization of horizontal politics, and a technototalitarian grip over public discourse. This new brand of authoritarianism, which Žižek has recently called “liberal fascism” (Žižek 2026), is bound intimately to capitalism and a total take-over of “the commons”—using the biopolitical contraptions of late capital to control and monitor “the space within which exchange and communication takes place” (Žižek 2023, 200). That this discursive commons has been seized by these forms of power has brought with it a kind of affective emergency. There have therefore arisen crises in imagination and political mobilization—as critics who would wish to resist this new domination struggle to use these very “privatized commons” to rebel. It is an urgent question now, therefore, whether it is possible to build collective group feelings and to mobilize them toward new, shared political goals—when the mechanics used to do so are themselves, to unprecedented degree, part of the very origin of crisis.

While it is beyond the reaches of this article to sufficiently analyze these structural crises, we might consider one special aspect in this issue on sentimentality and pop music: the history of the rearrangement of popular feeling through musical performance to organize political power. By analyzing sentimentality—its limits and its possibilities, by way especially of Berlant—we are offered helpful vantage on how sustained mobilization of feeling has strategically been made precarious amid the biopolitical conditions of a “liberal fascist” hollowing out of communicative commons. Can we feel and share radical feelings in arrangements where feeling is surveilled, anticipated, and curated by the tools we use to get out of the problem? What are the precedents for community-making in musical performance, and what might this reveal about the present and future of sentimentality? How are these traditions of musical performance—and their competing uses of sentimentality to construct publics—at odds with dissent in an era of the algorithmic?

As has been thoroughly demonstrated, sentimentality holds an illustrious place in the fabric of American culture and the history of its curation of publics. Its aesthetic and political methods—the mobilization of affect and feeling toward the arousal of collective, morally imbued political consciousness—lie at the core of U.S. cultural imaginaries and interventions in biopolitics: in both their most violent and most liberatory utterances. From founding documents’ claims of “barbarity” of kings, to *Uncle Tom’s Cabin’s* claims to “feel right,” to Martin Luther King, Jr.’s “dream”: There is an infinite catalogue of Americans plumbing the personal and pathetic for the desire to build a different, better, or more efficient world. But as one’s sensorium becomes dominated by the rhythms of algorithms designed to turn the subject into a data point amid a population, we must ask what possibility there is or any longer could be for agency in rearranging the affective states of things.

As regards such curation of publics, the first of Michael Warner’s influential criteria—that is, that “a public is self-organized” (Warner 2002, 413)—seems certainly ruled out in the new arrangement. A public “is self-creating and self-organized,” writes Warner, “and herein lies its power, as well as its elusive strangeness” (Warner 2002, 414). How could there be this self-organization when its unity is curated by subjectifying formulas defined exactly by their seizure of autonomy? A population is not a public. An aggregate is not affect. Here we must thus also contend with Warner’s sixth criterion—that “publics act historically according to the temporality of

their circulation.” The impending crises of this point Warner himself began to intuit, already in 2002:

One way that the internet and other new media may be profoundly changing the public sphere, by the way, is through the change they imply in temporality. Highly mediated and highly capitalized forms of circulation are increasingly organized as continuous (“24/7 instant access”) rather than punctual. [...] If the change of infrastructure continues at this pace, and if modes of apprehension change accordingly, the absence of punctual rhythms may make it very difficult to connect localized acts of reading to the modes of agency in the social imaginary of modernity. It may even be necessary to abandon ‘circulation’ as an analytic category. (Warner 2002, 421)

It is exactly these “localized acts” (without which we would banish “‘circulation’ as an analytic category”) to which we will turn our attention in readings of Baez and Dylan. In distinction to the revolutionary sentimentality successfully curated by Baez, we will see, however, that it might no longer be the difficulty, as intuited by Warner, merely of “connecting localized acts of reading to the modes of agency.” It seems no longer the problem of finding the connections. It is perhaps now the case, instead, in this biopolitical era of the algorithmic, that “localized acts of reading” have themselves become entirely ejected from “agency.” It would follow, therefore, that not only “circulation” might be abandoned as a category—but perhaps the very possibility of the “localized act.” Could that be the death of publics? For what mutual feelings and practices can arise in the absence of the punctual? What feeling public—what public of any kind—could be born amid conditions defined exactly by capitalist media’s seizure of autonomy?

So if the United States is a country born in a fervor of feeling (and it *is*), we might now ask: Is it one ending—as we have known it, anyway—in a vacuum of feeling? Or, at least, in the radical, perhaps total re-personalization of feeling toward a violently curated population? We are forced into fragmentation into “our own feed,” our own algorithmic experience, curated strategically for our own psychic vulnerabilities. While aggregate, these experiences are by no means public. On the contrary, they are the nearly perfect hallowing of public life through the aggregation of emotional states, thoughts, desires. “Neoliberal psychopolitics,” writes Byung-Chul Han, “seizes on emotion *in order to influence actions on this pre-reflexive level*. By way of emotion, it manages to cut and operate deep inside” (Han 2017, 48; italics original). Has this disruption in the curation of a public sphere thereby shattered the potential for the political mobilization of feeling? Have the circumstances of late-capitalist, technototalitarian life made impossible the political mechanism (sentimentality) on which their development has depended? In other words: Has American capitalist domination’s latest escape act been to banish dissent against it, through distraction, the mirage of polarization, the infinite fragmentation of one’s relations to the world? This would be part of what we saw Žižek above call the second “privatization of the commons,” which, in contrast to that “of the so-called primordial accumulation in England,” instead today’s transforming “commons *remain* commons and are *as such* privatized” (Žižek 2023, 200). Part of what Žižek elsewhere calls “liberalism brought to its (fascist) conclusion, to the actualization of its hidden immanent potentials” (Žižek 2026, 2–3), this relation is necessarily a rupture in the heart of sentimentality.

If we understand, by way of Lauren Berlant, the centrality of the sentimental in the political operations of life in America—and we most certainly should—we can indeed thus understand the current failures of politics today as a failure of the possibility for sentimentality: for the mass mobilization of feeling and affect toward the curation of a new world. Or, a step further, if Berlant writes that in the late twentieth century there remained yet “unfinished business of sentimentality,” we might now ask: Is perhaps, finally, the business finished?¹ To foreshadow my conclusion and hope: Can we instead imagine a sentimentality that could still congeal, that could avoid its algorithmic death knell, maintaining awareness of the violent and uneven conditions of the world—while pushing back against the limits of the biopoliticizing nation-state, making earnest appeals to conduct new forms of horizontal feelings, new publics, new ways around the nearly total biopolitical power of communication in late-capitalist life?

Memorializing Baez–Dylan—And Baez’s Revolutionary Distinction

Let’s turn to history. While inquiring into the extent and effects of the death knell—or fundamental reformation—of the sentimental and fellow-feeling, will need to be performed more systematically in other venues, we might proceed by considering a single twentieth-century case study that draws these tensions taught and reveals an understudied, highly relevant form of sentimentality: which we might understand as *revolutionary sentimentality*. The sentimental formulas of Bob Dylan and Joan Baez—sung enthusiastically, we saw above, by Obama—will provide a particularly productive example. In this case study, we can compare the duo’s performances in two public events in Washington, D.C.: the iconic 1963 March on Washington and the 2010 Obama White House concert held in honor of the earlier event. In comparing these high-pressure performances, we bear witness to a critical difference in sentimental politics that illuminates our present quagmires. Baez and Dylan use sharply distinct methods of deploying sentimentality: distinct ways of building collectivity, scenes of responsibility, and negotiating between difference as they construct their mythic public. In assessing these differences, we will find a window into our own moment: reflecting on long-held assumptions on the supposedly necessary reactionary nature of sentimentality—and thus its status and potential amid current political crises—and seeing how its form of public-making, as seen in what Warner would call shared “punctual” and “self-organized” musical performance, might in fact signal a trace of some yet-to-be-carved potential way out.

Across readings of the performances in these two events, Joan Baez demonstrates a peculiar, understudied form of sentimental constructions of publics. It is one that, today, seems somewhat unimaginable both in its breadth and in its sincerity. Baez maintains a critical rigor and historical specificity that construct sensitivity toward group making and political mobilization while also expressing full-throated sincerity for effecting liberatory politics. Dylan relies, on the other hand, on more commonly critiqued formulas of sentimentality: violently homogenizing and dehistoricizing, engaging squarely in the realm of what Berlant calls “the National Symbolic.” Dylan builds a folksy fabrication of “the general people,” thus eluding historical specificity and relying on the aesthetic slickness of a great folk feeling. In the work of Dylan, we find a politics of folk that lies in the unification of a singular “people”—the curation of an American that is great pre-

1 Thank you to Heike Paul, who first raised this question. This article and its pursuit of whether and to what extent and to what ends that “business” might be finished, and what that would mean, are an ongoing collaborative inquiry inspired by her. The other obvious question this raises is: Might we enthusiastically bid farewell to it? Might there, in the absence of a cultural regime of sentimentality, be new, more sober ways of organizing mass-level change, which cannot yet be imagined? I think not—because I cannot imagine building publics on such a scale without building collective feeling—but it is, in any case, an intriguing and urgent question.

cisely through his being general—of which much critique rightly abounds. Baez, alternatively, we will find creates group identity rooted in fundamental humanity and shared (but differentiated) moral responsibility. Her method uses the direct experience of pop—inviting people into performances, creating affective states as intense as they are focused—that gather feeling and affect and builds a critical texture, through collective rhetorical methods analyzed below, of the unequal ways that history produces difference. We find her, across centuries, demanding special responsibility for those implicated in the perpetration of atrocity. We find traces, thus, of a radical pop music—and an orchestration of publics through local performance—unabashedly sincere in its pursuit of transforming hearts toward revolutionary new political arrangements.

We can learn much in our present moment from a critical study of Baez’s dissident distinctions. Rather than banishing fellow-felling in a general critique of the sentimental as backward, to resist the technototalitarian we can also “build on the long history of community solidarity generated by people’s resistance to exclusion and enclosure” (McQuillan 2022, 135). In terms of pop music and performance, such might be a sentimentality that takes a revolutionary understanding of the human as the center of its unifying force: a shared musical experience that is historically prudent, critically rigorous, and committed to collectivist idealism and humanism that it believes can rearrange difference. This would be in line with what Berlant recently, and we must note optimistically, called “the power of feeling-with crossed with solidarity in the political sphere” (Berlant 2022, 114). Such critical reevaluation and distinction of types of sentimentalities (rather than the reactionary banishing of it) is of utmost urgency in our time of the attempted total biopolitical seizure of “the commons.”

And yet while actually highly disparate in their sentimental oeuvres, Baez and Dylan are most prominently—as seen in the case of Obama—flattened in their memorialization through iconic imagery as exact political pairings. In a second prominent alternative, Baez is sometimes alternatively depicted as a naïve sacrificial lamb for Dylan’s ascent into genuine art. Their short relationship, across these depictions, continues to be employed as symbol of a profoundly nostalgized moment. Either way, it bears the weight of the fate of political struggle, of freedom’s tipping point. Exemplary of the first and most prominent memorialization of the couple, the velvety atmosphere at Obama’s event we saw above epitomizes the potential of the Civil Rights Movement as a unique rhetorical source to perfectly unify progressive American forces. It is only because of the movement, Obama reminds us, that *he* could be in attendance that evening: that he could be at the helm of an ascendant America. This connection between pop music and national unity is made extraordinarily clear by the young president. Giddy atop what seemed then like a fateful, limitless new political order—in a hope that surely seems baffling now—Obama declares it was “Dr. King himself” who “once acknowledged that he didn’t see the real meaning of the movement until he saw young people singing in the face of hostility” (Obama 2010, 2:31–2:40). “Joan Baez and Bob Dylan,” Obama claims, “knew this. One day in 1963 they joined hundreds of thousands on the National Mall and sang of a day when the time would come, when the winds would stop, when a ship would come in. They sang of a day when a righteous journey would reach its destination” (Obama 2010, 3:53–4:12). He concludes: “So, to everyone here, or watching at home, let us enjoy the music we hear tonight. Let the music feed our spirits, give us hope, and carry us forward as one people, and as one nation” (Obama 2010, 4:32–4:46). From “people who were worlds different from them” to an “us,” moving “forward,” who make “one people” and “one nation.” “People worlds different” to “one people, one nation.” Exemplifying this prominent, millennial liberal version of American history with Baez and Dylan its faithful sentimental servants, for Obama it is a single sentimental folk music that conducts this miraculous jump.

The second, equally revealing, way we find this pair iconized—with Baez as the innocent symbolic sacrifice—is related in how it enters the couple into the realm of the national-symbolic as a stand-in for the national family. It stages, however, the romantic and political failures of the Baez–Dylan couple as failures of the national family: more particularly, the failures of sentimentality to hold together the national family. Recently, this was exemplified in James Mangold’s *A Complete Unknown* (2024). The film offers its audience the alluring Dylan–Baez relationship as an allegory of a potential past of American intelligibility—the perfect what-could-have-been. While Baez is depicted as sincerely integrated in the fight for struggle and revolution through heartfelt feeling, it is a doomed fight. There is the exploding Bob Dylan cast over her—a creative ready to assume his place as a genuine, if morally conflicted, musical artist. Baez is featured looking onward lustily as she watches her mode of sincere sentimental folk being banished in real time to history. We find Woody Guthrie, similarly decrepit and unable to speak, and Pete Seeger bumbling hopelessly about, emasculated, trying and necessarily failing in a sort of sentimental absurdity to corral the force of an uncontrollable future crystallized in Dylan.

In *A Complete Unknown*, we see this especially in Baez. The audience watches her become irrelevant. She becomes impossible. In such a staging, the couple is thus emblematic not of, like for Obama, a perfect sentimental family unison—but of a damnation of the possibility for sincerely mobilizing art at the hands of Dylan’s messianic place in a hedonistic Americana that gets beyond pop’s supposed platitudes. Sure, there was a time—a few months’ time—*A Complete Unknown* suggests, when it could be unironically sung that “we shall overcome” and that we would know who “we” was. It was, however, the alienating avant-garde of a mercurial Bob Dylan that would eclipse such backward looking folk publics. This was fate: it was an expressive power of the American Century amid the background of Soviet bombs. Seen most dramatically, Mangold has Baez first glimpse at Dylan—his face cut diagonally in a corner of a bar’s dramatic lighting—as she sings of the proverbial “house of the rising sun.” In a song imagining female sex work, Baez turns muse here: prophet, oracle of a real rising star. As if struck by some urgent message, she turns away, unable to bear to look even at half of him. Covering the microphone with her hand, she is forced by Mangold to abandon the impending electric (with which Dylan triumphs at film’s end) to complete her sacrificial introduction *a cappella*, in the too-familiar chorus of this too-familiar standard: backward-looking literally, prophesizing the sun as we see it rising across Dylan’s face.

Either of these narrative tensions of the Baez–Dylan difference—whether by Obama or Mangold, so to speak—can be read as examples of crises in what Rebecca Wanzo calls “sentimental political storytelling.” “‘Feeling deeply’ and ‘feeling right,’” writes Wanzo, “have been important in U.S. political discourse because of what Lauren Berlant describes as the continued cultural influence of a ‘particular form of liberal sentimentality that promotes individual acts of identification based on collective group memberships’ and binds citizens ‘to the nation through a universalist rhetoric not of citizenship per se but of the capacity of suffering and trauma at the citizen’s core’” (Wanzo 2009, 16; Berlant 1998, 636). A “useful political practice for many activists,” the sentimental, Wanzo analyzes, employs “the positive affect of sympathy”—that is, to accompany its focalization on a particular “villain,” there arises the “visage of the victim” that frequently includes “children and families holding each other in joy or pain” (Wanzo 2009, 7). Both Obama’s and Mangold’s sentimentalizing are exemplary of negotiations that Wanzo points to as the Civil Rights Movement’s special place as a strategic “building block of sentimental history in contemporary culture” (Wanzo 2009, 11). These two modes compete over its successes. Was it a perfectly harmonious iconic duo who brought the nation forward? Was it an iconic duo wherein the tragic shortcomings of sentimentality are staged at the expense of genius?

As far as examples considered in this essay are concerned, however, there is an alternative story we must tell. To understand the limits and functions of the sentimental in our moment of communicative and political crises, we can bear witness to and distinguish two specific kinds of collective making and their respective political differences. Baez offers a compelling historical example of sentimental cultural expression that relies not, in Berlant's words, on "the nation through a universalist rhetoric not of citizenship per se but of the capacity of suffering and trauma at the citizen's core" (Berlant 1998, 636). Upon considering these case studies and Berlant's own transformation in theorizing the possibilities of sentimentality, we can return to our present crises—where this essay concludes—and the question that lingers of the extent to which the business is, can, or must be finished.

In a way I will argue is particularly timely, Baez's methods challenge and broaden our understanding of sentimentality at a critical juncture: in our historical moment when critics attempt to employ digital authoritarianism against itself—which, examined above, is at odds with mass politics with any hope to get beyond, or rearrange at all, biopolitical discipline. Baez alternatively offers a case of sentimentality, performed live and collectively, that creates fellow-feeling with a center that is bent beyond the biopoliticking nation-state. This will come clear especially by the final readings of this essay—at the 2010 White House event, which looked to many like the beginning of global jubilee, and looks now like the entrance into a global era of strategic mass confusion, novel forms of biopolitical discipline, and militant anti-democratic politics. In a moment that seemed to many like hope, Baez's performance anticipates the danger of the jubilee that led to these present crises. While sentimentality "does not provide much skill for working through the antagonism or differences among potential comrades," in any case: "You can't have mass politics without sentimentality" (Berlant 2022, 194).² Baez shows just such a blueprint: group-building that, through textures of local and autonomous events, transcends the population-making of the capitalist nation-state and that penetrates, through rigorous historical specificity, into rearranging hegemonic power. From this perch, Baez's historicist subversion of sentimentality's weakness reveals how there still could be built productive counterpublics amid the "liberal fascism" that we now face. Could a democratic revolution, we might ask, still move us to tears?

March on Washington, 1963: Splitting Icon

On August 28, 1963, it was not likely the customary playlist of the majority of the crowd that organized on the Washington Mall—mostly Black, very Southern—when the likes of Bob Dylan and Joan Baez took the stage. "The folk-singing group"—as actor Ossie Davis, the event's emcee, referred to them—played first in the morning at the Washington Monument, and later, following the 1,300-meter march, at the Lincoln Memorial, just before King would deliver "I Have a Dream." Estimates are that just one fifth of participants were White. And yet these folk musicians, and especially Bob Dylan, stand for many as the face of this event and not infrequently for the general movement and politics it has come to symbolize.

This tension of representation is exacerbated by Dylan's song choice at the Lincoln Memorial. "Just a Pawn in Their Game" was selected—then an unreleased original ballad, distributed for the first time six months after the March, in early 1964, on his third record, *Times They Are a 'Changing*. The ballad reports on the death of Medgar Evers: an organizer and leader of the NAACP, who, just months earlier, in June 1963, was murdered at his home in Jackson, Mississippi, by Byron de la Beckwith, a local operative of the Ku Klux Klan. As historian William Jones has it, at the Lincoln Memorial, the ballad received "a tepid response." While Jones emphasizes the song's "cynicism" as this origin of this cool response, there might be more at play (Jones

² Thanks to Ege Özbek for debate over this bit by Berlant.

2003, 192). Dylan’s ballad centers sympathetically around the image of De la Beckwith—a KKK leader—as but a poor, White victim. He is positioned by Dylan as an innocent object of some other, unnamed, actually-responsible political force: “But he can’t be blamed, he’s only a pawn in their game” (Dylan 2019 [1963], 0:36–0:45). Discourse of racial difference is employed, instead, by an abstract political class:

These south politicians preach it to the poor white man:
“You got more than the blacks, don’t complain.”
“You’re better than them,
you’ve been born with white skin,” they explain.
And the negro’s name is used it is plain
For the politician’s gain
As he rises to fame
And the poor white remains
On the caboose of the train
But it ain’t him to blame
He’s only a pawn in their game.
(Dylan 2019 [1963], 0:45–1:25)

Transforming a KKK operative into but a pitiable “poor white,” these words were sung by Dylan on the exact stage that would host a speech by Evan’s widow, Myrlie Evans, for whom it would take thirty more years—in 1994—to get this “pawn” in jail after all-White Mississippi juries twice refused to sentence in 1964. While the March indeed seems like an occasion to think about systems, rather than focusing on individual guilt, it is bizarre that Dylan would excuse—or try at least to explain—the murder of Black civil rights activists for being simply conducted by a conspiring political class that is cast apart from a unified, folksy, purifying “We.” The song builds sentimental identification that includes KKK leaders and thereby absolves them of a shared and general guilt.

This foreshadows Dylan’s infamous—yet understudied—grievances with left-wing and liberatory politics. While, as Obama reminds us, Dylan continues to be championed as one of its most preeminent orchestrators, just months later he would turn away from both folk music and anything like radical-democratic politics. Eschewing pacifism and idealism and turning to the sixties’ Dionysian side, he suddenly embraced not political platforms but acid, rock and roll, and symbolist poetry. By 1965, he would famously claim, he would “work on Maggie’s farm no more.” Already by December 1963—just four months after the March for which he is heroically remembered—he would deliver a speech in New York, mocking the March for which he has become a representative figure. He claims that, at the March, he “looked around at all the Negroes there and I didn’t see any Negroes that looked like none of my friends. My friends don’t wear suits. My friends don’t have to wear suits. My friends don’t have to wear any kind of thing to prove that they’re respectable Negroes” (Dylan 2016 [1963]). In abstracting words hauntingly familiar today, Dylan concludes that he did not “see any colors at all,” becoming polemically mystical, and engaging thus in what Berlant would call “antipolitical politics”—or “national sentimentality” that is “sentimental because it is a politics that abjures politics, made on behalf of a private life protected from the harsh realities of power” (Berlant 1997, 11). Claims Dylan: “There’s no black and white, left and right to me anymore.” Instead: “There’s only up and down and down is very close to the ground. And I’m trying to go up without thinking about anything trivial such as politics. They has got nothing to do with it. I’m thinking about the general people and when they get hurt” (Dylan 2016 [1963]). A turn, then, from the historical and specific critique of the March into violent abstraction pure: the general people’s pain. As Berlant would have it: “The utopia of a color-blind and gender-consensual society has been used as an alibi to make cases of egregious inequality seem like exceptions to a national standard, rather than a structural condition” (Berlant 1997, 9).

To begin to better see this distinction in sentimentality, let us turn to Baez, whose sentimental politics at the March on Washington functions in a fundamentally different manner—and which constructs group identity in a different place. Committed to material political reform, Baez had exchanged with King, and worked together politically, since he was twenty-seven and she was sixteen—when they met in 1956, just after the bus boycotts, but before King achieved general notoriety. “One of his buddies” (Baez 2023, 2:02–2:24), Baez was one of the March participants who best knew King and for the longest time. This alliance can be witnessed in Baez’s performance. While she, too, employs a “folk we” at the feet of the Washington Monument, she employs pronouns that unify in ways that differ profoundly from those of Dylan. Not in an original ballad, but an inherited standard, Baez sings “We Shall Overcome” (“Keep Your Eyes on the Prize, Hold On” 2013, 0:00–1:28). Inviting participation from the crowd, Baez conducts collaborative action. The “We” begins with a unified response to the urgencies at hand—offering, implicitly and through experience, the March itself as a pragmatic and immediate solution. But it is not the suffering, in Wanzo’s words, that is made universal by this performance—but moral responsibility. It is sentimental group identify, yes—but the power of which is harnessed forward in collective struggle: “We shall overcome.”

Developing these delicate pronoun-driven politics—negotiating responsibility—Baez continues, moving to the Lincoln Memorial (“Keep Your Eyes on the Prize, Hold On” 2013 [1963], 11:30), with another sentimental, pronoun-driven selection. Here, she offers the crowd a rendition of “All My Trials.” Less commonly remembered, we encounter a signature, delicate renegotiation of the semantics of standards—which we will find anew in her later collectivization at Obama’s feet. In this performance, she inverts the song’s inherited pronouns. While seemingly a miniscule difference, in context it is a total revision of the formation of collectivity—and antithetical to the sentimentality of Dylan. Baez’s negotiation of identity politics is diametric to Dylan’s dreamy color-blind provocateurism. It is not “my trials” of which she sings, as the song typically laments. Instead, she directs the audience—the mostly Black 300,000 people before her—rather by repeatedly singing “*all your trials ... will soon be over*” (“Keep Your Eyes on the Prize, Hold On” 2013 [1963], 12:00–12:20).

Baez creates intimate space that declines the standard’s use of the lyrical subject. Her performance recognizes the historical specificity of the position of the audience. Putting her two selections together: Baez suggests this moment is defined by “your trials” that together “we shall overcome.” Antithetical to Dylan’s dreams of a folksy and post-racial “We,” Baez’s performance neither neglects responsibility nor tries to unify through claims to homogenous exploitation. Dylan employs the collective power of sentimentality to effect both those things. This is an example of Baez’s collaborative use of folk collectivities to build historically attuned radical politics—and thus a helpful departure point, in its precedent of historically responsible sentimentality performed collaboratively and *en plein air*, in thinking of the possibilities for sentimentality in a moment of algorithmic authoritarianism. In her live performance, Baez uses the sentimental register of popular folk music to establish a historically differentiated “you”—and yet employs a “We” that constructs shared moral responsibility to transform political conditions—and fuses this into a collaborative and physical event. Fifty years later, could this provocative linguist play be possible in front of a charming Obama, freshly in charge of the United States’s military and economic power?

D.C. Again: Two People, “Worlds Different”

One mile east and forty-seven years later, two guests of honor reengage with popular music set into the stuff of change. Bob Dylan opts to play a slowed, piano-driven rendition of “Times Are a’Changing” (Dylan 2010). In cue with this century’s Bob Dylan, he slows the pace of an original-

turned-standard in a transformation of songs once radical political anthems, now inward reflections on age, legacy, and death. On this eerily low-lit stage—like the half-illuminated face analyzed above from Mangold’s *A Complete Unknown* (2024)—the times changing seem here not of politics, but of pop music, of popular iconography, or just of Bob Dylan himself. With a scratchy voice, slowed by grand piano and steadily emphasized meter, legendary lines (like “For you better start swimming, or you’ll sink like a stone”) are here delivered more like an honest plea to take advantage of youth—to save or even reshape the world, not so much.

The curious tensions of folk’s place in American sentimentality are drawn yet more taut when we compare this to Baez’s performance at this same event. As in her D.C. performance fifty years earlier, it is again “We Shall Overcome” that Baez withdraws from her catalogue (Baez 2010). She reproduces the exact song, indeed, that she most famously offered at the event the Obamas were honoring that night. At first glance, the politics of this might seem disappointing. First, at an anti-racist, pacifist labor rally. Now at the White House of a president bailing out banks and expanding wars across the world. Rather than radical activists and clergy, it is Joe Biden, Barack Obama, and American political and military brass. These men were feeling swell about themselves, I am sure, as Reverend King’s friend serenaded them with the that delicious, folky “We.” Had Joan Baez sold out? Did she believe in the millennial force of American power?

While the song begins, for the first minute and a half, in such regular fashion, something surprising happens: a shift that is irresistible for analyzing sentimental political storytelling and the impending crises that we now live out. An awkwardness arises that unites Obama and Biden in confusion, rather than their earlier lustful unification of “people worlds different” and “one nation, one people.” After a minute and a half, Baez makes explicit King’s presence. She does so, however, not to position the Obama White House as its legitimate successor—but, rather, to turn it exactly against the event’s affective arrangement. Sing-talking over the band, she solemnly claims:

One day, Dr. King realized that non-violence fight went far beyond the shores of this great country, went far across the sea to a war that was being fought by god’s children on both sides of that great fight. And he knew that he had to speak out against that and he was afraid. He was very afraid. So we all raised our voices just a little bit louder. And we said we are not afraid today. We are not afraid today. (Baez 2010, 1:35–2:20)

Referring to American imperialism and specifically the Vietnam War—and the resistance thereto as a central facet of King’s work—Baez reforms the ceremony into a critique of the logical contradictions of liberal militarism in front of the man most endowed with its power. Through emphasis on King’s transition toward public condemnation of imperialism and capitalism, and of anything like liberation exclusive to any particular country or people, the folk “We” gets stretched by Baez and King uncomfortably past national imaginaries: An impossibility for this room of Obama’s. Like half a century earlier, Baez accomplishes this through acute historical specificity toward the fact of atrocity committed by the United States. In this case: the specifics of the violence perpetrated by the United States in Southeast Asia. This is counter fundamentally the ahistorical abstraction of national symbolisms that Dylan and Obama, as it were, prefer—and that made possible the self-righteous shared feelings of this luxurious event.

When this rendition of the standard turns inevitably toward “We are not afraid”—this most legendary of lines, sung here by Baez in an unusually deep key for the singer—the song takes on a different life. Uttered feet from the keyholder to human history’s largest military force—indeed, the manager of nuclear weapons—Baez employs sentimentality to turn the affective arrangement of the group toward a destabilization of itself. *You’re off script, Joan*. Already caught up in singing at their self-aggrandizing event—situating their own political power in a political tradition of liberation and not of crass hegemony—the room’s chorusing turns to something else:

against itself. It is no wonder why we see Joe Biden and Barack Obama, with an empty aisle between them, puzzled, become hush and dazed after their enthusiastic singing (Baez 2010, 2:23). How could this be?

This moment is critical in understanding the antagonistic functions of collectivities across sentimental genres—and, also, how we have gotten where we are. Dylan and Baez were indeed, in Obama’s words, “people worlds different.” As an icon, they seem nonetheless crystalline in memory—a past that recalls a future that could have been. Whether printed on a poster for their August 1963 duet, staged in a slick 2024 film, or recalled by a U.S. president appealing toward infinite liberal common sense, their completely disparate approaches toward liberation tend to be turned into a completed episode tucked comfortably away. The iconography of the young couple is an impossible balancing of two modes at odds. Uniting them in his description of what motivated Martin Luther King, Jr., and the millions of Black activists of the sixties, Obama takes enthusiastic part in this—and struggles (violently) to neutralize their own almost perfect demonstration of their difference.

Baez employs folk and its sentimental collectivizing in tow with King’s radicalism. King, likewise, was not “color blind,” of course, in August 1963—thus giving Charlie Kirk exactly zero reasons to like him—when he dreamt of a world where one is judged by “the content of their character” and not “the color of their skin.” While King’s speech appeals to abstracting American “founding document” language (citing, for example, Jefferson), and thereby skirts the breadth of what Berlant calls “the National Symbolic,” in context it centralizes historical difference and presses into critical analysis of being human. This is likewise the case for Baez both at the March when she delicately makes “your trials” “our” responsibility “to overcome” and at the White House in her insistence on communal identity and *Realpolitik* in her extralyrical taking Obama to task on the contradictions of liberalism (out of which our own crises are born). We witness the breadths of the popular burst. Singing “We Shall Overcome,” Baez returns to history through a deployment of a standard—a much-hummed song, defined by its ability to be shared, that, this time, not everyone is invited to sing along. Unless they repeat this language suddenly made aware of its own revolutionary potential—committed to collaboratively change the world. The standard turns against the failures of its own inheritances—into and against the room hoped to be purified by it. A folk standard, a pop hit, made a weapon. Like for King, we find the construction of textures of a “We” that are as open as they are specific. Baez’s folk was front-row, again, to power in D.C.: demonstrating how truly radical collaborative aesthetics—“the power of feeling-with crossed with solidarity in the political sphere” (Berlant 2022, 114)—is possible through such genres of historically astute revolutionary group-making toward liberatory mass politics. It is a musical performance that abandons neither the liberatory theorization of unity nor the violent particulars of history.

Sentimentality, the Event, and Liberation

Since the publication of Executive Order 14333, on August 11th, 2025, Washington, D.C., has been occupied by a military turned against citizens. In this historical moment it seems impossible to distribute sufficient resistance to the American state and rapidly transforming political-economic conditions globally. Methods of communication and information exchange definitive of our time—algorithmic individualization, paralyzing loops, supposedly neutral aggregation of information stolen (“scraped”) from working people, highly addictive interfaces coordinated by trillion-dollar companies bound to authoritarian rule—seem themselves to be both the effect and the cause of the crisis. They precipitate the crisis and make its end appear impossible. They deaden the texture of the event and make feeling broad new forms of unity, new publics, impossible. Become dependent on the alienating products of history’s most total biopolitical infrastruc-

ture, “writers and critics” (to quote Bob Dylan) struggle to formulate widespread democratic resistance to these forms of power. Their methods of resistance have until now been those forms of power.

To use art collectively to resist a government, or any organizing force, is reliant on the sentimental if we understand the sentimental as the systematic mobilization of feeling and affect toward rearranging politics. To build unity is to build a sense of collective. But in a moment in which the conditions of expression, or at the least the distribution of expression, are controlled by the very tools of democracy’s opposition—in contrast, for example, to spontaneously distributed leaflets at the 1963 March on Washington, or issues of *Freedom’s Journal* passed hand-to-hand in the 1820s—the ability for the utterance of new loci of horizontal social attachment has become entirely imperiled. We can learn from these musical performances of the past—successful in mobilizing millions and transforming people’s hearts and minds—that liberatory publics must not revolve around violent identities. But no democratic revolution can be waged online when data is the new frontier of capitalist extraction. The affective conditions for it cannot be made on biopolitical tools made to extract and dull: to bear populations, not publics. In contradistinction to Marx’s “dictatorship of the proletariat,” under the “psychopolitics” of late capitalism and its “neoliberal regime of auto-exploitation,” writes Byung-Chul Han, “people are turning their aggression *against themselves*. This auto-aggressivity means that the exploited are not inclined to revolution so much as depression” (Han 2017, 6–7; italics original). Where can a sentimentality that resists these new forms of power be constructed amid this strategic affective emergency?

Perhaps critics’ task thus is to find yet unimaginable sources—and methods of distribution and collaboration—for the enunciation of broad collective attachment. Such a collectivization of affect, moral force, and feeling would not need to result in what James Baldwin would say of the matter: “Sentimentality, the ostentatious parading of excess and spurious emotion, is the mark of dishonesty, the inability to feel” (Baldwin 1998, 12). But, as Baez above shows, should such a narrow understanding of the matter really be our limit in understanding sentimentality? Does one not feel a compelling political mobilization, for example—albeit, an unorthodox or disorganized one—when we feel the clash of David’s desire for Giovanni and his internalization of American heteropatriarchy? As indeed Baldwin’s own writing demonstrates against his protests, the political mobilization of feeling must not result in violent, stupid erasure. It must not, counter Baldwin, speaking of Stowe, “leave unanswered and unnoticed the only important question: what it was, after all, that moved her people to such deeds” (Baldwin 1998, 12). Baez, not unlike Baldwin, provides us also something of a blueprint for this: Feeling-charged mobilization bound to a scientific critique of what, per Baldwin, “moved her people to such deeds.” Critique seems not incompatible with the sentimental when its method lies in harmony with its aims. Especially in her White House performance analyzed above, Baez demonstrates how such methods take the spontaneous texture of pop to get beyond confines of power—both, in Warner’s words, “punctual” and “self-organized”—just as her inversion of pronouns worked within the boundaries of “the standard” to rearrange responsibility and shift the locus of feeling and group-building in the horizontally organized protests in the summer of 1963. But, as the examples of Baez show above: these necessitated a horizontal origin of attachment that destabilized hegemonic power and that shattered the population.

Keeping in mind the precedent and mechanics of Baez’s sentimentality, must we thus ask if the future of the sentimentality lies—in these times of technototalitarianism—not in the total abandonment of mobilizing feeling, but in newly imagined ways of building collective sympathy that get beyond biopolitical obsession? And that—perhaps most critically—rupture the forms of communicative domination that look like escape but are in fact the very object of critique? If, per Berlant, national sentimentality is an antipolitical politics of attachment to the nation that takes

its aim at public infrastructure (Berlant 1997, 11), is a sentimentality of its opposite not possible? Has it not, as Baez or King show, indeed already existed? How might such a revolutionary sentimentality look now? As we have seen above, it would take the origin of its sense of the collective in historically critical collectivity itself. It would transcend the “privatized commons” and “invent new forms of solidarity” (Žižek 2023, 201). It would neither take an alienating communicative system for its method nor aim—as Dylan did—toward the airy space of a purported apolitical ether. It would be democratic. It would take origin and aim in the localized, punctual, and shared—rooted to historical critique of the specifics of atrocity while committed to a humanist, anti-racist understanding of that human difference: circumstantial, contextual, always able to be overturned in surprising and wildly liberatory, spontaneous new social arrangements. “Big Data is wholly *blind to the event*,” writes Byung-Chul Han (Han 2017, 76; italics original). The potential of the space untouched by neoliberal domination—which still always exists—must be the affective place of resistance.

The *event*, which annuls what has held until now—the standing order—proves just as incalculable and abrupt as a *natural disaster* or *act of God*. It defies all calculation and prediction. When it occurs, an *entirely new state of affairs* begins. The *event* brings into play an *outside*, which breaks the subject open and wrests it from subjection. Events represent breaks and discontinuities; they open up *new spaces for action*. (Han 2017, 77; italics original)

This detachment from the particularity and intimacy of that which is shared in-person, in our era of algorithmicness, might be the trap of sentimentality’s supposed backwardness, or even death-knell, now. It is not that it cannot be made revolutionary, but that it cannot—so far—be freed of the evasive object of its critique. Perhaps something will thus arise that topples the contemporary limits of sympathy and the fragmentation and individualization of feeling—events where feeling is reorganized and tuned to new, local rhythms—building yet unimaginable places for the locus of feeling to be bound together, bound in struggle that can always arise, making new and newly horizontal arrangements of our world.

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