Social Imperatives


Are you someone who thinks the current theory debates would benefit from a healthy dose of social-science methodologies and keywords? Your answer probably depends upon a series of frames by which you understand the question: the debates themselves (close vs. distant reading), your own field and area priorities, perhaps the job market and your concomitant relationship to graduate students, and chiefly, what you think your undergraduate students need—chiefly, that is, if in fact you consider disciplinary debates urgent for your undergraduate pedagogy. In other words, you understand the theory debates in terms of your own priorities and point of view and your own professional and affective investments. Because these investments are not always conscious and not necessarily available for your reflection, you tend to naturalize them. In her new book, *The Social Imperative: Race, Close Reading, and Contemporary Literary Criticism*, Paula M. L. Moya introduces a word for these investments, drawn from the field of social psychology: schemas.

Moya argues that books, too, have schemas, and engaging them can change our own. As did mine when I read Moya’s book, which I ended up admiring, less for its drawing on the social sciences and more for its demonstration of how theory, context, and close reading can be combined to yield a complex understanding of literature that in turn can enrich our understanding of the world around us. Fittingly, Moya defines “the social imperative” as “the ongoing struggle to imagine . . . another way to be human and free” (165). If you are ready to grant this imperative in your reading and teaching, and especially if you research and write on race and ethnicity in literature, you will find Moya’s book a sincere model for exploring and relaying your values.

Moya’s first book, *Learning from Experience* (U of California P, 2002), sought a theory of social identity commensurate with the powerful politics of racial, ethnic, and gender and sexuality–based activism. Working within the “new realist” school of critics and philosophers and drawing on American pragmatist philosophy, that book argued for the epistemic salience of experience. Experience, Moya argued, is a mode of knowledge and can function objectively, insofar as—like the sciences—objectivity is the result of testing theories in the world and homing in on ever better accounts of how the world works. Minorities are forced to test their theories of identity against the world constantly and therefore have ever better accounts of identity matters. In short, people of color, women, gays, lesbians, and transgender people know what they are talking about. *Learning from Experience* includes what I thought of as a curiously placed chapter on pedagogy, and though it originally struck me as incongruent with the rest of the literary analyses in the prior chapters, it makes sense in light of the present book. Moya’s sustained project turns out to be understanding how we make sense of, learn from, and do better on behalf of people whose identities and experiences are different from our own, and she models a praxis in which research, writing, and teaching are all of a piece.
The Social Imperative wades into theory debates with an opening section titled “The Search for a Method.” As with the prior monograph, Moya addresses an authentic disciplinary question about the social value of literature, locating analytic space between those who would dismiss literature’s utilization for political purposes and those who consider literature nothing but a socially symbolic act. Affirming both close and symptomatic reading and both affective and contextual means of analysis, Moya deploys exemplary readings as proof texts for how literature can change consciousness and thereby do good work in the world. In this way, she is mindful of our dual roles as scholars and teachers. The vast majority of students we teach will never become professional literature scholars, and often our students are not even English majors. Rather, we teach students whose major curriculum includes the social and natural sciences, not to mention the business majors and those who go on to be simply . . . people. Why does literature matter to them, and how can we help them read literature to make sense of their lives and the world around them? Propelled by that question, The Social Imperative is altogether reasonable, so much so that you might want to lend a copy to your social-science provost or college dean who does not always understand why literary study matters.

Most of the book’s interdisciplinary engagements occur in the introduction, which, though ostensibly for literature scholars, reads like it might be addressed to a cross-section of the university. Key to her argument is Moya’s definition of literature as a “trans-historical and trans-individual social institution” that exists “within what social psychologists describe as the ‘culture cycle’” (6–7). At the same time, she grants that literature is an aesthetic object, produced by creative individuals: “A work of literature is thus a creative linguistic engagement, in the form of an oral or written artifact, with the historically-situated cultural and political tensions expressed at the level of individual experience” (9). Given these two dimensions, “a close reading of a work of literature can thus serve as an excavation of, and a meditation on, the pervasive sociocultural ideas—such as race, ethnicity, gender, and sexuality—of the social worlds, as well as the worlds of sense, within which both authors and readers live” (9).

Doubling down on science, Moya asserts, “literary critics need . . . to re-conceptualize literary criticism’s relationship to science and the scientific method. Instead of trying either to outdo scientists on the terrain of objectivity or to undermine the foundations of science by declaring scientific objectivity to be founded on the lie of language, . . . we would do well to develop more nuanced understandings of subjects (readers) and objects (texts)” (13). This requires science, specifically psychology, to understand how readers read, and Moya finds social psychology’s concept of the “schema” descriptive of the junction between the world and the subject that forms the “set of cognitive-affective structures” that we all have (15). In the famous social-psychology experiment, schemas are why most observer-subjects fail to see a man in a gorilla suit walk across a basketball court when the subjects are asked to pay attention to patterns of the game: no one expected to see a gorilla, so few did (18). In literature, the gorilla is anything we have not been trained or directed to see—specifically, the experiences of minorities. Given our demographic location, we are bound to share expectations about and perceptions of the world with people similarly situated, and likewise, we are frequently unable to perceive whatever has not been formed into our daily schemas.

The Social Imperative’s chapters do double duty, demonstrating for literary scholars the utility of social-science-based methods for analysis and highlighting the efficacy of close reading not simply in addition to but enhanced by context. The first chapter, for instance, on
literary remedies for racism, begins with a lengthy overview of how racism manifests as a subjective view on the world. Leaving aside the capitalist structures that materialize race in the first place, Moya focuses instead on how young people encounter racial difference, highlighting the transformative potential of interracial friendships: “[F]riendship between two people who are differently situated within the racial order thus enables an emotionally- and epistemically-productive kind of particularizing of consciousness. . . . A friendship between two people associated with different racial groups always holds at least the potential for expanding each friend’s emotional horizons and improving her racial schemas” (51). This seems a bit obvious, but it is an important premise for Moya’s continuing claim that literature can be the surrogate for that friendship, likewise altering a reader’s schemas or point of view on the existence and salience of racism. Regardless of whether a reader appreciates the social-psychology setup, the first chapter’s exemplary close reading of Toni Morrison’s *Sula* is worthwhile. Moya is a terrific, not-too-suspicious reader, alert to nuances of tone, characterization, and relationships finely etched into Morrison’s novel, and her conclusion, that *Sula* instructs readers about race and gender through its depictions of friendship, is rewarding.

The third chapter, on Helena María Viramontes and Manuel Muñoz, treats literature like a friendship, with the reader encouraged to consider context generously. In this regard, the chapter further engages the current debates about close and distant reading. Remaining a pragmatist, however, Moya does not simply argue for context but demonstrates how readers make sense of texts according to what they already know and understand. Contextualization involves increasing the range of information and understanding a reader brings to the literature. Writing about Viramontes’s short story “The Moths,” Moya first demonstrates a masterful, formal reading of the opening of the story, which proves to be archetypically about mothers and daughters, loss and survival. Then Moya brings to the foreground the “vestigial schema” of the Aztec story of Coyolxuahqui and Coatlicue, a daughter-mother legend that bears its own cosmology—a cosmology that Moya locates through further close reading of “The Moths.” Moya aims to overcome the arch distinctions between sociological and formalist reading practices, but the demonstration seems like nothing other than the sort of best reading practices most of us engage in our everyday teaching. Perhaps best of all is Moya’s openness to a plurality of readings of the story. The story is an object with its own “agency”; it has a sociohistorical context, which endows it with conscious and unconscious schemas; and the reader himself or herself has a point of view and experience that he or she brings to the relationship. Modeling that relationship yields a wholly reasonable practice that, while perhaps not necessarily breaking new ground, surely will not garner objection either.

I was disappointed that Moya did not engage with recent work on context inspired by Bruno Latour. Rita Felski’s important essay, “Context Stinks,” for instance, is simply side-stepped here. (Moya cites from the introduction to the journal issue in which Felski’s essay appeared.) Felski’s lucid statement that “history is not a box” containing and framing a literary text is a challenge to New Historicists, among others, who would look to context to deliver a text’s hidden meaning (Felski 577). Addressing objections to her method, Moya simply states that “contextualization can go wrong when a literary critic imagines that a text has only one context (a historical one), or that historical contextualization must either reveal the text’s blind spots or fix its true meaning” (80). Well, that is not all that can go wrong, as Felski makes clear. Critics can also fail to read, which for Felski means failing to take into
account how their own intellectual and affective positions are determinative of a text’s meaning. Felski’s point is not so far from Moya’s own, that reading is relational and changes both text and reader. In the case of Viramontes’s “The Moths,” the Mexica folkloric example is not exactly a historical context that “survives” in Viramontes’s story but the sort of information Viramontes herself would likely know and even seek out. Her fiction is often saturated with images and ideas drawn from her research on pre-Colombian history, and in this regard, she is typical of a whole generation of Chicana/o writers and artists who self-consciously retrieved the histories and folklore of the Americas in a bid to establish a retroactive indigeneity. When we add that context to our reading, we are able to ground our initial sympathy for the characters in a broader history and culture that may change our worldly perceptions beyond the text.

Especially when writing about authors like Junot Díaz, Viramontes, and Morrison, who constitute Moya’s archive, it seems irresponsible not to turn to contextual resources for reading, say, Díaz’s novel The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao. Perhaps Díaz’s palimpsestic weave of American comics, The Lord of the Rings, and Star Wars (to name the most obvious inter-texts) is perfectly transparent to you, but it was not to me, and my understanding of that novel was incomplete until I tracked down the references. And the day I Google-stumbled across a ninety-minute lecture by Díaz in which he explained how his engagement with the speculative genres enabled his novel to critique two centuries of colonial and neocolonial relations between Hispaniola and the United States, my reading and teaching of the novel was completely transformed. Is that context? Díaz is among the more avuncular authors, but Viramontes, Morrison, and many other contemporary writers who address race and ethnicity likewise describe their literature as projects of historical revision, postcolonial critique, and racial remedy. While debates depend upon two strongly opposed points of view, in practice we often use the materials, tools, and ideas available in order to understand or teach a text as richly and fully as possible, where understanding marks a productive point of exchange between text and reader. Doing so makes for reasonable reading and teaching, and, returning to Moya’s book, it is a hallmark of The Social Imperative.

By the middle of the The Social Imperative, the chapters are less intent on mobilizing keyterms and more focused on Moya’s astute reading practices. By the fourth chapter, which reads Díaz’s fiction through the lens of Audre Lorde’s 1980s-era feminist prose, her critical approach is less schematic and more interpretive and free of social-science jargon. The result is among the best treatments of Díaz I know—sensitive, complex, contextual, and highly attentive to the subtle shifts of tone and perspective in Díaz’s writing, especially in his short story “How to Talk to a Brown Girl, Black Girl, White Girl, or Halfie.” Beginning with a reflection on how the lexicon of race has been appropriated to block antiracist political interventions, Moya makes clear the need to return to the interventions of antiracist writers like Lorde on the way to reading ostensibly postracial writers like Díaz. The review of Lorde’s writing recalls the difficulty of “dismantling the master’s house” and the need for a new set of tools that do not simply reconstruct and reify racial essence. Díaz’s fiction is often situated at the intersection of affirmative racial identification and its deconstruction, and his layered narrative frames pull from the multiple worlds wherein race is established, obviated, and reconstituted. Indeed, Díaz’s fiction is often saturated with irony and commanded by such a strong narrative voice that it can be hard for a reader to catch the way his stories critique the structures of power his first-person narrators typically channel. I will confess to finding his stories thrilling but almost embarrassingly difficult, as his narrators make
remarkably objectionable statements about race and gender with such propulsive speed that I feel caught out with no time to read back against the grain. This is especially true with “How to Talk,” a story directly addressed to the reader (“you”), and Moya’s insistence on context, including history and authorial biography, makes for an especially effective close reading. She begins by reminding readers that Díaz was a college student in the 1980s who read Lorde and other radical feminists and understood that they “were not only forging in the smithies of their body-logos radical emancipatory epistemologies—the source code of our future liberation—but also they were fundamentally rewriting Fanon’s . . . Black Skin, White Masks” in order to locate both their oppressive interpellations and liberating counter-strategies (Díaz, qtd. in Moya 120).

Moya carefully takes her reader through several of Díaz’s nonfiction diagnoses of racism in the Americas and combines them with useful context about the Dominican Republic’s colonial history, thereby explaining the mix of racial shame and feigned macho arrogance of Díaz’s youthful narrator. Moya convincingly compares Díaz’s narration to prismatic refraction, yielding “a dazzlingly full spectrum of colors,” and concludes that “so does perception refracted through identity in this story produce a wide and varied range of interactional dynamics” (125). It is inadequate, in other words, to conclude that the narrator’s racist-seeming rhetoric means he or the story is racist, nor is it sufficient to say that the narrator is somehow knowingly ironizing the racist frameworks of his advice. Rather, “what Díaz’s syntactically odd sentences make clear is that, as specific factors involved in setting the scene proliferate, the identity contingencies multiply correspondingly. Du Boisian double-consciousness here opens up into Díazian multiple-consciousness” (125). This is the sort of conclusion you can only arrive at by working with a dynamic array of tools and methods, including, of course, close reading and context.

The Social Imperative closes with a strong reading of Toni Morrison’s Mercy, a novel that, Moya insists, has been under- or misread by critics for lack of understanding its complex historical, geographic, and discursive firmament. I am not so much persuaded that the novel does and says all that Moya attributes to it as I am that Moya has provided an inspired, substantive response, and in any case, it is the transaction, offered as both recuperation and demonstration, that matters most.

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