

LYNN LAYTON

Prisoners of Hope

My paper seeks to complicate traditional notions of empathy. I begin by examining empathy as a historically variable and socially constructed state, and I look at how empathy's cultural and clinical meanings have changed over time. I then look at contemporary uses of the term, examining what some culture critics have referred to as an "exhaustion of empathy." What characterizes the currently dominant "one-way" definition of empathy is that the vulnerability of the empathizer is denied and all vulnerability is projected onto the object of empathy. I attempt to understand the conditions under which a one-way version of empathy might prevail; to do so, I look at our contemporary political and social world, in which vulnerability has become a shameful state. I suggest that the repudiation of vulnerability is inextricably intertwined with cultural norms of gendering, racing, and sexing, and that this produces conscious and unconscious identifications and disidentifications that inevitably implicate us in each other's suffering. I draw on the work of Anna Deavere Smith and on clinical vignettes to demonstrate how we are or become complicit in each other's suffering—and how we can recognize our complicity. I conclude that in order to account for the way our histories of pain interpenetrate, it is necessary to reconceptualize empathy as a two-way event. The paper's thesis is that empathy is a position we can only hope to come to in the course of the treatment, and not the place we start from.

Lynne Layton, Ph.D. is Assistant Clinical Professor of Psychology, Harvard Medical School and faculty, Massachusetts Institute for Psychoanalysis. She is editor of Psychoanalysis, Culture & Society and author of Who's That Girl? Who's That Boy? Clinical Practice Meets Postmodern Gender Theory. She is a co-editor of Bringing the Plague. Toward a Postmodern Psychoanalysis, and of Psychoanalysis, Class and Politics: Encounters in the Clinical Setting.