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Introduction: Radical Sympathy

I've been led to the topic of radical sympathy by following the initiatives and activities of friends, peers and cultural workers, as well as institutions, who, over the recent years, have progressively focused on issues of care and commoning, articulating forms of empathic pedagogies and decolonization across a range of contexts and environments. In light of ongoing challenges and struggles shaped by climate catastrophe, systemic racism, heteronormative discriminations, and extractivist sensibilities and actions, demanding and nurturing greater orientation toward more egalitarian, pluriversal and destituent methods and modes of existence continues to inform and mobilize a great deal of creative and critical efforts. Radical sympathy is posed here as a contribution to such efforts, one that may speak toward a more general understanding and research into planetary connectedness, as well as lend a vocabulary for situated, historically embedded and embodied experiences and engagements. While notions of sympathy demand critical questioning, it is posed here as a generative capacity and embodied intelligence, echoing with what Francisco Varela terms "ethical know-how". As Varela argues, ethical know-how is grounded less in forms of "deliberation" and "moral reasoning", and more in embodied action; such actions draw upon a situated, historical self, where know-how is figured through a wisdom of the heart. For Varela, ethical expertise grounds ethical deliberation (Varela 1999).

Radical sympathy is underscored along the lines of ethical know-how as conceived by Varela, one that moves from personal compassion, and the sharing of immediate relations, to more pronounced enactments of care and justice. As a proposal, radical sympathy may be said to work at nurturing a type of general activism and sensitivity aimed at fostering cultures of solidarity.

On sympathy

What is sympathy and how does it impact onto particular situations? How does sympathy relate to care and the capacity to extend oneself toward others? In what ways is sympathy learned or mobilized, and in what ways can it participate within current

discourses as well as critical and creative initiatives? In his work on philosophical ethics, Stephen Darwall makes a useful distinction between empathy and sympathy. Empathy is understood as an experience of feeling what others feel, as a “sharing of another’s mental states”. Darwall further underscores empathy as an “emotional contagion” that passes between people as well as a form of “emotional projection” (Darwall 2002:54). An empathetic response takes the form of: *I show you how you feel*. There is a sense of emotional and physical charge at play, which may manifest as a gesture of mimicry – a mirroring by which one participates in the feelings of another and which supports greater sensitivity for the experience of others.

In contrast to empathy, sympathy is underscored as a concern for others that does not stay within the confines of shared emotion or a movement of interpersonal reflection. Rather, sympathy is a feeling or emotion that responds to an apparent threat or obstacle to another’s well-being. To be sympathetic is to feel compassion for someone else’s challenges. While everyday understandings of both empathy and sympathy often overlap – as what nurtures fellow feeling and helps produce a sense of commonality as well as compassionate action – Darwall’s distinction is embraced here as a useful base. In contrast to empathy, as feeling what others feel, sympathy is responsive and the basis for action, where sympathy leads to a position of “caring-for” – or, *the one who cares* – and therefore, works on behalf of another’s well-being. Sympathy is therefore motivated or prompted by an understanding for the vulnerabilities and challenges people share, and yet which some experience more than others; as a form of embodied intelligence, it underpins moral obligation and informs ethical responsiveness, lending to the capacity to sense beyond one’s immediate circles and to bring care to others.

Extending from Darwall’s work on sympathy, the author Jane Bennett equally addresses the topic, opening up a more materialist, environmental perspective. In her book *Influx and Efflux*, Bennett highlights the porosity and interdependency of persons, how one is susceptible to the influx of worldly experience and how expressions of agency are bound to complex webs

of relation. She elaborates this understanding by focusing on sympathy. In particular, she poses sympathy, or what she terms “currents of sympathy”, as a helpful guide in capturing the complexity of bodily connectedness. Currents of sympathy are not only about the individual capacity to sympathize with others and the expression of care and compassion; rather, Bennett emphasizes a materialist, somewhat “impersonal” perspective, shifting from emotion toward “currents of affection” which circulate “in the atmosphere to connect different types of beings and things” (Bennett 2021:29). Currents of sympathy and affection thus wield a force that sensitizes as to the interconnectedness of things.¹

Currents of sympathy, for Bennett, speak to the affective tonalities that pass across and through bodies and environments, subjects and objects, humans and more-than-human others. Such currents are material ambiances and resonant flows – the influx and efflux of influence and attraction. They are, rather, nonconscious, vibrant, embodied and impersonal, and yet they do come to inform personal decision-making and ethical know-how, figuring itself in “gravitational leanings” and the articulations of sensibility (Bennett 2021:23).

Bennett’s concern for the influx and efflux of worldly contact helps accent sympathy as what gives gravity to things and relationships – what pulls at us, or what pushes things in and out of place, and which influences a general disposition of consideration and concern. Stephen Darwall argues along similar lines, suggesting that sympathy performs on the level of personal compassion – to feel for the plight of others – in such a way that emphasizes well-being “categorically” (Darwall 71). From a direct relation – *I sympathize with what you struggle with* – to more indirect concern – *it is necessary to address the difficulties marginalized communities face* – sympathy extends beyond first-person narratives. Rather, third-person narratives emerge by way of sympathy, where I as an author or agent take on the role of telling

1 Such views draw forward a greater history of sympathetic thought, from Greek Antiquity and Stoicism, which conceptualized “cosmic sympathy” in order to explain forms of universal causality. See Eric Schliesser (ed.), *Sympathy: A History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015).

a different human story; I give my voice to the stories of others, or so as to enable the voice of others to speak through me. And I act in such a way as to benefit others, for *their* sake. As such, sympathy moves across different registers and modes, from direct to indirect action, from personal to impersonal care and concern, from sense to sensibility. It captures a dynamics of interconnectivity, figuring affective, sensual experiences that extend beyond empathetic feeling toward ethical responsiveness and reason.

Toward justice

Engaging with questions of sympathy allows for a greater reflection on the ways in which caring-for manifests as a general, ethical position or disposition, extending beyond personal well-being and toward the work of justice. In what sense is sympathy connected to justice? If sympathy contributes to ethical know-how, and an embodied intelligence of caring-for, how might it lend to fostering the building of what the Care Collective calls “caring societies”? (The Care Collective 2020).

There is ongoing debate regarding sympathy’s place in legal decision-making, for instance in the act of judgment. Within the courtroom should a judge decide by way of the heart or the head? How does sympathy impact on a jury’s ability to be impartial? We can appreciate how movements of social justice, for example, are driven by attracting the sympathy of others, especially those outside a given struggle; to adopt another’s struggle as one’s own is often to sympathize with the cause.

Sympathy, in this sense, is passionate, in terms of arousing feelings for the struggles of others, and therefore can be argued to cloud one’s judgment. Law, as such, is understood as an institutional or moral pillar based fundamentally on reason – law as what should not be tainted by emotion. Yet, sympathy is also called upon within certain situations, as it can help in recognizing the extent of another’s suffering, and thereby assist in the passing of fair judgment. On one hand justice is pursued passionately within our democratic, legal systems, while at the same time it must be seen to proceed dispassionately – justice

expresses sympathy for the suffering of others while upholding itself as rational and without emotional bias. If sympathy is what moves one to come to the aid of others, such movements are often required to take a more objective or impartial tone when entering the courts or other scenes of deliberation. How one approaches law and legal rights therefore is fraught with sympathy's complex influence.

In contrast to such views, there is a counter-argument within legal scholarship, which highlights sympathy not only as an emotional response, but one that is equally cognitive. Sympathy can enable a better understanding of complex situations by allowing one to appreciate a range of perspectives, for instance between a defendant and a plaintiff. In this way, sympathy is deemed helpful in leading one to more effectively understand opposing arguments or views. Sympathy allows for understanding the perspective of others, even those we may disagree with; it can move from personal to impersonal identification, from aiding a friend to supporting social movements of justice which require the heart as well as the head.

Although moral obligation often carries a connotation of duty, even discipline – that it is my duty to be responsible for others – I might equally approach obligation from a position of enchantment, wonder and joy, to suggest that what obliges one to others is rather a sense of fascination or amazement when facing each other – *to marvel at the face of the other*. The defenselessness which Emmanuel Levinas sees in the face, and which acts as a defining pivot in shaping one's responsibility for the other, is equally its enchantment. The face shines, it suffers, it is gravitational, marked by so much; the face of the other is equally attractive as it is repulsive, beautiful as well as disgusting – the face is the beginning of love as well as conflict and anguish. The ways in which the face participates in Levinas' ethical schema extends beyond the actual character or moral disposition of the other; rather, the face, even in its most striking or horrific, invites or compels consideration. What I'm keen to suggest is that ethical responsiveness and moral obligation are also affectionate, shaped by fascination, attraction as well as fear, even bewilderment.

In her writings Jane Bennett also focuses on the question of ethics by way of enchantment, leading to what she calls “energetic ethics” (Bennett 2001:155). This is based on the argument that moral codes require embodied enactment. While one may grasp an obligation of responsibility when facing the other, the movement toward being responsive is a question of affect, sensibility, know-how. “Enchantment is not a moral code, but it might spark a bodily will to enact such a code and foster the presumption of generosity toward those who transgress or question it” (Bennett 2001:32). The energetics of ethics is positioned as key to moving from facing the other, on a theoretical and abstract level, toward becoming answerable, concerned, sympathetic – to working at a generosity of understanding. Enchantment, for Bennett, is precisely what underpins the energetics of ethics, and lends to the cultivation of a disposition of caring-for. To move from code and duty to a sensibility predisposed to caring-for is to affirm a general wonder and amazement for life itself.

Energetics, and the enchanted materialism Bennett maps, gestures toward the ways in which sympathy may figure within the work of justice. Here, sympathy appeals to a generosity of understanding when facing others, contributing to greater sensitivity for the intricacy of arguments and the suffering of others; it may also keep one attuned to the complexity of real-world situations, balancing moral duty and responsibility with an embodied intelligence and knowledge.

Critical perspectives

There are a range of critical views onto sympathy which are important to consider, and which can help in capturing sympathy in its complexity. In the publication, *Compassion: The Culture and Politics of an Emotion*, Lauren Berlant challenges the ways in which compassion wields an “ethics of privilege”, whereby the sufferer is always “over there”. As she queries: “In a given scene of suffering, how do we know what does and what should constitute sympathetic agency?” (Berlant 2004:4) Berlant rightly seeks to enact a critique of how compassion and sympathetic agency

get articulated and positioned within Western liberal democracy (particularly in the United States, which is her focus), demanding greater tussle with assumptions as to what moral obligation for the suffering of others requires. What comes forward is an attack on the ways in which compassion formulates and concretizes a social relation between “spectator and sufferer”, often relegating others to a position of *needing help*. For Berlant, it becomes imperative to debunk how compassion and sympathetic agency are shamelessly held up as always already a sign of the good, and that often do little to intervene or challenge on a political level the ongoingness of systems of abuse. “The modern social logic of compassion can as easily provide an alibi for an ethical or political betrayal as it can initiate a circuit of practical relief” (Berlant 2004:11).

Berlant’s arguments open onto an important reminder of the complexity of sympathy and compassion: that in the work of compassionate action, or sympathetic agency, there needs to be room for questioning and also reorienting what it means to be moved by the pain of others. This critical questioning appears additionally in Carolyn Pedwell’s work on “decolonizing empathy”. Pedwell aims to challenge the ways in which the rhetoric of the “empathy economy” pervades much of neoliberalism and contemporary business practices, where empathy, and an affective politics, is instrumentalized in supporting development and growth: becoming better “attuned” to customers, and the global partnerships defining transnational corporate prosperity, becomes a means for businesses to mobilize opportunities for growth. She seeks to bring attention then to the “transnational politics of empathy”, and how empathy flows through the global circuits of power. By doing so, Pedwell ultimately argues for “alternative empathy”, founded on “‘provincializing’ emotional discourses and practices that have presented themselves as universal as a means to open up other ways of thinking and feeling affective politics” (Pedwell 2016). Alternative empathy finds traction through a more pronounced engagement with post-colonial and feminist discourses, which can enable greater attention and critical work onto the particular positionalities within affective relations.

Berlant's critique of compassion as an indicator of the good, and Pedwell's work on decolonizing empathy, both supply us with critical tools for approaching sympathy and the notion of radical sympathy being offered here. As Stephen Darwall poses, sympathy names an ethical and moral ground by which care and caring-for are mobilized. Whether this is always already housed within a moral or social construct of what constitutes the good is also to be questioned. Without a doubt, sympathy can perpetuate ongoing uneven relations across spectator and sufferer, the privileged and the underprivileged. At the same time, as Bennett and Darwall both suggest, sympathy is never only about suffering, or aiding those in struggle; rather, sympathy names an affective, emotional and material sensing of greater webs of interconnectedness, from direct to indirect, personal to impersonal relatedness. As such, sympathy requires critical practices so as to better interrogate the terms by which it is articulated and set in motion. Radical sympathy as a project aims to contribute to such practices; it recognizes a dynamic range of cultural, political, scientific and social activities taking place today which aim at addressing and ameliorating the suffering of others, while also bringing forward extremely dynamic vocabularies, positions and articulations of collaborative, planetary engagement that do much to warrant deeper attention to what sympathy is. While sympathy, empathy and compassion may continue to be instrumentalized for any number of financial and political gains, they may be equally conceived as forces that make challenging such instrumentalization possible.

Overview of contributions

In pursuing questions of radical sympathy, contributions have been sought across artistic and academic contexts. This includes forms of critical and creative research methods, and which integrate forms of reflection as well as activist and sited fieldwork. The essay by Anastasia A Khodyreva, Milla Tiainen, Taru Leppänen & Katve-Kaisa Kontturi opens key perspectives onto the question of attunement, and how attunement contributes to

forming and fostering collaborative research activities. Through an examination of the affective, embodied qualities of research, and stemming from new materialist and feminist theories that prompt greater recognition of interconnectedness across bodies and environments, people and things, attunement is posited as a generative lens by which to foster research processes aimed at posthuman inquiry and knowledge making. Following their essay, and related practice-oriented methods, attunement's significance and power are brought forward.

Questions of attunement and sympathy find a point of reference in the practice-based research of Margarida Mendes, a scholar and curator based in Lisbon. Her essay talks through fieldwork undertaken along the Mississippi river in Louisiana, which probes the ongoing environmental contamination perpetrated by a range of industries and corporations. Concerns for the toxicity of the site, and its impact onto local communities, both human and more-than-human, Mendes draws out important questions as to the links between colonialism, and histories of slavery, and contemporary industrial infrastructures and business practices. Throughout her fieldwork, a focus on sound, listening and the vibrational and resonant materialities found on site are emphasized, figuring an embodied, sensory and affective approach toward social and more-than-social engagement practices.

Attunement and resonance, listening and situatedness, are positioned as creative and critical means for research, and gesture towards radical sympathy as an ethically responsive, socially engaged framework. By way of research practices that seek to step beyond strictly discursive methodologies, radical sympathy can be captured as a *sensing-knowing along the way*, and that supports response-ability, not only to identifiable others, but equally to what may emerge within any critical and creative process, especially for those concerned with the urgencies of our times.

Extending from new materialist and environmental work, an interview with Achille Mbembe expands the discussion by addressing questions of coloniality on a broader scale. Mbembe articulates a range of key insights into the ongoingness of colonialism, and its relation to planetary crises, underscoring what's

at stake in acts and initiatives of decolonization. The concept of a “planetary curriculum” is proposed in order to intensify planetary thinking, and to bring greater engagement with the intersectional realities defining contemporary struggles, where environmental catastrophe, systemic racism, and gender inequality are intertwined with transnational financial instruments. Planetary curriculum becomes a ground by which to build up and support transversal knowledge – and the imperative of diversity mobilized by planetary thinking (Yui 2020).

Scholar, curator and creative practitioner Cecilie Sachs Olsen contributes to such a planetary curriculum through her research into urban planning and degrowth. Her essay, “Towards an Urban Attention Ecology”, poses degrowth as an important concept and practice, one that can interrupt the rhetoric of development and expansion defining capitalism and its extractive practices. This is given greater attention by way of documentation of the Oslo Architecture Triennial, which Olsen co-curated in 2019. Organized under the theme of degrowth, the Triennial sought to articulate a model of curating that would invite more speculative, propositional and discussion-based examination of contemporary architectural practice, especially with the aim of challenging the more “spectacular” visions of future architecture. Underpinning her arguments is a focus on attentional ecologies which, following Yves Citton, foster our capacity for engaged reflection, for attending to others, and that supports learning, listening and relational sensitivity.

The crafting of ecologies of attention as a relational method finds echo in the work of Michelle-Marie Letelier. Her research-based practice often works at extending relationality to the more-than-human, tracking geopolitical infrastructures and their impact on animal and human life. Documenting an artist residency she undertook in southern Chile in 2021, Letelier considers the salmon farming industries in the country, and how the introduction of salmon to the southern hemisphere has upset the natural ecology of the region. Through a role-play workshop with participating students, the artist worked at bringing such issues to the fore, in which the personification of a range of relevant actors,

from natural entities to corporate agencies, assists in drawing attention to the importance of formulating a planetary ethics.

The project and platform Pirate Care, initiated by Valeria Graziano, Tomislav Medak and Marcell Mars, has emerged in recent years as an important network of discussion and information related to the care crisis. Responding to the Covid-19 pandemic, and the intensification of an ongoing crisis in care infrastructures across Europe and elsewhere, Pirate Care provides a critical view onto the politics of care. Through a pirate approach, in terms of articulating a form of disobedience onto existing regimes of care, they capture a range of deeply committed and activistic initiatives that work at bringing care to those in need as well as arguing for greater caring imaginaries across society. Through their online platform, Pirate Care shows how care takes many forms.

Through the contributions gathered in *Radical Sympathy*, critical and creative practices articulate sympathetic agency in ways that extend from personal relationships across families and friends to that of institutional settings, self-organized scenes and professional environments; from curatorial, scholarly, artistic and activistic modalities, sympathetic agency is expressed through the material arrangement of things and the crafting of scenes of public gathering; through critical reflection and the sharing of knowledge and information; through paying attention to the world of others and bringing an imagination to such observations and what they may reveal about the infrastructures and systems that surround. Or, through the act of writing a letter. Concluding the publication, Lilia Mestre, a choreographer and researcher based in Brussels, addresses an imaginary You through a letter of sympathy written in the midst of lockdown. For Mestre, it becomes crucial to reorient understandings of friendship toward a more general perspective, where You are always already closer than imagined.

Sympathetic agency: conduits of cooperation

Sympathy, and a radical sympathy model, becomes a way of fostering modes of solidarity informed by interdependency, affection,

an ethics of hospitality and care, and by recognizing that the problems of the fallen are the world's problems. Such a view raises a question of proximity as well as scale, which are fundamentally shaping current global challenges. For instance, how might one come to respond to climate crisis, or the Covid-19 pandemic, both of which vastly exceed one's individual or local view, requiring evermore imagination. Radical sympathy may act as a framework for helping to approach such challenges, reminding how questions of causality are always embedded within a density of relations, systems and histories that are equally emotional, personal, *thick*. In this regard, I follow sympathy as a way of being-attentive that is adept at moving across scales, and that works at figuring affinity and concern. Such attentiveness, as I'm imagining, finds echo in the forms of attention theorized by the composer Pauline Oliveros (Oliveros 2005). Extending from her philosophy and practice of deep listening, Oliveros emphasizes the importance of cultivating one's capacity for focusing on an immediate field of details while, at the same time, attuning to a greater context. From the particular and the proximate to the diffuse and the global, Oliveros' deep listening mobilizes a form of being-attentive that is not solely about the reception of information; rather, such attentiveness comes to open onto recognition of the interconnectedness of things, where what is in front is always informed and influenced by a range of extended relations and forces, histories and ecologies.

In my own experience as an educator, I also understand sympathy as what draws me into an engagement with others in such a way as to cast the pedagogical scene as deeply transformative. The construct of the workshop or the seminar becomes an aesthetic, ethical and explorative form, a kind of dramaturgical work through which narratives emerge along the way, co-created by the gathering of participants. Facilitating such enactments requires that one hosts the emergence of what may come: to nurture and welcome debate and discussion, while bringing forward one's energies to challenging and guiding the narrative, supporting a plurality of voices and views (what Richard Kearney emphasizes as "narrative empathy" (Kearney & Fitzpatrick 2021)).

This I understand as a form of radical sympathy, manifesting as a conscientious, energetic figuring of attention and concern for the benefit of all. This requires fostering trust and to figuring an inspirational tone, where criticality is equally poetic, and knowledge is in touch with personal lives. As Paolo Freire has commented, “teaching is an act of love”. I follow this in that I work at being generous and nurturing, understanding that pedagogy always requires *something more*.

Sympathy here is not so much aimed at the suffering of others, but rather, affords a sense of deep responsibility and responsiveness, and a disposition of consideration and concern, that exceeds the task of teaching. Following such perspectives and understandings, I’ve been moved to approach the pedagogical scene as an opportunity for cultivating sympathy, as well as empathy – in short, to construct such a scene as one of radical hospitality. Hospitality is cast here as the welcoming of the strange: strange and unexpected ideas, new and emergent doings, deep and critical discussions, as well as the sharing of passion, all of which push at the limits of what we know and imagine (Kearney and Fitzpatrick 2021). Hospitality is not without its challenges, for the strange certainly intrudes and interrupts – it may overstep and over-reach. Such moments though become opportunities for deepening one’s capacity for sympathy, for learning of other views and perspectives, following the voices of others, and bringing forward a sensibility of care and adventure for what we may do together.

Returning to Bennett’s energetic ethics, sympathy can be captured as a deeply creative force – from personal compassion, and caring-for others, to the sensitive crafting of things and the tending of material worlds, sympathy as what often prompts *doing something more*. Such a view resonates with Donna Haraway’s understanding of “sympoiesis”, as that sense of co-creation that passes across bodies and things, subjects and objects (Haraway 2016). In contrast to “auto-poiesis”, as the automatic making of oneself, sympoiesis is a “making-with”, a making bound to being in company with others – sympoiesis, I might say, as a gravitational current of co-making. In this sense,

sympathy is fundamentally explorative, inciting responsiveness, improvisation, ethical sensitivity and that positively extends the limits of what counts as one's own. Radical sympathy is posed then as a model of sympathy that passes across the consonant and the dissonant, the near and the far, a pushing and pulling that is foundational to being a subject in the world with others – and that figures community less as an enclave of identity and more as a conduit of cooperation.

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