

THE RUMPUS

A Hug and a Promise Production



On Suffering and Sympathy

By [Matthew Clair](#)

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There's a photograph of a little black boy from Flint, Michigan that, whenever I see it, makes my heart drop. The boy, named Sincere Smith, stares at the viewer in distress, his cheeks scarred by patches of eczema. Sincere is one of the thousands of children in Flint suffering from lead poisoning after the city switched its water source to save money in April 2014. In February of this year, the boy's photograph was on [the cover of TIME Magazine](#).

"Photographs are a means of making 'real' (or 'more real') matters that the privileged and the merely safe might prefer to ignore," Susan Sontag writes in her final book *Regarding the Pain of Others*. Sontag is writing, in particular, about photographs that depict the suffering of war and other atrocities. In an article titled "[What Will Happen to the Flint Water Crisis Once the Cameras Leave?](#)," Lisa John Rogers compares the Flint crisis to war. She cites the work of toxicologist Mozghan Savabieasfahani, who has studied the effects of pollution from US bombings in Iraq. In recent years, rates of cancer and birth defects have spiked among Iraqi children, linked to lead and other contaminants from the bombings. Rogers writes, "it's almost as if we've quietly been bombing the people of Flint for over a year."

According to the photographer who captured Sincere Smith, [the boy's image helped "put a face" to the crisis](#). "He just seems so innocent and so sad at the same time," she told a reporter. For more than a year, city officials ignored the complaints of its mostly poor and mostly black residents, until several scientists confirmed and exposed what these residents knew all along. Images of the crisis sparked a national outcry. Apologies were issued, money was granted, officials resigned, and the water source was changed. But Sincere Smith still suffers from lead poisoning, and Flint's infrastructure still has aging, corroded pipes, as do many urban neighborhoods around the country. We are bystanders to future crises.

“[I]mages cannot be more than an invitation to pay attention, to reflect, to learn,” Sontag tells us. She explains that photographs of suffering may invite us to sympathize, but they rarely arouse meaningful action, much less longterm change. Is this true, too, of any form of media that attempts to render suffering visible—from a journalist’s photographs to an academic’s text, tables, and figures?



When I was twenty-five, I moved back to Cambridge, Massachusetts to begin graduate studies in sociology. I arrived on campus eager to learn how to analyze data and produce research that could contribute to social justice. Like the physicians, engineers, and public health officials who helped expose the Flint crisis, many social scientists—often spurred on by grant-making institutions that increasingly favor research with clear social implications—seek to have a positive effect on the world. We gather data, analyze it, and share it in the hope that our representations of suffering will catalyze change. But is our scholarship anything more than a modest invitation?

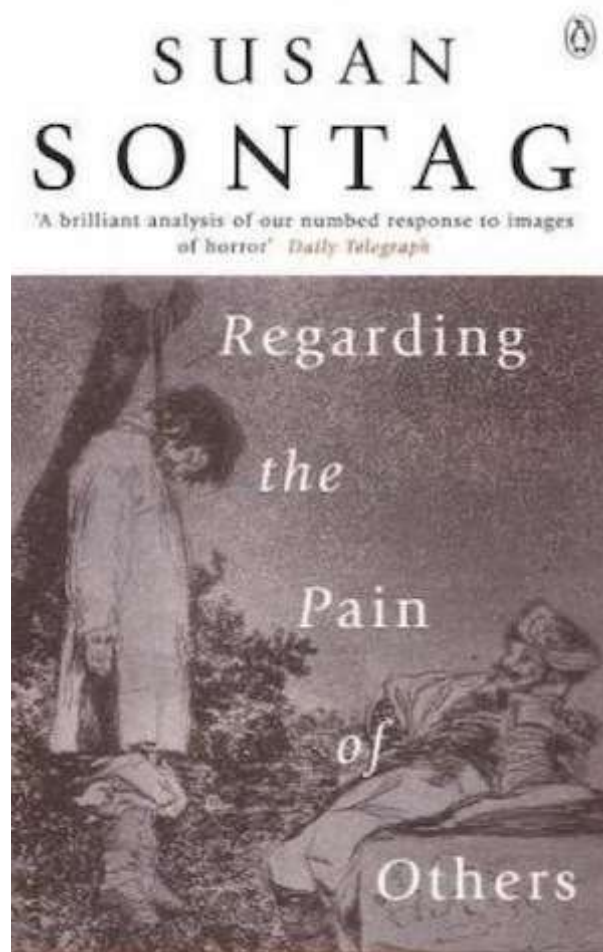
The other day, I came across [an article in *Fusion*](#) based on an interview with Samaria Rice, the mother of Tamir Rice, the twelve-year-old black boy shot dead by a police officer in 2014 while holding a toy gun. The article recounts Ms. Rice’s activism, her frustration with politicians, and her insistence that the “whole system” needs to change. Ms. Rice, we learn, was not always an activist for police reform. The article tells us that “Samaria had no idea how brutal police officers were against black people” until her son was killed. Not that she wasn’t paying attention; she was: “She had heard about Mike Brown [...] And she saw black mothers on television wailing.” But “it didn’t really hit home” until her son was dead.

Sontag suggests that images afford us distance from suffering, and it is this distance that partially explains our inability to act on behalf of suffering others. Distance can arise from a lack of sympathy, made possible by the fear of trading one’s privileges for the alleviation of another’s burdens. As James Baldwin writes about the fear of racial equality, “the danger in the minds and hearts of most white Americans is the loss of their identity.” But even when we sympathize and are willing to give up something on behalf of others, our sense of urgency may not be enough to overcome that distance. We are able to tell ourselves, in Sontag’s words, that “[t]his is not happening to *me*, I’m not ill, I’m not dying, I’m not trapped in a war.” Until we are.

Academia, on the whole, is in the business of distancing, of abstracting. It can become quite easy—as we spend our semesters debating in wood-paneled classrooms and our summers writing papers in coffee shops—to forget that the data we collect and discuss are abstractions of real people, of their very real problems. Even when we get up close—collecting

ethnographic field notes or in-person surveys in a community—individual struggles are converted into data points and community struggles into social patterns. The process of scientific analysis is a process of abstraction; objectivity demands distance.

What is the distance between sympathy and action? How do we travel from one to the other?



A summer ago, in August, I was in Chicago for a sociological conference, presenting research on inequality in the criminal court system. The third morning of the conference, a colleague and dear friend suggested the two of us take a break from the panels to observe the proceedings in a courthouse in Cook County—a court system larger and far more infamous in its treatment of criminal defendants than our own research site.

To be honest, I don't recall much from our observations that day, except one quite unfathomable thing: As we sat in a courtroom in one of Chicago's busiest courthouses on this random August day, a defendant with a familiar name—*my* last name—was arraigned right in front of us. As he was brought into the courtroom in handcuffs, I realized immediately—with his round face, button nose, brown skin, and small ears—that this was a relative of mine. At lunch, I called my dad and learned that he was a first cousin, one of the many Chicago cousins I have never met.

Later, back in Cambridge, I would google him. His mugshot was the first search result. He grimaced for the camera. This official, bureaucratic representation—available to the police, his defense attorney, and the judge who would sentence him—hardly inspired sympathy. I don't know this man, I remember thinking, but still I see myself in him. I understood, quite clearly, that I easily could have been in his position if it weren't for my dad's chance escape, in his teens, from the south side of Chicago to a boarding school in Southborough, Massachusetts. Blood and history drew me to him, and I suddenly felt an acute sense of wanting to help—a reaction I found to be an uncomfortable mix of presumption, instinct, and empathy. I recalled how, years ago, a college friend once argued with me that the family unit is the root of so much injustice because we care fervently for those we believe ourselves to be closest to, often at the expense of others. At whose expense was my

newfound empathy for this cousin I barely knew? An advertisement for laundry detergent suddenly popped up on my screen. Images of thin models folding clothes competed for my attention. I closed my laptop. I was late for a meeting.

This experience has stayed with me. No doubt it has altered the way I approach my research. I feel closer to my work. No longer am I able to assess with cold indifference the women and men I interview and observe in court. When they cry as they recount losing all their belongings during periods of pre-trial detention or losing a friend to a heroin overdose, I fight back tears. Still, my encounters with them are, ultimately, extractive: I gather their stories faithfully, analyze them for patterns, and present them as data in hotel conference rooms and peer-reviewed journals. Many of these women and men have expressed to me their hope that this ongoing process of gathering and showing, of witnessing and explaining will ultimately provide those in power with the tools and conviction to craft effective solutions. While they recognize, just as I do, that their own lives likely will not change for the better, perhaps the lives of people like them will change in the future.

Over these past few years, I have gained a greater awareness of power, inequality, and suffering. And, as a country, haven't we all? Power, in modern times, has been theorized to be a hidden creature—diffuse and subtle in its machinations. This is still true, in many ways. Yet, in a time of email leaks and daily video documentation of police brutality, so many forms of unjust power are exercised in the open for all our eyes to see. "Fuck your breath," a police officer hollers as he pins an already-shot man to the ground, his body camera be damned. Power no longer hides; it strides above us, unapologetic.

In March 1968, *LIFE Magazine* ran an image of a little black girl from Harlem named Ellen Fontenelle on its cover. The photographer Gordon Parks told readers of *LIFE* that he went to Harlem to document Ellen's family in order to explain the inner-city riots of the '60s and to show "what [the ghetto] was like, the real, vivid horror of it." Like Sincere Smith more than forty years later, Ellen—a single tear hovering just above her cheek—was meant to represent a crisis of poverty, segregation, and racism. After the story was published, sympathetic readers sent money to the Fontenelles, enough for them to buy a new house. But within a year, their new home would burn down. In the end, seven of the eight Fontenelle children would die before reaching the age of thirty. A recent *New York Times* article described the family's tragedy as what would seem to have been "an inevitable decline, as AIDS and the streets claimed the lives of one child after another."



Making suffering visible, even when we sympathize, is likely insufficient for achieving durable social justice. Sontag posits that sympathy masks our relationship to, and investment in, the suffering of others because "we feel we are not accomplices," failing to see "how our privileges are located on the same map as their suffering." But sympathy is not the

culprit here. On the contrary, sympathy is necessary—it is the first step toward imagining what we might be losing when others suffer. And when sympathy becomes empathy, we realize that another’s suffering could have been our own, were it not for the social categories we were born into.

The problem is not sympathy itself; instead, the problem is that our individual sympathies are no match for a social system that thrives on the suffering of others. The outpouring of financial support for the Fontenelles could not save them from the destitution of concentrated poverty. A generation later, Ms. Rice’s insistence that the “whole system” needs to change is at once a statement of fact and, perhaps, an admission of defeat. Can this whole system change? Probably not in our lifetime. The representations of suffering—the photographs, tables, and texts—may help, now and then, in contested, slow-moving ways. They may save one family from destitution, or one city from lead poisoning. While not insignificant, these moments of progress rarely endure. But we must understand that representations of suffering are not just instruments for social justice, but also—and more permanently—a renewal of the continued struggle we commit ourselves to in creating them.

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