

Reading to Be Free: Rewriting the Story that Oppression Tells Every Day

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Abstract:

Through a “socioformal” approach applying social and cultural psychology to literary criticism, Paula M. L. Moya argues for the discipline’s potential to contribute to the study of the “world-making social fictions” of race, ethnicity, gender, and sexuality (p. 1). Deeply written into the consciousness and cultural imaginary, the self is the story we are told, and tell, every day. Regular, brutal self-examinations, or close readings of the self, are instrumental in resisting oppressive external readings and achieving personal as well as social transformation. And literature possesses the tools to survey and deconstruct the fictional mechanics of oppression at the levels of self-concept and the concept of the other. Since multicultural literature provides readers access to subordinated individuals’ schemas, literature “is one of the key sites in which the social order can be imaginatively examined and reshaped” (p. 40).

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Moya, Paula M. L.: *The Social Imperative: Race, Close Reading, and Contemporary Literary Criticism*, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2015, 224 Pages, paperbound, 22 Euro, ISBN 9780804795708

“She was furious at the world for this newly acquired burden, furious at herself,” writes Junot Díaz in his Pulitzer Prize-winning novel, *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, as the title character’s mother develops an overripe feminine body during Trujillo’s kleptocratic dictatorship of the Dominican Republic (Junot Díaz: *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*. New York 2007, p. 93). Díaz’s novel serves as a multi-generational study, moving in time, space, and narrative perspective in an exploration of how an intricate interplay of forces shapes characters’ experiences and perceptions of the world they live in. The novel is preoccupied with the Body as Text – in other words, how a person’s corporeality (including gender, race, and sexuality) is read by others in a particular society at a particular time. A body is a burden, especially one whose reading as inferior invites subjugation and violence. Indeed, one of the novel’s principal themes is storytelling’s ability to propagate, subvert, and even rewrite the colonial imaginary. The stories the characters read, write, and tell each other fill the blank pages of a constructed history, thereby creating a temporary antidote to the family’s curse. Díaz urges his readers to turn inward in order to confront this system of oppression, as “[t]he world is full of tragedies enough without niggers having to resort to curses for explanations” (Junot Díaz: *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*. New York 2007, p. 152).

Although Paula M. L. Moya forewent a discussion of *Oscar Wao* in favor of another of Díaz’s works in her newest monograph, *The Social Imperative: Race, Close Reading, and Contemporary Literary Criticism*, the novel epitomizes her belief that complex literature by subordinated writers “provide[s] a particularly rich context for learning about the interactions, institutions, and ideas that create and maintain different forms of inequality” (p. 52). With its “socioformal” approach applying social and cultural psychology to literary criticism, Moya’s work hinges on literature’s functionality as a social communication system. Literature is a “trans-historical and trans-individual social institution” (p. 6) that reveals both author and reader’s particularly situated ideological communities. Literary criticism, through its practice of close reading, has the power to contribute to the study of the “world-making social fictions” of race, ethnicity, gender, and sexuality (p. 1), thus making literature one of the most effective ways to engage with social issues.

In her 37-page introduction, “Schemas and Racial Literacy,” Moya explains social psychology’s embeddedness in literature by focusing specifically on the concept of schemas. Schemas are a highly personal yet socially taught means of reading the world in anticipation of acting in it. In essence, schemas negotiate potential changes of being, ultimately composing an individual’s complex, multiply situated identity. Also a socially inscribed act of interpretation, racial literacy is a way of reading the textual body of another in a system of social classification that exists only within a specific semantic community. As such – contend the women of color theorists who later inspired Díaz – we are all constituted of our oppressions. Deeply written into the consciousness and cultural imaginary, (the racialized, gendered, etc.) self is the story we are told, and tell, every day. Regular, brutal self-examinations, or close readings of the self, are instrumental in resisting oppressive external readings and achieving personal as well as social transformation.

It follows, then, that literature possesses the tools to survey and deconstruct the fictional mechanics of oppression at the levels of self-concept and the concept of the other. Racism, Moya reminds us, operates emotionally, in the social-psychological space where shared ideologies find individual expression. Since multicultural literature provides readers access to subordinated individuals’ “worlds of sense” (see María Lugones), the reader’s schemas and, therefore, emotional horizons are broadened. Literature, insofar as it facilitates “world-shaping and world-altering dialogic encounters” between readers, authors, and characters (p. 53), “is one of the key sites in which the social order can be imaginatively examined and reshaped” (p. 40).

The most compelling example Moya employs to support this, her central argument, is Toni Morrison’s novel *A Mercy*. By opening with the question “Can you read?” Morrison not only implicates the reader in the highly racialized history of (alphabetic) literacy, but also prompts the reader to struggle through larger questions of responsibility as a fellow-creator of narrative meaning. Taken as a whole, Morrison’s writing attempts to break open the origins of race and human hierarchy with the ultimate goal of rewriting the origin narrative that leeches on the American popular consciousness. Furthermore, by structuring her narrative according to the wide range of types of people in colonial America, Morrison affirms their humanity and demonstrates that individuals shape and are shaped by their particular historical moments and geographical locales. The novel teaches racial literacy, fashioning a consciousness-altering antidote to America’s story of oppression. For Moya, this capacity of literature to enable a reader to imagine “another way to be human and free” constitutes the social imperative of literature (p. 165).

Throughout her monograph, Moya addresses the contemporary crisis in literary criticism by pointing out the discipline’s strengths and shortcomings. While she advocates a return to the individual text that maintains a balanced view of literature’s power to affect political change, she also asks her colleagues to reevaluate their understanding of the sciences’ applicability to their critical methodology, since questions of literature’s importance can’t be answered within the discipline alone. This interdisciplinary imperative, as it were, finds form in her close readings of five multicultural literary works, which successfully reveal literature’s value for the

study of race and ethnicity. Forcefully and eloquently, *The Social Imperative* extends literary criticism's reach into a multicultural, multidisciplinary future. Especially when read alongside literary fiction as theoretically driven as those of Díaz's oeuvre, Moya's well-researched work makes a strong case for literature's unique positioning as a socio-political force against the oppression of the consciousness.