Angry People at an Empathy Conference

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INTRODUCTION

Towards the end of the empathy conference, I asked what it might mean to be confronted with and to hold other people's anger. Until then, most of the interactions at the conference had been along tranquil lines. There was some of the nonempathy you might see at any conference — people working on their laptops, arriving late and leaving early, or attending only their own sessions — but it was a notably thoughtful and friendly group, and there were many insightful presentations. The generous interactions may have been due to how key people set a tone, or the style may have been that with which most of us there were comfortable. Perhaps many of us would have been at a loss if we'd been asked to listen and respond differently.

I wondered about our silences around power. How might the tenor of our talk have been different, I asked, if the conference had included significant numbers of people who were angry about racism, homelessness, homophobia, classism, sexism? I explained that I was not talking simply about inviting a more diverse group of attendees; rather, I wondered whether our interactions had been comfortable for some of us specifically because we were *not* in conversation with many people who were objects of certain kinds of contempt — people who had serious reasons to be angry not just in general, but at us. How might our approach to empathy be *dis*-organized, reordered, if we spoke with people who responded to us with anger?

Irritated by my question, one of the conference attendees demanded, "Why would angry people even want to attend a conference on empathy?" — adding dismissively, "Besides, they can always watch the webinar."[1] Now there were two of us who were angry. There were others, of course. Before the wall of niceness went back up, a woman of color spoke about the exclusion effected by an empathy exercise in which we'd engaged the previous day. Her voice faltering with emotion, she said that the conference did not feel to her like a safe place. Later, I want to trouble the language of "safe spaces," especially insofar as such contexts are likely to be conflated with nice spaces. Her own point, though, was that the kind of response being cultivated at the conference was implicitly tied to a racialized us/them sensibility. To be empathetic was to care about "them" — and she herself was "them."

Offering witness to her expression of unbelonging, a white man said that, in his medical meditation work, attempts to create a more diverse group by inviting in other people rarely came to anything unless the group started with the fact of societal tensions grounded in class-based or racial oppression. Shortly after he spoke, a deflector shield went up. Comments poured in at a tangent, all in agreement that trying to teach empathy would be misguided because students would be bound to fake whatever behavior they thought the teacher wanted to see. Someone mentioned that most of us present probably were at the high end of the empathy scale and that

it was only to be expected that not all people would be equally empathetic. Not everyone would care to attend an empathy conference.

<div align="center">EMPATHY IN RESEARCH</div>

I was drawn to the conference because it offered to explore connections between art, education, medicine, and empathy. I'd experienced a crisis around empathy when I lost my hand in a car accident. Another driver ran a red light, T-boning my car, flipping it two and a half times before it rocked back into place. By the time my car landed upright, the driver's side window had broken, my hand had been dragged across the pavement, and my wrist was pulverized. I was not immediately aware of pain. Until I saw what was left of my arm, blood streaming from its jagged edge, I didn't realize I'd been hurt. Two teenage boys stood on the sidewalk facing me. When I screamed to them to call for an ambulance, they ignored me, looking at their cell phones and laughing. The despair I felt was not entirely connected to my need for help; I realized someone else was bound to call 911. In fact, help arrived almost immediately. A nearby construction worker used his belt for a tourniquet, another found my severed hand and put it in his refrigerated lunch box, and an off-duty nurse climbed in the back seat to keep me from hyperventilating. Angels must have been looking out for me, she said. The help I received was indeed miraculous, but I was haunted by the boys. Although there was nothing they could have done that other people didn't do, I was chilled by their indifference.

Later, I asked my friend David Quijada about it; he works in Youth Studies. Obviously, no two teenagers can stand in for youth in general, but I was desperate for an explanation for the boys' callousness, their lack of what I would have thought of as elemental empathy. Could it be, I asked naïvely, that youth were so tied in with social media, or so inured to virtual violence in gaming, that they no longer responded to real-life trauma? That was too easy an explanation, he told me gravely. The problem lay with adults: we were the ones failing to teach empathy. Haunted though I am by the teens' lack of empathy, I am haunted now, too, by David's explanation for it.

My presentation at the empathy conference explored the roles of empathy in two university settings — in medical research and in graduate social justice education.[2] The first part of the presentation spoke to the silencing and phantom pain that had shaped much of my experience as a research patient in a prosthetics project funded by the Veterans Administration; the latter part addressed the arts-based inquiry that students in some of my classes had done regarding pain, loss, violence, and isolation.

I was the second volunteer research patient in the myoelectric prosthesis project. Because only one in eleven limb amputees has lost a hand or an arm, the demand for upper-extremity prostheses is comparatively low. Despite recent advances in technology, affordable prostheses remain fairly rudimentary; conventional prostheses are split hooks that must be manipulated with a fair degree of deliberation, as one might awkwardly drive an unwieldy vehicle. The challenge of creating myoelectrc prostheses that can grip without too much force, or switch in a moment from delicate to powerful manipulations, and receive signals directly from the brain, constitutes the cutting edge of neuroprosthetics research.[3] The purpose of the study in which

I participated was to enable a hand prosthesis to make use of nerve endings in the residual arm. The research was then at an early stage in terms of human subjects. The previous volunteer was a man who had lost his dominant hand some thirty years earlier; before that, the research had been done on laboratory animals, mostly cats.

An implant in my residual arm allowed me to be hooked up to monitors while the researchers sent low-level electrical pulses to my nerves and, on alternate days, directed me to manipulate my phantom fingers in accordance with the movements of a robot-like hand on the computer screen in front of me. Presumably as a result of the low-level electrical shocks I received over the four weeks of the experiments, my phantom pain intensified significantly. The pain kept my phantom hand curled in a claw-like position, with the result that I could barely perform some of the tasks; since the tasks couldn't be modified to accommodate the claw-like posture of my hand, I had to push through the exercises as best I could. The anger apparent in my presentation at the empathy conference wasn't about the pain. The research team had no reason to expect an increase in my phantom pain (their first volunteer had had none). What I was angry about was the often dehumanizing data-collection process.[4] Although ostensibly the study was intended to capture the complexity of the ways in which the mind and body interact in producing sensation, only feedback that aligned with the parameters of the computer software design was considered data. In effect, I was an articulate lab cat who could execute higher-order commands. Some months after my participation ended, I spoke with one of the researchers about my perceptions. "Oh, yes, the human element," she said.

As Todd Kuiken observes, the emotional, social, expressive, and sensory losses connected with upper-extremity limb trauma are as great as the functional challenges. In his own work, he refers to "patient collaborators" and "research collaborators."[5] I was sometimes referred to in similar terms, but I was not a collaborator. It is, admittedly, difficult for researcher and researched to know how to collaborate. Speaking of the relationship between lower-extremity amputees and the prosthetists who custom-fit their limbs for them, Steven Kurzman points out, "there is no shared language available with which amputees and prosthetists can communicate about aligning or using a prosthesis."[6] Developing such a shared language may prove integral to research on more organically performing upper-extremity prostheses. (Indeed, many historical advances in prosthetics were made by amputees who were searching for more satisfactory options for themselves.) At a meeting with the VA that I was asked to attend, a member of the bioengineering and medical team remarked that "the non-dominant hand is really just a helper." That is partly true. Opening a jar with one hand or holding open a heavy door while I drag in a suitcase, I can compensate with a foot, a hip, a shoulder, a thigh, my chin, or a prosthesis. But my hands were also soul mates; they knew intimately how to work together, how to connect with the world. A flaw in the VA project is imagining that all soldiers who lose a hand will go on holding a gun. Some of them will come home to hold their babies. The tools that the team hoped to make possible might not be what veterans most valued.

Uneasy at the anger registered in my presentation, a member of the audience suggested that, although I had been frustrated by the experimental process, surely

my comparatively brief discomfort was offset by the good that the research would do for veterans in the long run. The good that the research might do, I clarified, was *what* I found troubling, for the nature of the research and the knowledge it yielded were tied to its methods. In its fixed approach to data collection, the process seemed to me to forfeit an important attunement to its objectives. For example, I had been asked to narrate my physical responses for the video recorder — but my doing so registered as a distraction from the repetitive tasks that were the real source of data.

There were personal dimensions in both the empathy and the lack of empathy I experienced in the research process, but what organized the overall absence of empathy was policy. The research was at an early stage and therefore subject to narrow Institutional Review Board standards: the team had exactly a month within which to surgically implant electrodes below my elbow, hook me up to a computer for three hours, two or three days a week, set me tasks from which they could gather significant data patterns, and then remove the implant. There was little time to rethink or revise any part of the sophisticated experiments that had been devised in light of their research on the previous volunteer. Almost necessarily, any empathy brought to the process would be a personal supplement. At times, I experienced significant empathy (empathy that has stayed with me), but the procedures built into the research program worked against any nonproductive form of attention.

Empathy, Pity, and Sympathy

At the conference, empathy seemed to be understood as a kind of culturally transcendent attunement, idealized in terms of universal qualities: gentleness, open-mindedness, equanimity, and loving-kindness, as exemplified in the intense discipline of Buddhist monks' meditation practices. My proposing to embrace anger as part of empathy may have been heard as disturbing the kind of peace being sought. Perhaps anger was equated with a cold withdrawal of loving-kindness. Like empathy, caring, or friendship, though, anger plays out in multiple ways across power relations, cultures, and time periods.[7] While inevitably infused with a judgment, anger — insofar as it invites a response and deepens engagement — also may be generous.[8] As Audre Lorde and Marilyn Frye suggest, moreover, the uptake given to anger *is* engagement — is recognition.[9] If empathy is a listening embrace in the face of profound complexity and uncertainty, anger cannot be ruled out of what is to be embraced.

One conference delegate marveled at our friendliness. At other empathy conferences she'd been to, she said, there was a lot of hostility, usually around the question of how to define empathy. Although no one at our conference spent much time on definitions, implicit in many of the presentations was an acceptance of empathy as a universal quality that could be measured scientifically. The identification of empathy with a more or less generic human trait has a precedent in Jean-Jacques Rousseau's identification of pity as the key to Emile's development. Authenticity, for Rousseau, required freedom from the self-alienating desires to please others or the expectation for them to please us; pity offered an inborn corrective to an otherwise exclusively self-referential outlook.[10] Although pity in its contemporary sense often suggests condescension, its ancient sense referred to sorrow, tenderness, mercy, or heartfelt

concern for those who suffer.[11] Modern usage, even when not negatively inflected, suggests a spontaneous but somewhat impersonal charitable concern *about* another — usually someone implicitly inferior — in a way that marks the difference between us and them. In most cases, it is a distancing rather than a relational response.

By contrast, sympathy suggests compassionate concern *for* someone else, with varying degrees of involvement. In face-to-face relations, sympathy may offer valuable practical support. Provided that certain cultural expectations are met, "a sympathy interchange" may foster intimacy and "a bond of 'knowership'" between participants.[12] A neighbor takes care of the kids; a colleague provides affirmation; strangers send money; a friend helps with meals. But sympathy is not unconditional. As Candace Clark explains, there is both an economy and an etiquette associated with sympathy[13]: "Before others sympathize, they usually assess not only an actor's bad luck and social and moral worth — they also take the actor's sympathy biography into account."[14] Judgment thus is integral to sympathy. Beyond need, calculations are made regarding deservingness, appropriateness, and one's duties to family or community. A Latina in her thirties describes working herself up to sympathy for a family member "who never has enough money" but also in her view "doesn't work hard enough." Because it's family, "I try not to be judgmental and try to give sympathy even if it's maybe not heartfelt."[15]

Whereas sympathy or pity may be conditional upon commonality or lack thereof, empathy is poised for radically unframed listening. It is a feeling-*with* that emerges within difference. Empathy assumes alterity. As Max Scheler explains, "Two parents [who] stand beside the dead body of a beloved child" do not feel empathy for one another; rather, they feel the *same* grief and devastation.[16] One enters empathetically into another's experience not as a result of sameness ("I've been there") but through focused, nonevaluative attention, and emotional or imaginative resonance. Although "I know just how you feel" may register as "affirmative, comforting, and consolidating," such a claim to precise knowledge undercuts a receptive approach to empathy.[17] What is at stake in empathy is our willingness to let go of the secret or not-so-secret position of judge and to meet another in a feeling-with that does not impose a narrative. The point is not to be nonjudgmental in the sense of refraining from making negative or hierarchical assessments but to approach the other in a register that is not *about* knowing. To respond empathetically, one must be poised to listen and be responsive in something of the way that one may need to be in the moment or in the right ceremonial context to tell certain stories.

Ideally, we might be tempted to say that empathy offers an unconditional openness to another. Yet it may be a mistake to conceive of empathy in ideal terms. Lorraine Code claims that well-developed empathy "incorporates a capacity to assess its own aptness" (although she considers this capacity rare).[18] Appealing to such an internally regulated ideal means assuming that one's own relational practices can encompass what is called for — effacing the mystery of alterity. Appealing to an external ideal (such as a set of principles), on the other hand, risks framing empathy in effectively color-blind, would-be universal terms. Recognizing the *necessary* incompleteness of empathy allows us to appreciate the crucial role of engagement

with the other's response to us (or those like us), including anger, disappointment, or pain. We might see empathy as a kind of emotional *ekphrasis*, a generous, sideways engagement that wholly takes up what it cannot encompass. In another tradition, it might be called grace.

Although often associated with misery and suffering, empathy rightly extends to any dimensions of our worlds — our joys, our fears, that which we aspire to, that which we hold dear. That is why it requires an imaginative leap. It is not difficult for a white, Western, middle-class Christian or Jew to pity a Middle Eastern Muslim woman for the violence or poverty from which she suffers; to empathize with her regarding what she holds sacred is another question. Empathy requires a divestment of arrogance (such as the expectation that we can know another's situation) to make possible both a receptive and a responsive engagement with alterity.

Empathy, Anger, and Safe Spaces

"One of the urgent demands" of social justice, writes Sharon Todd, is working out "how community may be created and sustained in the face of" the extraordinary challenges of "getting people to interact and communicate across their differences."[19] Although empathy might seem to offer a way to meet this challenge, Todd argues that it represents a dangerous goal of collective understanding: we "have a responsibility to others even when understanding their experience is not possible."[20] I agree that empathy cannot serve as an engineer of democratic community-building — but not because empathy implies understanding. On the contrary, empathy refers to a "holding of wonder, … simultaneously knowing and not-knowing." It means "finding pattern and breaking apart."[21]

Empathy can help foster vulnerable but not safe spaces. Although we often appeal to "safe spaces" as necessary for authentic student learning, there is no such thing as a safe learning space.[22] There are imaginary safe spaces, and we may cherish them, but the pedagogical quest for safety is misleading.[23] Even the desire to escape symbolic violence may be misleading, as Ann Berlak and Sekani Moyenda, Megan Boler, and others suggest, for there may be trauma in being asked to reconsider our investments, to face anger, or to have our language undone.[24] Anger has to have some room to breathe in classrooms, but it also has to be taken up for one or more purposes. A pedagogy that takes anger seriously will consider some of the purposes to which both anger and play may be put.[25]

Empathetic relations in social justice classrooms are deepened, I believe, by openly addressing tensions and concerns; revisiting problematic exchanges; engaging in play; expecting surprises; and fostering shared vulnerability of a kind that invites students to turn to one another. Risk that plays with intellectual ideas without inviting familiar good-student responses may prompt more fruitful engagements. Students were the first to tell me how this worked. My original intentions were pedagogical but not relational. To help students understand marked and unmarked relations (as in whiteness theory), I had them sketch an object, telling them to focus not on the figure but the ground. To help them recognize the role of normalized codes, I gave them math puzzles that only made sense when students figured out that they were in base four. To engage students in a sense of what is at stake in different approaches to

academic writing, I had them exchange short pieces they had written in unfamiliar styles. The benefit I didn't anticipate was that students bonded over their uncertainty. In most cases, no one quite knew how to address the project; even when one or two people did, the typical graduate school relations of authority were breached. The person who got it jumped in to guide those who were at sea.

After students alerted me to the relational side effects of activities that prevented them from relying on accustomed academic authority, I began planning projects with a view to both intellectual and relational goals. I have had students create found-poetry thesis statements, undertake "queering methods" projects, and engage in semester-long "identity adventures." In a course about philosophical conceptions of recognition, I gave students crayons with which to illustrate both personal misrecognition and open-ended recognition on snow figures. The crayons were an important part of the activity: crayons signal "play." But the play is serious. Students want to see one another's work and hear one another's stories.

Risky exploration can help foster a collective vulnerability that unsettles the sometimes toxic stagings of authority we invite in higher education. In the desire to sound knowledgeable and unassailable, for example, white students may resort to the passive voice to acknowledge racial inequities ("Africans were brought to the United States to work as slaves."), so as to at once "demonstrate their tolerance and empathy for racial others" and "repress … any connection to them."[26] Whereas student approximations of expertise tend to work against collaborative inquiry, vulnerability connected to creative exploration may offer openings.[27]

<div align="center">CONCLUSION</div>

In *The Empathy Exams*, Leslie Jamison describes medical students being rated in their performances with "patients" whom they know to be actors with scripts.[28] Despite the artificial context, the students' sensitivity and interested concern are evaluated in terms of whether they can be read as genuine. Such formulaic measures of "authenticity" remind us of the performative and power dimensions of empathy. In the United States, for example, people of color often are expected to signify approval for white performances of empathy. Like a bartender listening over and over to the same beery sob stories, performing professional sympathy, support, interest, and surprise, one has to offer the impression of registering the speaker's deep pain while keeping the drinks coming. One might, indeed, feel surprise or sympathy, but the point is that the power behind the expectation that one *will* do so predetermines the value of the reading. Empathy is about vulnerability. When people in power call the shots about how our racial, cultural, or other good-guy empathy is to be read, we reserve for ourselves the position of judge.

Given the degree to which the prestige of medicine in the United States is tied to objectivity and exclusivity, the institutional culture of medical schools probably militates against an education in empathy. A third-year medical student on the hospital pain team treating me after my amputation stopped by several times to talk about pedagogy. What did it mean to instruct doctors to express empathy, he asked, when the whole training process seemed to work against that orientation? I wasn't in much of a position to talk, let alone try to answer questions like that, but his intent

presence stays with me. He played a key medical role in relieving my intense pain; he also helped me navigate my trauma and isolation. His concentrated conversation, his attention to our possibility of connection beyond my medical emergency, felt profoundly empathetic. Like cupped hands or a bowl, empathy allows us to hold another.

1. The webinar can be watched at "Interdisciplinary Symposium on Empathy, Contemplative Practice and Pedagogy, the Humanities, and the Sciences," The University of Utah, http://languages.utah.edu/events/index.php.

2. Audrey Thompson, "Labora-(s)tories and the Art of Trauma" (presentation, Interdisciplinary Symposium on Empathy, Contemplative Practice and Pedagogy, the Humanities, and the Sciences, Salt Lake City, UT, September 26 – 27, 2014).

3. Todd Kuiken, "A Prosthetic Arm that 'Feels,'" TEDGlobal (2011), http://www.ted.com/talks/todd_kuiken_a_prosthetic_arm_that_feels?language=en

4. I am giving a compressed account of the process. Certainly there were important ways in which some of the researchers did display empathy, and at least one case in which I think that that led to a productive alteration in the method.

5. Kuiken, "A Prosthetic Arm that 'Feels.'"

6. Steven Kurzman, "'There's No Language for This': Communication and Alignment in Contemporary Prosthetics," in *Artificial Parts, Practical Lives: Modern Histories of Prosthetics*, eds. Katherine Ott, David Serlin, and Stephen Mihm (New York: New York University Press, 2002), 230.

7. Carol Zisowitz Stearns and Peter N. Stearns, *Anger: The Struggle for Emotional Control in America's History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986).

8. Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, trans. Myra Bergman Ramos (New York: Continuum, 1970), 41–42.

9. Audre Lorde, "The Uses of Anger," in *Sister Outsider* (Freedom: Crossing Press, 1984), 124–33; and Marilyn Frye "A Note on Anger," in *The Politics of Reality: Essays in Feminist Theory* (Freedom: Crossing Press, 1983), 84–94.

10. Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Emile, or On Education*, trans. Allan Bloom (1762; repr., New York: Basic Books, 1979).

11. Jesse D. Geller, "Pity, Suffering, and Psychotherapy," *American Journal of Psychotherapy* 60, no. 2 (2006): 187–205.

12. Candace Clark, *Misery and Company: Sympathy in Everyday Life* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997), 175. "Knowership" is quoted from Erving Goffman, "The Interactional Order," *American Sociological Review* 48, no. 1 (1983): 13.

13. Clark, *Misery and Company*, 131–43, 159–93.

14. Ibid., 159.

15. Ibid., 49.

16. Max Scheler, *The Nature of Sympathy*, trans. Peter Heath (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1954), 14.

17. Lorraine Code, "I Know Just How You Feel," in *Rhetorical Spaces: Essays on Gendered Locations* (New York: Routledge, 1995), 123.

18. Ibid., 126.

19. Sharon Todd, "Teaching with Ignorance: Questions of Social Justice, Empathy, and Responsible Community," *Interchange* 35, no. 3. (September 2004): 338.

20. Ibid., 338.

21. Alfred Margulies, *The Empathic Imagination* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1989), xii.

22. See Annette Henry, "There Are No Safe Spaces: Pedagogy as Powerful and Dangerous Terrain," *Action in Teacher Education* 15, no. 4 (Winter 1993–1994): 1–4; Gloria Anzaldúa, "(Un)natural Bridges, (Un)safe Spaces," in *This Bridge We Call Home: Radical Visions for Transformation*, ed. Gloria E. Anzaldúa and AnaLouise Keating (New York: Routledge, 2002), 1–5; Zeus Leonardo and Ronald K. Porter, "Pedagogy

of Fear: Toward a Fanonian Theory of 'Safety' in Race Dialogue," *Race Ethnicity and Education* 13, no. 2 (July 2010): 139–57; and the special issue of *Studies in Philosophy of Education* 29, no. 6 (2010).

23. Audrey Thompson, "Imaginary Safe Spaces" (presentation, American Educational Studies Association, Cleveland, OH, October 2007).

24. See Ann Berlak and Sekani Moyenda, *Taking It Personally: Racism in the Classroom from Kindergarten to College* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2001) and Megan Boler, "All Speech Is Not Free: The Ethics of 'Affirmative Action Pedagogy,'" in *Philosophy of Education 2000*, ed. Lynda Stone (Urbana, IL: Philosophy of Education Society, 2001), 321–329.

25. See María Lugones, "Playfulness, 'World'-Travelling, and Loving Perception," in *Women, Knowledge, and Reality: Explorations in Feminist Philosophy*, eds. Ann Garry and Marilyn Pearsall (Boston: Unwin Hyman, 1989), 275–290.

26. Dreama Moon, "White Enculturation and Bourgeois Ideology: The Discursive Production of 'Good (White) Girls,'" in *Whiteness: The Communication of Social Identity*, ed. Thomas K. Nakayama and Judith N. Martin (Thousand Oaks: Sage, 1999), 189.

27. My brief review of invitations to vulnerability in my classrooms should not be taken to suggest that these experiments are always successful or that all students like them.

28. Leslie Jamison, *The Empathy Exams: Essays* (Minneapolis: Graywolf Press, 2014).