

*Solomon questions what it means to empathize with someone whose experience of racial discrimination you cannot share. Weaving personal anecdotes and reflection into conversation with essayists Claudia Rankine, Leslie Jamison, and Ta-Nehisi Coates, she establishes her own ethos as an empathetic reader and thinker. (Instructor: Lorelei Ormrod)*

## EMPATHY

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I shuddered at the sound of his menacing voice as he made it clear that my presence was not welcome. “Hey boy . . . I could stick this fork into your neck!” he bellowed. I winced. Laughter erupted around me. He jabbed me in my back and stomped on my feet as he continued spouting profanities and threats for me to get out of his face and out of the store. I was terrified. I had no idea what was going to happen next, what derogatory name he would shout at me next, which part of my body he would seek to ravage next and with what weapon, or if I would be strong enough to sit back and take it.

A gentle tap on my shoulder alerted me that the situation—the simulation—was over. I opened my tightly shut eyes, peeled my hands off the counter and placed the headphones back on the designated rack. Petrifying, terrorizing, heart-wrenching. These words are insufficient to thoroughly depict my experience at the ‘lunch counter simulator’ at the Center for Human and Civil Rights, but they will have to do. But was that experience even mine? After all, these petrifying encounters had not actually happened to me. They were but simulations of the Greensboro sit-ins, a reenactment of the encounters at lunch counters staged by African American participants in the nonviolent protests of the civil rights movements of the 1960s. Yet, even as my eyes closed, I imagined myself at the lunch counter as a black male, feeling the emotions that seemed appropriate in the circumstances presented. Upon opening my eyes and leaving the simulation counter, I was brought back to the reality: I inhabit the body of an Indo-Caribbean young adult female. How could I possibly know or even begin to imagine what it really felt like to be an African

American male at a lunch counter sit-in decades ago? Nevertheless, shaking the gripping feelings I felt during the simulation seemed impossible. Had I been too empathetic, or was I being empathetic at all? Was I empathizing with the black male during the civil rights movement during the simulation or was I less altruistic than that? Was I simply imagining how I would feel in an experience like that? What was my relationship to the black male during the simulation? And what is the nature of empathy? Before, I had interpreted empathy as putting oneself in another's shoes to feel what that person felt. Yet I felt the same emotions of terror mixed with subtle determination even after I exited the 'body' of the black male at the lunch counter. Is empathy an ongoing experience, or is it a fleeting feeling demarcated by the beginning and end of a situation, an altercation, a confrontation, or perhaps even a simulation?

Claudia Rankine explores empathy in *Citizen: An American Lyric*, posing the question: "How difficult is it for one body to feel the injustice wheeled at another? Are the tensions, the recognitions, the disappointments, and the failures that exploded in the riots too foreign?" (116). Rankine was responding to a conversation with an English novelist in which she was asked if she would write about Mark Duggan, a black man who was shot dead on August 4, 2011, in Tottenham, London, and whose death sparked the Hackney riots. She responded to his question by asking, "Why don't you?" and was then met with "[slight irritation]" from the novelist (116). She begins to wonder how arduous it is for one's body to not just feel compassion or sorrow for the injustice hurled at another body but to actually *feel the injustice*. Rankine notes that within this English novelist's body, "grief exists for Duggan as a black man gunned down," but there is no "urgency" in his body in response to the injustices, the "compromises, deaths, and tempers" over time which she as a black American woman, a black body, is all too familiar with but which "the man made of English sky" is not and apparently cannot be familiar with (117). The very phrase "made of English sky" directly contrasts with Rankine's "black body" (117) to highlight a physical difference between Rankine and the novelist that appears to translate into the difference in the immediacy they feel regarding Duggan's murder. Because the "English sky" could never reflect "black," because he does

not know what it is to move through life as a black body, the novelist unconsciously renounces any responsibility that he, as an English novelist, could be charged with in writing about the death of the English Duggan. Rankine seems to be proposing that it is truly difficult to put oneself—one's body—in another's body if, to begin with, there is hardly any commonality between the two bodies and their awarenesses, experiences, histories, and realities. But how much of the ability to empathize with another being is concerned with being able to physically imagine oneself in another's body? Do the physical differences between our bodies and thus how our "bodies [move] through the same life differently" (Rankine 117) create hurdles that prevent the journey of empathy? Is empathy, besides being an emotional journey and experience, at the same time a physical one?

To Leslie Jamison, author of *The Empathy Exams*, empathy involves getting past that hurdle. She describes empathy as moving beyond what can be seen, "acknowledging a horizon of context that extends beyond what you can see" and recognizing that the unspoken and the unseen are just as connected, if not more so, to someone's "trauma" (5). It is recognizing that the physical and the present do not comprehensively reflect a person, and that to truly empathize with that person takes genuine interest in understanding what hides behind their exterior and even deep in their past. Jamison further explores the meaning of empathy by way of its etymology, which reveals that "empathy" comes from the Greek words that mean "into" and "feeling," signifying a motion into "another person's pain as you'd enter another country . . . by way of query" (6). As physical as this imagery may seem at first, Jamison is suggesting that one has to be both mentally and emotionally invested in the journey to this foreign place. Perhaps the part where most falter, as the English novelist did, is in this initial step—being truly invested in another's pain, enough to be open to understanding it and willing to feel it as they do. Jamison seems to propose a way to launch oneself into this journey by making the conscious decision to "pay attention, to extend [oneself]" (23). In Jamison's eyes, empathy is no less genuine if the choice is made to embark upon the journey. As she analyzes her response to her brother's Bell's Palsy diagnosis she notes that "empathy isn't just something that happens to us . . . The act of choosing simply means

we've committed ourselves to a set of behaviors greater than the sum of our individual inclinations" (23). Empathy involves work, the effort of "getting inside another person's state of heart or mind" (Jamison 23). It involves putting aside one's own emotions and making the decision to seek to understand rather than to be understood, to love rather than to be loved.

President Obama describes empathy as a means to "find common ground" as, in journalist John Paul Rollert's words, "we unburden ourselves of the trivial rigidities that divide us" (qtd. in Rollert; Rollert). Claudia Rankine's *Citizen: An American Lyric* and Ta-Nehisi Coates's *Between the World and Me* are both books which seem to put my empathy on trial as I consciously wrestle to "find common ground" between myself and the individuals in the books. *Between the World and Me* challenges me to journey into Coates's pain, skepticism, courage, and every emotion in between as he writes an intimate letter to his son about the realities of being black in the United States. *Citizen* gives me the opportunity to meld into the body of Rankine as she candidly details the microaggressions she experiences daily as well as striking, racist injustices against black bodies. What makes these readings especially trying are their themes of racism and prejudice, which Coates describes as a "visceral experience," something that is encountered within and thus must be felt, not merely read about on a page, to be understood (Coates 10).

Coates skillfully tackles race and what it means to be living in a black body in America in a way that leaves no room for refutation, as it is his own experience that he writes from. He writes bluntly to his son, Samori, about growing up in Baltimore: how he had to learn the codes of the streets in order to get by and "shield [his] body," and about the "myths and narratives" of the world of a black body that Samori has yet to uncover and unravel (23, 21). Through this intimate letter to his son, a reader of *Between the World and Me* becomes aware of the many overlooked injustices faced by the black body in America. Coates takes no pleasure in sugarcoating the realities of this world in this letter and, like Malcom X, whom he so admired, he "[makes] it plain, never mystical or esoteric" because, like Malcolm X, Coates's concern is rooted "in the work of the physical world" (36). While this long letter, profoundly emotional, may make readers feel

uncomfortable, it is in this very way that Coates enables his readers to empathize. Through the overwhelming discomfort that engulfed me as I perused this epistolary autobiography, I was compelled to at the very least acknowledge the injustices faced by the black body in America; Coates thus brilliantly arouses in readers a longing for justice for the black body regardless of whether one is able to venture into the body mentally, emotionally, or 'physically,' like Jamison suggests.

Knowing that the pronoun 'you' was meant not for me but for Coates's son and other males inhabiting black bodies in America, it felt challenging to attempt to 'slip my skin' and see through Coates's eyes. However, upon contemplation, I came to the realization that being directly addressed was not necessary for empathy. If anything, it became easier to empathize as 'I' had already been removed from the equation. With knowledge of the biases, discrimination, plunder, and oppression of the black body, as reflected through the experiences of Coates himself, and without any reflection of my identity, my race, or my experiences, what was stopping me from truly internalizing his experiences and inhabiting his body, even for a second?

The answer I came to was that nothing was prohibiting me from 'slipping my skin' into Coates's other than the fact that I believed his book wasn't written for my demographic. Is it not a true test of empathy to make the conscious choice, as Jamison suggests, to embark upon a journey to an unknown land and be open to new findings and experiences, especially when the realities of this foreign place are so drastically different to one's own land? What better reason to choose to empathize than to experience what one cannot? By recognizing that the mind and the body are two separate things, I made the conscious decision to separate myself from my body and my experiences and was able to journey into what I thought Coates's experience would be like based on my interpretation of his written words. But did I feel what Coates felt? Perhaps I could never actually feel what Coates felt since my experience of empathy was founded in my subjective interpretation of what I had read of his experience. Perhaps this is an innate limitation of empathy itself. Perhaps empathy isn't completely void of subjectivity. Perhaps empathy in its purest form is just an ideal to which we aspire, a journey to a foreign place we long

to traverse but whose final destination is inevitably influenced by our own past journeys and experiences. Perhaps each person's journey is unconsciously personalized so that no two journeys, even if they are to the same destination, are identical.

While Coates's use of the pronoun 'you' at first seemed to distance me from the intended audience, I found that Rankine's strategic utilization of the same pronoun made me feel included, like I was inside the scenes and experiences that were laid out before me in print. This is probably because *Citizen* delves into everyday encounters centered around 'you' and through the eyes of 'you.' Once again, as with Coates's *Between the World and Me*—but more so in Rankine's *Citizen*—the uncomfortable quotidian scenarios in which I found myself that were so foreign to my experiences as an Indo-Caribbean female forced me to leave my body. I confronted those uneasy, awkward, and sometimes painful encounters through the eyes of the 'you' which was sometimes Rankine and sometimes others in her book's vignettes. Yet in each uncomfortable, painful journey, I felt an ever-present comfort. It was the comfort of knowing somewhere inside of me that this body I was journeying to inhabit was not mine, will never be mine, that I probably would never face those uncomfortable confrontations in my own life. In moments like these, I was able to empathize and yet be aware at the same time that they were moments of empathy. I was aware that I was 'slipping my skin' and inhabiting a foreign place momentarily, and that no matter how painful and tearful these moments were, even if I couldn't shake these feelings afterwards, I still was not, am not, the real 'you' in the scenarios. I had the comfort of knowing that I could slip back into my own body and seek refuge there.

Even Rankine seems to recognize the limitations of empathy. She writes in the article "The Condition of Black Life Is One of Mourning" that "there really is no mode of empathy that can replicate the daily strain of knowing that as a black person you can be killed for simply being black." When asked about this statement in an interview for *The Guardian*, she clarifies that not even empathy is enough to allow one to know the burdens and plights of another body, particularly the black body. She goes on to say that "empathy is not a cure" (qtd. in Kellaway). Empathy does not heal the wounded. It provides

no remedy for the ailing. Empathy itself changes nothing for the beaten and the broken. For the empathizer, the traveler, it can bring about feelings of satisfaction, pleasure, and a moment of learning, while for the person empathized with, empathy changes nothing. Regardless of whether empathy is experienced as an ongoing journey or a mere peek into another life, empathy remains the experience of the empathizer. It's even as if the person being empathized with is a mere bystander in the journey of the traveler. If empathy remains an experience for the empathizer, then what remains for the 'empathized'? What does it serve for Jamison's brother? What remains for Rankine and Coates? What is there for the black man at the lunch counter in the 1960s?

I am left asking why I or anyone else would *choose* to embark upon a journey into another's pain. Is it pleasurable for one to truly "feel the injustice wheeled at another" (Rankine 116)? Is feeling the pain of another the only way that we can truly be concerned for them? Are we so naturally self-absorbed that we need to feel another's pain to validate its existence? Do we need to first feel another's pain to recognize its importance? Or perhaps empathy is simply a mechanism we use to prove our humanity to no one other than ourselves.

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