

“So, I Kept Reading”: Re-Examining the Relationship Between Reading and Empathy with

Stories from Death Row

by

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Abstract

Literary scholars have long debated the extent to which empathy results from reading different forms of literature. Within these debates, scholars have tended to make broad claims that reading either does or does not elicit empathy, and that empathy produces either productive or unproductive consequences for both the reader and society. In these discussions, the unique experiences of individual readers tend to be lost. This thesis challenges generalizations about reading and empathy by examining the highly individualized, context-dependent process of reading. I enter this debate by interviewing five individual readers about their experiences with reading selected excerpts of literature about the death penalty. In my analysis, I create a conversation among three constituents: literary scholars, myself as a researcher, and the five readers I interviewed. This conversation highlights many differences in the emotional and empathetic reactions my five interviewees and I experienced while reading, ultimately challenging scholars' oversimplifications about reading and empathy. Empathy, I argue, is a much more complex phenomenon than critics acknowledge.

Chapter One engages with the work of five prominent scholars who have made contrasting arguments about reading and empathy. As I analyze points from each scholar's writing, I evaluate key functions of reading and rhetorical devices that the authors identify as relevant to experiencing empathy. In so doing, I prepare myself to re-evaluate the actual significance of these functions when they surface in my own and my interviewees' reading experiences.

Chapter Two serves as an autoethnography and an introduction to the pieces of death penalty literature I use in my study. I highlight key plot points and rhetorical devices used in excerpts of literature from three authors by walking through my experiences with reading these pieces. In identifying moments that caused me to feel particular emotions, personal connections to the readings, and/or empathy, I demonstrate how even my own responses diverge from scholars' broad arguments.

Chapter Three discusses how my five interview participants responded to the death penalty literature featured in my study, focusing again on emotions, personal connections to the readings, and empathetic responses. Building on my discussion of my own reading responses in Chapter Two, this chapter highlights the readers' individualized reactions to reading, none of which can be organized into the conclusive binaries adopted by the scholars I discuss in Chapter One. Ultimately, I argue that studies of reading and empathy must allow for more variation, messiness, and inconclusiveness in accounting for the complex relationship between reading and empathy.

Keywords: autoethnography, death penalty literature, empathy, emotion, altruism, reading, reader, character identification, narrative situation

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Introduction

The problem is that in most serious criminal cases — capital cases, especially — we seldom treat the accused as human, preferring instead to characterize them as monsters to be dispatched as quickly as possible, regardless of mitigating circumstances. They become ‘the other,’ so alien and evil that no one can relate. And that makes them easier to kill.

- Bob Herbert, *New York Times*

In January 2019, I walked into a prison for the first time through the University of Michigan’s Inside-Out Prison Exchange Program. Before participating in this class, through which university students and incarcerated individuals come together for weekly discussions on the topic of mass incarceration, I was generally unsure of what to expect. While the stereotypes regarding prisons — that they constitute dark, fenced-in spaces where those who are convicted of a crime are locked up — had briefly come up in prior conversations and classes, it wasn’t until we began reading about and discussing the realities faced by those who are subjugated by the prison system that I started to understand just how harsh and discriminatory our criminal justice system is. My most memorable moment of learning surfaced when we read the book *Becoming Ms. Burton*, in which the author, Susan Burton, recounts her story growing up in a community without resources that may have otherwise prevented her from circulating in and out of the prison system for years. As I eagerly read through her narrative, absorbed in the gripping details of her life story, something sparked within me. Everything I once thought about how people enter the criminal justice system began to change, and I experienced such a strong emotional reaction to her writing that I felt personally pained by the systemic injustices she was forced to endure. In most ways, my own identity and experiences make it nearly impossible for me to relate to Susan Burton, but the intensity of my emotions made me wonder if what I was experiencing could be empathy.

The reactions, questions, and thoughts I had while reading for *Inside-Out* have stuck with me, and they eventually became the driving force behind this thesis. Reading *Becoming Ms. Burton* gave me intensely visceral and emotional reactions that made me want to act, to make a change, to pursue a career in criminal justice reform, and I began to wonder whether similar experiences have been shared by other readers. Is experiencing empathy while reading about injustice the norm? Or, on the other hand, does feeling empathy depend on the experiences of the individual reader and the context under which they are reading? In order to answer these questions, I started to investigate popular arguments made by literary scholars on the intersection of reading and empathy. During these initial stages of research, I discovered binaries and generalizations in how scholars discuss empathetic reactions to reading. Specifically, these writers tend to argue either that empathy will or will not result from reading, and that the effects of this process are either productive or unproductive for defending reading and literary studies. As I sifted through these arguments, I continually thought back to my own reading experiences. I had difficulty fitting my experiences into scholars' generalized conceptions of the relationship between reading and empathy — in other words, I could not adequately describe the process by which I felt empathy when reading prison literature by using scholars' simplified explanations.

Using these reflections as a stimulus for criticism, this thesis will push back on current scholarship about reading and empathy by bringing individual readers' experiences to center stage. In order to visualize how the debate about reading and empathy has become problematically generalized, I designed and conducted a qualitative study which explores the various reactions of five readers to reading literature about the death penalty. I chose to use literature written on or about death row both because of my own personal interest in the criminal justice system and because of the intense aspects of this literature that, for me, are sometimes

difficult to read. I was interested in exploring the ways in which reading about death row, a place notorious for its ineffectiveness in deterring crime and for subjecting disproportionate numbers of minorities (including many innocent defendants) to die at the hands of the state, might affect readers with different perspectives on and relationships to this topic. Ultimately, my analysis of both my own and my readers' reactions serves to challenge literary scholarship that offers sweeping predictions about empathetic responses to reading.

In the following section, I detail the methods of my study. I explain the particular mechanisms I used to locate, recruit, and interview participants, and I outline the general structure of our conversations. I also discuss important limitations to my study and reflect on the ways my own experiences and biases determined what I, as a researcher, initially hoped or expected to discover. By acknowledging that my interactions with interviewees were ultimately shaped by my identity and opinions about the death penalty, I orient my voice and demonstrate how I prepared myself to be receptive to hearing responses to literature that may have once seemed uncomfortable and unpredictable. Above all, by exploring my own individual lens on this topic, I aim to establish transparency as a researcher.

Next, in Chapter One, I turn to the current literary debate. I frame my discussion by drawing on James Dawes' explanation of five main arguments that scholars make about reading and empathy. I then explore the work of Lynn Hunt, Suzanne Keen, Elisa Galgut, and Paul Bloom, four scholars who are often cited in literary discussions of empathy. As I will explain in this chapter, each author provides a different perspective on how empathy might or might not result from reading, and each debates either the benefits or the downfalls of presuming that empathy is a positive outcome of reading. Working meticulously through each author's core arguments, I evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of their claims. This evaluation paves the

way for exploring, in Chapters Two and Three, whether these scholars' predictions about empathy actually manifest when talking to readers.

In Chapter Two, I turn to the body of death penalty literature I chose to utilize in my study, and I write this chapter as an autoethnography that explores my own reactions to reading the selected texts. I chose to construct Chapter Two in this manner as both an introduction to key points of the literature my study is based around and as an initial piece of data to illustrate the difficulty of predicting how a reader might respond to a given set of writing. With each text, I walk through moments in which I did (or did not) experience emotional reactions, empathy, and a sense of personal connections to what I was reading. I begin with Bryan Stevenson's essay "Close to Death: Reflections on Race and Capital Punishment in America," which provides a combination of data, narrative, and statistical evidence to argue that the death penalty in America is both ineffective and unjust. Next, I respond to three short pieces taken from Mumia Abu-Jamal's book, *Live from Death Row*, all of which were written while Abu-Jamal (who is still incarcerated) sat on death row. Finally, I include a portion from Sister Helen Prejean's book *Dead Man Walking*, which takes readers through Sister Helen's experience of working with a capital defendant during his final hours before execution. By detailing my close reading of these texts, I begin the discussion on the complexities of empathetic reading and the ways in which my own responses to the readings diverge from scholars' generalized arguments about empathy.

Lastly, Chapter Three analyzes the qualitative study I designed and implemented. In this chapter, I trace my conversations with each of the five readers I interviewed, carefully analyzing each participant's response in order to further highlight the individualized nature of empathy and to challenge generalizations. In describing each reader's responses, I focus on the three main concepts explored in Chapter Two: readers' emotional responses, readers' personal connections

to the readings, and readers' self-identified empathetic responses. As the chapter progresses, I draw out similarities and differences among the readers' responses as well as between readers' responses and scholars' arguments. The result is a complex, messy report that represents the intensely contextualized and individualized ways that empathy works.

The goal of this thesis is to challenge current scholarship that argues there is a causal link between reading and empathy. As I build a conversation between scholars, myself as a researcher, and the readers I interviewed, I consistently weave our voices together, tracking similarities and differences in the ways each of us envision and discuss emotion, empathy, and reading. In noting all the moments, both minute and substantial, in which our experiences diverge, I break away from tendencies to establish patterns and draw firm, perhaps even satisfying, conclusions. My hope is that, beyond this project, the conversation will continue and the debate will be re-imagined as a space to defend and validate readers' unpredictability.

Methods

In order to assess scholarly arguments about reading and empathy, I designed and conducted a study that focused on the reading responses of five individuals. Because I am interested in studying empathy through the lens of particular readers' responses, I realized that I needed to explore in-depth responses from several individuals rather than conduct a large-scale quantitative study. This in-depth, qualitative approach proved to be essential for complicating the generalized arguments that some scholars make about reading and empathy.

In order to recruit participants, I contacted the University of Michigan's English Department. I chose to recruit students affiliated with the English Department because of the experiences many students studying English have with analyzing and reacting to various forms of literature. I was initially hesitant to recruit from only one department as I was concerned this would limit my study by excluding students from diverse academic disciplines. After contacting interested students, however, I discovered that not all of them were strictly English majors; they each brought a variety of academic experiences and strengths to the table. Additionally, I chose to work with undergraduate students as opposed to individuals from a larger age range because, on a practical level, I was aware that the busy schedules of faculty, staff, or even community members might present a barrier to completing interviews in a timely manner. On a broader level, I was also interested in talking with younger people whose opinions may still be forming about certain social issues, as I felt that this might lead to more engaged responses towards the texts. Following my initial inquiry, the English Department administration staff circulated an email, included in Appendix A, to a listserv of all undergraduate English majors and minors with a form students could use to sign up for participation.

I received responses from 41 students interested in participating in my study. To limit my interview pool, I began contacting students based on diversity in race, gender, and age. Not all of the students I contacted returned my email, which presented a barrier to obtaining a participant group as diverse across race and gender as I originally hoped to work with. Nonetheless, I chose five participants, whose information is provided in the table below. The names listed are pseudonyms, meant to protect the identity of each participant because of the controversial nature of the subject they agreed to discuss. The rest of the data — major, race, gender, age, and year — is information that participants self-reported, either in the original email sign-up form or in person during our conversations.

Name	Major(s)	Race	Gender	Age	Year
Anna	Biology	Asian	Female	22	Senior (recent graduate)
Beth	Psychology (Creative Writing Minor)	Latinx	Female	21	Senior
Chloe	English	Iranian-American	Female	20	Junior
Daniel	English and Creative Writing (Political Science Minor)	White	Male	20	Junior
Evelyn	English and Molecular, Cellular, and Developmental Biology	White	Female	19	Sophomore

I met with each participant for two individual interviews. I decided to conduct two interviews with each participant for several reasons. On a practical level, I wanted to distribute paper copies and give overviews of each reading in an initial meeting, where I also established a timeline with each participant to complete the readings. On a more personal level, I anticipated that having a shorter first meeting would allow me and each participant to “break the ice” and

would help each participant to feel more comfortable in our second meeting when discussing the emotional impact of reading about the death penalty.

During the first meeting with each participant, I broadly explained my project and the study in which they were going to participate. I also received their consent to be audio-recorded during each meeting via a consent form, included in Appendix B. I then asked the following three questions:

1. What do you know about the death penalty?
2. Do you support the death penalty, oppose it, or remain unsure of your opinion about it?
3. How would you describe your feelings about people on death row?

These questions were designed to be open-ended and informal, to give both me and the readers a broad look into their own preconceived notions about the death penalty and people on death row. I believed that asking these questions was important both to prompt readers to talk about capital punishment and to prime their reading experiences with thoughts about their opinions and feelings about death row and those on it. I did not intend for these questions to serve as a measure or scale to determine participants' growth in knowledge about the death penalty. My study is mainly concerned with participants' in-the-moment and reflective emotional responses, not changes in knowledge or opinion.

The purpose of the second interview was to discuss the experiences each participant had while reading. As I will discuss in Chapter Two, readers read several excerpts of death penalty literature authored by Bryan Stevenson, Mumia Abu-Jamal, and Sister Helen Prejean. When I first began designing the study, my hope was that these interviews would give a clear picture of the nature of the empathy readers felt for certain characters or while reading certain moments — that is, if they felt empathy at all. As I will discuss later, what I actually heard during these

interviews was much more complicated than the kind of “yes I felt empathy and here is where I felt it and why I felt it” type of response I imagined I might hear. The complexities in the five participants’ answers are important, and they manifested in part because of the open-endedness of my questions. I went into each interview with an outline of eight broad questions, included in Appendix C, but I tailored each interview based on participants’ responses, experiences, and interests. By facilitating these semi-structured interviews, I was able to take note of the intensely individualized aspect of my topic, seeing how and why different passages, characters, and quotes stood out to different readers. Most importantly, throughout each interview I avoided pointed questions that would implicitly lead readers towards desired or targeted answers.

Once I completed all ten interviews, I transcribed each conversation and sent them to participants for review. I gave participants the option to omit any quotations they felt uncomfortable having published in this thesis because I believe it is important to recognize that, in the heat of a moment, participants may make statements that, upon reflection, they feel may be a misrepresentation of their actual thoughts. I note here that none of the interviewees requested that quotations be omitted. Additionally, as necessary, I corrected the grammar of each quote used in this thesis and eliminated phrases such as “like” and “um” in order to maintain clarity and to avoid distracting from participants’ ideas.

As I highlighted above, the sample size of my study may seem small compared to larger-scale social science studies, but I chose to work with a smaller sample size of students because of the time and resource constraints that would have made it difficult to recruit other campus and community individuals. More importantly, given the qualitative nature of my study and its concern with analyzing in-depth conversations rather than large sets of data, working with five students provided an effective means to study the complexities inherent in empathy. As my study

progressed, I realized that each reader brought different ideas and responses to the table. As such, speaking to five participants proved extremely valuable and presented plenty of complex and colorful responses to analyze. In terms of the reading material I chose for the study, throughout the planning phases I questioned whether my literature sample was holistic enough both to provide participants with general facts about the death penalty and to produce opportunities for emotional engagement. This concern was addressed quickly in the process of conducting interviews as I realized that each piece, regardless of the themes or emotions I personally felt were most prevalent, was able to spark different reactions from different readers.

As with all qualitative research, my study is ultimately shaped by my own blind spots and biases, and it is necessary to conclude this section by self-positioning myself as a writer and researcher. I began my research with a sense of the kinds of answers I hoped to hear. My own personal and political opinions position me in stark opposition to the death penalty and make me wary of the way our criminal justice system currently operates. I intentionally chose to include texts that present bias against the death penalty because these arguments are what I am familiar with — had I chosen literature in support of the death penalty, the responses of both myself and my readers would have been vastly different. I therefore had to be keenly aware of the answers I hoped to hear from participants — that the readings sparked empathy and encouraged their resistance to the death penalty. I first addressed these biased expectations when crafting my interview questions and adopting open-ended inquiries that sought no specific answers from participants. I will admit, however, that when readers would say things like “the system needs a major overhaul,” or would report that they experienced “a call to action,” or would mention places where they experienced empathy, I felt small internal moments of celebration. It was more difficult for me to fully listen and understand when participants reported feeling no emotion

towards a certain character or moment in the text that I, on the contrary, had emotionally responded to. My initial reactions to the things I heard were inevitably filtered through my own political opinions. Thus, when reading over transcriptions and writing about participants' responses, it became crucial to fully recognize my biases and allow this project to acknowledge and give credit to readers' varying experiences and responses. This acknowledgement is especially important with regard to the aim of this thesis to highlight the unique, unpredictable aspects of reading and empathy.

Additionally, I am aware of the many ways in which my own identity shapes my interpretations of the readings used in this study and the interactions I had with interviewees. As a white woman from a middle-class background with no close friends or family members who are incarcerated, I am able to read about and talk about the death penalty from a privileged and distanced perspective. My identity is different from the identities of the majority of my interviewees, and this, whether or not I felt it was initially noticeable, affected our interactions. During our conversations, my desire to be attentive to my interviewees' experiences and the ways some of them explained that their racial identities connected them to the readings led me to monitor my responses, particularly my body language. When the topic of identity arose, especially when talking about race and class in Stevenson's essay, and when interviewees discussed their own identities and experiences, I would oftentimes nod my head 'yes' in order to express my discontent at the ways racial discrimination has shaped many factors of our political and social landscape and to create an atmosphere in which I, as the researcher, supported and encouraged an open discussion of this topic. While I didn't feel that my interviewees held anything back when talking about identity, I can't be sure of the extent to which my interlocutors felt free to express all of their ideas. Recognizing this potential gap is crucial to acknowledging

that I must give immense credit to everything my interviewees did share with me about their own experiences.

As a whole, it is important to recognize that the initial excitement I felt during certain moments in the literature and in my conversations with interviewees is a result of my own identity, lens, and opinionated approach to debates about capital punishment. In order to fully understand the value of complex and messy responses that do not support neat and tidy claims about the relationship between reading and empathy, it would be troublesome to allow my biases to shield me from the unpredictable. While the scope of this project makes it impossible to capture every word shared between me and my participants, my goal is to carefully walk through each of their perspectives so that their uniqueness can be celebrated and generalizations can be abandoned.

Chapter One: Critically Evaluating Debates About Reading and Empathy

Our collective conceptions of empathy are at best fractured and at worst incoherent.

- James Dawes

Within literary studies, scholars make a range of arguments about the relationship between reading and empathy. The inconsistencies revealed when comparing many of these arguments are matched by an inconsistency in a general understanding of empathy. While the term empathy entered English in the twentieth century (Hunt 64), scholars continue to debate its precise definition. Author Suzanne Keen outlines a common definition that I will use throughout this project: empathy is feeling “what we believe to be the emotions of others” (Keen 5). I have chosen to engage with this definition because it introduces the notion that empathy is contextual, based largely on the perception of the person who feels empathy. The emotions this person “believes” a subject holds at a particular moment are not always equivalent to what that subject is actually feeling. Keen also discusses the distinction between sympathy and empathy, as the two terms can be easily confused. Where empathy would elicit a response such as “I feel your pain,” sympathy might prompt the statement “I feel pity for your pain” (5). In other words, empathy is a process of stepping into someone else’s shoes, in which the empathizer feels the emotions that they presume someone else is feeling.

In the context of reading, many arguments made about empathy fall into dangerously generalized categories and conclusive binaries. In “Human Rights, Literature, and Empathy,” author and professor James Dawes identifies five main arguments that scholars make about reading and empathy. He characterizes these arguments as follows:

1. Stories generate empathy, and empathy generates helping behaviors ...
2. Stories generate empathy, and empathy generates helping behaviors, but helping behaviors do

not help ... 3. Stories generate empathy, but empathy does not generate helping behaviors ... 4. Stories do not generate empathy; they generate pseudo-empathy ... 5. Stories actively interfere with real-world empathy. (430-431)

Four of these arguments take up a yes/no position in claiming that reading either will or will not lead to empathy, and the majority of these arguments suggest that empathy either will or will not lead to action or “helping behaviors.” While Dawes’s list is certainly boiled down and thus overlooks many variations among the wide variety of scholars’ perceptions, his outline reveals that the field of reading and empathy tends towards conclusive and universalizing arguments. In my own review of the work of some of the most prominent voices in this debate, I indeed found that both “this will happen” and “this will not happen” arguments are common. As Dawes argues, “Our collective conceptions of empathy are at best fractured and at worst incoherent” (429). In order to understand the importance of examining empathy in the context of reading death penalty literature, it is useful to see where both generalizations and inconsistencies exist in current scholarship.

In this chapter, I will analyze the arguments of four scholars who debate reading and empathy: Lynn Hunt, Suzanne Keen, Elisa Galgut, and Paul Bloom. While Hunt offers a historical argument about how empathetic reactions to reading have grown, Keen, Galgut, and Bloom all enter the debate with differing opinions about empathy’s usefulness to readers and the outside world. Where Keen focuses on empathy and possibilities for outside-directed action, Galgut argues that empathy is useful in the ways it inspires readers to evaluate their own feelings and beliefs. Bloom, on the other hand, argues against empathy, and claims it is not useful in either its inner- or other-directed effects. Assessing the work of each of these scholars and

evaluating points with which I agree and disagree, I ultimately assert that empathy is a more complex phenomenon than any of the critics acknowledge.

Lynn Hunt

In her exploration of the rise of empathy as a result of reading, Lynn Hunt focuses on the responses of eighteenth-century readers to three of the era's most popular novels: Samuel Richardson's *Pamela* and *Clarissa*, and Rousseau's *Julie*. Each of these novels, she explains, was published immediately prior to the publicization of the concept of "the rights of man." According to Hunt, these novels encouraged readers to empathize outside of their immediate social circles. *Julie*, for example, "encouraged a highly charged identification with the characters and in so doing enabled readers to empathize across class, sex, and national lines" (38). In addition, Hunt argues that epistolary novels — novels written from the characters' perspective in the form of their letters — became especially popular in France and England between the 1760s and 1780s. As readers engaged with these novels, they experienced "a heightened sense of identification, as if the character were real, not fictional" (42). This acknowledgement is a strength of Hunt's work. As I will discuss in the following section, the degree to which empathy depends on character identification has been debated, and Suzanne Keen specifically offers an argument that aligns with Hunt's: namely, that identifying with a character does not require having shared identities, lifestyles, or experiences. Based on my research, I agree with the assertion that identification (and, perhaps as a result, empathy) can occur regardless of one's experience with the character's situation. The fact that, according to Hunt, this phenomenon has been occurring since the eighteenth century suggests that it is a common phenomenon among readers.

In order to substantiate her claims about eighteenth century readership, Hunt draws on a variety of testimony published during the period. For example, she explains how different readers of *Clarissa* reacted following the main character's death: "Lady Dorothy Bradshaigh recounted to Richardson her response on reading the death scene: 'My Spirits are strangely seized, my Sleep is disturbed, waking in the Night I burst into a Passion of crying, so I did at Breakfast this Morning, and just now again.' The poet Thomas Edwards wrote in January 1749, 'I never felt so much distress in my life as I have done for that dear girl'" (46). Here, however, is where Hunt's claims become complicated. While she does not have access to the minds of people who lived over 250 years ago, and while she recognizes that such people could not have explicitly identified these reactions as empathy because empathy as a concept had not yet been invented, Hunt never explains how these reactions qualify as empathy. The phrase "I burst into a Passion of crying" is a highly time-specific statement — readers of the twenty-first century most likely would not phrase their response to reading in this way. Because, to a modern reader, these eighteenth-century responses seem intensely emotional, perhaps it makes sense to assume they represent empathy. Without access to a more detailed account of these readers' reactions, however, Hunt's jump to claim that these responses are empathy risks assuming that empathy is a frequent phenomenon experienced by readers — there is, I argue, a generalization here.

While Hunt steadfastly asserts that readers empathized with characters in each of these novels, she does not claim that reading invented empathy. Instead, she argues that empathy is an inherent characteristic among individuals: "The capacity for empathy is universal because it is rooted in the biology of the brain," she writes. "It depends on a biologically based ability to understand the subjectivity of other people and to be able to imagine that their inner experiences are like one's own" (39). The readerly responses she includes in this argument, however, do not

provide evidence of empathy as a “universal” or “biologically” human response. Attempting to use the responses of a single group of readers, specifically, those in the eighteenth century with high social status, cannot adequately cover the many ways in which all individuals experience empathy — the subset Hunt features in this essay cannot be used as evidence for a claim about universality.

Hunt also argues that the rise in empathy ultimately created an acknowledgement of and respect for human rights. She relates this phenomenon to identifying with “ordinary” characters, arguing that:

Human rights could only flourish when people learned to think of others as their equals, as like them in some fundamental fashion. They learned this equality, at least in part, by experiencing identification with ordinary characters who seemed dramatically present and familiar, even if ultimately fictional. (58)

Hunt here asserts that acceptance of human rights hinges partly on empathetic reading, which generalizes reading and empathy to a phenomenon that will ultimately promote social good. As such, Hunt’s argument places her in Dawes’s first camp of scholars who believe “stories generate empathy, and empathy generates helping behaviors.” As I will show, many scholars do not share this viewpoint and, even for those who share similar viewpoints, their reasons are not the same. The discrepancies among different perspectives about empathy illuminate the dangers of ascribing hypotheses or formulas to such an inconsistent phenomenon.

Suzanne Keen

In her book *Empathy and the Novel*, author and professor Suzanne Keen joins a large body of scholars who are cautious about assuming that empathy inspired by reading necessarily

leads to action. While Keen claims that reading can and often does lead to empathy, she argues that empathy can provoke different responses among readers, and it cannot be assumed that readers experiencing empathetic responses will be inclined to take action in support of the character or to alleviate the broader societal problems addressed in the literature. I feel persuaded by several dimensions of Keen's arguments, particularly her recognition of the inevitable variations of empathy.

As discussed earlier, Keen defines empathy as feeling "what we believe to be the emotions of others" (5). She argues that empathetic feelings arrive spontaneously, and when these feelings are solely other-directed, focused on the emotional state of others, they lead to empathetic concern. Considering the potential effects of other-oriented empathy, Keen raises the question: "What role does empathy play in the morally desirable outcome of helping?" (16). She posits two possibilities: prosocial behavior and altruism. While both concepts are defined as voluntary actions undertaken to benefit another person, and both are generally motivated by values and concern for others, prosocial behavior has roots in "desire for rewards, or (in) fear of punishment" (16), so it is not as selfless or other-directed as altruism is thought to be. By asserting, however, that both prosocial behavior and altruism potentially lead to "morally desirable" actions, Keen does not argue that one is more valuable as an act of concern or generosity than the other. Making the distinction between the two is nonetheless important because it reveals how readers channel their empathy differently based on the situation at hand, and it raises significant questions about this process. Keen identifies a crucial point about reading and empathy: even if empathy does lead to action (which is contestable), this action will manifest in different ways. After experiencing empathy, readers may respond altruistically, or they may

avoid action altogether given the lack of an enforced incentive. Keen helpfully underscores the variability of empathy and the difficulty of assigning it a single motive or outcome.

Describing similar action-based behaviors that may follow experiences of empathy, Keen draws upon the work of psychologist Martin Hoffman, who has studied the relationship between empathy and morality, in order to explain specific possible outcomes of empathy. Outlining Hoffman's arguments, Keen writes that "empathic anger and an empathic sense of injustice can each lead to personal, social, and ideological responses based on understandings of unfairness ... Yet even here, Hoffman promises no inevitable leap between the perception and action in the world. Many people feel others' distress but do nothing to alleviate it" (18-19). Regardless of whether an empathizer feels a threat, a possibility for reward, or a selfless motivation, the likelihood that they will act upon their empathy in order to help another or promote social good is low. For readers, empathy is more likely to lead to inner reflection than to action that might benefit those receiving empathy. This point is crucial to keep in mind for my own study. Although the readings included in my own study are concerned with "injustice" and "unfairness," Keen offers an important reminder that even readers who have a strong empathetic reaction to reading about the death penalty may not feel impelled to take some form of action.

In addition to discussing empathy as an other-directed phenomenon, Keen also discusses self-directed effects of empathy. She explains that empathetic feelings become self-directed when an empathizer shifts their mindset to a reflection of their own emotional state during the process of experiencing empathy. This self-reflection creates an intense "over-arousal" of emotion and can lead to personal distress or a complete avoidance of another's emotional condition. In the context of reading, Keen asserts that personal distress "has no place in a literary

theory of empathy” (5) because it leads readers to distance themselves from or abandon the reading, thus providing no empathetic reactions for scholars to analyze. In making this argument, however, Keen erroneously assumes that personal distress is an emotion that cannot lead to socially productive responses that are worth analyzing. She also abandons the possibility that personal distress might be a precursor for some readers to experience other-directed effects of empathy, especially when confronted with distressing situations they are unfamiliar with. Her arguments about personal distress overgeneralize self-oriented readers as permanently self-oriented, less likely to experience altruistic empathy and, thus, unworthy of analysis. I believe that this element of Keen’s argument is exclusionary and at odds with the reality that empathy and its effects have inconsistencies and variations. Contrary to Keen, I assert that personal distress can be productive, as it is impossible to say that every reader will internalize this emotion and react by disengaging with the literature. As my own study will show, personal distress can lead to empathy and engagement.

In discussing her own research, Keen explains that she facilitated discussions about drafts of *Empathy and the Novel* at various church groups, libraries, book clubs, and universities, and she asked audiences the general question: “Can you think of any time where a novel made you do something specific in the world, something you might not have done or thought of if you hadn’t read the novel?” (66). In response to this open-ended question, readers often “commented quite appropriately and analytically about particular novels that had made a strong impression on them, but demurred when asked if the strong character identification or immersion in a fictional world that they reported had any specific results in their real lives” (66). Keen’s results thus substantiate her argument that instances of empathy leading to altruism “are exceptional, not routine” (65).

While altruistic actions may not ensue when readers experience empathy while reading, Keen describes several factors that enhance empathic responses to literature; of particular concern for my project are her discussions of character identification and narrative voice. Regarding character identification, Keen hypothesizes that “empathy for fictional characters may require only minimal elements of identity, situation, and feeling, not necessarily complex or realistic characterization” (69). Keen suggests that in responding to characters, readers do not always need to share similar traits, such as race, gender, or age, nor do they need to inhabit similar lifestyles, experiences, or temperaments in order to empathize with these characters. Additionally, Keen argues that readers can experience empathy even when they know the characters’ lives are not “realistic”: “if the very start of a narrative can evoke empathy at the mere gesture of naming and quick situating, then readers may be primed by the story-receiving circumstance to get ready to empathize” (69). Keen’s view of character identification aligns with Hunt’s assertion that readers can empathize with characters whose situations they have never experienced.

Keen’s argument about character identification manifested when she asked readers about their experiences with empathic reading. One respondent, for example, reported that, as a child, they identified with *Jane Eyre* and *David Copperfield*: “In both cases my strongest empathetic responses were aroused by the scenes of abuse by cruel relatives and abusive school teachers, even though I was a happy lovingly-nurtured child who adored my teachers and school” (69-70). In another response, a college-age student reported a similar experience of empathizing and connecting with a character whose identity and situation differed from their own: “Although I have never been in a situation in which I was charged with murder, I have experienced empathy for Vernon, the 15-16 year old boy in *Vernon God Little*. In my reading I have been overcome

with stress and frustration for him as he has been ignored by the ‘grown-ups,’ wrongly accused, and tricked” (71). Keen includes these responses to show how readers can feel a sense of identification with characters not necessarily by sharing similar identities, but by inhabiting the emotions the characters feel in their given situations. She challenges the assumption that placing oneself in another’s shoes and feeling empathy requires shared experience. If this assumption were true, empathetic reactions to reading would be limited, possible only when readers read literature about characters similar to themselves. Instead, readers have the ability to identify with characters even while noticeable differences between them persist. Still, Keen argues, this identification “invites empathy,” but does not guarantee it (70).

Next, according to Keen, “narrative situation” — the relationship between narrator and reader, including the narrator’s perception of characters, as well as narrative techniques such as point of view and setting (93) — follows character identification as the second quality most associated with empathy. First-person narration is often assumed to create a more empathetic relationship between reader and narrator, as it allows the reader to enter the character’s consciousness and internal dialogue. “Most theorists agree,” Keen writes, “that purely externalized narration tends not to invite readers’ empathy” (97). She then identifies several key questions about the specificities of first-person narration — for example, how the terms “we” versus “you” might create different empathetic reactions — and concludes by asking: “if a narrative situation devised to evoke empathy fails to do so, does the fault lie in the reader or in the overestimation of the efficacy of the technique?” (98). While Keen recognizes a relationship between empathy and narrative voice, she explains that “the existing experimental results for such as association of technique and reaction are not robust” (97). In my view, empathy is possible in reaction to reading pieces which do not feature a first-person narrator or even any

specific characters. Empathy is experienced in a myriad of ways among readers, and it would be problematic to rule out the possibility that a reader might feel empathy from reading a story with an extremely distanced or missing narrator. Nonetheless, I agree with Keen's main holding that understanding readers' relationship to the narrator, along with their real or imagined identification with characters, provides useful mechanisms for analyzing the ways in which empathetic reactions manifest.

Prior to conducting my interviews, I was curious about how character identification and narrative situation would surface in my own study. I wondered: Will participants empathize with characters whose identities and situations as capital defendants are vastly differ from their own? If so, how might readers respond, and how might they describe the emotions they feel, given the differences between themselves and the characters? Will narrative situation, specifically when a first-person narrator is employed, leave readers feeling more connected to or empathetic towards the character than if the piece were written from another perspective? I was also interested in examining how these two terms would reinforce one another in my study. If character identification comes more naturally with a first-person narrator, for example, how might this refine current scholarship about potential links between empathy and altruistic behavior? Do terms such as character identification and narration present a more straightforward link to altruism than empathy?

As I discuss further in Chapters Two and Three, I use Keen's ideas as a springboard by considering empathy, distress, altruism, character identification, and narrative situation in my study of readerly responses to death penalty literature. Keen's recognition that empathy is variable and unpredictable, and that it depends largely on context and situation, has been foundational for my analysis. I have found her following claim especially helpful: "As readers'

empathy is valorized by our culture at large and connected (whether justifiably or not) with social goods such as tolerance, volunteerism, and altruism, the pressure to respond acceptably to a fictional character may increase” (78). This statement relates to my own study’s biases, especially when considering how readerly responses may be conditioned by social norms and the perceived expectations of the people these readers talk to. Just as the responses of Hunt’s readers may have been a result of “pressure to respond acceptably,” it is important that I recognize the ways in which my own interviewees might feel this same pressure. By creating an open-ended atmosphere during interviews, one that seeks no particular response from readers, but rather is concerned with the concepts and characters in the texts that were most significant to them, I prepare myself to take seriously those moments in which readers do and do not report experiencing empathy.

Overall, Keen’s arguments that diverge from typical “this will happen” or “this will not happen” binaries about reading and empathy are especially useful when discussing inherently individualized emotions and reactions to reading. While she does make several generalizations that I push back on — namely, that empathy is a frequent product of reading, and that personal distress does not lead to empathy — the rhetorical devices she does identify as potential precursors to empathy are those that I will explore and evaluate as they surface in my own study.

Elisa Galgut

Elisa Galgut, author and professor of philosophy at the University of Cape Town, provides a defense of studies linking reading and empathy. In “Empathy, Mentalization and Meta-Reflective Capacities,” a chapter within the multi-author book *Philosophical Perspectives on Empathy: Theoretical Approaches and Emerging Challenges*, Galgut notes that “few better

opportunities for the development of our empathic capacities occur than in our engagement with literature” (51). While Keen focuses on the potential effects of empathy in an other-oriented sense and is cautious of accounts which assume that empathy always leads to other-directed action, Galgut focuses her writing on the self-oriented effects of empathy. She employs the terms “meta-cognitive abilities,” “mentalization,” and “self-reflection” in order to advance her argument that the value of empathic reading lies in what it teaches readers about themselves.

Beginning with a general overview on empathy, Galgut works with definitions similar to those employed by Keen. Empathy, in Galgut’s writing, means recognizing that another person feels a certain emotion and then feeling that same emotion. Galgut’s definition begins to diverge from Keen’s, however, when she introduces the idea of meta-cognitive abilities. These abilities are developed, she explains, when the empathizer recognizes that the reason they are feeling a certain emotion is because another person is feeling that emotion. Galgut argues, “in empathizing with the other we know that we are doing so, and this knowledge, as well as the imaginative exercise of seeing events from another’s perspective, provides—or can provide—insight regarding our own mental states” (47). In other words, imagining a character’s feelings and experiencing empathy in response to those feelings allows a reader to better understand their own feelings and mental state. Because imagination is a broad term, encompassing a sort of idea-exploration beyond what one might deem possible within the bounds of one’s own life, “imaginative exercise” implies that empathizers have the ability to understand the emotional states of those with experiences vastly different from their own. According to Galgut, reading about characters with experiences that differ from one’s own can help readers to understand “psychological characteristics of their mental states ... that might be otherwise unavailable” to them if they do not embark on this process of empathy and self-reflection (47). This process is

tied to Hunt and Keen's conceptions of character identification, as Galgut's claims about meta-cognitive ability show how character identification might lead to self-oriented effects of empathy.

Next, Galgut explains that the concept of "mentalization," introduced by psychoanalyst Peter Fonagy, refers to "our ability to understand those around us and to predict their behaviour" as well as "an ability to reflect upon our *own* mental states and behaviour ... the two abilities are inter-dependent" (47). While this concept has been commonly explored in psychodynamic psychology, Galgut uses it to advance her argument about self-reflexive empathy:

I am suggesting that empathy is an aspect of mentalization. It is, indeed, a way of mentalizing *well*, for it requires that the empathizer actively imagine the world from the perspective of another. Empathy involves not only the ability to *feel with* another, but it also involves a degree of *self-reflection*. The empathizer learns not only about how the target of her empathy thinks and feels about a state of affairs; she comes to learn new ways of seeing the world for herself, both by taking on the perspective of another and in virtue of thinking *about* this new perspective" (50).

In Galgut's view, mentalization is "a skill and a capacity" that forms and develops differently within individuals. In instances of personal distress, for example, one's ability to mentalize "may be impaired" (50). Galgut recognizes, however, that this response is not universal and that one's reaction may differ as one's mentalization skills become sharper. Additionally, Galgut marks mentalization as an important skill: "the better we are able to mentalize, the better we are at understanding others" (50). Mentalization, much like meta-cognitive ability, reveals how the process of thinking about one's own empathy, whether it involves a positive or negative experience, can evolve into self-reflection.

Shifting finally to an analysis of empathy and reading, Galgut applies her explanations of meta-cognitive ability, mentalization, and self-reflection to readers' consumption of literature. She argues that literature, which "engages our imagination and encourages the adoption of viewpoints different from our own," (51) allows readers to develop their ability to empathize and, consequentially, to mentalize and self-reflect. Galgut places great emphasis on empathizing and sharing feelings with characters whose experiences are vastly different from one's own, noting particularly the ways in which style or narration affect empathetic responses. Like Keen, Galgut argues that the use of free indirect discourse and the lack of distinction between the voices of character and narrator, for example, provide a productive sphere for empathy as these forms of narration allow readers to see the perspective of another (the character) and to feel the character's emotions (through encouragement from the narrator) (54). She asserts that "we move from one viewpoint to the other, first empathizing with the character's frame of mind, then the narrator's. By being asked by the narrative to *reflect* on these experiences, we enhance our mentalizing capacities — we have come to learn something not only about a fictional character, but something about ourselves" (56). Galgut also provides a new perspective on debates about narration and empathy: specifically, that free indirect discourse allows readers to learn about the inner workings of characters and obtain a new "other-oriented perspective" (56). As a result, readers may mentalize and learn more about themselves. If this relationship initially seems distant or unconnected, readers must employ imagination in order to feel closer to the characters and to achieve empathy. By reflecting on this process, Galgut argues, readers ultimately improve their own capacities for empathy.

Overall, I find Galgut's claims compelling. I agree with her assertion that empathy involves a degree of self-reflection and, as a result, can improve one's meta-cognitive abilities.

Yet, the conclusive nature of Galgut's theories, asserting that reading is likely to lead to self-reflection, will not hold true for all readers, and recognizing this is important in order to avoid diminishing the validity of readerly responses which do not involve self-reflection or self-oriented emotion. I resist exclusively prioritizing self-oriented empathy because doing so excludes readers who experience empathy but do not self-reflect. Because my project is concerned with the nature of readers' empathy in general, I consider all possible outcomes of readerly responses.

Paul Bloom

In contrast to scholars such as Keen and Galgut who emphasize the value of empathy and the productive outcomes of empathetic reading, Paul Bloom argues that the idea of empathy itself is useless. Bloom, a psychologist, author, and professor at Yale University, has authored several pieces that criticize empathy. In "Against Empathy," he explains that this position does not mean he is against morality and "doing the right thing"; in fact, he prefers these concepts over empathy. According to Bloom, "If you want to be good and do good, empathy is a poor guide" (14). Arguing that there is a disconnect between empathy and social policy, while also highlighting the difference between empathy and compassion, Bloom contends that the individualized nature of empathy does not provide enough traction for those experiencing empathy to be moved to change their own situation or the situation of others.

Bloom defines empathy as "narrow" because it "connects us to particular individuals, real or imagined" (15). Empathy felt towards one specific individual, according to Bloom, does little to alleviate the social ills that affect large groups within society. He suggests that abandoning this individualized approach to empathy would enable us to "appreciate that a hundred deaths are worse than one, even if we know the name of the one" and thus decide upon

social policy which is “fairer and more moral” (15). While my project is concerned with empathy as a uniquely individualized and context-based phenomenon that manifests differently in all readers, I recognize the validity of Bloom’s critique because I, as a researcher and writer, am wary of claims that empathy can lead to large-scale changes and reforms.

In this same vein, Bloom argues that empathy should not be used as a means for assessing and guiding public policy, asserting that biases are inherent within empathy and ultimately control who receives empathy or support. Challenging Keen’s and Galgut’s claims that empathy is often felt towards individuals with experiences vastly different from one’s own, Bloom argues that “we are more prone to feel empathy for attractive people and for those who look like us or share our ethnic or national background” (15). I agree with this assertion that empathy, when directed towards someone the empathizer is familiar with, will not always lead to social good because it might not evoke a strong emotional reaction to someone else’s issues. However, I disagree with Bloom’s assertion that we “feel empathy for attractive people,” because, as my research in Chapter Three illustrates, Bloom generalizes with this claim. The all-or-nothing nature of Bloom’s writing ultimately produces an oversimplification of the issue, failing to acknowledge possibilities of empathy leading to either other-directed action or self-reflection. If Bloom’s claims are taken seriously, and if a broader sense of compassion for society is what becomes championed, the personal stories of characters and individuals that are crucial for connecting with people and experiencing empathy will be abandoned. My own study seeks to explore the relationship between empathy and reading such individual stories, and while Bloom’s arguments are a key reminder that there is no causal link between feeling empathy for an individual and acting for the good of society, I still feel it is important to hold onto and explore the empathetic responses that might manifest in response to specific individual stories.

In addition to his antipathy towards using empathy to shape social policy, Bloom elaborates upon empathy's potential to produce negative effects, such as empathetic distress. He contends that compassion is more likely than empathy to lead to positive outcomes for both giver and receiver and thus should be prioritized over empathy. Bloom explains that individuals with a "strong inclination toward empathy ... report asymmetrical relationships, where they support others but don't get support themselves" (16). Similarly, those who experience empathy towards individuals in physical or emotional pain often end up in a situation of empathetic distress through attempting to feel this pain, which, Bloom argues, has negative effects. Compassion, on the other hand, is more likely to lead to kindness, altruism, concern, love, and a greater desire to help (16). Contrasting empathy and empathetic distress with compassion, Bloom highlights the example of charity:

It is conceivable, I suppose, that someone who hears about the plight of starving children might actually go through the empathetic exercise of imagining what it is like to starve to death. But this empathetic distress surely isn't necessary for charitable giving. A compassionate person might value others' lives in the abstract, and, recognizing the misery caused by starvation, be motivated to act accordingly. (16)

Although Bloom and Keen approach empathy from different angles—Keen exploring its positive possibilities versus Bloom asserting that it should be abandoned—Bloom's claim that the empathy-altruism theory does not hold resonates with Keen's refutation of the notion that empathy will always or even likely lead to altruism. However, Bloom's assertion that we should abandon empathy entirely disregards the possibility that reflections on empathetic distress can lead to positive outcomes. While "empathetic distress surely isn't necessary for charitable

giving,” reflecting on this distress, as Galgut would argue, might still lead someone to think more about their own inclinations to give.

Bloom’s arguments offer a helpful reminder to tread carefully with the concept of empathy, and to avoid assuming that empathy will always lead to one particular or positive outcome. Still, his forceful assertions that empathy will not lead to social good ultimately represent a generalization, albeit one that conflicts with the broad arguments made by Hunt, Keen, and Galgut. As I work my way through this thesis, I will carry key claims made by each of these scholars with me. Specifically, I will explore the many ways in which character identification, narrative situation, personal distress self-reflection, and altruism are reflected (or not) in my own and my readers’ responses to death penalty literature. As the following two chapters will illustrate, many of these concepts surface in context-driven, individualized ways, revealing a difficulty in making claims about their likelihood or predictability. Opening this thesis with an exploration of current scholarly arguments provides a framework for recognizing generalizations and being open to the many possibilities of reading that might stimulate empathy and lead to a variety of outcomes.

Chapter Two: Reading Death Penalty Literature and Tracing My Own Responses

The national debate continues to focus on abstract concepts: Personal tragedies of unjustly condemned individuals are transformed into empirical data, which are then subjected to debates about the generalizability of the samples and the reliability of the survey techniques ... what is often lost in the process are the vivid, personal narratives that can provide a crucial context for public understanding of the actual workings of the capital punishment system.

- Bryan Stevenson

When I began planning the qualitative study for this project, one of the first questions that came to mind surrounded what selections of literature I would distribute to participants. This seemed to be one of the most important aspects of the study, as the pieces I chose would ultimately determine the characters, situations, and moments of dialogue that readers would be exposed to as potential catalysts to empathy. I thought about my own past experiences of empathy from reading about the criminal justice system, and I immediately returned to Bryan Stevenson's *Just Mercy*, which recounts his work in founding the Equal Justice Initiative and representing Walter McMillian, a man sentenced to death row for a murder he did not commit. In this book, Stevenson argues that the death penalty is a re-invented form of lynching that targets poor racial minorities, especially in the South (Equal Justice Initiative). I remembered how reading this book made me feel significant amounts of empathy for McMillian. Knowing that Stevenson's writing is both informative for audiences who may have little or no background knowledge on the topic and is capable of producing emotional reactions among readers, I decided to include a piece by him in my study.

I ultimately chose to use excerpts from his essay, "Close to Death: Reflections on Race and Capital Punishment in America." On my first read through this essay, I took note of moments which struck me and, later, reflected on specific emotions I felt during these moments. As I will discuss later in this chapter, I was surprised to find that many of the portions of this

essay that sparked emotional reactions for me were statistics. For example, when I read that “for every eight executions that have occurred in the United States since resumption of capital punishment in the 1970s, one innocent person has been discovered on death row and exonerated” (Stevenson 78), I felt a combination of anger and shock towards the system that allows this error to exist and sadness for the people who are subjected to it. I thought back to my experience reading about Walter McMillian, whose personal narrative is one that has helped me to think about real life implications of this statistic.

After reading this piece, which offers an informational and argumentative approach to capital punishment, I turned to the works of Mumia Abu-Jamal and Sister Helen Prejean to include in my study. Where Mumia Abu-Jamal provides perspective from inside the system as a political writer who is currently incarcerated and was formerly on death row, Sister Helen Prejean provides the perspective of an outsider to this system who, in becoming a capital defendant’s spiritual advisor, observes and comments on prison conditions. I chose three short essays from Abu-Jamal’s book *Live From Death Row* and an excerpt from Sister Helen Prejean’s book *Dead Man Walking*. Before meeting with participants, I read each of these works in the same manner I read Stevenson’s — by noting segments that stood out to me and tracking my own emotional and empathetic responses to particular scenes, characters, conversations, or statements.

The purpose of this chapter is to walk through these moments of my reading and responding. As such, this chapter serves as an autoethnography that situates my own reading experiences in a manner that allows me to be keenly aware of the many ways other readers might respond to the same pieces of literature. By carefully analyzing my own reactions and responses to the pieces I have chosen for my study, I generate a critical piece of evidence to illustrate the

differences among people who engage in the individualized process of reading. Examining my own responses makes me, as a researcher, more attentive to ways in which other readers' responses converge with and diverge from mine, and more wary of homogenizing assumptions about reading and empathy. In exploring my reading responses, I also highlight important dimensions of the readings and rhetorical devices used by the three authors.

My autoethnography explores three components of my reading experience: emotional responses, personal connections to the readings, and empathy. These three categories will also serve as my framework for analyzing participants' responses in Chapter 3. I have separated emotion and empathy because I found that it was easier, both for myself and for readers, to identify emotional words to describe our reactions to the readings than it was to describe the phenomenon of empathy. In other words, I found myself reflecting on moments that struck me by thinking about the emotions these moments incited before evaluating whether or not I felt empathy. Likewise, as I will discuss in Chapter Three, participants were confident in their emotional convictions and described these responses to the pieces in tangible ways, using words such as "angry," "frustrated," "sad," or "shocked." When discussing empathy, however, participants' words tended towards more reflective responses about the process through which they experienced that empathy. Part of this process, for almost all of the readers, including myself, involved a discussion of personal connections to the readings, which I define here as readers' discussions of their own identities, interests, and knowledges they've obtained from past exposure to the topic, as well as descriptions of scenarios and situations that have occurred in their lives. While I will weave empathy throughout discussions of my personal connections and emotional responses to the literature, I return to it as a separate section to discuss any characters or moments that did (or, memorably, did not) spur an empathetic reaction.

Taken together, the selections I chose from Stevenson, Abu-Jamal, and Sister Helen provide a comprehensive sample of literature on the death penalty because they include voices from individuals who have different experiences with death row, and they feature a range of narrative forms, rhetorical devices, characters, and settings. By using this chapter as a space to describe my reactions to these authors' pieces, I pave the way for exploring, in Chapter Three, participants' unique, varied responses to these same readings. As someone who is opposed to the death penalty, I read the featured readings with a critical eye, keenly aware of the injustices perpetuated by the system. In paying careful attention to the ways in which my own biases and experiences shape how I absorb and analyze the texts, I prepare myself to be receptive to the responses of readers who may hold dissimilar perspectives and experiences. This chapter thus contributes to my critique of overgeneralized arguments about reading and empathy.

Bryan Stevenson

Bryan Stevenson is a public interest lawyer and Professor of Law at New York University School of Law. He founded the Equal Justice Initiative, a non-profit organization located in Montgomery, Alabama that provides legal aid to individuals who have been wrongly affected by the criminal justice system, and he currently serves as its Executive Director (Equal Justice Initiative). Stevenson has delivered numerous lectures and is a published author, his most famous work being *Just Mercy*.

In 2004, Stevenson contributed to the book *Debating the Death Penalty: Should America Have Capital Punishment? The Experts on Both Sides Make Their Best Case*, which features arguments from eight scholars, including judges, attorneys, philosophers, and a former governor, who hold differing opinions about capital punishment. The aim of the book is to help readers

understand and analyze different arguments about capital punishment; as the editors argue, “The contributors taken together bring to the discussion considerable experience with both the theoretical and the practical aspects of the subject. The result is a set of essays of unusual comprehensiveness, variety, and accessibility for a diverse public audience” (Bedau and Cassell x). Bryan Stevenson’s essay in the book, titled “Close to Death: Reflections on Race and Capital Punishment in America,” argues against capital punishment based on statistics and on Stevenson’s own experience, which together illustrate how the death penalty intentionally targets racial minorities and people from economically disadvantaged communities. Stevenson also highlights how the death penalty is often administered inaccurately, forcing innocent defendants to be executed after an unfair trial and sentencing process. For my study, I used excerpts of Stevenson’s piece, including a portion of the introduction and two later portions of the essay. Each of these three portions addresses a major part of Stevenson’s argument: his position against the death penalty, racial bias in capital punishment, and the effect of capital punishment on poor people.

Emotions

While reading Stevenson’s essay, I experienced strong emotional reactions to the statistics and data he used to substantiate his argument against the death penalty, as well as to several argumentative statements Stevenson makes about his own experience with capital punishment. Throughout the piece, there were moments where I felt discomfited, sad, disheartened, frightened, angry, frustrated, and overwhelmed. Considering my own opposition to the death penalty, I was not surprised that these kinds of emotions surfaced while reading about the injustice the system perpetuates. Moreover, the current political climate and my own

antipathy towards the current presidential administration have conditioned me to feel anger about a variety of political issues. When having conversations with friends and family, I have grown accustomed to expressing anger, uncertainty, and frustration towards the way the government is currently running. This mindset has inevitably shaped my perception and reading experience when I approach a political text, and with Stevenson's piece, my reflections on injustices in the criminal justice system are exacerbated by my sense of how difficult it is to reform such systems in a hostile political climate. However, even considering this context, I did not expect to have such a strong emotional response to reading statistics and numerical data, as I generally dissociate this kind of factual information from the emotional reactions that are common for me when I read about an individual's life.

One of the first moments that struck me while reading is included in the introductory section of the essay, where Stevenson writes, "We don't rape those who rape, nor do we assault those who have assaulted. We disavow torturing those who have tortured. Yet we endorse killing those who have killed" (76). This statement made me feel the kind of discomfort I often experience when thinking about the existence of capital punishment. For the state to deem murder a crime but to nonetheless murder its citizens through the death penalty is hypocritical. If the state applied this same hypocrisy to crimes such as rape or assault, public backlash would be fierce. For me, reading these lines and picturing this possibility — the state raping those convicted of rape and assaulting those convicted of assault — invoked grotesque images and elicited disgust. Here, Stevenson raises the question: why isn't this same disgusted response applied towards the death penalty? Reading this statement in the opening paragraph of Stevenson's argument felt especially powerful as I was immediately reminded of my own frustration towards capital punishment. Even before reading the empirical and historical data

Stevenson includes, I felt primed to examine the issue of capital punishment through a lens of discontent towards the dehumanization that results from the state encroaching upon human rights.

A second introductory statement that struck me is included in Stevenson's discussion of his background as an attorney and the moral values that have supported his lifelong opposition to capital punishment. Stevenson argues, "When executions are impersonal and unexamined, Americans are free to consider capital punishment in a disembodied manner in which death-sentenced prisoners are stereotyped villains with no discernible humanity" (77). The juxtaposition between Americans who are "free to consider" and "death-sentenced prisoners" who are "stereotyped villains with no discernible humanity" evoked sadness towards those individuals who face unjust stereotypes as a result of their stories being "unexamined." As I kept reading, this sadness intensified when considering the number of innocent people on death row. Stevenson includes the following statistic: "In the last several years, dozens of innocent people have been released from death row after narrowly escaping execution. For every eight executions that have occurred in the United States since resumption of capital punishment in the 1970s, one innocent person has been discovered on death row and exonerated" (78). I found myself re-reading this statistic multiple times — not only is it frightening to imagine "narrowly escaping execution" despite being completely innocent, but to read that one out of every eight people on death row "has been discovered" to be innocent is even more alarming. For a defendant to be "discovered" means that the defendant and their lawyers took the time and put in the work to prove their innocence, which was most likely met with criticism and difficulty. To think about this statement and then realize that this one-eighth figure inevitably does not encompass all of the people on death row who are innocent made me feel disheartened and extremely sad for those

individuals who might never be fortunate enough to be “discovered.” After reflecting on this statistic, I thought about the way Stevenson presents this data. Rather than simply stating the numerical statistic, he invokes a visceral image of people “narrowly escaping execution.” This surely contributed to my emotional response as I was prompted to think about the overwhelmingly large number of individuals who face countless hurdles in becoming exonerated.

Reading the second section of Stevenson’s essay, which discusses the racial bias that pervades the criminal justice system and capital punishment, I continued to experience strong emotional reactions to data and statistics. As I read this section, my emotions turned from overall sadness about the error rate of capital punishment to anger and frustration about the specific injustices it perpetuates. Reading about the experience of black men was especially powerful in this regard, as Stevenson includes the following statistic: “One out of three African American men between the ages of 18 and 35 is in jail, in prison, on probation, or on parole in the United States” (85). This point is alarming and infuriating because it illustrates the extent to which the criminal justice system entraps minorities. Not only are one-third of black men temporarily in prison — a huge number in and of itself — but they are also on probation and parole. Unlike the data about the number of innocent people on death row, Stevenson presents this point bluntly. Yet, even without persuasive rhetoric, I felt frustrated while reading about how the system objectively affects black men in a disproportionate way. As evidenced in this moment, I did not need some kind of rhetorical connection to the life of a specific character or setting in order to respond emotionally — a piece of straightforward empirical data was enough to conjure anger and frustration.

Continuing with this objective, blunt tone, Stevenson writes that “while African Americans make up 13 percent of the nation’s monthly drug users, they represent 35 percent of those arrested for drug possession, 53 percent of those convicted of drug offenses, and 75 percent of those sentenced to prison in this offense category” (86). This data is presented in an intentionally striking manner, and my emotions grew as I felt increasingly frustrated and overwhelmed. As the numbers increase, so too do the consequences. This pattern creates a building intensity, which helped me to visualize ways in which the system imposes harsh punishments on minorities in a manner that increasingly makes it difficult to escape. Later in this section, Stevenson writes that, according to a 1990 report from the United States General Accounting Office, “82 percent of the empirically valid studies on the subject show that the race of the victim has an impact on capital charging decisions or sentencing verdicts or both” (86). Again, Stevenson does not substantiate this claim with explicitly emotional rhetoric, yet I still felt a strong reaction while reading. A high, in this case frightening, number such as 82 percent stands on its own for provoking my frustration towards a system meant to objectively carry out the law without consideration of factors such as race. In both of these instances, I found myself experiencing a strong emotional reaction to straightforward statistics. While I came into this close reading experience assuming that I would feel more emotion when reading about individual stories or narratives, like I did with *Just Mercy*, by this point in Stevenson’s essay I was keenly aware that this assumption was wrong. I couldn’t predict how I would respond to the literature. After reading this section, I certainly felt encouraged to reflect more deeply on the ramifications of these statistics on individual lives, but the fact that in certain moments the data alone, which Stevenson presents with starkness and intensity, was enough to spur an emotional reaction disproves my own predictions about how reading these pieces would affect me.

Towards the end of this section, Stevenson turns to a discussion of the effects of capital punishment on specific individuals, and here my expectation that this kind of writing would foster an emotional response held true as I felt discomfort and anger for defendants who are forced to undergo mistreatment. Stevenson highlights one such individual narrative as he explains that a federal judge discovered in 1989 that a black man named Wilburn Dobbs had been tried by a state judge “who had spent his life and career defending racial segregation and who would only refer to Mr. Dobbs at trial as ‘colored’ or ‘colored boy,’” and by jurors who “believed that the Ku Klux Klan did good things in the community and that black people are more violent than whites.” Furthermore, Dobbs’s attorney held racist views, including “a belief that black people are morally inferior, less intelligent, and biologically destined to steal” (88). This narrative was emotionally upsetting for me to read as it illustrates alarming empirical evidence regarding racial bias and reveals how this evidence has been put into practice. When I read this section, I had already been informed about the high likelihood that race will affect trials and sentences, so reading about a judge who used outdated and racist terms such as “colored” to describe people, jurors who supported the Ku Klux Klan, and an attorney who believed black people were inherently criminal caused me to feel anger for Dobbs and to question how many other cases have involved similarly upsetting rhetoric and racist biases.

The third portion of Stevenson’s essay, which discusses class bias and the ways in which race and poverty may affect one’s likelihood of being subjected to the death penalty, provoked more frustration, anger, and, at times, guilt. In this section, Stevenson explains that racial minorities face disproportionately high levels of poverty, and taken together, the two factors of race and class increase one’s likelihood of being wrongfully affected by the criminal justice system. As with the introductory statement about “killing those who have killed,” I experienced

another moment of being taken aback by Stevenson's words. He writes: "There are hundreds of death row prisoners in America who are currently without legal representation. Many are literally dying for legal assistance" (95). The stark phrase "literally dying for" sparked my confusion and frustration about the fact that "hundreds" of people cannot receive the representation that should be guaranteed to them. In a system meant to be just, the cards are stacked against those who face economic barriers and racial discrimination. My frustration about this fact has persisted, and to read about the ramifications for those who face death at the hands of the state only heightened this emotion.

Finally, Stevenson discusses the public defender system, which invoked feelings of distress. He highlights the state of Alabama, where state funds do not cover public defense. Instead, defendants who cannot afford a lawyer are represented by appointed attorneys who receive extremely low compensation. As a result, many of these cases cannot be given the amount of time and the resources necessary to guarantee favorable outcomes for the defendant. Discussing the legal representation that is available for those who are economically disadvantaged, Stevenson writes:

There are too many capital cases in the United States in which indigent defendants were represented by attorneys who were asleep during trial proceedings, under the influence of drugs and alcohol, or otherwise engaged in unprofessional conduct as counsel for the capitally accused. Poor and minority defendants have been sexually abused by defense attorneys, subjected to racial slurs and bigotry by their counsel in open court, and undermined by the very advocate assigned to defend them. (95)

Rather than simply stating that it is difficult for poor defendants to find quality representation, Stevenson lists specifics about this process that are objectively problematic and create disturbing

images of defendants being abused by those with whom they have to entrust their life. Stevenson's point here is not to bash public defenders or those assigned to represent disadvantaged defendants — many of these attorneys do great work and care immensely about the quality of their representation. Rather, in describing such instances, Stevenson shows the barriers that poor racial minorities face to receiving the same quality legal aid that is available for more privileged defendants. When reading this section, I felt distress, anger, and guilt. It is clear that capital punishment is skewed because it affects people who cannot afford lawyers and other support networks who will work to keep them off of death row. As an individual with a more privileged identity, I have never had to wonder how this disparity would affect my own access to legal assistance. Because of my identity, I have been prone to view a court of law and its key players as models of fairness. This section, however, calls this notion into question by drawing attention to the systematic barriers that keep defendants and those who represent them from having access to resources that might help keep them off of death row.

Personal Connections

The personal connections I felt while reading Stevenson's piece were largely related to my past exposure to similar essays and pieces of literature about the death penalty. As outlined above, I thought about my experience and the emotions I felt while reading *Just Mercy* several times while reading this essay. Likewise, reflecting on the emotions I felt most frequently while reading — anger, frustration, discomfort — reminded me of past conversations I have had about the death penalty and other policies that I believe need reform. While I do think these connections, particularly my underlying discontent at the country's current political administration, made it easier for me to express and be confident in the emotions I felt while

reading, I do not think having an emotional reaction to begin with was solely dependent on having background knowledge and a longstanding opinion about the topic. The emotions I felt while reading often occurred before I closely dissected, analyzed, and reflected on specific passages. In other words, as I read the piece and thought more deeply about information I had previously been exposed to relating to capital punishment, my emotions intensified, but these personal connections were not a catalyst to feeling any emotions.

Empathy

Overall, I did not experience any strong empathetic reactions while reading Stevenson's piece. While I could certainly feel emotion when reading statistics and powerful argumentative statements, it was hard for me to place myself in the shoes of any specific individual affected by capital punishment. In reflecting on the statistics, for instance, I found myself thinking about the number of innocent people on death row and the number of racial minorities unjustly affected by the criminal justice system. While I certainly felt anger for their situations and sadness for what they face, it was difficult for me to imagine how I might feel in any given scenario. In this sense, my experience with reading Stevenson aligns with Bloom's hypothesis that empathy fails in many situations because it is individualized and only "connects us to particular individuals, real or imagined" (Bloom 15). As I will highlight in Chapter Three, this phenomenon occurred for all readers, as none of the five participants reported feeling empathy while reading Stevenson's essay. This is not to argue, however, that informative, data-driven writing cannot produce empathy. My participants and I are six of countless readers, so who is to say that reading statistics can never lead to empathy for those who face the realities of such statistics? In each of the other pieces I read, the empathy I felt was tied to having strong emotional reactions. While

this did not hold true for Stevenson's essay, reading his piece presents opportunities to reflect on the ways emotional responses can surface at different stages of the reading process and as a result of different forms of writing and narrative style.

Mumia Abu-Jamal

Mumia Abu-Jamal, an activist, essayist, journalist, and former Black Panther, was arrested in 1981 for the murder of a Philadelphia police officer. In 1982, he was convicted of this charge and sentenced to death. In 2011, however, he was removed from death row and sentenced to life in prison without parole. During his incarceration, Abu-Jamal has written extensively about life in prison and about the physical, mental, and emotional conditions faced by individuals on death row. Several of Abu-Jamal's observations were scheduled to air on an NPR segment in 1994, but legislators and police organizations launched protests against publicizing Abu-Jamal's work. His observations and commentaries were then published in 1995 in the book *Live from Death Row* ("Mumia Abu-Jamal").

My study features three short essays taken from this book: "The visit," "Legal outlaws: Bobby's battle for justice," and "A toxic shock," which were written in 1994, 1992, and 1989, respectively. While each of these essays is short in length, together they present substantial opportunities for exploring the possible conditions for and outcomes of empathetic reading as highlighted in Chapter One. In "The visit," Abu-Jamal introduces a scenario of being visited in prison by a girl who is presumably his daughter. "Legal outlaws: Bobby's battle for justice" outlines the story of Bobby Brightwell and his transformation from a man whom Abu-Jamal remembered as once being healthy and full of laughter and smiles to a man whose condition deteriorates as he is subjected to abuse at the hands of the criminal justice system. Lastly, "A

toxic shock” presents a scene in which everyone in the prison wakes up to find that all of their water smells like gasoline. In this story, Abu-Jamal outlines the response from the government to this scenario and his reflections on how this situation of having undrinkable water might be treated differently if it were to affect those with greater privilege on the outside of the prison.

Emotions

While reading Abu-Jamal’s writing, I experienced an emotional reaction to each of the three essays. With “The visit,” two key moments evoked sadness. First, when Abu-Jamal describes the moment he first sees his daughter after being away from her since she was a baby, he sets the emotional scene by writing:

She burst into the tiny visit room, her brown eyes aglitter with happiness; stopped, stunned, staring at the glassy barrier between us; and burst into tears at this arrogant attempt at state separation. In milliseconds, sadness and shock shifted into fury as her petite fingers curled into tight fists, which banged and pummeled the Plexiglas barrier, which shuddered and shimmied but didn’t shatter. (25)

In this section, Abu-Jamal takes readers through the motions of the experience, beginning with the hope of his daughter’s entrance — signaled by words such as “burst,” “aglitter” and “happiness” — to the “sadness and shock” of their separation, and finally to the “fury” at their inability to physically reconnect. Picturing a young girl who has “burst into tears” with “petite fingers curled into tight fists” made me feel especially sad, both for the innocent child’s helpless confusion and for Abu-Jamal’s despair at not being able to physically reunite with his own daughter. As I will outline later, this portion invited me to engage empathetically as I was placed directly into the scene. When Abu-Jamal writes that the barrier “didn’t shatter,” he illustrates that

reuniting with his daughter was impossible not only in the moment and in that specific room, but permanently because of the restrictions of the prison system, which contributed to my feeling of sharing in the helplessness of both characters. Abu-Jamal continues, stating that his daughter's "unspoken words echoed in my consciousness: 'Why *can't* I hug him? Why *can't* we kiss? Why *can't* I sit in his lap? *Why can't we touch?* Why not?'" (26). For me, these lines also produced an emotional response for both the father and the daughter. The repetition of a desperate and confused "why?" presented in his daughter's voice is nearly audible, and I felt despair for a child who is desperate for something as simple as a hug. The fact that these words "echoed" in Abu-Jamal's head also invited me to feel with Abu-Jamal; I felt the pain and despair that comes with his continual thinking about his daughter's innocence and confusion and the fact that he could do nothing to remedy her pain.

After describing a small joke he made to lighten up the situation, Abu-Jamal writes the following to conclude the scene: "... she uttered a parting poem that we used to say over the phone: 'I love you, I miss you, and when I see you, I'm gonna kiss you!' ... Over five years have passed since that visit, but I remember it like it was an hour ago" (26-27). Again, the presentation of both Abu-Jamal's voice and his daughter's voice allowed me to respond emotionally to both characters. The fact that this memory remains so vivid in Abu-Jamal's consciousness, "over five years" later, shows how important and emotional it was for him, which intensifies the sadness I felt for his situation. Additionally, the poem stated by the daughter and the mention of physical touch — "when I see you, I'm gonna kiss you!" — maintained my feelings of despair and helplessness as I wondered whether the father and daughter would ever get this chance to reunite. By explaining the hope, sadness, and frustration he and his daughter felt, through detailed descriptions of the glass shaking, his daughter crying, her words reverberating through his head,

and the memories that consistently “haunt” him, Abu-Jamal transported me into these same feelings of sadness and pain.

While the emotions I felt most strongly while reading “The Visit” were sadness and helplessness, when reading Bobby Brightwell’s story in “Legal outlaws: Bobby’s battle for justice,” I felt fear, anger, and frustration at the painful situation Brightwell is forced to undergo. Abu-Jamal’s description of Brightwell’s condition while he was on the witness stand at a 1992 trial in which he, as the defendant, brought claims of assault against prison staff is particularly painful to read. Brightwell appeared “... pale, listless, sickly, shrunken to nearly 150 pounds, a body bent on atrophy” (52). From this initial description, I was given insight into the intense physical damage that can be wrought by life in prison. Where Abu-Jamal began this story by illustrating the strength Brightwell once had, Abu-Jamal here creates a visceral image of Brightwell’s weakened condition that elicited an emotional response in which I felt upset and distressed about Brightwell’s health.

These emotions turned to fear while reading a description of one specifically harrowing incident. According to Abu-Jamal, Brightwell had been known for filing complaints against prison staff when they violated institutional rules. One April morning in 1992, Brightwell was randomly searched by these staff members, and the situation turned violent:

A lieutenant grabbed a baton and, using its tip like a dagger, jabbed Brightwell forcefully and repeatedly in his belly, knocking the wind out of the handcuffed captive. On his return to his cell, the sergeant intentionally slammed the metal cell gate into him, and when he made his way to the toilet, Brightwell vomited, and later urinated and defecated blood ... It wasn’t until April 13, three days later, that he saw a doctor, who briefly prescribed a liquid diet, but even now Bobby has difficulty keeping his food down. (54)

After this incident, Brightwell was returned to the restricted housing unit where he was attacked again. In describing these attacks, Abu-Jamal features grotesque details and violent imagery. The verbs he uses to describe the staff's actions — “grabbed,” “jabbed,” “knocking,” and “slammed,” — create a sense of frightening force that evoked my fear for Brightwell. The verbs which then outline Brightwell's reaction — “made his way,” “vomited,” “urinated,” and “defecated” — reveal the helplessness of Brightwell in this situation as he lost control over his own body. The themes of fear and powerlessness in this instance provided an opportunity for me to see how emotionally and physically devastating abuse is, which caused me to feel the kind of personal distress Keen discusses. However, as I will outline later, this personal distress did not hinder my ability to empathize, which goes against Keen's argument that personal distress “has no place in a literary theory of empathy” (Keen 5).

By the conclusion of this story, I once again returned to frequently felt emotions of frustration and sadness. Specifically, Abu-Jamal explains that while Brightwell was in court in 1992, he was found not guilty of assault and was acquitted of all of the charges against him. Even so, “When the verdict was returned, Brightwell didn't even smile. His mind probably was taken up with a picture of his tormentors, the guards, the well-paid civil servants, who stole all but his very life and who have never been charged with anything” (55). After reading about the abuse inflicted by the prison staff and then reading that they are “well-paid” and “have never been charged with anything,” I felt frustration towards the imbalance of power in this situation and sadness for Brightwell. Abu-Jamal's return to Brightwell's “smile,” which was featured in the introductory description as one of Brightwell's most prominent features before prison, also made reading this piece extremely difficult for me as I visualized a man who, by the end of this experience, was unable to elicit any physical sign of happiness. As a reader who has never felt

anything remotely close to this type of loss, I initially had difficulty imagining abstractly what this pain would feel like. But through the intensity of his descriptions and the disturbing images he crafts, Abu-Jamal encouraged me to confront this pain, to experience the terrifying forcefulness of being “grabbed,” “jabbed,” and “slammed.” As with “The Visit,” I felt placed into the scenes presented, which encouraged me to hear, feel, and interpret the same abuses of power forced upon Brightwell.

Finally, Abu-Jamal’s “A toxic shock” did not provoke a strong emotional response that I can describe in tangible words such as sadness, anger, or frustration; instead, this piece prompted me to reflect on my own position as someone who, unlike the prisoners who wake up to undrinkable water, has the resources to navigate these kinds of adversities. Throughout this story, rather than detail the scene and the reactions of the prisoners, Abu-Jamal focuses more heavily on his own reflections about this situation. This style of narration ultimately made it more difficult for me to connect emotionally with the characters in the story or to feel the kind of urgency and distress I might otherwise feel when reading data about how these situations are handled in prisons. For example, when reading the lines: “Water, I ruminate. How sweet. How we take this stuff for granted. It appears this water problem is more than prisonwide; civilian communities, sharing the same water source, are also affected,” (61) I was prompted to think about a time when a resource in my own life became unavailable — during a power outage, for example — and then, to imagine how this experience would have felt different if I had been incarcerated.

My reflection was furthered when reading Abu-Jamal’s contemplation on the commonalities between readers and the subject of the essay. “Despite the legal illusions erected by the system to divide and separate life,” he argues, “we the caged share air, water, and hope

with you, the not-yet-caged. We share your same breath” (62). In this statement, what is shared becomes more significant than what is different. Life itself is not possible without air, water, hope, and breath, and Abu-Jamal suggests that these things should not be taken away from individuals based on incarceration. Readers must confront the underlying humanity of all people. Recognizing that, even with these commonalities, my experiences with adversity are vastly different from those who are incarcerated, this moment of reading led me to consider Keen’s idea of character identification. As I will discuss later in this chapter, despite recognizing these differences among our experiences and attempting to understand how I might feel if I were to be incarcerated while facing the situation described in “A toxic shock,” I was unable to feel empathy while reading. Instead, this story struck me most powerfully in its meditative nature, encouraging me to deepen my familiarity with the characters’ plight.

Personal Connections

As with Stevenson’s piece, while reading Abu-Jamal’s pieces, I did not feel significant personal connections to the readings. The majority of the connections I made to Abu-Jamal’s stories related to my own background knowledge about the death penalty. While reading, I found myself connecting the stories to my knowledge about the realities of the criminal justice system, rather than relating characters to people I know in my own life or associating certain scenes with experiences I have had. Nonetheless, as I will discuss in the next section, having few personal connections to the readings did not hinder my ability to empathize.

Empathy

I experienced empathy while reading “The visit” and “Legal outlaws: Bobby’s Battle for Justice.” While my empathetic response to both of these stories was supported by Abu-Jamal’s writing style and ability to place readers directly into the scene, aspects of each reading made me empathize with characters for different reasons. First, I felt empathy for both Abu-Jamal and his daughter while reading “The visit.” Abu-Jamal’s first-person narration made it easier for me to place myself into his shoes and to visualize his thought process. His visceral descriptions of his daughter’s confusion and pain, however, also translated into my own empathetic reaction as I could craft a precise image of how she might have been feeling in the story and I could use this image to feel empathy for her emotional state. While the first-person narration is present in all of Abu-Jamal’s pieces, it felt particularly striking in this essay as it presents a descriptive account of an emotional scene between a father and a daughter. The combination of Abu-Jamal’s descriptions and his use of first-person made it easy for me to experience empathy for both characters. My response seems to affirm Keen’s claim that “narrative situation” plays a role in empathetic responses to reading, as “purely externalized narration tends not to invite readers’ empathy” (Keen 97). Even though I have never experienced a situation in which I could not reunite with a relative as close to me as my own father, I could empathize with both Abu-Jamal and his daughter’s emotional state. Thus, Keen’s idea of “character identification” also manifested in my reading experience.

Bobby Brightwell’s story presents another instance with which I have little personal experience: violent abuse at the hands of prison guards. While reading this story, I certainly felt a sense of the “personal distress” that Keen discusses. Diverging from her hypothesis, however, I found that this distress did not make it difficult or impossible for me to empathize with Brightwell. The story was initially extremely distressing to read because its details of being

tortured and ignored by medical professionals made me think about the terror I would feel if I were being subjected to this treatment in my own life. While I was reading this essay, my empathetic response was initially overshadowed by the piece's grotesque detail. At first blush, my reaction seemed to reaffirm Keen's assertion that personal distress can lead to moments of disengagement. It seemed impossible for me to know what being beaten by prison guards would feel like. As I kept reading, however, I found Abu-Jamal's narration pulling me into the scene, and I realized that my initial internal distance from empathy was a result of my shock at being thrown into a violent, despair-filled scene to which I had no previous physical exposure. By thinking about Brightwell's situation and attempting to break down my worry that it was unjust to even attempt to understand what his experience was like, I was able to consider what it *might* feel like for anyone to be subjected to such mistreatment. For me, this consideration was where empathy could begin to take hold. Rather than dissuading me from connecting with the story, my personal distress led to a moment of intense and challenging engagement with the text.

Lastly, when I read "A toxic shock," it was difficult for me to feel empathy. This story did not present any characters with whom I could engage. Instead, much like with Stevenson's piece, reading this story caused me to reflect on my own emotional and personal connections to the readings. These reflections were moments of "imaginative exercise" and "mentalization," terms outlined by Galgut to explain how thinking about the emotions of individuals with life experiences different from our own can lead to reflection on one's own emotional state and behavior. I diverge from Galgut's claims about these ideas, however, as she posits that "empathy is an aspect of mentalization" (Galgut 50). I did not need to feel empathy in order to experience the kind of self-reflection that Galgut argues can result from reading. I employed a form of "imaginative exercise" in order to consider how I might feel if I faced a situation of having no

clean drinking water while incarcerated, and in doing so, I reflected on my own privileges and access to resources. I experienced these reflections without fully empathizing with the characters whose emotional states I attempted to understand. This does not mean that I failed to connect with the characters; rather, my experience illustrates one of many complications with theorizing how empathy is stimulated by reading. Additionally, considering that the empathy I felt for certain portions of Abu-Jamal's essays and certain characters he describes manifested for different reasons (narrative form, character identification, reflecting on personal distress), it begins to become clear that broad arguments about empathy and reading cannot encompass the many possibilities under which readers might experience an empathetic reaction.

Sister Helen Prejean

Sister Helen Prejean is a Roman Catholic nun who has been a key player in the movement seeking to abolish the death penalty. Her work in this area began in 1981 when she became a pen pal with Elmo Patrick (Pat) Sonnier, a man on death row in Louisiana. Her book *Dead Man Walking: An Eyewitness Account of the Death Penalty in the United States* was published in 1994. The book outlines her experiences serving as a spiritual advisor to both Sonnier and another man on death row, Robert Willie. The book was nominated for a Pulitzer Prize and reached the number one spot on the *New York Times* best seller list ("Sister Helen Prejean"). My study features the first seven pages and final ten pages of Chapter Four of the book, which describe the final days before Pat Sonnier's execution. I chose to include Sister Helen's writing in my study because it features explicit and intentional detail that allows readers to place themselves directly within the scenarios Sister Helen describes, thereby offering opportunities to examine the relationships among setting, space, narration, and empathy.

Emotions

While reading Sister Helen's piece, I felt a variety of emotions, including confusion, fear, concern, discomfort, anxiety, sadness, and uneasiness. From the beginning of the chapter, I felt a sense of confusion when reading about an exchange of letters that was part of an attempt to prove Pat's innocence before his execution. Sister Helen explains how Pat's brother Eddie gave her a letter to the Governor asking the state to pardon Pat for his crime and take him off death row. Eddie's letter explains that "you're about to kill the wrong man ... I'm the one who killed the teenagers" (69). Reading about Pat's supposed innocence primed me to feel fear and concern for Pat throughout the chapter, since he is one of the many people included in Stevenson's statistic about innocent individuals on death row.

After this scene, Sister Helen leaves the prison visiting area and is driven by a guard to see Pat in what she calls "the death house" (71). Picturing a "house," a setting I often associate with comfort, as a place where individuals are taken to be killed was extremely jarring, and this moment intensified my fear for Pat. My emotions turned towards discomfort as I read Sister Helen's description of the landscape of this "house":

Across the front of the building in four neatly painted cans are geraniums, brilliant red. Just across the road, ducks swim in a lagoon. In front of the glass doors at the entrance sits a blue-uniformed guard with a rifle across his lap ... to the extreme left of the visitor room is a white metal door with no window. I know that this door is always kept locked. Behind it is the electric chair. Everything is very clean. The tile floors are highly polished. The paint on the wall looks fresh (72).

In the first statement, the setting is almost idyllic. If it were unknown to me that this is a prison, the images of “neatly painted” decorations with bright flowers and of ducks in a lagoon would evoke associations with a natural, more peaceful setting. However, by suddenly contrasting this description with an image of a guard sitting with a rifle, Sister Helen reminded me, instead, of the unnerving, frightening place she is entering. In the second statement, the contrast between the image of the electric chair and the descriptions of a “very clean,” “highly polished,” “fresh” building are even more unnerving, causing me to consider how the anxieties surrounding death row are often masked by a superficial, false sense of order and stability. Sister Helen’s descriptions of the orderly, “clean” aspects of “the death house” seem to be intended to provoke readers such as myself to confront the more disturbing aspects of the setting. The discomfort I felt while reading about this setting ultimately contributed to the emotions I was feeling towards Pat. Knowing that Pat was to be executed in a place hidden beneath false images of cleanliness and freshness made me feel doubtful about the validity of his (or anyone who enters the death house’s) execution, and made me more fearful that his situation was indeed based on a false conviction.

Once Sister Helen sees Pat, she explains the shift in her emotions as she anticipates his anxieties about his death, and her narration here likewise caused my emotions to shift towards a focus on her experience. She writes:

I have been calm until now, but seeing him here in this place, I feel my stomach muscles tighten ... I pray, *Please, God, don't let him break down.* I don't know what I will do if he starts to sob or shake or struggle against the guards. I remember in the newspaper account of his arrest that he had urinated on himself from fright. I try to be upbeat. (72-73)

The alliteration used to describe Sister Helen's worries that Pat will "start to sob or shake or struggle" gives a sense of urgency to the emotions both characters may be feeling. Imagining what it would feel like to witness a human sobbing, shaking, or struggling in a space that is in close proximity to the machine about to kill them made me feel sadness and anxiety not only for Pat, but for Sister Helen and the difficulty she would certainly face in trying to comfort Pat. Reading the phrase "I try to be upbeat" also contributed to the anxiety I felt for Sister Helen in her attempts to remain positive during such a heartbreaking experience.

In the last ten pages of the chapter, Prejean takes readers through the final 24 hours before Pat's execution. This section begins with Pat's final meal and a letter he writes to his brother. The letter reads: "Don't worry about me, I'll be okay. You keep your cool, it's the only way you'll make it in this place. When you get out someday, take care of Mama. Remember the promise you made to me. I love you. Your big brother" (89). Reading this letter as an individual with a close relationship to my own siblings, I was filled with sadness and uneasiness as I tried to imagine how I might feel if I were the one writing or receiving these words. Pat's tone is loving and forgiving, and it is an example of sibling support that is common in my own life. As I will explain later in this section, this moment of having a strong emotional response to the reading was supported by my own personal connection to my family, which ultimately played into the sense of empathy I felt while reading this letter.

This portion of the chapter continues as Sister Helen meticulously walks readers through the steps taken to prepare for Pat's execution. At the end of the chapter, she describes the moment of execution. Following an emotional build-up, she articulates: "Then the prison doctor, who has been sitting with the witnesses, goes to the body in the chair and lifts the mask and raises the eyelids and shines the light of a small flashlight into the eyes and raises up the clean

white shirt and puts his stethoscope against the heart and listens and then says to the warden that, yes, this man is dead” (94). The momentum created by detailing this moment in a single, long sentence left me feeling flustered and like I was holding one long breath for the entire sequence. At this point in the chapter, I had already experienced feeling anxious, scared, confused, uneasy, and sad for the situation both Pat and Sister Helen were faced with. In reading Sister Helen’s visceral description of the moments after Pat’s execution, my own emotions culminated in a cloud of sadness — a helpless sense that “wow, that really did just happen.” Additionally, the impersonal nature of the prison doctor working swiftly and bluntly to declare “this man is dead” contributed to my feelings of discomfort when reading about the superficially “clean” and organized aspects of the setting. In comparison to the other selections of literature chosen for my study, I felt the strongest emotional reactions while reading Sister Helen’s piece. Being taken through the final moments leading up to someone’s death felt overwhelming, almost intrusive. Her writing forced me to confront my own discomfort and to recognize the ways in which my relationships to those I hold dear contributed to the intense sadness I felt for Pat and for Sister Helen as she tried to salvage Pat’s humanity in the face of a brutal system.

Personal Connections

As outlined above, the moment during this reading that struck me at a personal level involved Pat’s letter to his brother. While reading this letter, I thought about my relationship to my own siblings, which intensified the sadness I felt both for Pat and his brother in having to communicate about taking care of their mother after Pat’s death. Ultimately, this personal connection contributed to my ability to feel empathy for Pat in this scene. In reading all the selected pieces of literature, this was the only moment in which I felt a personal connection to

the reading that had to do with my own life experiences rather than the knowledge I've obtained about the death penalty. My empathy, however, was not stronger in this moment than it was in other moments of reading. The fact that I experienced empathy both with and without having some kind of similar experience to the characters highlights the complicated nature of empathy and the conditions that foster it.

Empathy

In *Dead Man Walking*, the empathy I felt for Pat occurred during a moment of personal engagement with the reading as I was presented with an image of Pat writing a heartbreaking and final letter to his brother. Imagining the possibility of myself being in this situation, specifically by considering the effects this process would have on both me and my siblings, I was able to step into Pat's shoes and feel the despair he must have experienced. Additionally, reading about the conditions of the "death house" and the room in which Pat was executed allowed me to be placed directly into the scene and to empathize by sharing the anxiety and uneasiness this setting forced onto Pat and Sister Helen.

My empathy for Sister Helen emerged most powerfully while I was reading the scene in which she described her fears that Pat would break down and she would be unable to fully comfort him. While reading this passage, I empathized with the care and concern Sister Helen expressed towards Pat — when she described feeling her "stomach muscles tighten" I likewise imagined how my body would react with discomfort and despair if I witnessed someone facing execution. Additionally, Sister Helen's detailed descriptions throughout the piece made it easier for me to empathize with both her and Pat. Similar to the visceral descriptions used by Abu-Jamal in stories such as "The visit" and "Legal outlaws: Bobby's battle for justice," the rhetorical

devices used in Sister Helen's work made me feel as if I were going through the motions with her, taking in every sight, sound, and smell of the prison and "death house." Keen's ideas of narrative situation again manifested in my reading of *Dead Man Walking*.

At the end of this chapter in *Dead Man Walking*, as I read about the moments after Pat is executed, I found it difficult to experience empathy in the ways I experienced it during earlier descriptions of the activities and conversations Pat and Sister Helen performed. While I certainly felt a sense of personal distress reading about Pat's execution, I am reluctant to say that this, as Keen would hypothesize, is what led me to limited feelings of empathy. Instead, I began to wonder: Is it possible to experience empathy towards someone who is about to die, or who is dead? How can one place oneself in the shoes of someone sitting in the electric chair without knowing what death feels like? If it is nearly impossible to understand the emotions of someone preparing to die, then, when one feels empathy towards people on death row, what aspect of these people or their experiences is actually empathized with? In the context of my own experience as a reader, I've shown that one does not need shared experience with a character in order to feel empathy for them. Still, by the time Pat reached the electric chair, I found that I could not claim that I could understand what he must have been feeling in that moment. Even so, I am only one reader, and the way I experience the texts featured in my study may vastly differ from the way other readers respond to these same texts. It would be remiss of me to claim that experiencing empathy for someone who is about to die is impossible, as predicting the ways in which empathy manifests in readers is impractical and ineffective.

While tracing my own responses to the selected death penalty texts, several insights have emerged for me that relate to the context of this study as a whole. My own reading experiences interact with assertions made by the scholars I highlight in Chapter One in a variety of ways.

While I noticed narrative situation, character identification, mentalization, and personal connections to the readings having an effect upon my emotional reactions to the texts, my empathy related to these concepts in more complex ways than the scholars would have predicted. For example, I did not need empathy to experience Galgut's conception of mentalization, and personal distress did not hinder my ability to empathize, as Keen would otherwise argue. These interactions shed light on reasons why generalizations about empathy and reading are problematic. As I move into a study of five readers' responses to these same texts, I position myself in a way that is keenly aware of the issues with these generalizations. By understanding that my own responses to the readings are varied and individualized, I help prepare myself to recognize and acknowledge the many unique, unexpected, and perhaps difficult to understand ways in which my interviewees will discuss their reactions to death penalty literature.

Chapter Three: Witnessing Inconclusiveness: Conversations with Five Readers

There's something about the ability for both sides to be heard that feels just to me.

- Chloe

I entered this project curious about the ways in which reading death penalty literature might lead to a manifestation of empathy. Having offered my own analysis and responses to the Stevenson, Abu-Jamal, and Sister Helen pieces, I will now share responses from five students who read the same pieces: Anna, Beth, Chloe, Daniel, and Evelyn. Speaking with five readers has left me with results about reading and empathy that are far from conclusive. While my own responses to the readings seemed natural to me, talking to other readers quickly reminded me that all experiences with reading differ. I have gathered a wide range of emotional and empathetic reactions that are deeply individualized and personal to each reader. As such, my study challenges current literary studies that posit reading and empathy as a black-and-white, “this will happen or this will not happen” experience. My research argues that experiencing empathy as a result of reading is a complicated, messy, context-specific process that is impossible to reduce to generalized predictions or hypotheses. Each participant brought different experiences, backgrounds, and interests to the table and thus left their reading experiences feeling different things towards different characters for different reasons.

In this chapter, I discuss each individual reader, outlining important and unexpected portions of our conversations, in order to illustrate the similarities and the many differences between each participant's responses. Organizing the chapter in this way helps to show how difficult it is to uncover a pattern among readers' emotional and empathetic reactions, and — in turn — how difficult it is to make an argument about the likelihood that empathy will occur when reading. Within each reader's section, I discuss the three core components of each

conversation: readers' emotional responses, readers' personal connections to the readings, and readers' self-defined empathetic responses. When I report on readers' empathy, I discuss moments in which readers self-reported feeling empathy. As such, I trust readers when they self-identified this response. As in Chapter Two, I weave empathy throughout each of the first two components and return to it at the end of each reader's section to discuss the readings and characters which did (or did not) spur an empathetic reaction. I ultimately demonstrate how difficult it is to draw generalized conclusions about empathy, and, therefore, why it is problematic to discuss empathy as a sort of worldwide phenomenon dissociated from context and the individuals who experience it.

Reader 1: Beth

Emotions

Beth was the second reader with whom I spoke, and we met for the first time early into the winter semester on a typically cold, brisk January morning. In our initial conversation, Beth offered her general knowledge about the death penalty: it is applied for convictions such as murder, it is not used frequently, and not all states allow it. She seemed unsure of her opinion towards capital punishment, but landed on "supportive, under very strict reason, like murders, terrorism." When I asked her about her feelings towards people on death row, Beth stated: "I get kind of sad thinking about it, but it's sort of overpowered by they deserve it because of all the bad things they did ... but then again the only death penalties that I've known about are people who have murdered a bunch of people or done really bad things to those people." Beth's responses in this first meeting were hesitant, but by our second meeting, she expressed her emotions quickly and confidently. In her two-and-a-half minute response to my first question —

“What was your experience of reading these pieces?” — Beth used the phrase “eye-opening” five times, and some form of the word “angry” five times. She was responding to Stevenson’s piece, and she, like myself and most other participants, highlighted the statistics that stood out to her while reading. Expressing anger about the fact that minorities and poor individuals are more likely to be sentenced to death row, she stated, “I didn’t like any of it ... I couldn’t believe that these things (are) allowed to happen.”

As we progressed through our conversation, Beth continually returned to her emotional reactions, describing her emotions with the following words and phrases: “sad,” “shocking,” “distressing,” “disbelief,” “I did have to take a little break,” “I really had to sit back and think for a moment,” “incredulous to believe,” “hard to understand,” “horrible,” “devastating to read,” “hit deep,” “can’t fathom,” “can’t understand,” “afraid,” and “a lot more interest.” As I will show throughout this chapter, every reader used the word “sad” at least once. For Beth, her sadness occurred when reading Abu-Jamal’s stories, particularly “The visit.” She connected her sadness to the “barrier between” the father and daughter and to “family members viewing the other person on the other side.”

Beth also brought up emotions of distress and anger several times in her reactions to Abu-Jamal’s pieces, specifically “Legal outlaws: Bobby’s battle for justice.” Distress is an emotion I was particularly interested in when I began my study, as I considered Suzanne Keen’s argument which posits that this emotion makes it more likely readers will disengage from reading and, as a result, not experience empathy. Considering the violent depictions of abuse included in Bobby Brightwell’s story, I posed the following question to Beth (which I asked all readers, with slight wording variations): “Some scholars have suggested that when people read about physically painful things, we feel distress and we shut down and can’t read anymore, or we

find it harder to connect with what we're reading about. To what extent, if any, was that true for you while you were reading?" For Beth, Keen's hypothesis proved partially true. While she did state that "visualizing (Bobby's) transformation was shocking to me and I found this one to be the most distressing and I did have to take a little break because there was just a slight disbelief," Beth never indicated that her ability to empathize was hindered. Instead, as I will discuss in greater detail later in this chapter, she responded to a subsequent question about empathy by stating that she felt Bobby's defeat and empathized with him. Beth, like me, felt distress and shock, but these emotions did not hinder her ability to empathize.

In addition to discussing anger in response to Stevenson's piece, Beth referred to this emotion several times when discussing Abu-Jamal's pieces. She explained that when she read *A Toxic Shock*, the comparison between the incarcerated individual's experiences with undrinkable water and the hypothetical white woman's experience with undrinkable water caused her to feel anger. "It was just really angering to see that they didn't really care much for these people," she said. "Even though they were in jail, which I understand, but they're still people." Later, when I asked if any specific moments, characters, or portions of the readings made her feel a certain way, she again discussed Bobby Brightwell: "It was just completely angering to see all that he went through and trial to trial and then finally being free, but his assailants never getting charged with anything."

Finally, Beth brought up anger again at the end of our interview as she referred back to Stevenson's piece. "I'm probably never going to forget those statistics," she said. "It's probably made me a lot angrier at the system, that's probably going to stay." Because Beth, earlier in our conversation, stated that the statistic about the number of innocent people on death row provoked "a lot more interest in figuring out what made these people come to those conclusions," I pushed

the conversation further in the direction of the statistical nature of Stevenson's piece, curious to find out more about Beth's take on this rhetorical tool. Describing her experience of reading the statistics, Beth stated that "usually it's a number but when it's attached to really personal things it (is) just very shocking to see and very angering." However, as I will highlight throughout this chapter, the statistical aspect of Stevenson's piece did not always provoke anger among readers. In terms of Sister Helen's piece, Beth mentioned that Pat's story was "intensely devastating" and "really sad." As I will highlight later in this section, Beth connected these emotions to empathy, as she did with the distress she felt from reading Bobby Brightwell's story, stating that she "felt the sadness that (Pat) must've been feeling." She also explained that reading this piece through Sister Helen's eyes provided a "good perspective because you're not being pushed; you're just being told facts ... she's not pushing towards one way or the other. She's just saying what's happening." For Beth, the first-person narration had an impact on her reading experience, but, in contrast to Keen's hypothesis, this impact did not lead to feelings of emotional or empathetic connections with Sister Helen as the narrator.

Among the main emotions that Beth and I discussed—sadness, distress, and anger—each played a role in her self-defined experience of empathy. While Beth discussed a variety of emotions throughout our conversation, she most frequently brought up these three emotions, in addition to shock. As I hope to make clear, the emotions of sadness, distress, and anger were not always the most pertinent among readers, and, even if they were, they were not always related to empathy.

Personal Connections

Throughout our conversations, particularly in our second meeting, Beth made several references to her personal life and to information she's absorbed about crime and the death penalty in other contexts. Specifically, she discussed movies and television series about crime, media depictions of crime, and her own experiences as a person of color and as someone with a family member who has been arrested and has faced the realities of the criminal justice system. Most relevant to our conversation about her empathy were her remarks about her own personal and family history. These remarks surfaced when I asked the following question: "To what extent, if any, did you feel personal connections to anything you were reading?" Beth explained that "The visit" "hit really personal" as she thought about the recent arrest of one of her family members. She was not present during their court proceedings, and explained, "I (was not) in my hometown watching all this happening and I (didn't) feel the separation, but when I went back home I did feel the separation." She related this separation to that of the young girl separated from her father in "The visit." Additionally, Beth briefly discussed how reading Stevenson's piece as a person of color affected her. She stated that reading "the statistics of people of color also hit personal as someone who is of color and having to always take (this) into consideration. Maybe I won't have it as bad just because I'm not a male person of color but also thinking about the male people of color who do have it bad, it's always there in your mind."

To see if there was a relationship between these personal connections and the intensity of her reading experiences, I asked Beth if she thought her personal connections caused "The visit" and Stevenson's article to affect her more deeply than the other pieces. She responded no, explaining that Sister Helen's piece, for example, still affected her deeply because it was "intensely devastating" and evoked sadness, even though she felt no personal connection to Pat or any other character in the story. She then hypothesized that if she knew someone on death

row, she would have had an “even more intense feeling” about the readings. Still, Beth asserted that even though the stories with which she felt a personal connection “did hit” her, “just because they were more personal didn’t mean that I didn’t definitely feel a lot of emotion when I was reading the other ones where people were abused or on death row.” Similarly, as I will show in the next section, having a personal connection to a particular character or story did not equate to experiencing empathy.

Empathy

With the other four readers, I brought up questions about empathy after they had already discussed the concept (whether briefly or extensively), asking them to clarify or elaborate. With Beth, however, I asked about empathy rather directly because we had danced around the concept and alluded to it throughout the interview. Before I asked this question — “Do you feel like you felt empathy while you were reading?”— Beth alluded to empathy with her response to “The visit.” She never explicitly named empathy as a reaction she had towards the girl separated from her father in this story, but after describing her family member’s arrest, she explained, “I could just place myself in these shoes where I could definitely easily see myself as being the one on the other side of the glass just crying and wondering, he didn’t do anything bad, why is he behind that glass?” I identify this moment in my conversation with Beth as empathy because the language of placing oneself in another’s shoes is a common phrase used to express empathy. Beth’s empathy was related to a personal connection — here, her empathy and character identification were based on shared experience.

While her own personal experiences made empathy easier in the context of discussing “The visit,” Beth herself stated, “I don’t think whether it was personal or not had that much of an

effect.” Her hypothesis proved to be true when she responded to my direct question about empathy, as she explained that she felt empathy for Pat in Sister Helen’s piece and for Bobby Brightwell in Abu-Jamal’s piece. “I definitely felt empathetic towards the person on death row,” she said. With these two characters, Beth tied her emotional reactions, sadness and defeat, to her empathetic reactions. She explained that reading about Pat’s attempts to bring humor to the situation and to smile for Sister Helen “made me really sad surface-level-wise but it even made me really sad internally ... it’s kind of hard not to feel his sadness.” For Bobby, Beth likewise felt his defeat, stating that it’s difficult not to “feel Bobby’s defeat after everything that’s happened to him ... I’m never going to be in these situations but I could still feel their defeat and their sadness.” Here, unlike with “The visit,” Beth expressed empathy without a personal connection and from a perspective distanced from the experiences of Bobby and Pat. Beth’s reading responses thus confirm Keen’s hypothesis that readers can identify with characters even without shared experiences. Her emotional responses, specifically sadness and defeat, related to her empathy, but her empathy was not predicated on personal connections. My conversations with Beth thus illuminate the complexity of empathy and its relationship to emotions and experience.

Reader 2: Chloe

Emotions

The first time I met Chloe, she, like Beth, seemed uncertain when answering my questions about information she already knew about the death penalty and about her opinion on the topic. She was aware of the fact that use of the death penalty has decreased in recent years but was unsure about specific crimes that lead to a death row sentence or if the death penalty is

even administered at all. “I feel kind of horrible that I don’t know these things,” she said. Chloe’s opinion about the death penalty was “leaning towards opposing” it, and her feelings about those on death row summed up to feeling “a little bad, it’s unfortunate, and to know that you’re going to be killed, it seems very painful, but at the same time I’m sure a lot of them are deserving of that pain. I don’t know, it’s so complicated ... It depends on the crime, I guess.” In our second meeting, however, Chloe said that while reading the first paragraph of Stevenson’s piece, her “mind completely switched.” Where she was uncertain during our first interview about her feelings or reactions to capital punishment, after reading she “felt kind of a call to action.” Chloe attributed this feeling partially to Stevenson’s point that support or indifference towards capital punishment is a result of limited knowledge about or experience with the topic (Stevenson 77). “We can’t live in this way that’s like ‘it’s all about me and I’m just going to ignore ... people who are in lower income areas or are racial minorities that are getting severely mistreated,” she said.

Throughout our second conversation, Chloe used words and phrases similar to those Beth used to describe her emotional reactions, including “sadness,” “disgust,” “disturbed,” “disturbed in a dissociated way,” “shocked,” “anger,” “upset,” “heartbreaking,” “we are not so different,” and “ridiculous.” When I asked Beth to describe specific emotions or thoughts she remembered having while reading, and whether her emotions were different with each piece, she initially used an example from Stevenson’s writing to pinpoint her reaction. “It’s kind of hard to explain,” she said. “I put a lot of exclamation points when I was just shocked about something next to a fact or the way that something was framed, like when Stevenson writes the reality is that capital punishment in America is a lottery and ... the people without capital get punishment. An emotion to describe that was just anger. Definitely anger.” Later in our conversation, when I

asked Chloe if her feelings towards people on death row had changed since our first meeting, she said they “definitely” had and used Stevenson’s statistics to substantiate this shift. “One in every eight of these people are not even guilty, I mean that’s ridiculous,” she said. For Chloe, the statistical nature of Stevenson’s piece gave context for understanding the personal narratives of Abu-Jamal and Sister Helen, which she explained “got more at the emotional side and the reality of the statistics.”

Chloe highlighted each of Abu-Jamal’s pieces, using the phrases “sad” and “upsetting” to describe each. Discussing “The visit” reminded Chloe of a specific line that was “heartbreaking” to read: the daughter saying, “I love you, I miss you, and when I see you, I’m gonna kiss you!” (26) to her father behind the glass barrier. For Bobby Brightwell’s story, Chloe felt “disturbed” by the abuse Bobby faced despite being innocent of the crimes for which the guards targeted him. After Chloe described feeling disturbed while reading Bobby’s story, I asked her the question I asked all participants regarding whether they felt personal distress and an inability to empathize while reading physically violent or grotesque scenes. Beth had to take a mental break during this piece, but Chloe did not. The distressing nature of this story, she explained, did not hinder her ability to empathize or to have a strong reaction towards Bobby’s situation.

While Chloe did, as I will explain later, feel empathy for several of the main characters in Abu-Jamal’s stories, she also said that several minor characters in the readings stood out to her in her memory. In Sister Helen’s piece, for example, the prison guards who are assigned to work in the towers, staring at the yard for long, mundane hours, stuck with her. “It’s like everybody’s a prisoner to this strange system.” The housewife described in *A Toxic Shock* evoked similar feelings because the comparison of her situation to those in the described prison “shows that in a way we are not so different. We, the people outside of prisons, are not so different from the

people inside of prisons, and we're all, like I said, contained and suffering from some common things." While Chloe didn't use explicit or concrete words to explain emotions she felt towards these characters, the fact that she recounted their stories and how she reflected upon them is significant. Chloe did not, however, express feeling empathy towards these characters. In Chloe's case, then, empathy did align with emotional phrases and words — she described her reaction to main characters for whom she felt empathy (the little girl in "The visit" and Bobby Brightwell) in emotional phrases, but she merely used reflectional phrases to describe her non-empathetic reactions to minor characters. As I will outline later, Chloe was not the only participant who felt some kind of connection to or fascination with minor characters. The phenomenon of reporting both no emotional reaction and no empathetic reaction to these characters, however, was unique to Chloe, revealing another complexity in the relationship between emotions and empathy.

Personal Connections

The first time Chloe discussed any personal connections to the readings occurred after she had highlighted the empathy she felt towards certain characters. As such, I asked her, "To what extent, if any, did you feel personal connections to what you were reading? Did you feel empathy as a completely distanced outsider or as someone with personal connections to the readings?" Chloe described how her father, whose family is Persian and Iranian, immigrated to the United States at the age of 18 and faced racism both inside and outside of the workplace. Chloe has witnessed the difficulties her dad still faces today because of his racial identity. At his current company, she explained, it is difficult for him "to get to the position that he deserves, that he works so hard to be in. They keep him in the same place because the way that things are

constructed. Everybody else in the office is white or European and my dad's Middle Eastern." Because of her family's experiences in comparison to the experiences of those who have more privilege, she said, she felt "a small" personal connection to Stevenson's piece and his discussion of the way racial bias shapes the criminal justice system.

Chloe did not report any connection between her own personal experiences and empathy. As I will discuss in the next section, she sometimes questioned her empathetic reactions because of her preconceived doubts about people who commit crimes, but she did not relate her own family and personal experiences to her experience of feeling empathy. In other small moments throughout our conversation, Chloe explained how the readings reminded her of concepts such as Buddhism and karma, and also compared the Larry Nassar trials, which included victims' testimony, to Stevenson's point about the importance of personal narratives. "It's really interesting how they handled that," she said. "How it was broadcasted live and all of the victims' voices were heard, and then there were small moments where he spoke and I feel like ... there's something about the ability for both sides to be heard that feels just to me." In this example, Chloe drew connections between her own perception of current events and the arguments or main points she took away from Stevenson's article. This comparison represents a personal connection, and while such moments seemed to draw her closer to the piece in terms of her engagement, her empathy was not contingent on having these connections.

Empathy

Chloe's empathy seemed detached from personal experience but vivid with emotion. As I highlighted earlier, Chloe reported feeling empathy for several of Abu-Jamal's main characters — specifically, she empathized with Bobby Brightwell and the man in "The visit" (a deviation

from Beth, who empathized with the daughter in this story). Chloe first described her empathy for Bobby Brightwell when she answered my question about distress and an inability to empathize. “I did feel a strong sense of empathy,” she said, but she also explained that she felt prompted to discuss this issue because of my question. “Now that I have empathy and the thought of being empathetic in my mind from the question and I’m looking this over, I feel even more empathetic and like I could have felt more empathy, but I definitely felt some, a decent degree.” Bobby’s story, which Chloe earlier reacted to with the words “upsetting” and “disturbed,” evoked empathy for Chloe as it did for Beth, as they both pictured Bobby being weakened after initially seeing him as “some tough, mean guy.” For “The visit,” however, Chloe empathized with the father and explained that this empathy was because of “the very specific words he chose to describe his daughter with her ‘petite fingers curled into tight fists.’ Being very deliberate and specific about the words that he was using to paint a really specific picture evoked empathy for me.” This instance reaffirms Keen’s assertion that “the very start of a narrative can evoke empathy at the mere gesture of naming and quick situating” (69). In other words, the details of Abu-Jamal’s writing allowed Chloe to feel closer to the scene, and thus, narrative situation contributed to her empathy. This was a phenomenon that I also experienced while reading “The visit.” In terms of *Dead Man Walking*, Chloe said that she felt confused by this text because of the many characters who were introduced. While these peripheral characters were interesting to her, they ultimately distracted her from feeling a strong sense of empathy while reading. However, with Abu-Jamal’s pieces, Chloe explained, “how concise these were and how visceral they were, I felt more empathetic.”

Chloe’s empathy was related strongly to Abu-Jamal’s word choice and descriptions of his characters, but was not, unlike Beth, related to her own personal experience with the topics

discussed in “The visit” and “Legal outlaws: Bobby’s battle for justice.” Towards the end of our conversation, however, Chloe took an interesting turn as she began to question her empathy for Bobby and the man in “The visit”:

I forget what exactly they were on death row for or incarcerated for, and there’s just a little small voice in me that’s like but do you trust them? Like why should I trust them and why should I empathize for them? What did they do? ... What if they’re a Nazi? I always think what if they’re a Nazi? Because to me a Nazi is the worst person that you can be and I just, do I have empathy for, can I have empathy for a Nazi? That to me is the same, is equivalent to can I have empathy for a murderer.

These substantial questions are important to ask in the context of empathy, and I was glad that Chloe raised them. Several other participants expressed hesitation when discussing empathy for people on death row, primarily for moral reasons. For example, before describing her empathy and the way she felt Bobby and Pat’s sadness, Beth mentioned a similar concern. “It’s just such a hard topic,” she said. “I feel like you shouldn’t feel empathetic for people who did something, like I think they murdered people.” Similar questions also surfaced in my own reading of the texts, as I wondered whether I could empathize with people who are nearing death. These comments represent moments of meta-cognition and mentalization for us, as outlined by Galgut; in experiencing empathy for these characters, Chloe, Beth, and I questioned our own emotions and empathetic responses. This is not to say that our reflections became disengaged — while Chloe and Beth maintained that they still felt empathy in the midst of these questions, I recognized that I did not. These differences highlight another complexity, specifically in the ways individual readers think about their own empathy.

Reader 3: Evelyn

Emotions

In our initial interview, Evelyn, the youngest of the five readers, told me that in eighth grade, she conducted a research report on the death penalty. She came into our meeting with the knowledge that the death penalty is not a crime deterrent, that it's more expensive for the state than life in prison, and that botched executions happen. She also stated she is opposed to the death penalty because "it's just morally wrong to kill someone; I don't think you can really justify that," as well as because of its cost and failure to deter crime. Just like Chloe, Evelyn explained that she feels bad for those who are on death row. Given Evelyn's prior knowledge of and experience with the death penalty as well as her confident opposition to its usage, one might hypothesize that during our second meeting she would report feeling empathy for those on death row. Even I, after entering this study as open-mindedly as possible, had this hunch. As I have attempted to show in this chapter, however, empathy is unpredictable, and Evelyn's reading responses did not match my predictions.

Throughout our conversation, Evelyn described her emotions with the following words and phrases: "powerful," "scary," "sad," "almost cried," "horrible," "horrifying," "angry," "personal," "repulsive," "glad he got closure," "injustice," "don't want to read about it," "terrible," "dehumanizing," "morbid," "wrong," "isolated," "helpless," "made me feel gross," and "made me want to do something." Evelyn also brought up Stevenson's statistics, explaining that "reading these made me sad because it's kind of like the statistic ... an eight to one ratio of people who are exonerated once they're already on it, and that's scary because if you can't afford a good lawyer or if you are in a minority group there are huge disparities for who ends up on death row." According to Evelyn, her emotions were different when reading Stevenson's article

than when reading Sister Helen's personal narrative. While reading Stevenson, Evelyn felt angry because the piece addressed the flaws of the justice system in a statistical manner and from a distant perspective. The chapter by Sister Helen, on the other hand, was "being told from someone who watched someone die. It was much more personal and it made me a lot sadder to read." Evelyn explained that she nearly cried while reading the description of Pat's final hours.

Turning to the Abu-Jamal pieces, Evelyn described her reaction to Bobby Brightwell's story by describing the guards' actions as "repulsive." "The visit" and its description of the young girl banging her fists on the glass barrier was "very sad" to her, while the story of the undrinkable water in "A Toxic Shock" "was a harder emotion to describe. I was almost happy that he was able to come to what I assumed his realization was that he does still have stuff in common with the people outside and typical society... But I was also sad as well to see how all the prisoners originally assumed it was just the prison because that's all they know in their daily life." When I asked Evelyn about physical distress while reading about Bobby Brightwell, she explained that this particular story did not affect her in a distressing or empathy-inhibiting way. Instead, she experienced distress from reading Sister Helen's piece. "When you start to read it, you know he's going to die but you don't want to read about it," she said. "Death is more frightening to me personally than physical violence, so that could be why I differ from what (scholars) found." Interestingly, this distress did not make experiencing empathy more difficult for Evelyn, because, as I will explain later, she reported feeling the strongest sense of empathy for Sister Helen. Evelyn's reaction is similar to Beth's answer on this question, as she reported feeling distress while reading Bobby's story but nonetheless felt empathy towards him.

When asked about any specific passages she wanted to discuss, Evelyn talked mostly about the Stevenson and Sister Helen pieces. She tied these passages to explicit emotions,

explaining, for example, that the portion of Sister Helen's piece about watching the clock creep towards Pat's execution time has "a helpless feeling to it, like no one could do anything." She brought up this helplessness again later in our conversation, describing how this emotion affected her most significantly. "What really stuck with me when I was reading about the characters was just the pure helplessness they felt," she said. "That's just horrifying that they have to face this every day, constantly, like you're lesser. You're going to be kept here until we kill you, which is horrifying to have to think about."

Personal Connections

For Evelyn, having a personal connection to certain portions of the readings ended up being very important to her process of experiencing empathy. First, when talking generally about her reactions to the readings towards the beginning of our conversation, Evelyn described a memory in which she watched a death penalty case being discussed on TV while vacationing in Florida. "It did make me pause and think about it during that day," she said. "And later, when I looked at the clock, I was like oh, he's dead now. It's a really morbid thought, and I don't know how someone could work in one of those jails or see it on a daily basis and be able to cope with it." While Evelyn did not connect this anecdote to her empathy per se, it was an important moment in our conversation because she connected the experience of reading something that made her "want to do more" to the feeling of being constrained by daily tasks in Michigan and having a "location distance" from states where the death penalty is legal. Had she been in a place like Florida while reading, she explained, her experience might have been different "because then you can't just go about your day afterwards, because then it's right in your face and there's more of a need to do something about it."

This “location distance” that Evelyn described, however, did not hinder her empathy. Instead, having a personal connection to a character helped stimulate an empathetic reaction. Having discussed empathy in brief moments throughout our conversation, I asked Evelyn if there were any characters from any of the readings with whom she felt it was easiest to empathize. She quickly responded, “Sister Helen because I am religious, and so I kind of shared her own moral views going in already.” With *Dead Man Walking* she did “feel really bad” for Pat, but she found it much easier to step into Sister Helen’s shoes and relate to her:

I feel really bad for (Pat) because it was obvious he was feeling a terror, but it’s a terror I’ve never felt, and this isn’t necessarily told from his point of view. So you can feel empathy for him but you feel it, well I felt it most prominently with Sister Helen because it was someone mourning the loss of someone close and I can relate to that. I can also relate to her moral views so it was easier to, I guess, understand where she was coming from than the other characters.

Whenever Evelyn described empathy, she used a personal connection to justify or substantiate this empathy. She explained that her shared experiences with certain characters made it easier to empathize with them. This helps reveal how variable the focal points for empathy are. While one (including Sister Helen) might assume that readers would empathize with Pat, readers such as Evelyn and myself empathized with Sister Helen herself. Additionally, Evelyn’s reported link between personal connection and empathy diverged from other readers’ responses, and is evidence against Hunt and Keen’s assertions that a heightened sense of empathy is reported when readers identify with characters who hold different life experiences from their own.

Empathy

As highlighted above, Evelyn felt empathy for Sister Helen. While this empathy stemmed from her own personal connections to this character, Evelyn also explained how this particular reading was a new experience for her. “I had never read a first-person encounter of someone watching another person die before,” she said. “That’s a really scary thing.” Evelyn also explained that Sister Helen’s piece made her “want to do something” and to “find out more about the people in (the story).” In a small way, this desire to learn more counters Bloom’s claim that empathy is a useless tool for provoking social good. Indeed, Evelyn’s empathy is more complex than simply having a personal connection to Sister Helen. As she explained, it was difficult for her to feel empathy while reading Stevenson’s piece because “it wasn’t a personal tale or narration of someone who experienced it themselves,” whereas Sister Helen’s piece is told from the first-person narration of “someone mourning the loss of someone close.” Evelyn connects to Sister Helen not just through their shared religious background and experiences with mourning, but also through Sister Helen’s narration and the fact that Evelyn had never read a story about death row like *Dead Man Walking*. Evelyn even said that “no one wants to imagine themselves having to watch someone they’ve developed a really close relationship to just being killed,” and yet, stating that she felt empathy, she was still able to place herself in Sister Helen’s shoes as she went through this difficult process. The complexity of Evelyn’s response is a microcosm for empathy as a whole, as its origins and stimulators are often hard to trace in an individual.

In addition to feeling empathy for Sister Helen, Evelyn, like Beth, Chloe, and myself, also reported experiencing empathy while reading “The visit.” Similar to Beth, Evelyn felt empathy for the daughter in the story (as opposed to Chloe, who felt empathy for the father). Even so, Evelyn described her empathy differently than Beth — she felt empathy for the daughter for a different reason. For Evelyn, it was about her relationship to her own father, rather

than her relationship to someone who is incarcerated. “Just picturing not being able to see my own father, I’m able to put myself in the little girl’s shoes. That would be heartbreaking for me, and so I’m able to relate more easily to that,” she explained. Evelyn also differed from Beth as she did not experience empathy for Bobby Brightwell. She attributed this lack of empathy to never having gone through physical violence. “I’m sure if you gave this to someone who had been beaten by anyone, they could maybe relate much more closely to that man, but because I have more experience with my family and my own father, I can relate more to ‘The visit,’” she said. Interestingly, one similarity existed between Evelyn and Chloe’s empathy in “The visit” — they both used the term “visceral” when they described their reactions to the piece. This relates to Abu-Jamal’s writing style, which is something I also felt helped me to feel empathy. Even though Evelyn and Chloe felt empathy for different characters in this story, their empathy shared a source, Abu-Jamal’s narrative voice, that made it easier for them to connect with the characters.

For Evelyn, empathy seemed to be about whether or not she shared experiences with the characters and could easily imagine herself undergoing similar situations. For Beth, this mechanism also held true with “The visit,” but with Bobby Brightwell and *Dead Man Walking*, Beth’s empathy resembled hypotheticals and emotional imagination: “it’s hard not to feel his sadness,” as she said. In another divergent manifestation of empathy, Chloe experienced an empathetic reaction because of the specific details of the story; because of Abu-Jamal’s “visceral” descriptions and word choice, Chloe found it easier to place herself directly into the scene and to imagine herself as a father watching a young daughter in sadness and desperation. While these three readers reported experiencing empathy, the two remaining readers reported little or no empathetic reactions. At face level, these differences substantiate the claim that

empathy is not a guaranteed or universal phenomenon. Indeed, as I traced in the responses from Beth, Chloe, and Evelyn, even for those who did feel empathy, there was no universal reason or mechanism through which they experienced this empathy. Their reactions were highly individualized and depended on their own ideas, experiences, and contexts through which they read. While my project is concerned with empathy and the many ways in which it manifests through reading, it would be a grave mistake to discount readers who do not experience empathy. As I will show in the following two sections, the differences in their responses also reveal the complexities inherent in this topic as they demonstrate how, just like empathy, a lack of empathy cannot be explained by any specific pattern or reasoning.

Reader 4: Daniel

Emotions

During our first conversation, Daniel discussed several facts he already knew about the death penalty and explained that he is familiar with stories of innocent people on death row being executed. He stated that he is opposed to the death penalty, and that his feelings towards people on death row are “complicated because I’ve never had any experience with anyone on death row except perhaps maybe some true crime documentaries or something.” Daniel explained that he feels “very terrible” for people who are wrongly incarcerated, but he is not sure he feels “overwhelming amounts of sympathy or empathy” for those who are guilty of their crimes. This hesitancy to express empathy persisted throughout our second conversation, and, as I will highlight, was largely a factor of Daniel’s past exposure to stories and facts about death row.

In the beginning of our second conversation, Daniel initially described his experience of reading the pieces by explaining he found the articles “interesting” and “interesting from

different angles.” As our conversation progressed, he described his emotional reactions to the readings with the following words and phrases: “persuasive,” “insane,” “ironic,” “wild,” “creepy,” “numbed in a good way,” “less startled,” “moment of engagement,” “sad,” and “reminded me how unbelievably horrific/unjust/inherently unequal (the system is).” He also explained that his emotions felt “no longer (like) a burning anger but now changed into a deep sadness,” and that “I don’t know how much I can do to change this.” Many times when Daniel described his emotions, he explained that those emotions were a result of being reminded of injustices he had already read about. He explained that Stevenson’s piece was the “most persuasive in the sense of ... if I was going to give (someone) one piece of reading to be like this is why you should oppose the death penalty, I would probably give this reading because I think it’s kind of explicitly set out for that purpose.” The facts in Stevenson’s piece, he argued, were reiterations of information he was already familiar with, which caused a re-surfacing of “a feeling of how unbelievably ridiculous” the bias in the criminal justice system is.

With the Abu-Jamal pieces, Daniel stated that he was not sure he “had as strong of a reaction to them” as with the other pieces. Again, these pieces served as a sort of reminder for Daniel, in this case “a reminder of the humanity and interiority of these people.” In *Dead Man Walking*, several small moments stood out to Daniel. Specifically, he found the description of Pat’s tattooed prison number “wild” and “really creepy” and he stated he “did not like that” because of the way this represented a kind of forced ownership by the system. He also explained that he reflected on Sister Helen’s descriptions of the guard towers, which was a moment that also stood out to Chloe. This portion of the reading reminded him of certain philosophers he had read: “this was a really creepy passage that was so quintessentially Foucault’s panopticon about constantly being watched, but then also the idea that this is not only dehumanizing to the people

being watched but it's dehumanizing to the watchers." I also asked Daniel whether he felt any distress while reading, particularly with *Dead Man Walking* and Bobby Brightwell's story. He, like Chloe and Evelyn, explained that he did not experience distress. "I've numbed myself in a good way," he said. "In a sense it startles me less because I'm like yeah, I know this goes on in prisons, and so I didn't feel the need to distance myself from it." In other words, Daniel explained that, because of his extensive knowledge about the prison system, he is no longer shocked or surprised by heartbreaking stories of those abused or mistreated within this system. This limited surprise is because he has "numbed himself," which explains why he no longer needs to "distance himself" from otherwise distressing stories.

Daniel also explained that the characters that stood out to him from the readings were peripheral characters. In *Dead Man Walking*, he found the women in the guard towers, the priest who makes a brief appearance towards the end of the chapter, and Cowboy, the warden, to be the characters who "stuck with (him)." This response differed from Chloe's, as she felt distracted and "confused" by the many different characters introduced in *Dead Man Walking*. In terms of narrative form, Sister Helen's narration "individualized" the reading for Daniel. Her writing, he explained, "is so unbelievably detailed and specific that I almost feel like I was thinking about this particular instance, this particular person, this particular day, this particular hour." Daniel did not, however, feel the same way about Abu-Jamal's pieces, which were "too short for me to really get a sense of him (Abu-Jamal) as a person." This reaction also differed from Chloe, who said that Abu-Jamal's "visceral" and "concise" descriptions aided in her empathy and led to a stronger reaction to his pieces.

In addition to Daniel's brief mentions of peripheral characters who had an effect on him and his descriptions of being reminded of past exposure to information about the death penalty,

he several times expressed an understanding that changing the system is difficult. Because of this understanding, he no longer feels an intense anger or has an intense reaction to reading about the death penalty. “I feel like that anger has burned out a little bit into something that I know of and sits in the back of my head but it’s not engaged daily like it used to be,” he said. “It no longer becomes a burning anger and I think it changes into kind of a deep sadness.” Daniel also expressed doubt about the extent to which reading more about the death penalty would be formative for him. Instead, he hypothesized that “personal interaction and personal testimony, personal stories, rather than through a book” would perhaps re-ignite his strong reactions to the death penalty.

Personal Connections

The personal connections Daniel discussed the most during our conversation were related to past readings and videos about capital punishment to which he had been exposed. Feeling “numbed,” for example, was largely related to his experience with reading *Blood in the Water*, a book detailing the Attica prison uprising, which occurred at the Attica Correctional Facility in New York in 1971. This book was a large part of Daniel’s personal connections to the readings and, as I will explain, played a substantial role in the ways he felt little to no empathy. Daniel referenced *Blood in the Water* many times, saying that because he had already read this book, which features descriptions of the conditions those who are incarcerated must face while in prison, the details of the readings in my study were not overly shocking for him. Particularly, Abu-Jamal’s and Stevenson’s pieces reminded him of *Blood in the Water* because these pieces “conjured up a lot of stuff that I’ve absorbed somehow from true crime documentaries or just documentaries or things on the prison system.” While Daniel and I share a commonality in

having knowledge about the death penalty, I did not experience feeling “numbed” to the readings. Similar to Daniel’s reflections on *Blood in the Water*, I often found myself reflecting on *Becoming Ms. Burton* and other stories I’ve read about the criminal justice system, but I did not feel a sense of empathetic disengagement. This helps to reveal how personal connections to reading ultimately affect empathy in highly individualized ways.

Daniel’s interest in the peripheral characters in Sister Helen’s piece—particularly the prison guards working in the tower—was also reinforced by his experience with reading *Blood in the Water*. “I remember that was another thing that came out of *Blood in the Water* ... the guards put themselves in horrific conditions, they do horrific things and they’re not blameless at all, but that this also dehumanizes them and it’s less them and more the structure that is the problem,” he said. “It’s really the system that dehumanizes everyone involved in it.” This sentiment is similar to the one Chloe expressed, as the description of the guards made her feel that “it’s like everybody’s a prisoner to this strange system.” Chloe, however, did not report having read similar narratives about prison guards or the conditions of prisons. While this moment didn’t necessarily provoke strong empathy for either reader, the fact that these guard characters stood out to both readers for different reasons illuminates the highly individualized experience of reading.

In addition to discussing *Blood in the Water*, Daniel also talked briefly about his experience with political activism and being a student in the Political Science department. He felt limited empathy and did not experience a strong emotional reaction to the readings because of these experiences. “I used to be a very politically active person, and I feel like a couple years ago I really burned myself out and I really distanced myself away from that in order to improve my mental health and improve myself as a person,” he said. Added to this feeling of being “burned

out” is his knowledge about how certain texts work to evoke empathy. As a political science minor, Daniel feels “programmed how to absorb these texts” because of his experience with critically examining political texts and knowing where an author is attempting to make a certain argument or evoke empathy. “When you’re consuming so much text and you’re being asked to think about it critically, I think there is a distance you take from it,” he said. “So maybe it is kind of my academic skills that definitely have gotten in the way of visceral empathy.”

Empathy

The first time Daniel brought up the concept of empathy in our second conversation was in response to my questions about whether distress impedes one’s ability to empathize when reading physically violent or intense descriptions. He stated that he did not feel distress while reading because he had “numbed” himself from these emotions, and then explained that this reaction leads to the “risk ... of empathy fatigue, of becoming numb to those descriptions because I have seen them so much.” This “empathy fatigue” is what Daniel reported feeling throughout our conversation. While he engaged with peripheral characters in Sister Helen’s piece, his feelings about them were “detached.” He explained that his familiarity with prison scenes, such as those Abu-Jamal described, led to overall distanced feelings:

If I hadn’t encountered those I feel like my empathy would be incredibly engaged but I feel like this is an experience that I do know something about, as much as you can from just reading about it, that definitely stopped me from maybe having the initial kind of gut punch that happens when you hear about something for the first time. I remember reading *Blood in the Water* and having an incredible amount of empathy.

For Daniel, unlike for Beth, Evelyn, and myself, personal connections to the readings and a familiarity with the characters' circumstances did not lead to empathy. I want to note, however, that Daniel reported his "connections" to the readings — reading *Blood in the Water* and being politically active — differently from Beth and Evelyn. Unlike Beth's personal connection to the daughter in "The visit" because of her own experiences with a family member being incarcerated, and unlike Evelyn's connection with Sister Helen because of their shared religious background, Daniel did not explain his personal connections as real life experiences with similar details to those of the characters in the readings. Whereas Beth and Evelyn took their own life experiences and tried to imagine how they might feel if those experiences translated directly into a scene in prison or on death row, Daniel, like me, was reminded of his past knowledge of the prison system and acknowledged that what he was reading reflected reality. Because of this acknowledgement, he, unlike me, did not feel empathy; he instead felt "empathy fatigue" and a sense that there was not much he could do to change the system. As such, Daniel's response seems to affirm Bloom's criticism of empathy: that it does not lead to continual engagement with goals to advance society. Daniel's response serves as a reminder of the limits of empathy and its status as an unpredictable and individualized phenomenon.

Reader 5: Anna

Emotions

In our first conversation, Anna told me that her opinion about the death penalty and her feelings towards those on death row depended on context: the specific crime that was committed or the specific case being assessed. After completing the readings and discussing them with me, Anna's opinion remained the same. Throughout our second conversation, she argued several

times that “a person who has done crime is definitely more than what they’ve done” and that the readings helped to illuminate the humanity of people who are incarcerated. Anna’s emotional reactions to the readings were relatively similar to the other readers, but perhaps less intense. When she described her reactions, she used the words “surprised,” “shocked,” “intense,” “gross,” “seems wrong,” “didn’t expect,” “horrible,” “feel really bad,” “desperation,” “confused,” “really weird,” “wow,” “really sad,” “unpleasant,” and “powerful.”

Anna walked me through, in great detail, specific passages from every reading that stood out to her. Like many other participants, she discussed Stevenson’s note on the number of innocent people on death row and said she “felt shocked” when she read this statistic. She also explained that Stevenson’s writing style and word choice “stood out to (her).” Specifically, his phrase “the logic of gratuitously killing someone” (Stevenson 76) caused a “wow, it’s really intense” moment in Anna’s reading. Similarly, Anna, like me, described Stevenson’s blunt word choice in the phrase “many are literally dying” (95) as like “a slap in the face.” Many of her emotional reactions were based on how she close read details in each piece. For example, in “The visit” when Abu-Jamal describes prison as “the bowels of this man-made hell,” Anna focused on the connotations of the words “bowels” and “man-made hell.” “When you call it ‘bowels,’ it’s gross, deep, like a basement,” she said. “Then ‘man-made hell,’ it’s not something that’s there and bad already, it’s something that humans make, and they don’t make it nice, they don’t make it for people. So that just made me think that they’re making these for prisoners who they consider less than people.” Anna also explained that the words “plexiglass barrier” created a more detailed image while she was reading: “It was a really specific kind of barrier, and if they didn’t have it like that, it would’ve just been plain,” she said. “It was kind of like ... I was there and experiencing it with the person on death row.”

Describing Bobby Brightwell's story, Anna focused on the line: "knocked to the steel bunk, he yelled in a mad fit of pain, 'Why don't you just break 'em off?' as his legs were pulled savagely apart and sadistically twisted" (Abu-Jamal 54), which caused her to try to think about times in her own life when she's felt like Bobby. "I've never been in a point in my life where I felt such desperation," she said. "If I'm having a bad day, I've never been like, just end it all, or if I get splashed by water by the bus driving past me, I'm not like, why don't you just splash me again. But this was desperation and it really made me feel for what he was feeling... the more that I read these the more I felt bad." This feeling "for" characters is a sentiment Anna expressed in several points throughout our conversation, but as I will expand upon later, she never reached the point of feeling "with" a character. When I asked Anna if she felt any distress while reading the painful details in Bobby's story, she said she did not. While she could feel "for" Bobby, she explained, "it didn't turn into physical or much emotional pain for me."

While reading Sister Helen's chapter, Anna found the phrase "death house," which Sister Helen used to describe the building where executions are carried out, to be "pretty blunt." She argued that "describing a place as a death house, it's kind of like describing it like a slaughterhouse for animals and it just seems really inhumane." Anna also, like Chloe and Daniel, was struck by the descriptions of the prison guards. "They said that their relationship to inmates is based on distrust and I thought wow ... to have to expect that inmates will do the worst of the worst that they can is awful," she said. "It also puts a really low expectation on these people." Additionally, Anna explained that Pat's dialogue throughout the story caused sadness: "he's just saying what he's thinking in the moment and to me that's like a signal of you don't know what to do or what to think ... It was really sad ... it was definitely upsetting that he was talking in this way and, I don't know, I kind of wanted more for him even though I don't know who he is."

Here, Anna resembles Beth, who explained that Pat's attempts to make small jokes during his final hours made her "really sad." Anna explained that Sister Helen's narration evoked a different feeling from Pat's dialogue because "it was easier to think of her as a real person" as the narrator. To Anna, Sister Helen's narration felt "more detached," and she argued that the chapter would have been "harder to read if (Pat) was narrating it ... it (would be) more real." This realness, however, is different from the "real person" aspect Anna used to describe Sister Helen, where Sister Helen's first-person narration ultimately allowed for more insight into Sister Helen's interiority than Pat's. Thus, by saying that having Pat as a narrator would make the story "more real," Anna contended that the story would be more "personal" and would perhaps have more "goriness or sadness," giving a more intimate look into the realities faced by individuals on death row.

Returning to her reaction to Sister Helen's interiority, Anna discussed the scene in which Sister Helen tries and fails to eat with Pat during his final meal. "It just makes you feel like when you're too sad to eat," Anna said. "He's supposed to be enjoying his last meal but she can't because she's thinking of him and his last opportunity to eat. That's how I would feel anyways. I'm assuming that's how she feels." Again, Anna seemed to be inching towards empathy, but she never explicitly said that she felt empathetic towards Sister Helen or that she could put herself in Sister Helen's shoes.

Overall, Anna described her emotional state while reading all of the pieces as "really sad." Reading first in Stevenson about the number of innocent people on death row, and then reading about "what all of these people are going through, that they can't have brothers by them or their kids, it just made me really sad." As with other readers, contextualizing the statistics in

Stevenson's piece with narratives or stories from the other articles was especially effective for Anna in conjuring an emotional reaction.

Personal Connections

The first personal connection Anna discussed was her experience of going to a Catholic High School. While reading Stevenson's piece, Anna thought about the frequency of death row executions, which reminded her of documentaries she watched in her high school classes about religious individuals going to prisons and talking with those on death row. She also explained that portions of the other readings reminded her of moments from the media, such as news stories about crime, videos about American prisons and jails, and other crime documentaries. Anna talked about how Pat's execution scene reminded her of a hospital and time of death announcements, how reading "A toxic shock" made her think about the Flint Water Crisis, and how reading about death row in general made her think about her job in a science lab where she euthanizes mice. "It's definitely not comparable to having people die on death row, but ... it still makes you feel a certain way, you know?" she said. "It definitely made me feel more for them, mice."

Anna, like Beth and Chloe, discussed her experiences surrounding her own racial identity. When reading the portion of Stevenson's piece about racial bias in the criminal justice system, she said, "This reminded me of racial experiences I've had on campus where people speak to me in a language that they assume I speak and that I definitely don't." She did not elaborate further on this experience, and, like Chloe, did not tie this experience to any feelings of empathy (or lack thereof). The only personal connection Anna did draw to empathy—which, as I will explain in the next section, she did not report experiencing—was a reference to her family.

When she explained that she did not feel “physical or much emotional pain” when reading Bobby Brightwell’s story, she explained, “I grew up in an emotionally abusive and sometimes a physically abusive household, so I’ve learned to restrain my emotions a lot and a lot of times in the past empathy has cost me a lot.” The personal story she drew on here is part of the reason she, like Daniel, did not experience empathy.

Empathy

Along with Daniel, Anna was one of two participants who did not report experiencing empathy while reading. Aside from explaining to me that “empathy has cost (her) a lot,” the only other time Anna brought up empathy was when she told me that she took several online empathy tests and received low scores. Rather than empathize with characters, she expressed multiple times throughout our conversation that she felt “for” them — sympathy — or felt emotionally saddened from reading about them. In the very end of our conversation, Anna returned to her convictions from our first conversation that arguments about the death penalty should be more contextualized. “I still feel like killing is killing, but you have to see it through the person’s eyes, the person who did it,” she said. “Maybe they were doing it to protect a family member . . . Until you’re in that situation, you really can’t know what you would do.”

This quote suggests that perhaps Anna’s empathy was limited because she has never been in a similar situation to the characters in the readings. During our conversation, she used several phrases that hinted at this possibility, including: “It’s probably something I’ll never have to go through,” about capital punishment in general, “I don’t think I’ll ever be in the case that I need one,” about the lawyers referred to in Stevenson’s piece, and “I’m having the time of my life compared to what he was going through,” about Bobby Brightwell. When talking about “The

visit,” a story which Beth, Chloe, and Evelyn all said caused them to feel empathy, Anna described her own differences from the daughter: “I didn’t think a kid would be able to explain their thoughts in this way. I definitely don’t think that I was like that like a kid.” While she never explicitly made this link between limited death row-related life experiences and limited empathy, Anna’s statement that “until you’re in that situation, you really can’t know what you would do” reads as a defense of her inability to experience empathy for someone who has gone through situations she will never experience. Anna’s reactions here do not support Hunt’s or Keen’s assertion that empathy can be enhanced when a reader bears no shared experiences with a character. Nonetheless, while this lack of empathy may be true for Anna, it cannot be taken as a universal claim that having no personal experience with a person’s situation will inhibit empathy. As we have seen, Chloe felt empathy for the father in “The visit” and for Bobby Brightwell, despite reporting no personal connections to these characters. Additionally, Anna’s lack of empathy cannot really be compared to Daniel’s lack of empathy because they each experienced this phenomenon for different reasons.

Finally, Anna, like every other reader, reflected on her reactions to characters who may or may not have committed crimes. At the end of our second conversation, I asked Anna if her feelings about people on death row had changed since our first conversation. She explained that, overall, her feelings had not changed, but she had a newfound recognition of the importance of personal stories. “I think last time I said that people on death row are there for a reason and I probably said something like they should be judged fairly for what they’ve done and that sometimes it’s necessary to prevent further ... crimes, and I think I still feel pretty similar now,” she said. “Something that’s changed from last time is I definitely feel like the personal aspect

should not be excluded ... you should definitely consider the family and how this person grew up and if they have an opportunity to change.”

Discussion and Impact

Having digested the results of my own study, I now return to the first chapter in this project and the perspectives of those scholars who have made prominent arguments about “reading and empathy.” As evidenced throughout this chapter, each scholar’s argument applied at different times to different readers. While several participants’ reactions aligned with Keen’s ideas of character identification and narrative situation, for example, this does not mean that her ideas about empathy were true across the board. And, while one reader’s desire to take action and read more about this topic pushes back on Bloom’s criticism of empathy as a social guide, another reader’s “empathy fatigue” affirms Bloom’s criticisms that empathy does not have long-lasting, socially productive results. Each reader interacted with the texts differently, and no two readers felt empathy in the same way or for the same reason. My study thus illuminates the inconsistencies in the way empathy manifests, and it demonstrates that readers’ reactions are far too complex, complicated, and contextualized to fit into one of the five categories outlined in Dawes’ work or to be explained by the theories presented by Hunt, Keen, Galgut, or Bloom.

From conducting my own study on reading and empathy, I am arguing that current scholarship does not yet offer a holistic understanding of reading and empathy. In other words, we do not yet have a full sense of how complicated the relationship is between reading and empathy. While I understand the desire to find patterns among readers’ responses in order to make arguments simpler, easier to follow, and testable with large quantities of data, my study has shown that doing so is both ineffective and dangerous in this context, as empathy cannot be

understood without considering individual stories and testimony. Readers deserve more than being categorized into a binary of “they did experience empathy” or “they did not experience empathy.” As my conversations with five readers prove, this generalization overlooks the many ways in which emotional reactions and empathy function in readers’ responses to texts.

Conclusion

Throughout this project, I have shown the many different ways in which individuals do — and do not — experience empathy when reading literature. In contrast to the broad arguments made by the five scholars highlighted in Chapter One, my own responses and those of my five readers illustrate the uniqueness of individuals' reading experiences, which challenge generalized claims about the conditions in which a reader will or will not feel empathy. In criticizing prominent scholarly claims about reading and empathy, I argue that literary scholars who debate this topic should take more care in recognizing the experiences of individual readers, which often defy conclusive predictions or assertions about the relationship between empathy and reading.

My thesis suggests that this inconclusiveness is something to be celebrated, as the value of reading, teaching, and discussing literature comes from understanding the unpredictable ways in which readers respond to any given text. Diversity of responses matters because it allows for new insights to be developed among those engaged in the conversation, especially as we acknowledge the immense value in listening to all readers' perspectives without anticipating any specific or "productive" response. Acknowledging the range of readers' responses to texts is also important for challenging the ways in which arguments about reading and empathy get weaponized as a defense of literary studies. This weaponization generally discredits the many cases in which readers do not or cannot experience empathy. An individual does not need to experience empathy or feel moved to take action when reading in order for that reading experience to be meaningful. In the context of death penalty literature, it is crucial for us to avoid arguing that empathy is a measure of how this literature can be used as a political tool because, when this framework is accepted, those responses which present rifts in our empathetic ideals are

dangerously denoted as disengagements with any desire for political reform. In other words, this leads to disappointment any time a reader expresses a non-empathetic conviction. Literature is necessary for many things beyond being a measure for social justice reform or a tool for invoking political conversation. It is important to recognize the array of benefits reading brings to individuals, both within and outside of the political sphere.

While conducting my own study, I engaged with five readers who revealed to me the ongoing need to develop more complex theorizations of the relationship between reading and empathy. As I quickly discovered when speaking with the students I interviewed, not only are there inconsistencies in the ways empathy works within the reading practices of particular individuals, but there are inconsistencies in how empathy is defined and understood. Considering just how crucial specificity and individual response were to this project, it will be important for future research to clarify seemingly small details, as these details may help readers to understand their own engagement with literature and may help scholars to recognize the constant shifts in empathy as a concept. Highlighting the importance of work that is both meticulous and messy, this study forges a new path in debates about reading and empathy by acknowledging the perhaps uncomfortable truth that, even when scholars focus on detail and context, many questions within this debate can never be definitively answered. In particular, this topic will never allow for confident convictions on times when empathy will or will not manifest in specific readers, and acknowledging that this must be left unresolved is crucial.

I would be remiss if I did not also take this moment to acknowledge the difference this project might make in the realm of the criminal justice system. I chose to engage with literature about the death penalty not only because it involves a topic I am deeply interested in, but also because I was curious about the ways readers might respond to writing that diverges from

traditional and fictional character-driven novels. As I have illustrated, emotional and empathetic responses were not always reported by me or by my readers. Even though we were taking in information about a deeply corrupt and unjust system, there was no guarantee that we would consistently feel empathy towards those who are subjected to the biases of capital punishment. Despite this result, literature about the death penalty is still extremely important for teaching and learning. Readers do not need to feel empathy or deep emotion in order to engage with the topic of the text — just as important are the specific details readers take forward from the text and the life experiences and knowledge they are prompted to discuss as a result of their reading. This assertion is crucial for considering criminal justice reform. If an individual argues that the system should be changed but also acknowledges that they don't feel empathy for those affected by the current system, would we need to discredit their ideas about reform? If empathy and emotion are viewed as necessary precursors to political change, what happens to the relevance of data and fact-based claims in policy arguments? There must be an acknowledgement of the many ways political perspectives are shaped not just by emotional appeal, but by objective logic as well.

In reflecting on the work I have completed in this thesis, I realize that many things are left undone. If I had another year to work on this project, I would dig into other topics that interest me, such as trauma and stories of childhood, and I would select literature about this topic that spans a variety of mediums. I would compare responses to literature across different topics to see what other complexities emerge. I would ask additional questions about how readers respond to particular rhetorical devices in the texts and I would explore more about the environment in which they were reading so that I could grasp, more holistically, how the physical nature of reading might play a role in readers' responses to the texts. I would conduct research with non-students and readers of many different ages so that I could study whether older

individuals who may already be set in their political and social opinions respond differently to texts aimed at persuading audiences. Most importantly, I would continue to conduct my research with a perpetual acknowledgement that each reader has a voice that must be taken seriously. While it is certainly impossible to speak with every reader, I believe that future scholarship can better attend to a range of actual readers' responses because these responses will transcend simplified claims about how empathy works, therefore re-creating the longstanding conversation about reading and empathy.

My study suggests that future researchers should think through ways to fuse their own scholarly perspectives with detailed responses of readers themselves. The method I adopted in this thesis, which involves creating a discussion among scholars, myself, and readers, is one of many ways researchers might approach an analysis of readers' unique experiences of reading. I would be excited to see future research that sheds light on many more unexpected and unconventional responses to literature across political, social, and creative realms.

As we continue to engage with literature, to use the words on the page to learn more about ourselves or, perhaps, to escape ourselves, what is most important is that we continue to talk about reading. By engaging with ideas that may initially seem uncomfortable or ambiguous, we can safeguard literary studies as a space which welcomes diversity of thought. With literature, we are given the tools to appreciate and defend inconclusiveness. It is necessary that we have the courage to talk about ways to do so.

Appendix A: Email to Recruit Participants

Re: Participate in a Quick Study

Hello,

My name is Jordyn Baker and I am a senior writing an Honors thesis in English. I am looking for undergraduate student volunteers to take part in a study about reading and empathy. Total participation time would be 60-90 minutes.

Participants will read short excerpts of literature about the death penalty and answer questions face-to-face before and after reading. All conversations will be recorded, and participants will have a chance to review the transcript of the conversation before I incorporate elements of it into my thesis. All participants will remain anonymous and will be given pseudonyms in my thesis.

Participants will be compensated with \$20 gift cards to Literati.

If you are interested in taking part, please fill out the following google form no later than Sunday, December 8. (Filling out this form does not guarantee that you will be selected to participate. I will contact selected volunteers by email.)

(Link to Form)

If you have any questions regarding participation or the study, please do not hesitate to contact me via email, jordynrb@umich.edu.

Thank you,
Jordyn

Appendix B: Participation Consent Form

Consent Form: Senior english honors thesis exploring the relationship between reading, empathy, and death penalty literature

I understand that each of the interviews with the primary researcher, Jordyn Baker, will be audio recorded. I also understand that a transcript of the interviews will be provided to me via email to review before any portions of our interviews are published in the thesis, and that I have the option to omit wording that I do not feel comfortable having published. By signing below, I consent to these guidelines.

Participant signature: _____

Participant printed name: _____

Pronouns: _____

Date: _____

Appendix C: Interview Questions

1. Tell me about your experiences reading these pieces.
2. What thoughts, emotions and/or questions can you remember having while reading?
 - 2a. Some scholars suggest readers may feel distress when reading about physical pain or painful situations — to what extent, if any, is that true for you?
3. In what ways, if any, did reading this affect you?
 - 3a. What, if anything, has changed for you from reading?
4. What stood out to you about the book? Were there any specific moments, character, or portion of the readings that stood out to you or made you feel a specific way?
 - 4a. Can you point to specific passages that stood out to you?
5. To what extent, if any, did you feel personal connections to what you were reading?
6. To what extent, if any, did you find yourself thinking about the person on death row?
 - 6a. What did you find yourself thinking about?
7. Have your feelings about people on death row changed since the last time we talked about this question?
8. Do you imagine yourself reading more about this topic? If so why, if not why not?

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