

"The place of narrative empathy in cognitive postcolonial studies" Suzanne Keen

Abstract for MLA panel, "Cognitive Approaches in Dialogue with Other Approaches"

The practice of cognitive postcolonial studies has centered on affect since the earliest essays of Patrick Colm Hogan, whose work on narrative universals, literary empathy, and aesthetic feelings in Sanskrit theorists and ethical emotions in the Arabic Aristotelians established a practice of cross-cultural research. His work is exceptional among literary cognitivists in that it focuses on emotion as much as cognition and in its insistence on drawing its examples from world literature, ancient and contemporary, in diverse genres and languages of origin. The study of narrative empathy in which I have been involved demands cross-cultural comparison, such as that carried out by Frederick Aldama, but postcolonial theory and criticism shows little engagement with theorizers of universal human traits. Postcolonialists typically regard emotions as culturally constructed and often suspect empathy of patronizing "drive-by feeling" rather than genuine concern evoked by feeling with another. It does not follow, however, that the writers and artists that we might categorize as postcolonial invariably share the attitudes of postcolonial theorists about the potential of art to evoke empathetic feeling. Thus my first assertion: narrative empathy deserves a place in cognitive postcolonial literary studies not only because emotion is involved in cognition (that's another argument) but also because many postcolonial texts appear to cultivate empathetic responsiveness through an array of representational tactics that I have described under the terms bounded, ambassadorial, and broadcast strategic narrative empathy.

Literary cognitivists treating postcolonial texts run the risk of unwittingly participating in the exploitation of the colonized or condescension towards postcolonial subjects by effacing the particularity of representations of emotional experiences under what appears to postcolonialists a presumptuous and potentially damaging belief in a common human psychobiological inheritance. It is not my intention to brush the case against universalizing under the rug, for it is best to acknowledge that definitions of the human or discussions of intrinsically human traits, let alone putative universals of civilization (such as stationary agricultural practices rather than nomadic pastoral habits) have often been used to justify exclusion, dispossession, displacement

Especially in cases where fictional appeals for sympathy dovetail with real-world campaigns for assistance, such as the response to last year's earthquake in Haiti, the ethics and efficacy of narrative empathy demand attention. Some postcolonial writers employ strategic narrative empathy to reach distant audiences and to shift their beliefs about and behaviors toward suffering others. In this paper I contrast Edwidge Danticat's strategic empathizing and Jamaica Kincaid's resolute refusal to court or cajole her readers. Kincaid's work better illustrates the austerities of postcolonial literary theory on the subject of ready character identification, while Danticat's work better fits a cognitivist model that (at least in its aspirations) links experiences of narrative empathy with real life altruism.