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Article abstract

In this theoretical musing, I propose a methodological and normative framework for including fiction writing in interdisciplinary research. Reviewing some traditional literary and rhetorical analyses alongside social theory, I reflect on ways of reading and citing, which inform our own fiction writing practices. In the first section, I consider how to read the text seriously as the starting point of sharing literary social worlds, followed by a vignette of critiquing fiction through citations to subvert dominant narratives. I end with an aspirational call for academics to consider fiction as a space where inclusivity and narrativizing injustice must be centered.

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"NARRATIVIZING INJUSTICE" THROUGH FICTION

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Abstract: In this theoretical musing, I propose a methodological and normative framework for including fiction writing in interdisciplinary research. Reviewing some traditional literary and rhetorical analyses alongside social theory, I reflect on ways of reading and citing, which inform our own fiction writing practices. In the first section, I consider how to read the text seriously as the starting point of sharing literary social worlds, followed by a vignette of critiquing fiction through citations to subvert dominant narratives. I end with an aspirational call for academics to consider fiction as a space where inclusivity and narrativizing injustice must be centered.

Keywords: fiction; literary theory; method; inclusion

Introduction: Why We Write, Why We Read

At the end of the "Narrating the Nightmare and (Re)Imagining the Possible," a webinar talk organized by the African American Policy Forum's (AAPF) *Under the Blacklight: The Intersectional Failures that COVID Lays Bare* series, lawyer, critical race theorist, and moderator Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw asked her panel members, all writers, what is the role of the writer in the pandemic? Arundhati Roy, Kiese Laymon, and Viet Thanh Nguyen shared their insights and struggles during and before the pandemic. Largely, the writers discussed the importance of self-reflection in experiential writing and the unraveling of learning. Each writer responded in a way that is best synthesized by Crenshaw's concept of "narrativizing injustice," that writers unpack their own experiential realities that blur and build themselves in their fiction and non-fiction selves. Without a story, Crenshaw mused in the discussion, what are politics? What is survival?

Although Crenshaw qualified the question to be specific to the topic of COVID, the question could be asked more broadly. What *is* the role of the writer? Earlier, Viet Thanh Nguyen had already alluded to the universalization of stories and novels, clarifying that the stories he has written, though extremely personal, no longer belong to just the writer. It is this reading process, an entanglement between the writer and the reader, that I wish to reflect upon. What does it mean for a novel to be interpreted outside of its context? For academics who wish to uphold fiction as a praxis for arts-based research, on whose spaces are we treading and for what reasons?

Literature, like many objects taken out of their comfortable homes for academic purposes, has long intersected with the hybrid idealization of interdisciplinary studies. In Ashleigh Watson's call for novel writing as a creative methodological approach in sociology, she observes that the labor and analytical processes of novel writing are indeed complementary to the field of sociology, for its practice reveals our interpretation and understanding of social worlds and social realities (432). The use of "the social worlds framework" has already been established as both a theoretical and methodological package, best highlighted by Adele E. Clarke and Susan Leigh Star's focus on meaning-making and the eventual creation and participation of collective action among groups of actors (113). The social worlds that have already been instilled in the literary practices, whether those worlds are in literature departments, bookshops, or reading groups, have been reimagined by other groups. In Watson's insightful paper, she provides a historical background on the inevitable merger of sociology and fiction. In particular, she cites Howard Becker's observation that "critical reading of fiction still requires doing 'a lot of work'" (qtd. in 432). In a field like sociology, where social sciences could intersect with the humanities, hierarchical boundary work continues to be imposed on fiction as a form of knowledge and institutionally recognized knowledge. Watson adds a remark from Lewis A. Coser, that "fiction is not a substitute for systematically accumulated, certified knowledge" and "literary insight cannot replace scientific and analytical knowledge" (qtd. in 432). Therein lies that longstanding

debate of whose voices are prioritized as legitimate in academia. When Thomas Gieryn coined the concept of "boundary work" to describe the demarcation of sciences from non-sciences, he also shaped it as a literary concept. That is, boundary work "is a sociological parallel to the literary device of the foil" (Gieryn 791). The lesson to be learned here is not so much how long literature and fiction have existed, but how academic communities have retooled them for purposes of legitimation and new ways of knowing and producing knowledge. For Watson and others, they champion sociological fictions to cultivate a public sociological imagination that is inclusive and accessible.

This objective is indisputably democratic. But in this humble essay, I wish to guide us, as readers, writers, and scholars, to reflect on how we have treated literature in our lives. Texts and fictions, after all, have already been a form of our social lives. What texts do we read, how do we interpret them, and how do we use these stories when they are outside of our own experiences and communities? These questions require us to think more about Crenshaw's panel and what we mean by "universalizing" stories and fictions. As much a normative literary method as it is a reflective essay, I have deliberately named the subsequent sections "how we read," "how we cite," and "how we write." In each section, I highlight some important work by academics across multiple disciplines. They have used novels to make a claim about epistemic and colonial violence. Using these exemplars, I argue that we must read texts seriously and with the author's intentions and contexts in mind. Good novels and well-written fictions present a political vision of an unjust social world, and we can subsequently learn from these stories as ways for more diverse voices to be included and made visible. But this will require an actual "close textual-intertextual analysis" (Ceccarelli 6) that requires readers to abandon Roland Barthes' "death of an author" conceit and, instead, connect the text to the historical audiences or interpretive communities and texts written in the same period. A text is not a singular or solitary entity, nor does it exist without a specific context or a targeted audience. For this reason, we must discuss what we want from citing stories that are not ours. Finally, I end on the notion of academics writing with fiction to narrativize injustice as a way forward to advocate for epistemic justice and epistemic dignity.

How We Read: A Method

In the mid-twentieth century, when much art and cultural criticism became instructional guides for responding to different media, Roland Barthes outlined his view that readers could disregard the author's intentions and biographical details when interpreting a text. Using the now clichéd hyperbole, Barthes' "The Death of an Author" suggests that readers must know the text better than the author. "...Writing is the destruction of every voice, of every point of origin. Writing is that neutral, composite, oblique space where our subject slips away, the negative where all identity is lost, starting with the very identity of the body writing" (142). Further, "the voice loses its origins, the author enters into his own death, writing begins" (142). The disconnect between the author, the text, and the reader results in,

as Barthes tries to persuade us, the destination for the reader. The text, then, is the key geographical point. But to get to this point, the voice of the author must be diminished.

Barthes is a traditional textualist, though he appeared to acknowledge that there is a "voice" within the text. He makes a sociological point that "ideological systems are fictions...Every fiction is supported by a social jargon, a sociolect, with which it identifies…" (27). Further,

> All socio-ideological analyses agree on the *deceptive* nature of literature (which deprives them of a certain pertinence): the work is finally always written by a socially disappointed or powerless group, beyond the battle because of its historical, economic, political situation; literature is the expression of this disappointment. These analyses forget (which is only normal, since they are hermeneutics based on the exclusive search for the signified) the formidable underside of writing: bliss: bliss which can erupt, across the centuries, out of certain texts that were nonetheless written to the glory of the dreariest, of the most sinister philosophy. (39)

Connecting Barthes' ideas on literary theory and the title of his work, *The Pleasure of the Text*, he wishes to emphasize how the text makes the reader feel. Read together as a gesture to simply focus on the text, there is a problematic absence of the writer as a significant actor. If we, should we follow Barthes' advice, merely treat the text as an actor, the text's voice can take various and contradictory shapes based on the different interpretations of various readers. Such a reading actually loses the historical contexts and the world imagined by the author. A text, or any work of fiction, does not exist as an apolitical narrative. There is no tension to read a text pleasurably while simultaneously exploring what we should learn from the author's text.

If we do read texts seriously, as part of the author's social world, then of course reading can be a proper method of analysis (White 19). Unlike Barthes' overemphasis on the pleasurable act of reading, literary critic James Boyd White strongly asserts that there is a communal aspect between author and reader: "language is a part of invention, an organized way of making new meaning in new circumstances" and "some of these inventions are shared with others and become common property" (8). This "common property" should not ignore the niggling feeling that "all literature, fiction and nonfiction has an ethical and political dimension" (17) which must be shared in the communicative relationship between writer and reader. White provides an example of Homer's *The Iliad*, a literary classic taught throughout high school and university courses. The epic poem is "made out of a language, a culture, that does not change, and we live in the midst of cultural change" (58). That is, if the text presents a particular historical culture and the author is criticizing it, how is the text now meaningful in contemporary culture?

Much like Watson's proposal that sociology can be helpful in discussions of literature and fiction, adding a layer of social theory reminds us that a text is not simply a passive artifact when uninvoked. In Benedict Anderson's definition of an "imagined community," the newspaper could be conceived as a form of fiction (35) as social worlds and language are constantly being organized and constituted. Print capitalism changed how people think about themselves and relate to others (36) so much that it became a language of power (45). Interestingly, novels and newspapers "are set in homogenous, empty time. Hence their frame is historical and their setting is sociological" (204). There is autobiographical world-making, but much of the story veers into the politics of forgetting or forgetting an exposition of continuity.

Moving beyond the text and considering how audiences and readers relate to a text, literary analyses can be supplemented with Leah Ceccarelli's methodology of "close textual-intertextual analysis." Gesturing to literary concepts, Ceccarelli acknowledges readers will inevitably promote the "polysemous textual constructions" (5) of a given passage. A passage can be read in multiple ways and can bring different audiences for different reasons to accept a message (5). Rather than simply fetishizing the text as an actor, she argues that this analysis can "explain how texts work by connecting rhetorical strategies to the effects on historical audiences" (6). A way to use her analysis is to analyze the reception to a work as evidence (8).

These literary and rhetorical frameworks come together to suggest a more rigorous method of reading, but they also lead us to a subsequent challenge: what comes after reading, or how is the engagement of the text formed? White wonders who is the ideal reader of any text, a question that he asserts is a political one (282). How are political and textual communities judged? These questions are not simply a matter of reconstituting various interpretative communities or meanings, but challenge us to rethink how we cite these texts as active references. Paul Ricoeur cautions us to avoid treating the text as detached from its author for the action, then, becomes detached from its agents (541). For Ricoeur, a text can be active and meaningful because "human action is opened to anybody who can read" (544). One's understanding of the text should be, Ricoeur suggests, based on the propositions opened by both the author and the text (558).

How We Cite: Whose Voices and Whose Narratives?

The features of reading, as I have described them, also affect how a text travels and is cited in the political sphere. Yaron Ezrahi's book *Imagined Democracies* is deeply influenced by Anderson's *Imagined Communities*, though he moves beyond nationalism to observe how political imaginaries are created and performed. There is a "fictive" element in a democracy, and these very fictions are "the performative foundations of our own political world" (3). These political imaginaries encompass fictions, metaphors, ideas, and images "that acquire the power to regulate and shape political behavior and institutions in a

particular society" (3). These cultural treasures that produce fictive and fantastic imaginings are "significant components of the active political imagination that shapes the aesthetic, normative, and behavioral clusters of the political world" (42). The point Ezrahi makes is not directed at literary fiction specifically, but, rather, draws our attention to their role in shaping political identities and spaces. Fictions and narratives have always been produced and performed "to cover the production, articulation, dissemination, and institutionalization of imaginaries such as reality, agency, and time" (49) or what he calls "commonsense realism" (40). Commonsense realism needs a form of "epistemological literalism" that relates these fictive practices "to the world as a domain of plain public facts" (106). The importance of epistemological literalism is it "assumes that facts reveal themselves to simple ordinary observation" and "factual truths are inscribed on the visible surface of experience" (106).

Fiction, literature, and the arts are intimately linked with "the creation of interiority" (Ezrahi 200), and as such they are not simple material artifacts. These fictive imaginaries are often invoked as a panacea. How we read them ultimately impacts how we subsequently cite and write similar fictions. In Ezrahi's provocation that a fiction's success is through a process of meta-renderings of repetition and factual interpretation, the power of that fiction depends upon similar narratives and citations. A fiction is cited and invoked because the orator believes that there is a powerful imagery that captures the attention of the listener and broader society. That is, this citation or retelling of a fiction has to be a dominant, shared understanding, as Ezrahi and Anderson tell us. The description of an imagined community or a political imaginary suggests that the stories and fictions accepted in these realms are largely dominant and leave very little space for the inclusion of divergent voices.

The political motivations of citations have been made more transparent by Sara Ahmed's work on feminist practices. Citations, Ahmed writes, serve as feminist bricks and memory. "Citation is how we acknowledge our debt to those who came before; those who helped us find our way when the way was obscured because we deviated from the paths we were told to follow" (17). Ahmed's focus is on dismantling patriarchy and white institutions, in order for feminists of color to have a space in these exclusionary ones. Feminist interpretations of Ahmed's pedagogy suggest that we should practice more inclusive citations; of course, Ahmed's point also beckons to a postcolonial sensitivity, that we should also consider critiques of the dominant discourses and texts from the margins.

We can find exemplars of this approach to citation in the work of postcolonial scholars like Shiv Visvanathan. In an evocative essay on the colonizing force of science, Visvanathan's first sentence reads "Joseph Conrad was one of the great students of modernity-as-violence" (15). *Nostromo* and *Heart of Darkness*, as described by Visvanathan, are tales of how the western man has constructed the category of the Other as a savage in order to colonize; *The Secret Agent* "is a study of anarchist violence in England at the beginning of the twentieth century. It is an analysis of terrorism-as-faith, an unravelling of the

belief that one act of violence can literally erase bourgeois society" (15). Verolac is the anarchist protagonist, sent to bomb the Greenwich Observatory, an act Conrad presents "as a senseless one" (16). Visvanathan argues that what Conrad failed to explore is "the possibility that science itself could be a mode of violence or tyranny" (16).

Visvanathan's approach can be examined in two ways, aided by attending to Ceccarelli's textual-intertextual analysis, White's concern on the judgment of political readers, and Ricoeur's aspiration for a text to be meaningful action. Firstly, Visvanathan tells us that Conrad takes for granted the dominant assumption that progress entails science. This conflation, he argues, is part of a wider empire building, one that requires a violent and colonial imagination. Secondly, Visvanathan purposefully separates himself as a reader from Conrad's audience; that is, the white, literate publics of the nineteenth century. Conrad's audience is certainly not Visvanathan's community, for the imagination of science and civilization is a monolithic and singular one. Visvanathan's careful use of fiction illustrates how to cite such works, especially from dominant culture, while maintaining awareness of the social world of the author and resisting its potential to become violent action.

Citing literary fiction in our research is thus a meaningfully political act. Not only must we read a piece seriously, we must attend to our citational practices and to the political communities they create and reinforce. Insights developed by political and postcolonial theorists are not merely intellectual exercises, but they provide an entry point for improving our own citational practices.

Conclusion: How We Write

When Crenshaw asked her panelists what is the role of the writer, one could add: and what are the writer's commitments to the pressing concerns of injustice in broader society? Any good research and good writing should have a normative concern, which addresses the question of justice, democratic representation, and whose voices should have already been included in these discussions. It is with Crenshaw's question that I structured this reflective essay and reframe the question to ask academics: what is our purpose in using fiction?

Using fiction as a research tool is simply another way to look at the writer's ontological self and relation to society. This requires us, who have the desire, to retool our own methodological practices. If we want to include fiction writing, we should also consider whose spaces we are taking and whose voices we continue to leave out. Literary analyses and theories can actively support Black feminist authors and scholars like Audre Lorde, who has a strong response to Ricoeur's guidance on using the text as meaningful action. In Lorde's "The Transformation of Silence into Language and Action," she documents hostile social environments and abuses of power that have contributed to the silencing of others. And yet, she writes that this silence can be mobilized through words and actions: "What are the words you do not yet have? What do you need to say? What are the tyrannies you

swallow day by day and die of them, still in silence?" (41). She continues, "And of course I am afraid, because the transformation of silence into language and action is an act of self-revelation, and that always seems fraught with danger" (42). At the end, she notes, "The fact that we are here and that I speak these words is an attempt to break that silence and bridge some of those differences between us, for it is not difference which immobilizes us, but silence. And there are so many silences to be broken" (44).

Writers and scholars like Lorde, Kiese Laymon, Viet Thanh Nguyen, and Arundhati Roy's voices are already amplified in the literary and academic domains and their stated priorities are to be a voice among the silenced and to narrativize injustice. What, then, do academics hope to contribute to these existing literary and other artistic practices?

In their essay, "On Whiteness and the Racial Imaginary," poet and essayist Claudia Rankine and American Studies professor Beth Loffreda share how to talk about the imagined freedom of writing ahistorically and without racial boundaries. The very poignant discussion is targeted on the concept of representation. How does any writer portray characters who are outside of their lived experiences? Rankine and Loffreda note that some writers use the rights and freedom discourse to justify their stylistic choices, that imagination should not be limited to racial tensions and boundaries. However, "it is also a mistake because our imaginations are creatures as limited as we ourselves are. They are not some special, un-infiltrated realm that transcends the messy realities of our lives and minds. To think of creativity in terms of transcendence is itself specific and partial—a lovely dream perhaps, but an inhuman one" (Rankine and Loffreda). Instead of defaulting to the language of rights and liberties, they guide us to ask "first-principle questions" such as "to ask why and what for, not just if and how."

Academics can contribute to existing literary practices by thinking of fiction as a space of exclusion and violence. There continue to be failures of political and academic imagination, themes that are best revealed by Visvanathan's treatment of Conrad's fictive trajectory and Lorde's call for more Black feminist voices. Should academics wish to explore fiction writing in their own research practices, then the notion of narrativizing injustice, epistemic justice, and epistemic dignity must be at the forefront of their endeavors.

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