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"Regarding the Pain of Others": Urban Geography after Empathy

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Abstract

While urban geography has made significant contributions to mainstreaming disruptive thinking through its invocation of justice, less discussed is what good must our descriptions do especially when they pertain to others' suffering. This essay addresses the ethics of practicing social inquiry by drawing two thematic lessons: painful clarity and the appropriation of space. Centering the importance of painful clarity reflects on the relational politics of plural claims-making, the ongoingness of which helps us focus not only on our everyday complicity in others' struggles but also on what can be done here and now. The appropriation of space highlights the role of spatial milieu as a medium through which structural constraints and political agency can be situated in a specific time and place, enabling forms of social inquiries that are instrumental and operative. I conclude by suggesting three considerations that could help bridge the separation between knowledge and action.

Keywords

Ethics of social inquiry, social justice, relational politics, pragmatism, public geography, geography education

Introduction

In *Tough Enough*, Deborah Nelson (2017) writes about a set of six women writers in the first half of the twentieth century, focusing on their practical response to the writers' dilemma: what good should an aesthetic practice do after empathy? What, after all, is the purpose of our writing? The definition of "aesthetic" in Nelson's usage is different from what is conventionally thought. Following Susan Sontag, aesthetic is not "a question of beauty but … a question of knowledge—that is, knowledge through the senses" (Nelson, 2017, p. 120). Similarly, for Joan Didion, "bad style, or indifference to style, is not a question of beauty but a logical extension of the politics and morality of writing well (when) bad style permits a refusal to deal with painful reality" (ibid., p. 159).

I broadly understand "style" here as an "aesthetic practice" in which choosing our practices of thinking, writing, and producing knowledge presents an ethical challenge. The challenge to which I refer is captured in Sontag's (2003, p. 91) questions regarding the photographic display of others' suffering: "What is the point of exhibiting these pictures? To awaken indignation? To make us feel 'bad'; that is, to appall and sadden? To help us mourn? … Are we the better for seeing these images? Do they actually teach us anything? Don't they rather just confirm what we already know (or want to know)?" Replace photographic pictures with geographic descriptions and it becomes relevant for geographers to consider what work is done by our practice of making knowledge, with and beyond producing representations that evoke empathy.[1]

Questioning whether the certainty of our representations automatically reassures the materialization of "a better future", Robert Lake (2020, p. 272) speaks of the conundrum in today's geography scholarship. Whether due to a consolatory preoccupation with "objective" truth or the unreflective adoption of a foundational moral framework, academic writers in the disciplines of urban geography and planning often fail to engage with the question of how to move from knowledge to action—abdicating their political responsibility to prevent harm or foster betterment in a specific time and place (Lake, 2017, p. 1213).

The purpose of this intervention is therefore to extend this line of thought in expanding the possible trajectories of doing urban geography. Through drawing two thematical lessons focusing on painful clarity and the appropriation of space—I seek to provide concrete meditations on the ethics of knowledge production in human geography, urban studies, and adjacent fields of study. Inspired by the pragmatist tradition (e.g., Livingston, 2001), I consider these two themes in a transactional relationship with one another, in which urban geography's engagement with vibrant materialities can make a significant contribution in detailing how diverse spatial milieus become the medium linking structural constraints and political agency. I conclude by arguing that our role as educators and fellow social inquirers reminds us of the fact that academics are both the narrators and characters of a living tale; such recognition "will let us narrate without closure, without removing ourselves from the scene of events" (Livingston, 2001, p. 44). As active participants of cultural politics, the purpose of our "research" is to produce knowledge for, in, and of action. With a renewed focus on empirical richness and the complexity of moral

dilemmas, the process of doing and communicating our research with diverse publics can become a part of democratic moral inquiry toward a better future (Lake, 2014; Narayan and Rosenman, 2022).

Painful clarity

According to Nelson (2017), the thematical importance of "painful clarity" is well articulated in the works of Simone Weil, an engaged philosopher who worked in factories and actively participated in urban social movements. Disillusioned by the inchoate future proffered by putative revolutions, Weil instead decided to accept tragedy as the main genre of life, asking her readers to stay with afflictions (*malheur*) in the world rather than acting like they didn't or shouldn't exist. According to Weil, tragedy—as exemplified by King Lear or The Iliad—reflects the truth of life in its bare form, in which injustice ("gravity") is the norm and justice ("grace") is an exception (Weil, 2002[1947]). Her focus on affliction has a profound effect on the supposed timeline of social and political action. By restoring a tragic sensibility, and through the tactile experience of enduring pain, we get to stay in the present, paying attention to our own social complicity in the suffering of others instead of drifting off to an imaginative future where someone or some event will magically provide the final resolution.

In this context, the contribution of geographical work distills down to understanding specific conditions in which injustice arises, where relational politics of plural claims-making turns our attention to the everyday dilemmas faced by an acting agent. In his essay 'Geography and the Priority of Injustice', Barnett (2018) discusses how narratives in the geography discipline have been overtaken by "dogmas of egalitarianism" in which "injustice" is conceptually predetermined rather than empirically explored. The alternative that Barnett (2018) presents in response would be to focus on the empirical richness of injustice, where myriads of different claims (e.g., to rights or of freedom) remain active in sustaining or refuting the existing sociopolitical structures. Prioritizing injustice practically and conceptually is different from the practice of monopolistic "sensing" of injustice gaining an automatic moral authority through intellectualization. A sense of injustice, instead, must be considered as "arising from and being processed through intersubjectively meditated, shared inquiry" (ibid., p. 324), such that registering injustice is, ultimately, a public, and therefore a political, undertaking.

Clarifying the relationality of power dynamics in specific instances of claims-making, examining whether and how such claims are socially justified, and finally, illuminating how foundational[2] assumptions and logics permeate our everyday lives in ways that render us complicit in others' suffering can offer new insights that bear practical considerations for action. This is because clarifying the socio-material processes (e.g., of market expansion) in a specific time and place (Massey, 2005)—looking at the actors as well as their diverse private and public motivations enabling commodity fictions (Ghertner and Lake, 2021), for example—can highlight how the unfolding of this social drama is historically contingent and therefore always subject to new appropriations and different outcomes. To accept tragedy as the main genre of life is precisely to stay in the present in order to discern what can be done here and now, recognizing that the story has not ended yet and outcomes depend on whom you ask. To concretize this argument, I draw in the following section from an urban geography literature that demonstrates how spatial milieu offers an active site for mediating difficult moral dilemmas in which, from an agent-centered perspective, outcomes are always in the process of contestation and negotiation.

Appropriation of space

Continuing the train of thought above, this section zeroes in on how "space" can act as an ongoing medium linking structural constraints and political agency. Weber's (2022) multi-scalar analysis of Tax Increment Financing (TIF) reveals how seemingly value-neutral assumptions behind the budgeting rationales driving urban development projects—more precisely, the discount rates applied to convert future cash flows into the present monetary value (in order to numerically represent the time value of money)—give rise to predictable spatial outcomes that are not so ethically neutral after all. Low discount rates, often justified under practical or ideological arguments, set the stage for the conditions in which Chicago's property-based economy takes over its declining production-based economy, accelerating the capitalization of the rent gap, spatial inequality, and displacement. When such operating mechanisms representing the time value of money are unreflectively normalized, they remain unjustified, despite the fact that their material consequences would be subject to a social debate. The assumptions behind the choice of discount rates are pre-prescribed by the appraisal experts and are accepted without question as "the industry norm."

Here, the moral constraints of the capitalist economic system are "structural" in so far as there are enough subscribers to the foundational assumptions when the calculative logics of the time value of money are infiltrated into and deeply embedded within the everyday practices of regular actors such as government planners, property developers, and real estate appraisers. Further, behind the flourishing of a property economy there exist not only the usual profit-maximizing developers but also ordinary households developing a vested interest in financial market performance (e.g., diverting their savings to securities, pursuing defined benefit pension plans, passively or actively being subject to "asset-based" welfare programs) constituting the socialization of finance (see also Rosenman, 2019; Potts, 2020). Beyond moral outrage, Weber's writing draws attention to the specificity of the conditions in which concrete, however minute, details of foundational claims color the structures of injustice within the social complicity of everyday life.

What I see as the point of detailing the material processes (e.g., of the rise of a real estate economy, normalization of landed property and commodification)—particularly through an *agent-centered* perspective (Anderson, 1995)—is to specifically highlight how the moral conflict between private self (e.g., taking care of household interests) and social self (e.g., considering socially aggregated consequences) remains an ongoing process, and, in that process, how space can be appropriated in effecting a particular value program in a specific time and place. Weber's engagement with developers and planners pays specific attention to how the relational politics of divergent social or ideological motivations produce uneven development. As Weber put it: "the power of property value projections lies not in their ability to accurately represent the future, but in their ability to enroll and satisfy other stakeholders" (Weber, 2022, p. 511). Here, the role of material space and its contingency in enabling (or giving legitimacy to) certain relations over others becomes clear. Because "trust" is one of the mechanisms through which the most mundane value projections get physically validated in space (e.g., approval of a building project), open dialogues on the relationship between a specific urban development and individual pension investment returns or the interpersonal meanings of "land" (or situated sociomaterial surrounds) sacrificed at the expense of public legibility can reveal the "personally political" contestations of value claims implicated in land commodification processes.

Similarly, Wolf-Powers' (2022) *University City: History, Race, and Community in the Era of the Innovation District* is subversively provocative not only in its revelations of how structural racism has proliferated (and still proliferates) under "progressive" university-led urban redevelopment, but also in its invitation for readers to consider the moral dilemmas of "doing good" in practice. Considering the "paradoxes of self-help" (p. 73), Wolf-Powers discusses how resident-driven self-determination and collective will for progressive change are met with the realities of financial and managerial instabilities. Despite generating bottom-up resistance against top-down planning, grass-roots leaders were accused of selling out by more radical movements as they cooperated with universities for practical gains such as jobs and engagement opportunities for neighborhood youths.

Wolf-Powers relates similar stories of community action—a mix of compromise, experimentation, and political risk-taking through which real physical changes were able to materialize—when discussing Community Benefits Agreements that acted often only as a mitigation strategy temporarily guarding off the worst-case scenario (see also Berglund and Butler, 2023). It is important to be clear-eyed about what seems to be the end result of these negotiations when the default consequences are the community initiatives being run over by the structures of state capitalism, institutional racism, and the myths of bootstrapping, and Wolf-Powers is never shy about the bitterness of this diagnosis. But that "final" outcome itself does not annihilate the history of how some people genuinely cared about their community and tried to make a difference, and that process of experimentation, in the long term, becomes a building block of collective learning, dissemination of new ideas, and finally, tangible changes in social discourse, culture, and policy narratives. Because even when the grass-roots organizations "failed" in gaining the subversive politics that they sought, the generations that benefited from their less radical efforts—attracting investments to youth education and employment—continued their legacy and spirit amidst similar struggles in the coming decades. *University City* therefore ends on a rather optimistic note, particularly with regard to the power of discourse and its penetrating effect on policy debates. As the concept of a reparative approach to spatial planning, responding to "cumulative social harm, addressing the legacy effects of dispossession and asset stripping" (p. 186), enters into academic discourse and public debates, it is possible to render specific policy actions—e.g., those that address the structural roots of poverty, joblessness, and marginalization—as "common sense". Activist planners, scholars, commentators, journalists, and ordinary publics together constitute the everyday arenas of conversation that challenge mainstream value

logics and social norms, and the physical materiality of space then becomes a living site of contestation, mediation, and negotiation across plural value ontologies (Lake, 2023).

Urban geography after 'research': a transitionalist approach

I have focused on these two themes—painful clarity and the appropriation of space—to demonstrate how empirical concreteness works to favor social inquiries that are instrumental and operative rather than monopolistic or merely contemplative (Lake, 2014; 2017). There remains a broader concern, however, regarding whether and how a "better" style or aesthetic practice (necessarily) generate better moral outcomes. How might academics contribute to narrowing the gap between knowledge production and social action, and how might the ethics of pursuing the painful clarity of empirical concreteness in our research advance such a contribution? My argument is that academics can play a role in blurring the duality between knowledge and action by consciously engaging with the temporal dimension of our practice as writers, inquirers, teachers, or more generally, active participants of cultural politics in-the-making. When history is understood as the temporal dimension of spatial appropriation, time and space no longer comprise a passive background but engender a living storyline that mobilizes new assemblages of actors, new spatial materialities, and new moral outcomes (Koopman, 2013). The question of how this can be possible then lies at the heart of linking knowledge production and social action.

I propose two possible avenues of doing so, and offer examples from the literature that illustrate this dynamic. First is a transitionalist approach to historical geographies, demonstrating how the material specificities of socioenvironmental surrounds can be reassembled and re-narrated in a way that helps us imagine a better future. A second and related strategy considers the cultural politics of subjectivity formation as a serious and powerful ground in which academics actively participate in the process of its unfolding, where our writing practices are in a continuous engagement with diverse social actions happening on the ground.

Concerning a transitionalist approach to history, I learn from freedom geographies. If Weil (2002[1947]), drawing from her experience as a fellow worker, often equated factory

life with slavery in which a human being becomes a "thing"—one's soul pulverized by labor to the point where she is unable to think—Saidiya Hartman's (1997) *Scenes of Subjection* details a more complex narrative of the lives of the enslaved and the mixed legacy of emancipation. "Rather than trying to convey the routinized violence of slavery and its aftermath through invocations of the shocking and the terrible," Hartman writes, "I have chosen to look elsewhere and consider those scenes in which terror can hardly be discerned—slaves dancing in the quarters, the outrageous darky antics of the minstrel stage, the constitution of humanity in slave law, and the fashioning of the self-possessed individual" (ibid., p. 4).

What's particularly distinctive in her re-narration of nineteenth century American history is a focus on the repurposing of material space in which the agency of the enslaved, despite being severely constrained by structural violence, manages to leak out in the unprecedented specificities of particular times and places. Still possible in the scenes of subjection was a *refashioning* of permitted pleasures (holidays, songs, dance) as well as an array of performative tactics in an effort to "undermine, transform, and redress the condition of enslavement" (p. 51). One of the most noticeable examples that highlight the importance of spatial appropriation in these practices is that of "stealing away" (ibid., p. 65):

> When the enslaved slipped away to have secret meetings, they would call it "stealing the meeting", as if to highlight the appropriation of space and the expropriation of the object of property necessary to make these meetings possible. Just as runaway slaves were described as "stealing themselves", so, too, even short-lived flights from captivity were referred to as "stealing away". "Stealing away" designated a wide range of activities, from praise meetings, quilting parties, and dances to illicit visits with lovers and family on neighboring plantations.

The role of material surrounds is critical here, since meetings and related practices organized in a specific time and place signal a temporary rupture in the spatial organization of domination. This thesis is equally explored in urban contexts by Hartman (2019)'s later work, *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments*. Set at the turn of the twentieth century, Hartman documents how young Black women rushed to New York to escape the plantation: "The communal luxury of the black metropolis, the wealth of *just us,* the black-city-within-the-city, transforms the imagination of what you might want and who you might be,

encouraging you to dream. … This collective endeavor to live free unfolds in the confines of the carceral landscape" (ibid., p. 39).

Hartman's focus on spatial materialities of history—reassembled from the perspective of the acting agent and her everyday practice of freedom—effectively challenges the conventional portrait of those in pain as devoid of movement or action, a point elaborated extensively by Black geographies (McKittrick and Woods, 2007; McKittrick, 2011; Simone, 2018; Wright, 2020). These narratives move beyond the mere celebration or romanticization of performative resistance by highlighting how the fungibility and plasticity of the practices of Black lives were repetitively reconfigured in relation to the continuous exposure to extreme violence. Here, agency is discussed as a constituent in the wider dynamics of social relations, rather than a distinctive consolidation of will, identity, or autonomy.[3]

This transitionalist approach to history, demonstrating how the material specificities of the past can be rewoven in a way that helps us imagine a better future, shifts our attention from the passivity of terror to the centrality of practice. In "No 'Blank Canvas': Public Art and Gentrification in Houston's Third Ward", Wright and Herman (2018) elaborate on the strategies of Black artistry resisting gentrification, especially via temporary performances of occupying space. The violence of state capitalism is exhibited in the "renovation" of Emancipation Park in the Third Ward, a historically African American community, where a space that used to embody "Black habitus"—where Black youth played basketball, family gatherings were improvised, transient populations found a place for a night's rest—was upended as new development interests flooded in. Amidst these realities, however, the phenomenology of Black artists' "site specific, disruptive, and yet mobile performances" (ibid., p. 98) effectively challenged the linear process of gentrification and market domination. For instance, MF Problem, a duo of local artists, led temporary performances such as Mobile Block Party or Sunday Social, a gathering on an abandoned lot, expanding spatial imaginations of what a "dangerous corner" could become. The Black Guys, another duo of artists, occupied a local bus stop from 10:00 a.m. to 10:00 p.m., staging a performance called 24 Hrs, again challenging preconceived notions of the site as "undesirable". These performances generate new publics and movements through their ongoing interaction with contingent surrounds. As Wright and Herman (2018) put it: "These performances, and *the publics* that accompany them, create Black geographies" (p. 106, emphasis added).

These works invoke the temporal dimension of the writing act, when the line between "producing knowledge" and "social action" becomes ambiguous since the very act of re-narrating history is specifically designed to inform practices toward a better future, delineating agency and political possibility without disregarding the painful reality in which such action finds itself.

Speaking directly to our everyday practice as living characters within contemporary cultural politics, Sara Safransky's (2023) *The City After Property: Abandonment and Repair in Postindustrial Detroit* details the ongoing formation of diverse publics and their subjectivities in a specific time and place, in which the writer herself is a "learning participant". Here "research", in its process of unfolding, involves engaging with heterogenous groups and actors, constituting an act of interhuman meaning-making in and of itself. From this temporally conscious perspective, Safransky's dialogues with residents, grassroot activists, faith-based communities, local shop owners, city government planners, county officials, nonprofits, neighborhood associations, philanthropies—i.e., a network of plural actors trying to reimagine their relationship with land in the face of political abandonment and austerity—are a part of "social action", in the sense that these encounters and conversations are creating crevices of new interpretations, not only of Detroit but also of the foundational assumptions behind landed property. As Safransky (2023, p. 98) puts it:

> When you begin naming something, it changes the way you see the world. Given this, it is important but insufficient to just name the mechanisms— conceptual and material—that need to be abolished to realize more just socio-ecological property relations. It is also critical to name and chart the values, practices, ideas, and traditions that support the work of democratic reconstruction.

And, she continues,

> In our Uniting Detroiters project interviews, land control emerged as a major area of concern. Participants' reflections on their personal relationships to land and practices of community stewardship revealed a shared set of political and moral commitments in relationship to land—a land ethic, if you will, that was at once deeply historical and emerged from communities of practice. The existence of such a land ethic suggests some lines along which a decommodified property praxis may be nurtured.

Situating our research practice as a part of the larger culture in the making—embracing pragmatism's insight that "we are both the narrators and characters of a living tale" (Livingston, 2001, p. 44)—helps us reflect on our role not merely as passive describers of what's happening but as active participants in shifting the mood of our society (see also Narayan and Rosenman, 2022). What we communicate with others in the process of research—as colleagues, activists, educators, inquirers, and fellow residents—belongs to a wider sociocultural arena, as much as diverse social actions happening on the ground stir our own motivation to re-narrate histories of the living present.

Concluding thoughts

After peer reviews and publication, whom exactly do we imagine reading our papers? Our immediate public audience is undeniably university students (Ward, 2006), who are as concerned about their vocational prospects as they are about the contradictions and absurdities that they witness in the world. When Banfield, Hampton, and Zurek (2022, p. 162) argued that geography education should strive to offer "more practically oriented educational experiences" to prepare students "for engaging with pressing issues of environmental and social justice beyond the ivory tower," the key concern here also lies in the fact that what and how we write feeds into the construction of everyday knowledge. Our daily interaction with students, in and out of classrooms, is one of the living stages where the "common sense"—that underlies and propels social action—is nurtured and shared.

Considering this, what good could our writings do "after empathy"? Here, I lay out three considerations for our research and teaching practice going forward:

- Focusing on the complexity of moral dilemmas over theoretical abstractions of Justice: Furnishing empirical details of the conflicts that arise from contextual contingencies, and the difficult and ever-evolving practices of "doing good" amidst structural constraints, can enrich debates on what it actually takes for individuals and communities to create a more just world.

- Amplifying linguistically-fired imaginations beyond reductionist representations: We can move beyond the separation between "knowledge" and "action" when the process of producing knowledge is integrally connected to the *act* of collectively and democratically situated meaning-making. Engaging with plural, agent-centered narratives on why and how something becomes valuable, to the individual and the collective, can offer insights for knowing how to stand and fight for what's considered valuable, instead of knowing what's there simply for its own sake as an end in itself.

- Pursuing temporally recursive critique over passively retrospective description: History with a temporal consciousness is a living tale that can be reassembled and rewritten with a better future in mind (Jon, 2023). As part of the ordinary public, the writer or researcher must remain a "learning participant" in the knowledge production processes where our encounters, conversations, and reflections with diverse publics become a part of democratic moral inquiry in-the-making.

Urban geography can substantiate these dialogues precisely because spatial milieu and its phenomenological "publicness" (e.g., chance encounters and contact zones; see Lawson and Elwood, 2014) can be a mediator between the values of the private world and the social world. As Shannon Jackson (2010, p. 170) meditates on Jane Addams' Hull House experimentation and its conceptual significance in revolutionizing social welfare, "a relational model of subjectivity and extended kinship" can be articulated in spatial domains where "valuing knowledge of the particular and the concrete" effectively performs and redefines social ethics within and beyond the local. The point of embracing painful reality is to instigate social action in the here and now. Conversely, the spatial possibilities for mutuality and solidarity must be understood relationally with structural constraints that situate our action in a specific time and place. In order to think with and beyond empathetic invocations, urban geography must harness its strength in reassembling vibrant materialities in a way that helps us imagine a better future, where its axiology (i.e., determining the "better") is inseparable from the process of the author's engagement with the world. In operational terms, therefore, how does research "after empathy" justify its ethics of authorship, voice, data, and analytical strategies (Lake and Zitcer, 2012), as well as its moral ground for defining something as problematic and therefore deserving of analytical attention (Lake, 2014)? Beyond matters of style or representation, an urban geography after empathy

calls for reflection on all aspects of our conjoined praxis as colleagues, teachers, inquirers, and fellow citizens.

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Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Robert Lake, the section editors (Andy Jonas and David Wilson), and anonymous reviewers for their encouragement and extremely helpful comments on previous drafts. Any remaining shortcomings are solely the responsibility of the author.

Funding information

N/A

Disclosure statement

N/A

[1] It is not my intention to undermine the importance of geographical work that delivers "empathetic invocation" (Lake and Zitcer, 2014); rather, the phrase "after empathy" in my title aims precisely to question how the very success of urban geography in harnessing the role of affect (in propelling moral imaginations) furthers the debate towards what can come next.

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[3] I would like to thank a reviewer for pointing out that this aspect of re-narrating histories "from the ground-up" has also been addressed by authors such as Asef Bayat, Ananya Roy, Solomon Benjamin, Partha Chatterjee, and others. What I am suggesting here may not be substantially or conceptually different, but, in my view, freedom geographies provide concrete reflections on challenging the foundational precepts, assumptions, and values propagated by the mainstream society (e.g., "autonomy" or "human will") starting from the ontology of what is human/less-than-human (see Jackson, 2020).