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Engaging with the Failures of Racial Empathy

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Abstract

In the face of media attention that has recently spotlighted police brutality, racialized COVID-19 deaths, and the renewed visibility of white-supremacy groups, scholars, tech entrepreneurs, and media pundits are calling for an increase in empathy, claiming that it may move white and non-Black people of color beyond feelings of pity to dismantling anti-Black racism. However, in the context of anti-Blackness, is racial empathy possible? And what can we expect from it? Examining philosophical critiques of empathy's capabilities by philosophers and scholars engaged in feminist philosophy and Black studies, alongside Heidi Maibom's four-part definition of empathy, I focus on what empathy's limitations might tell us about the emotional and material structures that prevent empathy from achieving the results its advocates often hope for. I argue that the feelings of racial empathy, which may activate in empathy-inducing activities, may instead paradoxically point to the very anti-Black psychological structures that prevent empathetic action. I also contend that the feelings of racial empathy do not themselves undo the relations of anti-Blackness, but tracing the racism implicit in their activation may serve as a self-reflexive tool, an ongoing process, for understanding how anti-Blackness has shaped one's sense of self, embodied awareness, and lifeworld.

"What would it take for you not just to empathize and feel bad but to think and act differently?" asks sociologist Courtney D. Cogburn in her TED Talk, "Experience Racism in VR" (Cogburn 2017). Cogburn is discussing "1,000 Cut Journey," a virtual reality (VR) simulation that enables viewers to take on the perspective of a Black man, embodying him as he encounters racism at different stages in his life and reflects on the racism experienced by other Black people. Cogburn's perspective-taking experience is meant to immerse (white) viewers in "a virtual experience of racism that helps them to better understand the complexities of the realities of racism," not an understanding that is the result of intellectual exercises alone but an understanding that is "based in your body and in your spirit as much as reason."

Cogburn frames the stakes of her project with the death of Trayvon Martin in 2012. In the face of Martin's death, Cogburn reveals that her friends who were pregnant with Black boys confessed online to feeling "anxious, frustrated, angry, [and] hopeless." Meanwhile, Cogburn's white friends were "giggling about kitten memes." Even when

her white friends did discuss Martin, they in no way felt threatened by the death of what they perceived to be a stranger. Yet, for Black people, Martin is not a stranger but their son, their brother, their cousin. In her project, Cogburn wants both to surpass empathy and to leverage the power of empathetic feelings of racism in order to address racial injustice. However, in the context of anti-Blackness, is racial empathy possible? If so, what can we expect from it?

Although empathy may appear to be an ideal goal, many Black philosophers and critical race scholars have challenged the capacity of empathy and empathy-inducing technology to address racial injustice. In this essay, I work through the premises of these arguments on empathy, considering and bridging together their collective insight on empathy's capacities and (non)effectiveness. For example, Ruha Benjamin notes that VR intended to create empathy for Black people "can present another opportunity for 'poverty porn,'" and she argues that such VR technology is more likely to be used in initiatives aimed at generating empathy for those in power (for example, police officers) rather than those who are subject to the abuses of power (for example, people who experience police harassment) (Benjamin 2019, 172). In a similar vein, game scholar Robert Yang questions why there is a need for a shared feeling of trauma (Yang 2017). Are the nonoppressed incapable of believing the claims of those who have experienced injustice without having experienced it themselves? Myisha Cherry supports a role for empathy in addressing racial injustice but provides caveats on the activation of empathy. In her response to Lori Gruen's concept of entangled empathy—the development of a caring perspective toward others (Gruen 2017)—Cherry argues that whether people engage in entangled empathy depends on if they care about who they are empathizing with and if they care about the quality of relationship they have with that person. If these two conditions are unmet, Cherry argues that people may respond to each other "in ways that are paternalistic and harmful" (Cherry 2017). Saidiya Hartman and Frank B. Wilderson's critiques of empathy are the most adamant in disavowing empathy's possibilities for racial justice. In short, Hartman argues that experiences of empathy can displace the Black subject being empathized with. Wilderson argues that we are not designed with an innate capacity to empathize prior to socialization. Rather, empathy, as a constituent component of civic relationality, has played a foundational role in constructing our current civic relations, relations that are anti-Black. In his words: "Empathy (and, by extension, the possibility for justice) is not, however, the always already of our genetic code but a mode of production that secures civic relations. And anti-Blackness is a generative mechanism of this mode of production" (Wilderson 2015, 186). In short, empathy cannot undo that which it actively secures: an anti-Black social world.

Despite these expansive critiques of empathy made by Black feminist philosophers and critical race scholars, scholars have yet to put these critiques in conversation with antiracist work that seeks to employ empathy. This article fills in this gap by bridging these philosophical insights together and bringing them to bear upon the work of antiracism. Within these arguments the use of the term *empathy* includes a range of emotions and behaviors. To be able to see how these various forms of empathy may speak to one other, I draw from philosopher Heidi Maibom's four-part definition of empathy (below) to clarify how empathy is functioning in the above philosophical arguments for and against what I call *racial empathy*. Racial empathy, in the context of this article, refers to the ability of white and non-Black people of color to share the feelings and perspectives of Black people on the realities of anti-Blackness.¹

Engaging scholarly critiques of empathy, which point out the irrelevance, dangerousness, and impossibilities of empathy in struggles for racial justice, I consider what empathy's limitations can teach us about the emotional and material structures that often prevent empathy from achieving the antiracist results its advocates often hope for. In examining these scholarly critiques, Cogburn's "1,000 Cut Journey" serves as a key example of work that seeks to employ empathy for racial justice, but it is important to note that this article's arguments about racial empathy are not based or centered on VR. Although I retain sympathies for goals like Cogburn's—to use feelings of racial empathy to induce empathetic action—I argue that, paradoxically, the feelings of racial empathy, which may activate in empathy-inducing activities like Cogburn's VR simulation, may instead point instead to the very anti-Black psychological structures that prevent empathetic action. However, although I contend that feelings of empathy do not themselves undo the relations of anti-Blackness, I argue that tracing the racism implicit in their activation may serve as a self-reflexive tool, an ongoing process, in understanding how anti-Blackness has shaped one's senses, psychology, and lifeworld. What is needed to impel white and non-Black people of color to struggle against anti-Blackness is not more proof that Black people suffer but a reckoning with the affectual structures that prevent white and non-Black people of color from refusing relationalities of white supremacy that require or are complicit with the social and physical death of Black people. Engaging with the activation of racial empathetic *feelings* and their failure to mature into empathetic *action* might enable us to face these very structures. To theorize how this may occur, I first define the emotions and behaviors that comprise empathetic feelings and differentiate them from empathetic action. Then, I examine scholarly arguments against racial empathy to outline how current obstacles to empathetic action might serve as fronts for future antiracist work. To clarify, this article will not offer a method to make people commit to empathetic action or even feel empathetic feelings. Rather, I aim to show why empathetic feelings can manifest without transforming into empathetic action and describe how these instances offer us tools to begin to attend to the structures of and our attachments to anti-Blackness.

Empathy and Race

The term *empathy* has been used to define various behaviors and psychological states. Maibom sorts these behaviors and states into four categories: (1) emotional contagion, (2) affective empathy, (3) perspective-taking, and (4) empathetic concern (that is, sympathy) (Maibom 2020, 15–16). *Emotional contagion* is a transitory state that can occur when we notice what someone else is feeling and start taking on those emotions ourselves without realizing it. For example, witnessing a person who is startled, we may feel startled ourselves, even if we are unaware of why the other person feels startled (8–9). *Affective empathy* is when we share the emotions of another but can understand that our feeling is different from their feeling, what Maibom calls “a robust self–other differentiation” (9). For example, if a friend feels sad about something traumatic that happened to them, we may also feel sad on our friend's behalf. Our sadness is not for ourselves nor is it directed at our friend, but it is directed at the event or episode that caused our friend's sadness. *Perspective-taking* is placing ourselves in another person's shoes to imagine the thoughts and feelings that another might feel and then once returning to our own position, ascribing to that person what we imagined they might have felt while allowing for differences (10–11). *Empathetic concern*, also called sympathy, is the emotional state that one person has for the well-being of another person. It

does not necessarily require that a person feel the same feeling as another person (11). For example, we can witness another person suffer and not feel the sadness or desperation that the suffering caused in the sufferer but still feel angry, motivated, or determined to end that suffering for the other person. Beyond Maibom's four categories of empathetic feelings, advocates of racial empathy aim to prompt what I term *empathetic action*, in which the person who experiences one of the four emotional states of empathy actualizes steps toward ending the suffering of the racialized other.

Applying Maibom's framework to Cogburn's "1,000 Cut Journey," we can say that Cogburn attempts to engage viewers in perspective-taking with a VR experience, with the hope that participants may experience the emotions that Black people could feel during a racist encounter (emotional contagion), which would lead to affective empathy and even past empathetic concern into a type of critical empathetic action. Empathetic action against anti-Blackness requires not merely an understanding that Black people suffer but acknowledging how Black suffering is constituted through white and non-Black advantage and feeling accountable to undo the privileges, status, and invulnerability that is achieved through the social death of Blackness.

In the next section, I look more closely at the arguments against empathy to theorize how these collected limitations delineate empathy's possibilities and the white resistances to racial justice that empathy, in its current formation, seemingly cannot untie. Critics of (racial) empathy posit three main critiques: (1) Empathy and empathy-inducing technology are likely to be misused; (2) Empathy requires a prior relationship to the other that enables us to care about and see the other as they are. In other words, empathy needs to be accompanied by other social relationships and commitments prior to its effective activation; (3) Empathy within our current social relations cannot be extended to Black subjects whose expulsion from the category of human—a condition that the category of human rests upon—renders them unable to be fully empathized with. Putting this combined set of critiques in conversation, in the next section I theorize how anti-Black contexts forestall empathetic feelings from manifesting into empathetic action.

Empathy's Failures

Misusing Technologies of Empathy: Benjamin and Yang

Both Benjamin and Yang point out that technology supposedly capable of generating empathy can be misused. Benjamin uses the example of Mark Zuckerberg's virtual visit to Puerto Rico following Hurricane Maria (2017) using Facebook's VR app, Oculus Rift, and a three-dimensional video made by National Public Radio (Benjamin 2019). In an online livestream video, Zuckerberg and a company executive, while using the VR, appear as cartoon avatars in the middle of the hurricane devastation, passing in front of flooded roads, people washing their clothes in a river, and sunken housing. Zuckerberg details Facebook's involvement in relief efforts, which span from fundraising to creating technology to help people communicate their whereabouts to loved ones, and his accompanying executive comments, "it was crazy to feel like you're in the middle of it." Critics noted that the comment and the cartoon avatars made billionaire Zuckerberg and his executive seem out of touch with the people they were attempting to help. Zuckerberg responded that "one of the most powerful features of VR is empathy" in that VR can raise awareness about "what's happening in different parts of the world" (Benjamin 2019, 170). But does Zuckerberg experience racial

empathy while using Oculus or did his livestream video enable viewers to experience racial empathy?

In Cogburn's "1,000 Cut Journey," we can see that having to navigate racial trauma in a perspective-taking experience may lead to empathetic feelings of emotional contagion or affective empathy, but it may not always lead to empathetic action. Zuckerberg's example is markedly different from technology meant to induce empathy like "1,000 Cut Journey." First, Zuckerberg's VR experience was not meant to generate empathy. It also did not require the participant to embody the perspective of those experiencing the hurricane. Zuckerberg did not have to navigate the disaster the way people did in the video. Unlike Cogburn's VR experience where the participant must react to being apprehended as a Black subject, Zuckerberg and his associate were free to wander and explore the disaster at ease. Their choices and mobility were not curtailed by what they saw. Having only to visualize it, instead of embodying or experiencing it through the lens of someone actually living there, Zuckerberg is not participating in a perspective-taking experience but, rather, a visual experience.

Further, Zuckerberg's VR experience rarely showed the emotions of Puerto Ricans within the video; thus, by not portraying their perspectives and emotions, it is unlikely that emotional contagion or affective empathy could occur as there is no person from whom emotion is being transferred. Likewise, viewers of Zuckerberg's experience could have engaged in a perspective-taking experience in regard to the Puerto Ricans living there, but they might have as easily imagined being Zuckerberg. Despite Zuckerberg's claims about the potential of VR to induce empathy, his own use of Oculus in the aftermath of hurricane devastation—to market Facebook's humanitarian work without challenging the US's imperialist response to the hurricane—demonstrates Zuckerberg's lack of empathy (perspective-taking and holistic empathetic action).

One might argue that Zuckerberg's VR experience did not feature the emotions or perspectives needed to enable emotional contagion or affective empathy to occur. The VR experience may have allowed for perspective-taking, but it certainly did not make it a requirement for use. Therefore, we cannot argue from this one example whether empathy or empathetic action is impossible or simply limited by these technologies. In regard to the limitations of Zuckerberg's VR video to provide an immersive empathetic experience, Benjamin contends that changing *what* we see in VR will not change *how* we see (Benjamin 2019, 171). I turn to Yang's arguments on empathy to explain why this may be true about racial empathy.

Yang's arguments against empathy are drawn from his critiques of straight gamers empathizing with queer video game characters. Although Yang focuses on empathy across sexual identities in contrast to racial identities, his example raises important questions that can be applied to the context of racial empathy. Yang's example diverges from Zuckerberg's VR experience in a key way: In contrast to Zuckerberg, who claims that Oculus is a tool for empathy but does not necessarily include the conditions needed for empathy in his livestream video, Yang's queer video games do feature the perspectives and emotions of the queer community. And yet Yang critiques straight people for making "empathy machines" out of his video games that were not intended for them (Yang 2017). Yang argues that using the games in this way makes the purpose of the games about the feelings of the would-be empathizer instead of the perspective of the people who are featured in the games. Further, Yang questions why such empathy devices are necessary. Why do straight people need to feel the suffering of the queer community to believe the testimonies of queer people describing their experience? The question, when extended to the context of VR centered on racial empathy,

becomes: Why does the suffering of Black people need to be embodied by white and non-Black subjects? How has Black testimony been so devalued that the suffering of Black communities needs to be validated through a game or virtual simulation rather than ascertained from quotidian behavior and the long history of documented anti-Blackness? In Yang's example, empathy-inducing technologies do not benefit LGBTQ+ communities if they do not prompt straight people to adequately reflect on the structures of heteronormativity. Despite displaying the emotions of queer people, when these emotions, desires, and pain become a source of emotional entertainment rather than a display of queer self-actualization, straight participants already seem far removed from the perspective of queer people who would surely not see their pain as a source of entertainment but as a reflection of their lived experiences. When straight gamers do not reflect on the structures of heteronormativity while playing queer games, we can think of straight people's engagement in the emotions of queer people as a type of emotional contagion (and even possibly affective empathy) but with a different type of robust self-other distinction than Maibom mentioned, one that forecloses deeper forms of empathy, such as perspective-taking and empathetic concern or sustained empathetic action.

From the examples above, we can see how one may feel the pain and feelings of the oppressed but as an emotional excursion rather than a form of critical contemplation. For two very different reasons, neither Zuckerberg's technology nor queer games seem capable of or oriented toward cultivating empathetic action and mobilizing the unmoved against social injustice. Benjamin's example is an instance where the conditions needed to induce empathy in viewers may be inadequate. Zuckerberg's promotional VR experience sidesteps the Trump administration's racialized response to Hurricane Maria and does not delve into how the Trump administration's response occurs within a larger system of settler colonialism and the racist devaluation of Puerto Rican life. In Yang's example, queer games are also not focused on explaining the oppressive forces of heteropatriarchy but are about experiencing queer solidarity. In this case, the activation of empathy (emotional contagion or affective empathy) in nonqueer people points to the very structures of heteronormativity that enable players to experience the pain of the other, not as an experience of self-representation but as a mode of enjoyment. Applying this understanding to anti-Blackness and technology meant to induce racial empathy, I submit that when the feelings of emotional contagion and affective empathy arise but forestall into developing empathetic action for Black people, these empathetic feelings underscore the psychic structures of anti-Blackness that reduce the suffering of Black people to a form of entertainment.

A final type of technology that constitutes a misuse of technology for empathy for Benjamin and Yang is technology meant to induce empathy for the perpetrator of racial oppression. Benjamin offers the case of VR meant to induce empathy for police officers, and Yang gives the example of white research managers in the post-Civil War era asking their Black researchers to find more "diversity" in slave narratives that emphasized "the good times" of slavery (Yang 2017; Benjamin 2019). In both Benjamin's and Yang's second examples, they are not arguing that empathy is impossible but that empathetic feelings might be directed toward the wrong subjects. If these technologies point to the powerfulness of empathy when directed toward whiteness, the question then becomes: What about when a white or non-Black person of color intends to empathize with Black communities? Can racial empathy occur in white people and non-Black people of color for Black people? If not, what stops racial empathy from being activated?

I turn to Gruen's concept of entangled empathy and her engagement with Cherry and Wilderson to think through this question. I posit that when empathy, in the form of intentional perspective-taking, enables the would-be empathizer to feel something unexpected and previously unfelt in the form of emotional contagion or affective empathy, it highlights how anti-Blackness forecloses those feelings and understandings of race in everyday situations for non-Black people. However, the following question remains: Why does perspective-taking not manifest into empathetic action? Examining Gruen and Cherry's conversation, I unpack the relationship between perspective-taking and empathetic action, and I argue that, without an interrogation into how the structures of anti-Blackness produce contemporary non-Black well-being, feelings of racial empathy cannot manifest into empathetic action.

The Limits of Empathy as Perspective-Taking: Gruen and Cherry

Within Maibom's rubric, Gruen's concept of *entangled empathy* falls squarely under the category of perspective-taking with a couple of noticeable differences. Gruen describes entangled empathy as "a process of perspective-taking" that "is not itself an emotion, but a process of engaging caring moral perception," which "may draw on affections that build up over time" (that is, affective empathy and empathetic concern) but does not require such emotions or even a close relationship with those to whom one extends empathy.² Gruen's entangled empathy is a continual process of developing and correcting one's perception "to accurately attend to the well-being of others" (Gruen 2017). Further, her concept of entanglement positions living beings as always in relation to each other. For Gruen, engaging in these ongoing perspective-taking exercises leads to empathetic action.

Cherry supports Gruen's concept of entangled empathy and theorizes how a practice of it might address racial injustice, but she also points out there is no inherent reason why people who engage in entangled empathy (perspective-taking) would feel motivated to attend to injustice. She reminds readers, like Yang, that one can imagine oneself in someone else's shoes without doing anything to give that person new shoes (Cherry 2017, 449). And, perhaps more dangerously, one can empathize without seeing oneself as related to that person, which could lead to "paternalistic and harmful" behavior (449). We might envision examples of this paternalistic perspective in isolated instances of philanthropy, which attempt to "help" poor Black communities through private donations and career-training options and which recognize the undesirable living conditions of Black communities but in no way confronts or challenges the policies and mindsets of white supremacy and anti-Blackness that produce these conditions in the first place. Cherry acknowledges that Gruen's concept of entangled empathy includes working to imagine being in someone else's shoes from the other's perspective (and not merely one's own position), but this is not enough for Cherry. For empathetic action to occur, Cherry argues we need to care about the other and the quality of our relationship with the other. This type of caring does not immediately follow from attempting to imagine the other's position from the other's perspective (444).

In response to critics, Gruen argues that knowing a person makes it easier to empathize, but such close relationships are not necessary to imagine the perspectives of others (Gruen 2017, 453). Thus, Gruen's entanglement is an imagined entanglement (or perspective-taking process) based on the knowledge that our existence is related to others, but it is not necessarily an interpersonal investigation into or a development of those relationships. On motivation, she contends that understanding oneself as being in

relationship to others translates to understanding that one's moral agency expands by securing the well-being of others (458). Thus, although there is no automatic motivation to empathize, understanding oneself in this agential way makes one prone to engage in entangled empathy. Gruen mentions Wilderson's arguments, cited at the beginning of this article, and refutes his critique of empathy by redefining anti-Blackness as a phenomenon akin to a set of norms. Also, unlike his concept of relationality, which refers to civic relations, Gruen's concept of relationality refers to all the ways our life conditions are structured in relationship to the human and nonhuman, and thus she argues that anti-Blackness is itself a relation (Wilderson 2015, 185, 204; Gruen 2017, 461). In relationship to anti-Blackness, Gruen states that "disempowered groups are often pressed to conform to normalized mainstream social understandings" (460), but she argues that entangled empathy is not confined to these normalized understandings of the world, which require the social and physical death of Black people. She points to the insights of Black feminism to argue that "understanding on the margins happens all the time" (461). However, she does not indicate if this same "understanding" happens from center to margin.

If anti-Blackness is confined to a type of normative understanding of Black communities, then Gruen's arguments concerning empathy might hold. But anti-Blackness, as theorized by Wilderson, exceeds this. Anti-Blackness is less about Black people being forced to fit into a dominant narrative, although this occurs, than about the pervasive devaluation and deprivation of Black life, which structures all communities, resulting in the dominant narratives one tells about oneself and others. With this more expansive understanding of anti-Blackness, we might flesh out Gruen's concept of relationality, a concept she admits needs to be made more robust to rigorously account for anti-Blackness (461). If we account for the anti-Black aspects of Gruen's relationality, these components include not only dominant norms, narratives, or actions intentionally or unintentionally committed by white subjects that harm Black people and other people of color but the ways in which civic relations within our contemporary relationality are dependent on the subjection of Blackness financially, culturally, socially, and emotionally. With the way that racism is often defined—in the words of Robin DiAngelo as "discrete acts committed by [bad individuals], rather than a complex, interconnected system"—most white people do not grasp the extent of their entanglement (DiAngelo 2020, 3). Marilyn Frye's metaphor of the birdcage describes this myopic effect. If one presses one's face against a birdcage, the bars disappear from view. If one focuses one's gaze on a single wire, it would be hard to see how the entire set of wires come together to form a cage (Frye 1983, 5). If the cage symbolizes racism and the bird represents Black subjects, a non-Black person outside the cage may not understand why the bird in the cage does not fly away. Thus, although Gruen admits that her concept of relationality must account for anti-Blackness, without a sustained engagement with a study of race, anti-Blackness, and white supremacy, a non-Black person's understanding of race is likely to range from looking past the bars to looking at one or two of them, failing to blossom into racial empathy.

Gruen's inability to hear the full critique that Wilderson is making reveals the efficacy of Cherry's critique. Without fully understanding how race, specifically anti-Blackness, structures civil society, the harmful conclusion that can occur, however well-intentioned, is that anti-Blackness is merely an individual bad feeling toward or a stereotype about Black people rather than the dispositions, institutions, norms, and laws that govern and shape the material realities, perceptions, and life conditions of us all. In conclusion, it seems that the efforts of white and other non-Black people on their own

to imagine and correct their perceptions may not necessarily develop into empathetic action—a committed effort to undo anti-Blackness—since a majority of white people are unlikely to recognize or admit what they do not know about anti-Blackness, specifically how it constitutes their entanglements and sense of self.³

However, would relationships with Black communities be enough to prompt non-Black people to correct their worldviews and move toward empathetic action on a mass scale? If so, why has mass empathetic action not already occurred considering the many interracial relationships (in the form of colleagues, friendships, family members, and romantic partners) that already exist? In the next section, I take a closer look at Wilderson's critique of empathy in *intra*racial situations to see if his critique completely forecloses the possibility of empathetic action and, if not, under what conditions might it operate? I argue that the activation of empathetic feelings might direct us toward confronting the anti-Blackness within oneself. However, such a confrontation is unlikely if the would-be empathizer is resistant to admitting how anti-Blackness shapes their and others' conditions of survival.

Anti-Blackness and the Failures of Empathy: Wilderson and Hartman

Wilderson stages his critique of empathy by examining responses to Maggie Delvaux-Mufu's death, a death in which Delvaux-Mufu, a Belgium woman of Congolese origin, poured petrol on herself and lit herself on fire to protest racism in the EU. Wilderson argues that "gratuitous violence which accrues to Black people" is not an embarrassing exception to the normal functioning of civil society but a required "compulsion" that provides a world "its sense of self and peace of mind" (Wilderson 2015, 185). This required compulsion also structures how people can or cannot extend inter and intraracial empathy. He notes that in response to Delvaux-Mufu's death, white media responses called for sympathy and support not for Delvaux-Mufu or Black people but for the traumatized white viewers who vomited upon witnessing the act. Moving to Black responses, Wilderson outlines three main variations: (1) responses that inverted structural critiques of power, blaming African governments for Delvaux-Mufu's initial migration into the EU, instead of the EU itself; (2) responses that blamed Delvaux-Mufu's state of mind, framing her reaction to racism as overblown and unhinged; and, finally, (3) responses that placed Delvaux-Mufu's death into a religious framework instead of a political one. Each of these responses, similar to white liberal responses, divert reflections away from the nature of anti-Blackness. However, Wilderson notes that the position from which these two parties speak is vastly different. Black people must articulate their suffering through analogy, since this is how "interlocutory acts" work, and yet there is no analogy for the degree of Black suffering in society, and, thus, they must always speak from a compromised, fragmented position, even when Black suffering is articulated, such as in the South African play *The Colored Museum*, in which Wilderson served as a dramaturg. Wilderson calls such work "provisional" intra-African recognition that does not translate into relationality writ large (198). These works, while providing catharsis for non-Black spectators, do not necessarily direct spectators "back to a terrifying contemplation of structural power" and their role within it (198).

Saidiya Hartman voices similar critiques of empathy, which precede and are akin to Yang's concerns about straight empathy. In *Scenes of Subjection*, Hartman interrogates white "flight[s] of imagination" in the rhetoric of abolitionist John Rankin (1793–1886), who attempted to impassion those who were indifferent to slavery with detailed

depictions of Black suffering (Hartman 1997, 21). In these attempts, Hartman notices that the enslaved person both becomes a fungible repository for white feelings and imaginations and is also displaced by the would-be empathizer's own body, whereby Black suffering is only legible or believable when such suffering is either envisioned as white suffering or substantiated by white testimony (21–22). In both instances, perspective-taking in these abolitionist contexts testifies to the extent to which Black suffering cannot be seen, neither in the spectacular, which must be rendered via whiteness, nor in the mundane, which is entirely ignored.

In both Hartman's and Wilderson's cases, empathy seems wholly impossible or worse—a dangerous type of displacement. However, does that mean feelings of racial empathy and its failures to manifest into empathetic action offer us nothing? What if we agreed that, under anti-Blackness, racial empathy is always a *racialized* empathy, an empathy conditioned by and through anti-Black racism? What might racial empathy teach us through its activation and frequent failure to manifest into empathetic action? Rather than undoing anti-Blackness outright, I propose that attempts to engage in racial empathy, when aware of empathy's compromised conditions of activation, may reveal how anti-Blackness impairs the subjects' racial awareness and capacity to feel. By interrogating what emotional excursions were necessary to activate affective empathy and empathetic concern in the empathizer, feelings of racial empathy can serve as a self-reflexive tool for understanding how anti-Black entanglements compose our everyday visibility, cognition, and feelings.

The feelings that are potentially provoked within the white and non-Black empathizer during this kind of perspective-taking are not meant to reveal what Black subjects feel. Rather, the empathizer's feelings point to what the empathizer could not feel for Black people based solely on interacting with Black experiences, testimony, or scholarship: the nonactivation of affective empathy or empathetic concern in everyday life without an immersive perspective-taking exercise or experience. And, since brief encounters with racial truths can trigger emotional contagion, as in the case of Delvaux-Mufu's death, which is often met with white defensiveness, these instances could potentially facilitate self-reflective moments to consider one's own emotional fragility and intolerance to understanding race. Finally, the sudden activation of feelings of racial empathy during these exercises can point to the fears, attachments, and benefits that forestall a subsequent empathetic action, since white and non-Black subjects often refuse to undo the sense of self and well-being secured through anti-Blackness, a refusal that Lori Gallegos de Castillo calls "the psychological resistances of racism" (Gallegos de Castillo 2018).

Engaging with the Failures of Racial Empathy, or Undoing the Self

If, as in Hartman's examples, Black suffering suddenly becomes legible when non-Black people experience it either through imaginative perspective-taking or through VR perspective-taking, it becomes clear to these "empathizing" subjects the degree to which they either did not believe in, perceive, or comprehend Black suffering before engaging in this type of empathetic practice. It indicates the degrees to which anti-Blackness made these realities illegible, fragmented, or justifiable outside of these empathy exercises. Practicing empathy in these cases is not about knowing the other through one's self but about recognizing that which one could not see—namely, recognizing how Black people did not register as fully human to a white or non-Black person of color in everyday life. Empathy is not a process that helps one identify with the other,

but it helps one realize the ways the other has remained an other, by pointing to the pains one could not believe until one felt or imagined them oneself. In doing so, it does not so much bring the other closer, but it enables one to sense structures of feeling and cognition that prevented one from responding to them as one would have responded to oneself. Engaging in this framework, feelings of empathy are not about replacing the other but are about noticing and reckoning with the many ways that anti-Blackness is a consistent practice of subjection that composes one's embodied awareness.

To expand perspective-taking to empathetic concern and eventually empathetic action, the answer is not to reduce engagements with Black suffering to a type of multicultural colorblindness that claims we all suffer. That would be to flatten, consume, or displace Black subjects in the ways that Hartman and Yang critically caution us against. What one would need to do is to understand the structural mechanisms that made the other's difference and suffering an ontological status that supports white and non-Black positionality. How does Blackness become an ontological status synonymous with the slave, a status that threatens Black life chances while enhancing non-Black survival? To comprehend this would require an intake of the fears and resistances around refusing to act in service of white supremacy (Ioanide 2015, 8–9). The empathizing subject would need to assess their reluctance to move toward empathetic action—namely, all of the advantages, status, health, and other life conditions that they would not be willing to relinquish in order to dismantle anti-Blackness.

White, non-Black, and Black people must admit the costs of undoing the selves that are made to serve white supremacy and anti-Blackness. These costs are not equal. Empathetic action requires that we face the social, emotional, and financial benefits that are relinquished in this process of ending anti-Blackness. It requires admitting who pays the cost of continuing anti-Blackness, and it requires mapping out what can be gained from new civic relations that are not rooted in anti-Blackness. Then, white and non-Black subjects would be in a position to grasp and admit the dangers of increasing their survivability in an anti-Black world, which comes at the expense of Black lifeworlds.

Wilderson's critiques, while highlighting why Black suffering cannot be fully articulated, does not necessarily point to the incapacity for a variation of empathetic feelings. For example, in the case of Delvaux-Mufu's death, white bodily reactions, such as vomiting, evidence a type of acute emotional contagion. Wilderson underscores the current anti-Black impasse of empathetic feelings—the inability of emotional contagion to transition into empathetic concern or empathetic action. However, even at this impasse, actions can still be taken to confront one's own anti-Blackness. When empathetic feelings arise, they can become a cue to empathizers to diagnose the cause of their new-found empathetic feelings (for example, not believing Black testimony; not admitting that Black people could experience harm; not assuming Black lives mattered enough to understand Black life conditions). In line with Wilderson's critiques, empathizers can also assess whether their empathetic feelings engendered actions that would return the empathizer to a place of comfort (for example, isolated instances of philanthropy not connected to larger political actions; pointing out anti-Blackness in others but not in oneself) or if their empathetic feelings impelled them to understand and undo the ways in which non-Black existence is founded on anti-Blackness. If our engagements with racial empathy point us toward a contemplation of structural power, we would be poised to reckon with how anti-Blackness composed our sense of self. If it pointed us back to the same civic relations, where we felt a sense of empowerment, self-

righteousness, or even connection despite anti-Black civil relationships remaining as they are, we might question whether our empathy was merely an emotional excursion. If our empathy leads us back to the same civic relations rather than undoing them, one can ask: What understandings of anti-Blackness am I missing? Or if white and other dominant subjects refuse to relinquish the benefits, hierarchies, and sense of self produced through anti-Blackness, they can begin to turn toward their own emotional attachments to the social relations of anti-Blackness and the sense of security, status, identity, or pleasure that these relations afford them.

Engaging with the failures of racial empathy does not restore Black subjects to relationality writ large, but it can prepare the empathizer to assess the conditions within themselves that stand in the way of addressing anti-Blackness. Feelings of racial empathy are not the actions of racial justice, but their activation might shed light on our relationship to racial justice and how unprepared we might be for it. Feelings of racial empathy are productive in their limitations and failures if they direct one to contemplate: How have I been conditioned in our racialized society to direct my emotional gaze, loyalties, and aspirations in anti-Black ways? What could I not feel or perceive in a situation until I inserted whiteness or non-Blackness into a situation? How does my attachment to my sense of security and way of life prevent me from taking empathetic action? In this way, racial empathy is not what one does for others, it is what one does to undo oneself. Feelings of racial empathy are not an end goal but can serve as a node in one's ongoing interrogation of how anti-Blackness has informed one's life-world, one's sense of self, and one's capacity to relate to and see oneself and others.

It is important to note that this essay has limited its discussion of racial empathy to the activation of feelings of empathy and a subsequent failure of those feelings to mature into empathetic action. We could, of course, imagine past and present instances in which anti-Blackness is so pervasive that not only is empathetic action foreclosed, but no feelings of racial empathy ever emerge in a subject, neither emotional contagion nor empathetic concern. For example, this greater failure of racial empathy can be readily observed in historic photos that depict white audiences grinning at the scenes of public lynchings. This nonactivation of empathy can also be witnessed in recorded instances of law enforcement officers, irrespective of racial identity, who appear to enthusiastically engage in the assault of Black people. In these cases, racial empathy fails not because of its delayed activation that required a formal perspective-taking excursion nor because of how its activation stops short of empathetic action, but, in these cases, racial empathy fails because no feelings of empathy ever occur.

I have also limited myself to theorizing what can be done with empathetic feelings—namely, a type of acute self-interrogation, but I have not theorized what would prompt that to happen or who might be capable of such a process. As we have seen with the examples of Benjamin and Yang who point out how empathetic feelings can be used as entertainment, empathy-inducing technologies do not inherently produce self-reflection. This essay does not aim to propose a new deterministic use of racial empathy, in which I map out how empathetic action can be automatically induced in a would-be empathizer when they experience a particular emotional excursion. Rather, I have tried to theorize how anti-Blackness both produces an activation of racial empathy while also forestalling empathetic action. I have also offered ways to feel through one's own anti-Blackness and suggested instances to confront one's own anti-Black attachments and modes of survival. I conclude with an invitation to imagine how one can build economic, political, and psychological structures that no longer secure white and non-Black survival through the subordination of Blackness.

In short, if depictions of Black suffering, for Wilderson, “reek of the piecemeal and the provisional” when they do not direct us toward interrogating structural power, then the antiracist fronts we can move toward question why such reckoning with structural power is foreclosed, tracking all the ways that subjects manage to cohere and thrive under such a system of anti-Blackness, materially and emotionally. Engaging in racial empathy does not in and of itself undo the civic relations of anti-Blackness. Again, racial empathy is not a replacement for dismantling one’s support of and complicity with anti-Blackness. If it inoculates the empathizer from feeling responsible to engage in further antiracist work, it is not a self-reflexive or antiracist contemplation of empathetic feelings. Rather, by engaging with the failures of racial empathy, I submit that simply watching Black suffering is not enough to provoke empathetic action and, at times, even empathetic feelings. As Hartman and Wilderson point out, rarely can such suffering properly come into unfragmented view.

However, engagements with perspective-taking experiences and empathy technologies, such as Cogburn’s “1,000 Cut Journey” that opened this piece, may offer the opportunity to nurture a discomfort with the dominant narratives about the selves composed within an anti-Black world—not by merely engaging in these activities but by actively giving an account of the fears and blind spots that such engagements point to and open up. This discomfort may drive us away from racial justice, making us reinscribe Blackness into anti-Black and white-supremacist modes of perception. Or this discomfort may impel us to seek to undo our antagonistic modes of survival, civic relations, and sense of self, divesting them from the psychic norms and political institutions of anti-Blackness.

Notes

- 1 For this article, I examine racial empathy in the context of anti-Blackness, but I acknowledge that multiple forms of racialization exist, and, thus, there are multiple ways of conceiving how interracial and intraracial empathetic action do (not) manifest in response to other types of racial injustice.
- 2 For more scholarship that focuses on the moral process and potential of empathy as perspective-taking, see Coplan 2014; Emerick 2016; and Bailey 2020.
- 3 Barrett Emerick points out that we cannot correct our moral blind spots on our own, and argues that empathy, conducted within a larger moral community, can overcome “testimonial injustice” (the devaluation of testimony given by the oppressed) and correct one’s moral perception (Emerick 2016). I agree with Emerick that we often do not readily correct our moral perception on our own. However, considering Wilderson’s arguments, I contend that empathy, self-reflection, and empathetic action are all distinct processes that do not automatically lead to one another. Considering how we are all conditioned within the context of anti-Blackness in the ways that Wilderson mentions (a context that positions Black people outside of the realm of civic relationality), Black suffering cannot (always) come into unfragmented view. Even when Black suffering becomes visible, at times and in pieces, the attachments and sense of self developed under anti-Blackness can still become an obstacle to empathetic action.

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