



# Exploring selves and worlds through affective and imaginative engagements with literature

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## ABSTRACT

To engage in critical readings of literary texts, in ways that are also ethical and compassionate, requires readers to enter emotionally and imaginatively into the complex, textual worlds of others as they are portrayed in stories. Such stories have the potential to create new worlds that make visible our collective being in ways that allow us to enter into democracy with more empathetic and just lenses. In this regard, we discuss both past and recent work of scholars whose insights we believe are useful for rethinking and deepening what it means to read and respond to creative narratives with “one’s heart as well as with one’s mind.” Given the popularity in recent years of teaching literary theory, and embracing the power of “critical” reading in English classrooms, the value of affective and imaginative ways of reading has been increasingly understated. We thus call for an engaged humanities reform we believe is ultimately crucial to creating reader-citizens who can successfully engage in community practices and decisions rooted in a general concern for the value of the lives of others.

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## Introduction

Literary texts activate ones’ metaphorical sensibilities to the myriad possibilities for reflecting on our own lives while inviting us to imagine the complex experiences of others. Readers’ ability to engage with such creative texts is inseparable from their capacity to prioritize feeling and emotion. Literature engages both intellect and affect as it offers readers an emotional pathway into the complexities, hearts, and minds of others. As readers of literary texts are keenly aware, such texts offer storylines or circumstances that ask them to reconcile what was initially expected with what eventually transpired. As such, transactions with literary texts are fundamentally about trying to navigate the mixed and sometimes problematic comforts of the customary with the transformative temptations of the possible (Bruner, 1986). In this way, literature can offer alternative ways of seeing the world, exploring the lives of others, and glimpsing our own potentials for being.

Critical educators Paulo Freire and Donald Macedo (1987) argue powerfully that reading should be affective, intellectual, *and* contextual in that it should encourage readers to move beyond the word on the page and into a space of reflection (then action) about the world

beyond the page, i.e. texts should facilitate “reading the word and reading the world” (1987). Because personal engagement in literary texts is requisite for reading critically, we believe that English educators have a responsibility to provide students with both the opportunities and the tools to move beyond the “official knowledge” that the Common Core State Standards expect students to display (Apple, 1993). Our perspective is derived from the research of an interdisciplinary cohort of scholars who have argued that privileging affective modes of engaging aesthetic texts means that literature readers are encouraged to read in the realm of feelings that entails participating in a unique way of knowing/reading that values the importance of human emotions while providing opportunities for accessing the feelings and diverse lived perspectives of others (e.g. Chabot-Davis, 2014; Edmundson, 2004; Jarvis, 2012; McGinley & Kamberelis, 1996; McGinley et al., 2017; Mirra, 2018; Nikitina, 2009; Nussbaum, 1995; Weinstein, 2003; Worth, 2008). However, as the popularity of teaching literary theory, especially critical literary theory in English classrooms has grown in recent years (e.g. Appleman, 2009; Gillespie, 2010; Ginsberg & Glenn, 2019), the importance of literary perspectives that embrace the value of affect and imagination has been gradually eclipsed, understated, and even caricatured.

As former secondary school English teachers and current university researchers in the US, we explore how reading literature in ways that prioritize affective and imagination might be connected to creating and cultivating a vision of self, social justice, and democratic equity. We argue that reclaiming the humanities in English language arts education requires attention to the role of empathy and compassion—traits that are essential if students/people are to become critically aware and engaged citizens. In our call for acknowledging the importance of personal/imaginative engagements with literary texts along with critical theoretical engagements, we align ourselves with the growing number of scholars raising questions about the trajectory of humanities education in both secondary and post-secondary educational contexts (e.g. Musil, 2015; Nikitina, 2009; Ruddick, 2015; Spellmeyer, 2003). Specifically, we contend that placing an emphasis on the personal as well as the critical is essential if students’ school-based literary explorations are intended to foster compassion toward others, democracy, engaged citizenship, and informed social and political activism.

As Weinstein (2003) explained, the literary arts prioritize feeling as a vital and critical way of knowing and imagining. Stories, poems, or plays are unique in their ability to reveal landscapes of feelings—the feelings of individuals caught up in the emotional exigencies of trying to shape their own affirmative life narratives in response to a diversity of personal, social, cultural, gendered, health-related, and economic experiences. Drawing in part on the work of Weinstein, the perspective explored in this paper is that a literary or art-inspired journey may involve readers in complex imaginative, emotional, and experiential (i.e. affective) engagements in the lives of people that not only offer possibilities for envisioning new ways of living but possibilities for new ways of encountering the mysterious and imagining the so-called “unexplained” or unknown. Throughout, we use the word “imagination” to draw attention to one’s capacity to see the world “as having the potential to support and sustain novel connections” between and among people and experiences as described by Levy (2019, p. 133) in his recent analysis of the productive dimensions of Jean-Paul Sartre’s conception of imagination.

In this realm, literature readers/listeners/viewers are encouraged to practice an approach to knowing that highlights the complexity of human subjectivity. As Weinstein and others have suggested, literary experiences may develop one’s capacity to begin to nascently feel the perspectives of the lives of people that canonical culture and history so ruthlessly, unconsciously, and instinctively authorize (e.g. McGinley et al., 2017; Bruner, 1986; Mirra, 2018; Nussbaum, 1995; Deveare-Smith, 1993). This way of perceiving requires empathic imagination in addition to critical analysis (Kamberelis et al., 2015; McGinley & Kamberelis, 1996; McGinley et al., 2017; Nussbaum, 1995). This sort of compassionate imagination may be essential to democratic equality and social justice because it offers readers a kind of partial access into an array of lived exigencies not their own. This is the process through which literary experiences develop peoples’ capacity to imagine

beyond the viewpoints that official culture and society sanction while complementing the more analytical or rationale forms of investigation associated with critical theoretical ways of reading as “imagination, feeling, analysis, and critique are ‘cooperatively mangled’ in powerful ways (McGinley et al., 2017, p. 68).

While a focus on reading with one’s heart as well as with one’s head is far from revolutionary, it has been largely superseded by the growing trend in secondary English teaching to focus heavily on critical theoretical approaches inquiry (e.g. Ruddick, 2015; McKenzie & Jarvie, 2018). As the popularity of teaching critical literary theory in English classrooms has increased in recent years (e.g. Appleman, 2009; Gillespie, 2010; Ginsberg & Glenn, 2019; Wilson, 2014), theories foregrounding the roles of affect and imagination have been increasingly eclipsed. Reader Response Theory (Rosenblatt, 1978) for example, has been largely eschewed as relativistic and pedestrian because it does not employ a grounded and prescribed critical lens. Such characterizations position the affective and the intellectual as mutually exclusive rather than as synchronous and symbiotic; as a result, students experience English classrooms wherein their feelings and imaginations are to be sacrificed to “intellectual” approaches. Contrary to what many advocates of critical approaches to reading have suggested, engaging affectively and imaginatively with literature is not merely the exploration of one’s subjective experiences and beliefs. In reality, reading and responding to literature with emotion and imagination are requisite for a reader’s ability to re-envision and even interrogate sociocultural norms (a goal most often associated with critical approaches to reading and interpretation). It is only by embracing a kind of *both/and* thinking regarding interpretive paradigms—by engaging readers both affectively *and* critically with literary texts—that such approaches become “cooperatively entangled” in potentially powerful ways (McGinley et al., 2017; Nussbaum, 1995; Weinstein, 2003). As secondary and post-secondary English teachers might imagine, this cooperative entanglement should be a primary goal as it allows readers to more fully exploit multiple ways of understanding ourselves and our world.

### Reconsidering affective and imaginative literary engagement

Factual, fictional, and even poetic stories—offer glimpses into the histories, cultures, social movements, and individual struggles of those whose lives many readers would otherwise never have encountered. We contend that such goals—developing an understanding of experiences beyond one’s own narrow and immediate contexts—remain largely out of reach to readers who are unable or unwilling to engage with literature in a personal or affective manner. An emotional investment in literary content is not only critical for reading persistence (Cothorn & Collins, 2010; Guthrie & Wigfield, 1999), it is requisite for a reader’s ability to engage in more critical theoretical readings of literary texts (e.g. Greene, 1995; McGinley et al., 2017). The sort of literary instruction envisioned in this essay recognizes that is *through* emotion and imagination that readers begin to acquire the social and political insights so often thought to be the exclusive domain of critical approaches to reading. Life is feeling, and feeling is “central currency of our lives,” writes Weinstein (2003, p. xxii). Feeling, he explains, is the mode of travel through which people begin to get a sense of the experiences of others. In this way, feeling reconceives art and literature as “profoundly democratic resources” that actually abide in each of us (p. xxv).

Even critics of this approach (see Bruce Maxwell, 2006) concede that engaging with texts emotionally and socially is essential to those texts’ abilities to engender more ethical and compassionate reader-citizens. Spaces where students connect stories, characters, and situations to their own lives and experiences differ markedly from spaces in which they are queried about literary conventions or tasked with discovering specific ideological content or engaging in “resistant” reading of creative texts (e.g. McKenzie & Jarvie, 2018; Ruddick, 2015). The latter is perhaps a somewhat limited “intellectual” endeavor; the former offers the possibility of bringing students into constructive dialogue with texts and with each other in ways that invite

imaginative participation and the kinds of understanding that result from emotional engagement: “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” (Greene, 1993, p. 218).

The literary orientation we are advocating connects to the work of Robert Coles (1989), a psychiatrist and author of numerous books on the moral, political, and spiritual sensibilities of children and adults. Coles noted that by giving readers opportunities to move outside of their own limited experiences and perspectives to enter imaginatively into the lives of others, literary texts provide powerful opportunities for moral analysis. Cole believed that, much like the cognitive dissonance wrought by traveling to new places and by experiencing new cultures (Festinger, 1962), literary journeys sensitize us to matters of commitment, context, and choice in relation to others as they offer readers invitations to explore the “vicissitudes of human intention” (Bruner, 1986, p. 13). Such “poetic” ways of seeing are necessary for connecting individuals to the emotional worlds of others, as well as to the possibilities of cooperatively resisting and re-creating shared visions of cultural, educational, and community life.

For some, these commitments to feeling and creative outreach into the lives of others offer a provocation to “re-locate,” to engage in movement as a part of confronting one’s self and other individuals. This kind of motion is also expressed and encouraged in the dramatic performances of African American playwright Anna Deveare-Smith, and not unlike the “vision of feeling-as-connective-tissue” also put forth by Weinstein (2003). In the introduction to her play, *Fires in the Mirror*, Deveare-Smith (1993) describes the affective and empathic possibilities she imagines when using performance art 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 Deveare-Smith, encouraging audiences “to reach for the other” while also being aware of the distance between themselves and others, does not necessarily invite the clichéd “feel-good” kind of empathic experience about which Chabot-Davis (2014) and Keen (2010) caution. According to Deveare-Smith, reaching for the other through encounters with dramatic works may also involve difficult self-encounter as members of her audience are encouraged to engage in the work of trying to connect to and feel the experiences of others as “their own” in some partial or emergent way. Thus, engaging in thoughtful literary critique is ultimately dependent upon readers’ capacity to feel and to imagine.

While we ask readers to reconsider the importance of affective and imaginative responses to literature, there are also two important caveats worth recognizing. First, it is clear that not all emotions are equally useful for understanding the experiences of others. As critics of more personal approaches to literary interpretation have cautioned, individual emotions are largely inseparable from one’s own personal histories, cultural experiences, and economic backgrounds. Second, while novels can reveal insights that would otherwise remain hidden, they can also serve to obfuscate or even misrepresent those insights. Storytellers can intentionally or unintentionally misrepresent the experiences of others. Because readers can only explore others’ realities emotionally and imaginatively, they are all the more vulnerable to misinformation. In short, because readers use texts to venture to new places and ideas *and* because texts can mislead, the “cooperative entanglement” of affective and critical perspectives are essential to each other.

### **Lost in translation: Re-imagining affective and critical reading**

When individuals deal in stories, they deal in the art of the possible and “the sense of the alter-nativeness of human possibility” in cultural life, says Jerome Bruner (2002, p. 53) in his book *Making Stories: Law, Literature, Life*. The applicable “skills” that stories teach, reside in one’s awareness of how they can be used to imagine new ways conceiving one’s self and living with others. But, dealing in stories also involves being tossed, intentionally or not, into ruthless, repressive, or exploitive storylines that one must hope to be able to navigate over a lifetime,

perhaps through an emotionally demanding and critically transformative re-storying process aimed at completely re-mapping or re-conceiving troublesome or extremely painful and traumatic experiences (e.g. Appleman, 2009; Frank, 2010; Kingston, 1975/1989; Soter, 1999; Thomas, 2018).

Though such a “re-storying” process appears to require both critical and affective knowledge, some educators have characterized affectively focused approaches to literature as overly relativistic and only marginally appropriate to engaging critically with creative texts (cf. Lewis, 2000). Some have argued that the teaching of literature in secondary English classrooms suffers from the influence of a single authoritative perspective—the personal responses of each individual. Maxwell (2006), for instance, questions the efficacy of reading practices aimed at developing empathetic understanding or democratic ideals. He notes that students’ distinctively individual ways of engaging with texts might “deepen pre-existing antipathies” (p. 340), making them more vulnerable to the subjective influence of a teacher. Other advocates for critical approaches to reading have critiqued emotional knowledge or affective readings as insufficient to the task of understanding social inequities and issues of social justice. Deborah Appleman’s celebrated book *Critical Encounters in High School English* (2009), for example, unfortunately suggests that “we give up the power of the text to transform” when we read from a personal or emotional perspective: “How can literature foster a knowledge of others when we focus so relentlessly on ourselves and our own experiences?” (p. 29). Citing Smith and Rabinowitz (1998), Appleman posits that it is only through the introduction of ‘scholarly’ frameworks (e.g. historical, feminist, archetypal, post-structuralist, psychological, etc.) that “we bring attention to authorial readings” (p. 29). Throughout the calls for more formalized approaches to literary interpretation in secondary English classrooms, there is the strong sense that to read literature in legitimate ways—to see the transformational power that is inherent in texts—requires the sacrifice of the personal or the imaginative. Further, reading personally *and* critically is, this line of reasoning holds, paradoxical; because it is enmeshed with limited experiences and biases, reading affectively may too often lead to an inability to recognize the realities of others and how oppression plays out in the lives of individuals less familiar to readers. It is worth noting, however, that critical theoretical approaches to literary study are not themselves without paradoxes and contradictions. For example, any particular critical theoretical reading implies or invokes another. There are always limitations to any particular theoretical reading. Additionally, fictional texts have life-informing potentials that may unintentionally be eclipsed by critical theoretical readings. Fictional texts always have a surplus of meaning. To deny the play of *différance* (Derrida, 1973) in reading and interpretation is to engage in dogma.

We hold that affective and imaginative forms of engaging with texts are requisite to cultivating a vision of social justice and democratic equity espoused by critical readings. Understanding or making ethical judgments about the circumstances of other people’s lives and actions can only occur from a position of having first participated *in a personal way* in those circumstances and lives:

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)

Literature, Nussbaum argues, both represents the tenets and tensions inherent in democratic societies and it makes these tenets and tensions palpable to reader/citizens; literature is critical to civic debate, social justice, and discourse in the public sphere because it prioritizes the value of emotional and imaginative ways of knowing. Ignoring literature’s ability to connect the theoretical with the personal is to deny what is arguably the most important reason to read it (Edmundson, 2004; Nussbaum, 1995). Similarly, in his book, *A Scream Goes Through the House: What Literature Teaches Us About Life* (2003), Arnold Weinstein notes that affective pathways

ultimately serve as powerful, critical, and democratic tools because they actually orient us outwardly toward the experiences, lives, and worlds of others.

Though we fully acknowledge that affective and imaginative responses to literature are not the only endgame—readers should indeed be prompted to question their own limited perspectives while interrogating how they shape their understanding of the lives of others—we nonetheless believe that the kind of literary understanding that might develop from affective forms of reading is certainly worth encouraging and equally fundamental to any reading experience, including a critical one. Using a variety of theoretical reading approaches is important and edifying, yet they need not—and furthermore cannot—come at the expense of the affective. According to Weinstein (2003) secondary English teachers and college professors employ “a specialized language and set of interests, as well as a massive theoretical scaffolding,” p. 425) for reading and discussing literature. Because these constructs tend to be complex, take time to learn, and shun personal interpretations of texts, it is possible that their use can actually serve to burden rather than engage students in reading. Again, a deeper and perhaps more engaging approach to literary reading might be one that incorporates personal knowledge as a vehicle for true self-extension and imaginative involvement with others both fictional and real. Such an approach is open to exploring the possible selves and possible worlds that literature makes visible (e.g. Bruner, 1986; McGinley & Kamberelis, 1996). Based on this perspective, we believe with Weinstein (2003) that as teachers and professors of literature, we have perhaps 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*.

### Literature and the critique of emotion

Novels, stories, plays, and poems portray people’s lives in ways that are emotionally evocative. When people read, they react emotionally to the narrative lives of others, and ones’ “involvement” in these lives gives us glimpses of modes of human understanding that are compassionate, ethical, and socially just. Becoming emotionally and imaginatively involved is essential for the “critical analysis of moral and political thought, of our moral and political institutions, and of the judgments of others” (Nussbaum, 1995, p. 76). It is through empathetic and imaginative processes that readers develop and cultivate “literary imagination”—a way of seeing beyond the “facts” of a life in order to recognize nuance and inferences, personal histories and individuals’ motivations. All of these are essential for developing “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” (p. xvi). Emotional and imaginative encounters with literary characters reveal a stylistic portrayal of life and a way of seeing others that is marked by a commitment to describing the events of a life from within, “as invested with the complex significances with which human beings invest their own lives [and] to the richness of the inner world of others” (Nussbaum, 1995, p. 76).

Noted anthropologist George Marcus (2010) explains in *The Sentimental Citizen: Emotion in Democratic Politics* that dominant approaches to political analysis mistakenly assume that emotion limits one’s capacity to fully consider consequences, reasons for action, and analytic critique. This is analogous to the conventional wisdom dominating the terrain of literary studies today, especially as applied to the critique of personal response and engagement. Conventional critiques of emotion would have us believe that feelings lead to action without contemplation, that emotions passively happen to us without intention or control. Marcus reminds us, however, that emotionally based communications are not only the lifeblood of politics, but also requisite for reason and rationality. Enabling rationality and supporting critical analysis, emotion plays an essential role in creating and sustaining the conditions for reason. In the political arena, emotion is cooperatively entangled with reason. This is due in part because “emotions have more

information about the state of the world, as well as our own resources, than is available to consciousness" (Marcus, 2010, p. 62). Further, because our emotions indicate when the usual has become strange, the interplay between emotion and reason is what interrupts comfortable habits, encourages public deliberation, and generates sufficient energy needed to translate new understandings into action.

Drawing on Marcus' insights, we claim that the ability to engage in thoughtful literary critique is predicated upon the ability to affectively and imaginatively participate in the realities of other's lives and worlds. Engaging in a Marxist literary analysis of *Oliver Twist*, for example, requires readers to first enter imaginatively and empathically into the lives and worlds of the characters in Dickens's text (1982). Engaging in a feminist analysis of *The Portrait of a Lady* (James, 1996), readers must vicariously experience the worlds of Isabel Archer, Pansy Osmond, and other characters in the novel. Reading in ways that evoke affective and imaginative participation is not just compatible with the humanities, it is crucial to democratic forms of community that are rooted in a concern for the welfare of others—it is integral to social justice. The focus on individual identity, once construed as the major limiting factor associated with affective and imaginative reading, is now re-construed as an indispensable component of reading with an eye towards engaged citizenship. Using literature to journey out of one's own narrow paradigm is an "exercise in freedom, in negotiating subjectivities and lives that are not our own" (Weinstein, 2003, p. 394). Feelings comprise the "affective passageways" that lead us out, connect us, and serve as the basis for our compassionate connection to others in the world.

### **Amending conventional wisdom: The myth of identification and reading "Personally"**

Critical literary approaches start with the idea that conversations about literature are first and foremost social, cultural, and historical constructions; that all texts should be read "suspiciously" for the myriad unintended assumptions, perspectives, and ideologies that require specific analytical tools to reveal taken-for-granted ways of seeing and being that are themselves circumscribed by the contexts and cultures in which they were written (e.g. Appleman, 2009; Ginsberg & Glenn, 2019; Wilson, 2014). Critical approaches to reading highlight race, class, gender, sexuality, age, etc. as constructs to be explored as they are revealed in the context of literary study. This approach has also been tied to how classroom English instruction might inform students' thinking and perspectives on matters of equity, liberal democracy, social justice, and the possibility of social change. After acknowledging that "the reading of *some* texts should be done without any theory or interpretation at all" (Appleman, 2009, p. 22, emphasis added), advocates for employing critical literary perspectives argue that reading for social change is possible only when students are directed via critical literary frameworks. High school readers, according to Appleman (2009), "need encouragement and practice in reading culture against the grain, and resistantly" (p. 88).

As we have noted, an exclusive focus on critical theoretical practices without a complementary focus on empathic understanding and/or tangible social action or advocacy seems to us to constitute a growing failure of literature education and humanities education more broadly (e.g. Nikitina, 2009; Spellmeyer, 2003). As researchers and teachers of literature in US public schools and universities, we believe that affect is a fundamental yet largely invisible fact of the lives of the broader reading public. What's more, literature conveys far more than facts or circumstances; rather, it is affect-laden in the sense that it "explodes with news about the world of feeling" (Weinstein, 2003, p. xx). Our stance does not mean that we wish to construe reading personally or empathically as little more than an opportunity to "identify" with the plights and experiences of characters. Nor do we wish to diminish the epistemological benefits of emotional identification with texts. Instead, we seek to revisit and amend conventional wisdom surrounding the

consequences of reading emotionally and imaginatively. We hold that while encounters with literature can be occasions for identification, they can also be invaluable tools for learning from and about the lives and worlds of others in ways that only literature affords. Literature repositions individuals—readers and characters—in relation to each other and thereby reveals them as always and already connected rather than as fundamentally individual. 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).

Only when both affective and critical responses to literature are valued in the classroom students can develop reading practices with political teeth—ones that transcend deconstructing cultural canons and entrenched practices of social inequality to seek ways to imagine others, to change the world, to go from social critic to social activist. As Louie Schwartzberg made clear in a now-viral *Ted Talk*, “We protect what we fall in love with.” Through literature, the affective leads to action. This has major classroom implications. Rawia Hayik (2016), for example, demonstrates how combining an affective imaginative reading with an analytic/critical reading of the traditional Cinderella story bridges critique and action; it challenges the gender stereotypes present in the story, helps students develop a critical understanding of gender and gendered relationships, prompts readers to reflect upon and critically confront their own gendered selves, and motivates them to engage in some kind of political action in the world.

Both affective/imaginative and critical analytic/orientations are requisite for mining the richness literature has to offer. As we teach literary theory and discuss literature with students in US classrooms, it is important not lose sight of the value of more affective and imaginative forms of engagement. Reading and responding to literature with ones’ heart as well as ones’ mind certainly contributes to self-knowledge and personal growth, but it also constitutes the foundation from which to understand other worlds so that one can imagine and engage in activities focused on making the world more equitable, socially just, and democratic.

### **Stories, emotion, and imagination: Beyond school and in-school perspectives**

Numerous scholarly sources support the ways that literature invites readers to adopt critical stances and engage in work that transforms the possible into the actual. For example, in *Under Three Flags: Anarchism and the Anti-Colonial Imagination* (a comparative study of the early stages of globalization), Benedict Anderson (2005) tells the story of José Rizal, the famous novelist and “founding father” of Philippine nationhood. He focuses on Rizal’s second novel, *El Filibusterismo*, because it went beyond simply commenting on the dishonesty of the church and imperial rule to engage his people’s collective imagination in change by depicting an alternative Philippines without Spanish domination: “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). His novel brought “into existence an ideal of Philippine nationhood which subsequently ignited the anticolonial aspirations of younger generations of Filipinos” (Campano & Ghiso, 2011, p. 2). In this case, fictional narrative was central to the process through which Philippine citizens were able to imagine life without Spanish imperialism and to bring that vision to fruition.

The Russian philosopher and literary critic, Mikhail Bakhtin, noted a similar connection between affective reading and social action (Bakhtin, 1990), specifically through the works of Fyodor Dostoevsky and Leo Tolstoy. Bakhtin felt that the practice of evaluating literary works by means of literary theories is fundamentally misguided (Morson, 2007). Rather, Bakhtin aspired to what he believed was a personal responsibility to respond to literature and art from the perspective of his own life and then to use such judgment as a mirror so as to reflect and engage in change: “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”

(1990, p. 1–2). Bakhtin saw literature as a means toward both connection to others and a connection to self—both of which are required if readers are to imagine and enact change.

As should be clear by this point, we believe that seeing literature as catalyst for self and social change could and should be cultivated in U.S. classrooms. Much like advocates for critical literacy (itself a distinct literary interpretive paradigm), we hold close the tenet that while it is important to read with an eye toward recognizing social injustices, this should merely be the first in a step toward social activism. Examining the power of literature to influence change, Lewis (2000), documented some of the ways that students' empathetic engagement with young adult fiction provided opportunities for interrogating the complex nature of their own cultural histories and ethnic identities and, taking action to write about these identities and histories in ways that contrasted with the dominant discourses prevalent in traditional literacy instruction. More specifically, throughout their middle school book club discussions, immigrant students from Mexico frequently adopted and co-opted the feelings and experiences of fictional characters with similar ethnic backgrounds and used these as tools for leveraging and voicing their own emotional experiences and cultural perspectives as topics of literary conversations. In so doing, they legitimized the cultural experiences of the characters about whose lives they read and drew on those lives as the grounds for identifying and valuing their own life experiences. In relation to these points, Weinstein (2003) notes that literature has the unique power to evoke the "seismic emotional and psychic reality underneath *our true reality*, one of nerves and visceral traffic that is hard to measure." 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 *vitas*" (p. xxiii).

Drawing on theories of socio-narratology (e.g. Frank, 2010)—a focus on what stories do rather than what stories are and emphasizing "watching them act, not seeking their essence" (p. 21)—our own research adds clarity to the perspectives outlined above. Our own work with middle school teachers confirms this. Inspired by the hugely popular photography book *Humans of New York* (Stanton (2013)), we collaborated with one middle school teacher to engage her students in a similarly designed project called *Humans of our City*. Seventh- and eighth-grade students took photographs of people from all walks of life whom they met on the streets of their town. These adolescent photographers had to talk with diverse strangers, learn a little bit about their stories, compose and capture images of them, and then write captions about them. In speaking about the experience, one of the seventh-grade students summarizes the impact of the experience:

I learned that you normally kind of might walk past someone and have a story in your head about how people came to be where they are. Like this woman [points to the photograph], she was homeless actually, and I think that normally you would just walk past someone who is homeless and think, "Oh, they maybe had an addiction, or they couldn't keep it together and lost their job." And you're just automatically in a space where you feel like you need to judge them, because you don't understand what they've been through because you don't know, and you don't take the time to talk to them. But when we interviewed her, she was actually really nice. And she has kids, and she was talking about the struggle of being homeless and how she really wants to support her kids even though she is in this space where it's really tough to do that. But, um, I never would have taken the time if I hadn't listened to these stories ... if you just talk to people. (Maggie, 7th Grade)

The photographs and the short stories students generated from their interviews was a multi-genre language arts experience that offered students tangible and engaged understandings of the lives of others. Our examination of this process revealed some of the ways that students reconsidered the power of narrative for accessing the experience of others. Specifically, students developed heightened awareness of the importance of empathy and imagination in coming to understand the experiences of a very diverse group of humans living very different kinds of lives within their own local community. In the process of developing greater understanding, students recognized how affective networks both connect individuals and force a re-consideration of

assumptions (their own and others); they analyzed the role stories play in creating the conditions for our collective existence and make visible truths about the human experience; and they learned how stories help individuals re-imagine and rewrite maps of where selves begin and end. The knowledge gained from this experience then translated into a better understanding of the literary texts they were exploring (in this case, Harper Lee's *To Kill A Mockingbird* (1960)). This small study serves to support a growing body of scholarship that emphasizes the importance of affective and imaginative dimensions of literacy and reading literature in school classrooms (e.g. Kamberelis et al., 2015; McGinley, 2019; Mirra, 2018)

In a related study, Kamberelis et al. (2015), examined how literature discussions might be re-imagined as places wherein students might imaginatively participate in the lives and worlds of others and thus expand upon their sense of moral and civil engagement in their world. While reading and responding to the historical novel, *My Brother Sam is Dead*, students in one school were encouraged by their teacher to explore the emotional worlds that Sam and his brother Tim inhabited at the point in the story when it becomes clear that Sam will be executed for a crime he did not commit. Student readers linked their emotionally-based reflections to key social and political realities, such as weighing the good of the individual against the good of his society, the ambiguities often inherent in deciding guilt or innocence, the nature of martyrdom and the effects of conspiracy theories, and the differences between moral thought and legal thought. Again, reading prompted emotion that prompted self-knowledge, that inspired change—reading affectively actually made actionable some of the changes that theories of critical reading are designed to promote and support.

### **Cooperatively entangled: Embracing both the Affective/Imaginative and the Critical**

Compassionate participation in the lives of storied characters is an essential aspect of literary reading that is both affective and critical. In the process of exploring the possibilities of identifying with and participating in the hopes, dreams, fears, conflicts, and dilemmas of fictional characters, readers can cross experiential borders and develop insights into the realities of lives they would otherwise never experience. This process can be at once individually nourishing and collectively beneficial; it opens up spaces for fundamentally good modes of civic reasoning to grow and extends our potential thinking about the moral and ethical dimensions of being in a world with others. In this way, readers have the potential to see that, very often, “understanding” is culturally and contextually based. This process is often labeled as dangerously individualistic and self-indulgent (Pirie, 1997), intellectually limiting, and academically restrictive (e.g. Bonnycastle, 2007). And, when done poorly, it can be all of these things. Yet, reading in ways that turn back toward the self, ultimately enhances rather than diminishes the ability to connect one's own experiences to those of others in viscerally and imaginatively powerful ways. Similarly, reading affectively can promote the self-extension through introspection. Stories rouse the possibility that “other lives enter our own as richly and mysteriously as air enters our lungs” (Weinstein, 2003, p. xxv). Cultivating affective and imaginative engagements with stories can actually lead readers *out* of themselves and into the lives of others in what resembles a kind of “creative outreach.” The capacity for recognizing the intentions and desires of others is linked to creating the conditions for peoples' collective existence. This, in turn, depends on ones' ability to organize and share their affective and imaginative lives in narrative forms. Through affective and imaginative modes of reading, individual experience is converted into “collective coin[s], which can be circulated ... on a base wider than merely an interpersonal one” (Bruner, 2002, p. 16). By entering imaginatively into the storied lives of others, one's own solitude is disrupted, one's ability to commune with others is expanded, and ones' potential for action is enhanced. A more holistic approach to the consumption of fictional narratives produces collective forms of consciousness,

memory, and history. It is through this approach to literary study that the humanities can engender ethical and compassionate reader-citizens—people who acknowledge the complex capabilities of the mind and the heart and bring out the best in both (e.g. McGinley, 2019).

It is our hope that, informed by this perspective, English teachers in US public schools might start to break down what we see as an arbitrary affective-critical reading dichotomy to envision the literature classroom as a *both/and* space. These are spaces where students are encouraged to engage in affective and imaginative responses to literature and to engage in analytic, critical assessments of language, text, and life. In these *both/and* spaces, readers' affective and imaginative engagements become part and parcel of the ethical forms of analysis and the critical explanatory work that scholars like Appleman (2009); Ginsberg and Glenn (2019) and others promote as the most significant forms of literary engagement. Much like second-wave feminism's cry that "the personal is political" (e.g. Hanisch, 1969), we propose that when engaging with literary texts, the *personal/affective* is always already *critical* (or at least on the road to *critical*). Engaging in literary reading by positioning ourselves in a *both/and* space allows us to connect past, present, and future in constructing new classroom spaces, ones that cultivate a blending of individual emotion and collective literary wisdom.

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