
Roles of Affect and Imagination in Reading and Responding to Literature: Perspectives and Possibilities for English Classrooms

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We talk of the mind's capacity to analyze. This capacity—to abstract, to absorb elements of knowledge, and to relinquish them in statements, verbal or written—is an important part of what we are: creatures of language, of symbols galore. But we need not use ourselves, so to speak, in only that way. We have memories; we have feelings. We reach out to others . . . That side of ourselves is not set apart from our intellect. In order to respond, one remembers, one notices, then one makes connections—engaging the thinking mind as well as what is called one's emotional side. (Coles, 1989, p. 128)

LITERATURE OFFERS THAT KIND OF EXPERIENCE, uniquely activating our metaphorical sensibilities to the might-be-could-be in our lives and worlds. Engaging with literature typically involves dwelling in the primary affordances of the texts themselves and

engaging in critical theoretical reflection. Strange as it may seem, the ability to engage in thoughtful literary critique, or political critique, is perhaps ultimately located in our capacity to vicariously feel, imagine, and think about what is going on in the hearts and minds of others in ways that deepen or exceed the “passive ideal” often used to frame or characterize empathetic engagements with literature or others (Davis, 2014; Goizueta, 2001; Ruddick, 2015; Sepulveda, 2011). As teachers and readers of literature, we are constantly provided with circumstances or events that ask us to negotiate between what was initially expected and what eventually transpired. For readers of all ages, transactions with literature are fundamentally about coming to terms with the “mixed comforts” of the customary and the “temptations of the possible.” These texts offer alternative ways of seeing our worlds, exploring the lives of others, and glimpsing our own potentials for being, and they do so in complex ways.

In a passage written more than 25 years earlier, Robert Coles (1989) identified one of the fundamental distinctions between *personal* and *critical* approaches to reading fiction. Literature’s invitation to enlist our “emotional side” as well as our “thinking mind” requires that we imagine the English classroom as a place where students might be encouraged to read and respond with both their hearts and minds. It is this capacity to read stories, with both intellect and emotion, with critique and imagination, that we wish to more fully acknowledge and explore as an essential component of literary reading and literature instruction. Although this perspective is not new (see C. Lewis, 2000), we believe that reviewing the work of key scholars on the subject will be useful and edifying. As recent years have given rise to the popularity of teaching literary theory, and especially critical theoretical approaches (e.g., Appleman, 2009; Gillespie, 2010; Mellor & Patterson, 2001; Wilson, 2014), the value of personal ways of reading has been increasingly eclipsed, understated, and even caricatured. These unenthusiastic characterizations make us concerned about the fate of affective and imaginative approaches to reading and responding to literature in school classrooms. Our concern, however, is not so much with celebrating personal engagement over other forms of engagement as it is with arguing that its value has been inadequately understood and thus undervalued. Contrary to many advocates of critical approaches to reading, we thus argue that engaging personally with literature involves much more than the exploration of one’s subjective experiences or one’s own inner life. Moreover, we argue that when readers engage both personally *and* critically with literary texts, imagination, feeling, analysis, and critique are “cooperatively mangled” in powerful ways. This “cooperation” has the potential to fully exploit the *both/and* ways of knowing (embodied/visceral and analytic/critical) that reading literature affords (e.g., Davis, 2014; Weinstein, 2003; Nussbaum, 1995).

Finally, we believe that teachers (as knowledge workers) have a responsibility to provide students with opportunities and tools for seeing beyond what is culturally canonical or officially expected. This mode of teaching connects the purposes of critical reading with the purposes of personal and emotional reading. In this paper, we argue for an affective and imaginative humanities reform, which we believe is necessary for the development of the empathy and compassion needed for students to become engaged citizens, capable of recognizing differences while enacting a thoughtful understanding of power and injustice. In the following section, we reconsider the vital roles that affect and imagination can (and often do) play in literary reading. Next, we provide an extended analysis of the roles of affect and imagination in reading and teaching literature. We then provide an explanation and critique of “critical” literary theories, arguing that critical readings are most powerful when connected with affective and imaginative readings. Finally, we explore approaches that teachers might implement to encourage this type of

engagement with literature, aimed at cultivating democratic capacities within our students and within ourselves.

Engaging Affectively and Imaginatively with Literature: A Reconsideration Inspired by Narrative Theory

The humanities remind us where we have been and help us envision where we are going. Emphasizing critical perspective and imaginative response, the humanities . . . foster creativity, appreciation of our commonalities and our differences, and knowledge of all kinds. (Commission on the Humanities and Social Sciences, 2013, p. 9)

Central to our proposed reform are insights embodied in theories of narrative and narrative ways of knowing, especially the insights about how literature creates conditions for vicariously participating in the lives and worlds of others (e.g., Bruner, 1986; 2002; Davis, 2014; Weinstein, 2003; Nussbaum, 1995). Inspired by these scholars, we contend that literary learning and teaching in classrooms ought to be connected to humanities education generally, which is designed to foster compassion for others, as well as engaged participation in social and human life (e.g., Spellmeyer, 2003; Musil, 2015). In short, this kind of explicit, theoretical reframing of the nature and functions of literature is vital to transforming literature instruction in ways that invite a more emotionally vibrant and socially concerned approach to literature study and humanities education more generally.

In not fully understanding, and thus underestimating, the potentials of personal, response-based approaches to reading and teaching literature, we diminish the manner in which readers' affective engagement enables the development of their literary imaginations and their capacities for empathetic critique, both of which are necessary for the compassionate and critical analysis of text and life (e.g., Davis, 2014; Greene, 1995). Indeed, despite his reservations about the potential of students' personal engagements, Maxwell (2006) recognized that empathetic participation is, nonetheless, essential to any view of reading that offers the possibility of engendering more ethical and compassionate reader-citizens. In reading affectively and imaginatively, an approach derived from diverse narrative perspectives, we conceptualize literature instruction as an invitation for new kinds of engagement that include tangible enactments (e.g., Nikitina, 2009), but also recognize imagination and emotion as the basis for powerful and persuasive kinds of literary "participation" in the lives and worlds of others. Additionally, we propose that recruiting affect and imagination is essential when reading literary texts in ways that yield social and political insights so often thought to be the exclusive domain of reading critically.

In the worlds that literary texts create, affect and imagination are the foundations of believability, the vicissitudes of knowing, and of the complex "truths" that stories invite us to consider (Bruner, 1986; O'Brien, 1990). The truth-telling power of narrative ultimately resides in the artistic and "unrealistic" translation, or even the distorted twisting, of reality that is sometimes necessary in making something *feel* true. Theories of narrative understanding—especially their insights into how stories embody "structures of feeling" (Williams, 1977) that *both* create the conditions (or potentials) for our collective being, *and* trouble and subvert our sense of the "real" or the canonical world—have been central to the approaches embraced by a

diverse group of scholars (e.g., Bruner, 1986; Coles, 1989; Greene, 1995; Noddings, 1991; Nussbaum, 1995; Weinstein, 2003). Narrative theory, according to these scholars, provides a uniquely powerful framework for creating curricula and instructional practices that are compatible with participatory humanities instruction outlined in the work of several key authors (e.g., Musil, 2015; Nikitina, 2009; Spellmeyer, 2003).

The investigation of the nature and functions of narratives and narrative understanding is comprised by a long tradition of theoretical work across a range of disciplines—including anthropology, sociology, political science, philosophy, English, and education—that offer diverse perspectives pertaining to literature instruction. In general, these perspectives recognize and prioritize the importance of narrative as a specialized way of knowing that is necessarily dependent on recruiting readers' emotion and imagination (e.g., Ganz, 2010; 2011; Greene, 1978; 1995; Nussbaum, 1995; Weinstein, 2003). Still others have connected this way of knowing to developing potentials for agency and critique that result in the kinds of understandings made possible when individuals take other people and their perspectives seriously (Davis, 2014; Musil, 2015). Indeed, opportunities to read, write, tell, and listen to stories take students out of the classroom and into places where they can engage in dialogues with others about issues and experiences that matter to them—personally, socially, culturally, morally, and politically. Asking students to try to “identify” with the life of a character in a way that inspires a kind of motion “from self to the other”—as opposed to a self-interested search for reader/character commonalities—may very well result in passive self-satisfaction; but it may also provoke destabilizing moments of self-critique or self-alienation. According to Davis (2014), the theater of the African American playwright and performer Anna Deavere Smith offers an “inspirational model for the progressive possibilities of cross-racial empathy” while simultaneously engaging audiences in an intense examination of the racial conflicts that continue to inhabit urban communities (p. 10). In the introduction to her play, *Fires in the Mirror*, Smith (1993) theorizes about the empathetic possibilities that she imagines when trying to “interest people around us in motion, in moving from one side to the other, in experiencing one hand and the other hand, and to building bridges between places” (p. xxxix). For Smith, encouraging audiences “to reach for the other,” while also being aware of the space or the distance between themselves and the other(s), does not necessarily invite a feel-good kind of empathetic experience. To the contrary, as Smith describes, reaching for the other may involve or even encourage audience members to feel emotions such as discomfort, anger, pain, and distress that sometimes accompany the jolt of self-disclosure.

Such moments may bring students into critical self-reflection and constructive dialogue, allowing them to complicate and critique comfortable, empathetic claims of solidarity and interconnection between and among the characters, their peers, and themselves. Readers can both empathize with and critique the lives of the characters whom they study in ways that enable them to experience “the discomfort that empathy ought to produce” (Davis, 2014, p. 10). Indeed, as Davis thoughtfully argues, although there are certainly reasons to remain wary of the problematic possibilities of empathetic emotions, we should be equally careful not to characterize these problems as inevitable or without more positive, productive dimensions. For example, in light of the levels of political apathy in the United States, she suggests that “more attention needs to be paid to the role of affect—and emotionally engaging encounters with cultural texts—in galvanizing efforts for radical change” (p. 12).

Almost 25 years earlier, Maxine Greene (1993) touched on the powerful possibilities for critical self-analysis and recognition that might develop when students begin exchanging stories

with others that are rooted in or involve movement among “other landscapes” or experiences, offering new pathways of perception and self-recognition:

Even in the small, the local spaces in which teaching is done, educators may begin creating the kinds of situations where at the very least, students will begin telling the stories of what they are seeking, what they know and might not yet know, exchanging stories with others grounded in other landscapes, at once bringing something into being that is in between. . . . It is at moments like these that persons begin to recognize each other and, in the experience of recognition, feel the need to take responsibility for one another. (p. 218)

Interestingly, this orientation can be readily traced to the work of Robert Coles (1989). A psychiatrist and author of numerous books on the moral, political, and spiritual sensibilities of children, Coles’s work represents an early exploration into how personal and literary narratives can foster the critical empathetic sensibilities central to the clinical work of a physician. Literary narratives, according to Coles, can provide opportunities for moral analysis because they present readers with occasions to imaginatively and critically encounter the lives of characters, offering openings for self-scrutiny about how we view others and ourselves. When this occurs, the hopes, fears, discomforts, struggles, and joys of these characters have the potential to help us move from self to the other. Literary narratives, then, serve as a kind of critical, empathetic companion or bridge, enabling us to explore life’s contingencies, conflicts, and dilemmas by inviting us “to reach for the other” while also experiencing the distance between selves. Compared to many other experiences, these narrative “journeys,” Coles argues, sensitize us in unique ways to matters of commitment and choice. For Coles, literary narratives afford unique learning experiences that are fundamentally emotional, historical, empathetic, imaginative, and critical. In echoing this sentiment, Bruner (1986), explained that the imaginative use of narrative is unique in its invitation to explore the vicissitudes of human intention in ways that inform and trouble one’s perspectives.

Extending the Insights of Narrative Theory: The Value of Affective and Imaginative Engagements with Literature

A critical literary approach originates with the idea that the point of departure for any conversation about a piece of literature is that it is first and foremost a social, cultural, and historical construction—full of assumptions, perspectives, and ideologies that require a specific set of analytical tools to reveal the ways of seeing and being outlined by an author who is located within a specific set of social, cultural, economic, and historical circumstances (e.g., Appleman, 2009; Mellor & Patterson, 2001; Soter, 1999; Wilson, 2014). Additionally, reading critically develops the significance of race, class, gender, sexuality, etc. as constructs to be explored as they are revealed in the context of literary study. This critical approach to reading literature has also been vitally linked to how classroom English instruction might inform students’ thinking and perspectives on matters of equity, inclusion, social justice, and the possibility of social change. According to Pirie (1997), the literature-reading community should rightfully question the “limits of the doctrine of individualism before our classroom practices harden into self-perpetuating rituals” (p. 9).

From this perspective, it follows that personal responses to literature deserve examination because they stand in contrast to the view that such responses take readers nowhere but deeper within themselves. Yet, engaging affectively and imaginatively is necessary for reaching outside of oneself to understand the sometimes distant and different lives of others. For Weinstein (2003), these matters are worth contemplating because the realm of feeling is an exceptional resource, one that is almost completely unimagined and unexplored by the more discursive paradigms or modes of thought that outline and define Western thinking about how we seek to know and connect to others. Building on these perspectives, in this section, we examine the matter of personal engagement and its vital role in more critical theoretical ways of reading.

To the extent that one's emotions and imagination are summoned, drawn upon, and uniquely cultivated through responding personally to a literature, we are reluctant to regard reader-response theories and approaches as ways of reading that are peripheral or in some way epiphenomenal of "real" literary engagement (read: critical theoretical engagement). In this regard, a number of recent investigations involving young readers (and writers) have emphasized the affective and imaginative dimensions of reading and responding to literature in both elementary and middle school classrooms (Dutro, 2008; Jamieson, 2015; Kamberelis, McGinley, & Welker, 2015; Lewis, 2014; Louie, 2005; McGinley, Whitcomb, & Zerwin, 2006; Sepulveda, 2011). These studies have highlighted the many ways that personal connections are fundamental to one's critical understanding of self and others.

As it pertains specifically to language arts and literature curricula, instructional approaches that encourage an exclusive focus on critical theoretical practices without a complementary focus on empathetic understanding *and* tangible social action or advocacy seems to us to constitute a serious failure of literature education and humanities education more broadly conceived (see also Hersh & Schneider, 2005; Nikitina, 2009; Spellmeyer, 2003). Although empathetic involvement and real-world enactments may take many forms (including the emotional embodiment of abstract concepts through media and the arts), it may also involve various modes of engaged citizenship such as participation in community-based projects, initiatives, or movements designed to trouble and transform social inequalities (Ganz, 2010; Nikitina, 2009).

As teachers of literature, the decision to do more than "come up short" of what is possible begins with the belief that affect is a fundamental yet largely invisible forces in our lives, and that literature is affect laden in the sense that it "explodes with news about the world of feeling," not the world of information or rational analysis (Weinstein, 2003, p. xx). This, of course, does not mean that we wish to construe reading as little more than an opportunity to "identify" with the plights and experiences of characters. Quite the opposite. Although we certainly do not intend to diminish the epistemological benefits of emotional "identification," we also wish to revisit and amend the conventional wisdom surrounding the consequences of emotional and imaginative literary engagements. We take this stance because, although encounters with literature can be occasions for identification, they can also be prodigious tools for learning from and about the lives and worlds of others in ways that only such texts afford. Specifically, with respect to feeling and empathetic identification, literature redraws individual locations on the relationship map as always-already connected and collective rather than as fundamentally individual or monadic. In so doing, the revolutionary force of feeling has the potential to "reconceive what we take to be our actual contours, where you or I begin and end" (Weinstein, 2003, p. 7).

Re-Imagining Reading as *Both Affective/Imaginative and Analytic/Critical*

Teaching or inviting students to read affectively and imaginatively is often described as a less critical or even as a “touchy-feely” approach to literature study in school. Recent arguments for including more critical readings of texts in school tend to characterize reading affectively and imaginatively as insufficient to the task of understanding social inequities and issues of social justice. Laurent Berlant (1999), for example, offers little possibility that humanizing emotions or the “passive ideal of empathy” will ever inspire people or readers to pro-social action. Distrustful and unconvinced about the likelihood that variations in emotions could lead to significant structural change in public life, Berlant has made clear her stance that “private responses are not only insufficient but part of the practice of injustice” (as cited in Davis, 2014, p. 11). Yet, others have argued that personal forms of engagement are actually essential to cultivating a vision of social justice and democratic equity. Drawing on the empathy-based work of psychologist Gail Reed, Davis (2014) thoughtfully argues that broad characterizations of empathy as an “impediment to political change” essentially diminish its potential social impact while failing to consider how such empathy “can play an important role in changing attitudes and self-perception or even catalyzing action” (p. 11).

From our perspective, understanding or making ethical judgments about the circumstances of another’s life (and their effects) can only occur from a position of having first participated with empathy and imagination in those circumstances. Literature (and art generally) are relatively unique in their capacity to involve readers in these forms of engagement. To not exploit these potentials, according to Martha Nussbaum (1995), would be to deny what is arguably most unique and important about engaging with literature. In her book, *Poetic Justice: The Literary Imagination and Public Life*, she regards literature and the influence of literary readership as indispensable to matters of civic debate, social justice, and discourse in the public sphere. She describes the “literary imagination” as a way of seeing the world that is developed or cultivated by a reader’s iterative personal involvement with the exigencies of what it means to be human and social as they are portrayed in literature. Only by taking-up the unique potentials for affective and imaginative engagements that literature affords, she maintains, are people adequately equipped to engage in public/civic reasoning and to make informed judgments about the lives of others:

Finally, we need the imaginative ability to put ourselves in the positions of people different from ourselves, whether by class or race or religion or gender. Democratic politics involves making decisions that affect other people and groups. We can only do this well if we try to imagine what their lives are like and how changes of various sorts affect them. (Nussbaum, 2010, para. 6)

It is important to note that this type of dialogue or movement from self to other is not always comfortable and can be perceived by English teachers as negative or unwanted. For example, having one student express her/his frustration with a character only to have another student, who connected with this same character’s experience, offer an opposing perspective might create tensions or discomforts not usually encouraged in the classroom. However, it is important to remember that these spaces of empathetic discomfort often lead to significant learning experiences because of the potential to “call attention to difference and the operations of

power that complicate any claims of solidarity” (Davis, 2014, p. 11). In the example just mentioned, each student can question his or her own reality against that of another's that is quite different, perhaps causing them to identify and surrender assumptions and entitlements in order to include the thoughts, feelings, and needs of their peers. Experiencing these types of realizations can help students enter into decisions more openly in ways that allow them to imagine the multiple possibilities and implications of their past, present, and future choices.

Few question the fact that literature draws upon and explores the landscapes of human feeling and imagination. However, some scholars have characterized personal responses to literature as somewhat restrictive and only marginally appropriate to engaging critically with literature (see C. Lewis, 2000). In fact, a growing number of educators and researchers have expressed concern that teaching literature in public school suffers from the influence of a single authoritative, conceptual perspective which is namely a personal, emotional response from one individual.

Taking up this line of critique, Maxwell (2006) went so far as to question the transformative potential once associated with students' personal approaches to literary texts. Questioning the idea that there is any value of reading practices aimed at developing empathetic understanding or democratic ideals, Maxwell argued that students' distinctively individual ways of engaging might “deepen pre-existing antipathies,” (p. 340), making them more vulnerable to the subjective influence of a teacher. As Appleman (2009) explained, a diversity of critical/theoretical approaches (e.g., historical, feminist, archetypal, post-structuralist, psychological, etc.) are equally, if not more essential, because they enable young readers to construct interpretations through a number of theoretical lenses and not simply in relation to their own limited experience.

Others have suggested that the practice of overvaluing personal engagement is not only simplistic and dangerous, but essentially misguided since readers do not really make pristine meaning “alone” or apart from the specific social, cultural, and historical contexts that influence the meaning making process (e.g., Desai, 1997; Bonnycastle, 2007). Under the spell of the pedagogy of “identification,” personal-response readers are regarded as being denied the same opportunities that readers using multiple critical approaches are afforded (C. Lewis, 2000).

Other supporters of critical reading have cautioned that if school readers continue to focus on their own “individual experience, then the communal basis for the discipline will disappear and literature classes will have nothing to hold them together” (Bonnycastle, 2007, p. 174). A decade earlier, McCormick (1995) similarly argued that “good” or “better” reading is more likely to occur when the “dominant significations of reading in school begin to change . . . so that readers can begin to see themselves as interdiscursive subjects, to see texts as always ‘in use’ and to recognize that different ways of reading texts have [different] consequences” (p. 308). In sum, critical perspectives outline a rationale for why individual meanings need always be interrogated for their social, cultural, and political influences, as well as their historical representations and narrative inclinations.

Although we fully acknowledge that personal engagements with literature are not the endgame, we believe that instructional activities designed to elicit students' affective and imaginative participation in the lives and worlds of fictional characters are fundamental to any reading experience, including a critical theoretical one. We agree with critical theoretical scholars that using a variety of theoretical approaches to reading is important and edifying. However, we also agree with scholars who argue that experiences with literature that engage students imaginatively and emotionally—in ways that stay with them once English class has

ended—are not only valuable but also crucial for critical thinking and civic engagement. In other words, given the task of preparing socially engaged and democratically minded students/citizens for an increasingly complex, socially stratified, and culturally rich world (i.e., a world inhabited by vastly different religions, races, genders, sexualities, ideologies, and values) we are reluctant to place our hope solely in the hands of “political rage, a discourse of demand and radical critique” (Berlant, 1999, p. 83). Rage and critique may lead to political action, but narratives of hope and possibility have proven to be essential in inspiring and sustaining powerful social movements as well (e.g., Ganz, 2010; 2011).

Finally, we posit that critical theoretical reading is most powerful when connected to responses that are deeply personal, affectively charged, and imaginative. In this regard, it is worth noting that critical theoretical approaches to literary study are not without paradoxes and contradictions. For example, any particular critical theoretical reading implies or invokes another. This is the essence of Derrida’s (1973) construct of *différance*—the continuous disclosure of meaning potentials and thus deferral of particular meanings. There are always limitations to any particular theoretical reading.

Additionally, literature has life-informing potentials often eclipsed by critical theoretical readings. Specifically, from the perspective of narrative theory, our access to the inner worlds and the lived exigencies of fictional characters occurs largely as a function of our affective and imaginative engagement with how they are rendered in stories. In his book, *A Scream Goes Through the House: What Literature Teaches Us About Life*, Weinstein (2003) noted that affective currency is the primary currency of narrative ways of knowing. Moreover, affective pathways ultimately serve as powerful, critical, and democratic tools because they orient us outwardly toward the experiences, lives, and worlds of others—an approach that reverberates in the theater of Anna Deavere Smith (1993) and in the scholarly work of Kimberly Chabot Davis (2014).

Therefore, reading in ways that evoke affective and imaginative participation is ultimately crucial to democratic forms of community rooted in a general concern for the values and lives of others. This is a key reason why we are advocating for an affective and imaginative humanities reform in English education. Within such a reform, the acts of identification and empathy, once construed as the major limiting factor associated with reading personally, are re-imagined to be an indispensable and vital component of reading with an eye towards possible forms of engaged citizenship based on imaginative insights into the lives of others. The decision to “journey out of one’s own borough,” so to speak, by engaging with literature and art is an “exercise in freedom, in negotiating subjectivities and lives that are not our own” (Weinstein, 2003, p. 394). Feelings, writes Weinstein, comprise the “affective passageways” that lead us out, connect us, and serve as the basis for our compassionate connection to the world and others in the world. The following paragraphs explain how affective and imaginative modes of responding to literature can inspire the democratic capacities of its readers.

Although literary texts are instructive, they rarely tell us what to do. Instead they have the potential to gift readers with emotional assets of considerable value and to open up vistas of what it means to be human and to act humanely. In this way, we make the unlikely claim that the ability to engage in thoughtful, literary critique is ultimately dependent upon our own capacity to feel and to imagine. Drawing on a long tradition of perspectives most closely aligned with theories of narrative and narrative ways of knowing, we invite readers to revisit and re-imagine the importance of personal responses to literature in the context of English instruction in schools.

Given the unique affordances of literary texts for exploring the visceral traffic and the affective worlds that connect and define us, it seems reasonable to be somewhat suspicious of exclusively critical approaches, especially their insistence that we avoid reading from the heart—in relation to lived experience and with empathy, emotion, and imagination. From our perspective, it is important to understand that affect and imagination are essential tools both for personal engagement and critique. Although the specialized languages of literary theory provide a shared lexicon among the so-called reading “elite,” these approaches often have little relevance among the larger reading public, not excluding school students. As Weinstein (2003) further explained, many literature teachers and professors “have created a specialized language and set of interests, as well as a massive theoretical scaffolding” (p. 425) deemed necessary for reading and discussing literature. Even though the best criticism and scholarship are not totally devoid of affective dimensions of response, these dimensions are neither central nor preferred in most cases.

Again, a deeper, more engaging approach to reading literature is one that is not only critical, but also fundamentally personal, one that reconceives “identification” as a vehicle for true self-extension through affective and imaginative involvement with others—both fictional and real—and is open to exploring the possible selves and possible worlds that literature makes visible (Bruner, 1986; Weinstein, 2003). As playwright and performer Anna Deavere Smith clarifies on the matter of identification, “I resist mushes of identity. I don’t believe that when I play someone in my work, I ‘am’ the character” (as cited in Davis, 2014, p. 11). In light of these perspectives, we agree with Weinstein (2003), that as teachers and professors of literature, we have lost our connection to the broader, book-reading public due to our preference for *analysis* in place of *conversation* and *critique* in place of *exploration*:

I think the academy has it wrong – we go through the wrong motions, talk about the wrong things, and simply walk right by the actual treasures in front of us. We are warned to be “professional,” and above all not to be “confessional.” Yet, I have noted, over and over, the surprised look of interest and excitement in students’ eyes each time I become personal, each time I relate a point to my life, to their life. There is an elemental logic in play here, the logic of a species that is seeking the best nourishment it can find, that inevitably asks of what it encounters: What good will this do me? What is of sustenance here? And very often, we the professors come up short. (p. 427)

Coincidentally, Douglas Waples, a Chicago School scholar who has probably conducted the most compelling research on the reading public, expressed similar sentiments well over half a century ago (Waples, Berelson, & Bradshaw, 1940). Indeed, “Waples helped construct a vocabulary about how reading figured into people’s roles and their participation in a democracy that remains vital and stimulating today” (Kamberelis & Albert, 2007, p. 271).

Literary imagination and the affective and imaginative involvement it requires are critical agents of social justice equality both for the excluded and the powerful. As Freire (1993/1970) and others have taught us, it is by reading the word that the oppressed generate strategies for reading and rewriting the world. Novels, stories, poems, and plays portray people’s lives in ways that are emotionally evocative (Nussbaum, 1995). When we read, we react emotionally to the lives of story characters, and because their lives are emotionally evocative, our involvement in/with these fictional lives gives us glimpses of modes of human understanding (and action) that

are compassionate, ethical, and socially just. The insights garnered from our emotional engagement with characters in stories can lead to interpersonal understandings and conceptions of civic reasoning of what is good and true for humanity.

Such commitments to *qualitative* distinctions, to emotional involvement, and to imaginative/empathetic modes of knowing are absolutely necessary for further critical analysis of moral and political thought, moral and political institutions, and the moral judgments of others. It is through this empathetic process that readers develop and cultivate literary imagination—a way of looking and seeing beyond the evidence, beyond “the facts,” so to speak, that is uniquely nourished by reading literature and is fundamentally necessary in our personal, social, and political lives (Nussbaum, 1995). This imaginative participation of readers is an essential feature of “an ethical stance that asks us to concern ourselves with the good of other people whose lives are distant from our own . . . and to have emotions related to that participation” (Weinstein, 2003, p. xvi). As Rancière (1991) and others have taught us, empathetic readings of characters’ lives help the powerful see the mistreatment of others as their own, a mistreatment that opens them to possible avenues of action on behalf of themselves and others.

When readers engage both personally *and* critically with literary texts, then affect, imagination, and the desire for analysis and critique are “cooperatively mangled.” As noted anthropologist George Marcus (2010) explained in his book, *The Sentimental Citizen: Emotion in Democratic Politics*, prevailing approaches to political analysis, for example, mistakenly assume that emotion limits the capacity to fully consider consequences, reasons for action, and analytic critique. This is also the conventional wisdom that seems to dominate the terrain of literary studies today, especially when it is applied to the critique of personal response and engagement (e.g., Berlant, 1999). According to Marcus, conventional critiques of emotion would have us believe that feelings lead to action without contemplation. As popular wisdom prescribes, emotions simply happen *to* us without intention or control. Marcus reminds us, however, that emotional communication and arousal are not only the lifeblood of politics, but also a prerequisite for the practice of reason and rationality in the world. Emotion invokes reason, and emotion enables reason’s conclusions. In other words, emotion plays an essential role in creating and sustaining the conditions for reason, enabling rationality and supporting critical analysis. Emotion is “cooperatively entangled” with reason in the political arena. This is largely because “emotions have more information about the state of the world, as well as our own resources, than is available to consciousness” (p. 62). What is more, the connection between emotion and reason is what interrupts comfortable habits, encourages public deliberation, and helps to generate sufficient energy needed to translate new understandings into action because emotional markers indicate when the usual has become strange.

Drawing on Marcus’ insights regarding the role of emotion in democratic politics, we make the equally unlikely claim that the ability to engage in thoughtful literary critique is ultimately located in being able to affectively and imaginatively participate in the exigencies of other human lives and worlds. So, for example, engaging in a Marxist critique of society based on reading Dicken’s *Oliver Twist* or Sinclair Lewis’s *Babbitt* requires that readers have imaginatively and empathetically encountered the lives and worlds of the characters in those texts, albeit vicariously. Similarly, to engage in trenchant critiques of tradition and conventionality in Henry James’s *The Portrait of a Lady* requires readers to experience vicariously the lived experiences and worlds of the key female characters in the novel.

As we have tried to make clear, the act of engaging personally with the stories of others can have important consequences for the ways we think about our own lives. More specifically,

the indirections and vicissitudes that are part of any story's characters can become our own and/or cause us to trouble our own. Empathetic participation in the lives of others is vital to developing humanities and literary-based approaches to teaching that take seriously a renewed desire to connect humanities education to fostering compassion for others and engaged citizenship.

A “New Look” at Reading Literature in the Classroom

A growing number of scholars support the power of literature to invite readers to adopt critical stances and engage in transformative work that makes possible that which was previously impossible. For example, in his comparative study of the early stages of globalization, *Under Three Flags: Anarchism and the Anti-Colonial Imagination*, Benedict Anderson (2005) tells the story of the famous novelist and “founding father” of Philippine nationhood, José Rizal. Drawing upon Anderson's analysis of Rizal and his creative work, Campano and Ghiso (2011) revisit the imaginative impact of Rizal's second novel, *El Filibusterismo*, noting that it went beyond simply commenting on the dishonesty of the friars and imperial rule. Following Anderson's perspective, they focused on the way Rizal's work engaged the collective Philippine imagination by gesturing toward an alternative world without Spanish domination. His novel helped “imagine into existence an ideal of Philippine nationhood which subsequently ignited the anticolonial aspirations of younger generations of Filipinos” (Campano & Ghiso, 2011, p. 2). In the words of Anderson (2005), “What Rizal had done in *El Filibusterismo* was to imagine the political landscape of this society and the near-elimination of its ruling powers” (p. 165). For Rizal and his readers, fictional narrative was central to the process through which Philippine citizens were able to imagine and work toward a life without Spanish imperialism.

Similar transformative practices have been cultivated in U.S. classrooms. In this regard, Lewis (2014) was able to document some of the ways that empathetic engagement with young adult fiction offered students critical potentials for interrogating the complex nature of their own cultural histories and ethnic identities. It also afforded opportunities for writing about these identities and histories, which had often, in their experience, been disregarded or misconstrued by mainstream peers in the course of traditional literacy instruction. Throughout literature discussions and other activities, immigrant students from Mexico frequently adopted and deployed the feelings and experiences of fictional characters with similar ethnic backgrounds as a powerful discursive tool for leveraging and voicing their own emotional experiences and cultural perspectives. In so doing, they legitimized and honored the cultural experiences of the characters, while critically drawing on the characters' lives as the grounds for identifying, explaining, and valuing their own life experiences as children of Mexican immigrants in predominately white, mainstream classrooms.

Additionally, Drawing on Goizueta's construct of *acompañamiento*, Sepulveda (2011) engaged transmigrant high school students in reading non-canonical literature and writing autobiographical stories and poems about their experiences of being physical, social, and linguistic “outsiders,” and the debilitating and disorienting effects these experiences had on them. According to Goizueta (2001), *acompañamiento* “includes not only ‘being’ with another, or feeling with another, but also ‘doing’ with another” (p. 206). To accompany another person is to walk with him or her. It is, above all, by walking with others that we relate to them and love them. *Acompañamiento* “necessarily implies equality, the possibility of accompanying the

[marginalized] does not exist unless or until the [marginalized] themselves are equal participants in dialogue and interaction” (p. 206). Important, *acompañamiento* re-imagines and deepens the meaning and power of empathy, community, and selfhood so that “one’s full humanity, dignity, and common personhood are affirmed” (Sepulveda, 2011, p. 558). By re-imagining literacy pedagogy as *acompañamiento*, Sepulveda’s work with transmigrant Mexican high school students not only helped them become writers who could “voice” themselves and their experiences; it also provided them with opportunities to talk back to educational institutions and society at large, and it helped them create ways “to survive and adapt, to bridge cultural worlds, and to live and love with dignity” (p. 559). Indeed, Sepulveda’s pedagogy of *acompañamiento*, the ways his students responded to it, and the profound effects it had in their lives is further testimony to the powerful affordances of affective and imaginative engagements with literature.

It is clear that engaging with a short story or a novel can be a time for textual analysis, abstraction, and intellectual debate, but it need not be these things alone. With regard to practices that privilege analytic and critical ways of reading, Elizabeth Long (2003), has argued for the need to recognize some of the ways that cultural and institutional authorities (e.g., universities, college professors, book critics, and teachers) shape reading practices, both in and out of school, by officially identifying “preferred” ways to read and study literature. “Academics tend to repress consideration of variety in reading practices due to our assumptions that everyone reads (or ought to) as we do professionally, privileging the cognitive, ideational, and analytic mode” (p. 192). Reading can, and at times, should “insinuate itself into a remembering, daydreaming, wondering life” (Coles, 1989, p. 128). Weinstein (2003), in particular, refers to the “seismic emotional and psychic reality underneath *our true reality*, one of nerves and visceral traffic that is hard to measure” but is nonetheless a central affordance of literature and art; for him, fictional narratives, poems, novels, and plays are “*notes from underground*, or to put it another way, *reports from the front*” illuminating “our underground, our front . . . the repertory of selves we harbor within . . . all those ‘inside’ selves that are not on show, not included in our resumes” (p. xxiii, emphasis in original).

In some of our past research (e.g., Kamberelis, McGinley, & Welker, 2015; McGinley & Kamberelis, 1996; McGinley, Whitcomb, & Zerwin, 2006), we added clarity to the perspectives of Weinstein and others. We have drawn from theories of narrative understanding, especially their insights into how stories serve as the basis for connecting to the world compassionately and imaginatively. Drawing specifically on theories of socio-narratology (e.g., Frank, 2010), we employed a collaborative and participatory action research design (e.g., Kemmis & McTaggart, 2000). We worked with a group of middle school language arts teachers, helping them to imagine and enact curricula with the goal of embracing an approach to literature instruction that evoked affective and imaginative participation, compatible with humanities reform and rooted in a general concern for the value of other lives. For example, inspired by the creative photography and storytelling of Brandon Stanton’s (2013) book, *Humans of New York*, we collaborated with one middle school teacher (Katie Miles) to engage students in a similarly designed project called *Humans of Boulder*. Like Stanton, Miles engaged 8th-grade students in taking photos and writing lengthy “story captions” from the people they met on the streets of Boulder. Taken together, these portraits and short stories became a kind of integrated language/*arts* experience that offered students a more tangible and engaged invitation to encounter others’ lives, as well as their own.

Our research findings revealed some of the ways that students reconsidered the potential of listening to and co-narrating others’ lives as a way to confront differences while also complicating expectations of solidarity when contending with the difficult experiences of others

they met. Specifically, students developed a heightened awareness of the importance of imagination in confronting others' lives in emotionally evocative ways. In sum, they recognized the affective networks that connect individuals while challenging assumptions about difference, self-enclosure and inexpressible feelings; they analyzed the role of stories in creating the conditions for our collective existence that link us to others in shared community; they explored the truths about human life that literature makes visible, as well as how stories help individuals re-imagine and rewrite the map of where selves begin and end; and they connected this knowledge of stories and people to the characters of the creative texts they were studying in their ELA classroom, such as *To Kill A Mockingbird* (Lee, 1960) .

The Russian philosopher and literary critic, Mikhail Bakhtin, outlined a similar set of ethical and emotional convictions derived from the moral significance he associated with the literary works of authors like Fyodor Dostoevsky, Leo Tolstoy, Ivan Turgenev, and Nikolai Gogol. For Bakhtin, the practice of evaluating literary works according to the literary theories and values of the academy is fundamentally misguided (Morson, 2007). Contrary to the traditions associated with most academic literary theory, Bakhtin aspired to what he believed was a personal imperative or responsibility to respond to literature and art *with* his own life. In his words, "I have to answer with my own life for what I have experienced and understood in art, so that everything I have experienced and understood would not remain ineffectual in my life" (Bakhtin, 1990, pp. 1–2). Neither Weinstein (2003) nor Bakhtin (1990) are alone in their convictions about the central importance of affective and imaginative engagements with art and literature. Other scholars and educators have expressed similar convictions at one time or another, including Edmundson (2004), Greene (1995), Rosenblatt (1938), Sumara (2002), and Wolf and Heath (1992).

Additionally and as previously noted, a growing number of recent studies involving young readers have emphasized the importance of affective and imaginative dimensions of literacy and reading literature in school classrooms (e.g., Dutro, 2008; Kamberelis, McGinley, & Welker, 2015; Lewis, 2014; Louie, 2005; McGinley, Whitcomb, & Zerwin, 2006). These studies draw upon more contemporary contexts in explaining and illustrating the many ways that affective and imaginative connections are essential to one's critical understanding of self and others. This work is also encouraging as a response to recent concerns and criticisms about the declining role and function of humanities education that many have recently expressed (e.g., Musil, 2015; Nikitina, 2009; Spellmeyer, 2003).

Kamberelis, McGinley, and Welker (2015), for example, re-imagined literature discussions as surfaces of emergence through which participants might imaginatively participate in the lives and worlds of others, thus expanding the possibilities for moral and civil engagement. Among other things, they showed how students engaged in reading and responding to Collier and Collier's (2005) historical novel, *My Brother Sam is Dead*, which explores the emotional worlds that Sam and his brother Tim when it becomes clear that Sam will be executed for a crime he did not commit. Moreover, these students linked these imaginative explorations of the inner lives of others to key social and political realities, such as why an innocent man might be executed for a presumed greater public good, difficulties involved in making decisions about guilt or innocence in the absence of indisputable proof, the nature of martyrdom, the nature and effects of conspiracy theories, and differences between moral and legal thought and discourse.

Final Thoughts:

The Value of Cooperative Mangling the Affective/Imaginative *and* the Analytic/Critical

As we discussed, many critiques of personal approaches to the study of literature have characterized them as dangerously individualistic and self-indulgent. Other critiques have concluded that the exclusive attention to one's own perspective is intellectually limiting and academically restrictive. Although literature does encourage introspection, introspective acts do not preclude the possibility of imagining the lives and experiences of others or engaging in difficult acts of self-confrontation, along with the reflections such acts often engender. In this regard, literature actually rouse the possibility that "other lives enter our own as richly and mysteriously as air enter our lungs" (Weinstein, 2003, p. xxv). Cultivating affective and imaginative engagements with literature actually leads readers *out* of themselves and into the lives of others.

For Bruner (2002) this capacity for recognizing the intentions and desires of others is linked to creating the conditions for our collective existence, which depends, in part, on our ability to organize and share our affective and imaginative lives in narrative form. Through creative narrative forms (e.g., stories, poems, plays), individual experience is converted into "collective coin which can be circulated . . . on a base wider than merely an interpersonal one" (Bruner, 2002, p. 16). Again, and contrary to conventional depictions, the truths about human life in literature re-imagine and rewrite where selves begin and end.

This process is made possible because literature and art evoke "structures of feeling" (Williams, 1977) that constitute unique kinds of emotional networks, "places we can visit via imagination, so that all our assumptions about self-enclosure and incommunicable feeling are utterly exploded," where feeling is a kind of "connective tissue" that links us to others and ultimately serves as a form of movement and transformation (Weinstein, 2003, p. 6). In other words, literature invites readers in ways that are "collective, relational, and extended" because, by entering imaginatively into the lives of others, one's own solitude is disrupted. Literature reveals the "emotional lines of force that bathe individual life, separate us, yet connect us to one another" (Weinstein, 2003, p. 5). Love, joy, pain, hurt, feeling are made public and shared. As Weinstein explains, participating affectively and imaginatively in a story, poem, novel, or play actually engages readers in a form of "creative outreach" that opens them to the worlds of others. This process can also provoke moments of discomfort and self-estrangement, since in "reaching for the other," readers are made aware of the space or distance between themselves and someone other than themselves.

Nussbaum (1995) encapsulates our *both/and* position well. According to Nussbaum, literary imagination, which always includes emotional engagement, is essential to compassionate, ethical modes of human understanding; however, neither imagination nor emotion are themselves substitute for deliberate reasoning, theoretical critique, or rational debate. We, too, believe that affective and imaginative engagement can be productively connected to critical theoretical forms of civic engagement. As we have noted, these ways of reading have been thoughtfully discussed in the work of several researchers (Appleman, 2009; Bonnycastle, 2007; Carey-Webb, 2001; McCormick, 1995; Pirie, 1997; Rabinowitz & Smith, 1997; Soter, 1999; Thomson, 1993). We have also made the case that readers' *compassionate participation* in the lives of characters is an essential aspect of literary reading that is both personal and critical. In the process of identifying with and participating in the hopes, dreams, fears, conflicts, and dilemmas of fictional characters, readers cross affective borders and develop insights into

exigencies of life and living they may not have yet experienced directly. However, not every emotion is useful for understanding the experiences of others. When we read, our emotions can at times be prejudicially located as a function of our own personal histories, cultural experiences, and economic backgrounds. Such backgrounds may skew the meanings that readers experience or construct from textual worlds. In addition, literary texts can falsely depict and misrepresent the lived experiences of individuals across a wide range of racial, cultural, religious, gendered, and socioeconomic groups. In this sense, the perspectives and insights offered by the “cooperative entanglement” of personal and critical perspectives, of emotion and reason, of empathy and critique can be reframed as essential to each other. More than this, according to Marcus (2010) critical engagement with textual worlds or the world we live in must begin with our capacity to feel and imagine.

With regard to this, Nussbaum (1995) has emphasized the unique position that readers occupy as “judicious spectators,” or ones who are both *participants* and *witnesses* to narrative dramas. Informed by this perspective, teachers can perhaps envision the literature classroom as a *both/and* space. It is a space where students are encouraged to engage in emotional and imaginative responses to literature and a space where they can engage in analytic, critical assessments of language, text, and life. In these *both/and* spaces, readers’ emotional and imaginative involvements would be viewed as part and parcel of the ethical forms of analysis and the critical explanatory work that scholars like Appleman (2009), Mellor and Patterson (2001), Soter (1999), and others argue are the most important forms of engagement. Indeed, we believe that *critical* forms of engagement with texts have the capacity to do some democratizing work on the ground, but only when affective and imaginative forms of engagement (as described, for example, in Nussbaum, 2010) are also cultivated. To conclude, reading practices that integrate affective, imaginative, analytic, and critical engagements are typically the ones that have the greatest political teeth because they hold the greatest potential for going beyond deconstructing cultural canons and sedimented practices of social inequality to actually working toward increasing inclusion, equity, and social justice in the world, with all of the concomitant risks and opportunities.

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