
Response to Presidential Address

BEARING WITNESS TO THE SUPERHERO:
AN EVERYDAY EMPATHY AND SOME INTEREST CONVERGENCE

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In “Becoming a Superhero,” Stacy Otto argues for the larger significance of “everyday people rendered extraordinary,” like Ieshia Evans. I now render a white man’s response to a white woman’s paper to try to bear witness to everyday superheroes. I draw from things I’ve studied, others I’ve not, and others I was drawn to by virtue of reading and re-reading Stacy’s paper. Stacy can tell us if we are also supposed to become superheroes or educate kids to become superheroes, but at this moment, it seems important to bear witness.

Information about Ieshia Evans was just emerging before the conference. A series of time lapse photos of the arrest of Ieshia Evans on July 10, 2016, from Reuters photographer Jonathan Bachman helped me to pull together some questions and provocations for Otto. The photos also helped me to appreciate Otto’s point. This response expands on that appreciation and then attends to the concepts of empathy and interest convergence.

ICONIC IESHIA

According to a report, Iesha had just been told by bullhorn three times to move from the three-lane highway. The time-lapse photos suggest that the arrest was quite quick.¹ In the iconic photo, Evans’ right arm is at her waist, and her left arm is reaching out as if blessing the officers. In the time-lapse we see why. Before the officers approach, she stands hugging herself with both hands. Her right hand is holding her phone to her body, and her left arm, holding what appear to be keys, is reaching out to accept the officer’s outstretched arm. As the two officers approach, she is standing firm, but resists not at all. She puts both her arms down. They turn, join arms with her, and she begins walking with them. They are in perfect rhythm together and move out of the shot. We don’t know how fast, but the time-lapse makes it seem fast and flawless. In the time-lapse photos, it almost looks like they are rescuing her, although it is clear they are not. A few weeks later, horrible floods ravaged the Baton Rouge area, and differently-attired officers might have performed a similar action.

Evans was misidentified at first, and shortly after the incident, once she was identified correctly, she asked via Twitter that her friends and acquaintances decline interviews. She said she wanted to tell her story. We learn from the various sources, including an interview on July 15 on *CBS This Morning*, why

¹ Katie Reilly, “Watch Iconic Protester Ieshia Evans Get Arrested in Baton Rouge,” *Time*, July 12, 2016, <http://time.com/4403440/baton-rouge-protest-photo-ieshia-evans/>.

this 28-year-old Pennsylvania mother was in Baton Rouge. She said she felt like a bystander before, going about her daily life—mothering, earning a living—each time police violence ended the life of another black man, woman, or child.² This was her first protest and her first arrest. Seeing video of Alton Sterling and Philando Castile, who were killed in rapid succession by police, made her numb. “We don’t have to beg to matter,” she told CBS News. She said, “I wasn’t afraid.” But also, “I was not brave.” “I took a stand.” “I am a vessel.” She felt she had been chosen by God, that a job had been given to her.

In the overabundance of video images, two iconic photos of black women appeared in 2016. Ieshia Evans, like Tess Asplund before her, appeared as a black female superhero.³ Like Ruby Bridges, Rosa Parks, and Mamie Till, Evans and Asplund performed actions that led to imagery that powerfully entered public consciousness. It was not their art, but imagery of specific actions or results of their actions, quite often but not always or always acknowledged to be captured by a white photographer, and certainly captured by a white imaginary. Mamie Till insisted on an open-casket funeral for her son Emmet. Ruby Bridges infuriated her tormentors on the steps of her elementary school while praying for their forgiveness.

Also available for consumption are the trolling comments on articles about Evans, which exhibit the typical progression of trolling behavior—the comments start by shredding or heroicizing the subject of the story, then move to shredding others, some mentioned in the article, some not, a few people malign the character of Philando Castile’s girlfriend, then the commenters start turning on each other. The theme of most of the shredding comments toward Evans is that she isn’t special, apparently the most damning underlying message that can be currently conveyed via social media. (The message seems to be that she’s not worthy of a post, which the commentator nevertheless just read and then took time to comment on.)

In Otto’s work, however, the charge of not being special may be the most praiseworthy, because it’s in the ordinary, everyday that Otto locates the superheroinic. She is also arguing that the individuality of moments of empathy spur and maintain progress.

Otto is arguing, I believe, for a superhero that is ordinary, that is characterized by simplicity. From there, Otto goes conceptually to empathy and what it inspires. The central sentences in her address are these: “I suggest that recognizing the benefits of outsider-ness and certain perils of belonging allow us

² CBS News, “Woman in Baton Rouge Protest Photo: ‘Silence Speaks Volumes,’” July 15, 2016, <http://www.cbsnews.com/news/ieshia-evans-woman-iconic-baton-rouge-police-protests-photo-speaks-out/>.

³ In David Lagerlöf’s photo, Tess Asplund is shown protesting a neo-Nazi march in Börlänge, Sweden. See David Crouch, “Woman Who Defied 300 Neo-Nazis at Swedish Rally Speaks of Anger,” *The Guardian*, May 4, 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/may/04/woman-defied-neo-nazis-sweden-tess-asplund-viral-photograph>.

to look beyond these superheroes’ bravery and vulnerability to understand how social movements gain strength and succeed.” She then offers “a different way of looking at the strength offered by obscurity,” and a key claim later on is this: “we have long been coöpted by the notion that a successful movement gains strength from numbers, . . . yet the victories of social movements . . . have always stemmed from individual stories and the empathy they evoke: individual empathy that has often turned to public outcry.”

The argument here is against the inordinate significance granted to coalitions of interests, adding attention to individual, symbolic moves that generate empathy (and public outcry). The empathy is there already with those with common contextual experience. #BlackLivesMatter wouldn’t exist without that. Public outcry, specifically from whites bearing witness, comes from instances of these iconic photos. I would argue the outcry is partly from empathy, and partly from interest convergence.

EMPATHY AND CONVERGENCE

We might get some traction here by thinking of the individual and collective together. Two places to go are, first, the discourse about “empathy” as problematic psychologically and ethically, and second, what critical race theory has to say about interest convergence.

The problems with empathy as a concept have intrigued me in various contexts of their use in philosophy of education and educational research.⁴ Basically, the psychologists have ruined the concept of empathy by framing it as a psychologically impossible and philosophically implausible idea that empathy is the experience of feeling what someone else is feeling. It’s not defined that starkly, of course, but I am exaggerating to make a point about the problems of empathy. Projection and privilege are two important ones, summarized by the blunt response of “No you don’t, asshole” to the “I know just how you feel” claim so often made by the well-meaning empathizer. This is the psychologically and philosophically correct response, especially if the claim to know cuts across differential positionalities. A related question makes its way into the child development literature on empathy: at what age is a child cognitively capable of distinguishing self from other sufficiently for an emotional response to an emotional response to count as “empathy”?

The philosophical problem follows. If empathy is as they say, then this is based on a theory of distinction between self and other and what it means for them to be in relation. This gap between self and other is something to theorize. Sharon Todd did compelling work using Levinas to theorize this gap and redefine

⁴ Michael G. Gunzenhauser, “From Empathy to Creative Intersubjectivity in Qualitative Research,” in *Qualitative Research: A Reader in Philosophy, Core Concepts, and Practice*, ed. Barbara Dennis, Lucinda Carspecken, and Phil Francis Carspecken (New York: Peter Lang, 2013), 57–74.

empathy.⁵ Promising is pursuing intersubjectivity, with Eva Johansson looking at empathy for children as a phenomenon of interaction, so that the self-other gap need not dominate.⁶

The conceptual problem with empathy that's really relevant here is presumption of understanding that leads to subsequent action. Empathy can lead to action but what action? We might be mindful of Derek Bell's point about progress occurring in racial justice only and always when there is interest convergence. Interest convergence takes over. The legal thesis: "Black rights are recognized and protected when and only so long as policymakers perceive that such advances will further interests that are their primary concern."⁷

That's not to deride empathy. Empathy is important but it's unreliable. Empathy that leads to someone's understanding of their implication in injustice is powerful. Mamie Till's superhero moment is the open casket, leading to the iconic photo of her son's body being published worldwide. As Bell suggests, it was one of many openings for the Civil Rights Movement, along with the Freedom Rides, the Montgomery bus boycott, Selma, and Birmingham, sites for continual actions that kept openings open. These are the Foucauldian ruptures Otto refers to, the Maxine Greene awakening imagination moments.

The need for breaking through is evident in Otto's discussion of *New York Times* columnist Russ Douthat's naming of "elite tribalism," which he argues is a more accurate depiction of the philosophy guiding the liberal elite, who would lay claim to a more pluralistic cosmopolitanism. While the coherence of Douthat's idea of "elite tribalism" sounds untenable to me (his target audience seems to be the upper-middle-class Manhattan elite that he would know well), there is an important underlying point about the lack of empathy built into elite tribalism. There's no community in a group self-satisfied with its superiority, only enclave. Otto turns to Virginia Woolf and Michel Foucault to explain what's at stake with elite tribalism: in the "huge normalizing carceral machine," vagabondage disavows our bondage to "comfort, security, belonging, tribe, nation, coterie." It wears us all out, exhausting us from the pursuit and maintenance of comfort.

As Otto helps us to see, there is ordinariness in indiscipline. Evans's superhero moment is certainly the arrest as captured in the photo. But it's also the decision to leave Scranton for Baton Rouge, her decision to act as an outsider. She is also an outsider to Russ Douthat's cosmopolitans—what Otto might call the neoliberal cosmopolitans, who consume world citizenship as a superior identity, losing sense of their implication in injustice.

⁵ Sharon Todd, *Learning from the Other: Levinas, Psychoanalysis, and Ethical Possibilities in Education* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2003), 43–63.

⁶ Eva Johansson, "Empathy as Intersubjectivity? Understanding the Origins of Morality in Young Children," *Studies in Philosophy and Education* 27, no. 1 (2007): 33–47.

⁷ Derek Bell, *Silent Covenants: Brown v. Board of Education and the Unfulfilled Hopes for Racial Reform* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2004), 49.

As an alternative, might Otto be putting forth something riskier, something like “deep empathy”—an empathy that doesn’t collapse the other into sameness (as Todd warns us against), but instead implicates us, demands action that speaks to our connection to the perpetuation of violence? The neoliberal subject, the member of the elite tribe, is safe from the violence that perpetuates its elite status. It is safe from implication, so perhaps deep empathy is where we must go. I recognize how hard it is for an iconic photo to lead to implication. The photo of the Syrian toddler on the beach engenders immediate empathy in me. The child’s skin tone, hair color, size, clothing, gender, resting position evoke my younger son. I have bodily experience of reaching down and picking up an identical child (it was not long ago my son was that small). Implication is clearer for a European, less for a more distant and less-informed American. Empathy certainly motivates the American to become more informed, but the implication is vaguer to ascertain. Remembering the lesson of interest convergence may provide some help. White supremacy is motivated to protect its privilege. Evans has raised ire of those more inclined to empathize with the police. Evans and the attention she receives raises ire with those who are starting to feel their implication in injustice, *and they don’t want to feel implicated*.

The ordinary superhero has implication for educational practice as well. In her work in social studies education, Ashley Woodson has looked at master narratives about the Civil Rights Movement, how they’re taught in schools, portrayed in textbooks, and conveyed to urban black high school students.⁸ Woodson argues that the students themselves are learning several troubling things from these narratives, which paradoxically downplay and reinforce white supremacy. Racism is positioned as isolated to bad whites; racism is positioned as non-existent; and, most relevantly for what we’re talking about right now, the struggle against racism is understood as over, having been fought by heroes through heroic effort at a time when the black community was of one mind, well-organized, well-led, and had the support of good white people. Woodson argues that this way of teaching continues to do the work of white supremacy. It robs urban youth not only of their civic agency, but also a sense of civic agency that is remotely accessible to them. Importantly, it also defines away or apart from civic agency work that the youth are already doing, or starting to do.

Reflecting on the conference theme crafted by Otto, “Reclaiming Education from the Menacing Neoliberal Beast,” we are truly in divided times. Neoliberalism would have us looking out for ourselves and those most like us. Otto reminds us to enact empathy, not as a way to reduce the other into ourselves,⁹ but to realize what more it is we have to learn from the ordinary superheroes.

⁸ Ashley N. Woodson, “We’re Just Ordinary People: Messianic Master Narratives and Black Youths’ Civic Agency,” *Theory and Research in Social Education* 44, no. 2 (2016): 184–211.

⁹ Todd, *Learning from the Other*, 51.
