

Reading, empathy and justice in the age of migration

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Abstract *Does “sharing” feelings lead to “caring”? The claim, or one very like it, is regularly made in relation to literature: that reading fiction teaches us compassion or empathy, and this in turn is essential to the successful functioning of liberal democracies. This is an argument that is obviously appealing to literature scholars like myself – and it may not be only by chance that its prominence in recent decades has coincided with the widescale loss of status enjoyed by Humanities scholarship and education in many countries. Nonetheless, scholars from a range of disciplines, including pedagogy, postcolonial studies, and feminist cultural studies have raised doubts about this formula, suggesting in various ways that the benefits and effects of such empathetic or compassionate reading may be more one-sided and less transformative than its advocates suggest. In this chapter, I investigate some of these recent debates about and scholarship on literature, art, and empathy/compassion in the context of contemporary migration and the reading and teaching of migration literature to ask whether, and under what conditions, fellow feeling can enable or contribute to a more caring and just global society.*

Reading as a tool of justice

In recent decades, as the funding available to and the widely acknowledged value of Humanities scholarship and education have plummeted in the West, literary scholars have increasingly reached for a particular defence of their profession. Dubbed the “democracy-needs-us” defence by Helen Small (2013: 5–6), such arguments seek to position literary study as necessary preparation for democratic citizenship. Very often, it is the capacity for empathy taught by the Humanities – particularly literature – that is positioned as key to their “elevation from a private good to an indispensable public force” (Fischer 2017: 436). As Michael Fisher shows in his summary of several arguments of this kind made in the volume *The Humanities and Public Life* (Brooks 2014), their shared claim is that “reading fiction reinforces such central democratic values as tolerance, human rights, and the necessity of dialogue” because “we readers expand our awareness of other points of view, thereby making us more

responsive to the rights and needs of others” (Fischer 2017: 438–439). Most adherents of this view do not propose a direct correlation between reading a particular work and treating others with compassion; nor do they propose a didactic model of literature. Rather, they proposed that the “empathetic imagination of readers, strengthened by literary experience, over time transforms their actions as citizens, enlarging their circle of concern to include others previously denied attention and respect” (Fischer 2017: 440).

These arguments align closely with the work of Martha Nussbaum, who is perhaps the most prominent representative of this position, and who has long argued for literature in education as a means of generating the compassion (her preferred term) that she understands to be a necessary emotional component of a functioning liberal democracy (Nussbaum 1995, 1996, 2001, 2013). As Fischer writes,

“More than any other recent advocate for literature, Nussbaum assigns it a major role in a much bigger historical drama: the partnership between love and justice that in her view keeps democratic societies moving forward. Literature plays a key part in the interchange between deeply felt personal emotions and institutional concerns” (Fischer 2017: 442).

Particularly in her most recent work, Nussbaum “steps back from focusing on a solitary reader being moved by a literary work to seeing literature join other cultural forces in activating fellow feeling and keeping in check disgust at others” (Fischer 2017: 443). Fischer agrees with this ideal, but considers its success ever more unlikely in the contemporary US context – that is, amidst increasingly political polarization and balkanization caused by online communication and extreme economic inequality. According to Fisher, “The splintering of American society that I have been describing thus inhibits empathy and jeopardizes our ability to communicate across political, economic, and racial divides – essential to collective decision making in a diverse democracy” (2017: 447). Rather than hoping that reading about others, especially about their pain and suffering, will generate empathy for them, when so many other aspects of contemporary US society militate against such forms of understanding, Fischer instead argues that we should aim to alter *ourselves* through reading. Literature, he argues, can be “a means for releasing the good in us” (2017: 458) or “the release of responsiveness” (2017: 459). That is, it can combat moral cynicism and, more simply, current tendencies towards withdrawal and disconnection in society, making us aware of our *capacity* for empathy, and possibly of our own current limitations in extending it to others.

Fischer’s call for reading as a form of personal development is a partial retreat from the goals formulated by other scholars in the *democracy needs us* school, but it rests on the same assumptions: that reading about others makes us more able and more willing to seek dialogue, understanding and political compromise with others, re-

shaping our interactions with others, encouraging greater trust in others, and thus leading – eventually – to greater social justice. Precisely this focus on the self and self-transformation, however, has been criticized by pedagogical and postcolonial scholars thinking about the relationship between empathy, art, and its political effects, as I explore below. Although Fischer highlights the increasingly vast economic inequality of US American society as a key cause of social disintegration and a barrier to the empathetic thinking he endorses, yet his call for social change is strikingly limited: he suggests that wealth and privilege are “inevitably” (2017: 455) unevenly distributed and that it is important only that the resulting “winners’ and ‘losers’” (2017: 455) are not static, determined and justified by differences such as race. It remains entirely unclear how greater empathy might alter the concentration of wealth and privilege in the US and thus effectively counter the destructive forces Fischer identifies. The role of the academy and the (higher) education industry in contributing to that inequality also goes unexamined. This dynamic, in which calls for empathy or compassion are *not* accompanied by demands for substantial social change or critical reflection of one’s implication in such structural forces, is precisely that identified and criticized in the critiques of empathetic reading to which I now turn.

Pedagogical critiques of empathetic reading

Although there is no hint of it in Fischer’s article, scholars of pedagogy have repeatedly raised doubts about the equation of reading, empathy, and social justice offered by Nussbaum and others. For example, Megan Boler argues that “through modes of easy identification and flattened historical sensibility, the ‘passive empathy’ represented by Nussbaum’s faith in ‘poetic justice’ may simply translate to reading practices that do not radically challenge the reader’s world view” (Boler 1997: 255). Boler offers the term “passive empathy” as a more telling equivalent to Aristotle’s “pity” and Nussbaum’s “compassion”. In each case, these terms denote an altruistic emotion that encourages readers to imagine themselves in the place of the suffering other; to imagine that they, too, could suffer in the same way, and to therefore recognize that suffering as a moral wrong. It is this recognition of shared vulnerability that many advocates of empathetic reading understand to be generative of its democratic and justice-seeking force. Boler, however, casts doubt on the value and effect of this empathetic identification with the other: first, she suggests, the empathetic identification with the other is far more a projection of the self than knowledge or understanding of the other; the emotional response is generated by fear for the self. Secondly, in such a model the reader is called upon to judge or evaluate the other’s experience and thus “passive empathy [...] situates the powerful Western eye/I as the judging subject, never called upon to cast her gaze at her own reflection” (Boler 1997: 259), a position of power that models of empathetic reading generally neither ack-

knowledge nor seek to alter. While she concludes that reading may certainly generate such passive empathy, she argues that “passive empathy is not a sufficient educational practice. At stake is not only the ability to empathize with the very distant other, but to recognize oneself as implicated in the social forces that create the climate of obstacles the other must confront” (1997: 257). For Boler, therefore, passive empathy or compassion is of relatively little value in creating substantial social change, as it does not require or encourage critical self-reflection by the reader on their own possible implication in or responsibility for the suffering of the other.

Boler’s concerns are shared by other scholars who similarly question the presumed connection between empathetic reading and substantial social change (e.g., Hallemeier 2013, Zembylas 2013). Echoing Boler, Michalinos Zembylas shows how students’ reading about traumatic experiences may produce passivity and voyeurism rather than a sense of responsibility, desire for social change, or disposition to take action (2008). Similarly, Katherine Hallemeier argues that “the cosmopolitan world that readers purportedly help to create in the process of reading is, simply put, profoundly self-centered. Pedagogies that aim to uphold reading as instantiating cosmopolitan community consequently risk perpetuating the inequalities that they ostensibly aim to combat” (Hallemeier 2013: 96). This is not to say, however, that such an outcome is the *inevitable* result of reading about the experiences or suffering of others. Rather, Zembylas concludes, “teaching about stories of suffering, pain, and trauma allows for learning that is emotionally, politically, and educationally significant; yet ... in this process there are several dangers that need to be critically analyzed and dealt with” (Zembylas 2008: 19). Elsewhere, he contends that “more theoretical work is needed to link compassion and pedagogies and explore how pedagogues can teach specific political dispositions ... to compassionate action” (Zembylas 2013: 505).

A politics of pity? Feminist and postcolonial critiques

These critiques of the overly simplistic assumptions of some theories of empathetic readings and their social benefits align with and often draw upon critiques of the politics of (apparently) shared feelings from feminist and postcolonial scholars. While various feminist and anti-racist thinkers have advocated for the importance of empathy as a means to move towards global social justice (for a summary of some of this work, see Pedwell 2014: 46–50), feminist thinking on affect has also long recognized that “stories of pain involve complex relations of power” (Ahmed 2004: 22) and that “compassion, like other forms of caring, may also reinforce the very patterns of economic and political subordination responsible for such suffering” (Spelman 1997: 7). This, however, is not the only power relation at work: not only may compassion work to maintain the status quo and thus the power relations which attain to it, but it may

also grant power to the compassionate by suggesting that (only) they have the power to alleviate the suffering of others (Ahmed 2004). These thinkers suggest that empathy or compassion may indeed, as Fischer intimated, primarily effect change for the self and not the other – however in ways that *hinder* rather than enable social justice. First, the affective response of empathy may function to obscure the power relations that contribute to the suffering in question in the first place and are then also potentially reinforced by empathy. It can then take the form of “public sentimentality”, which Lauren Berlant argues is “often a defensive response by people who identify with privilege, yet fear they will be exposed as immoral by their tacit sanction of a particular structural violence that benefits them” (2000: 33). Secondly, the public expression of empathy works to construct the empathetic subject as “virtuous” (Berlant 2000: 34). As a result, the dominant culture and its privileged subjects mistake the *recognition* of suffering (evidenced by the expression of empathy) as step toward the *amelioration* of that suffering (Berlant 2000: 33). At the same time, the virtue that accrues to compassionate subjects (or readers) absolves them of responsibility for any further action. In reverse, the transformation of expressed sympathy into a character trait requires the forgetting or obscuring of the sympathetic subject’s privilege as a result of the power relations in question (Ahmed 2004). In a twist on contemporary “testimonial culture” (Ahmed/Stacey 2009), the compassionate subject’s expressions of empathy may even drown out the voices of the suffering – a theme more recently taken up by Lilie Chouliaraki in her work on the “politics of pain” (2024: 27) and competing claims for victimhood.

These concerns have recently been taken up by postcolonial scholars in relation to European responses to migrant death and suffering at Europe’s sea borders. Ida Danewid offers a critical reading of various artistic responses to mass migrant deaths centred on grief and/or the grievability of dead migrants, including well-known works such as Ai Weiwei’s life-jacket installations; “Porta d’Europa” (Gateway to Europe) by Mimmo Paladino on Lampedusa, Italy; artistic-activist interventions such as “Die Toten Kommen” (The Dead are Coming) by the *Zentrum für Politische Schönheit* (Centre for Political Beauty); and numerous designated “days of mourning” or similar. Danewid argues that

Grief for unknown others – for strangers – is here understood as offering a radical challenge to the xenophobia and white nationalism that underwrite the necropolitical logic of the European border regime. When viewed closely, these calls for rescue, welcome, and hospitality nonetheless confirm rather than disturb colonial relations of power. As we shall see, by seeking to extend ‘grief and care to the dead stranger’, they contribute to an ideological formation that disconnects connected histories and that divorces the contemporary Mediterranean crisis from Europe’s long history of empire and racial violence. (Danewid 2017: 1679)

It is imperative, Danewid argues, to understand contemporary subaltern migration to Europe as “part of Europe’s ongoing encounter with the world that it created through more than 500 years of empire, colonial conquest, and slavery” (2017: 1680). Such a historical understanding of migration, however, is hindered by calls for empathy with (dead) migrants, as these tend to “reproduce, rather than challenge, dominant interpretations that portray Europe as an innocent bystander” (2017: 1680). The result, according to Danewid, is a “politics of pity” (Boltanski 1999: 3, see also Arendt 1990) alongside the production of what Gloria Wekker (2016) terms “white innocence”: “a white(washed) sense of self and satisfied way of being in the world ... that sees little or no relation between current social advantages and the long history of structural violence” (Danewid 2017: 81).

Danewid here draws on Hannah Arendt’s work on pity and justice in her book *On Revolution*. For Arendt, pity is a public sentiment that distorts or interrupts politics – it is the opposite of or “alternative” to solidarity (Arendt 1990: 88), which is guided by political ideas and is itself “a principle that can inspire and guide action” (1990: 89). Pity, in contrast, is a sentiment. This means that “pity can be enjoyed for its own sake, and this will almost automatically lead to a glorification of its cause, which is the suffering of others” (Arendt 1990: 89). As a sentiment that has come to be understood as a sign of virtue, pity is loquacious (Arendt 1990: 85), it speaks of itself (rather than acting for change). In Luc Boltanski’s terms, therefore, in his reading of Arendt, her thinking offers a stark choice between a “politics of pity” or a “politics of justice” (1999: 3). Other recent readers of Arendt, particularly feminist thinkers and scholars of humanitarianism, revise and partially reject elements of Arendt’s thinking on pity (which in her terms is broadly comparable to Nussbaum’s *compassion* and Boler’s *passive empathy*), as I explore in the section “decolonizing empathy” below. Nonetheless, all agree that an uncritical valorization of empathy or compassion may tend to endorse the self-satisfied complacency of privileged subjects more than functioning as an engine of social change and justice.

Resisting empathy in migration art and literature

In a recent essay, the Zambian novelist Namwali Serpell took up these arguments, including the work of Arendt, from the point of view of a writer and artist. She, too, argued that the “empathy model of art can bleed too easily into the relishing of suffering by those who are safe from it” (2019: n.p.). It is “an emotional palliative that distracts us from real inequities, on the page and on screen, to say nothing of our actual lives,” she suggests, and it may work as a “gateway drug to white saviorism” (2019: n.p.). Serpell thus broadly repeats the critiques noted above, but then goes beyond these to also point to the literary-artistic consequences of the demand for empathy: “it has imposed on makers of art, especially the marginalized, the idea that

they can and ought to construct creative vehicles for empathy” (2019: n.p.). Other writers have voiced similar complaints, like Sumana Roy in her identification of and protest against “guilt lit” (2020); or Elaine Castillo, who rails against the expectation that writers of colour will provide “gooey heart-porn of the ethnographic” (2022: 15).

Among literary scholars, a similar critique has been voiced most clearly by critics of migration and particularly refugee literature. Dominant portrayals of refugees tend to depict them “as passive victims of decontextualized violence or demand first-person testimonials of their trauma” (Lê Espiritu Gandhi and Nguyen 2023: 1). This produces a “refugee aesthetic”, according to Marguerite Nguyen and Catherine Fung, that is tied to international humanitarian discourses, in which refugees are reduced to the role of “eliciting the care of the international community, which in turn erases Euro-American production of refugees” (Nguyen and Fung 2016: 2). Cultural productions about and particularly by refugees do not, of course, all conform to the dominant aesthetic, however the outsized influence of the dominant culture in the publishing industry means that many (of the few) works of refugee literature share generic features expected and desired by the majority culture and readership (Nguyen 2016).

It is in this context that Glenda R. Carpio focuses on an important and somewhat new subgenre of migration literature: literary texts that resist or refuse the “plot of acculturation” (Carpio 2023: 3) that dominates US American immigrant fiction, in particular, as well as migration and refugee fiction in the global North more generally. Such tales of Americanization – or more generally of acculturation and integration in the nation-state – are marketed “as a genre that promotes empathy”, but instead such narratives “keep readers stuck in the realm of feeling: a sentimental terrain wherein feeling bad for immigrants rarely, if ever, leads to questioning one’s own assumptions and actions” (Carpio 2023: 3). Instead, Carpio identifies a corpus of migration literature that employs various formal means to resist such empathetic readings and instead demand others modes of relating to the text and its characters and alternative understandings of migration. This “migrant aesthetics”, as Carpio terms these formal strategies,

forecloses or thwarts empathy by rejecting autobiography in favor of strategic anonymity, choral or collective narration, and shifting vantage points, all of which challenge the idea that representative voices can offer the reader truthful affective links to the text. ... the strategies become a means to reject the empathy model of fictional relations, inviting readers to inhabit positions, not persons. (2023: 13)

In line with Danewid’s call for a historical understanding of migration, these literary texts represent migration as “a global phenomenon that takes specific and varied shape according to capitalist interests, related global conflicts, and war” (Carpio

2023: 13–14), as well as situating contemporary movement in a longer history that includes trans-Atlantic slavery and European colonialism.

This resistance to or evasion of empathy has also been identified in other art forms, as in the intermedial installation works discussed by Janna Houwen (2016). Houwen examines how two works, Isaac Julien's *Ten Thousand Waves* (2010) and *Friday Table* (2013) by the art collective Foundland, invite critical reflection on the possibilities and limits of empathy and encourage viewers to become aware of the differences between themselves and refugee subjects or, to put it another way, to remain conscious of the gaps and absences that separate them from the experiences of refugees, rather than “indulging in overidentification” (Houwen 2016: 57) with the (absent) refugee figures. Like Carpio, Houwen is interested in the formal strategies these works employ to resist empathetic (over-)identification, whether the interplay of media in *Ten Thousand Waves* or the deployment of absence and discomfort in *Friday Table*.

These scholars' identification of works that resist or challenge overly simple empathetic identification align closely with the demands of scholars like Danewid, who argue that contemporary migration can be better understood if European citizens and societies are encouraged to develop a historical awareness of how contemporary movement is connected to European history – both of colonialism in the past and neocolonialism in the present. In this formulation, migrants are no longer understood as strangers, and European societies that receive migrants are no longer offering hospitality (Danewid 2017). Carpio identifies various strategies to achieve this effect: in addition to resisting the expectation to provide an authentic-seeming, testimonial account of an individual migrant's journey and acculturation, “they superimpose diverse time periods in a palimpsestic mode ... or create historical resonances or echoes ... or zoom in and out of micro and macro historical frames” (2023: 14). Furthermore, such texts may resist the demand for cultural translation (Carpio 2023: 14; see also Nguyen 2016), and many employ metafictional strategies that draw attention to the process of reading (and thereby meaning construction) (Carpio 2023: 15, see also Serpell 2019).

Further strategies can be added to this list: I would include texts that frustrate the rescue narrative, that is, the generic expectation that refugee narratives, in particular, end with the refugee arriving in a place of safety, usually the global North, and texts that use additional literary techniques – not only metafiction but also intertextual references, realist representations, narrative unreliability and other – to both disrupt easy identifications with and empathy for migrant characters and to frustrate the generic expectation of realist narrative, which can too easily bleed into an ethnographic reading style. For example, Djamila Ibrahim's short story “Heading Somewhere” (2018) embeds its protagonist Sara's flight from Damascus during the recent Syrian civil war in the complex social and economic circumstances that have led her, as a young Ethiopian woman, to live in Syria as a labour migrant in the first

place. The story engages with the humanitarian rescue narrative but such institutions prove useless to Sara, who at the story's end is hiding in a people smuggler's van, "heading somewhere" undefined. E.C. Osondu's short story "Waiting" (2008) similarly casts doubt upon humanitarian institutions, but it also employs intertextual references to sentimental fiction (Dickens's *Oliver Twist*) and absurdist literature (Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*) and narrative unreliability to invite readers to critically reflect upon and question the expectations they have, including the pleasure they expect to obtain, from a story about refugee experience.

My teaching experience, however, suggests that focusing on these sorts of texts in class – texts which, according to Carpio, resist empathetic readings – is in itself insufficient to prevent the sentimental reading practices, overidentification, and performative declarations of moral virtue criticized above. In my experience, some students use classes on migration literature to declare their empathy and their status as particularly compassionate Europeans, no matter the text at hand, no matter whether the text might be considered, by scholars, to invite such empathetic identification or not. While Carpio's work is invaluable, therefore, in identifying the aesthetic strategies at work in an important subset of migration literary works, it is insufficient, in my experience, to overcome the established norm of empathetic reading. What is needed, therefore, is another reading – and therefore another pedagogy – not simply other texts.

Decolonizing empathy

My own interest in this topic began with my confusion and, at times, frustration when teaching migration literature. I noticed that students were eager to voice their compassion for the fictional characters in the texts – without any prompting by me or, in my opinion, the chosen texts particularly inviting such a response – and more than usually unwilling to analyse or discuss the texts in any further depth. In an earlier essay, my colleague Carly McLaughlin and I (2022) suggested that a focus on close reading and formal analysis in the classroom could be a way to combat this by necessitating close attention to the form and aesthetics of the text. Such a form focused reading is not only a pedagogical strategy to move beyond both the "semiotics of suffering" (Cox/Durrant/Farrier/Stonebridge/Woolley 2019: 8) and the virtue of compassion and its slide into "white innocence" (Danewid 2017: 1681), however. It is also essential to any adequate analysis of migration literary texts, which are important sites of knowledge production (Fiddian-Qasmiyeh 2020) about migration in the contemporary "age of migration" (De Haas et al. 2020) – knowledge that is conveyed in the ways these texts grapple with literary forms and traditions as well as in the content of their stories they tell.

Nonetheless, I now suggest that it may be more productive to combine such formal analysis with a critical engagement with students' expressions of compassion. Thus, students might first be challenged to identify what motivates their empathy (whether internal or external to the literary text), then to analyse the narrative situation and characterization offered in the text to consider whose perspective is offered and with whom we as readers are invited to empathize or identify – and thus to reconsider the question of whether the text itself that invites empathy or something else, and why this might be. In addition, students might consider the causes of migrant suffering in the text and reflect on their relationship thereto. In doing so, empathy – or an emotional response to literature more generally – is not forbidden or demonized, but students are encouraged to critically question, investigate, and contextualize (their own) such responses. In encouraging students to critically assess their own implication in the structural causes of migrant suffering, displacement and deracination, this approach might begin to approach a “decolonizing pedagogy of empathy [that] is not premised on taken for granted assumptions about »care«, concern and sympathy towards the other, but rather inspires modes of affective perspective-taking and affective practices that call subjects (e.g., teachers, students, parents) into account for their own complicity in perpetuating coloniality” (Zembylas 2018: 405).

By shifting away from the widespread assumption that empathy is simply *good* – an assumption that, as Carolyn Pedwell notes, often leads to “a conceptual stoppage in conversation or analysis” (2016: n.p.) – this approach seeks to “understand the complex links between empathy and *transnational relations of power*” (Pedwell 2016: n.p., see also Pedwell 2014). Such a critical approach is thus not simply a pro/contra debate about empathy. Rather, it seeks to understand which specific forms of empathic acts (more than identities) might be conducive to global social justice in a particular context as well as to reflect on moments of empathetic “failure”: situations where empathy shows its limits, is rejection, or has unintended or anti-thetical consequences (Pedwell 2016). It might also encourage critical reflection on the contemporary demand for empathetic subjecthood, the potential appropriation of rhetorics of empathy and »care« by transnational neoliberal logics of profit and growth, and the connection between empathy and forms of neoliberal subjectivity that may *buttress* global inequalities rather than dismantling them (Pedwell 2012, see also Pedwell 2014 and Pedwell 2016).

This critical literature on the potential pitfalls of empathy in the context of contemporary transnational relations suggests that globalized forms of »care« and social justice may, in some cases, be better served by forms of distancing than the (perceived) closeness of affective identification. Lilie Chouliaraki (2006) argues that we must cultivate forms of (self-)reflexive distancing to avoid self-absorption and instead work towards a cosmopolitan public culture and a cosmopolitan subjective disposition. Such a public culture would be characterized by what Arendt calls

“worldliness” (1968): “a mode of relating to the ‘others’ that takes as its point of departure the affairs of the external world rather than the interiority of the self” (Chouliaraki 2006: 217). Key to such a shift is the medial mediation of the distant events and the experiences of distant others, and the question of whether this makes possible and encourages every person – every reader – to take “public action”.

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