

A More Finite Empathy: On Pain, Recognition of Distance, and Respect of Finitude

Sarah Cooke

Abstract: This essay examines the limitations of the contemporary understanding and application of empathy as an attempt to ameliorate distance. Using Maggie Nelson and Simone Weil as interlocutors, I explore the ramifications of empathy, the recognition of difference within the context of individual experiences of pain, and ultimately the respect for finitude (of our own and of others) for which Nelson and Weil both argue.

In her memoir *Bluets*, Maggie Nelson describes a friend's pain as so overwhelming in scope that it feels like "an invisible jacket of burn hovering between us."¹ In such situations, where we are acutely aware of our finite ability to understand a pain that seems comparatively infinite, how do we respond with empathy? Can we only have empathy for what we know, or could we also have it for what we do not or cannot know? If so, what would such a model of empathy look like? Working with those questions, I will discuss in this paper the problems raised by considering empathy as an attempt to ameliorate distance, and put them in conversation with what Nelson calls a "hierarchy of grief" and with Simone Weil's notion of affliction. This approach will serve as a means of exploring our current model of empathy, and how—or indeed, if—it is possible to arrive at a more spacious one. Ultimately, I argue that such a model of empathy is possible, but it would require us to keep intact the contingencies of individual experience as we recognize the irreconcilable distance that governs all our relationships.

Because part of the concern motivating this project is my wariness about the conflation of terms through comparison, I believe it is worthwhile to begin by establishing how I will use the term "empathy" in my discussion. I've chosen to base my working definition of empathy on what appears in the *Oxford English Dictionary*, for the simple reason that the *OED* charts

the historical evolution of the term and shows what old traces remain in the new ways we use it today. Defined in the 20th century as “the power of projecting one’s personality into or mentally identifying oneself with an object of contemplation, and so fully understanding or appreciate it,”² empathy today more generally refers to the capacity to understand the experience of another.³ In the way that I read this definition, the specifically physical aspect of empathy—“the projecting of one’s personality”—eroded over time to a more general “understand[ing] of the experience of another,” an evolution that defines empathy in part as a response that works with and through the body and its capacity for cognition, whether mental, physical, or some combination thereof. In that response, I see the impetus to think of the body as a site in which we face simultaneous recognitions of our shared corporeality, in the form of human body itself, and the fact that, depending on how our bodies are identified (both on our own terms and those conditioned by social norms), we experience that corporeality and its vulnerability in different ways. In this paper, then, I understand empathy as a practice of recognition and identification, where the physical fact of our bodies alerts us to the similarities and differences that we experience as individual and social animals.

This definition explains in part why many tout empathy as a means through which we can ameliorate distance in relationships, personal and political alike.

If I can recognize part of myself in somebody whose experiences may be otherwise unrecognizable, I can begin to identify the similarities that we may share, the categories of experience or identity that we have in common. The recognition that we are neither unique nor alone, and that They are not completely dissimilar from Us, has been and remains an effective means of recognizing the similarity that we may share as individual, mortal animals.

But what is it that we're actually seeing when we recognize an Other as a similar Us? The OED's definition of empathy presents the possibility that comparison between two disparate things might allow us to privilege identifications of similarity above those of specificity, in which recognizing our similar but separate bodies and experiences could be an attempt to overcome difference in the name of finding "common ground." If I say that because I recognize a trace of myself in the midst of all that I cannot recognize in you, that I can understand exactly what you're experiencing because I myself have experienced it, then I'm bringing myself closer not to your experience, but to what I see of myself in that experience. In this sense, it would seem that my empathy, my identification, is less with you and more with a piece of myself that I recognize in you; it's not that I see you more clearly, but that I see the reflection of myself layered on top of you. You are familiar to me in so far as I can take you and remold you to fit with what I know of myself. My aim in raising this

pitfall of the way we talk about and practice empathy is not to suggest that empathy is an inappropriate or unproductive response. I believe that it can be productive, when we expand it to include recognitions of distance that compare differences without attempting to resolve them. But when we privilege empathy that overcomes distance and difference, we address only the first half of this corporeal fact of our bodies: the similarity that nonetheless remains contingent on specific, individual experience.

As I see it, the lover's paradox addresses that similarity-specificity dyad, and it is for that reason that the empathy that I want to work towards in this paper is predicated on it. The lover's paradox is this: the lover desires union but requires separation.⁴ Distance is simultaneously something that we want to overcome—the assumption being, that we know intimacy through proximity, closeness of a corporeal and emotional kind—but that constitutes for better or worse all of our relationships, even our most intimate ones. Grammatically, we require this distance in order to love: I love you because I cannot love I—which is not to locate love solely in lack or longing, or to say that self-love is impossible. Rather, by highlighting the grammar of the lover's paradox, I offer the possibility that distance and difference between us as individuals is not something that necessarily needs to be brought into comparison in order to be ameliorated. It points

us to the inherent incommensurability that underlines all our relationships, that those we love (or have yet to love) have experiences that we cannot fully know, and vice versa. That I take this as an irreconcilable fact of our relationships is not an endorsement of resigned acceptance of what we can never know about each other. Indeed if anything, it is why I am hopeful that we can acknowledge the difference and distance of others *without* resorting to the belief that acknowledging our limited ability to fully understand each other is a sign of defeat or failed intimacy.

Make no mistake: the limits of our ability to fully understand the experience of others are liabilities. By acknowledging that through empathy we can meet others in spite of our respective differences, we are able to overcome, however temporarily, the sense that we are bounded by the limits of our bodies and the experiences they give us access to. As the lover's paradox demonstrates, to acknowledge the limits we have, particularly in the context of intimacy, in the relationships that allow us to feel arguably *more* spacious, full of space and life, is a tacit admittance that intimacy operates on a base level of failure. If there are limits to what I can fully know of you, then there are limits to how I can respond; there may be a time when I cannot respond in a way that you want or need. It's as Judith Butler writes: "Let's face it. We're all undone by each other." But it's important that Butler immediately adds, "And if we're not [undone by each other], we're

missing something.”⁵ For Butler, the notion that undoing ourselves, unraveling and showing the lines that delimit our bodies and experiences from others, is somehow solely a bad, as opposed to a good nested within a bad, is a deeply limiting one indeed.

To test Butler’s point (and my faith in it), I will play out a scenario in which I might choose to embrace a category of experience with another as a matter of solidarity. Consider the vulnerability of an oppressed body, in this case a gendered one: because of my woman’s body, I experience a certain corporeal vulnerability as I walk down the street. Through catcalls, street harassment, and other expressions of intimidation, I am made aware that my body is seen in the world as an invitation for objectification and oppression. But if I were to say that vulnerability gives me full access to how other oppressed bodies experience *their* socially-constituted corporeal vulnerability, I risk not only conflating our different forms of vulnerability, but also saying that my experience of the world can be understood as comparable or even interchangeable with theirs. Take the experience of a black man: although we both share our individual experiences of oppression and physical vulnerability, those experiences are so differently constituted that to conflate them under the category of “corporeal vulnerability” would elide the significant distance that lies between our experiences of the world. It would also free me from the culpability that my whiteness has in propagating the oppression of his

blackness, and that which his maleness has in regards to my femaleness. Were I to say that my vulnerability lets me understand his, I would in a sense be mitigating the contingencies that define each of our bodies and the politics they inhabit in the world. My empathy would seek the embrace of the familiar instead the occasionally uncomfortable acknowledgment that there are limits to what I can claim to truly know about the experience of another.

If we can't compare, then, on the basis of category, can we compare on the basis of magnitude? Maggie Nelson asks as much when she writes in *Bluets* of a "hierarchy of grief."⁶ Even in the aftermath of a car crash that left her quadriplegic, Nelson's friend holds no "hierarchy of grief" in comparing the quality and types of pain she had before and after her accident, on the grounds that their differences are too significant to be brought into comparison with one another. It is not that one pain is greater than the other (although it may certainly feel that way), but rather that the nature of individual pains, and the pain of individuals, is so specifically, contingently unique as to render themselves incommensurate.

Of course, as a practical matter, a hierarchy of grief is helpful. Consider the question "On a 1 to 10 scale, how painful is it?" that doctors ask patients. There, measuring pain is a means of ameliorating or at least addressing suffering in a pragmatic sense: *Tell me how and where you hurt, and I can help you.* But even then,

that hierarchy remains grounded in specificity; the 1 to 10 scale is an important barometer for how much pain medicine to give a patient. That comparison remains a comparison across one entity, one pain, rather than a study of the multitude of pain experienced in different times and places. If I were to make such a hierarchy and apply it to my multitudes of pain, the terms on which I could compare them would necessitate different comparisons, e.g. heartbreak is not a broken bone, and mental illness is not “just in my head.” What’s more, if I were to make a hierarchy between the multitude of my pain and the multitude of yours, I would both compound the pitfalls of such a hierarchy and inflict them on you and our relationship, whatever our relationship was. I would not only ignore the distance that constitutes the differences between my pain and that of another, but also fail to recognize the arguably more important point: that pain arises out of individual instances shaped by both structural and random factors.⁷ I raise this point not to condemn such extensions of empathy, which can in their better moments serve as important first steps in the cultivation of interpersonal relationships, but to suggest that limiting empathy to *just* those outreaches does a disservice. That type of empathy is limited, I believe, because it lets us empathize with what we can recognize of ourselves in others while stopping short of acknowledging that there are limits to what our individual experiences let us access.

I turn now to the paradox of our current practice of empathy: because we fear that we can never transcend the finitude of who we are, we limit the acknowledgement of our finitude, but that in turn limits our empathy and allows it, at times, to force us into comparative matrices that conflate categories of experience. This is where I believe that Simone Weil's theory of affliction can offer the spacious possibility for empathy to include not only that which we can recognize but also that which we cannot recognize or fully know. Although the project of this paper is not invested in making claims about theodicy as Weil is, I nonetheless take her argument to have relevance to the secular claims about empathy that I am interested in exploring here. In the following paragraphs, I read Weil on her theological terms but with an eye to its possible application to a project of establishing a more nuanced model of empathy.

Defined by Weil as “an uprooting of life, a more or less attenuated equivalent to death,”⁸ affliction is a pain beyond pain itself and thus the perfection of pain. It is neither solely physical nor mental pain (although it often contains both) but instead a pain that makes the afflicted feel as if they were infinitely distant from themselves, their fellow humans, and the world at large—thus, a pain beyond pain. Weil uses a hierarchy of pain—there is physical pain, there is mental pain, and then there is affliction, the most perfect pain of them all—to illustrate how affliction ultimately escapes that hierarchy. As she writes, “In the realm of suffering,

affliction is something apart, specific and irreducible.”⁹ It cannot be contained to a hierarchy, or indeed to this world.

For Weil, affliction is the perfection of pain, but in being the perfection of something, even the ostensibly “bad” of pain, it is also a good, or rather a good contained in a bad: although “God can never be perfectly present to us here below on account of flesh,” he can nevertheless “be almost perfectly absent from us in extreme affliction.”¹⁰ Ultimately, argues Weil, we can only accept affliction as a good in the midst of the “bad” of perfected pain if we understand it through distance, because distance is how God himself experiences love. In order for God to love God’s self, God had to create an infinite distance across which his love could travel; the earthly world and us, its human occupants, are the result of “this supreme tearing apart” between God and God.¹¹ For Weil, the infinite distance that affliction forces us to feel is what actually allows for a recognition of the relationship we have with God as the objects of his attempt to love to love Himself. Through the experience of affliction, we are forced to acknowledge the infinite distance between God and ourselves.¹² But in acknowledging that distance for what it is, we realize that it is a distance of love, of relationship, and therefore not something that requires empathy.^{13 14}

This sense of separation is compounded by the fact that the origin of affliction varies from individual to individual; what may afflict me may not afflict you.

Take a broken bone: you could experience that pain as purely physical, but for me it might be an experience altogether devastating, in which the broken bone is not itself the affliction but the origin of why I came to feel afflicted. As a matter of grammar, it seems that we should be able to compare our afflictions: if I feel afflicted, and you feel afflicted, then we are both feeling the same thing. But Weil would argue otherwise, that grammar is not a large enough category in which to compare the experience of affliction. Because even though our individual afflictions create in us the feeling of infinite distance, and therefore share a category of similarity though they can be brought into comparison, the fact remains for Weil that the distance we feel is infinite and thus by definition impossible to compare. But because that distance alerts us to the relationship we have with God, it and the affliction that arises from it is ultimately a supreme kind of intimacy, existing as it does between the infinite God and a finite human.

Removed from Weil's theological commitments, affliction presents a model of relationship that acknowledges distance and indeed is predicated on it, in which the origins and consequences of our pain (regardless of degree or category) cannot be drawn into comparison with each other. Just as Nelson refuses to value a hierarchy of grief that places pain into comparative matrices, Weil's insistence on the incommensurability of the origins of affliction asks us, I believe, to recognize that even experiences that share

the same category will nonetheless express themselves differently from individual to individual. Such a recognition of our limits suggests that in addition to the empathy we have for what we can recognize in others, we may also require empathy for what we cannot know, a respect for the limitations that our finitude imposes on our ability to understand experiences beyond our own. It is a model of empathy that neither apologizes for that finitude nor uses distance as an excuse to end our engagement with what we cannot fully know or even say.¹⁵ In that sense, it is empathy as a high form of generosity, for as Weil once wrote, “[t]he capacity to give one’s attention to a sufferer is a very rare and difficult thing; it is almost a miracle; it is a miracle.”¹⁶

I began this paper with the hopes of starting a conversation about the paradox of our current model of empathy and ways in which we could ameliorate it. In the coming together of Nelson and Weil, I see the basis for a more spacious empathy, which is to say a more infinite one, that incorporates the small, cheering moments of common humanity but does not limit the basis of our relationships to them; that asks for recognition of distance as the prelude to radically mature intimacy, instead of the reason why we cannot sustain said relationships; and that above all does not insist on comparisons that conflate the myriad contingencies that make us the individual animals we are. In this empathy, the recognition of a distance (however infinite it may be or feel) between us, our

loved ones (or simply those we have yet to love), and our respective, specifically contoured pains does not have to be the end of engagement or an elaborate apologetics of what we cannot or do not yet know. This kind of empathy could be the means by which we commit ourselves to the practice of showing up in our relations, and honoring in equal stead both our finitude and those who are wondrously, gloriously, most perfectly and assuredly not us.

Notes:

1. Maggie Nelson, *Bluets* (New York: Wave Books, 2009), 39.
2. “empathy, n.,” accessed May 10, 2016, <http://www.oed.com.revproxy.brown.edu/view/Entry/61284?redirectedFrom=empathy#eid>
3. Sympathy, on the other hand, refers to the supposed feeling of similarity that witnessing another’s experience or emotion can provoke in us; unlike empathy, it doesn’t rely on the projection of our prior experience onto another’s.
4. Professor Anna Bialek, “RELS0052 Lecture: Simone Weil,” April 25, 2016.
5. Judith Butler, *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* (London: Verso, 2004), 23.
6. Nelson, *Bluets*, 39.
7. What’s more, were I to express empathy on the grounds that because I’ve had an experience that fits under the category of your experience, I know exactly what you’re feeling, I would overcome the distance that separates you from me, not because I’d ended it but because I’d ignored it all together—hardly a sustainable solution to the inherent limits of our ability to imagine the experiences of others.
8. Simone Weil, “The Love of God and Affliction” in *The Simone Weil Reader* (New York: David McKay Company, 1977), 440.
9. *Ibid.* 439.
10. *Ibid.* 446.
11. *Ibid.* 444.
12. Because Weil assumes that her readers are as equally theologically committed as she is, I use her terms to work through her argument but do not take her assumption as anything but a

reflection of her thought; it is neither a belief I share nor one that want to impose on my readers.

13. Ibid. 441. I paraphrased Weil's claim here — "Compassion for the afflicted is an impossibility"—because I believe that its bluntness is misleading. I read Weil here as saying that the afflicted do deserve compassion, but only until they realize that affliction is actually the closest a human can get to experiencing what God does.

14. Discussing one possible response to the affliction of another, Weil writes: "To project one's being into an afflicted person is to assume for a moment his affliction"—essentially, what we once used as our definition of empathy, and the traces of which remain in how we apply it today. But we can't do that, argues Weil, because "[o]nly Christ has done that." Which means that when we give ourselves to others, or attempt to through empathy, it "is not really [our] own being" that we give, but rather "Christ himself," because such charity "is a sacrament" (460) in light of the mechanisms that govern the world that Weil believes to be both finite and fallible.

15. Maggie Nelson described a similar project in regard to her writing. In an interview with *The Rumpus*, she explained: "The first is to reiterate the importance of space, of silence, of void. Yes, of course. But insofar as worshipping at that altar might bring one toward the veneration of not speaking, not writing, I find myself wandering off."

16. Simone Weil, *Waiting for God* (New York: Harper Collins, 1951), 114.

Works Cited:

Butler, Judith. *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence*. London: Verso Books, 2004.

Nelson, Maggie. *Bluets*. New York: Wave Books, 2009.

Oxford English Dictionary. "empathy, n." Accessed May 10, 2016. <http://www.oed.com.revproxy.brown.edu/view/Entry/61284?redirectedFrom=empathy#eid>

The Rumpus. "The Rumpus Interview with Maggie Nelson." Accessed May 13, 2016. <http://therumpus.net/2015/05/the-rumpus-interview-with-maggie-nelson/>

Weil, Simone. "The Love of God and Affliction." in *The Simone Weil Reader*, edited by George A. Panichas, 439-468. New York: David McKay Company, 1977.

---. *Waiting for God*. New York: Harper Collins, 1951.

Works Consulted:

Barnard Center for Research on Women. "The Argonauts: A Salon in Honor of Maggie Nelson." Filmed April 14, 2016. YouTube video, 1:46:56. Posted April 27, 2016. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MfPIFR6UijM>

Bialek, Anna. Conversation in Office Hours. With Sarah Cooke. May 6, 2016.

---. RELS0052 Lecture: Simone Weil. Brown University, Rhode Island. April 25, 2016.

Funk, Emma. Peer Review Meeting. With Sarah Cooke. May 14, 2016.

Jamison, Leslie. *The Empathy Exams*. Minneapolis: Gray Wolf Press, 2014.

Larson, D. G. and Chastain, R. L. "Self-Concealment:

Conceptualization, Measurement, and Health Implications.” *Journal of Social and Clinical Psychology* 9.4 (1990): 439-455.

Oxford English Dictionary, “compassion, n.” Accessed May 10, 2016. <http://www.oed.com.revproxy.brown.edu/view/Entry/37475?rskey=gXGgPO&result=1&isAdvanced=false#eid>

---. “sympathy, n.” Accessed May 10, 2016. <http://www.oed.com.revproxy.brown.edu/view/Entry/196271?rskey=cypHu7&result=1&isAdvanced=false#eid>

Uysal, A., Lin, H. L., and Bush, A.. “The reciprocal cycle of self-concealment and trust in romantic relationships.” *European Journal of Social Psychology* (2012). Accessed May 10, 2016. doi: 10.1002/ejsp.1904.