Empathy in Reading: Considerations of Gender and Ethnicity

I. Reader-Response Criticism Meets Intersectional Narratology

Considerations of gender and, to a lesser degree ethnicity, have been associated with emotional reading habits for more than a century. The emotional reader, as opposed to the coolly rational evaluator of literary texts, has often been characterized as weepy, immersive, escapist, undiscriminating, voracious, and female (Warhol 2003, 29; 48; Walsh 1997). The ethnic reader – contrasted with an implicit white Western educated reader – appears either as an aspirational figure of the colonial world, modeling his reading on an imperial standard and yearning for escape from the margins (Naipaul 1961) or as an injured party, shocked to find those like herself invisible, or dehumanized if represented at all in the pages of literature.¹ These representational and critical phenomena have contributed to the disrepute of emotional reading habits in the 20th and 21st centuries. The educated reader learns early to focus on theme, form, and theory, training that puts distance between naïve, emotional reading practices and approved literary critical discourse, especially when practiced at university level. Meanwhile, because emotional reading habits are attributed to female and non-white readers – Oprah's readers – women critics and non-white academics may also shy away from reporting on the feeling of reading, to avoid being branded as middlebrow. Feminist critics, cultural theorists, and postcolonialists have been eager to dismantle the hierarchy of values implicit in the denigration of feeling reading, but relatively few have been willing to risk endorsing the emotive, affective path. Hard-won equality in modes of reading and interpretation associated with New Critical close reading, formalism, Marxism, structuralism, deconstruction, and high theoretical forms of post-structuralism has come at the cost (for female and non-white critics, as well as for working-class white male critics) of disavowing emotionality.

The Affective Fallacy labeled and deprecated by Wimsatt and Beardsley in 1949 has had a very long run as an often repeated (less often examined) fundamental of literary-critical practice, warning students from confusing the poem with the results of reading the poem (Wimsatt and Beardsley 1954, 21). Impressionism, relativism, and psychologizing the text seemed to mid-20th-century critics a risk of considering readers' responses. Even among reception theorists, we find defensiveness about a focus on the results of reading. Wolfgang Iser writes, "the reproach of the 'Affective Fallacy' cannot be applied to a theory of aesthetic response because such a theory is concerned with the structure of the 'performance' which precedes the effect" (Iser 1978, 26-27). The emotionality of aesthetics as experienced by a subject encountering an artwork, theorized by Vernon Lee in the early 20th century and rendered moribund by the formalisms of mid-century, was not resuscitated by an 'affective stylistics' which placed greater emphasis on textual cues than on unruly feelings of readers (Fish 1970). As Steven Mailloux observes of Iserian reception theory and Fishian affective stylistics,

[w]hat becomes invisible in many such readings is the sociopolitical context constituting the reception of a text at particular historical moments. This form of reader criticism

¹ Jamaica Kincaid depicts and redresses such readerly experiences of erasure in many of her fictional and autobiographical works (1985; 1990).
often assumed an ideal reader unencumbered by particular characteristics of class, occupation, race, nationality, gender, and age. (Mailloux 1990, 48)

The informed reader’s most important characteristic thus becomes a literary competence expressed by objectivity.

However, as Rita Felski has brilliantly demonstrated, even the most arid discourses of high-theoretical debate reveal emotional drives: to label an ardent feminist critique as symptomatic of the “hermeneutics of suspicion” is not to escape rhetoric driven by passion, nor pleasurable sensations (Felski 2011, 215-216). Furthermore, an affective turn can now be observed in many disciplines (Keen 2011a, 18-30). Philosophers (Dadlez 1997; Feagin 1996; Robinson 2005), neuroscientists (Damasio 1994; Lane and Nadel 2000), and even cognitive scientists (Turner 2006) have rehabilitated emotion as an aspect of rationality. The research programs that have opened up questions of affect allow a return to an area of reader-based theorizing that never entirely eschewed the feeling of reading: David Bleich’s subjective criticism, which at least acknowledged gender as an aspect of reading (Bleich 1975; 1988), and Louise Rosenblatt’s transactional theory of reading, which strongly emphasizes emotional responses of readers to literary texts (Rosenblatt 1938; 1978; 1995). This article carries forward the project of analyzing readers’ empathy (Keen 2007, 65-99) by means of an intersectional narratology, an analytic method that can accommodate a rich set of multiple, competing aspects of identity that provoke divergent responses to texts intended to evoke empathy (Keen forthcoming 2014). The elevation of empathy as a desirable human quality causing improved concern for and action on behalf of others has encouraged claims that narrative empathy for fictional characters – including experiences of intense identification and emotion-sharing with bodily effects – leads to altruism. As I have earlier argued, narrative empathy evoked by fictional texts does not present a standard or predictable pattern (Keen 2007, 65-84). Many factors, from the underlying dispositions of readers, to personal histories, to aspects of culturally formed identity (including gender and ethnicity) alter the intensities of this aspect of reader response. Employing an intersectional narratology complicates research questions about narrative empathy, in the end strengthening conclusions about formal techniques eliciting narrative empathy, about its variable impact on readers, and its effect on real-world changes in attitudes and behavior. For narrative fiction evokes a great diversity of responses, from a wide range of personalities: actual readers include the trained academic readers who may bring dispassionate analytical habits that take emotional responses offline; immersive readers who seek the transportation often expressed as being “lost in a book;” attentive readers; skimmers and skippers (Price 2000, 5); and low-empathy individuals who respond in an emotionally disengaged fashion to works that many others find intensely moving (Keen 2007, 72-73). This variation can be accounted for in part by differences among readers, differences in experience, identity, and temperament or disposition (Keen 2011b, 302-310).

The revived reader-response practices of this decade contribute to an intersectional narratology by embracing the different directions and locations of a rich set of texts, contexts and identities while framing global observations about the workings of narrative in the world. The old-school Iserian formulation in which the responses of a singular idealized “reader” (Iser 1974) represent univocal illustrations of reception has already been qualified by more than three decades of work on specific differentiated reading communities (Gilligan 1982; Radway 1984; Long 2003; Colclough 2007; and Johnson 2012) and by more recent empirical studies of readers’ self-reports and bodily responses to narrative (Andringa 2004; Miall 2007; Zyngier et al. 2008; and Lázló
Rhetorical narratology by Peter Rabinowitz earlier opened up consideration of the different stances or positions with regard to the text an individual reader may occupy in his description of authorial and narrative audiences (Rabinowitz 1998, 96-100), and Brian Richardson has theorized the multiple implied readers a single text may invoke (Richardson 2007). Following the lead of Robyn Warhol, who has urged feminist critics to "take what Kimberlé Crenshaw named an 'intersectional' approach because white privilege, class privilege, hetero-normativity, and other positions of relative power complicate hierarchies of gender" (Warhol 2012, 9), I seek further to open theorizing about "the reader" in reader-response theory to considerations of gender and ethnicity, at least, with other axes of identity complicating any blanket assertions about what "the reader" feels, perceives, remembers, and contributes to the task of co-creating narratives through reading. I review the available research and suggest that attention to intersectional identity in representations and in readers enriches both narrative ethics and an updated transactional account of reader response. The intersubjectivity involved in rhetorical narratological models of narrative empathy such as my own points towards a diversity of responses to emotionally evocative fiction, responses that can be better understood if the identity of a monolithic "reader" can be opened up to the complications of diverse readers' intersectional identities. This in turn should assist future theorizers of reception in integrating results from empirical studies of narrative impact, especially if those experiments attend to the interactions of identity and readers' responses, interactions that have been expected to produce divergent interpretations. However, our commonalities may turn out to be more substantial than our cherished distinctive individuality. An intersectional narratology ought also to be able to identify significant crossroads where narrative calls upon shared humanity, if they exist.

Some practitioners of reader response criticism take recognition of readers' individuality further than I do, admitting an infinitely variable and divergent set of responses, where understandings of and responses to texts are as unique and numerous as the actual readers. Perhaps because of my commitments to rhetorical narratology and communication models for narrative dynamics, I discern evidence of patterns in responses, patterns that demonstrate how fictional texts elicit recognizably related understandings from cohorts of readers. Textual content and narrative technique do put some limits on the possible interpretations of a text. A common-sense test of a reading's legitimacy is to discover whether another reader of the same text at least recognizes the interpretation, though different, as arising from the same textual starting point. The destabilization of hierarchy implicit in an intersectional approach discourages a published, canonical, or otherwise institutionally sanctioned interpretation from becoming the litmus test of a right reading, but it need not devolve into a multitude of mutually incomprehensible interpretations. For at the same time, rhetorical narratology's commitment to discovering how authors employ textual strategies to invite readers' imagining of a storyworld invests significance in the communication vehicle, the fictional text, which places some limits on the possibilities. The basis for this theoretical stance I locate in the transactional theory of Louise M. Rosenblatt.

II. Transactional Theory and Narrative Empathy

Of Louise M. Rosenblatt, Wayne C. Booth writes in a foreword to the 5th edition of her textbook Literature as Exploration (1995), "I doubt that any other literary critic of this century has enjoyed and suffered as sharp a contrast of powerful influence and absurd neglect" (Booth 1995, vii). One purpose of this essay is to revisit Rosenblatt's transactional theory of the literary work, articulated in her 1978 book, The Reader, the
Text, and the Poem, and emerging from work begun in her influential textbook Literature as Exploration (1938), especially in the 1968 second edition. (Rosenblatt altered her textbook modestly between its original edition in 1938 to its last edition in 1995, but an early revision for the second edition added her terminology of transaction, developed in The Reader, The Text, and the Poem (1978) and other articles). Rosenblatt’s theorizing is an often unacknowledged point of origin for modes of interpretation that recognize the role of the reader as co-creator. As Rosenblatt writes, "a text, once it leaves its author's hands, is simply paper and ink until a reader evokes from it a literary work" (Rosenblatt 1978, ix). Text and reader are dynamically interfused (viii), and while texts offer both openness and constraint (x), readers possess particular attributes that make their contributions unique (15). In Booth’s words, Rosenblatt "saw the folly of ignoring diversity of response" (Booth 1995, ix) that emerges when literary reading is construed as an individuated experience, yet she also defended critical judgments about better and worse readings, writing

[t]here is, in fact, nothing in the recognition of the personal nature of literature that re-
quires an acceptance of the notion that every evocation of a text is as good as every other. We need only think of our successive readings of the same text, at fifteen or thirty or fifty, to know that we can differentiate. Undisciplined, irrelevant, or distorted emotional re-
sponses and the lack of relevant experience or knowledge will, of course, lead to inade-
quate interpretations of the text. The aim is to help the student towards a more and more controlled, more and more valid or defensible response to the text. (Rosenblatt 1995, 267)

As I acknowledged in Empathy and the Novel, my theorizing of narrative empathy is indebted both to Rosenblatt’s transactional theory (Keen 2007, 65) and to one of her major influences, John Dewey. Rosenblatt advances a case for readers’ unique contributions to both meaning-making and aesthetic experience, without displacing the text or the teacher who guides readers towards more valid interpretations. Her theory underscores the perspective-taking that imaginative responses to literature (often labeled "the poem" in Rosenblatt’s work) requires; she insists that the practice of reader-focused pedagogy contributes to inductive study of literature (Rosenblatt 1995, 272) and the formation of citizens suited to participate in democratic societies. She writes, in words that have inspired generations of literature teachers, especially those laboring in secondary school classrooms,

[w]hen there is active participation in literature – the reader living through, reflecting on, and criticizing his own responses to the text – there will be many kinds of benefits. We can call this growth in ability to share discriminatingly in the possibilities of language as it is used in literature. But this means also the development of the imagination: the ability to escape from the limitations of time and place and environment, the capaci-
ty to envisage alternatives in ways of life and in moral and social choices, the sensitivi-
ty to thought and feeling and needs of other personalities. The youth will need to grow into the emotional and intellectual and aesthetic maturity necessary for appreciating the great works of literature in our own and other languages. As he does this, he grows also into partnership in the wisdom of the past and the aspirations for the future, of our cul-
ture and our society. The great abstractions – love, honor, integrity, compassion, individ-
uality, democracy – will take on for him human meaning. (Rosenblatt 1995, 276)

The "transaction" of transactional theory has a purposeful direction. The individual reader contributes to the enlivening of the text and its co-creation, but the practice of encouraging sensitivity to the textual cues of intersubjectivity points, for Rosenblatt, in an improving direction. Rosenblatt has not travelled far from George Eliot's cultivation
of the reader's sympathetic imagination; the Deweyan pedagogical theory that inspires Rosenblatt's work directly infuses the themes of moral sentimentalism with early 20th-century convictions about democracy and education. In recent years, narrative empathy has often been identified as the driver of the transactional reading that turns the naïve youth into the good world citizen, in Martha Nussbaum's phrase (Nussbaum 1997, 90).

Narrative empathy, glossed as the sharing of feeling and perspective-taking induced by reading, viewing, hearing, or imagining narratives of another's situation and condition (Keen 2006, 207), involves readers, texts, and authors, and it is well-suited to interpretation through a transactional theory, in which readers "interanimate" the words put together by authors (Rosenblatt 1978, 53). The reader's behavior is less firmly governed by the text or the writer than purely formalist descriptions of narrative technique or biographical accounts of authorial intention suggest, and this may be especially true of the range of responses that we relegate to the affective or emotional side of narrative impact. Yet response in a transactional account does bear serious relation to textual parameters: reading may lead to offline daydreaming, to be sure, but engaged fiction reading itself involves co-creation of a storyworld and its denizens from the tacit cues of the text. These include techniques deployed by authors in an attempt to evoke readers' empathy. Intersectional axes of identity play a role in narrative empathy's core experiences: mental simulation during reading, the aesthetics of reception (the feeling of reading), and divergent responses to formal narrative strategies. That the temperaments and dispositions of actual readers in all their variety have a profound impact on the co-creative work of reading narrative fiction I take as axiomatic, in an extension of Rosenblatt's transactional theory of reading (Sedgwick 1990, 22; Keen 2011b, 302-310). This insight has recently received empirical validation. For example, gender difference in readers' responses has been verified by cognitive scientists and analysts of discourse processing, but not always in the ways we might predict. Özen Odag, for example, reports on studies of emotional involvement of readers which show, contrary to expectation, and as opposed to both feminist theory and widespread survey results, male participants score higher than females on questionnaire scales assessing emotional involvement. At the same time, the personal reminings of readers disclose no differences in how closely men and women approach characters. Likewise surprisingly, the category of a literary work [fiction and non-fiction] seems of negligible importance for the two sexes, while the thematic focus of a text appears to have an impact on female reading in particular. (Odag 2008, 308; emphases in the original)

Odag's counterintuitive results showed male readers are more emotionally involved than women, especially with the driver of narrativity, suspense (2008, 317), though they did confirm women's greater involvement with narratives of inner worlds than externally-narrated stories (while men had moderate to high emotional participation across those distinctions of technique) (319). Though Odag's work disconfirms many expectations about gender and reading, it does suggest male readers' predisposition to enjoy plot and the emotions of narrativity, and female readers' interest in characters result in similar intensities of affective engagement, with differentiated experiences of plot-driven narratives focusing on externalities (325). Odag concludes,

it became clear that (certain) men can in fact be more engaged during reading than (certain) women. And it became evident that men and women are not always different from each other but astonishingly similar in how closely they approach characters in narrative. (325)

2 See also Odag (2013, 1).
Study of narrative empathy should be ready to parse both similarities and differences in responses that a given text may evoke in readers who themselves vary in ethnicity, gender, and other aspects of identity. For Rosenblatt, there is no such thing as a generic reader, for "each reader is unique, bringing to the transaction an individual ethnic, social, and psychological history" (Rosenblatt 1995, xix). Her distinction between efferent and aesthetic reading differentiates between purposeful reading that carries away meaning (efferent) and affective, associative experiences of texts (aesthetic) that unfold in individual and individuated readers. Following Rosenblatt, I hold that aesthetic readings thus differ from one another as much as readers do. Balancing the diversity of aesthetic responses, including the effects of narrative empathy, with the inevitable narrowing of efferent readings founded in a more limited range of meanings remains a challenge for applications of Rosenblatt's transactional theory.

III. "The reader...he"

Can readers who experience divergent aesthetic readings arrive at mutually comprehensible efferent readings, or interpretations of meaning? How much do individual differences, including differences of gender and ethnicity, alter empathetic responsiveness? Do the responses of readers marked by differences of identity command attention and respect? Dissent and reading against the grain certainly persist, and teachers committed to balancing individuality with democracy in classroom probably do not vote down minority views. The process of discussion need not elevate the opinions of one gender or the responses of a privileged ethnic group. Yet the possibility of the tyranny of the majority persists in discussion and interpretation of literary works. Whose views prevail? A typical literature classroom at university level almost certainly has more women than men in it, and it is more likely than ever to be led by a female professor. Do the aesthetic and efferent readings of female and non-white audiences register as equally legitimate in the cacophony of responses, or do white male voices still, in the second decade of the 21st century, dominate? There are reasons for concern. In the professional area of book reviewing, works by male authors are still more frequently reviewed, and male reviewers are more frequently published, in The London Review of Books, The Nation, The New York Review of Books, The New York Times Book Review, the Times Literary Supplement, The Atlantic, The New Republic, and Harpers (VIDA 2013). This list cites some of the journals studied by VIDA, Women in Literary Arts, a group founded in August 2009 "to address the need for female writers of literature to engage in conversations regarding the critical reception of women's creative writing in our current culture" (VIDA 2009). More than a century of feminism and at least a half century of women in the professions and the academy have not yet brought equality of opportunity to published opinion about books. That this circumstance should persist even though census polls of readers discover higher rates of reading among women than men (a pattern verified by the

3 National Endowment for the Arts, Reading at Risk (2004) and Reading on the Rise (2009), based on US Census surveys of over 18,000 adult Americans. Reading on the Rise reported that "male reading of literature grew at an 11% rate between 2002 and 2008, after declining from 1982 to 2002" (when there was a low of only 37.6% of male readers, compared to 55.1% of female readers). In 2008 the gender gap had narrowed but was still evident: 41.9% of men had read at least a single work of literature, whereas 58% of women were self-reported literary readers. See National Endowment for the Arts (2009, 6).
market surveys of the publishing industry⁴ and studies of library usage⁵) gives us pause, or ought to. If empirical data on rates of reading analyzed by gender were our guide, we would consistently assume that "the reader" is a woman or a girl. Instead, referential practices aimed at avoiding sexist language usually gloss over differences among readers by referring to them in the plural. What might we lose sight of by omitting gender difference from studies of emotional responses to reading?

Rosenblatt herself consistently refers to a singular male reader, even as she imagines the protean potentiality of his transactional role in co-creating the meaning of the literary text: "We cannot simply look at the text and predict the poem," she writes, for this, a reader or readers with particular attributes must be postulated: for example, the author-as-reader as he is creating the text; the author as he reads it years later; contemporaries with different backgrounds; other individuals living in specific places, times, and milieus. (Rosenblatt 1978, 15)

The plurals admit women and men, but the direct references to readers always revert to the male pronoun: "The transaction is basically between the reader and what he senses the words as pointing to" (21); "As he engages with the text, the reader, as we have seen, sets up hypothetical frameworks, entertains expectations as to what will follow, and uses these as guidelines for selecting out from alternative responses" (137); "The reader, it can be said, provides at that point in his life or in that social situation, a particularly receptive context, a kind of amplifier, for what he derives from the text" (157). While the insights as to the role of the reader's activity and the impact of the reader's identity remain persuasive, the limitation to a universal male as representative human actively works against Rosenblatt's insistence on readers' diversity. This rhetorical choice (or capitulation to 1970s house style) in The Reader, The Text, and the Poem renders the singular human being as male by default. It has in my opinion contributed to the relative neglect of Rosenblatt's theorizing in literary studies, perhaps especially by the first wave of feminist reader-response critics.⁶ Her belated plea, in her 1995 preface to the 5th edition of Literature as Exploration, indicates Rosenblatt's awareness that assumptions about the universal applicability of terms in the male gender had changed over the years. She writes,

A reminder of when the book first appeared is the generic he, then taken for granted, no matter how feminist, as in this case, the writer might be. To remedy this would have required a total rewriting. I must simply assume that my readers are sufficiently free of old patriarchal attitudes to keep in mind my statement [that each reader is unique]. (Rosenblatt 1995, xix)

In retrospect that total rewriting might have been worth the effort, for she is often passed over in silence by feminist critics who almost certainly owe something to

---

⁴ Market research for the US publishing market in 2011 found (from a sample of 80,000 unique consumers) that women bought 59% of all books, 62% of all fiction, 70% of mysteries, 89% of romances, 54% of biographies. Only in the category of graphic novels do male consumers account for a majority of sales (67%) (Bowker Market Research 2011).

⁵ The January 2011 Harris Poll Quorum reported that 72% of US women visited circulating libraries, in contrast to 58% of men. Women are also the majority of library-card holders (Harris Interactive 2011).

⁶ Reader-Response: From Formalism to Post-Structuralism (1980), edited by Jane Tompkins, barely acknowledges Rosenblatt beyond the bibliography. Her work receives serious consideration only in David Bleich's contribution (1980, 144-146); Tompkins mentions her to brush her aside (1980, x). Steven Mailloux observes that first-wave reader response critics kept debating the reader-text binary opposition as if Rosenblatt had not already offered a pragmatic antifoundational epistemology in her transactional model (Mailloux 1990, 40-42).
Rosenblatt. Drawing attention to Rosenblatt’s anticipation of the concerns of early reader-response criticism, as Wayne C. Booth does, leads to the recognition that Literature as Exploration “having incorporated and transformed close reading, respect for the canon, and multiculturalism” also boasts radical interdisciplinarity and "the deep cultural embeddedness of every writing and reading act" (Booth 1995, xi-xii). It is well worth explicitly updating Rosenblatt’s transactional theory in order to keep her contribution relevant.

Rosenblatt’s gender neutrality under the guise of a universal male reader thus should be revisited and revised. When actual readers' responses to reading narrative fiction are studied, gender differences are sometimes revealed. In an experiment in reader response that elicited different affective terminology from surveyed readers, a student of mine documented gendered responses to a flash fiction. Conducted by Jina Park (Washington and Lee, class of 2013), the study of responses to Saki’s very short story "The Open Window" suggests that male and female readers use quite different words to describe the emotional experience of reading a story that plays with readers' credulity. To evaluate emotional engagement of readers, Park's study questioned participants during and after their reading. First, Park employed a survey to pose a set of questions on positive and negative emotion as well as intensity of response at one juncture of the short story, between section two and section three, of "The Open Window." Second, Park asked readers to describe their emotion towards each of the three characters in Saki’s story. Having informed the participants in her study about the distinction between sympathy and empathy, Park asked respondents whether the story aroused sympathy or empathy, and inquired about the degree of their engagement. This led to questions about readers' ability to immerse in the story and vividly picture the imagery and setting. Park concluded her investigation with a last few questions pertaining to the readers' interpretation of the ending and their state while reading (emotional or rational), as well as demographic questions on gender and age.

Park did not discover gender difference in female and male readers’ impressions of empathy and sympathy, and she found that emotionality "varied for both genders from no emotion to 'pretty intense'” (Park 2013). However, Park’s open-ended queries did elicit striking differences in the way male and female readers reported on their reading experiences. Mid-way through the story, she found women's responses to be more descriptive, and when positive, more dynamic and acute about identifying feelings. In contrast, Park found men more focused on plot development and on discomfiting sensations. When readers completed the story, their negative emotions about the core experiences of narrativity evoked by Saki’s story (curiosity, surprise, and suspense) correlated to gender difference while their positive emotions did not. Positive responses to the "plot twist include, 'relieved', 'glad', 'funny', 'humorous', 'surprised', 'amused', and 'entertaining’ from both males and females (Park 2013). Words about negative feelings revealed more gender-specific patterns:

Unlike male participants, all but one female participant felt a wider range of negative emotions than males; with 'annoyed' at Vera being the strongest and most common re-

---

7 Rosenblatt's home base in a school of education may also have contributed to her diminished reputation, despite the manifest impact of her theorizing on secondary school literature pedagogy. On the impact of Rosenblatt's Deweyan transactional theory through Literature as Exploration, a textbook widely adopted by educators for over half a century, see Connell (2000, 27).

8 Park's study elicited full email responses to survey questions from 15 female and 9 male subjects, drawn from the university community, especially but not exclusively undergraduate students.
Park's study demonstrates that the emotional reading experience of male readers and female readers can differ. Though men and women share experiences of emotional intensity to fictional prompts, and their cognitive ability to experience and process emotion from fiction reading matches, the open-ended responses in Park's study showed that female readers find narrative texts to be more evocative of a wider range of emotional responses than for male readers. Park's analysis of the responses shows the gender difference as especially significant for negative emotions in critical responses to the drivers of narrativity. Park speculates that the biological substrate of sex difference accounts for some of the variance, writing that the resulting differences in emotional responses come from physiological factors, which primarily explain higher female brain activity in association with negative emotion and emotional arousal than in males (Park 2013). My own interpretation of Park's results would rely less on biological substrates of sex difference and more on social elements such as acculturation to the performance of gender. If the culture expects and demands greater emotional attunement from female humans, then it is not surprising that they respond with a greater variety of emotion words when prompted to examine the feeling of reading. Though Park's sample size was small, her discernment of differences in the words employed by respondents validates suppositions about gendered language use in the work of James Pennebaker and his collaborators, who use very large collections of text samples, numbering in the thousands (Newman et al. 2008, 229-230). While I doubt that the underlying cause of gender differentiation in literary response is biologically based, except insofar as our biological sex interacts with our environment in the form of our social world (including aspects of culture embedded in narratives), it is certainly the case that cultural expectations predispose females towards expression of emotions, but not necessarily on the potential for affective response.

This cultural context has an impact on empathy and by extension on narrative empathy (a variant of empathy sometimes described as fantasy empathy, as narrative empathy involves sharing feeling with unreal beings in imagined worlds). Janet Strayer and Nancy Eisenberg's literature review of empathy research suggests that cultural factors associated with gender expectations rather than physiological differences between female and male brains explain apparent differences between degrees of empathy felt and reported by males and females (Eisenberg et al. 1987). They found that pen-and-paper surveys or those with live interviewers interacting with subjects showed the greatest divergence between male and female empathy, while studies relying on physiological measures (such as skin conductance and heart rate) showed insignificant differences between the biological sexes. The impact of cultural expectations about the performance of gender shows when data is elicited through self-report or interviewer questioning. Notwithstanding influential claims about male and female brains (Baron-Cohen 2003, 1-2), individual men (and women) are distributed over a wider spectrum of low to high empathy measures than men in contrast to women. To distinguish biological bases of a contrast from those influenced by culture, however, is not to dismiss observable differences such as those discovered by Park. An intersectional narratology encourages the addition of gender difference to the axes of unique identity that a reader brings to the interpretive and affective trans-

---

9 Fantasy empathy is one of the subscales of Mark Davis's Interpersonal Reactivity Index (IRI), a commonly employed survey employed to measure empathy in human subjects.
action in reading. In its application to narrative empathy, intersectional narratology enables discussion of the complex overlays of narrative form, contexts of creation and reception, and identity that work together to provoke diverse responses to narrative, among divergent readers of a wide variety of texts. Complicating rather than schematizing, intersectional narratology hazards proliferation of axes rather than insisting on neat taxonomies. As Lanser writes, intersectional feminism "can now map and be mapped by narrative patterns across time and space, accounting for vectors of difference to create a narratology that is deeply locational and therefore cross-cultural and historical" (2010, 32). This practice, while complicated, opens possibilities for fresh discoveries about the correlates of narrative empathy.

Raymond Mar, Keith Oatley and Jordan Peterson, controlling for gender and tendency to become immersed in a story, discovered that fiction readers of both genders, not women, have higher empathy (Mar et al. 2009, 424). This finding supports my hypothesis that the perception of fictionality by a reader enhances the likelihood of narrative empathy (Keen 2007, 88-89), but it confutes the notion that female readers of fiction are more empathetic than male readers. While others have found in thematic preferences of male and female readers support for the idea that prototypical female and male responses to core emotions of narrativity (curiosity, suspense, and surprise) reveal sex-based differences (Odag 2008, 308), we should take care not to generalize beyond the verifiable point that a tendency towards fantasy empathy predisposes subjects of both sexes to experience narrative empathy (Mar et al. 2009, 417). Hierarchical linear regressions performed by the Mar group demonstrate that "fiction print-exposure predicts performance on an empathy task, even after gender, age, English fluency, trait Openness, and trait Fantasy are statistically controlled" (420). The Mar lab has found that readers who immerse more deeply in fictional worlds had higher degrees of print fiction exposure and greater ability to infer another's mental state, an expression of cognitive empathy. This finding gains support from the research of Dan R. Johnson, who has discovered that subjects who were more transported into a story exhibited higher affective empathy and were more likely to engage in pro-social behavior (Johnson 2012, 150). That is, Johnson shows "a direct link between reading narrative fiction, affective empathy, and helping behavior" (2012, 154). A habit of fiction reading correlated in both studies with empathy, and in one case with helping behavior, on behalf of both male and female readers. To discover what readers of both biological sexes have in common as they respond to fiction, or to pin down how they differ, a researcher ought to augment Rosenblatt's respect for the reader's role in the transaction with attention to gender identity and other axes of identity, disposition, and circumstance. In time we may be able to establish whether the apparent gender differences reflected in reading habits, preferences for certain genres, and reported emotional responses are artifacts of our assumptions about the sexes or verifiable differences predictive of specific effects.

IV. Readers in Color

The role of race and ethnicity in reader response and transactional theory is more difficult to discover than that of gender, though aspirations about the ethical impact of reading literature pervades Louise M. Rosenblatt's work. For example, in Literature as Exploration, Rosenblatt writes,

Literature offers a release from the provincialism of time and space. In this way it may exert a powerful influence on the youth's future behavior. In a heterogenous, democratic
society, more and more explicitly seeking to create new social and economic patterns, literature can perform an increasingly important function. [...] More than ever before it is essential that the individual be liberated from the provincialism of his particular family, community, or even national background. (Rosenblatt 1995, 184)

Rosenblatt holds up awareness of diversity, discovery of the different goals that individuals may pursue, discovery of temperament, trial-and-error vicarious imagining of alternative outcomes, and occasionally, a transformative reading experience of a singular book as the potentialities of literary reading (1995, 212-213). Cultivation of the role-taking imagination is, for Rosenblatt, one of the core affordances of the experience of literature, developing sensitivities to the temperaments and circumstances of "different kinds of people" (1995, 176). The Deweyan project of cultivating human sympathy in order to forge a democratic nation, capable of resisting the sadistic appeals of totalitarianism, is at the heart of Rosenblatt's thinking:

Lack of such imaginative sympathy is probably back of many of our present-day difficulties. No matter whether the problem is just distribution of taxation or universal civil rights or federal-state relations, the basis of any ultimate decision should be its meaning for actual human lives. It is easy enough to understand the possible effect of a point of view on ourselves and on the human beings with whom we feel the kinship of family, class, nation, or race. We must also develop the capacity to feel intensely the needs and sufferings and aspirations of people whose personal interests are distinct from our own, people with whom we have no bond other than our common humanity. (1995, 177-178)

Where Rosenblatt differs from Martha Nussbaum, who shares this moral sentimental agenda and believes in the efficacy of a certain kind of literary reading in creating good world citizens, or from Lynn Hunt, who sees in 18th-century novel reading the birth of human rights discourse, is in Rosenblatt's modesty (Hunt 2008). While she asks, "is not humanitarianism ultimately the result of this sense of the prime importance of the human being, based on the ability to transcend selfish interests and to feel the needs of others?" (178), she also recognizes the limitations of literature: "It would be absurd to suggest that literature was the cause of this" increase in humane practices (178). Making a point that I have repeated in Empathy and the Novel, Rosenblatt sees the human influence, not books alone, as the "most powerful and lasting" (Rosenblatt 1995, 179) influences on readers' ability vicariously to enter into the experience of others (178). Throughout Rosenblatt's work, a universalizing impulse avoids defining the "youth" as possessing a racial or ethnic identity, though as I have discussed above, he is male and by implication American. We could attribute a tacit whiteness to Rosenblatt's reader without controversy. Yet recently Rosenblatt's work has been seen as anticipating (without directly contributing to) the ethical turn in literary theory, drawing on an unusually interdisciplinary base for its time: "She attempted to break through the provinciality and disciplinarity of literary studies by demonstrating what reading might mean if it were recognized as a social process, as a transaction between and among human beings," according to her most ardent contemporary advocate (Flynn 2007, 68).

This makes it worth asking, does race or ethnicity enter into the transactional experience of reading? Because of the demonstrable racial bias of arguments about the contrasting abilities of members of different racial groups (Jacoby and Glauberman 1995), researchers in reader-response may have shied away from asking questions based on readers' race and ethnicity. There is a dearth of research in the area. If gender has the appearance of influencing reader response, an appearance not consistently verified by empirical investigations, the race and ethnicity of readers also contributes to their intersectional identities. I have mentioned several influential literary accounts
of what it is like to be a non-white reader encountering canonical western texts. Given this influential testimony, I believe it is worth asking whether readers from an in-group respond differently than readers from an out-group, concerning the same text? I have argued that authorial strategic empathizing allows individual texts to appeal to different audiences, near and far (Keen 2008). When those audiences differ in race or ethnicity, can – or should – distinctive reading responses be correlated to such markers of identity? Are readers identified with a particular in-group necessarily biased readers about an out-group, or can experiences of narrative empathy overcome bias in the face of difference? Literary study has often vouched for the salutary ethical effects of reading about characters that differ from the reader in race, ethnicity, and nationality, but the studies in social psychology and social neuroscience find that intergroup bias can be difficult to overcome (Avenanti et al. 2010).

What effects of narrative empathy might be diminished or enhanced by depictions of otherness marked by race or ethnic difference? That racial bias in a subject reduces empathetic responsiveness to the pain of other races is a well-validated observation in social psychology, cognitive science, and social neuroscience (Feagin et al. 2001; Cosmides et al. 2003; Avenanti et al. 2010, 1018). The susceptibility of empathy to in-group bias may extend to narrative empathy, though I have argued that authors of fiction employ techniques of ambassadorial and broadcast strategic narrative empathy to evoke sympathy from readers beyond the in-group (the audience for bounded empathy) (Keen 2008, 480-490). Many of the studies showing racial or ethnic bias in empathic responses rely on images (e.g. Xu et al. 2009), but how implicit or overtly described racial/ethnic identity in prose narrative effects readers' empathy is less well understood. Yet recent fMRI studies of failures in intergroup empathy do employ short narratives about, for example, Arabs and Isarelis (Bruneau and Saxe 2010; Bruneau et al. 2012) that would be recognized by narrative theorists as very short fictions. The responses in the brain areas of members of ingroups and outgroups reading very short narratives about representative characters can be understood as a new form of reader-response study. A few labs focus specifically on the impact of narrative fiction, seeking to validate the belief that empathetic engagement with representations of outgroups reduces bias, changes attitudes, and leads to prosocial behavior. For example, encouraging recent news comes from Dan R. Johnson and his students, who report that reading narratives that employ counter-stereotypical characters is effective in reducing Americans’ implicit prejudice against Arab-Muslims. Johnson found that reading short fiction was "particularly effective at reducing implicit prejudice in low dispositional perspective takers" and he hypothesizes that reading fictional narrative "appeared to provide a safe haven from intergroup anxiety" for low empathy individuals (Johnson et al. forthcoming 2013). This result is important because it shifts the focus from high empathy individuals with a tendency to immerse readily in narrative fiction and engage in character identification to those less prone to perspective taking when reading fiction. Within every ingroup and outgroup, people whose dispositions (and experiences) make them less ready empathizers exist. It may be that their responses to reading fiction differ sufficiently from high empathizers to deserve separate study. Indeed, differences in dispositional empathy may cut across more obvious markers of identity such as ethnicity. An intersectional narratology can address dispositional differences and could reveal commonalities not immediately apparent to view when cruder binaries of sex or race divide subjects.
Intersectionality, which accounts for "the relationships among multiple dimensions and modalities of social relations and subject formations" (McCall 2005, 1771), meshes well with a narrative poetics that is open to diverse effects of narrative techniques in various texts, contexts, and modes. In an insight that Meir Sternberg developed in discussion of insets and quotations altered by their local context, he develops a principle that is widely applicable to narrative form, the "many-to-many correspondence between linguistic form and representational function" (Sternberg 1982, 112). Like intersectional analyses of discrimination (Crenshaw 1991), for which the concept was first formulated in legal studies, my version of intersectional narratology seeks to understand why certain positions and concepts are privileged while others suffer from inattention or disparagement. Is it really the case that women make more feeling readers, or those steeped in the great tradition make the best world citizens? In her foundational rendering of feminist intersectionality for narrative theory, Susan S. Lanser emphasizes the discernment of the way "systemic, structural, and institutional 'traffic' […] operates to the advantage or disadvantage of individuals and groups according to their social positioning" (Lanser 2010, 34). This means, in my extension, that intersectional narratology need not aim primarily at verifying folk wisdom or received theories about how men and women read, or how representations contribute to the perpetuation or eradication of biases. Drawing on the psychology of narrative impact and studies of fantasy empathy in diverse audiences, further research might explore how the intersectional identities of readers (including their gender, ethnicity, and dispositional empathy) puts them in the position to respond feelingly to writers' bounded, ambassadorial, or broadcast strategic narrative empathy (Keen 2008). An intersectional narratology can take seriously the actual responses of a wide array of different readers, without predispositions about how their identities predict their reading experiences. A reader-response criticism attentive to the complex crossings of identity can revivify transactional theory and its commitments to democracy.

Works Cited


