Narrative Theory Unbound

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This essay seeks to explore why further understanding narrative empathy requires adoption of an *intersectional narratology*, a method that can accommodate the different directions and locations of a rich set of texts, contexts, and identities while framing global observations about the workings of narrative in the world. Since exploration of narrative empathy takes place at an interdisciplinary crossing point (of literary studies and psychology), a communication challenge deriving from competing definitions of the term “empathy” often arises. The legitimacy of the kind of intersectional research I propose in this essay depends upon baseline terminological clarity, a clarity that rarely exists when scholars from different disciplinary contexts discuss empathy. To reach that end of greater clarity about the disparate phenomena discussed under the label of empathy, I discuss here psychologist C. Daniel Batson’s authoritative description of different concepts called empathy. Because Batson, a preeminent figure in the field of empathy research, does not comment on empathy for nonexistent beings, I further extend each concept to gloss its application to the study of narrative empathy. Further communication across disciplinary lines can be improved if parties know which version of “empathy” we mean when we write and speak about it.

Two other terms demand immediate attention: *intersectional* and *narratology*. Robyn Warhol has urged feminist critics to “take what Kimberlé
Crenshaw named an ‘intersectional’ approach because white privilege, class privilege, heteronormativity, and other positions of relative power complicate hierarchies of gender.” Though Warhol makes a strong case that feminist narratology has already branched out to “include race, sexuality, nationality, class, and ethnicity as well as gender, the components of intersectional analyses” (“Feminist Approach” 9), she prefers the term “narrative theories” to narratology because it “still connotes for many a theoretical approach cut off from questions of history and context” (9). I pitch my tent on the ground of postclassical narratology, which opens “the fairly focused and restricted realm of narratology to methodological, thematic, and contextual influences” (Alber and Fludernik 9). Postclassical narratology has been profoundly shaped by feminist narrative theory. Its transdisciplinary embrace of cognitive and affective theories of narrative also makes it accommodating to a developing theory of narrative empathy. As I have earlier defined it, narrative empathy involves “the sharing of feeling and perspective-taking induced by reading, viewing, hearing, or imagining narratives of another’s situation and condition. Narrative empathy plays a role in the aesthetics of production when authors experience it . . . in mental simulation during reading, in the aesthetics of reception when readers experience it, and in the narrative poetics of texts when formal strategies invite it” (Keen, “Narrative Empathy”). In this essay I suggest how an intersectional narratology necessarily complicates research questions about narrative empathy, in the end strengthening conclusions we may draw about its formal techniques, its impact on readers, and its effect on real-world changes in attitudes and behavior.

Though my prior work on narrative empathy has made contributions to rhetorical narratology, it has taken a focused approach to specific roles in a communication model, emphasizing (for example) varieties of authors’ empathy involved in inviting feeling responses from nearer and more remote audiences. When one turns to actual readers and their experiences of narrative empathy, I have argued, one finds a great diversity of responses, including individuals who respond in an emotionally disengaged fashion to works that many others find intensely moving. This can be accounted for in part by differences among readers, differences in experience, identity, and temperament or disposition. Intersectionality, a feminist concept examining “the relationships among multiple dimensions and modalities of social relations and

2. For my broadest narratological discussion, see Keen, “Narrative Empathy”; on authors’ empathy, see Keen, “Strategic Empathizing.”
4. See Keen, “Readers’ Temperaments and Fictional Character.”
subject formations” (McCall 1771), meshes well with a narrative poetics that is open to diverse effects of narrative techniques in various texts, contexts, and modes, following Meir Sternberg.\footnote{On the “Proteus Principle” as it applies to the effects of narrative techniques, see Sternberg.} Like intersectional analyses of discrimination (Crenshaw), for which the concept was first formulated, my version of intersectional narratology seeks to understand why certain positions and concepts are privileged while others suffer from inattention or disparagement. In her foundational rendering of feminist intersectionality for narrative theory, Susan S. Lanser emphasizes the discernment of the way “systemic, structural, and institutional ‘traffic’ . . . operates to the advantage or disadvantage of individuals and groups according to their social positioning” (34). This means, in my extension, that intersectional narratology need not aim primarily at uncovering discriminatory representations, but may also focus on the status of the representational vehicles carrying meanings. It thus extends the feminist project of scrutinizing non-mainstream texts to complicate observations based on a limited canon.

In its application to narrative empathy, intersectional narratology enables discussion of the complex overlays of narrative form, contexts of creation and reception, and identity that work together to provoke diverse responses to narrative, among divergent readers of a wide variety of texts. It complicates rather than schematizing, and it risks proliferation of axes rather than insisting on neat taxonomies. It still remains narratology as long as it seeks evidence of impact of narrative techniques, manifestations of theme in form, and as long as it discerns dominant, residual, and emergent forms in historical contexts. As Lanser writes, intersectional feminism “can now map and be mapped by narrative patterns across time and space, accounting for vectors of difference to create a narratology that is deeply locational and therefore cross-cultural and historical” (32). An intersectional narratology would skeptically examine beliefs in universal impacts of narrative techniques, but it would embrace evidence that examines narrative arts’ contribution to an expanded circle of empathy, especially if that extension benefited vulnerable members of disadvantaged peoples. For when narrative empathy reaches across boundaries of difference, geographical and temporal distance, to evoke shared feeling, what—if anything—happens as a result? Propositions, derived from the science of real-life empathy, include changed attitudes, greater tolerance, reduced fear of the other, and increased helping behavior or altruism.

An intersectional narratology brought to bear on narrative empathy extends rhetorical narratology’s interest in transactions between authors
and readers, makers and audiences, emphasizing the challenges to theorizing of substantial differences among real human beings. Yet it also accommodates a sense of shared human experiences derived from the behavioral sciences, where much of the empirical work on empathy has been carried out. The psychology of narrative impact examines ranges of possibilities, discovers clusters of frequent experiences, and records outliers among readers’ responses to emotionally evocative texts. These empirical techniques support intersectional narratology’s project of discerning differences stemming from multiple competing axes of identity and experience in subjects. I concur with Lanser that “the articulation of women—and men—into distinct pluralities opens multiple new avenues for historical, cross-cultural, and intra-cultural inquiry” (Lanser 33; emphasis in original). Intersectional narratology enables the theorist to employ markers of identity, technique, or impact derived from contextual, feminist, and queer narrative theories, rather than sticking to a single binary contrast. The emergent queer narratology has already usefully complicated the binary starting point of much early feminist narrative theory. Further openness to the multiple intersecting axes of readers’ subject positions and the protean possibilities of narrative techniques (Sternberg) characterizes intersectional narratology. This makes it especially adaptable to the study of narrative empathy. Just as empathy involves both affective and cognitive responses, the study of narrative empathy inquires how the blend of affective feeling with and cognitive accuracy in mind-reading relates to multiple aspects of readers’, characters’ and authors’ identities.

**Empathy: What It Is and What It Does**

In contemporary discourse, empathy has many definitions, components, and roles to play in accounts of human emotional responsiveness, communication, social behavior, and altruism. It is one of the factors, for instance, attributed to the decline of violence against women (Pinker 409–15) and gays (447–54) in the latter part of the twentieth century and in the early decades of the twenty-first century. C. Daniel Batson, one of the most influential authorities on empathy in psychology, has recently highlighted eight of the possible phenomena known as empathy, as the term is currently used in psychology and to a lesser degree in philosophy.\(^6\) His essay represents an important disentangling of competing meanings that imply different research methodologies.

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\(^6\) For a history of the term going back to its origins in late nineteenth-century German psychological aesthetics, see Lauren Wispé.
and assumptions about empathy’s real-world impact. Here as in subsequent paragraphs, I extrapolate from Batson’s real-world empathy between human subjects to narrative empathy, where some of the agents involved are made out of words. Discussions of narrative empathy ought to establish firmly to which version of empathy they correlate, and this discussion should make that definitional task easier for intersectional narrative theorists to accomplish. Although only some of the phenomena listed by Batson are obviously involved in narrative empathy, where the eliciting prompt of empathetic feeling is a construct or effect of narrative (including fictions) rather than another actual person in the real world, a review of the phenomena using Batson’s categories freshens our sense of their links to literary response as well as their inherent complexity. This complexity encourages the development of an intersectional narratology, especially as it pertains to narrative’s impact on vulnerable populations. An intersectional narratology would skeptically examine claims for universal impacts of narrative techniques, but it would welcome evidence that shows the narrative arts contributing to an expanded empathetic circle.

Batson’s overview of the eight psychological states that correspond to different versions of empathy begins with a cognitive definition, “Concept 1: Knowing Another Person’s Internal State, Including His or Her Thoughts and Feelings” (4). Sometimes called cognitive empathy, this phenomenon has been studied by William Ickes for its degree of successful mind-reading, or “empathic accuracy” (Ickes 57), since most humans estimate with relative ease what a person close to them is thinking or feeling, in everyday mind-reading. For narratologists, knowledge of internal states correlates with matters of narrative situation and narratorial reliability or unreliability. An intersectional narratologist might investigate whether the age, gender, ethnicity, and literary experience of a reader makes a difference in the response to a first-person narrator such as Katniss Everdeen in Suzanne Collins’s Hunger Games trilogy (2008–10). In a recent discussion, an eleven-year-old girl resonated with the emotions of narrativity, especially curiosity and suspense. She took Katniss’s narration at her word. An eighteen-year-old young woman in the same conversation felt no sympathy, distrusted Katniss’s self-reports, and reported a cooler response to the narration. The eighteen-year-old was alert to the gaps in Katniss’s (a consonant narrator’s) own self-knowledge, which had a distancing effect for her. Would an olive-skinned reader, or one who had lost a parent in an industrial accident, recognize Katniss’s internal states more readily? A larger and more diverse sample of readers could help an intersectional narratologist test some of the many existing suppositions about conditions that increase the likeliness of cognitive empathy.
For narratologists concerned with form, questions about cognitive empathy and narrative technique often suppose differing impacts of first- and third-person narration. In narrative empathy for fictional constructs, I have argued, empathic accuracy for characters can be vouchsafed by third-person narrators’ representation of characters’ consciousness (Empathy and the Novel 136). When a narrator generalizes in a reliable fashion about a character’s thoughts and feelings, using psycho-narration, readers have little reason to doubt it. Similarly, in fiction employing either quoted (interior) monologue or narrated monologue (free indirect discourse), in which the words of the characters’ thoughts appear, narrative empathic accuracy will be high. However, the potential that Batson acknowledges, that “you could be wrong, at least about some nuances and details” (4), increases radically in less reliable first-person-narrative situations (Empathy and the Novel 137), or when readers bring their individual preferences, memories, experiences, predictions, fantasies, and feelings to the task of co-creating fictional characters by filling in the gaps (Keen, “Readers’ Temperaments” 295–96). Thus experiences of narrative empathy, which cannot be verified by cross-checking with real people about their actual feelings, involve greater likelihood of what I have named narrative empathic inaccuracy, the strong conviction in reader’s empathy that divergently attributes emotion or state of mind to a fictional persona, at cross purposes with an author’s apparent intentions (Empathy and the Novel 137).

Batson’s second concept, “Adopting the Posture or Matching the Neural Responses of an Observed Other” (4), refers to the rapid, automatic, and unconscious mimicry of others’ bodily or facial positions. Some psychologists believe that the neural substrates of this widespread animal behavior underpin other more cognitive, conscious forms of empathy in humans, though not necessarily to higher-order concern, sympathy, or altruism. Motor mimicry in an audience certainly occurs during dramatic productions, in film viewing (such as facial close-ups or action sequences of acrobatic parkour), and probably in response to graphic narrative representations of nonhuman characters (Keen, “Fast Tracks” 135, 137). As Batson comments, “the problem of anthropomorphism arises precisely because we humans have the ability—and inclination—to make such inferences” about what others think and feel, “even about other species” (5). It is possible that descriptions of characters’ disposition in space in imagined locations of prose or verse fictional storyworlds call upon readers’ motor mimicry. Reports of painful bodily experiences or descriptions of dysphoric facial expressions, even of fictional

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7. Blair and Blair report, “There are no current data relating motor empathy to moral or social rule development” (139).
characters, can elicit physical responses in the reader’s own body (Warhol, *Having a Good Cry* 62–63). Though often regarded as a behavior of sentimental women responding to affecting stories (Radway), such experiences are also reported by male readers. When my husband read John Muir’s account of Mr. Young hanging from a cliff in Alaska with dislocated arms (40–41), he grunted aloud and adjusted his own shoulders to make sure they were still in their sockets. Does a gender difference between reader and protagonist alter the degree of motor mimicry experienced when reading a novel such as *The Hunger Games*? When Collins manipulates the pace of her narration, employing expansion as Katniss stands immobilized on the metal circle at the start of the games for sixty seconds (148–49), do readers’ differing axes of identity, including experiences of timed athletic contests, alter their degree of motor mimicry? Pace of reading, heart rate, sweating, and visible signs of bodily posture alteration could all be studied with the assistance of a psychologist.

Concept 3 of Batson’s survey addresses the more affective element of emotion-matching and emotion-catching: “Coming to Feel as Another Person Feels” (Batson 5). Identifying this well-documented aspect of human behavior as *emotional contagion* suggests that the same feeling spreads from person to person, whereas the older terminology of sympathy, dating back to David Hume and Adam Smith’s influential eighteenth-century accounts, does not demand an exact match in feelings. (Hume and Smith do also describe instances of motor mimicry under discussion of sympathy, compassion, and fellow feeling). Since empathy in some contexts appears as a virtual synonym of sympathy, this concept clearly has a literary history (Keen, *Empathy and the Novel* 39–55). The version of emotion-catching and matching that Batson describes comes closer to empathy as theorized by the neuroscience of mirror neurons, comprising a shared manifold for intersubjectivity (Gallese 171). Mirror neurons work quickly, giving an onlooker a fast physiological version of the observed subject’s action, expression, or feeling. That is, if humans have a mirror neuron system like other primates, then witnessing or even hearing about another’s feelings may prompt fast emotion-matching and catching without an extensive educational process. This kind of empathy and its narrative correlate could be studied by adepts in neural imaging. To what degree biological differences among subjects, let alone social and cultural aspects of identity, alter this affective emotion-matching is an open question. Intersectional narratology could focus on contentions that appear in essentialist binary formulations, such as the argument that female readers are more empathetic than men.8

8. The culturally promulgated assumption that women are more empathetic than men (Baron-Cohen 1–2) is not borne out when physiological measures of empathy are employed
The remaining concepts enumerated by Batson more obviously correlate with aspects of narrative empathy. Batson's concept draws on the original meaning of empathy as a translation of *Einfühlung*, as theorized by late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century aesthetics: “Intuiting or Projecting Oneself into Another's Situation,” as Batson describes aesthetic empathy (6). Batson pushes the definition towards human perspective-taking, lightly glossing the target of *Einfühlung* as “some inanimate object, such as a gnarled, dead tree on a windswept hillside” (5). Aesthetic empathy remains an important effect of fictional storyworlds. Fiction readers and writers know that setting can evoke narrative empathy, both through its connection with a human perspective and through a feeling for the landscape, buildings, rocks, and trees. Suzanne Collins opens the last novel of her trilogy, *Mockingjay* (2010), with a prompt to *Einfühlung*:

I stare down at my shoes, watching as a fine layer of ash settles on the worn leather. This is where the bed I shared with my sister, Prim, stood. Over there was the kitchen table. The bricks of the chimney, which collapsed in a charred heap, provide a point of reference for the rest of the house. How else could I orient myself in this sea of gray?

Almost nothing remains of District 12. (3)

The disorienting ruins of the firebombed house and its surrounding mining town employ the association of a human-built environment with human culture (hearth and home), as well as with the missing people. Though the passage alludes to family, Collins directs the reader’s attention to the fate of destroyed objects. Although a reader who has gone through a house fire or aerial bombardment would possess empathetic reference points for this scene, the gray ash alludes to the televised scenes of the aftermath of the Towers’ collapse in the 9/11 attack. (In 2001, Collins’s original readers were between five and ten years old.) Do readers who remember 9/11 more readily make this poetic connection? As Rae Greiner has recently argued, the “the formal protocols of empathy align with those of poetry” (420), actively relating the *unalike* human perceiver and inanimate object of perception, analogously with metaphor: “With its fusion of subject and object, empathy accomplished the work of metaphor, while sympathy, with its emphasis on context—

(Lennon and Eisenberg 197, 203). Cognitive science on gender difference in empathy affirms that men and women have equal empathic capacities, and acknowledges that sufficient motivation accurately to read others’ thoughts and feelings alters performance, which accounts for perceptions of gender differences in empathy if females are more motivated by cultural expectations than most males (Ickes et al. “Gender Differences” 219).
one’s adjacency to or distance from others with whom one does not merge—calls the attributes of metonymy to mind” (421). It will take a serious effort to resuscitate psychologists’ interest in the early twentieth-century version of aesthetic empathy.9 Batson dismisses it: “Such projection is rarely what is meant by empathy in contemporary psychology” (6). However, for literary studies, *Einfühlung* has a specific literary history, from Vernon Lee’s early theorizing to the mid-twentieth-century work of romanticist Richard Harter Fogle to recent work by Greiner.10 Congruently, in contemporary neuroscience, the study of brain response to verbal directional prompts may provide a basis for understanding how empathy for things and others rests on a foundation of physical orientation (Zwaan and Taylor). This has a bearing on some of the most vivid effects of fictional storyworlds on aesthetic empathy in immersion reading.11

Deliberate perspective taking, or in Batson’s terms for concept 5, “Imagining How Another Is Thinking and Feeling” (7), involves sensitivity to another’s point of view. Related to the aesthetic projection of *Einfühlung* (concept 4), but moving away from inanimate targets, the “imagine other” condition of empathy involves one person’s “feeling into” another’s thoughts and feelings. This definition of empathy focuses on the other person, with an awareness of the separate being of that individual. Rather than experiencing emotional fusion with the other, the empath who engages in perspective taking employs observation of the other and knowledge of that person. Empathy in this sense is a more obviously cognitive operation that depends on having a theory of (another’s) mind (ToM). For narrative theorists exploring the phenomenon of character identification, this mode of empathy transposes quite neatly to the kind of narrative empathy that follows on effortful attention to a fictional character’s actions, circumstances, speech, represented thoughts, and reported or inferred motives. Much (but not all) of the philosophy of empathy refers to perspective taking.12

The closely related concept 6, “Imagining How One Would Think and Feel in the Other’s Place” (Batson 7), also receives emphasis in philosophi-

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9. For my effort to discover how aesthetic empathy contributes to Thomas Hardy’s strategic empathizing in poems such as “The Convergence of the Twain,” see my “Empathetic Hardy” 354–56, 363–65.
10. Greiner persuasively argues that the realist novel’s representational aims accord more with sympathy than with empathy.
11. Studies of the effects of video games suggest that moving in the three-dimensional space of the game may activate spatial orientation mirror neurons. See Tajerian.
cal accounts of empathy, in part because of its appearance in Adam Smith’s *A Theory of Moral Sentiments* (1759) under the older term sympathy. This version of empathy is also cognitive (since it involves active imagining), but it is rooted in role-taking (putting oneself in the shoes of another) rather than taking the perspective of that person. It answers the question *How would I feel?* rather than *How does s/he feel?* Batson notes that the “imagine-self perspective is in some ways similar to the act of projecting oneself into another’s situation” (concepts 4 and 5), but asserts that the two stances should not be confused, as “the self remains more focal here than in aesthetic projection” (7). Like perspective-taking empathy, role-taking empathy is likely to be involved in readers’ experiences of narrative empathy. Indeed, many readers reporting strong sensations of character identification phrase their experiences in terms of how they would feel themselves in the position of the character. Some theorists of narrative empathy regard this form of empathy as more “categorical,” more dependent on matches with the self and group identity, and therefore less other-directed and less likely to lead to the ethical expression of compassion than “situational” empathy (Hogan 134–36), which is closer to perspective taking (Batson 7, concept 5). An intersectional approach to experimental design might well be able to examine these possibilities, which have been theorized but not subjected to empirical testing.

If role taking is more egotistical than perspective taking, personal distress is more self-focused than either. Personal distress is an empathic reaction that focuses on one’s own sensations to the point of diverting attention from the suffering other’s experience. As concept 7, Batson describes it as “Feeling Distress at Witnessing Another Person’s Suffering” (7). As Batson explains it, personal distress expresses not feelings *for* (sympathy) or feelings *like* the other’s feelings (empathy as defined by concepts 1–6), but “feeling distressed by the state of the other” (Batson 8; emphasis in original). Personal distress as described by developmental psychologist Nancy Eisenberg is an aversive emotional response that leads to avoidance. It can have little to tell students of narrative empathy, since true aversion leads to cessation of the reading or viewing that evokes the response (Keen, *Empathy and the Novel* 4–5). Many younger readers of Suzanne Collins’s *Hunger Games* abandoned *Mockingjay*, the third novel of the trilogy, in which representations of violence escape the game arena and take over the primary fictional world. Collins’s interrogation of just-war theory and her unsparing account of the costs of violent resistance to an unjust regime drive many of her young readers away. If the ability to be transported by fiction is one of the key precursors to narrative empathy, then proneness to personal distress rather than other-
oriented empathy may become an obstacle to immersion reading. The effects of personal distress continue when the reading is not abandoned. Educational circumstances that compel reading of an upsetting fiction or viewing of a distressing film to continue in the face of an aversive response can block the impulse to get away from the stimulus, but they cannot dictate a spirit of receptiveness or openness in readers and viewers.

Batson’s eighth and final concept will be familiar to literary scholars, for it is best known as sympathy, with an emphasis on the feeling component rather than the cognitive knowing another’s perspective described in concept 6. “Feeling for Another Person Who Is Suffering” (Batson 8), or for the fictive equivalents of persons in narrative, has been discussed under the older terms pity, compassion, fellow feeling, and sympathy. Related to empathy in some social psychology as the concerned outcome of an other-oriented feeling for another, empathic concern expresses an appropriately “congruent” emotion that needs to match the other’s feeling exactly: feeling sorry for a frightened person or gratified for a joyful person would exhibit sympathy. Many philosophers regard sympathy as an ethical expression of what begins as empathy, a more mature and other-directed concern than the motor mimicry, emotional contagion, or feeling-matching that Batson describes in concepts 1 through 3. As a goal of fictive representation, sympathy has had a prominent role to play in literature, with important statements in its favor by Henry Home, Lord Kames, Percy Bysshe Shelley, and George Eliot (Keen, *Empathy and the Novel* 44–55) and historic exhibits in the narratives of George Eliot, James Joyce, Harper Lee, Doris Lessing, Maya Angelou, Toni Morrison, and hundreds if not thousands of other novelists. Some influential commentators on the social impact of the realist novel persistently refer to its empathy-inducing qualities (Hunt 27–34; Nussbaum 90; Pinker 177). It must be acknowledged, however, that to the perpetual bedevilment of those who would distinguish empathy from sympathy, the terms have often been conflated or reversed. As Keith Oatley, an expert guide to the emotions involved in fiction reading, remarks, in his *Such Stuff as Dreams: The Psychology of Fiction*, “In modern usage, sympathy is generally taken as separate from empathy (feeling with), and usually means feeling for someone in their predicament” (118). Oatley associates literary experiences of character identification with empathy, and readers’ recollection of emotional memories with sympathy (126), and I concur with that difference, although I think that character identification does not inevitably lead to empathy (or vice versa).

Strangely, Batson does not address fantasy empathy. One of the most widely used empathy scales is Mark Davis’s Interpersonal Reactivity Index, or IRI (Davis, “Multidimensional” 85). Davis’s multidimensional scale includes
subscales measuring personal distress, empathic concern, perspective-taking, and fantasy empathy. The fantasy empathy subscale measures subjects’ “tendency to imaginatively transpose” themselves “into fictional situations” (Davis, *Empathy* 57). David acknowledges that fantasy empathy exhibits congruence with perspective taking (58) but rightly insists that the questions elicit experiences of “imagining oneself in the place of fictitious characters appearing in books, movies, and plays” (58; emphasis mine), a key difference often glossed over in discussions of narrative empathy’s relation to altruism or pro-social behavior.\(^\text{13}\)

If we are to understand how narrative empathy works in human subjects, then the difference between fiction and nonfiction narrative should not be disregarded. An intersectional narratology can attend to generic differences among other axes. I have argued that a perception of fictionality (whether the source is truly made up or simply presented as fiction) enhances the likelihood of empathic response by releasing readers or viewers from any sense of obligation to help real people in the real world (or the expectation of reciprocity) (Keen, *Empathy and the Novel* 16). Fictionality may intensify readers’ empathy without necessarily causing altruism. This contention has not yet been tested, and readers of the many popular memoirs on the contemporary literary scene doubt it. However, the relation of fiction to empathy has been affirmed in several ways. There is some evidence that people of high-empathy dispositions enjoy fiction more than people of low-empathy (or no-empathy) dispositions (Esrock; Mar et al., “Bookworms”); lack of enjoyment of fiction is a diagnostic trait for high-functioning autism (Wing). The Raymond Mar lab in Toronto has recently demonstrated that readers with a preference for nonfiction score lower on social abilities associated with empathy than readers who prefer fiction (Mar et al., “Bookworms”). The Mar group has also investigated the impact of exposure to fiction on readers’ ability to interpret emotional facial cues and on their verbal ability, in contrast to nonfiction reading (Fong and Mar). The additional complication of fictional versus non-fictional narrative prompts combine with the existent dichotomies in empathy research: the affective and cognitive; the automatic response and the learned behavior; the self- and other-directed forms of imagining; the neural and the moral.

\(^{13}\) While Martha Nussbaum asserts that experiences of narrative empathy (with the right kind of novels) will produce good world citizens (90), other theorists find examples of the prosocial impact of empathy in fiction itself. For example, see Hoffman 225, where he uses the actions of fictional characters engaged in altruistic acts to demonstrate the efficacy of empathy.
Theoretical Intersections in Narrative Empathy

Batson’s disentangling of empathy-related concepts reveals the complexities of empathy research. Even under the big umbrella of “psychology,” the study of empathy can involve expertise in both affect and cognition. The neural substrate and chemical bases of empathic responses have been studied by neuroscientists, while social and developmental psychologists have charted much of empathy’s roles in social behavior and moral development. Philosophers in a variety of traditions (ethics, moral sentimentalism, utilitarianism, aesthetics) have theorized empathy, sometimes in collaboration with cognitive scientists or developmental and social psychologists. The study of empathy is automatically interdisciplinary, even if not all empathy researchers undertake the task of answering questions and posing problems that navigate disciplinary boundaries. As relative latecomers (or belated returners) to the scientific and scholarly conversation about empathy, literary theorists find some assumptions congenial and some alien, some conclusions predictable and some startling, some running counter to our own disciplinary commitments, some affirming our beliefs, and some challenging our deepest convictions. Developing an intersectional narratology will assist researchers in the discovering and disseminating findings about narrative empathy in an interdisciplinary field.

For instance, while studying narrative empathy as a feature of immersion fiction reading, junctions of narratology, feminism, affective studies, and cognitive science could help us answer how, under which circumstances, and in response to which techniques, individuals as distinct from one another as we are can experience the emotional fusion and intense recognition of shared feeling. Introspective testimony from readers and viewers who have experienced narrative empathy (or not!) in response to an emotionally evocative text should receive our respectful attention, but we should not make the error of mistaking our own intense reading experiences for universal or predictive phenomena. They are instead starting points for an intersectional narratology of narrative impact. Thus variable cultural contexts, individual differences among people, readers’ temperamental dispositions, as well as their gender and sexual orientation, would emerge from the brackets into which classical narratology placed all evidence about actual audiences. Though this procedure would render the convenient construct “the reader” irreducibly complex, fluid, and extremely resistant to simplification and schematization, it would encourage confidence in future discoveries about narrative empathy.

Intersectional narratology participates in the extension of feminist narratology’s project, responding to Ruth Page’s challenge: “To make a more convincing discussion of the ways in which gender might intersect with
the characteristics of narrative form, considerably more empirical data are needed, about the tellers and receivers as well as the tales themselves” (“Feminist Narratology?” 52–53). This data originates from many sources, including the work of David S. Miall, Melanie Green, Raymond Mar, and their collaborators. Literary scholars have begun and should continue the project of communicating their empirical findings, as well as collaborating with researchers in other disciplines. So, for instance, empathetic effects of narrative have been evaluated by means of experiments in discourse processing, in the psychology of narrative impact, and through philosophical introspection, but the conflicting data on gender and empathy have not yet been systematically investigated with respect to either literary responses of female and male audiences or gendered narrative forms.14

Among other questions, the relation of narrative empathy to altered attitudes and prosocial action in the real world, often theorized by philosophers such as Martha Nussbaum, deserves the respect of experimental scrutiny. Research in neuroscience, cognitive science, developmental psychology, and discourse processing has advanced our knowledge of both empathy and narrative empathy, but much remains to be discovered. Regarding narrative, Fong and Mar remark, “empirical research investigating the social outcomes of reading is in its infancy” (61). Regarding empathy, two of the neuroscientists who have extended our understanding of its neural substrate enumerate the gaps: “A second big issue is the link between empathic brain responses and sympathy or compassion, that is, feeling as and feeling for the other. Thirdly, it is an open question how empathic brain responses relate to prosocial motivation and behavior and finally, almost nothing is known about the plasticity of the empathic brain, that is, about the trainability of empathy and compassionate motivation, all issues that should have considerable practical impacts on society” (Hein and Singer, “I Feel” 157). Note that these scientists point out what is not known about the chain of responses reputed to exist between empathy and sympathy and empathy and altruism, let alone how those relations change when empathy, in psychology’s empathy-altruism relation, is replaced by narrative empathy. Literary scholars and reception theorists can add nuance to the discussion of empathy-inducing texts, which have often been hedged about with canonical barriers that suggest only the most high literary narratives can have ethical effects. What if escapist reading also benefits readers by shifting perspectives, opening up attitudes, and prompting more generous feelings and actions toward others? The answers to

14. More common in psychology is the opposite effort, to control for gender rather than contrasting male and female responses.
these research questions about narrative empathy will be of immediate interest to many, including feminist and queer theorists, who hope to show how narrative literature, broadly defined, can expand the empathetic circle in the real world.

A conjunction of cognitive narratology, feminism, and affective studies occurs when studying narrative empathy: whenever we ask how, under which circumstances, and in response to which techniques, beings so different from one another as we are can experience the emotional fusion and intense recognition of shared feeling mediated by fiction. As many of the contributors to this collection demonstrate, narrative empathy felt and exercised by makers (novelists, graphic narrative artists, filmmakers, the amateur videographers of the “It Gets Better” project) motivates fictional and nonfictional utterances aimed at specific target audiences. This strategic narrative empathy may be focused in its direction, announcing and forming a text’s intended audience (Keen, “Strategic Empathizing”), though texts may certainly have multiple audiences, as Brian Richardson has theorized. Furthermore, the divergent evidence of actual readers’ various responses to individual narratives motivates a layering of methodologies. As I argue in *Empathy and the Novel*, no one narrative text evokes empathy from all readers, nor does any specific narrative technique reliably produce the spontaneous shared feeling and perspective taking that are the hallmarks of empathy as conceived by contemporary psychology and philosophy (92–99).

Matters of identity, experience, and context combine with the possibilities enabled by readers’ and viewers’ embodied minds to condition potential responses to the invitations of narrative technique (Keen, “Readers’ Temperaments”). In novels, stories, and film fictions, narrative empathy overarches narratological categories: a range of techniques might be operating at once to produce the likelihood of empathy. It can involve fictional characters; point of view and narrative situation; handling of pace, duration, and seriality; and storyworld features such as settings. An intersectional narratology begins with some contextual premises: the willingness to combine inquiry about a narrative technique—for instance use of a second-person “you” narration—with data from outside the text. Does familiarity with the conventions of 1930s documentary films, which commonly address the viewer, train a reader to accept a “you” role as an addressee? Does a habit of playing Xbox Live with friends make a reader of fiction more flexible about the overlap in addressee and avatar in “you” narratives? In co-creating a “you” narration, does a queer reader feel more or less likely than a straight reader to naturalize it representationally into a “he” or “she,” or do other experiences and aspects of identity complicate a queer/straight binary? Does a female and feminist reader accus-
tomated to cross-reading books for boys more easily sustain the sense of “you” as narratee? Do any of these differences correlate with—or cause—heightened or diminished sensations of narrative empathy?

While classical narratology typically focused its attention on forms, techniques, taxonomies, and communication models, feminist narratology re-evaluates these theories in light of gender. This matters to a theory of narrative empathy not because empathy is an exclusively or especially female trait: it is not tied to biological sex. Males and females show similar ranges of empathic responsiveness on physiological measures (Lennon and Eisenberg 197, 203). Cultural contexts, however, can motivate the expression of empathic concern by females more than by males. The gendering of genre plays a role in reaching readers that have been acculturated to regard experiences of emotional fusion as desirable or as a response to be suppressed. This in turn has a bearing on the marketing and reception of emotionally evocative fiction. Gendered conventions that appeal to the ostensibly female, feeling reader or a male excitement-seeking reader thus make up a culture-bound component of narrative empathy. To return to my example of second-person narration, if gender is one of the axes of identity that orients readers’ co-creation of fictional worlds, do female (or feminist) readers make feeling readers prone to identify with characters who look like, feel like, dress like, speak like “you”? Or is the word “you” enough all by itself to erase barriers of difference? A feminist narratologist, in cooperation with an analyst of discourse processing, or a psychologist of narrative impact, could design a study to find out. To my mind, devising those studies is preferable to simply believing that we already know the answers.

You might think, for instance, that commentary about readers’ empathy would foreground the women readers who purchase most of the fiction bought in stores and check out the majority of novels borrowed from libraries, the popular genres and middlebrow fiction aimed at them, and the tradition of women writers seeking to educate their readers’ sympathetic imaginations, but you would be wrong. Commentators on the edifying effects of literary novel-reading often attempt to dignify the novel’s ethical project by ruling out ordinary women readers’ common experiences of feeling with fiction (e.g., Robinson 413). My own work on narrative empathy has pursued a feminist critical agenda by arguing that the disparagement of women’s middlebrow and escapist reading by writers on narrative ethics undermines broad claims made about the impact of “the novel” on readers (Keen, *Empathy and the Novel* 102–5). Which novels do they mean? Only canonical, realist, literary fiction written primarily by men prior to 1925? A theory of the impact of readers’ empathy will only benefit from extension to a greater and more representa-
tive range of narratives. If we want to understand how novels alter readers’ perceptions of others, we should not begin by ruling out most of the novels read because they are popular with women (Oprah books) or that belong to denigrated subgenres (romances, mystery novels). For despite the work of feminist literary critics who have expanded the range of valued texts and kinds of reading experiences (Radway; Warhol, *Having a Good Cry*), exclusion of all but the most canonical and high literary texts typifies commentary on readers’ empathy. We should ask what role gender plays in reader response to narrative techniques, modes, and genres rather than using prejudiced categorization as a means to eliminate diverse readers and texts from the scope of our studies. Following Ruth Page’s caution, techniques and effects of narrative empathy should not be expected to map onto gendered modes of narrativity such as *écriture féminine* (“Feminist Narratology?” 43). We should be alert to the publishing market’s response to book purchasers’ gender, and biases that still show in the greater number of novels written by men reviewed in the influential weekly book reviews, reviews still (in 2011!) mainly authored by male reviewers.15

Once the range of narratives has been opened up to include what diverse readers actually read or watch—including telenovelas,16 graphic narratives,17 Oprah books,18 multi-authored fan-fiction,19 fictions created for the Internet,20 Booker-prize shortlisted novels—I believe we will discover a great array of techniques and representations that invite emotional engagement and evoke narrative empathy. However, the effect of real-life empathy on altruism (or the less stringent standard of prosocial helping behavior) does not necessarily carry over in predictable outcomes of narrative empathy, though imaginative role-taking for fictional characters has been shown to shift perceptions of outgroups (Hakemulder 146–47). More favorable perception of despised group members is a significant outcome, but it differs from real-world helping of representatives of those or similar group members. The evidence for

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15. Male reviewers outnumber female reviewers, and books by women are reviewed less frequently than those by men. See the research aggregated by VIDA, Women in Literary Arts.


17. I have written about the strategic empathy employed by graphic narrative and comic book authors in “Fast Tracks to Narrative Empathy.”

18. As I argue in *Empathy and the Novel*, Oprah Winfrey makes empathy a linchpin of her aesthetics, as evidenced by her televised book club discussions (115–16).

19. See Ruth Page on the narrative poetics of participatory storytelling projects (*Stories and Social Media*).

20. A superb online novel with many opportunities for responses of narrative empathy is Geoff Ryman’s *253: A Novel for the Internet about London Underground in Seven Cars and a Crash.*
altruism induced by narrative empathy is scanty though the cultural faith in the benefits of narrative empathy is strong.\textsuperscript{21} Seeing what isn’t working the way we expect can lead to alternative explanations. So, for instance, the cultivation of the sympathetic imagination through rendered perspectives of fictional characters is a linchpin of narrative ethics. Yet cognitive scientific efforts to verify this theory by studying the empathetic impact of role-taking instructions during fiction reading have not yielded robust results. Cognitive science surprises us by showing instead that exercises in visualizing mental imagery more reliably produce empathetic effects and (short-term) helping behavior. In other words, a more vivid and absorbing storyworld, visualized in the mind’s eye, may intensify the ethical effects of reading where the injunction to “walk in the shoes” of a character may not (Johnson 150–55). Joining a fictional world as a temporary visitor may involve effects as robust as those often attributed to character identification.

One possible yield of experimental scrutiny could be the challenge to re-evaluate previously disparaged aspects of reading (such as escapism and fantasizing) as an aspect of narrative empathy. We could ask whether an experience of narrative empathy facilitates cross-reading over generic categories that usually imply a gendered readership, or other barriers to imaginative access to fictional worlds. We could discover whether narrative empathy felt for a minor character opens a path for critical resistant reading. We could extend the fascinating work begun by psychologist Shira Gabriel, in which she and her graduate student Ariana Young demonstrate that immersive reading of fantasies such as Stephanie Meyer’s \textit{Twilight} (2005) and J. K. Rowling’s \textit{Harry Potter} books (1997–2007) gives children the experience of belonging and thereby enhances empathy: “The current research suggests that books give readers more than an opportunity to tune out and submerge themselves in fantasy worlds. Books provide the opportunity for social connection and the blissful calm that comes from becoming a part of something larger than oneself for a precious, fleeting moment” (Gabriel and Young 993). While \textit{amae}\textsuperscript{22} and empathy are linked in some psychological studies of Japanese subjects, Gabriel and Young are the first to suggest the link as an effect of fiction reading. Their finding challenges hierarchies of literary quality and taste that

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\item See Keen, \textit{Empathy and the Novel} 16–26, 145–46 for my critique of the application of psychology’s empathy–altruism relation to narrative empathy. For the empathy–altruism hypothesis regarding real-life empathy and prosocial action, see Batson, ed., \textit{The Altruism Question}.
\item Not widely known outside of the psychology of emotion, the term \textit{amae} describes the comforting feeling of attachment and belonging that receives more emphasis in collective cultures than in individualistic societies (Doi).
\end{enumerate}
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would regard *Twilight* and *Harry Potter* as unlikely sources of socially beneficial reading experiences. An intersectional narratology could ask if the temporary shedding of identity that occurs when readers intermingle with fictive beings in fantasy worlds opens readers to empathy across social difference by way of *amae*. Freed from the strictures of representational identity aesthetics, we could admit that fans of *Twilight* include middle-aged moms and adult gay men as well as thirteen-year-old girls, and that they seek not images of themselves but to get out of this world.\(^{23}\)

The goal of such research projects would not to be to defend *Twilight* as art, but to understand what happens when such diverse members of the actual readership of a novel experience social connection, satisfaction, and positive feelings while reading a series of novels that reverses the conventional horror at vampires. This calls upon the would-be intersectional narratologist to suspend some of her own categorical presuppositions, derived from her own axes of identity. As a literary critic I dislike *Twilight*’s tedious prose style. As a middle-aged feminist I am dismayed by the popularity of a romance for teenagers and tweens that features such explicit representations of violent sexuality (*Breaking Dawn* [2008]). As an English professor I tip my hat to any popular novelist whose work encourages voracious reading. As a non-LDS gentile I wonder why a Mormon novelist would choose to represent immortal marriage in terms of conversion to vampirism, which I associate with soul death. As a former watcher of *Kolchack: the Night-Stalker* (1974–75), I resist the allure of vampire Edward Cullen, preferring the warm-blooded Native American werewolves. I am on Team Jacob. My gay brother-in-law is on Team Edward. What’s up with that? Clearly a large number of readers of the *Twilight* books are getting a big charge out of character identification and empathy with Bella. Isabella, announces *Parenting* magazine, was the number one name for baby girls in 2010, after a forty-year period of rarity (Goodin). I would be an irresponsible student of narrative empathy if I ignored this cultural phenomenon, with its evidence of widespread impact. If we want to understand how narrative empathy works, and to investigate whether these experiences lead to changes in the real world, then we should not ignore *Twilight* and *Harry Potter*. But how do we go about discovering the role that empathy plays in creating the groundswell of popularity that leads to a bestseller? The crowdsourcing of reader response may be necessary.

Reports from diverse readers make any discoveries about shared experiences or predictions about impact more persuasive. One critic’s introspec-

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\(^{23}\) See Blackford for the case that girls seek reading experiences about fictional worlds different from their social worlds and about characters distinct from themselves.
tion about narrative impact on herself may begin the process of analysis, but one reader’s impressions should not inevitably be construed as the reader. Thus, in applying intersectional narratology to narrative empathy, reports from more readers than one should be analyzed. This would oblige narrative theorists to attend to readings that may strike professional literary critics as erroneous. When the movie of *The Hunger Games* (2012) came out, a subset of young viewers objected in tweets to the film’s Rue, played by a young black actress (“Hunger Games Cast Subjected to Racist Attacks”). They had read Rue as white, having misread, skipped, or forgotten the clear descriptions in the novel that render Rue as having “bright, dark eyes and satiny brown skin” (*Hunger Games* 98). Their sympathy for the character, to whose death Katniss responds humanely and subversively, was disrupted by the accurate representation of her race. Intersectional study of this failure in strategic narrative empathy could address readers’ and viewers’ age, gender, race, reading level, skimming and skipping, and disposition to fantasy empathy. The condemnation of the evident racism of the young viewers’ tweets does not help us understand how the novel permitted an empathetic response while the film blocked it.

Formalist analysis can and ought to intersect with accounts of the experiences of actual and various readers. Gender and sexual identity are among the conditioning factors that contribute to readers’ collaboration in fictional worldmaking, but so are underlying temperaments and individual life experiences (Keen, “Readers’ Temperaments” 296). I recall here Eve Sedgwick’s first axiom, “*People are different from each other*” (22; emphasis in original). Sedgwick saw women and queer and effeminate men as especially adept at “the refinement of necessary skills for making, testing, and using unrationaled and provisional hypotheses about what kinds of people there are to be found in one’s world” (23). This observation suggests that feminist and queer readers (as well as women writers and gay and lesbian authors) cultivate skills of interpretation that can contribute to an intersectional narratology. Individual male straight readers, too, should be recognized as possessing differences that escape what Sedgwick castigated as “inconceivably coarse axes of categorization that have been painstakingly inscribed in current political and critical thought” (22). We are all different from one another, but in our embodied humanity we also share the narrative habit: stories are part of the natural habitat that we spin out of ourselves as we respond with emotion and calculation, moodily and rationally, to a world populated with other beings. Narratives are extraordinarily effective devices for opening the channel of fellow feeling and breaking through barriers of difference thrown up by distance, time, culture, experience.
Works Cited


