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Book Review:

Radical Empathy

Radical Empathy: Finding a Path to Bridging Radical Divides, by Terri E. Givens, Polity Press, 2021, 204 pages, 978-1-4473-5724-7, \$27.38.

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Givens' background is unique. She is American, although she traveled a lot to Europe majoring in European politics. She is African American, although her dominant life sphere is white with her white husband and a job in a predominantly white institution of higher education. She is a woman, although she succeeded in becoming a leader in the U.S. academia, where African American women are few and far between in the leadership position. Her life story, therefore, is enough to motivate other minority women in the U.S. to engage in a new discussion that involves what she calls "radical empathy."

Radical empathy in European philosophy, psychology, and literature has three different meanings or definitions. Husserlian phenomenology, epitomized by Merleau-Ponty, for example, bears a philosophical meaning of the process of integrating "the phenomenological stance into our attempts to understand others." The differentiating feature of the phenomenological stance is "the capacity to suspend one's own beliefs and assumptions in order to recognize relevant features inherent in another's sense of reality" (Magrì, 2018). Therefore, radical empathy qua phenomenological stance is the mechanism that bestows existential functions to the reduced entity of "Ego (I)" that enables it to be connected cognitively and emotionally to other Egos that have processed phenomenological realities differently from one's own Ego. What makes a human being an existential being is her ability to complete a cycle of radical empathy.

In psychology, scholars tend to construe radical empathy as possession through spirituality or ritual healing: "Individual differences between healer and sufferer are melded into one field of feeling and experience" (Koss-Chioino, 2006). Therefore, radical empathy qua spiritual possession of a physical body by an external entity in the process of understanding others has a much more drastic but passive connotation than that of the philosophical use, which assumes agency (the reduced "I") and intentions.

Finally, the literary use of radical empathy has its famous root in the works by Virginia Woolf, who used the term as a symbol of modern women in the 1920s U.K. In the novel, *Mrs. Dalloway*, Woolf through her main figure Mrs. Dalloway introduces a new concept of a "radical novelistic empathy," which "might thaw the frozen paralysis that grips British society in the novel." The process of the "thaw" involves "the great empathy of the balanced character of Clarissa Dalloway [...], standing as she does in the middle of a continuum of characters ranging from the stoic to the overly emotional." To construct radical empathy, distanced from the conventional concept of empathy (a

borrowed word from German, *Einfühlung*), Woolf delineates Clarissa as a new woman who maintains “the thoroughgoing, lifelong nature of her empathy: she is a habitual empathizer and has been her entire adult life” (Russell, 2015).

Givens’ book, however, eschews the theoretical aspect of radical empathy, as she underscores the importance of the practice of radical empathy against the backdrop of the U.S., where the racial divide during the Trump presidency heightened after the seeming victory of the African American minority in U.S. politics, exemplified by the election of Barack Obama. Givens’ own diagnosis of the U.S. racial problem necessitates the realization of the racial issue as a deeply institutionalized political idea from the days of independence in 1776. To annihilate the incessant nature of racism inculcated deeply in the minds of Whites in the form of white privileges and supremacies, Givens suggests that minority people of all backgrounds and walks of life equip themselves with radical empathy and practice it every day. To her radical empathy enables “each of us to be motivated to create the change that will allow all of us to benefit from economic prosperity and develop the social relationships that are beneficial to our emotional wellbeing” (p.13). Like Karl Marx in his critique of Feuerbach and other idealist philosophers of his contemporaries, Givens argues that the ultimate purpose of radical empathy is to bring about changes in the U.S. racial institutions, not interpreting them.

For an epistemological and methodological facet of her radical empathy practice, Givens adopts C. Wright Mills’ famous sociological imagination: the sociological empowerment of an individual who can link her personal problems and biography to social issues and histories through empathy. Astonishingly though, Givens never cites Mills not even once in her book, even as she touts the importance of exchanging personal histories among victims of racism in the U.S. as a means of empowering their existence through radical empathy. She explores her own experimentation with radical empathy from the death of her father. Her personal biography with a focus on her family then expands into the health (both mental and physical) issues rampant among her family members. She then allocates a lengthy portion of her book for her academic career, which culminates into her leadership role in various academic and civic organizations. She makes her biography distinctive from others by revealing her love and interracial marriage with a white man. Based on her own story, she concludes her book by suggesting how ordinary victims of racism, especially during the Trump era, can also explore their chances at radical empathy.

Givens’ program of practicing radical empathy to change, not interpret, the world consists of the following stages and components (p.34):

- A willingness to be vulnerable.
- Becoming grounded in who you are.
- Opening yourself to the experiences of others.
- Practicing empathy.
- Taking action.
- Creating change and building trust.

The “change” part of radical empathy refers to the last three components of “practicing empathy,” “taking action” and “creating change and building trust.” Trust, therefore, is the end result of radical empathy. Most victims of racism will give up their radical empathy project after the first three stages because they are hard on themselves, not on the racists; fail to allow making mistakes and learn from them; fail to allow others to make mistakes; and, are unable to create a social network of victims who freely and safely share their stories among members (p.51-52).

Radical empathy as a practical manual for the victims of racism is a good starting point that emphasizes the importance of “I” and “my” family (and extended families) as a springboard from which one can jump into a new dimension of thinking about their personal and familial problems in terms of larger social contexts. It also preaches about the importance of social networks and social spaces where similar-minded people with personal histories of being victims of racism can openly and safely share their stories with others. Practicing empathy, therefore, leads to the awareness of social and political issues that are deeply connected with the age-long history of racist institutions. The awareness among the social networks will eventually lead to social movements, about which most theories of social movements elided while focusing too much on consciousness education, movement organizations/industries, resource mobilizations, and the weakness/strength of the state. Givens corroborates her arguments all with her own personal experiences and stories that she has accrued over time, most of them being extremely rare for an African American woman.

Nonetheless, the book is not without limitations. Although Givens has successfully explained the nuts and bolts of radical empathy through her own personal stories and by linking them to bigger social and historical issues of the U.S., she does not provide why people like her were motivated to be radically empathetic other than the untimely and unfortunate death of her father. Radical empathy, therefore, is a tool for overcoming racial victimization, not a motivation for practicing radical empathy. Without any explanations of how one can be motivated toward radical empathy, many who are left in the ghettos, H.U.D. housings, and many other life spaces of unemployment and homelessness cannot even start to love themselves (i.e., a willingness to be vulnerable and becoming grounded in who we are), the beginning stage of practicing radical empathy.

As I have argued on various occasions (see *inter alia*, Oh, 2011, 2017; Oh and Kim, 2019) all empathetic actions start from a motivational structure of melancholia (e.g., gendered, racial, and postcolonial). Melancholia gives a strong intrinsic motivation to learn about one’s own position in society, her relationships with others, and the discovery of her desire to learn about both new and nostalgic knowledge to create something. Therefore, this book adds to the literature on melancholia by providing a new implication that melancholia can turn into a social movement by practicing radical empathy and changing political institutions.

Ingyu Oh is a Professor of Sociology at Kansai Gaidai University, Osaka, Japan, and the editor of Culture and Empathy. As the former president of the World Association for Hallyu Studies, he has written several articles and books about Hallyu.

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