Critical Empathy

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Introduction

This paper introduces the term *critical empathy* and offers it as an addition to the lexicon of critical social theory. It does so against the background of a recent surge of interest in the trope of empathy in Western liberal-style democracies. Evidence of an 'empathic turn' in the last couple of decades can be found in such varied phenomena as: the introduction of "empathy projects" in schools (see Borowsky, 2015; Ó hÉochaidh, 2013); heightened displays of conspicuous empathy in public life, including those described by Woodward as the "presidential politics of empathy" (Woodward, 2009); an explosion of scientific research in pursuit of the neurochemical substrates and "empathy circuits" of the brain (see Enger and Singer, 2013; Zaki and Ochsner, 2012); and a trend to ascribe social and individual psychopathology to "empathy deficits" (LaBier, 2010; Simon Baron Cohen, 2011). Business consultants extol empathy training as the latest technique in human resource management (Boyers, 2014), while at recent gatherings held for world and financial leaders on the peaks of Davos, workshops promise to cultivate participants' empathy and mindfulness (Davies, 2016). Everywhere, it seems, empathy is in the air. So prevalent has empathy talk become in the formal and informal byways of daily life – on TV talk shows, in workplaces and social institutions of all kinds – that psychologist Stephen Pinker has dubbed the phenomenon "today's empathy craze" (Pinker, 2011, p. 576).

This new preoccupation with empathy circulates not only within discourses of popular culture, but is emerging too in the sophisticated theory of many knowledge disciplines. No longer just a tool of the clinic (Kohut, 1984; Schore, 1994), the concept has entered political and moral philosophy and is informing new theories of deliberative democracy, civil virtues and political citizenship (important contributions here include Krause, 2008; Morrell, 2010; Nussbaum, 1997). Empathy is identified by developmental

psychologists as a key source of altruistic and pro-social behavior (Hoffman, 2000); and feminist ethicists of care view it as the wellspring of concern for our fellow creatures and as fundamental to a moral psychology that speaks in a "different voice" to that of rationalist, procedural theories of justice (see here Gilligan, 1982; Noddings, 2010; Slote, 2007). Even the grim science can count among its numbers the odd empathy advocate. Economist Jeremy Rifkin, for example, recently nominated the human capacity for empathy as *the* resource with which to combat the social and environmental calamities of a late capitalist economy. According to Rifkin, the survival or demise of our species now hangs in the balance, and it rests on how well we harness our (previously neglected) evolutionary potential as "*homo empatheticus*" and realize the telos of human history as a global "empathic civilization" (Rifkin, 2009, p. 43).

What is a critical theorist to make of this spectacular flourishing of 'empathy discourses' in the early 21st century? Should she squint at them quizzically, wondering whether they constitute a kind of messianic irrationalism; more a symptom than a cure for the current pathologies of reason and of just how bad things have got? Or, is it rather the case that some variety of empathy project could initiate a fresh trajectory for the critical project itself – at a time when the latter is (reputedly) susceptible to malaise and decline? If the general zeitgeist manifests an empathic turn, should the good critical theorist turn *with* or *against* it?

In this paper I argue that something of both may be in order, and that there is real peril, as well as promise, in these modern empathy projects. To capture this ambivalent, double-sided potential,[1] the following discussion presents a mixed typology of empathy organized around a distinction between what I here call *critical empathy*, on the one hand, and *doxic empathy* on the other. Unlike the majority of standard definitions of the concept and, indeed, in contrast to much of the "empathy literature" in psychology and philosophy,[2] this typology will be constructed explicitly around an argument about the irreducible imbrications of empathy and power.

I. The faces of empathy under neoliberalism

Prior to addressing what variety of empathy project might prove compatible with a critical project (of the sort aligned with the tradition of Critical Theory), let me first describe in more detail what I propose here as its functional opposite, namely *doxic empathy*. By 'doxic' here, I mean to invoke Pierre Bourdieu's specific use of 'doxa' as it appears in his *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, namely "what is taken for granted in any particular society"; what in "the natural and social world appears as self-evident"; and all that "goes without saying because it comes without saying" (Bourdieu, 1977, pp. 164-67). Much of the 'empathy talk' that circulates today, I suggest, is precisely in this spirit.

Far from heralding a radical encounter with otherness or a confrontation with what is alien to or incommensurate with our well-worn presuppositions, or tuning us in to the damaging effects of power and domination, doxic discourses of empathy can shore up conservative ideologies of the always known and the already given. They are certainly not in the business of 'making strange'. Rather, they reiterate deeply ideological images of the

familiar that naturalize and thereby de-politicize the status quo. From them we learn 'truths' such as: women are the naturally empathizing sex (Baron Cohen, 2003, pp. 29-60); evolution has hard-wired out brains for empathy (Gallese, 2009); children should be taught how to empathize in school – it improves their grades (Ó h Éochaidh, 2013); empathy is good for business and "lifts the bottom line" (see Booth, 2015) and other similarly instrumental affirmations of empathy's purpose.

While there is little surprise that the modern therapy culture of the early 21st century evinces many keen participants in today's "empathy craze", less anticipated, perhaps, is the degree of enthusiasm with which the idea of empathy has also been seized upon in the managerialist and business culture of late capitalism. Notwithstanding the fact that the 'other-orientation' of empathy evokes a value system seemingly at odds with the maximising self-interest of the neoliberal order, there is growing evidence that a capacity to empathize, in our present moment, is undergoing radical reconfiguration into a technique of a deliberately cultivated skill-set; a kind of lucrative and marketable addition to the affective portfolio of the modern "enterprise self" (on the self as enterprise see McNay, 2009, pp. 55-77). Domesticated to the status of a strategic technique, empathy is thus rationalized (quite shamelessly it seems) in the service of heightened business efficiency, profit maximization and smoother human resource management.[3]

Under these conditions, there is a real danger that precisely at the historical moment when a vision of the human potential for empathy exerts enormous appeal as the resource that may save us from the depredations and ruthlessness of the globalized neoliberal order, it also becomes subject to hijacking and 'reincorporation' by the very forces of capitalism itself, in accord with the recuperative mechanism elucidated by Boltanski and Chiapello (2005). At very least, we need to notice how the contemporary paean to emotional intelligence – including the explicit cultivation of empathy – has surged within business and industry sectors just at the moment when the precarity and insecurity of labour intensifies. Managers are increasingly schooled in the skills of empathizing with their workforce at the same time as the burdens of structural risk are ruthlessly externalized onto the same vulnerable figures – with whom, it goes without saying, one can then even more keenly empathize. If one were inclined to cynicism, one might say that it is almost as if structural ruthlessness is being exonerated by individualized affirmations and exhortations of empathy as a core human value.

If this is so, then an explicit cultivation of empathy (as neoliberal technique) can be seen to be capable of forging an alliance with wider power structures that reproduce, rather than mitigate, forms of social and economic inequality. For this reason, we should regard with caution claims that 'more' empathy this will magically rescue us from the worst ravages of neo-liberalism - at least, to the extent that neo-liberalism succeeds in co-opting the value of empathy to its own ends. Of course one could always say this represents a perversion of the rhetoric of empathy, rather than any ethical flaw in empathy proper, but we need to be aware of this vulnerability of the concept to such neoliberal hijack.

There may be grounds, too, for much closer critical attention to how identities of class and gender mesh with cultural tropes of empathy. In effect, 'doing empathy' is often

deeply suffused with stereotyped expectations of 'doing gender' in the sense that the expectations, rewards and costs of women's performance of empathy are demonstrably different from those of men, as these align with the codes of "hegemonic masculinity" and "emphasized' femininity" (Connell, 2005, p.16). Recent research indicates women face extra pressure to be empathic in the workplace, for example, although paradoxically they can be penalized both when they succeed, and when they fail to meet those expectations (Gentry, 2015).

So too, the differential distributions of empathy as a cultivated 'soft skill' of professional life can also make it a mediating site for the reproduction of the different life chances (and 'habitus') of children, relative to their class position (on the reproduction of class in childhood see Laureau, 2003). There are powerful indicators that a distinctly middle-classed celebration of empathy (currently infiltrating contemporary patterns of parenting and pedagogy) can – even as it touts a humanist universality – mobilize discourses and practices of empathy in ways that bolster class difference and reinforce class advantage. Such class-specific empathy can interact with, and become integral to, the reproduction of social and economic privilege, rather than working to challenge, question or undermine it. If these efforts devoted to the cultivation of empathy can (inadvertently?) contribute to the reproduction of social inequality, this complicates from yet another angle the over-optimistic assumption that 'more' empathy automatically equates to transforming the world into a better or fairer place. Here the question of distribution (in empathy, as in much else) is everything.

None of this, of course, is to say that empathy is therefore "bad" – but rather to say (in the spirit of Foucault) that it might, at times, prove "dangerous".[4] Given the perils of a doxic empathy, what grounds, then, to speak in favour of empathy, or to think it might contribute anything to a project of progressive social critique? What might a *critical* empathy entail?

II. The promise of critical empathy

I use the term *critical empathy* here to describe a particular kind of attention paid to social suffering; or, more precisely, to that suffering's *affective, non-verbal and embodied* communication. Empathetic processes, in this sense, open up a channel for the inter-subjective transmission of what Axel Honneth, in his early work, called the pre-theoretical 'disclosures of injustice'; a disclosure performed by negative emotional states. Negative emotional reactions, according to Honneth, "reveal to individuals or social groups their conception of the ethical good" (Honneth, 1995, p. 153). Much as a photographic image is printed up from a negative, so too the (positive) image of the ethical can be extrapolated from "the sum total of all the feelings of hurt and violation with which we react every time we confront something indefensible" (Honneth, 1995, p. 153).

How is empathy relevant here? Empathy matters particularly, I suggest, under socio-political conditions where the sufferer is prevented from, or hampered in, making sense of her own negative emotional states (as an *intra*-psychic, monological process). Empathy can then offer a form of *inter*-subjective recuperation of those potential disclosures that could

otherwise fail to deliver moral knowledge that a wrong or violation has indeed occurred. Such failure of (self-reflexive) delivery can occur as a consequence of what Bourdieu describes as the induced "aphasia of those who are denied access to the instruments of the struggle for the definition of reality" (Bourdieu, 1977, p. 170). Whether in a horizontal relation (an empathy felt between peers), or a vertical relation (such as that between a privileged empathizer and a suffering, disenfranchised other), such critical empathy can retrieve the traces of moral harms that register on the level of negative affect (as suffering), but which may be blocked – as an effect of power – from being articulated or 'known' *as* products of injustice by the one who suffers them. (Toward the end of the paper I describe how this empathetic reception can offer special redress in those instances of moral harm that philosopher Miranda Fricker calls "hermeneutical injustices"). Empathy, then, is a channel for the communication of non-verbal, affective, and bodily states of distress that arise from conditions of injustice, but for which the sufferer herself may have no "words to say it". In keeping with the tradition of critical theory drawing upon the methodological resources of psychoanalysis (see here Allen, 2016), we might conceive of such critical empathy as a politicized adaptation of the psychoanalytic method of "listening with the third ear" (Reich, 1948) to the non-verbalizable, affective communications of social suffering.[5]

If there are no available words for the articulation of those states of social distress (aphasia), and no inter-subjective relation of critical empathy available to contain them either, then negative emotions don't necessarily follow a course towards the enlightening disclosure that Honneth envisages for them. Instead, they can explode in uncontained, violent, affective outbursts; or, conversely, devolve into depressed, mute paralysis and resignation (what Bourdieu calls *amor fati*). Amartya Sen gives a concrete illustration of the latter phenomenon in his discussion of severely economically deprived widows in India in whom "discontent is replaced by acceptance, hopeless rebellion by conformist quiet, and cheerful endurance" (Sen, 1984, 309). Sen further observes that this "quiet acceptance of deprivation and bad fate affects the scale of dissatisfaction generated, and the utilitarian calculus gives sanctity to that distortion" (Sen, 1984, p. 309). How might empathy help the social critic combat the effects of this distortion and the 'utilitarian calculus' that blesses it? [6]

As Lois McNay has argued, when it comes to generating genuinely engaged social critique, rather than resorting to abstract and socially weightless ontologies of "the political", we might instead reanimate those rich strands of critical theory that teach us how a "focus on embodied experience sheds light not only on the said, but also on the unsaid, on negative social experience which may remain unarticulated as a distinct claim about injustice, even though their pathological effects may be widespread"(McNay, 2014, p.20). My claim in this paper is that what allows us this focus on embodied experience and, crucially, on *the unsaid*, is none other than critical empathy. Empathy is the process by which this 'unsaid' stratum of negative social experience can come to light.

A further distinguishing feature of critical empathy resides in the specific nature of the suffering to which it responds. That is to say, critical empathy isn't just a process of 'feeling one way into' or identifying with suffering in general, but with a morally specific variety of suffering (that arises from social pathology and injustice). It therefore comes

infused with a moral imperative that derives from the knowledge that this particular human suffering is contingent, unnecessary; that such "suffering ought not to be, that things should be different", as Adorno put it in *Minima Moralia* (quoted in McNay, 2014, p.219). If we compare this critically inflected empathy with the empathy we feel for victims of a natural disaster (for people, say, caught up in the horrors of an earthquake or a tsunami) we get an intimation of why it is qualitatively distinctive. Natural disasters provoke what we might call – for want of a better term – our "natural empathy", but this empathy is nevertheless not *critical* empathy, in the sense I use the term here, because it lacks the imperative of an encounter with preventable suffering that ought not, and need not, have happened at all.

III. Doxic and critical empathy on the ground: A tale of two empathy projects.

To illustrate some practical differences between doxic and critical empathy, I want to now briefly examine two empathy projects "in the field". The first example appears in an essay by the UK feminist Carolyn Pedwell (Pedwell, 2012).[7] In her analysis of the literature of International Development, Pedwell attends specifically to the troubling entailments of a discourse of empathy appearing in recent "immersion programmes". Under the auspices of these so-called "immersions", aid workers and government officials from 'first world' countries are sent to live for short periods with members of impoverished communities in the developing world. The stated goal of these organized face-to-face encounters is to increase participants' capacity to empathize with the suffering of those who live under conditions of poverty and hardship. Pedwell describes how this literature, however, is predominantly guided by the aim of achieving the affective "self-transformation" of these emissaries from the rich global North. In her view, such an empathy project relies, firstly, on dubious epistemic assumptions about how empathy supplies direct "knowledge" of the other's reality (ignoring any recognition of the mediating work of imaginative reconstruction). Secondly, this epistemic access to the "truth" of the other is then used to license and enhance the authority of those already privileged subjects to speak in the name of those who are its object. (This question of speaking for the other is highly vexed terrain, as I will discuss further below, especially as some degree of privileged epistemic access is also claimed in critical empathy's rescue of the disclosing function of negative emotions under conditions of epistemic injustice).

The moral peril of this neoliberal, transnational empathy project, according to Pedwell's critique, lies in the way that such empathizing with the victims of the global neoliberal order serves as little more than affective trimming on the mantle of already privileged subjects; it secures the enhanced empathic 'expertise' and authority of the empathizer at the expense of the agency and voice of the other it was meant to serve. As Pedwell attests, "through providing an 'insider perspective' on a 'felt truth', the empathy attested to in these immersions becomes a basis for the making of authority claims on the part of development practitioners" (Pedwell, 2012, p.171). Instead of upending or mitigating the unequal relation of power as this is expressed on the international stage, such empathy becomes the arena of epistemic patronage of the other, thereby re-inscribing the very relation of disadvantage and

asymmetry that, on another level, it takes as its object of ostensible concern. In short, Pedwell's analysis exposes a dark potential of empathetic processes to serve as a neoliberal *"technology of access"* (Pedwell, 2012, p. 172), rather than to serve the projects of social justice that some feminist and anti-racist advocates had envisaged for it.[8] Activated at the point of the "imbrication of scholarly and state-oriented discourses of affect in the context of neoliberal governmentality" (Pedwell, 2012, p. 169), this variety of empathy project ultimately does little to rectify injustice (hermeneutical, political or otherwise); on the contrary, it magnifies and exacerbates it. In Pedwell's view,

> in the neoliberal economy in which the international aid apparatus operates, empathetic self-transformation can become commodified in ways that fix unequal affective subjects. (Pedwell, 2012, p. 163)

What emerges here is a sense of how complex and ambiguous is the terrain of empathy, once the issue of power is introduced into the equation. For if empathetic processes can contribute to the ossification, rather than alleviation, of oppressive power relations, it seems unwise to claim without reservation that empathy constitutes a positive normative value or moral good. In my view, the question of whether empathic processes are realized in normatively positive or negative effects/outcomes depends heavily on the social context of the field of power relations in which they occur. For this reason, the (however laudable) effort to arrive at an "overarching" or universal definition of empathy can itself be problematic in so far as tempts us to arch our definition right over these determinant effects of power.

In *Empathy and Democracy*, Michael Morrell offers a fine-grained conceptual distinction that might be helpful here. He distinguishes the *processes* of empathy (that range from corporeal-affective contagion, emotional mirroring or resonance, to high level imaginative identifications, but which are all in themselves *morally neutral*) from the *outcome* of those same processes – which might (but need not automatically) include *substantive normative values* such as empathic moral concern and care for others (Morrell, 2010).[9]

This substantive neutrality as process offers a clue to empathy's ambiguous moral valence and double-sided potential. Recognizing this normative promiscuity at the level of process prepares the way to apprehend how the outcomes of empathy might go either in the direction of sustaining the status quo (of the neo-liberal order), *or* equally might be able to challenge it when harnessed to a project of social critique. Without the power/empathy relation being factored in as highly relevant to, if not determinant of, what empathy actually 'is', the work of conceptual definition itself risks succumbing to doxa.[10] Consequently, it may be most prudent to conclude that empathy is not, in fact, any one singular phenomenon at all. Rather, what empathy 'means', and the moral (or immoral) work we should anticipate from it, cannot be reliably determined independent of the specific context in which it is practiced, nor adequately understood if divorced from the nexus it forms with power in the social field in which it arises.

To what extent then, should the critique of empathy as a technology of power, or as Pedwell describes, a neo-colonizing "technology of access" require the repudiation of empathy tout court as a plausible critical resource?[11] Minimally, it seems necessary to observe that not all self-consciously avowed 'empathy projects' of late capitalism are in any way critical projects: on the contrary, as I have argued, they can be firmly anchored to the defence and reproduction of the status quo. Yet, before we yield to a full-blown skepticism that concludes empathy offers nothing but a pseudo moral legitimation for power, it may be instructive to recall an earlier vision of a more socially transformative empathy project.

My second example comes from Paulo Freire's description of his project of working with Brazilian peasant populations in the late 1960s. In Freire's influential *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, we once again find empathy expressed for the suffering of the disadvantaged and dispossessed, but this time an empathy turned to very different political ends (Freire, 1970). Indeed, Freire's revolutionary pedagogy could scarcely be a greater contrast or further removed from the neo-liberal variety of empathy project dissected by Pedwell. He presents the vision of a pedagogic engagement that strives to be "dialogic" on the basis of its affective-imaginative entering into the lived perspective of the other's suffering (Freire, 1970, p. 53). But such an 'entering into' the position of the other is undertaken with an acute awareness of the risks attendant upon such an unequal, asymmetrical social relation, and includes a reflexive monitoring of the dangers of empathy collapsing into the colonizing or patronizing intrusiveness of "cultural invasion" (p. 152-56). The neoliberal "immersions" of Pedwell's example pay no such explicit attention to power, nor to the potential of a technology of empathy to collude in the reproduction of power asymmetries. For Pedwell, the 'immersions' of the literature of International Development ultimately focus on the affective self-transformation and enhanced epistemic authority of their privileged participants. Freire's 'investigators' by contrast, enter the poor and illiterate rural communities of Brazil dedicated to a project of vesting authority and political literacy away from themselves, and towards members of the oppressed community as respected co-creators of an embodied knowledge of social suffering, who then become increasingly adept in articulating that phenomenology of suffering. Integral to the realization of Freire's pedagogical project, then, is that these 'investigators' should willingly cede the position of epistemic authority as the dialogic-empathic process itself unfolds, and thereby endorse the enhanced agency of the other as the most important product of that empathic relation.[12] Empathy of this emancipatory variety therefore anticipates, welcomes and makes space for what Clare Hemmings calls the "struggles and *loss of authority* that real empathy requires"(Hemmings, 2012, p.152). In the case of doxic empathy, by contrast (that simultaneously denies even as it enacts a relation to power), empathy can instead reify both the asymmetry of the unequal relation and the top-down authority of the empathizer.

To decide whether empathy is 'good' or 'bad' (normatively speaking) might therefore also require factoring in an essential temporal component. I am thinking here of the line from Goethe (quoted by Rainer Forst in his essay on the concept of toleration), which specifies that: "Tolerance should be a *temporary* attitude only; it must lead to recognition. To tolerate means to insult" (Forst, 2004, p.316). What if such an observation also holds true for (critical)

empathy? Within an asymmetrical power relation, critical empathy would then need to include provisionality as part of its telos; the empathic relation would be called upon to gives way, in time, to another kind of relation altogether, rather than becoming a permanent state of affairs. Doxic empathy, by contrast will tend to hypostatize that asymmetry, and reify empathy as an a-temporal (rather than a temporary) virtue.[13]

So far my discussion has applied the categories of "doxic" and "critical" empathy to asymmetrical/unequal social relations (an empathizing 'top-down', so to speak, along a vertical social gradient of privileged subject and disadvantaged other). But what happens when the empathy occurs between peers, or is extended from one sufferer to another who is a social equal?

To examine how doxic and critical empathy might apply on a more horizontal plane, that is, between social peers, let me take the following hypothetical case: Let us imagine a woman living in a poor village, perhaps in one of the provinces in rural India such as Bihar or Uttar Pradesh discussed by Martha Nussbaum in her book *Women and Human Development* (Nussbaum, 2000). Here the life chances for women and girls are dire. The male to female gap in education is large; the disparity between investments in basic food and health care given to boys, as compared to girls, is striking (Nussbaum, 2000, p. 27). Malnourishment and inadequate sanitation are common. Imagine further, that this woman is mother to a young daughter, who suddenly contracts a serious illness not long before her fifth birthday, which takes a fatal turn, and to which she quickly succumbs. The mother, now grief-stricken at the death of her daughter, is offered comfort by two of her neighbors who lived close by and come to be with her in grief. Let us imagine also that they themselves are both mothers, also raising children under the same harsh conditions of food shortages, poor water supply, and chronic malnourishment. For each neighbor it is all too easy to imagine what it is like to be in the shoes of the bereaved mother and to feel the anguish of her loss. Perhaps they even know what it feels like first hand, or have a friend, or a family member who knows. Each witnesses the shock and distressed grief of their neighbor. They cry with her. Both empathize deeply. But let us say that while both neighbours empathize with the grieving mother, there is nevertheless a qualitative difference between the empathy of Neighbour A as compared to Neighbour B, that is not so much a difference in intensity, but rather maps onto the difference between doxic and critical empathy that I am proposing here. Where, exactly, might that difference lie?

As a way to answer this, let us now stipulate that for Neighbour A, the deep empathy she feels for the grieving mother is nevertheless framed by the horizon of resignation that is itself a product of the severe deprivations under which both women live: "Yes, this is what often happens to us. Life is hard, but this kind of terrible misfortune is the way things always are and will always be." To this extent, this neighbor's empathy can be said to be completely empathically 'accurate' in the sense that she knows intimately *that* and *what* the grief-stricken mother suffers, and yet also 'inaccurate' in the sense that it is caught within an interpretive horizon of doxic resignation that distorts perception of what lies at the causal origin of the child's death – and consequently reframes it as a matter of fate, not of injustice. If so, this doxic framing interferes with empathy's (potential) 'disclosing function'. The problem I want

to raise here is that empathy itself may come under the same doxic pressures that produce "maladaptive preferences" or the "deformations of adaptive preference" noted by Nussbaum (and also in the work of Amartya Sen).[14] Under the effects of such a deformation, what a person expects for herself can fail to reflect her (genuine) objective interests: her expressed 'preferences' and 'expectations' (and hence her demands on life) can be radically deformed, even if at the same time she has an inchoate intimation of things amiss that she cannot quite formulate to herself.[15] Such deformations will, logically, also impact also on the horizon of expectations she holds for others whom she identifies as being in the same situation as herself. In this case, doxic empathy is once again subject to power and its distortions, but in a quite different manner to that prevailing in a doxic empathy practiced 'top down' by a privileged empathizer. In this instance, doxic empathy is not felt 'top down' by the privileged subject benefitting from the asymmetrical relation of power, but rather this is a *maladaptive empathy formation* that takes root in the victims of power themselves. Under these conditions of deformed expectation, it is possible that a woman in the position of Neighbor 'A' may have internalized oppressive gender norms, even as these are radically in opposition to her real interests and those of her own female children. She may, for example, have accepted the predominant patriarchal view that both explicitly and implicitly ascribes greater value to male children, and think such thoughts as "at least it was the girl child taken and not her (more valuable) brother". Such an internalized attitude need not entail that the neighbor does not empathize with the mother at the loss of her child, but we might say that she empathizes in a way that remains in accord with the value system that systematically devalues the lives of girls and women in the village (even though she herself is, of course, equally the victim of such a value system).[16]

Let us now return to our hypothetical case, in order to imagine an alternative possibility embodied by the empathy of the second neighbor. Let us imagine that 'Neighbor B' has been meeting of late with several other women from the village, perhaps at a literacy workshop of the sort described by Martha Chen (referenced in Nussbaum, 2000, p. 287). In the company of these women in her group, she has begun to notice in a new way what of course all of them have always 'known': the shocking statistics that many more girls than boys die of malnutrition and disease in infancy; that among those girls who survive, most won't have access to the schools their brothers attend. Under these conditions, her empathy with the suffering of her bereaved neighbor could deliver the affective impetus that pushes her stirrings of discontent over a certain critical threshold. Against the background of her new collective experiences of group meetings, she looks again at what it means for women and girls to suffer in this way. If, at this moment, empathy and critique come together in a powerful amalgam, a new interpretive horizon may open.[17] In the following section, I examine one last example of the potentially transformative effects of critical empathy when engaged in a horizontal relation of solidarity between disadvantaged peers.

IV. Critical empathy and epistemic injustice

In her influential book, *Epistemic Injustice*, philosopher Miranda Fricker identifies a distinct form of injustice that consists in being "wronged in one's capacity as a knower" (Fricker, 2007, p. 1). Fricker specifies two ways that subjects can be harmed "specifically in the sphere of epistemic ability": the first, she calls "testimonial injustice", and the second "hermeneutical injustice*"* (Fricker, 2007, p. 5)*.* Testimonial injustice results when "prejudice causes a hearer to give a deflated level of credibility to a speaker's word" (Fricker, 2007, p. 5). Those subjected to prejudice and bias (of race, class, gender) are, on the basis of a stigmatized, inferiorized identity ascribed to them, also denied recognition as legitimate knowers. Consequently, their words do not count. Their testimony has little weight. What they know is not recognized. This "credibility deficit" robs them of epistemic standing and status (Fricker, 2007, p. 17).

In addition, Fricker proposes a second form of epistemic injustice: *hermeneutical injustice*. This category directs our attention to the harms done to the ability of a subject to grasp and meaningfully interpret her own lived experience of oppression in the social world. If testimonial injustice describes the de-legitimation of stigmatized subjects in their status as knowers recognized *by others*, hermeneutical injustice works at an even more foundational level to interfere with what the subject can know and interpret *to herself* (and by extension to others) about the nature of her experience. Hermeneutical injustice therefore causes a rift within the subject, isolating her affective and embodied experience from a hermeneutic framework that could reveal her suffering *as* a moral harm.

As a powerful illustration of this category of injustice, Fricker asks us to contemplate the following vignette: a woman is subjected to unwanted and traumatic sexual attention at work, but at a historical juncture when the notion of 'sexual harassment' has yet to be formulated (Fricker, 2007, pp. 148-52). The phrase has as yet no currency in either the lay or feminist lexicon, and, consequently, nor is it possible to register it in the conceptual-epistemic field either. There is therefore, in one sense, quite literally no such thing as 'sexual harassment'. This is not to say, of course, that the wrong and the suffering involved do not have experiential reality – far from it – but there is (as yet) no means to formalize it or conceptualize it *as* a category of injustice. As if giving a sort of politicized spin to Wittgenstein's maxim "whereof one cannot speak, one must remain silent", Fricker's account of the woman's situation observes how the extant moral episteme is limited in the way it draws the boundaries of what can be conceived of as a 'wrong'. The linguistic lacunae here is itself by-product of the same power relations at work that sustain the gender regime in which that wrong (action) occurs. The silence produced by this form of epistemic injustice compounds the injustice of the harassment itself – a kind of 'second order' injustice that potentiates the harm, and leaves the victim with no means (either conceptual or political) to fight against it.

Paradoxically, we can say that the woman in question both obviously knows and yet, in some sense of the word, also does *not know* that she has been 'sexually harassed'. A person is subject to hermeneutical injustice, according to Fricker, when "[…] some significant area of [her] social experience is obscured from collective understanding owing to a structural identity prejudice in the collective hermeneutical resource" (Fricker, 2007, p. 155). Under

these conditions she will flounder in a kind of conceptual-linguistic vacuum because the sexist culture of the day literally offers no words for a "problem with no name"(see Friedan, [1963], pp. 10-15), and therefore no way to adequately comprehend the wrong. She will run up against the epistemic (but also moral) limits of her age that block her from the kind of self-clarification she needs.

As a method of attunement to the phenomenology of social suffering, critical empathy offers a means of intersubjective rescue of the moral import of such experience from the oblivion that otherwise threatens it. Because it holds open an access to pre-verbal and affective experiences of suffering – that find no adequate echo in the language of the dominant episteme – empathy establishes a rogue channel for the transmission and reception of what is otherwise excluded from knowledge by the work of power.

If our existing lexicon has gaps in it that reflect the 'holes' and insufficiencies in our ethical imagination, then — however committed to consensus and respectful of the "unforced force of the better argument" (see here Allen, 2012) – the discourse of communicative rationality may not always be adequate to detect or combat the hermeneutical injustice to which Fricker alerts us. If one of the most debilitating effects of oppression is "the 'aphasia' of those who are denied access to the instruments of the struggle for the definition of reality"(Bourdieu, 1977, p. 170), then setting out to adjudicate between parties' interests on the basis of who can muster the better argument may rather miss the point. The aphasic subject, after all, won't prevail under circumstances in which she can't even enter, let alone win, the contestations of the discursive terrain.

It is in such a domain – of an injustice that cannot (yet) be said – that empathy, in my view, can become *critical*. For empathy, as a cognitive-affective straddling of the verbal and non-verbal elements of communication, allows another kind of registration of the wrongs embodied in suffering, but that cannot necessarily be articulated in terms of the criteria of currently prevailing discourses of justification. It is this capacity of critical empathy to "listen with the third ear" to the immanent and otherwise aphasic claims of social suffering that exposes the lacunae in current moral language games. In so far as this alternative communication channel allows us to intuit a moral-linguistic inadequacy in prevailing discourse, it also exerts pressure against those limits of what can be said, raising the demand to find ways to put back *into language* the particular injustice for which there may as yet be no words. To illustrate what this process looks like in practice, Fricker quotes a frame-by-frame report by Susan Brownmillar of a key moment in second wave feminism in which such a transition from wordless suffering to a newly 'worded' state unfolds:

The 'this' that we were going to break the silence about had no name. "Eight of us were sitting in an office of Human Affairs", Savignes remembers, "brainstorming about what we were going to write on the posters for our speak-out. We were referring to it as 'sexual intimidation', 'sexual coercion', 'sexual exploitation on the job'. None of these names seemed quite right. We wanted something that embraced a whole range of subtle and unsubtle persistent behaviors. Somebody came up with 'harassment'. *Sexual*

harassment! Instantly we agreed. That's what it was. (Brownmiller quoted in Fricker, 2007, pp. 149-150)

Essential to such a moment that acts like a revelation of what was always 'known' (and yet not 'knowable' in a political sense until that moment) is, I suggest, a collective empathetic resonance between peers: just the sort that occurred between the women who came together in feminist consciousness raising sessions. This is a horizontal variety of critical empathy at work. It shows that in situations of hermeneutical injustice, we may need to demand more of an idea of communicative action than a commitment to work towards political consensus derived from the 'unforced force of better arguments'; in addition, there may be a need for a neologistic creativity or flexibility that responds to empathy's push against the limits of what language has been able to say up to that moment, and a determination to play an open and not a finished ethical game – in keeping with the fact that neither our normative world, nor the linguistic world, is already closed or complete. Empathy can then be a bridge between the affects of suffering and their expression in a generative language that gives new names to experiences that, until this instant of fresh articulation, we cannot fully comprehend. Striking examples of this minting into language of new moral concepts would be neologisms like "sexual harassment", "Anti-Semitism", "implicit bias", "micro-aggression", all of them of relative recent coinage because our moral language is itself a work in progress.[18]

Conclusion: Mapping empathy's ambivalence

The picture I have presented here – of empathy as divided into 'doxic' and 'critical' modes – can now be further subdivided into a more finely grained typography that includes empathy of at least four discernible kinds. Schematically, we might say these are:

Two forms of Doxic Empathy:

1. *Doxic Empathy Type I*: This is doxic empathy when it is practiced 'vertically', i.e. directed downwards from a position of privilege on the social gradient – a dangerous potential source, we might say, of moral folly as illustrated by the ease with which empathy can be yoked to the technologies of neoliberal power (in keeping with the arguments of Pedwell. Spelman and other feminist 'empathy skeptics').

2. *Doxic Empathy Type II*. This is doxic empathy practiced 'horizontally' – i.e empathy between peers who share a position of social disadvantage or oppression. Here empathy, while in some sense 'accurately' felt, is nevertheless ideologically distorted in its interpretive framework (as an effect of power). This can result in 'maladaptive empathy formations' that can extend to others a transitive correlate of the 'maladaptive preference formations' that are reflexively applied to the self. Empathy of this sort can combine with a fatalism and resignation (amor fati, as

Bourdieu uses this term) as demonstrated in my example of *Neighbour A* (in contrast to *Neighbour B*).

And two forms of Critical Empathy:

3.   *Critical Empathy Type I.* This is critical empathy, but one practiced and felt from a position of (ultimately self-dissolving) authority and privilege. We might call this 'vertical' empathy because the empathizer begins from a position of relative advantage or epistemic authority with regard to the one empathized with. But unlike the empathy that operates in 'Doxic Empathy Type I', Critical Empathy Type I is an empathetic authority deployed in the genuine service of the *other's* autonomy. This means that it must (to the extent that it is genuinely critical) also carry the provisionality of that authority within it, because its goal is to dissolve the asymmetry of the relation in which that empathy itself is initiated (as we see in Freire's vision of an empathic pedagogy). In contrast to Doxic Empathy (Type I), the position of (temporary or transitional) authority here is not used to cement, naturalize or reproduce relations of inequality, but is committed to their transformation towards a greater parity of participation.

4.   *Critical Empathy Type II.* This is a form of critical empathy that differs from Critical Empathy Type I in so far as it arises between peers: as a 'horizontal' (not 'vertical') empathy, it provides affective foundations of political solidarity. (Doxic empathy Type II, we saw, also occurs between peers, but in that case produces only a solidarity of resignation or shared amor fati). Conversely (as demonstrated in the critical empathy instantiated by Neighbour B in my hypothetical example set in the rural Indian village), a horizontal empathy between peers can also lead to a critical solidarity. As a further example of this, the consciousness-raising groups of second wave feminism provide another powerful instance of a critical empathy between peers, and its contribution to collective movements for social change.

Part of the difficulty in assessing the normative valence of empathy, I have argued here, lies in the fact that empathic practices can never be extricated from the fields of power in which they occur. Rather than seeking to arrive at a definitive assessment (either positive or negative) of its effects – as if empathy comprised a single, generic phenomenon – a mixed typology (of the sort I have sketched above) may better reflect the complex relations of empathy to power, and its ambiguous technical and normative status under neoliberalism.[19] As a result of these irreducible entanglements, the task of securing empathy for the purposes of critique must remain, at best, a shaky bid, staked against a background struggle of appropriation and re-appropriation of a concept whose critical impetus is all too easily lost.

The ambiguous, double-sided valence of empathy as modern technique - i.e. one that challenges, but also colludes with, power – is what creates, in my view, a need for the double gesture of a *defence of* critical empathy, on the one hand, and the *critique of* doxic forms of empathy on the other. Tolerating this fraught double-sidedness may be the best riposte we

have to the facility with which neoliberalism can 'flip' treasured emancipatory and moral concepts in an uncanny "dynamic of resignification", as Nancy Fraser puts it (Fraser, 2009, p. 108). Confronted with this, as with other perplexing "paradoxes of capitalism" (see Hartmann and Honneth, 2006), a vigilant monitoring of the entwinements of the techniques of empathy with technologies of power may be the best bet to salvage (if not completely isolate) something of its emancipatory potential from a total neoliberal recuperation.[20] The central claim of this paper has been that – granted the proviso of this reflexive scrutiny – empathy in its critical mode gives fresh impetus to the project of "the self-clarification of the struggles and wishes of the age" – that Nancy Fraser (quoting Marx) names as the central task of critical theory (Fraser, 1989, p.113). In resonating with the embodied affects of suffering that lie below the threshold of language, critical empathy pulls back into play those experiences which hermeneutical injustice would otherwise exclude from the realm of communication, and opens us up to the challenge of finding new words and ways of speaking to power – and to each other – about them.

NOTES

[1] I have earlier discussed the implications of this ambivalent potential of empathy as it applies specifically to the field of feminist psychology (see Lobb, 2013).

[2] Standardly, definitions of empathy refer to a capacity "to imagine what it is like to be in that other person's place"(Nussbaum, 1997, p. 90), or to "feel one's way" into another person's experience. For a useful review of the complex (and surprisingly recent) genealogy of the concept see Pigman (1996, 237-56). In the psychological and philosophical literature, a wide array of cognitive and affective processes travel under the term. These include the primitive contagion of affect (such as when one infant is moved to sob in concert with another) and the powerful concordant and spontaneously mirroring reactions our bodies can have (perhaps via the 'mirror neurons' firing in our brains) on witnessing another's distress (our involuntary wince, say, if we see someone fall). But empathy also designates imaginative identifications undertaken at a mediated distance (when reading fiction, for example). Further complicating the picture, the concept is used to describe both *spontaneous* reactions (such as the automatic mirroring of another's bodily state; affective contagion etc.), but also a *deliberate method* or purposive *technique,* as when, for example, empathy is conceived as a "value-neutral tool of observation for gathering data" on another's subjective experience of the world (Kohut, 1984, p. 175).

[3] 'Empathy talk' appears in contemporary business models and management advice: for example, "Today's manager's need to tap into other motivators to get results and improve the best performance from employees […] One such emotion we need to see more of in our workplaces is empathy" (Murphy, n.d).

[4] "My point is not that everything is bad, but that everything is dangerous, which is not exactly the same as bad" (Foucault, 1982, pp. 231-232).

[5] Critical empathy (like its psychoanalytic cousin) faces the task of retrieving the communications of (social) suffering not only from the darkness of 'aphasia', but also from the blankness of 'disassociation' (what is 'split off' from consciousness and not immediately accessible to the subject herself).

[6] This involves what can sound like a very peculiar claim: namely, that a social critic may need to empathize with the objective plight of a sufferer, even when the sufferer does not (or ceases to) herself subjectively register her own situation *as* one of suffering. In *Empathy and Moral Development*, Martin Hoffman outlines this paradoxical feature: an empathy in which the affect state of the empathizer does not necessarily "match" that of the person being empathized with. He elaborates this complex concept as follows:

> an empathic response according to my definition is the involvement of psychological processes that make a person have feelings that are more congruent with another's situation than with his own situation … I see empathic accuracy as including awareness of the model's relevant past and probable future – the model's life condition – an awareness that contributes importantly to an observer's empathic affect. For this and other reasons, dropping the requirement of an affect match between observer and model affords empathy far more scope (Hoffman, 2000, p. 30).

It is in within such a wider empathic scope that critical empathy could also be located. I thank an anonymous reviewer for drawing my attention to the parallel between Hoffman's account and my own on this point.

[7] While writing up the final revisions of this paper, I discovered that Pedwell has since expanded on her original essay in her book *Affective Relations: The transnational politics of empathy* (2014). There, Pedwell's fine and nuanced account of the multidimensional meanings and functions in a transnational context overlaps, to a certain extent, with aspects of the analyses that I develop here. For example, the contemporary phenomenon that I've identified (after Pinker) as the "empathy craze" of Western liberal-style democracies, she dubs "a Euro-American political obsession with empathy" (Pedwell, 2014, p. ix.). There are likewise some striking overlaps between Pedwell's depictions of the ambivalent and differentiated effects of empathy as it interacts with power under neoliberalism (see Pedwell, 2014, pp. 44-69) and my own offered above. Yet there are also some marked differences in our orientation and conclusions. Not only do we come to our respective diagnoses via somewhat different intellectual traditions (in my case, via thinkers associated with Critical Theory, Axel Honneth, Pierre Bourdieu and Nancy Fraser; in Pedwell's case this is via cultural feminist theories of affect and transnationalism), so too we locate the residual promise of empathy somewhat differently: Where Pedwell's is a defense of a type of empathy oriented towards the "creation of the new" or, as she puts it, forms of empathy that "open up rather than resolve, that mutate rather than assimilate, that invent rather than transcribe" (p. 42), my own concern is with a type of empathy oriented towards furthering the aims of Critical Theory, that is, emancipation of some sort or other (however this may be understood).

[8] In this feminist and anti-racist literature, an "acknowledgement of *complicity* [with power] is essential to any form of empathetic engagement with the potential to play a role in radically disrupting existing power relations" (Pedwell, 2012, p. 172).

[9] As *process*, then, empathy does not itself have any fixed substantive *content*. It is rather, the means through which we gain access to affective content (such as anger, sorrow, grief) experienced by another. For this reason, it makes sense to say: "I can empathize with your sadness," but nonsense to say: "I can empathize with your empathy".

[10] In other words, not only can the *practices* of empathy be 'doxic', but so too can the *conceptualization* of empathy itself, in so far as the concept is defined in such a way as to erase all awareness of the imbrications of empathy and power.

[11] The question whether there is any 'pure' empathy – in the sense of uncontaminated by power – echoes the contested issue of whether there is 'pure' communicative rationality, similarly uncontaminated.

[12] Freire describes his critical pedagogy in opposition to one "which begins with the egoistic interests of the oppressors (an egoism cloaked in the false generosity of paternalism) and makes of the oppressed the objects of its humanitarianism" (Freire, 1970, p. 54).

[13] This might go some way to addressing the objections of postcolonial, feminist 'empathy skeptics' for whom empathy (at least of a liberal humanist variety) amounts precisely to a kind of moral/political insult to the other (see here Spelman, referenced in Pedwell, 2012, p. 166).

[14] I set this thought-experiment in rural India for the utterly contingent reason that I'd been reading Sen and Nussbaum at the time (and this literature left its mark). But of course the critic from the 'global North' needn't venture so far from home to discover "maladaptive preference formations". Material gathered in Arlie Hochschild's recent "journey into the heart of the far right" of Tea Party supporters in

the U.S could serve just as well to reveal just as stark (albeit quite different) instances of "maladaptive preferences" (although Hochschild herself, I think, would eschew the term). For demonstration of the potential mismatch between 'subjective preferences' and 'objective-real' interests, it is hard to go past her interviewees' hostility to government environmental regulation, even as their homes are devastated by deadly waste dumped on their doorstep by petrochemical companies (see Hochschild, 2016, p. 128).

[15] I thank one of my anonymous reviewers for pushing me to consider whether applying this language (of "restricted horizons", "deformed expectations", "maladaptive preferences" to describe poor, brown, illiterate, rural women (like 'Neighbour A'), doesn't carry a risk of stripping them of epistemic standing and agency. This strikes me as a genuine worry, given the realities of epistemic injustice. But I think this danger needs to be balanced against another worry: namely, how much critical purchase gets lost, if, in the effort to avoid this trap, we give up the language with which to identify situations when a person's subjective understanding of her own condition really is at odds with her 'real'/objective interests. Surely this mismatch does occur (as evidenced by Sen's example of widows in India who suffer from appalling health, but who subjectively report they have nothing to complain about, in contrast to the men of the same villages whose health is objectively better, but who complain about it more vociferously). Does saying this amount to denying agency to such women and committing an epistemic injustice against them? Or does Sen, through his empathy with the (objective) plight of these women, offer them a point of view with which to identify, from which they might actually change their mind about their own condition? I am disposed to lean towards the latter view and therefore I have adhered to this terminology of "deformation" when defining doxic empathy (Type II), while nevertheless accepting there is also good reason to post some 'warning flags' around it.

[16] For an interesting parallel case see again Hochschild (2016): Hochschild describes a devout Baptist mother in Louisiana whose child becomes terminally ill after exposure to local environmental toxins, who reports that she "did not know how she would have got through her grief without the support of her church" (Hochschild, 2016, p. 124). Here we could note that her church (much like Neighbour A of my example) provided her with plenty of empathy, yet decidedly not of a 'critical' sort. This is not to preclude the value such empathy may have as a source of comfort and solace in such moments of grief (I thank a reviewer for this point). However, on another level, such empathy, to my mind, remains morally problematic to the degree that it reinforces the horizons of expectations and resignations that sustain the values, or are complicit with the circumstances, that produced the illness and suffering in the first place. It is from within the confines of such doxic empathy, I suggest, that another of Hochschild's subjects (whose best friend has lost her child to a rare cancer, likewise associated with exposure to toxins), "allowed herself to feel sad about these things. But having permitted herself to feel to feel sad about environmental damage […] she renounced the desire to remediate it, because that would call for more dreaded government" (Hochschild, 2016, p. 177). This slide towards renunciation, I suggest, is precisely the mark of doxic empathy.

[17] In the words of Jean Paul Sartre, "It is on the day that we can conceive of a different state of affairs that a new light falls on our troubles and our sufferings and we *decide* that these are unbearable" (Sartre, 2003, p. 456).

[18] Other powerful neologisms forged in feminist thought include: "wounded attachments" (Brown, 1995); "misframing" (Fraser, 2005); "testimonial and hermeneutical injustice" (Fricker, 2007) and "sticky signs"(Ahmed, 2004). Even the gesture of marking a lacuna without quite knowing how to fill it can suffice to show something is amiss or missing in our conceptual-linguistic domain – see here Betty Friedan's classic gesture of naming the elusive "problem with no name" (Friedan, [1963], p.15).

[19] The neoliberal resignifications of empathy might demand the same refusal of an a priori presumption of normative value that Zambrana claims should hold for the concept of recognition (see Zambrana, 2013, p. 105).

[20] If the critical theorist can't (quite) live with such concepts in their resignified/distorted form, she can't (quite) live without them either, at least not without yielding up much of the terrain of the emancipatory project itself.

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