

Introduction

Empathy from the side

Anger, thick with anxiety, is a signature of the age. Outrage comes easy, often leads, and thrives like a weed. An affront, a retort, THAT escalated quickly, and who can remember how it began, much less how to stop it.

Polarization, they call this: the passing exhilaration of flexing muscle, flying the bird, or clicking send on that crafty tweet; the chronic dread of return missiles, or worse.¹ Us versus Them, loathing and fear, bodies braced for what comes next in the gripping drama of demonization. In such times, pressing pause can change the game, bringing other options into play.

Like listening to what else ‘fuck you’ might say.

I write this in the wake of the 2020 US presidential elections—the day after, to be precise, when the outcome remains unknown but hope springs eternal. I run errands to distract myself from the endless counting. Unsuspecting, I walk into a glass-cutting shop, and it is all I can do not to turn and walk out.

Three men glance my way, and I cringe as they pull up their masks begrudgingly, eyes rolling. I wince at the multiplying cues I don’t belong, at the dawning: I just strolled into MAGA² town. I should’ve known; I should’ve avoided this place, stayed in safer space. I’m in no mood for this today, and from the looks of it, neither are they.

But I also come prepared, a woman reared on red meat, the religious right, and bottomless awe for rugged, enterprising, down-to-earth, red-blooded, and thoroughly white American masculinity. I may have pulled myself out of it, but I will always be the daughter of a Trump-supporting family, and I sure as hell know what to do. I’ve got all the snappy quips to needle these dudes. Yeah, my highly raised, highly educated eyebrow is what they’ll remember, when they’re mocking me in a last gasp of deflated manhood. Game on, boys; armor ready.

Then he greets me kindly, with the courtesy he’s learned to show a woman—or some women, anyway. Disarmed, I can’t help but notice that the nerves racking this room are not only mine. These guys are jittery, unsure how to step around me, ill at ease on this of all days, but trying. We share this tension, and it’s an opening.

Absorbing his t-shirt, which playfully deifies a ‘hick’ icon, I try to relax my body and speech. A smile breaks out behind my mask, and it’s real. Can he sense it? “Strong shirt,” I say, chuckling. I’ve startled him. His body jumps ever so slightly. For a split second, I regret the move.

“Oh this?” he replies. “I wouldn’t think you’d even know who this is.” Moments later, still cautiously eyeing me up and down, he adds, “Remember when we used to laugh, like, in public, with other people? Before all this political bullshit?” He blurts it wearily, as if facing down a literal wit’s end. Silence. The proverbial pin drops in slow motion—you know the feeling. The other men turn to look.

“Yeah, I remember. I’ll take more of THAT, please!” I say with confident warmth, still wobbly on my feet. And for the next 20 minutes, we have a genuine conversation.

I don’t think I’m the only one who would say: Good feeling flows by the time I walk out the door with a new glass tabletop, and we all wish one another less politics and more laughter with strangers in 2021.

I’m not saying the conversation was free of problems, or that it fixed anything. I’m just saying it was something different, something more than compassion or humanization. No grand understanding or profound sympathy achieved here. Just a pause that outstripped us all as individuals, baring—and momentarily soothing—the tender belly of our antagonism.

If only it could last, or catch on and spread like the wildfire of rage.

This book calls for empathy, but of a different sort. I will not ask you to understand, sympathize with, or show compassion for others’ declared perspectives and emotions. I will not suggest you try on shoes that don’t fit or imagine how it must be to walk in them. These gestures have their place, but it is not here.

The empathy I have in mind is not about our interpersonal dealings. It goes beyond any individual or group and the demands they may shout to notice the weak places patched up by showy fits of strength. Empathy of this sort picks up on less obvious currents of energy, the kind we *don’t* declare. That gnawing feeling papered over and recognized only faintly. Subtle apprehension in a guarded stance, or signs of vulnerability in the quick leap to ‘fuck you!’

Working with empathy in this way requires that we slow down the motion to perceive what animates hostility, rather than confronting the hostility itself. Take the anger as a curious symptom instead of a known disease. What else can the symptom tell us, beyond what it barks out loud? Better yet, what is it doing, and where is it going? What shelter or comfort does it provide, alongside whatever wreckage it may wreak?

Pausing to consider these questions, we refuse the temptation to take the symptom at face value, confront it head-on, or react in any way that meets too quickly on its terms. Approach it from the side instead, where it isn't clenched in defense. See the soft spot shielded by aggression—the unease, or let's call it 'dis-ease.' Address and, dare I say, heal it from the unprotected side angles.

This is what I mean by empathy from the side: understanding and care directed not toward another's position or action, but toward the body's energetic susceptibility. Empathy like this moves beyond what people expressly *communicate* to name what has gone *communicable* between them. **Lateral empathy** is concerned with exactly this, the communicability of feeling.

What might happen if lateral empathy met the current wave of populist politics sweeping the globe? With this book, I slow down long enough to venture an answer.

It is often observed that ordinary people around the world are fed up and fuming—at austerity, political correctness, and globalization, at smug professionals and the eternal onslaught of experts who spew annoying facts from their comfortable lives, to name a few objects of scorn. So the sick-and-tired regular folk stoke the rise of populist movements and governments, often nationalistic, xenophobic, racist, anti-immigrant, anti-intellectual and illiberal in tone, and typically magnetized by brazen figures ready to fight for the common man. You know the type by now: Trump, Modi, Johnson, Orbán, Bolsonaro, Jokowi, and the list goes on—lots of variation among them, to be sure, but ample similarity too.

The contemporary surge of populism alarms many onlookers with its apparently regressive and destructive character. But what to do about this backlash? Two main options seem to have emerged thus far, by no means mutually exclusive: argue against and/or affirm populist complaint.

The first response is oppositional, confronting populism as invalid at the level of ideology. *Your worldview is mistaken and must be defeated.* Witness the flood of commentary fretting over the outbreak of populism, the threat it poses to democratic institutions and processes, and how it can be halted.³ Understandably, critics like Thomas Frank⁴ reject the anti-populist vein that pulses around this response, that thinly veiled elitism which basically proves the populist point.

The second option takes what would seem to be the reverse tack, validating populism at the level of lived experience. *Your outlook makes sense and must be heard.* This is empathy as we usually think of it, compassion for others' viewpoints and feelings. Observe celebrated works like Arlie Hochschild's

Strangers in Their Own Land or J.D. Vance's *Hillbilly Elegy*,⁵ which explain how populist backlash arises from living, breathing circumstances—justifiably, that is. This second line of response cultivates sympathy for the backlash, even when disagreeing with where it leads. Accepting the populist face put forward, it shows what I call empathy from the front.

Though seemingly contrary, both responses recognize contemporary populism *as* populism. They take at face value, and thus legitimize, what such politics claim to be: the will of ordinary people. With little question, today's populism is received as a largely socioeconomic standpoint, an authentic voice emanating from those who inhabit lower class status, those with less material and cultural means. In this sense, even the first, oppositional response validates populism *as such*, in the very act of invalidating it.

Put another way, both options meet populism on its own terms, assuming that it is actually animated by the class motives it claims. Yet there is good cause to put the brakes on this interpretive reflex and tune in more closely. On further inspection, the principal participants, agendas, and ethos of many populist movements make it clear: Socioeconomic factors are not the only, or even the primary, force in play.

This book will show that class-based characterizations of populism should not be taken for granted. It develops an alternative approach to the kind of populism booming today, one that begins with gender instead of class yet does *not* drop or downplay class concerns. This mode of analysis pauses to notice dis-ease around the edges, attune to its subtle textures, and follow the communicability of feeling. It shows empathy from the side, not the front.

I take up with an observation that is both fairly obvious and routinely dismissed: the predominance of certain men and manly energies in populist movements. This undeniable pattern is not simply a continuation of patriarchal dynamics that have long haunted public politics; nor is it coincidence. Masculine prevalence is not incidental, superficial, tangential, or any other way we like to shelve it *beside* the real point of populism. It *is* the point, that contagious resentment which propagates populist movements but cannot quite be owned outright.

Specifically, I suggest that **aggrieved masculinity**—a seething sense of rightful virility wrongly denied—is the beating heart of populism today.

Mark the crucial focus on *feeling* right away. I speak not of a fully formed perspective, ideology, or worldview. Manifestos may certainly follow feeling, trying to make (more) sense of it, or to make it endure. But mainly the feeling comes and goes as an unnerving sense, that is to say *sensation*, of manliness threatened. Like many feelings that don't fully register—at first or maybe ever—this sense comes over a body, defines it in relation to others, endows

it with purpose, and moves it to action. That it can spike the pulse, electrify the air, and bulge the chest, yet somehow still trips over the tips of our tongues—that it is *felt* better than expressed—makes it all the more potent.

Also take note that the focus on gendered feeling turns the spotlight away from ‘men’ and ‘women’ per se and surrenders any easy claims of men ‘versus’ women. More to the point, it redirects how we see gendered bodies, and gives sensation a stronger role in making them as such. Humans are susceptible to feeling gender in a wild spectrum of ways that exceed their official categorization as male and female, or even their identification as men, women, non-binary, and more. Binaries fail real life and analyses of it all the time, but especially when it comes to feeling. Let’s face it: Aggrieved masculinity can strike *anybody*, although certain sorts of men are more likely candidates (targets?).

For example, in the name of everyman, many populist rallies whip up pent-up frustration at the fall of old-school manhood, dispensing thrilling, if fleeting, doses of virility. This can be every bit as true for a woman participant, and there are many. Her swagger may take a somewhat different form—say, an outraged wife and mother defending her family from the hostile world ‘real men’ face today. But it’s the strut of aggrieved masculinity just the same. Indeed, on the off chance you missed this detail, her swagger confirms the deep-seated heterosexuality of manly grievance, which entices many women to invest with a profit-sharing promise.

That last point raises a final thing to note right away about my focus on gendered feeling: It’s never just about gender, so this book won’t be either. To analyze gender well, we *must* address race, sexuality, class, and countless other factors all nuzzled up together to make the sensation of aggrieved masculinity feel right. Religion, ethnicity, and citizenship status are often indispensable too. An infinite array and combination of factors may determine the right to manly grievance. All these aspects are interwoven, so interdependent as to be inseparable. Single-factor analysis (be it class, gender, race, or anything else) simply will not do.

To complicate matters, regional variations of manly grievance abound. No analyst could possibly encapsulate them, and I do not profess or aspire to here. This book discerns a global thread without claiming to capture all its strands. I try to stay in my lane, so to speak, working from the world most intimate to me while acknowledging the partiality of that world and my resulting limitations. I riff off the US case without generalizing from it, freely conceding what I do not know. My aim is to open a conversation, not proclaim a case closed. *This is what I am detecting from here, but what about you over there? What is missing, and can we collaborate?* Like this ...

In the US, manly grievance is most readily available to white, straight, Christian(ish) cis men of varied class standing, though plenty of other factors can also come to matter in the mix. This is strange if you think about it.

I don't doubt that such men have plenty to complain about, but by and large, they are not the ones bearing the greatest risk or paying the heaviest toll when it comes to socioeconomic and other forms of injustice. How do they hold the rights to being wronged? And when all else fails, is this the most precious right?

If you begin with gendered feeling, you can see that, in fact, aggrieved masculinity is *not* a sense available to every man, though contemporary populism dishes it up with an everyman front. Even when manly grievance is dangled in front of some women and disenfranchised men and passes through them—as it surely is and does—it is a feeling specially reserved for only some men and masculinities: those to whom entitlement (relatively speaking) has long come more easily, if not automatically. Who, then, is really aggrieved?

Or can we dispense with that tired competition and ask a less predictable question: What is aggrieved masculinity *grieving*—where I am, where you are, all over the world? Now how can *that* be addressed, without caving to the grievances declared?

Such a reframe demonstrates empathy from the side. It neither opposes nor authenticates the symptom. Instead, it bypasses the bluster to find out what else is going on. Is there another way to treat injured, angry, distressed masculinity than fighting it head-on or sympathizing with its open wounds? Yes, and that's what this book is about.

Contemporary populism has become one of the most acceptable outlets for aggrieved masculinity, precisely by giving it cover as the will of ordinary people. Bluntly, I am saying that much of *what we call* populism hijacks actual class bleeding on a trip to restore outmoded forms of masculine power, then has the audacity to claim that bloodshed as its own. No wonder populism is finding root and flourishing around the world, when it's fueled by a simmering and contagious rage left with few other viable vents.

This book reframes the worldwide outbreak of populism as symptom rather than disease or honorable way of life, a signal that *the dis-ease of aggrieved masculinity has gone viral and global in a consequential pandemic of feeling.*

If this argument is too strong or weird for you just yet, I understand. If you have never considered how gender can help to explain world events, I get it. I spent my masculine-identified young adult life bored with binary claims that things would be better if women were in charge. That's too simple, and most of us know it. This is not your father's—or do I mean your mother's (wink)—gender analysis. Read on and give it a try, even if gender isn't really your thing. I don't mean this to sound melodramatic, but the modest truth is there's no creature alive who doesn't have a stake in it.

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Like most readers, I suspect, I regard the intensification of class inequality as an imperative priority. That's *why* it is all the more urgent to disentangle class from the virulent strains of manhood traveling under its good name. Aggrieved masculinity obscures the specificity of socioeconomic hemorrhaging. It holds up certain masculine figures as proxy for common folk, distracting attention from the concrete regional profiles—racial, ethnic, gender, sexual, religious, and more—of real class vulnerability.

The world cannot continue to respond to besieged manhood as the legitimate voice of ordinary people. Aggrieved masculinity serves entitled men and those invested in their power. It hinders effective attention to actual class strain (including—to be clear—that among many marginalized white men).

Aggrieved masculinity does worse than this, however. It is not overstating the case to say that its global proliferation poses serious danger to the world. The COVID-19 pandemic has already demonstrated how this is so: Populist governments propped up by aggrieved masculinity grossly bungled the pandemic. Most of them ‘managed’ the virus by stoking outrage at viral mitigation, leading to some of the worst health outcomes.⁶ On this measure alone, they have proven deadly, and they fail on plenty of other measures I will document too. Up ahead lie even more daunting challenges, like climate change. The health of the planet hangs in the balance.

Ignoring the invasive sense of victimized manhood is not an option, for it is dangerous and spreading quickly and widely. And yet, current efforts to engage it on its own terms, through argument or affirmation, aren't defusing it either.

Aggrieved masculinity relishes a fight. Playing offense by defense is its trademark, so it welcomes the attack. Empathy from the front also plays into its hand. There may be nothing manly grievance loves more than a sympathetic spotlight that lets it monopolize the stage and suck up all the air. Ever the protagonist, our browbeaten hero. Make no mistake. Empathy of the sort we normally elevate is *not* a virtue when it comes to aggrieved masculinity.

What would lateral empathy propose instead? On what other terms can the dis-ease of manly grievance be addressed? How about: as a public health problem?

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No matter how captivating, invigorating, or just plain right it may feel in the moment, aggrieved masculinity is hazardous to everyone, including those who appear to gain from its flourishing. A public health frame is made just

for this: acknowledging the presence of communal harm matter-of-factly and acting to minimize it in a pragmatic and caring way.

Public health practices related to virus mitigation lend an especially helpful hand in retooling our responses to manly grievance. Since the entire world recently received a crash course in virus mitigation—thanks in part to mismanagement by populist governments—we emerge utterly ragged and all too familiar but, nonetheless, well-equipped to extrapolate useful lessons from the experience.

As COVID-19 taught us all, virus mitigation is about tracking how something transmissible operates in order to decelerate its circulation and impact. The point is not to judge or demonize a virus, much less those who become infected. Why waste time blaming individual hosts or bemoaning the nature of the virus, empathizing with its need to roam, or trying to persuade it otherwise? A virus is beyond reasonable argument; it's a traveling force. The modest goal is to slow and, eventually, stop it in its tracks. You 'outsmart' and 'defeat' it by watching how it moves and minimizing its opportunities.

Viral combat is not a moral confrontation or victory. No point in getting mad or virtuous about it when energy is better spent learning how the virus spreads and healing those infected and affected. Simply put, virus mitigation brings a spirit of practical curiosity and care rather than reasoned judgment and righteous anger.

This book aspires to cultivate a similar spirit of response to aggrieved masculinity. *Stop engaging what it says. Start tracking how it spreads.*

Debate and indignation will (and must) always have their place, of course. Ideological critique, oppositional protest, and other reliable tools of social justice will continue to stir social movements that vastly enhance the world. I seek to add to, not detract from, such ongoing efforts. My claim is only that, in this historical moment, head-on tactics *alone* are not up to the task of slowing populist propagation.

Aggrieved masculinity thrives on confrontation and empathy from the front. We have seen how it feeds on most any form of recognition that proceeds on its terms, or permits its terms to proceed. What it doesn't see coming, and cannot contend with, is the kind of empathy that pays attention to what it *does* and how it *moves* more than what it *says*, dodging its front to peek in from the side. Like this, a public health—and, specifically, pandemic—frame exemplifies lateral empathy. It works from the vulnerable edges, sidestepping the raging symptom to address the dis-ease it conceals.

I realize pandemic comparisons are everywhere these days. I promise that mine does not hop on that trend to be clever, nor is it a superficial analogy. This book builds a pandemic approach to contemporary populism by

developing the notion of “viral masculinity” in two ways. First, as a better metaphor for the times, a necessary evolution beyond “toxic masculinity” for grasping the state of manly grievance today. And second, as a real phenomenon *beyond* metaphor.

Ultimately, the book reveals aggrieved masculinity as a physically transmissible social relation. It cultivates new awareness of the ties that bind our social and physical worlds and asks how this can change accustomed habits of orientation and intervention. The abbreviated answer? By introducing a missing paradigm of movement, which pulls back from matters of content to emphasize circulation—the communicability of feeling—instead. Let me put that plainly. To understand *why* populism continues to grow, we need to ask *how* it moves.

I write about aggrieved masculinity from this place not because it comes easy, but because, for the love of one another and the planet, we need to find another way, fast.

