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# Affect at the margins: Alternative empathies in *A Small Place*

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## ABSTRACT

Against the contemporary universalist injunction to 'be empathetic', this paper explores the possibilities of what I call 'alternative empathies' in the aftermath of the Atlantic slave trade and European colonialism. Offering an affective reading of Jamaica Kincaid's *A Small Place* (1988/2000), it examines how empathy expressed at the margins of postcolonial imaginaries might disrupt or refigure some of the dominant ways that affect is thought and mobilised in pervasive Euro-American liberal and neoliberal discourses. As a powerful commentary on the cultural, political, economic and affective links between slavery, colonialism, and contemporary practices of tourism in the Caribbean that has provoked intense emotional responses among its readers, *A Small Place* offers a pertinent site through which to consider how history, power and violence shape the meanings and effects of empathy. It illustrates how the affective afterlives of decolonisation shape contemporary subjectivities in ways that are not easy to penetrate, nor possible to undo, through the power of empathetic will alone. Yet it also points to the role that alternative empathies can play in interrogating ideas of time as linear and universal and space as self-contained, revealing how we live affectively through different temporalities and spatialities – with varying implications for our senses of possibility *in* and *for* the world. I thus argue that exploring alternative empathies might open out to affective politics which do not view emotions instrumentally as sources of – or solutions to – complex social and political problems, but rather examine diverse and shifting relations of feeling for what they might tell us about the affective workings of power in a transnational world.

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'[G]reed is out, empathy is in.' Primatologist Frans de Waal's catchphrase captures the spirit of the dominant Euro-American affective imperative to eschew 'bad' feelings for 'good' ones, value generosity and connection over self-interest and division, and have faith that 'putting oneself in the other's shoes' can remedy the most deep-rooted social problems. As de Waal declares in *The Age of Empathy*, the public's outrage at the U.S. government's 'lack of empathy' in the wake of Hurricane Katrina, together with the global financial crisis and the election of a new American President, 'produced a seismic shift in society' (2009: ix). If we can harness this empathetic surge to focus public attention on 'what unites a society, what makes it worth living, rather than what material wealth we can extract from it', he contends, we will be one step closer to 'a more just society' (ix; see also Obama, 2006; Rifkin, 2010). Concomitant with claims for an epochal shift into 'the age of empathy' are stark warnings that current neoliberal political ideologies and policies are depleting the very affective capacities that hold our potential to become a more equitable and democratic society. For example, in *Not for Profit: Why Democracy Needs the Humanities*, philosopher Martha Nussbaum contends that with universities becoming increasingly corporatized, and the arts and humanities being everywhere downsized, we are witnessing a serious erosion of the very qualities essential to democracy itself, namely empathy: 'the ability to imagine sympathetically the predicaments of another person' (2010: 7). In order to address these troubling deficiencies, she insists, we must 'look deeply into the psychology of the individual' and ask what we can 'do to help compassion and empathy win in the clash over fear and hate' (43) and neutralise the pernicious effects of 'disgust and shame' (38; see also Calloway-Thomas, 2010). For these authors, empathy is both the emotional ingredient that binds us together as human subjects and communities and the affective panacea to a wide range of social, political and economic divisions and grievances.

These and other popular 'affective texts' express contemporary variants of what has been referred to as the liberal narrative of empathy: In short hand, the conviction that, in a transnational and multicultural world, social crises, hierarchies and antagonisms can be addressed affectively through practices of empathetic imagination, perspective-taking and engagement. As Megan Boler notes, the emergence of liberal accounts of empathy has been linked to

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the writings of progressive American educational philosophers such as John Dewey and Louise Rosenblatt who, at the onset of the Second World war, 'wrote optimistically of their faith in the "social imagination", developed in part through literature which allows the reader the possibility of identifying with "the other" and thereby developing modes of moral understanding thought to build democracy' (1999: 155). Over the last thirty years of multiculturalism in 'the West', and particularly in North America, empathy has been promoted increasingly by liberal opinion leaders 'as a bridge between differences, the affective reason for engaging in democratic dialogue with the other' (159; see also Berlant, 2004). Although liberal narratives of empathy differ on the basis of context and conditions of production, most share a presumption that empathy is both a universal and inherently 'positive' human capacity, to be valued and employed to combat 'negative' feelings such as greed, shame or fear. Empathy is associated in these discourses with other allegedly humanising emotions such as compassion and sympathy in denoting an orientation of care towards others, yet is distinguished from these feelings on the basis of the stronger element of identification or perspective taking it entails. It is also frequently conceptualised in liberal discourses within linear temporalities of progress – through its power to engender self and social transformation, empathy is framed as that which can heal past wounds and move us forward into a more peaceful, harmonious and equitable future. As such, empathy is understood in teleological terms: its invoking as affective remedy implicitly pre-supposes a natural *telos* or end-point, at which tensions have been eased and antagonisms rectified. Furthermore, while empathy is often posited as an affective force that can bridge geographical distance by creating emotional proximity, such discourses tend nevertheless to view space (prior to the 'arrival' of empathy) as discrete and self-contained. Today, discourses of empathy are resurgent across a wide range of sites, including national and transnational politics, media, international development, education, business, evolutionary science and psychology – and are often mobilised with political agendas that might more accurately be described as neoliberal or conservative than liberal per se (Pedwell, 2012a,b; see also Boler, 1999; Berlant, 2004; Goldie and Coplan, 2011).

If liberal discourses of empathy have a long genealogy, so to do their critical counter-discourses. As feminist and postcolonial theorists in particular have argued, liberal claims to 'know' or represent the experiences of 'others' through empathy often involve forms of projection and appropriation on the part of 'privileged' subjects which can reify existing social hierarchies and silence those at the margins (Spelman, 1997: 115; see also Hemmings, 2012b). Critical scholars have also shown that an uncritical framing of empathy, or other so-called positive emotions, as inherently desirable or 'good' fails to address both the fluid and unpredictable quality of emotion and the ways in which feelings are produced and felt differently in different social, cultural and geopolitical contexts (Ahmed, 2004, 2010; Bondi et al., 2007; Gunew, 2009; Ngai, 2005; Pedwell, 2012a,b). In addition, they have interrogated the ways in which narratives of affective social transformation often privilege 'the emotional' and 'the personal' over 'the structural', without ever teasing out their complex imbrication. As Lauren Berlant argues, while 'the displacement of politics to the realm of feeling both opens up a scene for the analysis of the operations of injustice in lived democracy', it also illustrates starkly 'the obstacles to social change that emerge when politics becomes privatized' (2008: xii; see also Cvetkovich, 2012; Pedwell and Whitehead, 2012).

Although the risks and limitations of liberal (and neoliberal) narratives of empathy are many, this paper is concerned primarily with the critical implications of how, despite conceptualising empathy as universal, these discourses routinely take for granted a socially privileged subject as potential 'empathiser'. That is, in the vast majority of these texts, it is an imagined subject with class, race and geo-political privileges who encounters 'difference' and then chooses whether or not to extend empathy and compassion. Arguably, there are important historical and political reasons for privileged subjects to be in greater need of developing empathy and a concomitant recognition of responsibility for the oppression and suffering of others in contexts marked by slavery, colonialism and transnational capitalism. Nonetheless, as critical theorists have argued, the act of 'choosing' to extend empathy or compassion can itself be a way to assert power. As such, the repeated mapping of categories of 'empathiser' and 'sufferer' onto traditional social and geo-political hierarchies can function to fix such hierarchies and the privileges they sustain and uphold (Berlant, 2004; Spelman, 1997; Woodward, 2004). Furthermore, the liberal framing of empathy as universal rarely takes into account the historical circumstances and power structures that make empathy more possible or beneficial for some than others (Bartky, 1996; Boler, 1999; Koehn, 1998; Whitehead, 2012). The assumption that empathy is inherently a good thing also fails to consider that the so-called 'other' may not want empathy – that, in particular circumstances, being empathised with could be a 'horrifying prospect' (Hemmings, 2012b).

This consistent and yet un-interrogated assumption that empathy is the purview of privileged subjects is not, however, a concern limited to popular liberal discourses. Indeed, even in more critical academic writing, it is nearly always a socially advantaged subject who is compelled to imagine the situations, constraints and feelings of 'others' and, through such empathetic engagement, be moved to recognise their own complicity in oppressive power structures and their concomitant responsibility to act for social change. For example, in Kimberley Chabot Davis's analysis of African American literature and 'the politics of cross-racial empathy', it is the 'white emphathizer' who, through 'empathetic experiences of seeing from the vantage point of another' can 'become critically aware of racial hierarchy' and compelled to 'work against the structures of inequality wherein her own power resides' (2004: 405). In Boler's work on affect and pedagogy, it is privileged university students in North America who are envisaged as potentially moving beyond the 'passive empathy' she associates with Nussbaum's liberal approach to become critical 'testimonial' readers who can recognise themselves as 'implicated in the social forces that create the climate of obstacles the other must confront' (1999: 166; see also Koehn, 1998; Meyers, 1994).[1] Although important and compelling, the risk of such conceptualisations is that, while the affective capacities and skills of privileged (middle class, white, and/or Western) subjects can be cultivated, honed and tested through empathy, the less privileged (poor, non-white and/or 'third world') 'other' remains simply the object of empathy and thus once again fixed in place (Pedwell, 2012b; see also Hemmings, 2012a). In this way, as with the more mainstream narratives discussed above, the repeated linking of empathy with social privilege across various critical analyses can work to preserve the oppressive relations of power such theorists would otherwise seek to contest.

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[1] For an important exception, see Patricia Hill Collins (1990), who explores how, within the history of African American knowledge production, emotional expressiveness, and particularly empathy, has been valued as part of an alternative epistemology of validating truth. Empathy in this context is not about a privileged subject endeavouring to put themselves 'in the shoes' of a less privileged 'other', but rather about how ways of knowing and relationships of trust and reciprocity are legitimised in communities historically excluded from mainstream thought.

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