

Weaponized Empathy:
Encountering the Other on the Page

by

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This is to certify that the accompanying thesis by Alexandra Maria Bohr has been accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for graduation with Honors in Politics

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“What does it mean for the theory and practice of social transformation when feeling good becomes evidence of justice’s triumph?” -**Lauren Berlant**

“I ask that you try to be ‘un-sutured.’ If that term brings to mind a state of pain, open flesh, it is meant to do so.” -**George Yancy, “Dear White America”**

Introduction

One day at the beginning of the year, I found myself in a classroom with a visiting journalist-turned-novelist, Omar El Akkad. “Good fiction is weaponized empathy,” he said to the room. I was eating a tofu caesar wrap and it was leaking some kind of opaque dressing, but suddenly that seemed less important than the fact that an actual writer was sitting before me, saying that word—*empathy* (I did not, then, consider what the “weaponized” qualifier might mean). The discussion moved on, so my empathy question was left hanging in my head, a nearly imperceptible trace of doubt.

El Akkad began to talk about his favorite books, listing several by Toni Morrison. I would later come across an article about him in which he describes his first encounter with *Song of Solomon*: “I now divide everything into what I read before and what I read after this book. Before I read it, I thought it was possible to have beautiful writing in a book or have an incredibly powerful and dangerous political message in a book or have a world-changing technique to do something fundamentally new. But I didn't think you could do all of those things at once. Then I read *Song of Solomon* by Toni Morrison.”¹ This was, perhaps, his first encounter with weaponized empathy, with a politically emancipatory book that is also beautiful and deeply affecting.

The conversation then turned to the professor in the room, who was in the process of writing an academic book. Someone asked what he hoped the reaction to his book would be. Without missing a beat he replied, “I want it to disturb people.” To generate

¹ “5 Books That Inspired Canada Reads Finalist Omar El Akkad,” *CBC*, March 7, 2018.

controversy, to contest the natural order of things. He wanted his book to unsettle the status quo, and he wondered if academic writing had the same power to do so that fiction does.

Critical race scholars would respond to his concern with an emphatic *yes, and*. Their work has long been a testament to the deft linguistic and affective maneuvering required to generate emancipatory knowledge within a language of oppression. It is a response to poet Adrienne Rich's line that reads, "This is the oppressor's language yet I need it to talk to you."² Storytelling, creative prose, and experimentation, as Carl Gutierrez-Jones tells us, is vital to critical race theorists' political interventions.³ Creative writing is a path towards newness, disruption, and political possibility.

After some time, I made myself ask the question that had been lingering in my head: "What exactly is the point of empathy?" The class laughed, but El Akkad took the question seriously. He thought for a moment, and then said that there is no such thing as foreign suffering. He said that empathy is a difficult place to stand in, but it is vital for making us feel the urgency of injustice that will push us to act. He referenced the German root of empathy, *Einfühlung*, which translates as *in-feeling* or *feeling into*. Empathy collapses distance, it raises the stakes.

He paused for a moment, and then said, "But honestly, ultimately, no matter how much you can feel with, or *into*, someone else, one difference will remain: at the end of the day, you can always walk away." And whoever you are empathizing with cannot.

² Adrienne Rich, "The Burning of Paper Instead of Children."

³ Carl Gutierrez-Jones, "Critical Race Stories and the Problem of Remedy" in *Critical Race Narratives: A Study of Race, Rhetoric, and Injury* (New York: New York University Press), 69-90.

The Case for Empathy

The word *empathy* is a curious one. Search the definition of its sister word, *empath*, and you'll find a parenthetical qualifier that reads, "(chiefly in science fiction)."⁴ The definition continues on to describe an empath as "a person with the paranormal ability to apprehend the mental or emotional state of another individual." An empath takes the Other's experiences as her own. Experiencing true empathy—accessing another's thoughts and feelings—is itself implausible. It's the stuff of fiction. So how exactly do we wield empathy in the so-called real world?

Those who argue for empathy do so from a place of earnest belief in its potential to effect change and encourage altruism. Through its perspective-sharing and attunement to others' feelings, empathy offers connection in a world of apathy. Reading, in particular, is often hailed as a catalyst for empathy. An article in the *New Yorker* discusses the rise of bibliotherapy, a practice in which "book therapists" prescribe tailored reading lists to ease various intellectual, emotional, and spiritual ailments. The notion of bibliotherapy dates back to a 1916 article in *The Atlantic Monthly*, which tells the story of a man named Bagster who ran a bibliotherapy clinic from a church basement and believed in the healing power of books. One of Bagster's clients came to him with a case of "opinions partially ossified," and in his prescription Bagster counseled the man with great urgency: "You must read more novels. Not pleasant stories that make you forget yourself. They must be searching, drastic, stinging, relentless novels."⁵

⁴ "Empath," *Oxford English Living Dictionaries*, <https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/empath>.

⁵ Ceridwen Dovey, "Can Reading Make You Happier?", *The New Yorker*, June 9, 2015.

It is unsurprising that bibliotherapists advocate for fiction as a path to transformation. It is fiction, after all, that wields affective power, that changes hearts. Psychology research supports what book lovers have long known: reading fiction leads to empathy.⁶ Studies have found that fiction leads to perspective-taking, a mental process that decreases hostility and discrimination towards marginalized groups.⁷ In fact, practices of humanization (such as reading fiction) are more effective at reducing explicit prejudice than are strategies based in education.⁸ It would seem that empathy—and reading, by proxy—makes for better people and kinder world.

Even Obama has joined the chorus of empathy proponents. He has gone so far as to say that the “empathy deficit” in our society is worse than the federal deficit.⁹ In *The Audacity of Hope*, he writes, “I believe a stronger sense of empathy would tilt the balance of our current politics in favor of those people who are struggling in this society.” Our cultural icons have spoken: it’s good to be Team Empathy. But what exactly does it mean when we consider empathy to be our political saving grace?

⁶ Sarah Kaplan, “Does Reading Fiction Make You a Better Person?”, *Washington Post*, July 22, 2016.

⁷ Florien M. Cramwinckel, Daan T. Scheepers, and Jozanneke Van Der Toorn, "Interventions to Reduce Blatant and Subtle Sexual Orientation- and Gender Identity Prejudice (SOGIP): Current Knowledge and Future Directions," *Social Issues and Policy Review* 12, no. 1 (2018).

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ Mark Honigsbaum, “Barack Obama and the ‘Empathy Deficit,’” *The Guardian*, Jan 4, 2013.

You Get a Book, And *You* Get a Book: Reading With Heart

It's the fall of 1996, and Oprah Winfrey is standing next to a table of books, clad in a maroon pantsuit. She says to her audience, "Okay, this is one of my all-time favorite moments I'm having on television *right now*." She gushes to the camera, the audience, the nation that she *really* loves books. She is standing here to announce the beginning of her soon-to-be wildly popular book club. She addresses the crowd with excitement bubbling in her voice, "I want to get the country reading again!"¹⁰ After she says this, the camera pans to the audience: it's a sea of white women, mostly blonde, who are hanging on her every word. They burst into applause at the announcement. "Books are important!" Oprah cries amidst the cheers. The camera zooms in on a white woman in a pink suit and round glasses—she nods robotically, looking enamored. Oprah concludes by saying, "Okay, we'll meet back here in a month and we'll talk about the book. Just like they do in the reading clubs. Isn't that exciting? *I love it*." The white women smile and clap. Oprah dazzles with a smile. The clip ends.¹¹

As part of her book club segment, Oprah invites viewers onto the show to discuss her chosen book, usually over a meal. It is meant to feel homey, comfortable, personal. She is trying to teach the country how to feel. These scenes often cut to teary clips of crying women and sentimental stories of loss and reconciliation. The camera hones in on white women, in particular, who feel deeply moved and fundamentally changed by

¹⁰ Trysh Travis, "'It Will Change the World If Everybody Reads This Book': New Thought Religion in Oprah's Book Club," *American Quarterly* 59, no. 3 (2007): 1017.

¹¹ Oprah Winfrey, "Oprah's Book Club (Do You Remember the First Book She Picked?)," YouTube video, 3:10, posted by OWN, March 18, 2015 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fuoaQoxITiE>.

having read the novel. Oprah's book club is a testament to a belief in empathy as a tool for social, political, and racial reconciliation.

The conversations on Oprah's show, however, are stripped of political teeth and kept in the realm of personal emotional transformation. Oprah encourages an "interpretive mode focused on empathetic identification and the cultivation of 'openness.'"¹² Her goal is love—the feel-good kind. Once, when appearing on *The Oprah Winfrey Show* for a book discussion, Toni Morrison urged an intellectual response and told the audience to resist simplistic emotional identification with characters. Oprah, however, championed the heart. She said of Morrison's *Paradise*, "Don't just read this book with your head."¹³ But this method, this practice of affect-based reading, can be dangerous. It leaves everything but white feelings untouched.

¹² Travis, "It Will Change the World," 1030.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 1031.

White Empathy, Weaponized Empathy

I first come across *The Bluest Eye* during my sophomore year of high school when it is assigned for my English class. It is introduced with no fanfare, it is simply the next book on our syllabus after *Lord of the Flies*. It doesn't cross my mind to consider what it means to read a book about a black girl in a mostly white class at a mostly white school. I don't recognize that there is vulnerability and danger in this assignment, that the story carries messages of my own white complicity (if I will see them) and a warning of racism's irredeemability. And it certainly doesn't strike me as a moment of political potential.

Despite reading the book in an academic context, my response is personal rather than analytical. My fear of—or apathy about—confronting race and labelling my own whiteness leads me to fall back on easy emotional identification instead of critical engagement. I am sad for Pecola, I *feel for her*, but I never think to label racism as the driving force behind her suffering. Instead, I name the problem as unattainable beauty standards, something I myself can identify with. This is white empathy: appropriating Pecola's suffering for my needs and prioritizing an emotional response over critical awareness of structural injustice.

When my teacher assigns an essay about the book, I write, “Pecola is clearly affected by the beauty myth—she is filled with disgust for herself because she doesn't fit the beauty standards of her time.”¹⁴ I am young and self-conscious and I cannot think

¹⁴Alya Bohr, “The Beauty Myth,” (essay, Analy High School, 2013), 1.

beyond my own world. I worry about my shoulders, which I am certain are too broad, and my nose, which someone once compared to a pig's nose, but I never once think about my race. I take it for granted because I can. My approach to Pecola's story eclipses the racism she experiences because I am desperate to fit her into my own world—and because mine is a white world, it works. No one questions my analysis. No one calls me out. I get an A. My white empathy is rewarded.

Telling this story does not get me “points” for retroactively recognizing my privilege. It makes me just as complicit in perpetuating the dominance of whiteness and just as responsible for addressing it, for interrogating the power it has given me and channeling that into action. The question, then, is how. How do we begin to challenge the privileges bestowed by white skin and the rule of white supremacy? And how do we engage in this antiracist work without extracting emotional and intellectual labor from people of color by asking that they educate and direct us?

This is where I am inclined to turn to literature. Seeking political emancipation through reading has a long and intricate precedent. While a cursory glance at European history might suggest that reading is an act belonging primarily to the privileged class, to those who could afford leisure time or were welcome in the bourgeois spaces of Enlightenment era salons, an exploration of subaltern struggle suggests otherwise. In Nicaragua and Cuba, popular socialist uprisings led to large-scale national literacy campaigns that increased collective political consciousness and notably reduced class, social, and political divides.¹⁵ In the antebellum North, free blacks formed “literary societies,” spaces for vibrant collective engagement with the written word. Anna

¹⁵ David Archer and Patrick Costello, “Nicaragua, Lecheguagos: Literacy as a Political Crusade,” *Literacy and Power: The Latin American Battleground* (New York: Earthscan, 1990).

Douglass, wife to Frederick Douglass, was a lifelong member of one of these literary societies. She was also illiterate.¹⁶ The act of reading is not limited to those in positions of privilege. The above forms of reading were fundamentally *for the people*, and specifically for a people who had been historically exploited and excluded from the public domains they were now entering.

In this context, however, I am interested in exploring moments of political possibility for readers who *do* have privilege. I want to know what it means to weaponize liberal empathy. As Kimberly Chabot-Davis argues, reading has the potential to incite a “self-implicating sense of outrage and empathy”¹⁷ born of engagement with a difficult text that leaves us willing to challenge our own privilege. Perhaps reading can spur us to become what Charles Mills refers to as race traitors: “individuals [who] betray the white polity in the name of a broader definition of the polis.”¹⁸ Race traitors are those who choose to act with a commitment to racial justice rather than guarding their white privilege and upholding what Mills calls the “Racial Contract” of white supremacy. White people are “signatories” to this contract because it promotes a political and ideological rule that benefits us, but we can betray it.

I am after what it means to read with political consciousness, to respond thoughtfully to literary affect, and—through this process—to challenge systems of injustice. Of course, there is a danger here, too, because this project should not be about the personal growth and enlightenment of white people. Rather, it is about inciting

¹⁶ Elizabeth McHenry, *Forgotten Readers: Recovering the Lost History of African American Literary Societies*, (Duke University Press, 2002).

¹⁷ Kimberly Chabot Davis, *Beyond the White Negro: Empathy and Antiracist Reading* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2014), 5.

¹⁸ Charles Mills, *The Racial Contract* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1997), 108.

material changes in the unjust conditions faced by people of color. So I ask: can reading change the world? The answer, I believe, is yes, but not always for the better. If practices of reading go uninterrogated, if we neglect to consider the structural relationship between text and reader, then we risk reifying forms of inequality through our engagement with others' stories. The act of reading may hold political possibility, but it is not immune from the material conditions of our world. This uncertainty is where I begin.

Love is Blind: The Dangers of Empathy

The “neutral,” “objective” reading of *The Bluest Eye* goes something like this: Pecola Breedlove is eleven years old, and she hates her black skin. She aches for blue eyes with a desire so intense it draws her past the brink of sanity. And because we live in a world dominated by whiteness, Pecola cannot look away from the blond curls, blue eyes, and easy giggle of Shirley Temple. This hostile world turns Pecola against herself. *The Bluest Eye* ends with a mental breakdown, ends with Pecola alone and abandoned, ends with her unwanted baby’s premature death and with marigolds that will never sprout, let alone bloom.¹⁹ She doesn’t get a happy ending—she is black in a white world.

These may be the facts of the book, but it is *subjective* readings that capture the tension between affect and story. One of the viewers invited onto Oprah’s show to discuss *The Bluest Eye* is a white woman named Diana Bliss who gushes about her connection with Pecola. In a letter about the book, Bliss writes, “by reading this book, I could look into the eyes of Malcolm X and say, I understand, I embrace you, I love you.”²⁰ Pecola’s “pathos-ridden body”²¹ is the focal point of Bliss’s charged emotional response to the book. She latches onto Pecola’s pain as a site of transformative connection. This response is one of white empathy: Bliss feels emotionally moved by Pecola’s suffering, which leads to a false sense of redemption and justice. In reality,

¹⁹ Toni Morrison, *The Bluest Eye* (New York: Knopf, 1993).

²⁰ Rebecca Wanzo, “The Reading Cure,” in *The Suffering Will Not Be Televised: African American Women and Sentimental Political Storytelling* (Albany: State University of New York, 2009), 21.

²¹ *Ibid.*

nothing has changed but her feelings. White empathy thrives on colorblind humanism and postracial identification.

In attempting to relate to Pecola, Diana Bliss tells a story from her childhood. As a young girl, she desperately wanted to be cast as an angel in a local pageant, but was denied the part due to her brown hair and eyes. She thinks this experience is comparable to racism, that because of her own experience with exclusion she can understand racial outsidership. This response neglects to consider the benefits reaped by whiteness. It promotes a politics that claims, *we're all the same if only we open our hearts!* It remains stuck in colorblindness and oblivious to pervasive structural inequalities. The political rule of white supremacy remains untouched.

When we form romanticized attachments to suffering characters, it becomes easier to identify with the victims of racism than to acknowledge our complicity with the perpetrators. Romanticizing stories about people of color does not make us antiracist. It exposes us. It reveals the depth of white dependence on palatable representations that do not challenge the status quo. George Lipsitz points to “Western culture’s enduring attachment to romanticism, to separating life and art, to elevating individual emotions over collective conditions, and to making an aesthetic of social pain.”²² White people use black art to ease their consciences. An empathic response to aesthetic suffering functions as a salve for the psychic fissures of white fragility. It will not change the world.

Lauren Berlant is a scholar and cultural theorist who studies affect, or the emotional contours and atmospheric sensations that undergird our fractured and precarious existence. Affect connects us to the world through visceral responses that

²² George Lipsitz, *The Possessive Investment in Whiteness: How White People Profit From Identity Politics* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2006): 119-120.

shape our thoughts and actions. Berlant calls stories like *The Bluest Eye* “countersentimental,” referring to their refusal to make an easy appeal to pathos—though of course that doesn’t stop people from trying anyway. Love and empathy, Berlant tells us, are not emancipatory. They just feel good. And feeling good doesn’t mean much in a world where hierarchies of inequality are built into our political, financial, and social ways of operating. A *New Yorker* article about Berlant’s work reads, “Everyone has heartstrings. Over time...we [have] grown addicted to having them pulled, rather than focusing on what the pulling could accomplish by way of political change.”²³ We mistake feeling for action, affective experience for material transformation. Berlant tells us that feeling another’s suffering leads to passive complicity with unjust systems. Stories that prioritize sentimental identification with suffering characters—*Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, for instance—are counterproductive in addressing the deep roots of inequality because they eschew an analytical response. Berlant writes that “the politico-sentimental novel uses suffering vampirically to simplify the subject, thereby making the injunction to compassion safe for the consumer of the suffering spectacle.”²⁴

Emotional reactions are easy for the reader: they allow us to skip the uncomfortable stuff and feel satisfied in our sentimental responses—I know because I’ve done it. Empathic identification lets us off the hook from interrogating the ways we may benefit from inequality because, instead, we can find redemption in our ability to vicariously experience suffering and respond with compassion. Berlant writes that “the use of the logic of romantic desire to neutralize, at least symbolically, the violence and

²³ Hua Hsu, “Affect Theory and the New Age of Anxiety,” *The New Yorker*, March 25, 2019.

²⁴ Lauren Berlant, “Poor Eliza,” in *The Female Complaint: The Unfinished Business of Sentimentality in American Culture* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008): 58.

attraction at play in hierarchical social relations implicitly suggests that structures and institutions of power can always be overcome by personal feelings, personal choices.” She refuses to measure justice against affective change in individuals. Empathy, she tells us, is an act of complicity, not emancipation.

In 2017, a white woman’s painting of Emmett Till’s mutilated body was featured at the Whitney Biennial in New York. Backlash came quickly, as members of the art world critiqued both the museum and the painter for using black pain as raw material, for sensationalizing historical trauma, for appropriating racism for white art. The painter in question, Dana Schutz, pleaded empathy. She said that as a mother, she identified with Mamie Till-Mobley, Emmett Till’s mother. She believed that the label “mother” could transcend racial lines.²⁵ Because of her faith in the power of empathy, she neglected to acknowledge the harm that her handling of traumatic material had caused for many people. White empathy is not confined to the sphere of literature, but is part and parcel of our liberal value system. We see this exemplified when people chant “love trumps hate!”, invoking a politics that places emotional understanding at the center of the fight for justice without acknowledging the actual work required to dismantle oppressive structures. The stakes of empathy-as-political-salvation extend beyond the seemingly passive domain of reading and into the materiality of our unequal world.

In her book, *Whitewalling*, which discusses the controversy surrounding the painting, Aruna D’souza quotes Lumumba in saying, “The problem here is that when white people think about racism they think only about what happened to its victims and not its perpetrators, because they are the perpetrators and it’s so much easier to simply

²⁵ Aruna D’Souza, *Whitewalling: Art, Race, and Protest in 3 Acts* (New York: Badlands Unlimited, 2018), 42.

display the pain of others than examine their own complicity within it.”²⁶ This is precisely the problem with empathic responses to black literature, to black art in general. White people misidentify with suffering characters, and neglect to interrogate our own privilege. Lumumba continues, “If white people can only talk about racism from the perspective of its effect on black people then they will not be able to dismantle their own complicity and will continue to enact their racist behavior.”²⁷

Critical whiteness studies aims to denaturalize whiteness as the unexamined standard of being. By naming whiteness, we begin to expose its mechanisms of maintaining power and privilege, we begin to challenge its purported naturalness. Philosopher George Yancy writes that whiteness produces its own truths of being. The power of whiteness is productive and creative: it designs its own reality. It builds a world to its liking, and reifies it through institutions, legislation, forms of knowledge, and prevailing cultural norms.

Whiteness as such can be understood through Jacques Rancière’s notion of the police, or social, order.²⁸ This order governs the realm of the sensible—that which we observe, that which is rendered legible. It is highly controlled and maintained by those in power, and it is reinforced by sentimental affective responses that favor personal change over tangible action. The police order paints dominant forms of power as the only possible option. It sweeps under the rug those who are marginalized, hides injustice, covers up cracks and splits so there seems to be no possibility for emancipation. Empathy is its minion: it blasts us with affect that overwhelms to the point of inhibiting action and

²⁶ D’Souza, *Whitewalling*, 49.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 50.

²⁸ Jacques Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics: The Distribution of the Sensible*, Trans. G. Rockhill. (London: Continuum, 2004).

awareness. The police order says, “There is nothing to see here.” It tells us, “Stop looking.” It makes whiteness appear as the indefatigable norm. We forget that it was constructed over time, that it is not invulnerable.

Reading Through Colorblind Glasses

Four years after the start of her book club, Oprah introduces *The Bluest Eye* as her latest pick, saying to her audience, “It will change the world if everybody reads this book.”²⁹ *The Bluest Eye* goes on to secure a spot on the *New York Times* bestseller list, second only to *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer’s Stone*.³⁰ The fact remains, however, that Morrison’s books are raw, gritty and—to use Berlant’s term—countersentimental. Her pages hold no redemption for the wages of slavery. She doesn’t want an easy story or a happy ending; that kind of feel-good continuity does a disservice to those affected by the thorny and complex realities of racism. A countersentimental story functions as a fissure in the police order. It refuses to fit into the glossy narratives of race produced by whiteness.

Oprah opens the discussion of *The Bluest Eye* by saying, “Regardless of what color you are, there are a lot of women who have defined themselves by what other people think of them.” She quickly defangs what could be a difficult engagement with race in order to make it easier for white viewers to consume the narrative at hand.³¹ These words do not call attention to whiteness, but rather bend over backwards to avoid naming it. This introduction allows white readers to romanticize the novel, to see themselves in Pecola, to feel love and empathy rather than discomfort and complicity. After all, Oprah’s *modus operandi* is to change hearts. Her credo is transcendental love and emotional

²⁹ Travis, “It Will Change the World,” 1020.

³⁰ “Best Sellers Plus,” *New York Times*, May 28, 2000.

³¹ Perhaps Oprah has to use this approach, given her positioning as a black women in the national spotlight and the countless stereotypes and limitations that inhibit full modes of expression for women of color. Though a critical analysis of her politics is still viable, it is also important to recognize other factors at play.

identification. Empathy is perfect for this because it allows us to skip over the part where we acknowledge our role in systems of power and privilege. It lets us off the hook, simply because we have the capacity to feel.

Oprah is careful in picking which readers to invite on the show—she makes her choice based on letters they write in response to the book, and she prefers the ones who pile on the empathy and sentimentality. Her politics is one of feeling, of individual change. *The Bluest Eye* resists this very response. Author Rebecca Wanzo remarks, “The absence of self-transformative closure in *The Bluest Eye*, and the lack of emphasis on affect, is contrary, however, to Winfrey’s project, which depends upon the possibility of resolution.”³² Oprah’s white viewers ignore the irresolution of the novel, and instead claim identification with Pecola’s struggles. But the novel resists. It demands to be about race. The question is: will we see it?

³² Wanzo, “The Reading Cure,” 109.

Confronting the White Gaze

One day, Pecola walks to a grocery store run by a white man named Mr. Yacobowski. She is a child with a sweet tooth and a few pennies to spend, and it should be as simple as that. Instead, her trip to the grocery store finds her trapped in Mr. Yacobowski's white gaze. She sees distaste in his eyes and notes that "The distaste must be for her, her blackness. All things in her are flux and anticipation. But her blackness is static and dread. And it is the blackness that accounts for, that creates, the vacuum edged with distaste in white eyes."³³ Though this description bears the mark of an objective summary, the white gaze is never neutral—not even for readers.

Just as Pecola is determined by the white gaze of characters in the novel, she is also caught in the gaze of white readers. When Diana Bliss reads *The Bluest Eye*, she consumes Pecola's suffering for her own affective transformation. She sees Pecola as a character whose experiences are there to serve Bliss's own spiritual awakening. When I forced Pecola into my narrative of unattainable beauty standards, I saw her as a proxy for my own insecurities. I read her how I wanted to, not how she was. In this way, Pecola is doubly determined: once by the white people in her own world, and a second time by the white readers who engage with her story.

One afternoon, I watch a video of Toni Morrison talking about the white gaze. It's an interview with Charlie Rose, but the clip focuses primarily on her. It's a close-up shot of her face against a black background. Her grey dreadlocks are pulled back, she is

³³ Morrison, *The Bluest Eye*, 42.

wearing a leopard print shirt, and she speaks purposefully, gracefully, intentionally. She talks about how readers are often assumed to be white, and how she can “feel the address of the narrator over [her] shoulder, talking to somebody else—to somebody white.”³⁴

At the beginning of the video, Morrison recounts a story of a reviewer who chastised her for not writing about white people. She responds, determined, “I spent my entire writing life trying to make sure that the white gaze was not the dominant one in any of my books.” As a black writer, she is deeply conscious of her readers, of the reception of her work. She knows she is not writing in a vacuum, but in a racialized world.

³⁴ Toni Morrison interviewed by Charlie Rose, “Morrison White Gaze,” YouTube video, 3:05, Oct 5, 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SHHHL31bFPA>.

Know Thyself, Name Thy Whiteness

In her book about the contours of white fragility, Robin DiAngelo writes, “A critical component of cross-racial skill building is the ability to sit with the discomfort of being seen racially, of having to proceed as if our race matters (which it does). Being seen racially is a common trigger of white fragility, and thus, to build our stamina, white people must face the first challenge: naming our race.”³⁵ This is the work of critical whiteness studies. This is where we must begin. Naming one’s whiteness requires acknowledging racial difference, requires understanding the ways that power works in favor of whiteness. Having empathy for Pecola—without awareness of the role of race in shaping the encounter between character and reader—eclipses and erases the longstanding forms of inequality that continue to govern our world. We must see whiteness for what it is: unearned power and privilege.

Philosopher Charles Mills also notes the importance of naming whiteness. In *The Racial Contract*, he writes that white supremacy depends upon its taken-for-grantedness, upon the invisibility of its operations. Though white supremacy is the governing structure that has shaped Western thought and politics for generations, it goes unnamed. It is a tacit agreement that white people sign on to for our own benefit.³⁶ The task is to see our whiteness, to look it squarely in the face. To stop identifying with its victims and instead understand our own complicity in systems of racial injustice.

³⁵ Robin DiAngelo, *White Fragility: Why It’s So Hard for White People to Talk About Racism* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2018), 7.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 29.

Some theorists emphasize the importance of “self-work,” saying that personal interrogation of one’s identity, privilege, and social position can lead to the acknowledgment of injustice and our relation to it. This is said to be a catalyst for informed change and political action.³⁷ However, Greta Fowler Snyder expresses concern with this prescription. She worries that our phenomenological limitations can prevent those of us in privilege from truly acknowledging the barriers that marginalized communities face. She writes, “Even if a privileged white American is committed to acknowledgment in theory, before this commitment guides action it must be filtered through the frameworks or interpretive schemas that shape his or her phenomenology.”³⁸ For many white people, acknowledgment looks like colorblindness, and because white people tend not to critically examine race, our “acknowledgment” often fails to incorporate historically produced, politically incentivized structural inequality. We are socialized to think that the solution to racism is treating everyone the same, and that if Jim Crow laws are gone, so is racism. Snyder contends that “racially privileged Americans may believe they are ‘acknowledging’ when they are, in fact, shouldering less than their share of the burdens of social life while members of historically oppressed races who practice acknowledgment bear more than their share.”³⁹

In tenth grade, when I attempted to see myself in Pecola’s story, I was missing the point entirely. I *could* plead phenomenological limitations and say that I “didn’t know better,” but appeals to ignorance are a manifestation of white fragility. Such a response would reveal an unwillingness to admit that my whiteness allowed me to engage in a

³⁷ Greta Fowler Snyder. “Self-work and the Reproduction of Privilege: Reading Beloved Against Antigone,” *Polity* 43, no. 4 (2011): 463-4.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 464.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 476.

colorblind reading. The truth of the matter is that I was afraid to name my race (or, perhaps more insidiously, I couldn't be bothered), and so I let myself lean on my white privilege. I was born into a system that allowed me to ignore the many manifestations of racism and my own role within them. As Robin DiAngelo explains, we are not separate from our culture and its modes of distributing power along racial lines. Our lives are always already racialized. This is not to say that we have no agency over our actions or that we are not accountable for our racism—we do and we are—but rather that shifting the discussion from individual “bad actor racism” to an understanding of socialized and incentivized white supremacy is necessary for examining our roles in it.

George Lipsitz writes that “People always have the option of becoming antiracist.”⁴⁰ We inherit whiteness and its associated privileges for no reason other than chance, but our response to it is our own. Of course, the fact remains that white people are incentivized to stay apathetic about whiteness because it materially advantages us. We are given better medical care, make more money, have more housing options, are safe from police violence, see lower rates of incarceration, etc. In 1988, Peggy McIntosh penned the now widely known piece, “White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack.”⁴¹ In it, she lists fifty concrete (and unearned) privileges that she experiences, simply because of her white skin. Some of these include:

- I can go shopping alone most of the time, pretty well assured that I will not be followed or harassed.
- I can be sure that my children will be given curricular materials that testify to the existence of their race.

⁴⁰ George Lipsitz, *The Possessive Investment in Whiteness: How White People Profit from Identity Politics* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2006), viii

⁴¹ Peggy McIntosh, “White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack,” 1998

- I can swear, or dress in second hand clothes, or not answer letters, without having people attribute these choices to the bad morals, the poverty or the illiteracy of my race.
- I can worry about racism without being seen as self-interested or self-seeking.
- If my day, week or year is going badly, I need not ask of each negative episode or situation whether it had racial overtones.

There are many more, of course, and they are subtle forms of privilege that the majority of white people may never think twice about. We come to expect that this is the norm, we take our whiteness for granted. But here is Lipsitz telling us that we can make a *choice* to become antiracist, that it is a practice we can cultivate.

But to be clear: this is not an individual practice because racism is not an individual act. It is structural, historical, financial, and institutional. It is even embedded in how we read, in how we engage with literature. To assume we can simply choose to not be racist is a misguided assumption that racism is elective and personal. The liberal recourse to empathy-as-politics (à la the “love trumps hate” chant) falls into this same trap. Personal changes in feeling do not dismantle systems of oppression. I cannot shed my racial privilege, even if I am powerfully overwhelmed with emotion, because my white skin will continue to benefit me wherever I go.

White Consumption of Black Art

We often conceive of reading as an act intended for personal pleasure. Books, under this logic, serve as entertainment—something to amuse or inspire or educate us. Their value lies in the personal benefit and edification we derive from them. But in order to arrive at a place where the act of reading holds political potential outside of ourselves, we must interrogate what it means to consume, and particularly what it means for a white audience to consume black art in a world of capitalist commodification. In “Eating the Other,” an essay critiquing commodity culture, bell hooks writes that “the desire to make contact with those bodies deemed Other...assuages the guilt of the past, even takes the form of a defiant gesture where one denies accountability and historical connection.”⁴² She warns us to be mindful of how we engage with the Other, to interrogate any sense of entitlement to another’s experience that we may have. We must be conscious of the ways in which cultural consumption is both racialized and historicized.

One afternoon in Pittsburgh, in the middle of the nineteenth century, a white performer known as “Daddy Rice” laid his eyes upon a nearby black man. Rice dragged the man to a local theater and demanded that he disrobe. He then dressed quickly in the man’s clothes, donned blackface, and burst onstage to perform an outlandish show of stereotyped racial mimicry for an enraptured white audience. In the weeks leading up to this moment, Rice had become enchanted with black singing and was hungering to take advantage of it for his own gain. Partway through his performance, the man whose

⁴²bell hooks, “Eating the Other: Desire and Resistance” in *Black Notes: Race and Representation*, (2012): 308.

clothes Rice had taken rushed onstage naked, begging for his clothes back so he could go to work. The audience erupted into wild laughter and applause. The moment would come to be catalogued as the first performance of blackface minstrelsy.

From there, minstrel shows sprouted into performative displays of caricatured song, dance, jokes, and racist impersonations. These shows appropriated “blackness” for the consumption of a white audience, they turned white obsession with black bodies into a marketable spectacle. Eric Lott writes that “raw commodification was the economic context out of which blackface display emerged, and this display, in turn, depended upon the dangerous, imaginary proximity of ‘raced’ bodies.”⁴³ There was money in the game, and illicit racial desire, too—a familiar pattern that still defines cultural consumption today.

Take Beyoncé’s video album, *Lemonade*. As bell hooks writes, “Viewers who like to suggest *Lemonade* was created solely or primarily for black female audiences are missing the point. Commodities, irrespective of their subject matter, are made, produced, and marketed to entice any and all consumers. Beyoncé’s audience is the world and that world of business and money-making has no color.”⁴⁴ This is not to say that *Lemonade* is not also affirming, groundbreaking, and culturally significant in challenging the white gaze and centering the stories of black women, but merely that in a world of capitalist commodification and racialized desire, we must be conscious of how we relate to art. We must ask: is our consumption of cultural products defined by an expectation of personal

⁴³ Eric Lott, “Love and Theft: The Racial Unconscious of Blackface Minstrelsy,” *Representations*, no. 39 (1992): 23-50.

⁴⁴ bell hooks, “Moving Beyond Pain,” *bell hooks Institute*, May 9, 2016.

satisfaction? Might that also relate to a subconscious desire to erase the distance between “Us” and “Them”?

Though consumption of *Lemonade* is not comparable to blackface, Eric Lott’s critique remains salient. He writes, “My subject here is the affective consequences of that proximity [between capitalism and cross-racial obsession]—an affair of dollars and desire, theft and love.”⁴⁵ For a white audience to engage with black cultural products, there must be an awareness of the broader context in which such engagement is occurring. If we feel encouraged to nurture sentimentality, we must question if this is undergirded by the capitalist pressure to feel good in our “consumption” or the desire to assimilate a racialized Other into ourselves. In contrast, a countersentimental response to literature challenges the modern ethos of consumer satisfaction and romanticized notions of cross-racial identification. It demands confrontation with our “natural” responses.

⁴⁵ Lott, “Love and Theft,” 40.

An Alternate Approach

In her analysis of cross-racial reading, Kimberly Chabot-Davis advocates for an ethic of encounter, rather than consumption. She writes that “cross-racial sympathy can often resemble a colonizing appropriation of blackness for white needs, [but] that cross-cultural encounters can stimulate radical acts of treason against white privilege.”⁴⁶ The goal of such encounters is to radically interrogate the white reader’s self-perception and to encourage a rejection of privilege. This contrasts a consumptive approach, which allows the reader to remain unchanged, to absorb a story and its characters’ suffering. An ethic of encounter urges us to see ourselves as participants in more nebulous webs of interaction, feeling, and connection. It encourages us to adopt a broader conception of agency, as the theory of New Materialism explores. Books, though physical objects, need not be flattened into mere commodities. Stories are so much more than that—they are vital to how we understand our lives. They are irreducible to their utility or market price.

Encounter. From Late Latin *incontra*: in front of. From Latin *in + contra*: in and against. From Old French *encontre*: to meet as adversaries, to oppose, to confront.⁴⁷ To encounter something is to be present with it, to engage across difference—often with a degree of conflict. To encounter is to grapple. The theory of agonistic politics teaches us that democracy happens through discord, that “contestation or struggle [is] the heartbeat of democratic politics.”⁴⁸ With this in mind, we must be willing to let reading force us

⁴⁶ Kimberly Chabot Davis, *Beyond the White Negro: Empathy and Anti-Racist Reading* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2014): 3.

⁴⁷ “Encounter,” *Online Etymology Dictionary*, <https://www.etymonline.com/word/encounter>.

⁴⁸ Holloway Sparks, “Mama Grizzlies and Guardians of the Republic: The Democratic and Intersectional Politics of Anger in the Tea Party Movement,” *New Political Science* 37, no. 1 (2014): 32.

into conflict with our own privileged interests. If we consume black literature with passive empathy and avoid interrogating its barbed messages of complicity and inequality, we risk reifying unequal power relations. Berlant writes that “sentimentality, after all, is the only vehicle for social change that neither produces more pain nor requires more courage.” In other words, emotional identification feels good, but does nothing to unsettle the status quo. Further, as Berlant acknowledges, “Associating the human with the suffering actually limits the human to a mode of absolute passivity that, ethically, cannot embody the human in its fullness.” Flattening Pecola into her pain obscures the importance and complexity of her story. It picks emotional simplicity over political struggle.

In her discussion of agonistic politics, Holloway Sparks writes that “Democracies must actively work not to minimize or tame conflict, but to preserve the spaces for struggles that serve as the seedbeds of change.”⁴⁹ The practice of reading can be a generative act if we let a text challenge us, or if we debate its meaning with others, rather than attempting to tame it with emotional identification or simplistic readings. The agonistic connotations of encounter are precisely what we must apply to a politically informed practice of reading.

This political project requires commitment to self-reflexivity, discussion, and action. At first blush, reading appears to be a passive and one-sided act, one that makes for a great hobby or easy time-killer, but requires little from the reader. This need not be the case, however. Paulo Freire writes against what he calls the “banking” model of education,⁵⁰ which characterizes the passive transmission of ideas from teacher to student

⁴⁹ Sparks, “Mama Grizzlies,” 33.

⁵⁰ Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, (New York: Continuum, 1993): 53.

(or in our case, from writer to reader). Freire argues that this method of depositing information is stifling, complacent, and insufficient to dismantling oppression. What is required, instead, is engaged action and reflection upon the world—praxis. Teacher and student, text and reader, must explore together, creatively, in response to the problems at hand. We must roll up our sleeves, and grapple.

These words may lodge somewhere I could never have intended and your experience of reading this will be nothing I could have predicted. There is a space of possibility where interpretation occurs, a gap between performance and observer, text and reader. In his discussion of teaching, Rancière refers to what he calls the “third thing,” an object that is owned by no one and cannot be reduced to any one person’s perspective or understanding.⁵¹ When it comes to this “third thing,” there is always room for interpretation. In this case, it happens to be a novel. Two people reading *The Bluest Eye* may have entirely different experiences of it, and the presence of the “third thing”—the autonomy of the book itself—denies any “right answer” or easy legibility. Engagement with the story inherently involves contestation, discourse, dissensus. In its indeterminacy, the book cannot be pinned down by the heavy hand of the police order. Its ambiguity exists as an interruption in the broad stroke stories told to us by those in power. The slipperiness intrinsic to the “third thing” is where its emancipatory potential lies.

An ethic of encounter urges a “self-implicating sense of outrage and empathy”⁵² born of confrontations between the text and the reader’s personal/political consciousness. This form of empathy is barbed and weaponized. It comes with anger and awareness and a keen understanding of the roots of injustice. It means that we must be willing to meet

⁵¹ Jacques Rancière, *The Emancipated Spectator*, Trans. G. Elliot, London: Verso (2009).

⁵² Chabot Davis, *Beyond the White Negro*, 5.

the truth of another's experience, to understand our role in it, and then to see beyond this individual interaction and into the longer, larger forms of relationality at play. We must wrestle with the ambiguity of the "third thing," using its indeterminacy to generate political meaning.

Reading to Self-Incriminate

On the online discussion forums for *The Bluest Eye*, a heated debate about empathy takes place. One white woman writes, “I am having a hard time with the white posters who say they can ‘relate’ to Pecola. After I read this book I realized that I will never quite know prejudice or pain like the characters have known.”⁵³ A black woman agrees, saying that “the luxury of bypassing race can only be for those who are not affected by racism.”⁵⁴ Other readers challenge these critiques by saying that “pain is pain” and suffering is universal. They say that we all struggle differently, but that empathy is the best response to pain nonetheless. This is a vital moment of micropolitical agonistic debate. *The Bluest Eye* is the “third thing” that the differently positioned readers attempt to navigate and understand. It is a moment of encounter, of active dissensus.

In the midst of this struggle over affect and identity and interpretation, an alternate response emerges. Somewhere in between the “racism is unknowable to whites” and the “we’re all human” poles, certain white readers begin to take a different approach: they allow the book to teach them how to see themselves within systems of racism. Their response is one of self-incrimination. A woman writes that after reading *The Bluest Eye*, she began to critically reflect upon ending a childhood friendship with a black girl at her mother’s request. Her post ends, “Did I make that girl wish her eyes were blue?”⁵⁵ She is seeing her own whiteness and its effect on others. She is naming her privilege.

⁵³Kimberly Chabot Davis, “Oprah’s Book Club and the Politics of Cross-Racial Empathy” in *The Oprah Affect: Critical Essays on Oprah’s Book Club*, ed. Cecilia Konchar Farr and Jaime Harker, (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2008), 151

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 152

Granted, on the scale of political change, this is but a blip. But it matters for the fact that contentious discussions like this make white people explore their whiteness. It matters because, though sometimes divorced from material and historical realities, affect is an inherent—and influential—part of our world. Lawrence Grossberg writes, “Affective relations are, at least potentially, the condition of possibility for the optimism, invigoration, and passion which are necessary for any struggle to change the world.”⁵⁶ This only works, of course, if we are willing to interrogate our affective responses and look critically at ourselves. Though we live in a moment of postmodern disenchantment, we are still feeling beings, and as long as we are going to feel, it is vital that we learn how to do so in a politically responsible way.

Kimberly Chabot-Davis does not see personal, affective responses to reading and public action as mutually exclusive. In fact, she believes that self-implicating empathy is an important catalyst for political protest and lasting structural change. She writes, “I contend that the larger impediment to radical change is not sympathy itself, but conditions that weaken its effectivity—such as widespread public skepticism that protest can actually accomplish social change in a world controlled by postmodern capitalism.”⁵⁷ In our neoliberal society, the atomization of agency would have us believe that only individual, rational choices can effect change. We are made to think that our only locus of control is ourselves, and that systemic change and large-scale political action are naive and pointless. Affect runs counter to this. It doesn’t fit into easy cost-benefit analyses or theories of individual responsibility. Affect makes us believe that we can connect and

⁵⁶ Lawrence Grossberg, *We Gotta Get Out of This Place: Popular Conservatism and Postmodern Culture*, (New York: Routledge, 1992), 86.

⁵⁷ Chabot Davis, “Oprah’s Book Club,” 156.

resist and overthrow and change. It lets us feel that those things are possible, in spite of everything. And maybe we need some of that—tempered with an understanding of the work required to actually enact change. Perhaps there is a middle ground here, a form of weaponized, self-incriminating empathy that, while guided by a commitment to humanity, doesn't neglect structural and historical matters in the fight for justice.

Reading Politically, Together

So what exactly does it look like when affect meets political context? When reading serves not only to challenge to one's individual privilege, but as a means of connecting to a community of engaged political actors? It is in the space opened up by these questions that I begin to explore the intellectual, personal, and affective components of reading as they contend with the materiality of violence that defines our world today.

It's August in Missouri, and Michael Brown has just been killed by Darren Wilson, a white police officer who will not be indicted for his crime. There will be calls for body cameras, something to hold law enforcement officers accountable for their actions, but cameras won't change anything because sight is subjective and it is beholden to those in power. This is Rancière's police order at work.

In the midst of the grief and anger following the murder of Michael Brown, two protesters have an idea. They own a bookstore in St. Louis—Left Bank Books—and they decide to create a reading list to offer context, to help explain the chaos and pain unfolding in Ferguson. The manager of Left Bank Books says of the list, "For me, it's been like a course list in empathy, in expanding past your own experiences and looking at the wider world."⁵⁸ Empathy, for her, is grounded in the world at large, not individual affect. It's a way to orient oneself in the current political moment.

This reading campaign, which comes to be known as #FergusonReads, will morph into a Black Lives Matter reading list, which will ultimately become a catalyst for

⁵⁸ Tracy Mumford, "The Black Lives Matter Reading List: Books to Change the World," *MPR News*, Feb 7, 2015.

book clubs around the country composed of people who want to talk about, and grapple with, what's going on with race in the United States. The first two books the club reads are *The New Jim Crow*, by Michelle Alexander, and *The Rise of the Warrior Cop*, by Radley Balko. One of the co-owners of the store, Jarek Steele, says of the book club, "We wanted to celebrate the courage it takes to openly talk about race, make mistakes, learn from them, and move on."⁵⁹ It is meant to be a space for self-reflexive discussion. The club is not an end in itself, but the beginning of a movement to build community through uncomfortable but important discussions. The store owners note that some people "didn't have the language" to understand and speak about the complexities of race, and that's what the club hopes to offer.

The first meeting is big, with about fifty people in attendance, and a little awkward. It takes the group a while to get comfortable, and there is a lot of silence. But eventually something shifts and people begin to speak, connect, argue, and share their stories. Slowly, over time, a community begins to form.⁶⁰ The #FergusonReads campaign takes off and tweets come pouring in with suggestions for books to add to the list, ideas of how to spread the program, and stories of how the chosen books have touched lives and changed minds. Engaging with race through the context of literature proves to be a productive way to meld the political and personal.

This ethic of reading must be a dedicated, ongoing, and informed practice. Reading brings us face-to-face with communities, ideas, and realities that matter urgently. It demands continued self-reflexive engagement with the Other, and not in the way that I

⁵⁹ Daniel Barks, "A #BlackLivesMatter Reading List: One Bookstore Shaping Unrest into Education." *Beacon Broadside*, December 8, 2014.

⁶⁰*Ibid.*

did in high school. Not in Diana Bliss's emotional attachment to Pecola, either. Rather, this practice of reading tempers affective responses with an awareness of one's position in systems of power and privilege.

In exploring this further, I called up a woman named Maggie, whose book club's mission statement includes an intent to cultivate a "prejudice-free community" and an "environment of healing and understanding."⁶¹ Maggie tells me that the book discussions are not meant to stay in the cushy living rooms of the participants, but to spark engagement with the broader community, with the world at large. Like in Ferguson, the club began after a local police shooting of a black man. After a fraught city council meeting following the shooting, community members rallied together to start discussing race, to do the work of looking closely at themselves and their town. The book club is deeply invested in the local, in the everyday experiences of their community members, and has found the process of collective reading to be both generative and transformative.

I asked Maggie if reading books about race translates into material engagement with politics. She paused before responding, and then said, "It's hard to avoid politics."⁶² Literature unravels any pretenses of an apolitical life. But of course it takes more than understanding and awareness to spark action; apathy abounds in spite of knowledge. It takes a sense of urgency and a critical awareness of our own roles in systems of power. It takes practice, intention, and commitment. It takes community.

⁶¹ Maggie X (book club member) in discussion with the author, Dec 20, 2018.

⁶² *Ibid.*

Moved, Not Touched

I am reading *The Bluest Eye* again, and this time I am trying to let it show me what I refused to see before. The heartbeat of politically emancipatory reading may be collective action and solidarity, but it starts with knowing ourselves. Before we can read and organize and heal together, we must first contend with our own relations to power. Reading can expose our complicity and teach us about the world so that we may better come together to change the systems in which we live. I read to implicate myself, but it does not stop there. I read to learn how to connect, to organize, to share the generative space of literature with those around me, and to fight for material change. It may start with seeing myself critically, but collectively mobilized critical affect will end up so much larger.

The Bluest Eye begins with a reference to the Dick and Jane primer, and though there is no mention of their race, I recognize my whiteness in their cookie-cutter house and laughing family. Even if I have been an outsider, even if I have struggled, *whiteness* is the structural advantage that I share with Dick and Jane, and not Pecola. “They are very happy,” Morrison tells us. Theirs is a happiness that belongs to whiteness; it inhabits a sense of ease that Pecola’s family doesn’t get to have. I too am allowed that happiness, and I must contend with that.

Just the other day, I noticed that the book includes an afterword by Toni Morrison, written nearly twenty five years after the book’s initial publishing. In it she expresses a concern that grounding “the weight of the novel’s inquiry on so delicate and vulnerable a character could smash her and lead readers into the comfort of pitying her

rather than into an interrogation of themselves for the smashing.”⁶³ She wants readers to be *moved*, not touched. She wants those of us who are smashers to understand our complicity, and to do something about it.

I know that when I put down the book, I get to walk away. It is a truth that Yancy pinpoints when he says, “After a day of theorizing, the white theorist rides back to the suburbs, escapes being profiled, [and] walks up and down the streets of all-white neighborhoods without fear of being harassed or labeled a ‘problem.’”⁶⁴ But we also get to make a choice. We can decide to stay with the urgency. I care, deeply, about Pecola’s story, but I have learned that emotional investment is not enough. I must care enough to wield my empathy so that it benefits others and not just myself. I must care enough to share this space—where affective urgency meets critical self-awareness—with a solidary collective. The work of challenging privilege and redistributing power cannot be done alone.

⁶³ Morrison, *The Bluest Eye*, 211.

⁶⁴ George Yancy, *What White Looks Like: African-American Philosophers on the Whiteness Question* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 16.

Conclusion

Four years ago, George Yancy penned a letter for the *New York Times*. It is entitled “Dear White America,” and in it he turns his critical philosopher’s gaze upon the slippery racial category of whiteness that relies on its self-conceived normalcy. He is gentle but firm in his address to White America. He repeats the phrase “Take a deep breath” five times throughout the piece. He seems to know that the very act of naming whiteness feels inflammatory to those who cling to its privileges.

In this epistolary—a form that is both intimate and public, personal and collective—Yancy writes, *If you are white, and you are reading this letter, I ask that you don’t run to seek shelter from your own racism. Don’t hide from your responsibility. Rather, begin, right now, to practice being vulnerable. Being neither a “good” white person nor a liberal white person will get you off the proverbial hook.*⁶⁵ Yancy is offering us an ethic of reading and living both. He tells white people to live “un-sutured” in the broken open place of acknowledging our whiteness and the responsibility it demands.

What catches my attention most, however, is the way the letter begins. *Dear White America*, Yancy writes, *I have a weighty request. As you read this letter, I want you to listen with love, a sort of love that demands that you look at parts of yourself that might cause pain and terror, as James Baldwin would say. Did you hear that? You may have missed it. I repeat: I want you to listen with love. Well, at least try.*⁶⁶

⁶⁵ George Yancy, “Dear White America,” *New York Times*, December 24, 2015.

⁶⁶ Yancy, “Dear White America”

I am struck by his belief in the power of affect to do political good. Where Yancy invokes love, I call for weaponized empathy. This empathy is bound up with vulnerability, with the willingness to be exposed. It is self-critique and collective care at once, together. Let us be clear, however: this is not an appeal to some abstract feel-good type of empathy or simplistic emotional identification. As James Baldwin writes, “The wet eyes of the sentimentalist betray his aversion to experience, his fear of life, his arid heart; and it is always, therefore, the signal of secret and violent inhumanity, the mask of cruelty.”⁶⁷ If empathy is to be reparatory, it must be countersentimental. We must sit with the discomfort of vulnerability, with the urgency of injustice, and with the complexities of our own privilege.

I Googled “empathy” the other day, just to see, and the first result that popped up was a definition. I was about to scroll past it but one of the synonyms caught my eye: *togetherness*, it read. Togetherness feels different from the type of empathy that I’ve been studying. There is a relationality implied by togetherness that is eclipsed in white empathy’s power differential. Togetherness suggests common ground, shared purpose. It is empathy plus political understanding, self-critique plus solidarity.

At the end of his letter, Yancy writes, *White America, are you prepared to be at war with yourself, your white identity, your white power, your white privilege?* He names the fledgling first step of political action: before we can embrace togetherness and direct our energy outwards, we must first implicate ourselves. Before we can live a politics of solidary empathy, we must understand our own affective responses so that we do not inflict more harm. We must look carefully at ourselves, at the complexities and

⁶⁷ James Baldwin, “Everybody’s Protest Novel,” *Partisan Review* 16, no. 6 (1949).

darknesses bound up in our relations to power, and interrogate our reliance on privilege. Our empathy must be softened with vulnerability and thickened with critical understanding. It must be shared with others, weaponized with action. It will not be easy, but that is the point.

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