Narrative Theory Unbound

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Empathy and 1970s Novels by Third World Women

In addition to the overall questions motivating this volume, two questions—one general and one more specific—inspired this essay. First, in the wake of poststructuralist and other critiques of Eurocentric, bourgeois feminisms, cross-cultural feminist solidarity remains a thorny question: to what extent can feminists share allegiances “across cultures”? As we know, our often compulsory performances of gender, sex, and subjectivity do not express something wholly ontologically prior to that expression but rather help constitute it; even if human beings share biological potentialities, not only our cultural understandings but also our emotional and cognitive processes and material realities are conditioned by history and culture. One way to think in terms of both universality and difference, then, is through the ways in which narratives draw on shared potentialities while also producing different outcomes in different historical contexts. A second, related question is one raised by Suzanne Keen: To what extent does empathy aroused by novel reading result in “prosocial action”? In contrast to some optimistic views about

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1. I would like to thank all the participants of the Queer and Feminist Narrative Theory Symposium, as well as my co-panelists and audience participants when I presented earlier versions of this paper at ASAP/3 in October 2011 and MLA in January 2012, particularly Meghan Marie Hammond. Thanks also to Jennifer Ho, Betsy Huang, Paul Lai, and Stephen Hong Sohn for their invaluable feedback, support, and general wisdom.
the moral effects of novel reading, Keen examines evidence that suggests that, historically, reading novels does not necessarily produce ethically desirable results. Nonetheless, Keen maintains that “both authors’ empathy and readers’ empathy have rhetorical uses,” and she calls for further study on empathy and narrative, particularly on postcolonial novels (140; emphasis in original).

In this essay, I explore these two questions by examining an instance when narrative empathy did arguably produce notable social change by crossing and changing existing borders between different groups of women. I first review some discussions of empathy and its relation to narrative, ethics, and subjectivity. I then discuss the terms “Third World women” and “women of color,” both of which I use in this essay, and I examine ways in which, in the 1970s, postcolonial and ethnic women writers—including Anita Desai, Buchi Emecheta, Bessie Head, Merle Hodge, Maxine Hong Kingston, and Toni Morrison—employed specific narrative strategies in part to explore and map out the kinds of oppressions, repressions, and erasures that women of color shared across ethnic and national boundaries. I examine not only how these instances of narrative empathy worked, but also what this case can show us about the possibilities and limits of empathy and other emotional responses to reading, particularly in later decades in the context of an increasingly flexible, voracious, and fetishizing global capitalism.

Empathy

As is the case with many basic affective and cognitive processes, empathy is familiar yet difficult to define. Empathy is generally described as a process in which a subject experiences the emotions of what he/she believes another person to be feeling. Basic empathy is described as an immediate reaction—for instance, the empathy of babies who cry when other babies cry (Keen 17)—but empathy becomes more complex, cognitively, affectively, and somatically, producing a variety of effects depending on context. For instance, the social position of the empathizer to the person being empathized with can mediate the reaction, as does the empathizer’s aversion to personal distress, disagreement with the assumptions underlying the emotions, and so on. Some scholars, such as Amy Coplan, argue for a narrow definition of empathy, while others, such as Martin Hoffman, argue for a broader definition that does not necessarily involve volitional or complex psychological understanding.²

² For an overview of the various genealogies of empathy, contemporary multidisciplinary research on empathy, and reassessments of empathy’s relationship(s) to literature, see Hammond and Kim.
Partially motivating recent interest on empathy are its perceived moral and ethical potentials. In the widespread “empathy–altruism” hypothesis, novel reading produces moral growth on the part of the reader, who understands others more fully and engages in “prosocial” actions. But Suzanne Keen points out that, given the dearth of evidence that novel reading actually translates into social action or into erasing biases based on familiarity, such an emphasis on the power of empathy may be not just illusory but actually dangerous. For example, “failed empathy” can result in disillusionment, withdrawal, and apathy (Keen 54–55). Richard Delgado describes false or superficial empathy as the liberal fantasy of believing one knows the other while in fact simply reproducing power hierarchies by imposing the self on the other. In short, such debates ask, what is the relationship of empathy to justice?

One way we can explore empathy’s relation to justice is by interrogating the dynamics of difference and sameness. Some accounts of empathy, particularly those espousing empathy as producing prosocial behavior, hinge on the argument that empathy helps make the “other” into the “same” through the shared emotion. Liberal individualist accounts hold that empathy between different persons reveals their sameness and produces altruism, charity, volunteerism, and so forth. Even more sophisticated accounts of empathy privilege sameness; for instance, Hogan privileges “situational empathy,” or empathy based on shared experience, particularly of suffering, over “categorical empathy,” or empathy based on shared identity, because the former serves to bridge ostensible differences between subjects and groups (150). While I would not wholly discount the ethical potential of empathy, standard accounts of empathy that privilege sameness over difference can be problematic for two reasons. First, accounts of empathy that hinge on shared emotion underestimate the potential normative function of ideology in such experiences of empathy. In other words, a perceived empathic process of “making the other into the same” may actually participate in a complex, multifaceted ideological apparatus that in effect forces the other to be the same in order to count as a subject. Second, some accounts of emotion underestimate the complexity of subjectivity itself by focusing on individuals as atomized and discrete rather than dialectically related to groups and systems and, relatedly, by insufficiently considering the different definitions of a subject. In such cases, a perceived emotional sameness may serve to mystify and perpetuate hierarchal differences.

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3. Such “false” empathy roughly describes the literature of subjectivity tourism/fetishism that I will discuss later in the essay.
Empathy can serve a normative function that not only prescribes what one should feel but also defines who can feel, or who constitutes a subject capable of feeling. For instance, Remy Debes, who considers narratives as integral to producing empathy, argues that empathy is by definition normative. He differentiates the intelligibility of another’s emotion from a legitimation of the appraisals that produce that emotion. If we did not agree with the interpretations, explanations, and value systems of another person, we would not necessarily feel the same way. This approval may be tacit or unwilling, and the empathizer may not necessarily recommend this path to everyone. Nevertheless, Debes claims, “to empathize as the result of narrative is not just to identify the ‘why’ of the emotion, it’s to accept the emotion in light of the ‘why’—in light of the reasons offered in a narrative. And it’s to accept those reasons just because one feels the same way as the narrator” (224). Instances of empathy, then, can be examined for the implicit (or explicit) ideological and/or ethical norms embedded in the shared emotions. Furthermore, overly narrow accounts of empathy may implicitly prescribe who constitutes a thinking, feeling subject.4

Another approach to empathy and justice is to consider that feeling between individuals may insufficiently account for different kinds of subjects in multiple, simultaneous systems. Even if we understand others as “capable of feeling” as we do, or if we imagine that we feel the emotions of others, the feeling subject is not necessarily equivalent to the political, economic, or legal subject; they are connected but not identical. Barbara Johnson makes the useful distinction that “lyric and law might be seen as two very different ways of instating what a ‘person’ is”; the “lyric” subject is “emotive, subjective, individual,” whereas the “legal” subject is “rational, rights-bearing, institutional” (550). For instance, as Susan Lanser argues, the eighteenth-century novel that helped develop a modern sense of subjective interiority licensed a lyric subject at the expense of the legal subject. Lanser writes, “The very dynamic of the novel that gives speaking voices their efficacy may also be encouraging a separation between the psychological and the political” (497). Novels thus played a key role in developing a notion of the human that privileged the affective and obscured the legal, economic, and political subject.

4 For instance, Ralph Savarese argues vigorously against the commonplace notion that autistic people do not experience empathy. Savarese points out that research into the cognitive process of autistic people as well as examination of texts written by autistic authors demonstrate that some autistics experience a greater range of empathy beyond narrow and normative “neurotypical” conceptions of affect and cognition. Savarese argues for “neurodiversity,” which would approach cognition as happening in a variety of ways, and “neurocosmopolitanism,” which calls on neurotypicals to work towards understanding unfamiliar ways of thinking and being to the same extent that, for example, autistic people have had to do (284, 288).
We might add to the lyric and legal subjects a third term or category: the “embodied” subject, which includes elements of the subject that are neither “individual” as generally recognized nor “institutional,” but rather unrecognized and/or perceived as nonvolitional. This embodied subjectivity may include elements of identity that have been discussed over the past several decades: gender, race, queerness, cognition, disability, emotion, and performativity (in the Butlerian sense). In terms of empathy, the embodied subject may refer to aspects of subjectivity that commonly accepted models of the lyric or the legal fail to account for. For instance, examples of embodied subjects who put pressure on definitions of the “lyric” and “legal” subject may include autistics who are seen as less capable of empathy (and/or less human) because they do not feel the same way as neurotypicals, or women of color, whose bodily marked intersections of gender and race historically rendered them less legible as either psychologically complex or political, rights-bearing subjects.5

In other words, not just our experiences of but also—and perhaps more importantly—our definitions of empathy play a key role in articulating and demarcating group boundaries, including the border between “person” and non-person, or whom we consider subjects. While recognizing our common possibilities as feeling, thinking beings can serve the ends of justice, conceptions of empathy that privilege an individual lyric subject, while occluding aspects of personhood that are legal and/or embodied, risk legitimizing existing hierarchical orders and concealing the ideological functions of empathy. That is, notions of empathy that are limited to the lyric individual run the risk of exacerbating structures of oppression and exploitation by failing to locate the sufferings of others in those structures and histories, and by failing to recognize the distinctions as well as the connections between the lyric, legal, and embodied subjects. So the fact that altruism may not be produced by empathy via novel reading is almost beside the point. Empathy in reading literature can produce meaningful social change when it is linked to an understanding that ostensibly individual emotions are tied to cognition, ideology, and social structures, as well as to social-political movements beyond the text, but to which the text refers and in which it participates. When the contexts change, the same strategies meant to evoke readerly empathy will not necessarily produce the same results.

5. That is, everyone has gender and race, but the minority term is marked; e.g., women “have” gender whereas men are presumed not to.
“Women of Color”

The novels I deal with here include Anita Desai’s *Clear Light of Day* (1980); Buchi Emecheta’s *Second-Class Citizen* (1974), *The Bride Price* (1976), and *The Joys of Motherhood* (1979); Bessie Head’s *When Rain Clouds Gather* (1968), *Maru* (1971), and *A Question of Power* (1974); Merle Hodge’s *Crick Crack, Monkey* (1970); Maxine Hong Kingston’s *Woman Warrior* (1975); and Toni Morrison’s *The Bluest Eye* (1970) and *Sula* (1974). While the specific contexts of their production, publication, and reception vary widely, these texts share ideological concerns and aesthetic strategies at a moment marked by political mobilizing among non-white feminists across ethnic and national boundaries. In the United States, Great Britain, and postcolonial nations, such texts became the de facto “representative” literary voices in English of Third World women. Furthermore, despite variations in the contexts of the texts, they share an explicit critique of gendered and racial oppression. These texts are significant as the works that attained publication (several through Heinemann), indicating a level of conformity to publishing and literary standards. Written within and against the tradition of novels in English, these novels pose a particularly interesting intellectual challenge for narrative theory. The literary strategies and political concerns of these novels are also shared by writers in the 1980s, including Alice Walker, Sandra Cisneros, and Tsitsi Dangarembga, as well as writers in the 1990s and later. Moreover, the common aesthetic strategies of these novels are more noticeable when contrasted to the work of other women of color / Third World women writers in the 1970s—such as Theresa Hak Kyung Cha, Jessica Hagedorn, Gayl Jones, and Nicholasa Mohr—that, although dealing with similar issues, did not garner critical attention from feminist and ethnic studies scholars until a generation later.

These writers emerge at a moment in which, as has been well documented, Third World women were becoming politicized by both the experience in political mobilizing in anticolonial, Civil Rights, antiwar, cultural nationalist, and second-wave feminist movements, as well as internal critiques of

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6. For instance, Maxine Hong Kingston became an instant literary celebrity, while future Nobel Prize winner and public intellectual Toni Morrison’s first novel, *The Bluest Eye*, received mixed reviews and sold relatively few copies. South African / Botswana writer Bessie Head was well received by British and American reviewers, even being invited to the prestigious University of Iowa International Writers Program—although her experience there was complicated—but her novels never sold in large quantities. Head’s experiences in the English publishing and the literary worlds provide fascinating insight into the vicissitudes of being a “woman of color” writer in this moment; see Eilersen as well as Nazareth’s reply to Head’s account of her visit to Iowa, “Path of Thunder: Meeting Bessie Head.”
sexism, homophobia, racism, and bourgeois assumptions. The 1970s sees a relative flourishing of feminist organizing in, for example, the First National Chicana Conference in 1971; the publications of Asian Women in 1972 and the Combahee River Collective Statement in 1974; the 1975 UN Conference on Women's Issues in Mexico City; the 1977 National Women's Conference in Houston, TX, where the term “women of color” was coined as a political designation, and so forth. In the context of decolonization and worldwide student movements, many of these discussions were explicitly and self-consciously transnational. Further theorizing about “women of color” comes in the 1980s with publications by Angela Davis, bell hooks, Audre Lorde, Gloria Anzaldúa, Mitsuye Yamada, and others, several through Kitchen Table: Women of Color Press, founded by Barbara Smith in 1980. Chandra Talpade Mohanty famously intervened in homogenous constructions of “Third World woman” in 1984, and critics such as Chela Sandoval, Geraldine Heng, Grace Hong, and others have variously taken up Third World and/or women of color feminism in the following decades. While some uses run the risk of essentialism, most theoretical discussions of “women of color” and “Third World women” explicitly state that they are political designations meant to elucidate a subject position that points outward to social structures, rather than inward toward biology or essence.

While the terms “women of color” and “Third World women” have sometimes been used interchangeably, debates over the terms, as well as “postcolonial feminism,” have been numerous. I do not want to gloss over the complexities of the terms; in fact, part of my focus is on how these heterogeneous groups of women somehow became a historically and ideologically marked group. The salient point here is that the category or group of “Third World women” or “women of color” was not in common usage prior to the 1970s when women of color began organizing across racial, ethnic, and national boundaries. These women shared a critique of white middle-class

7. For just a few examples, see Sangari; Mohanty; Suleri; and Rajan and Park.
8. For example, despite differences between Japanese, Chinese, Korean, Filipina, Vietnamese, and other Asian American women, a pan-Asian American feminist identity was forged through shared experiences of U.S. racial formations as well as of patriarchy and heteronormativity. As the editors of 1971's Asian Women write, “Asian-American women are faced with a double contradiction—their struggle as a Third World people in a racist nation and their role as women in a sexist society . . . . Third world women in the United States understand the double jeopardy of color and sex”; moreover, they argue, “We must not be divided from other Third World women” (129). Similarly, Cherrie Moraga notes in the introduction to the foundational 1984 This Bridge Called My Back that the feminists in the collection “identify as Third World women and/or women of color” (xxiv). In the foreword to the second edition, however, Moraga notes, “In the last three years I have learned that Third World feminism does not provide the kind of easy political framework that women of color are running to in droves” (n.p.).
feminism, nationalist and cultural nationalist patriarchy, colonialism and neo-imperialism, and also often capitalism and homophobia. 9

Furthermore, the terms “women of color” and “Third World women” have been applied to all of the writers I am discussing (e.g., Head, Kingston, Desai, Morrison). Part of my argument is that the very narrative strategies that the novels use to evoke empathy in readers played a role in constituting this group and articulating its politics. 10 In these texts, empathy is invoked not only through identification with the characters, but also through an exploration of the social systems producing yet limiting that character. A key narrative strategy to create this double-layered empathic experience is the use of split internal perspective, creating a space between the ideological naïveté of the protagonist(s) at the diegetic level and the more complex analysis of the narrator or implied author. These narrative strategies produce a double-layered empathy that seeks to explore the subject as both lyric, or individual and feeling, and legal, or institutional and political. The reader is invited to empathize with the emotions of the lyric subject, but the texts also show how the lyric subject is reproduced by the legal subject’s situation. Moreover, the texts illuminate how the relative powerlessness of the legal subject is tied to the women of color’s embodiment as raced and sexed beings.

In mapping out these shared experiences and social oppressions, these 1970s novels did not simply appeal to already existing communities of readers; rather, in facilitating empathy, the novels played a part in identifying certain subjectivities, experiences, and situations as gendered and raced across national and ethnic boundaries, and thereby constituting new communities through reading. This process involved not only shared emotions but also—and crucially—a shared recognition and critique of intersecting systems of power based on conceptions of the body. In Hogan’s terms, this group of readers moved from “situational empathy” to “categorical empathy.” That is, a

9. “Race” is inflected variously in the texts, as variously and complexly as it functions in the world. Colonial racial regimes are distinct from racial formations of the United States, and the particular inflections of ethnic groups within the United States are also varied (e.g., “model minority” myth). But while the specific histories and ideologies are different, what ties the Western minority and the postcolonial together is the project of worldwide white supremacy, which historically produced the very concept of racial minorities and makes race so ubiquitous and complex an ideological monster for us to deal with today. Thus, “race” today often refers both to ethnic minorities in the West and to people of Third World nations—as well as “whiteness” as a historical construction—whose modern experience has been shaped by colonialism and neo-imperialism.

10. Moreover, individual writers have complex relationships to different kinds of feminisms; for instance, Chikwenye Okonjo Ogunyemi notably leaves Buchi Emecheta out of her genealogy of womanism, although others have questioned this omission. See Ogunyemi; Sogou; and Haraway.
certain set of historically produced social systems shaped a set of experiences shared by these writers, whose novels deploy common narrative strategies to evoke empathy in readers. Readers of all kinds could and did empathize, but some readers shared experiences evoked in the novels because they were located in a similar social position. This particular set of readers defined a new group—“women of color” or “Third World women”—based not only on those shared experiences but also on the critique of the social systems that produced their shared experiences."

“Neither White nor Male”

Suzanne Keen has described three kinds of strategic empathy employed by authors. First, “bounded strategic empathy” functions “with an in-group, stemming from experiences of mutuality and leading to feeling with familiar others” (xiv). Second, “ambassadorial strategic empathy addresses chosen others with the aim of cultivating their empathy for the in-group” (xiv). Third, “broadcast strategic empathy calls upon every reader to feel with members of a group, by emphasizing common vulnerabilities and hopes through universalizing representations” (xiv). The writers I examine here employ both “ambassadorial” empathy—in the sense of calling out to specific others not hitherto identified as part of their own group—as well as “broadcast” empathy in pointing out systemic injustices, in which everyone is complicit and which everyone should recognize as unjust. Nevertheless, because the systems they were writing about cohere around certain raced and gendered bodies, the stories and characters may have been more familiar and more readily empathizable to readers who shared that nexus of social identifiers (i.e., race

11. I am not saying that the novels were the only things bringing together women of color. But the writing played a key role in the development of this particular group that while diverse had much in common structurally and experientially, and these commonalities are what helped develop later development in women of color, Third World, and postcolonial feminisms. Furthermore, these women of color were not the only ones to have used these narrative techniques, which are used by all kinds of writers; rather, my emphasis is on the confluence of a group of writers, texts, and readers responding to and in a particular historical moment. Also, the empathy-evoking features of the texts are not their only or even primary features; rather, I am interested in how these texts worked in an overall historical process, and what this process can show us about empathy. Finally, when talking about literature and society, causality is not always measurable or traceable, but in addition to examining narrative strategies and effects on readers, we can also look at larger social and ideological changes. In this case, I would argue that “social change” means not only on-the-ground political mobilizing but also the articulation of a political identity based on a political analysis, or changes in the shape and definition of social groups.
and gender), whose readerly empathy played a role in creating a “category” based on these shared social locators. Or, to return to Keen’s terms, the ingroup audience for “bounded strategic empathy” was an ongoing product of the intersection of narrative strategies that were also meant to elicit ambassadorial and broadcast empathy. To induce such reactions, these texts tend to employ either first-person and/or third-person limited perspective through a particular character or characters. As Keen points out, the use of internal perspective, through either first-person character narration or third-person narration that shows us a character’s perspective, tends to encourage character identification and promotes readerly empathy (96). This third-person narration can be either fixed in one character’s viewpoint throughout a text, or variable, shifting between characters’ points of view (96). Techniques like free indirect discourse, interior monologue, and psychonarration also promote this internal perspective.

Furthermore, in these novels empathy is invoked not only via identification with the characters but also through an exploration of the social systems producing yet limiting that character. The reader is invited to empathize with the text or with the implied author’s critique of and sometimes anger at the system. A key narrative strategy to create this double-layered empathic experience is the use of split internal perspective, creating a space between the ideological naïveté of the protagonist(s) at the diegetic level, and the more complex analysis of the narrator or implied author. This split perspective tends to appear in three forms: (1) a narrator of “now” and a younger protagonist (often a child) of the action; (2) two female characters (or more) in and out of which the narrative perspective alternates; and (3) between a third-person narrator and a character. I will sketch out some of the ways this split perspective works.

First, the distance between the child narrator and the adult narrator allows the text to reflect on the ideological forces at work on the child narrator, particularly those having to do with race/ethnicity and gender. Crick Crack, Monkey and Woman Warrior are pointed examples of this. In Crick Crack, we can identify at least three distinct—although not entirely separate—voices of the first-person narrator “Tee”: an adult narrator, the initial child narrator, and the older child’s voice (in the second part of the novel). She has many names—her formal name, Cynthia; her nickname, Tee; and the name of her fair “proper me,” Helen—that reflect the different ideological directives of her childhood, her education, and her class mobility. Likewise, many moments in Woman Warrior are split between the intense emotions of the child narrator and the overt or covert reflections of the adult narrator; for example, the child narrator’s initial understanding of her mother’s stories contrasts with the adult
narrator’s interpretation of them. The reader is invited to share in the child narrator’s experiences and emotions as well as the older narrator’s analysis of and emotions about the situation.

Second, in some texts, internal perspective alternates between two doubled female characters, usually with one character who obeys some cultural rules, and another who does not follow the rules or, rather, follows different rules. This doubling allows the text to highlight conflicting interpretations of ideological injunctions while also exploring the shared structural limits on each woman’s freedom. Examples of this include Bim and Tara in *Clear Light of Day*; Claudia and her sister as well as Claudia and Pecola in *The Bluest Eye*; the narrator and her mother in *Woman Warrior*; and Nel and Sula in *Sula*. This doubling in a sense allows one woman to try on different paths, attitudes, and so on, and in many instances to experience the limits imposed on her by the constrictions of gender, class, and race. For example, in *Sula*, Nel follows the rules—she gets married, has children and a house, and does all the things that her mother wants her to do—while Sula goes to college, has affairs, lives alone, and is insufficiently filial to her mother. In the novel, we hear both their perspectives via their internal thoughts as well as through pointed conversations. When Sula asks, “Why? I can do it all, why can’t I have it all?” Nel replies, “You can’t do it all. You a woman and a colored woman at that. You can’t act like a man. You can’t be walking around all independent-like, doing whatever you like, taking what you want, leaving what you don’t” (142). Despite their different choices, Nel ends up alone and angry, and Sula ends up discontented, shunned, and dead. Ultimately, at the end of the novel Nel realizes she was missing not her husband Jude but rather Sula; the divergent paths of the two women ultimately serve to highlight their loss in not banding together against shared structural forces that delimit them by race and gender.

The third recurrent example of this split internal perspective is between a third-person narrator and a character to whom that narrator has been closely tied. Bessie Head does so quite often, sometimes adopting a disconcertingly metaphysical tone; both *A Question of Power* and *Maru* have third-person narrators closely tied to the protagonist, yet the narrator often inserts evaluative comments. Likewise, in Buchi Emecheta’s *Second-Class Citizen*, the narrator steps back from close identification with Adah to comment on the situation, sometimes with a direct address to the reader. Toni Morrison is the master of all three techniques. Most of *The Bluest Eye*, for example, is narrated in first person by Claudia. At the start of the novel, an older Claudia-narrator ruminates with comments like “We thought, at the time . . .” and “It was a long time before my sister and I admitted to . . .” (5–6). The first section, “Autumn,”
shifts between the nine-year-old Claudia narrating in present tense and the adult Claudia narrating in past tense. The novel ends with the narrator in the “now,” criticizing herself and her peers for achieving a self-definition by contrasting themselves to Pecola. The Claudia adult narrator tells us: “All of us felt so wholesome after we cleaned ourselves on her” (205). In addition, Claudia and Pecola are contrasted to see what possibilities and limitations are available to women of color. The younger Claudia, with a modicum of class privilege and family stability, can destroy blonde dolls, while Pecola has few resources to defend herself from the assaultive power of dominant ideals of goodness and beauty. Claudia and Pecola share the weight of a hegemonic blonde, blue-eyed femininity from which they are categorically excluded.

Other parts of the novel focus on Pecola’s perspective via the third-person narrator (40, 44–58). The third-person narrator, however, steps back from Pecola’s internal perspective in order to highlight the systemic problems that produce her suffering. For example, when Pecola goes to Mr. Yacobowski’s store to buy candy, the narration alternates between Pecola’s thoughts, Yacobowski’s perspective, and the narrator’s metacommentary. On one hand, Pecola experiences feelings that she does not yet have the language to express, feelings that the narrator explains emerge from her subconscious sense of the man’s “total absence of human recognition” for her. On the other hand, the narrator asks us, “how can a fifty-two-year-old white immigrant store-keeper with the taste of potatoes and beer in his mouth . . . his sensibilities blunted by a permanent awareness of loss, see a little black girl?” (50). Here, the narrator invites us to empathize not only with Pecola and even Yacobowski, but also with the narrator’s distress at the dehumanizing racial and gendered systems in which they are both caught. The use of present tense throughout this scene further troubles the difference between diegetic and narrative time, between the “past” of Pecola and the “now” of the storyteller, suggesting that the implications of the scene extend beyond that one moment in time. The narrator then suggests how we should feel not simply with the characters but about the situation: Leaving the store, Pecola experiences a fleeting moment of rage—but shame quickly takes over again. The narrator then interjects, “Anger is better. There is a sense of being in anger. A reality and a presence. An awareness of worth. It is a lovely surging” (50). In other words, we are invited not only to experience Yacobowski’s blindness and Pecola’s humiliation and rage but also the narrator’s assessment that anger is the more appropriate response to this situation. In other words, the novel shows that Pecola as a lyric subject—a feeling individual—is tied to her as a legal subject—institutionally defined—because of her embodiment as black and female (and young).
Likewise, in *Sula*, the third-person narrator steps outside Nel and Sula’s perspectives to comment directly on their overall situation. In what is sometimes called “psychonarration,” the narrator describes the characters’ states of mind:

So when they [Nel and Sula] met, first in those chocolate halls and next through the ropes of the swing, they felt the ease and comfort of old friends. Because each had discovered years before that they were neither white nor male, and that all freedom and triumph was forbidden to them, they had set about creating something else to be. Their meeting was fortunate, for it let them use each other to grow on. Daughters of distant mothers and incomprehensible fathers . . . , they found in each other’s eyes the intimacy they were looking for. (52)

The various novels also use minor characters to offer perspectives that differ pointedly from those of the protagonist and/or character-narrator, with implicit or explicit evaluations of these contrasting views by the narrator-I. The kinds of characters who figure largely in these tales include husbands and brothers, mothers and aunts, and various socially marginal figures (old bachelors, prostitutes, etc.). These characters promulgate patriarchy, nationalism, or cultural nationalism, and/or exist distinctly outside communally sanctioned boundaries and thereby draw attention to these boundaries. In terms of setting and place, the texts include minimal direct reference to or explanation of public historical-national events. In contrast to the self-conscious historiographic metafiction of, for example, Salman Rushdie’s *Midnight’s Children*, in which the lyric subject is arguably subordinated to the legal subject (and the body primarily a metaphor for the state), Desai’s *Clear Light of Day* narratively subordinates the 1947 partition of India and Pakistan to the domestic dynamics of Bim and Tara. *Clear Light of Day* is not any less political than *Midnight’s Children*; rather, what affects Tara and Bim at that historical moment is patriarchy in the shape of their brother Raja’s frustrated desire to be a poetic or political hero, and whether or not they can inhabit available roles of femininity and masculinity. In many senses, these novels are domestic fictions, in which the texts share a heightened awareness of and narrative attention to private spaces and the body, not only in terms of skin color, beauty regimens, classed and raced standards of beauty, and the policing of sexuality, but also in relation to food preparation and consumption, illness and neurosis, and other everyday, intimate bodily functions.

However, while class and sexuality are central to the theorization of women of color feminism, these issues do not figure as centrally in the novels
I am focusing on here—or rather, these issues figure differently. While much women of color feminism has foregrounded lesbians and poor women, many of the texts formally naturalize a middle-class, heterosexual point of view. For instance, the narrative strategies of several novels invite the reader to empathize with the middle-class protagonist, not the poor. Even in stories of poverty, such as *The Bluest Eye*, the reader is prompted to identify with the adult middle-class Claudia, rather than the poor, mad Pecola. Pecola may be the ostensible subject of the novel and the title, but because the evaluation and description of the narration comes through Claudia, the novel invites us to identify with Claudia-as-narrator instead of Pecola. Similarly, even though Margaret in *Maru* is a Masarwa (derogatorily referred to as “Bush” people) and therefore deemed inferior to the Batswana, she is educated by and named after a white missionary. These texts also tend to be heterocentric. While there are degrees of female intimacy, there are few lesbians. The absence of lesbians is striking in contrast to, again, the work of women of color theorists, or the fiction of Gayl Jones and Nicholasa Mohr.

These absences are in some ways written into what become the accepted terms, “women of color” and “third world women”; both terms foreground gender and race. In part, these women-of-color writers were less concerned with subverting a prescriptive middle-class, hetero femininity because they were trying to interrupt a white/Western middle-class femininity that was, in many ways, defined against them. But in contrast to early women-of-color feminist theory, this group of novels focuses more readerly empathy on the embodied subject of gendered and racial regimes than the legal subject in economic or sexual regimes. Thus the figure of the “woman of color” as lyric subject in these novels runs the risk of becoming recuperable and/or complicit with a straight and bourgeois yet raced femininity. In the next section, I argue that this is in part the trajectory that takes place in later decades.

**Empathy, Feminism, and Narratology**

In later decades (and even in the 1970s), the identity category “women of color” and even “Third World women” can and has been appropriated into late capitalism’s consumerist, individualist multiculturalism, partly due to the narrative configurations of empathy, subjectivity, and ideology outlined in the previous section, but partly regardless of the specific narratives. As has been well documented, the 1980s in particular saw a backlash against social movements around the world. Concomitantly, the logics of culture and the marketplace rapidly transformed into more flexible, mobile, and “cos-
mopolitan” forms. Ostensibly, the non-white woman fits into this cosmopolitan consumerist world as both subject and object. She fits into this new world order as literal subject; take, for example, the Asian woman shown flying business class in an advertisement in The Economist. The advertisement invites women not to deny their gender and non-whiteness but to embrace it. Yet a few pages later, we may also see advertisements featuring an exotic Asian stewardess, or an exhortation to make use of the nimble, pliant labor of Third World women in free trade zones. Within this contradictory context, the Third World woman can also function in the literary marketplace as an object of empathy. Today, liberal multiculturalism and cosmopolitanism are not seen as antithetical to but in many ways compatible with and even necessary for global capitalism, and a tenet of this sort of multiculturalism is that one ought to empathize with cultural others. In other words, consumption of novels by Third World women can and does constitute a certain kind of cultural capital for the middlebrow and/or educated cosmopolitan reader, even and perhaps especially in the university classroom as one key training site for neoliberal subjects.

One telling example of this commodification of women of color’s subjectivities can be seen in the new editions of several of these women’s novels from the 1970s and 1980s. Whereas the first editions featured some kind of abstract drawing, a child, a picture of a place, or some image otherwise suggested in the text, editions in the 1990s and 2000s frequently feature a photograph of a woman on the cover, sometimes quite glamorously made up. Such bodies appear on newer editions of Nervous Conditions; Dictée; Crick Crack, Monkey; Woman Warrior (prominently featuring the almond-shaped eye); and Clear Light of Day, and this fetishization applies to both women in Third World nations and minority women in the West.12 Similar changes have not occurred with newer editions of Midnight’s Children, Invisible Man, or Gravity’s Rainbow; we do not see draped across the cover of Things Fall Apart an exotic male model whose body we might link to both the protagonist and the author. In other words, the same texts that can invite narrative empathy for both lyric and legal subjects can also be mobilized in service of the consumerist liberal multicultural logic of late capitalism. These covers illustrate a fetishized aesthetic that transcends any individual cover designer; the packaging and objectifying of Third World women’s bodies speaks to the market for their “humanity” via a dominant, naturalized conception of empathy in terms of the atomized, discrete lyric subject.13

12. I have not cited the specific editions here because my goal is not to vilify one particular publisher or editor; rather, my interest here is in an aesthetic and ideological trend.
13. In this context, the ideological and aesthetic interventions of the work of Cha, Jones,
These novels—and their particular narrative strategies for inviting readerly empathy—have been and are being conscripted into the general production of a limited, normative notion of subjectivity as lyric (feeling, individual) and legal in certain ways (race, gender, nation), but not in others (economic, sexual). This commodification of empathy for the Other constitutes a kind of subjectivity fetishism and tourism. The middle-class woman of color can be targeted as a new cosmopolitan consumer subject to be marketed to, as well as an object of consumption for others. This object of readerly empathy is a figural “woman of color” who appears to wield the newly desirable cultural capital of “difference” but is actually the same—lyric and limited versions of the legal subject of neoliberalism—and can be used to obscure the conditions of women of color—particularly poor and/or lesbian women of color—by obfuscating economic and sexual regimes. The apparent empathy induced by these novels on the multicultural marketplace to some extent actually mystify their commodification, because they are marketed and read as bearing the aura of “the human” in lyric terms (Coykendall). The individual’s readerly empathy may be real, and a reader may experience genuine emotion at the sufferings of a protagonist in very different circumstances. But if that empathy remains at the level of lyric subject, at the expense of the legal subject or certain varieties of legal subjectivity (e.g., gender vs. class), then the readerly empathy not only fails to bridge differences but also participates in licensing and exacerbating the hierarchical, exploitative legal, economic, and political systems that produce those differences.

The empathy from the novels I discuss here can be productively contrasted to other novels from the 1970s and 1980s, including Corregidora and Dictée. Corregidora’s protagonist Ursa resists the empathy of a typical middle-class reader; the violent sexuality of the history that produces her is so foregrounded that the novel is often described as “brutal.” Similarly, critics in the 1990s and after embraced Dictée for its critique not only of imperialism and patriarchy but also of the very processes of ideological subject formation.14 Nicholasa Mohr’s novels feature poor women and a variety of sexualities (hetero, homo, pan), but because their target audience is young adults, the narratives function very differently. They do not produce as deep a sense of the lyric subject’s interiority in quite the same way as, say, Kingston’s or Morrison’s, but they do relentlessly highlight the sexual and economic regimes that shape the lives not only of poor women of color but also of their communi-

14. See Kim and Alarcón as well as Lowe.
ties. These different approaches, however, do not prevent these novels from also being appropriated and instrumentalized in late capitalist multicultural consumerism; book covers of new editions of *Dictée* and *Corregidora* similarly foreground the woman of color’s body. But their complication of conventional readerly empathy makes these texts slightly more difficult to consume easily, although, as literary tastes change—again, often through the medium of the university classroom—and the exigencies of capitalism change, they may also become familiarized and commodified.

In the 1970s, narrative strategies of empathy in these novels helped articulate a group across existing boundaries, partially through an insistence on the subject as both lyric and legal, and, moreover, whose legal subjectivity was impinged upon due to certain elements of embodiment. In later decades, the marketing of women of color (e.g., the woman’s bodies on the book cover to market her story within) draws on this lyric notion of the subject and certain aspects of legal subjectivity (particularly patriarchy and racism as located in the past⁴), but, in its instrumentalization in fostering the hegemony of consumerist individualism and the fetishization of difference, may obscure other aspects of legal subjectivity, such as class and sexuality.

So, to return to the first questions of this paper: When questions arise about the differences between cultures, the conversation often relies on an implicit notion of groups as fixed, discrete, autonomous. For instance, categorical empathy is seen as the less ethically desirable outcome because it is based on an in-group and thus on exclusion. But the preference for situational empathy over categorical empathy does not take into account that most modern group categories arose—at least at some distant point in the past—out of a sense of situational commonality. Today, the most marked, politically charged identity group categories—including nationalisms—arise out of historical systemic processes (colonialism and neo-imperialism, patriarchy and heteronormativity, capitalism and labor flows) that shaped the unmarked norm (“Western white male”) as much as the Other, and certainly narratives, particularly novels since the eighteenth century, have had a central place in articulating those categories. To return to the second question: empathy produced by reading—and the myriad political, affective, cognitive, and other results of this reading experience—may effect social change, but this potential depends in large part on the conceptions of empathy and subjectivity and the

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⁴ Note that “the past” can be projected in terms of space, as in other cultures/places being less modern than the West.
historical context in which these concepts are operative. In other words, both empathy and subjectivity are complex, historically and institutionally embedded concepts.

In this sense, expanding our conceptions about empathy is consonant with broadening the field of narrative theory to engage feminist and queer theory, which is inextricably interwoven with the fields and concerns of ethnic, post-colonial, disability, and Marxist studies. To echo Robyn Warhol’s *Gendered Interventions*, in understanding narrative empathy, narrative theory can help us elucidate a poetics, but contextualizing and historicizing are necessary accompanying processes. This inextricable relationship between history, narrative form, and the ethics of reading is why narrative theory must continue to widen the field of literary, historical, and theoretical texts that it examines and incorporate the insights garnered from examinations of these texts in order to continue as a living, vibrant field.

**Works Cited**


