
Reviewed by **John Alba Cutler**, Northwestern University

Paula M. L. Moya sets an ambitious agenda in *The Social Imperative*, proposing in the introduction to tackle a set of weighty questions: “Does literature still matter? Do literary critics still matter? Does my training still matter? Does the literary ‘text’ still matter, or should we all become literary historians or sociologists of literature?” (6). These admittedly “anxious” questions reveal much about Moya’s intended audience and the state of literary scholarship as she sees it. This is a book for scholars who have presumably become unnerved by the climate of crisis in the humanities. As such, *The Social Imperative* mounts a rousing defense of literature and literary criticism as important forms of social knowledge. As her last question implies, Moya sets out especially to defend close reading, which might surprise readers familiar with her reputation as a formidable scholar of race and ethnicity. After all, doesn’t close reading as a methodology derive from the New Critics, a school that most cultural and ethnic studies scholars regard with some suspicion? Anticipating this anxiety, Moya follows the lead of Marjorie Levinson to argue the merits of “activist” formalism, which she defines as a “dialectical model” in which formal analysis is “continuous with a concern for sociohistorical analysis” (3).

Although Moya asks whether literary criticism still matters in general terms, it quickly becomes clear that she is most interested in whether literary criticism matters to one particular sphere of human experience—namely, race. Indeed, the “social imperative” turns out to be nothing less than the claim that literature is a powerful tool for advancing racial literacy (165). To prove the case, Moya argues for a particular form of activist formalism that combines close reading with insights from social psychology, particularly the notion of schemas, psychic frameworks that individuals develop through personal experience and use to “apprehend[] and interact[] with incoming stimuli” (15). In this way, Moya models a species of reader-response criticism throughout the book. Encounters with literary works invite readers to confront the schemas they have acquired through personal experience, education, and cultural immersion. According to this line of thinking, literary works that depict how people understand and experience race can reconfigure reader’s racial schemas, making them more historically aware and empathetic.

Given that Moya’s project is pegged to a defense of close reading, the quality of the book’s close readings provides at least one measure of its success. By this gauge, *The Social Imperative* is a compelling, often brilliant, work of scholarship. Moya’s writing is
lucid, and her analyses consistently draw surprising, illuminating insights from a series of texts. These close readings develop in such a way as to elaborate a synthesis of close reading with sociohistorical analysis. Thus, she begins by citing philosophical and social psychological evidence that interracial friendships are important sources of racial literature, then pivots to a close reading of how friendships in Morrison’s *Sula* (particularly the friendship between Nel and Sula) exemplify the importance of open engagement in both embodied relationships *and in reading*. Her analyses of Helena María Viramontes’s “The Moths” and Manuel Muñoz’s “Zigzagger” then show how certain kinds of cultural and historical context are important for creating the right conditions for this engagement. The chapter on Junot Díaz’s “How to Date a Browngirl, Blackgirl, Whitegirl, or Halfie” returns the book’s gaze toward the reader, persuasively showing how the story’s second-person narration hails readers, inviting them to examine their internalized prejudices, just as Yunkier, the story’s protagonist, does. The final chapter, on Morrison’s novel *A Mercy*, asks readers to consider their own investments in racial thinking as well as the long genealogy of such thinking in US history. Although the book’s argument unfolds compellingly a step at a time, each chapter also stands on its own and would make an excellent secondary reading assignment in an undergraduate or graduate classroom.

Moya’s success in advancing the larger argument—that literature and literary criticism “matter”—is more difficult to assess. Scholars and students of literature will likely be predisposed to agree with the Introduction, as I was, which articulates an urgent, reasoned defense of our discipline. Scholars interested in race and ethnicity will also appreciate Moya’s persuasive account of how literary criticism can contribute to increased racial literacy and human empathy for readers of literature.

Yet the book’s larger arguments encounter some significant difficulties. The first is definitional: what is literature? Moya takes great pains to define literature as an “institution . . . a system (made up of even smaller systems) of formalized activities enabling social communication via culturally-specific forms of aesthetic expression” (7). This definition allows her to distinguish between literature as a complex set of interactions among writers, publishers, critics, readers, etc., and individual literary texts. It also allows the activist formalism Moya models throughout *The Social Imperative* to complement, rather than compete with, other modes of literary scholarship, such as the distant reading and quantitative analysis championed by Franco Moretti, Ted Underwood, and others.

Despite her careful definition, Moya’s close readings default to a more restrictive idea of literature centered on prose fiction, especially the novel. This is apparent both in Moya’s selection of literary texts—all prose fiction—and in statements made throughout the
book about the value of literature. Moya asserts, for example, that “a proper appreciation of the semantic open-endedness of (especially) long and complex works of literature” is “[c]entral to an understanding of how and why literature holds out the potential for epistemic and emotional growth” (55). Making length and complexity (understood principally as heteroglossia) “central” to an appreciation of literature, however, excludes a large swath of other literary texts, particularly poems. A slightly different version of this problem arises when Moya writes that “literature remains the most significant venue” through which readers can confront complex accounts of other humans’ experiences and motivations (76). It is unclear what the measure of significance is here, since in terms of cultural influence and sheer numbers, film and television surpassed literature long ago as media for encountering narrative representations of others’ experiences.

Of course, any definition of literature will inevitably feel insufficient to scholars with varying interests. But because Moya is so careful to introduce her argument by offering a situated, textured definition of literature, the centrifugal force of narrative fiction in the subsequent chapters is slightly disconcerting. The idea of schemas as a form of embodied knowledge presents perhaps another way forward, which would be to deemphasize narrative complexity in favor of a focus on language as both a medium of communication and a material experience in its own right. A different way of thinking about literature, in other words, would be to think on a more granular level about form, about the pleasures and challenges of syntax, diction, rhetoric, and rhythm, among other things. How, for example, does the sheer aural pleasure of a passage such as the climactic sentence in Muñoz’s “Zigzagger,” which Moya quotes to great effect (104), potentially create an embodied experience of that text? What possible effects could that aural pleasure—apart from the thematic content of the passage—have on reconfiguring a reader’s racial schemas?

Another approach entirely would be to take seriously the entire system of literature as it comes to bear on particular acts of reading (alone or collectively, silently or aloud, in print or online) and interpretation (as the work of individuals in quite reflection, or as the work of groups of individuals in dialogue). This would give a way out of an impasse in Moya’s conception of schemas. As it is, there is a certain circularity at play: a reader’s schemas might be reshaped by a literary text, resulting in greater racial literacy, but the catch is that readers must discover the text in the right way. Who provides the schema for encountering the text correctly? Implicit throughout the book is the response to one of Moya’s original questions: do literary critics still matter? If readers must be taught how to meet texts properly (and which ones) in order to challenge and change their racial schemas, then of course they need a teacher, which is the epitome, after all, of both New Criticism and poststructuralism.
Moya’s nuanced, beautiful readings model the potential for good literary criticism to provide frameworks that might indeed reshape a reader’s racial schemas. What is missing, however, is something palpably present in the Introduction: an explicit foregrounding of the work of the literary critic in the classroom, in books and articles, and in the public sphere. This is not so much as a weakness of *The Social Imperative* — a formidable work of literary scholarship on every level — as it is an opportunity for other scholars to build on the work Moya has begun here, to demonstrate clearly and forcefully how the work of literary critics can make a difference in the creation of a more just, humane world.