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Afterword

Empathy's entanglements

Carolyn Pedwell

What does it mean to think and sense beyond empathy's iterative associations with emotional equivalence, fellow-feeling, or humanisation to instead confront its deep and immanent entanglement with radical otherness? What, in turn, are the implications of understanding empathy not as simple or singular but rather as an unfolding set of socio-biological, techno-cultural, and politico-ethical relations that imbricate the human and non-human within worldly transactions and ecologies? These are two of the central questions this interdisciplinary volume explores with considerable distinctiveness, acuity, and insight.

Such concerns are salient in a context in which we may now be approaching 'peak empathy', as the literary scholars Emily Johansen and Alissa G. Karl claim in their introduction to *Rereading Empathy*. Liberal contemplation and debate concerning 'how much empathy we ought to spend, and where we ought to spend it', they note, 'is matched by an overall swell in attention to empathy in education, therapeutics, media and scholarly circles' (2022, p. 3). Or, as I argued in *Affective Relations: The Transnational Politics of Empathy* (2014), in the midst of late liberalism, empathy has become a Euro-North American socio-political obsession. Understood in shorthand as the ability to 'put oneself in the other's shoes', empathy is what we want to cultivate in ourselves and others. It is the affective attribute that we want to define 'our' society and that which we hope will characterise our interactions with those living outside our borders. Yet, precisely because it is so widely and unquestioningly viewed as 'good', empathy's invocation can effect a conceptual stoppage in conversation and analysis. The most pressing questions have thus tended less to be 'what is empathy?', 'what does it do?', 'what are its risks?', or 'what happens after empathy?', but rather the more automatic refrain of 'how can we cultivate it?'. The result, I have suggested, is a sentimental politics of feeling that fails to confront the fundamental ambivalence of empathy – how, that is, empathy can distance as much as it connects, exclude as much as it humanises, fix as much as it transforms, and oppress as much as it frees.

As the present volume illustrates compellingly, however, centring radical otherness in our discussions of empathy opens up the concept to a host of

more critical, expansive, and generative investigations. If, in the face of contemporary social, cultural, political, and economic relations, empathy has been most commonly articulated as the affective act of seeing from another's perspective in ways that assume the possibility of direct psychological access or easy affective identification, foregrounding the relationship between empathetic engagement and otherness attunes us powerfully to the question of *empathy's limits* – as well as its orientation towards that which is experienced as 'foreign', both internally and externally. Focusing on empathy and radical otherness also highlights how – in its intertwining of unfolding cognitive, affective, and somatic processes – empathy 'does not exist in isolation from other capacities', or from the particular environments and ecologies in which it arises and take shape: it 'is entangled within and amidst selves and others, and emerges in places and settings and within moments and times that are particular to people, places and context' (Peluso, this volume). In other words, empathy is not universal and it is not one thing – it is generated, experienced, and felt differently via different transnational circuits and relations of power.

Empathy as limit experience

As a number of this book's contributors note, empathy, in its very processuality, has no precise limit point: it is, as Douglas Hollan observes, 'always in motion as people's emotional states and perspectives change over time, and even from moment to moment, sometimes as a result of having been empathized with' (this volume). Nonetheless, actual occasions of empathy always emerge from and involve limits. As C. Jason Throop puts it, invoking Emmanuel Levinas, 'the other with whom we are experientially intertwined always exceeds us' – and, as such, there is 'a necessary asymmetry between the experiencing subject and the subject who is experienced by them' (this volume). From this perspective, empathy is not premised on the possibility of emotional equivalence, nor is it necessarily oriented towards the transformative potential of fellow-feeling; rather, it is 'an experience of the limits of accessing another's first-person experience directly'. Empathy, as such, is *a limit experience* which 'discloses the other *qua* other' (Throop, this volume) – whether this other is a person, an animal, a fictional character, an intelligent machine, an idea, a linguistic translation, or a molecular bio-chemical process. What becomes vital, however, as editors Francesca Mezzenzana and Daniela Peluso underscore, is *how*, exactly, empathy 'enables us to understand, imagine, and create otherness' (this volume) – the particular ways in which it might allow us to appreciate and grapple with alterity within current ecological conditions, including the alterity within, or which brushes against the limits of our own self-understanding.

There is a range of rich philosophical, psychological, and cultural genealogies for thinking empathy as a more-than-human set of relations oriented towards the experience of otherness, alterity, or foreignness. Most salient

to several contributors across this volume are the German phenomenologists writing in the early twentieth century, namely Edmund Husserl, Edith Stein, and Max Scheler, who associated empathy and sympathy with the affective capacity to enter the minds of others, with an emphasis on embodied perception, attunement, and sensing. For Stein, in *On the Problem of Empathy*, empathy is ‘the perceiving [*Erfahrng*] of foreign subjects and their experience [*Erleben*’] ([1916]1989, p. 1). It is how we come to ‘experience foreign consciousness in general’ (Stein [1916]1989, p. 110) and, through this process, understand that our ‘own zero point of orientation is a spatial point among many’ (Stein [1916]1989, Translator’s Introduction, xxi). As Susan Leigh Foster notes in *Choreographing Empathy*, in Stein’s view, ‘empathy was the bodily experience of feeling connected to the other, while at the same time knowing that one was not experiencing directly the other’s movements or feelings’ (2010, p. 164). In the midst of late liberalism and its postcolonial biopolitics, I want to argue, Stein’s use of the term ‘foreign’ is suggestive, connoting both those materials and forces that lie outside the fleshy boundaries of the individual human body and those (frequently racialised, sexualised, and classed) bodies and practices excluded from the ‘we’ of the nation or community.

In this context, contemplating empathy’s entanglement with otherness attunes us to how, while particular experiences of empathy may produce transformative connections, they can also generate damaging exclusions – and to how empathy, more generally, involves unevenness, failure and ‘translations that go awry’ (Grewal 2005, p. 24). This is particularly the case, as a number of chapters across this volume illustrate, when ‘the foreign’ is constituted as threatening and affective articulations of ‘us’ and ‘them’ manifest in reduced empathy for out-group members (Ferguson and Wimmer, this volume). It is salient, in this respect, to foreground the colonial legacies of empathy and sympathy. As Foster argues, in interactions between British colonisers and the people they encountered in North America, Africa, Asia and the Pacific, ‘sympathy and empathy each served to establish the grounds on which one human being could be seen as differing to another’ and were thus mobilised ‘in part, to rationalize operations of exclusion and othering’ (2010, p. 11). For the eighteenth-century Scottish philosopher Adam Smith, for instance, sympathy (which he defined similarly to modern understandings of empathy)

accrued to those in a civilized society who lived in relative comfort and those of better means possessed greater sympathy. Savages, in contrast, necessarily spent their time tending to their own needs with no available time to devote attention to another.

(2010, p. 142)

As these kinds of examples make clear, empathy has long been employed as an affective ingredient in the construction of pernicious social, cultural, and

geopolitical ‘difference’. To invoke the late critical theorist Lauren Berlant’s words, empathy, then, turns out ‘not to be so effective or good in and of itself’, but rather ‘merely to describe a particular kind of social relation’ (2004, p. 9).

At the intersection of contemporary forms of post-coloniality and global capitalism – or what Jennifer Wilson calls ‘the Empathy Industrial Complex’ (2021) – empathy remains implicated in powerful modes of biopolitical governmentality. We might consider, in this vein, how empathy and compassion are cultivated to create certain forms of value and profit within the international aid apparatus. In her analysis of humanitarian interventions in Haiti, for instance, Erica Caple James employs the term ‘compassion economies’ to address the dynamics through which ‘the suffering of another person, when extracted, transformed and commodified through maleficent or beneficent interventions, can become a source of profit for the intervener’ (2010, p. 26). In my own work (Pedwell 2012a, 2012b, 2014, 2016, 2021a), I have similarly explored what happens when empathy becomes a competency defined primarily in terms of its market value, whether via the affective discourses of American presidential politics, the neoliberal rhetoric of ‘the empathy economy’, or the emotional politics of international development. Across these overlapping domains, gendered social and geopolitical hierarchies are central to determining who has access to profitable affective capital on the one hand and who is confined to performing unrecognised emotional labour on the other. With this in mind, it is clear that a focus on radical otherness must confront empathy’s uneven constitution and effects – the particular hierarchies and exclusions the cultivation of empathic capacities can (re) produce in an international frame.

Contributors to the present volume open up critical analysis of the unfolding biopolitics and geopolitics of empathy to other salient relations and domains, with a focus on the complexities of collective efforts to redress historical articulations of radical otherness. Esra Özyürek’s chapter, for example, considers how contemporary Holocaust education initiatives can ‘become a mechanism for excluding racialized minorities from the moral fold of the German nation’ when Muslim minority Germans are judged as not feeling ‘the right’ feelings or not engaging in the (narrow) empathic journeys such programmes intend. Turkish and Arab-Germans, in particular, who express fear or envy instead of shame, remorse, and a desire to accept responsibility in response to such initiatives, Özyürek suggests, generate ‘public discomfort’ which elicits various modes of affective policing, censure, and exclusion. As such, the imperative to disrupt notions of radical otherness can function precisely to amplify such othering (Özyürek, this volume). While compelling approaches in phenomenology, affect studies, and other interdisciplinary fields attune us to empathy’s processuality, mobility and unpredictability, then, powerful examples such as this one indicate the concomitant importance of attending to how empathy ‘sticks’ (Ahmed 2004) – how it tends to circulate via established networks of social and cultural investment.

For Özyürek, however, twentieth-century German phenomenology – and particularly Edmund Husserl’s work – continues to provide generative resources. While Husserl’s concept of intersubjectivity has long been (mis) translated as ‘mutual understanding’, he was, as psychological anthropologists have recently argued, much more interested in the affective dynamics of ‘changing places’ – understood to be premised on the embodied experience of difference, limit, and misinterpretation (Duranti 2010 cited in Özyürek, this volume). From this perspective, as Özyürek illustrates, we can shift the focus from the ‘inappropriate’ emotions of minority communities to the fundamental problems with visions of national belonging that offer ‘a single historical perspective as a moral standard’. The enemy of social justice and accountability is not, from this angle, insufficient or undeveloped empathy per se, but rather visions of empathic connection that fail to take into account the significance of location, power, and translation – or, the true nature and implications of empathy as a limit experience.

Alternative empathies

A key insight emerging from this volume is that appreciating difference, alterity, and situated relations as central to any experience of empathy might better orient us to the cracks, openings, and lines of flight for engaging with otherness otherwise. This is, in fact, resonant with Stein’s ([1916]1989) earlier formulation of empathy and ‘the foreign’ – her phenomenology, I want to suggest, orients us most potently towards how engagement with what is experienced as ‘foreign’ need not inevitably lead to the reproduction of problematic sameness or difference; rather, in particular conditions, it might open out to an experience of being deeply affected by that which does not simply confirm what one thinks one already knows (Pedwell 2014, 2016).

Along these lines, the visual scholar Jill Bennett, in her book *Empathic Vision* (2006), figures empathy as ‘a mode of thought that might be achieved when one allows the violence of an affective experience to truly inform thinking’ (2006, p. 55). Thus, while empathy is frequently approached as an exercise of cultural mastery which depends on amassing accurate knowledge of the cultural ‘other’ – or more generally as the ‘assimilation of what is foreign into what is familiar’ (Butler 2012, p. 12) – something quite different might unfold when one actually surrenders oneself to being affected by that which is experienced as ‘foreign’. That is, in approaching empathy as something other than emotional identification with another subject or ‘the transcription of a psychological state’ (Bennett 2006, p. 38), new forms of affective connection and solidarity across differences might take shape. Indeed, for Stein, as Foster paraphrases, ‘multiple subjects could experience empathy collectively, creating a distinction between an “I” and “you”, while also bringing into existence a “we”’ (Foster 2010, p. 164).

What is perhaps most striking about Bennett’s discussion of ‘empathic vision’, however, is that it is not centred on relations between two (or more)

embodied subjects but rather on our affective connections with visual art, and particularly non-representational forms of art. While affective modes of responding to art associated with a sympathy that depends on identification with characters and their narratives are often tied to moralities that follow predictable logics of intelligibility, Bennett (2006) argues that those associated with a mode of empathic vision – conceived as a critical ‘shock to thought’ (Massumi 2002) generated by our direct engagement with art’s affective force – have the potential to move us beyond pre-set narratives, opening up a more radical space of ethical engagement. In this way, Bennett’s writing resonates with wider critical scholarship which argues that it does not make sense to figure empathy as necessarily linked to ‘humanising’ practices of care because it is not a property owned by or encapsulated within the boundaries of human subjects. That is, while empathy may describe the cognitive and/or emotional quality of particular human relationships, it might also explain a wider range of more-than-human relationalities and processes of ‘affecting and being affected’, to invoke Spinoza’s (2002) much cited formulation.

Empathy, as such, may occur intersubjectively between differently located embodied subjects but also unfold above or below the level of ‘the subject’ – playing out via scales and speeds that are not ‘our own’ and involving various forms of complexity, opacity, and indeterminacy. In this vein, Robin Truth Goodman’s chapter in the present volume considers how, in a complex economy, empathy ‘underlies transactional relations not only with strangers, but also with invisible and unknown abstract market interactors’. From this perspective, empathy is not only an affective mode of access to ‘a community of feeling in a spatially expansive market society’; it is also, in its fundamental relationship with alterity and uncertainty, a cognitive-sensorial mode of engagement with ‘a world filled with the unexpected, the unfamiliar, and the different’ (Goodman, this volume). While Goodman explores how the development of technologies of travel and communication have demanded increasing interactions with strangers and unknowns which empathy arises to navigate, Jacqueline M. Kory-Westlund examines how socio-technical innovations – including artificial intelligence (AI)-enabled technology, Internet of Things (IoT) devices, digital assistants, and smart toys – mean that many people now engage robots in ‘social, emotional, empathetic, and relational ways that complicate their positioning within common thought as radically different others’; dynamics which suggest more-than-human forms of empathy that affectively and materially entangle a range of human, non-human, and inhuman entities and processes within changing political-economic, socio-technical, and natural-cultural ecologies.

In exceeding (without disavowing) the emotional dynamics of ‘the subject’, these alternative visions of empathy actually return us to empathy’s original usage in German aesthetics to describe our cognitive and somatic relationships to the non-human and more-than-human. Originally coined by German aestheticians in the early twentieth century as a translation of

the German word *Einfühlung* ('feeling into'), empathy came to 'denote the power of projecting one's personality into the object of contemplation and has been a useful term in both psychology and aesthetics' (Garber 2004, p. 24). As Gregory Currie notes, while we now 'think of empathy as an intimate feeling-based understanding of another's inner life', a century ago, discussing empathy for intimate objects 'would have seemed very natural' (2011, p. 82). Such genealogies of empathy, I want to suggest, bear interesting resonances with (as well as distinctions from) contemporary new materialisms and affect theories, which have, in varied ways, sought to address the limits of post-structural theories of linguistic signification in grappling with questions of materiality, agency, and transformation (Pedwell 2020). For the philosopher Brian Massumi (2002, 2015), and others working in the Spinoza/Deleuze tradition, for instance, 'affect' is precisely that which 'escapes confinement' in human bodies, subjectivities, and relations. It refers to 'an entire, vital and modulating field of myriad becomings across the human and nonhuman' (Seigworth and Gregg 2010, p. 6). Focusing on empathy's links with the immanent dynamics of radical otherness can, then, as Mezzenzana and Peluso suggest, generatively expand the range of others imagined to be involved in various worldly relations and entanglements of empathy.

Crucially, however, these Euro-North American trajectories of empathy are not the only, nor the most salient, frameworks for understanding these kind of cognitive, affective, and somatic processes and their implications across many transnational cultures. In her discussion of 'subaltern empathy', for instance, the literary scholar Sneja Gunew considers various paradigms for understanding emotion that move beyond 'European categories of affect theory' (2009, p. 11) – including the anthropologist Anand Pandian's analysis of 'the figurative topographies of sentiment and sympathy sketched in a genre of funeral elegy (*oppu*) in South India' (Gunew 2009, p. 8) and the postcolonial scholar Dipesh Chakrabarty's discussion of the Bengali concept of the 'exemplary' or 'compassionate heart' (*hridaya*) (Gunew 2009, p. 19) (see also Gunew 2016). Relatedly, Joan Anim-Addo turns to literary accounts of the gendered 'history of the Caribbean slave plantation' to 'delineate a trajectory and development of a specific Creole history in relation to affects' (2013, p. 5). Against 'consolidated, universalising and Euro-centric conceptualisations of affect', she develops a 'differentiated cartography and literary archaeology of affect' that pays critical attention to how affective creolisation occurred in and through intimate sexual relations in the context of slavery (Anim-Addo 2013, p. 5). As I have argued elsewhere (Pedwell 2014, 2016), the imperative here – as indicated by Anim-Addo's use of the term 'creolisation' (see also Glissant 1997) – is not to see the world as composed of discrete, culturally particular traditions of feeling, but rather to explore the ways in which such affective discourses, practices, and experiences have been produced relationally and are, as such, genealogically implicated in one another.

Also at stake here, however, are diverse genealogies of affect that resist reduction to – or remain incommensurable with – Eurocentric and/or anthropocentric logics. Such dynamics are engaged powerfully in the present collection via the chapters by Mezzenzana and Peluso, which mobilise insights from their longstanding anthropological work with indigenous peoples in the Amazon. As Mezzenzana explores, while the difference between non-humans and humans may seem insurmountable within most Western intellectual paradigms, this is not the case for indigenous people of the Amazon, ‘for whom access to the inner experiences of non-humans seems to be relatively unproblematic’. The Runa people, she suggests, ‘manifest empathetic relationships towards animals’ that diverge considerably from Western conceptions of empathy (this volume). Peluso, in this vein, is concerned with the conditions in which empathy with non-human others emerges and becomes salient for Amazonian Ese Eja and what this suggests about radical otherness. While all Ese Eja human–animal encounters are premised on belief in an originary state of human/non-human differentiation, these positions are, importantly, understood as amenable to reversal and change. For example, ‘if a human is seduced by a non-human animal other, they can potentially transform into an animal, even though at first they encounter each other as discrete, separate, and different beings with distinct points of view’. For Ese Eja, then, non-human animals are radically different until, at a moment’s notice, ‘they are not’ and it is ‘within this everyday lingering potentiality, whereby something suddenly shifts, that radical sameness becomes apparent as it unexpectedly emerges from radical difference’ (Peluso, this volume). Empathy, in these moments of transformation involving ‘an opening up of the senses’ is thus ontologically productive, it is ‘a critical enactment of “making people” through recognition’.

As such interventions illustrate powerfully, then, radical otherness is made and re-made within particular worldly ontologies and epistemologies, and empathy is not reducible to sameness or difference, but rather arises amidst the complex, shifting, and politically and ethically charged relations between them; it is, fundamentally, an *affective relation*.

Affective relations and ontologies

To approach empathy as an affective relation is, as I have discussed elsewhere, to become attuned to the relational nature of emotions themselves (how they are not owned by or confined to individual subjects but rather signify complex relations that implicate and constitute multiple affective subjects, objects, and contexts) – as well as to how empathy takes shapes and circulates through its relationship with other sensorial experiences, modes cognition, and affective (in)capacities (Pedwell 2012a, 2012b, 2013, 2014, 2016). As the chapters across this volume illuminate in different ways, this involves cultivating a ‘non-objectifying view of emotions as relational flows, fluxes and currents, in-between people and places rather than

“things” or “objects” to be studied and measured’ (Bondi et al. 2007, p. 3). It is about honing immanent modes of sensing ‘how affect arises in the midst of in-betweenness: in the capacities to act and be acted upon’ (Seigworth and Gregg 2010, p. 2). Thinking and feeling affective relations also, however, demands that we address the ongoing imbrication of empathy with structural relations of power in the context of contemporary biopolitics, geopolitics, and ontopolitics – wherein ‘ontopower’ is understood as a power to incite and orient emergence that ‘insituates itself into the pores of the world where life is just stirring, on the verge of being what it will become and yet barely there’ (Massumi 2015, p. xviii). Conceptualising empathy relationally, then, is to see it as inseparably entangled with ontology: to appreciate how it is implicated in emergent forms of power that work to (re)constitute reality, to mediate the flow of experience, possibility, and becoming in the world.

Questions about the relationships among empathy, ontology, and ontopower assume particular salience and urgency, I want to suggest, in current global conditions in which software, AI, and algorithms play an increasing role shaping the immanent flow of everyday life. Whether in the form of personal recommenders like Amazon and Netflix which mobilise self-taught software to anticipate our preferences, needs, and desires, or context-aware sensors embedded in ‘smart homes’ or wearable computational devices that attune to our unfolding feelings, movements, and rhythms, machine learning technologies are actively redistributing cognition and affect across humans and machines and profoundly changing ‘what it means to perceive and mediate things in the world’ (Amoore 2020, p. 16). With algorithmic architectures now acting to anticipate and shape behaviour and conditions of possibility across social, political, economic, and cultural domains in ways that far exceed human sensorial, cognitive, and perceptual capacities (Pedwell 2019, 2021a), renewed concerns and anxieties emerge concerning human nature, agency, emotion, and sociality – as well as the ethics and politics of our relationships with computational machines.

As Kory-Westlund observes in her contribution to the present volume, through the empathic relations they develop with smart technologies, many American children now ‘place robots in an ontological category in-between the usual dualistic categories of alive, animate beings and inanimate artifacts’ (this volume). While social robots may represent a non-human other that is ‘radically different’, children, she suggests, appear to treat such smart technologies ‘as social-relational others’. This kind of ongoing affective interaction ‘turns these robots from objects that children project onto (like toys, imaginary friends, and so forth) into others for *being with* – others perceived as having minds’ (Kory-Westlund, this volume, emphasis in original). Yet, what demands critical examination within emergent techno-social ecologies is not only the nature and implications of the affective relations that link human and non-human entities, but also the emergence of ‘an authentic cognitive subjectivity’ (Serres 2015, p. 19; see also Pedwell 2019,

2021b) which sutures human and machine modes of sensibility, perception, and thought. The more that we invest in and adapt ourselves to algorithmic architectures, it is argued, the closer we come to a ‘kind of co-identity’ in which ‘we define who we are through digital practice because virtual spaces are becoming more real than visceral ones’ (Finn 2015, p. 190).

These interpersonal and infrastructural developments raise important ontological questions concerning what human – or indeed, non-human – empathy can be said to entail within conditions in which ‘humans are lodged within algorithms, and algorithms within humans’ (Amoore 2020, p. 58). Also at stake at the current socio-political and technological conjuncture, however, is the growing prominence and impact of machine learning technologies which operate *otherwise to* anthropocentric temporalities, processes, and experiences (Hansen 2015). How, that is, machine learning innovations which make AI more ‘intuitive’ or ‘empathic’ do not seek to simulate human sensory, cognitive, or perceptual functions but instead hone computational capacities that may be wholly incommensurable with them and, as such, entail ‘inexperiencable experience’ (Chun 2016, p. 55). It is here, perhaps, that the limits of empathy – or empathy’s force as a *limit experience* (Throop, this volume) – rise most starkly to the fore, as human lives, subjectivities, and relations are increasingly mediated, and indeed constituted, by algorithmic processes to which we have no direct access and cannot sense, perceive, or understand, let alone control.

Amidst these shifting configurations of social life, (im)materiality, temporality, and agency, addressing the place, logics, and possibilities of empathy in our changing world requires that we understand it as an affective relation that imbricates ‘the human’ and ‘the non-human’, ‘the immaterial’ and ‘the material’, ‘the cultural’ and ‘the biological’, ‘the personal’ and ‘the impersonal’, and ‘the structural’ and ‘the ephemeral’ across social and geopolitical borders and boundaries. This, I want to suggest, involves attending to empathy’s immanent unfoldings across a range of everyday, more-than-human events and encounters; attuning, that is, to its enmeshment in our habitual and sensory lives (Throop and Duranti 2015; Pedwell 2017, 2021a). At stake here is the possibility of engaging empathically with that which hovers ‘at the very edge of semantic availability’ (Williams 1977, p. 134) – while appreciating that not all aspects of such socio-political, environmental, and technological ecologies are amenable to human perception, recognition, or sensibility. In attuning to these ongoing modes of transformation, conflict, otherness, and entanglement, we might begin to sense, and indeed collaborate in, empathies premised on ‘processes of immersion and inhabitation’ that are ‘more complex and considered that a purely emotional or sentimental reaction’ (Bennett 2006, p. 65, 24). We might, in other words, both appreciate and generate *alternative empathies* – ones that open up rather than resolve, that mutate rather than assimilate, and that invent rather than transcribe.

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