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Reading Literature in a Global Age

The Deliverance of Others
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Although I am sure she has no recollection of this, the initial idea for this book occurred during a conversation I had with Regenia Gagnier many years ago. At that time, I had the pleasure of having her as a colleague at Stanford. Maybe it was partially because we both had been trained at Berkeley and shared some sense of displacement in Silicon Valley, but for some reason Regenia started talking about rational choice theory. Not only was she speaking about it with regard to her research interests, but she was also commenting on how, after having been what she felt a long time at Stanford, she sensed that this way of accounting for human behavior had become pervasive on campus. Eventually I came to feel that along with rational choice theory came an implicit set of values, which I later dubbed “rational choice thinking.” By that I meant the belief that not only could human decision-making be formalized in rational choice’s parsimonious and elegant formula, but also that its various manifestations could be widely articulated as “common sense” — “people” act on the basis of common ways of reasoning, and, what is more, they should be treated according to that logic. This kind of thinking undergirds our sense of how we behave toward each other and think about the world. Two incidents, which occurred a decade apart, illustrated this in a particularly dramatic fashion.

The first was Larry Summers’s infamous World Bank memo of 1991. During his tenure as chief economist for the World Bank, Summers issued a memo suggesting that there was indeed a problem with pollution — the First World had too much of it, and the Third World too little. He proffered a number of rational-choice type arguments, among them the rationale that since the life expectancy of those living in the Third World was so far below that of those living in the First World, the human cost of breathing toxic fumes and consuming toxic food and water would be much greater in the First World than in the Third. After all, those living
in the Third World couldn't expect to live as long as “we” do, so what would be wrong with reducing their lifetimes by a minuscule amount, when, on the other hand, if we ourselves were to breathe in the by-products of our First World lifestyle, it would decrease our lifetimes by a much greater proportion? As Summers puts it,

“Dirty” Industries: Just between you and me, shouldn’t the World Bank be encouraging more migration of the dirty industries to the LDGs [Less Developed Countries]? . . . The demand for a clean environment for aesthetic and health reasons is likely to have very high income elasticity. The concern over an agent that causes a one in a million change in the odds of prostrate cancer is obviously going to be much higher in a country where people survive to get prostrate cancer than in a country where under 5 mortality is 200 per thousand. Also, much of the concern over industrial atmosphere discharge is about visibility impairing particulates. These discharges may have very little direct health impact. Clearly trade in goods that embody aesthetic pollution concerns could be welfare enhancing. While production is mobile the consumption of pretty air is a non-tradable.²

The response of Jose Lutzenberger, the Brazilian minister of the environment, on reading this leaked memo seems to sum it up well:

Your reasoning is perfectly logical but totally insane. . . . Your thoughts [provide] a concrete example of the unbelievable alienation, reductionist thinking, social ruthlessness and the arrogant ignorance of many conventional “economists” concerning the nature of the world we live in. . . . If the World Bank keeps you as vice president it will lose all credibility. To me it would confirm what I often said . . . the best thing that could happen would be for the Bank to disappear.³

While one might applaud such a sentiment, Lutzenberger appears to offer a contradiction: aren’t logic and sanity deeply affiliated? What could be their possible point of separation? Glossing the terms helps untease the “rational” from the sociopathic, the “impeccable” ethics of business based on some utilitarian notion of “the greater good” (particularly construed, of course) from the notion of an ethical system based on some sense of global community and the goal of a more democratic, just, and equal modality of interdependence. What were the respective fates of Summers and Lutzenberger? Lutzenberger was fired after sending his riposte, while Summers became President Bill
Clinton’s secretary of the Treasury, then president of Harvard University, and then a chief economic advisor to President Barack Obama.

The second example took place shortly after 9/11: the Pentagon’s Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency (DARPA) proposed a “terrorism futures market.” As one news article put it,

It sounds jaw-droppingly callous, not to mention absurd: An Internet gambling parlor, sponsored by the U.S. government, on politics in the Middle East. Anyone, from Osama bin Laden to your grandmother, can bet over the Web on such questions as whether Yasser Arafat will be assassinated or Turkey’s government will be overthrown.

If the bettors are right, they’ll win money; if they’re wrong, they’ll lose their wagers. The site itself will keep numerical tallies of the current “odds” for various events.

Why not just ask the guys at the corner bar whether or not we should invade Jordan, or play SimCity to make foreign policy decisions? But experts say the DARPA-backed Policy Analysis Market . . . is based on a legitimate theory, the Efficient Market Hypothesis, that has a proven track record in predicting outcomes. Basically, the idea is that the collective consciousness is smarter than any single person. By forcing people to put their money where their mouth is, the wagers help weed out know-nothings and give more weight to the opinions of those in the know.

“Markets are a great way of aggregating information that a lot of different people have,” said Eric Zitzewitz, an assistant professor of economics at the Stanford Graduate School of Business. “One of the big issues with intelligence that was gathered before 9/11 was that information wasn’t aggregated within the intelligence community. This is directly aimed at addressing that.”

Although the idea sounds offensive to some, “to the extent this has even a small probability of using valuable information to help prevent tragedies, that’s got to be the overriding ethical concern,” he said.

Nevertheless, what led to the scheme’s downfall was not its sheer weirdness, but the fact that it was broadly publicized. Even Fox News commented,

When the plan was disclosed Monday by Democratic Sens. Ron Wyden of Oregon and Byron Dorgan of North Dakota, the Pentagon defended it as a way to gain intelligence about potential terrorists’ plans. Wyden
called it “a federal betting parlor on atrocities and terrorism.” Dorgan described it as “unbelievably stupid.”

Criticism mounted Tuesday. On the Senate floor, Democratic Leader Thomas Daschle of South Dakota denounced the program as “an incentive actually to commit acts of terrorism.” “This is just wrong,” declared Daschle, D-S.D. At an Armed Services Committee hearing, Sen. Hillary Rodham Clinton called it “a futures market in death.” At the Foreign Relations hearing, [Deputy Defense Secretary Paul] Wolfowitz defended DARPA, saying “it is brilliantly imaginative in places where we want them to be imaginative. It sounds like maybe they got too imaginative,” he said, smiling.6

While there is much here to comment on, I focus on two aspects that relate to the main concerns of this book. First, there were the rival metrics of the various cost-benefit analyses—moral, ethical, practical, and “aesthetic” (it just sounded wrong). The Deliverance of Others is intimately concerned with how literary aesthetics in particular help us meditate on the ways we are connected to, and act in relation to, others. Second, there was Wolfowitz’s chilling suggestion that the notion of a terrorism futures market was perhaps just a case of too much imagination. Really? Where did DARPA cross the line? And do we really want to harness the imagination of the world in this way?7 In this volume I tackle the problematic of what drives our imaginations, especially of others, and what limits our imagination, for both good and bad reasons. Indeed, I am interested in how literature helps us think through these judgments.

In these pages I look at the various modes of representing and analyzing how humans behave, make choices, express preferences, achieve goals, and assess their place in the world vis-à-vis their goals. However, The Deliverance of Others addresses not only rational choice theory, but also other modes of defining human commonality and interaction—the discourse of the human body and how bodies can interpenetrate in (even) nonsexual ways; the discourse of the emotions and sentiments, and how both are common properties of humans, yet flow between us as well. These questions form the building blocks of my reassessment of the role of contemporary narrative literature in imagining this “togetherness” in and with the other in a critical fashion that I believe should be central to any reading of and any teaching of what we now call “world literature.” Let me provide another anecdote—a more generic one.
One of the first rites of being welcomed into a new community is often the cocktail party. I am sure what I am about to relate has happened, for example, to every teacher of literature. You are nibbling on your curried shrimp, swilling your chardonnay, and a nice person comes and asks what you do. You say, “I teach at X.” You feel secure—you have a job, it’s a good school, people like schools. But you don’t feel that way for long. “Oh? What do you teach?” Here I would say, “Comparative literature.” My new friend’s eyes start scanning for an escape route—where is there a venture capitalist or engineer or, even better, both in the same body? I can see reeling through my soon-to-disappear friend’s mind a flashback to the English A.P. exam: “Lord, he’s going to ask me what I have been reading, and even worse, to discuss my thoughts on it!”

OK, I feel the same way when I meet engineers. That’s why we have cocktails, and lovely weather to point to here in the Valley.

For twenty-odd years now, I have been trying to see how certain powerful ways of describing how we are bound together have taken hold: we are the same because we all define, rationalize, and reach for our economic preferences and utilities in the same way; we all have a human body; we all have human emotions. These are baseline assumptions, and they help keep us talking to each other. But what has happened now, in this age of increased globalization, when more and more people—closer to us in real and virtual ways than before—need to be vetted on whether or not they are actually the same as us in these ways, precisely? Furthermore, what happens when we try to imagine the genesis and consequences of seeing others through the systems that deliver them to us? And how can the humanities, and literature in particular, aid us in understanding these new sets of problems of “deliverance” in this newly interconnected world?

I admit that the phrase “the deliverance of others” has a strong biblical air and tradition, as it refers to how others can be lead into “the light.” While this volume does not emphasize that connotation of the phrase, because of the import of its clear ethical connotations, neither does it disavow it. What happens when we take on the call to embrace others and take responsibility for them? Put more precisely, this book seeks to delve into the shape, nature, and structure of systems that deliver otherness to us—taking people from “different” worlds and importing them into ours—and analyze those systems when even the most benign and seemingly neutral ones of them actually work to filter out “excessive” otherness for the sake of the functioning of the system. The questions
then come to be about what “difference” gets siphoned off and where it goes, and, more important, what stays in to change the system, showing its limitations when it comes to actually presenting others to us and creating an ethical global community. I look to literature—specifically, modern and contemporary prose narratives—as a unique mode of understanding a world comprised of new peoples, new choices, new data, all seeking to interact in the best way possible. It would be my hope that, at the cocktail party, I would pull out a literary example and show how its treatment of some issue about which my interlocutor surely knows (economics, choice theory, healthcare, biomedicine, advertising, information, media) not only describes how those systems work (or don’t), but also how the literary imagination and literary art sees, from a point outside the system, another way of conceiving of those relations between people in those delivery systems. In my most hopeful moments, and if my friend is still there, I would close with some discussion of what this experience has tried to teach us about living together ethically. This is a short book, meant to be almost a kind of primer. I hope you find it useful.
Acknowledgments

I want to express my gratitude to a number of people. I have had the great benefit of talking about the subjects treated in this study, in direct and indirect ways, with many wonderful colleagues and friends. Renato Rosaldo and Mary Pratt welcomed me to Stanford and their cultural studies reading group two decades ago, and I will never forget the intellectual buzz, the comradely good humor, and the sense of doing something important in the curriculum and in our writing that kept their house aglow. It was in that context that I first met Regenia Gagnier, to whom I owe the kernel of inspiration for this book. I also want to thank two people who, along with their intellectual brilliance, exemplify for me the warmth, humor, and humaneness one would want to aspire to: Linda Hutcheon and Roland Greene. I also want to thank Heather Houser, whose work in a graduate seminar and in the fine dissertation that followed opened my eyes to so much, and whose work is now doing the same for all its readers. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak has been a core inspiration for many years, and nothing has delighted me more than now working with her in various venues. Her notion of literature’s “unverifiability” has always stayed with me, along with the need to actually read, and read, and read, and to think first, before anything else, ethically.

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As always, my greatest debt is to my wife, Sylvie, and to our son, Fabrice. Sylvie, with her deep love of the intellect and especially of literature, showed me, in conversation and action over these decades, how life and art are not separate, and that strolling down any avenue or oceanside can animate conversation about what, for instance, we had debated at a recent graduate seminar, or lectured about in class, or tried to prove to our son, and how what we experience in life can enhance our understanding of the lessons we try to teach our students (and ourselves) as we pick up a work of literature and open a page. My one wish is that the world becomes more aware of this truth about life and art, and ethics and pleasure, for our son’s tremendous talent, creativity, and love of the arts deserves a home, too.
Introduction

One of the chief aims of this study is to help us arrive at a sense of responsibility toward others by learning to read contemporary literature in a way that includes a critical reappraisal of systems and discourses of “sameness” that deliver others to us. Specifically, I look to ideas of rationality, of the family, of the body, and of affect—each of these notions holds within it some sign of human commonality and communicability, or “deliverance.” I show how these discursive “delivery systems” imply commensurate relations between selves and others, and yet how these relatively simple systems become less and less stable as they interact with, and try to accommodate, a more radical type of otherness produced in contemporary historical contexts. Each of the novels treated in this book rigorously tests the faith these systems place in commonality and commensurateness; each text offers a vivid and often troubling view of the disruption of such a belief in our contemporary age. Nonetheless, there is in each of these novels also a redemptive moment that, while certainly not unproblematic, gives a different view of each “delivery system,” and this vision resides precisely in the deliverance available through the literary aesthetic. However, and critically, I update the idea of the aesthetic to include the specific problems literary aesthetics face in this age of increased “otherness” and virtual proximity.

I begin, in this introduction, by showing how the notion of empathy has defined the relation between self and other in rhetorical, social-philosophical, and finally literary discourses. The first two of these argue that similarity and identification are necessary between orator and listener, or between social actors. I juxtapose this to modern literature’s valorization of difference—the aim of literature is precisely to deliver to us “others” with lives unlike our own. This makes literature qualitatively different in aim and scope. However, this also presents a historical
problem today. The notion that literature should mobilize (or even instantiate) empathy for others and enhance our ethical capabilities is rooted in the early modern period, wherein “otherness,” while certainly increasingly present, was not nearly as immediately, insistently, and intensely pressing itself into the here and now of everyday social, cultural, and political life. This voluminous influx, quantitatively and qualitatively new, is a distinct feature of the late-twentieth- and early-twenty-first-century age of globalization. We now have to deal with this question: if we still adhere to the modern valorization of literature as bringing the lives of others to us in a vivid way, once we admit “others” into “our” world and place value in the difference they bring into our lives, where do we set the limit of how much otherness is required, as opposed to how much is excessive, disruptive, disturbing, in ways that damage us, rather than enhance our lives? This forces us into taking an ethical position, and calls on us to address another kind of “selfishness”: we take so much and then leave the rest, but at what cost? How have we learned anything more about “us” and the situation in which we find ourselves? Contemporary literary narratives generate worlds in which we must puzzle out these questions in particular manners.

Previously, people were thought to be able to identify with each other according to the fact they could “feel” as if they too could be in “the situation” of the other depicted in the orator’s speech, in the social imaginary, or the narrator’s text. In the present study I update that understanding. Aren’t we all living in the same global “situation”? Don’t we all perform rationally as economic subjects in the global economy that transfers goods, materials, bodies, images to all of us across real time and huge distances? Don’t we now all ingest materials that we find from the same sources, transported laterally across the world without absolute regard to borders? Not only food, but also drugs and medical practices have become nearly universal. In the most intense form of sharing human experience, organ transplants disclose the new commonness, as elements from one body can be inserted into another. And haven’t global media fed on and produced similar human affect? Don’t people share a common register and repertoire in the realm of feelings, feelings that are touched and produced by worldwide representations of contemporary lives? Finally, hasn’t the political world incorporated all sorts of previously disenfranchised people? “Our” situation now cannot so easily bracket off more distant parts of the planet or deny the par-
Globalization has delivered to us far more distant spaces and peoples than ever before, with greater regularity and integration on multiple fronts—economic, political, social, cultural, ecological, epidemiological, and so on. “Otherness” is thus not only increasingly in contact with the “same,” but the points of contact and contagion with otherness are far more numerous. Therefore, the degree to which we are the same as or different from others is discernible only in very specific manners that demand to be carefully and critically scrutinized. I am thus interested in otherness as both a “thing,” manifested in various forms, and as a relation.

Essentially, the problems of otherness press up against the mainstays of Western liberal thought. The primacy of the individual, the safeguarding of her prerogatives to act freely in the world so as to manifest in the fullest way possible her distinctive humanity, is negotiated against the recognition of our being together as social creatures. The problematics of otherness, as taken up in the course of this study, are therefore played out in the realms of rationality and choice-making, the integrity of the body, the freedom to feel. And yet “sameness” (and “equality”), though declared, is not guaranteed, and calling attention not only to inequality, but also to its sources, is as old as liberalism. However, events of the postwar era set the stage for ever more potent insistence on “otherness,” which paralleled the emergence of new structures that drew people together.

The seeds of enfranchisement sown in the eighteenth century were more fully manifested in the postwar era of decolonization and eventually in the anti-apartheid era, bringing forth widespread tension over the distribution of wealth and resources not only in terms of the “Third World,” but also according to the different mappings of hemispheres and peripheries. Widespread liberatory movements called up issues of race, gender, and sexuality. One example of the crisis of expanding and disruptive otherness was evident in the seventies, as described in a report by the Trilateral Commission, The Crisis of Democracy: Report on the Governability of Democracies to the Trilateral Commission (1975). In it, Samuel Huntington remarks, “The essence of the democratic surge of the 1960s was a general challenge to existing systems of authority, public and private. In one form or another, the challenge manifested
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itself in the family, the university, business, public and private institutions, politics, the government bureaucracy, and the military service. People no longer felt the same obligation to obey those whom they had previously considered superior to themselves in age, rank, status, expertise, character, or talents. . . . Each group claimed its right to participate equally—in the decision which affected itself." In short, while lauding the active participation of an increasing number of diverse populations on the one hand, Huntington is concerned that there may be too much of a good thing (or, in the language of this volume, too much otherness): “The vitality of democracy in the 1960s raised questions about the governability of democracy in the 1970s.” This increase in political participation is “primarily the result of the increased salience which citizens perceive politics to have for their own immediate concerns.”

So what’s wrong with that? Isn’t this precisely the picture of a robust democratic society? Not exactly, for this vigor is largely made up of minority voices and viewpoints demanding attention to their particular needs, and acted on the basis of other kinds of rationality. This puts pressure on the political institutions of the state: “In the United States, the strength of democracy poses a problem for the governability of democracy. . . . We have come to recognize that there are potentially desirable limits to the indefinite extension of political democracy. Democracy will have a longer life if it has a more balanced existence.” This ominous phrase is indeed Huntington’s concluding statement, and is emblematic of the kind of swelling up of anti-authoritarian “otherness” that shows the tipping point of liberalism that occurred not only in the United States, but globally. Where were those limits to be drawn? How was “balance” going to be achieved? Liberal values, seen both in the ethos of modern literature’s role in diversifying our frames of reference and in liberal democratic rule, become challenged by others who insist on entering the system as full participants, with their otherness fully intact. Hence the crisis of governability. This hugely revealing statement from the mid-seventies signals the historical instantiation of a problematic of otherness that spreads into other realms as well, and has only intensified as new technologies have created both the promise of new kinds of commonality and new ethical dilemmas. In today’s world, the hierarchical recognition of some rationalities as existing below the threshold of the rational, of some bodies as harvestable and commodifiable, and of some affects as dangerous to the psychic and somatic
health of the self occur precisely within global delivery systems that owe their existence to contemporary politics and technologies.

Today we find new political economies of organs, tissues, genetic materials that build on and indeed reinforce preexisting structures of inequality, affluence, need. The value placed on “the body” is now negotiated in ways once unheard of; now what is up for sale is not only a cadaver, but parts of living beings. The very psychic equilibrium of the “self” is put into greater and greater affect of contact, virtually and in face-to-face encounters with others who now appear on our everyday communications apparatuses. The sale and transfer of goods and commodities is premised on continually produced affect in a global market. Given these imperatives, which are facilitated by the logic of neoliberalism, how do we regulate the influx of otherness so as not to destabilize the system? How much of this goes beyond the pale of what liberal ideology, so protective of the self, can allow? How much variance in the exercise of rational acts can we tolerate? How do we both facilitate the transfer and mobilization of bodies and body parts across borders (to satisfy our needs for labor and bodily rejuvenation, even survival), and create walls and barriers to stop autonomous flows of bodies across borders? How do we hope to tap into an “oceanic feeling,” so as to instantiate need and desire for the products we wish to sell, yet stem the influx of affect that emanates from disruptive others and circulates back to us?

This study shows how contemporary literary texts register this new historical “situation” differently and asks us to reexamine more closely the grounds for those claims of commonness and to see the still vital resistance of otherness to it. Not only do the texts I have selected for this study vividly illustrate the precise ways that globalization today differs from that of the past, but reading them in the ways I undertake to do helps us to critically reflect on how we negotiate this new being with otherness.

That others occupy the “system” differently is not hard to recognize. Despite the celebratory gestures of “globalization,” this occupation discloses the fissures and residual differences that remain beneath the surface of systems of sameness. Literary aesthetics today thus involve a recombinatory poetics that would not have been possible without the friction, resistance, autonomy that otherness still insinuates into the “same.” In this study I show how the selected novels each reveal the
effort to deliver others to us within the contingencies of our historical condition. I start by examining closely how “sameness” has been a linchpin in social thought, variously evident in rhetorical treatises and social philosophical writings, and then consider the premium modern literature has placed on “difference.” I then move to a discussion of the relation between the notion of “situation” that englobes self and other in classical rhetoric and in Adam Smith’s social philosophy, and adapt that notion to my idea of contemporary “delivery systems.”

The Sameness Requirement

“Stepping into the other guy’s shoes works best when you resemble him. . . . If you are structurally analogous to the empathee, then accurate inputs generate accurate outputs—The greater the isomorphism, the more dependable and precise the results.” Or so says Ray Sorensen, writing on what he calls “Self-Strengthening Empathy” in the journal Philosophy and Phenomenological Research. Thank goodness, then, that Sorensen believes “Mother Nature has made your mind isomorphic to mine,” because this isomorphism aids in the perpetuation of the species. To put it another way: we empathize, therefore we survive. The pragmatic aspect of empathy has not been lost to thinkers from the classical age on. Empathy—feeling the pain or joy or fear experienced by others—is useful, whether it be to convince one’s audience of the rightness of one’s position, or as a key element in fostering moral sentiment and social equilibrium, or, indeed, in propagating human kind.

In The Rhetoric we find Aristotle claiming that effective acts of rhetoric rely on the listener feeling that he could find himself in the very situation being described in the speech of the orator. Chapters 1 through 10 of the Second Book of The Rhetoric are devoted to discussing the emotions and the way they may be enlisted in rhetorical argumentation. The eighth chapter takes as its subject Pity, and Aristotle’s discussion seems to touch on familiar ground: “We pity those who are like us in age, character, disposition, social standing, or birth; for in all these cases it appears more likely that the same misfortune might befall us also” (114). Self-interest and indeed self-empathy is not slightly a part of this receptivity.

In their discussion of The Rhetoric, William K. Wimsatt and CLEANTH
Brooks raise three useful points. First, they say, one should regard the text as “an approach to knowledge.” I will argue that a large part of this knowledge is eminently social; Aristotle’s meditation on language and discourse has everything to do with how members of a social group present themselves—their ideas, desires, needs, fears—to others, and how that presentation can be best effected. This notion is supported by another claim Wimsatt and Brooks make, that The Rhetoric can be regarded as an offshoot of dialectic and also of ethical studies. In that respect the logic attending The Rhetoric is embedded in both dialectical thinking—reasoning out the exchanges of assertions and responses—and a consideration of the ethical and moral bases and implications of taking certain positions vis-à-vis the orator’s discourse. Finally, Wimsatt and Brooks point out that The Rhetoric “presents alternatives, things that might have been.” In that sense the epistemological and ethical realms are enriched by a set of data that exceeds the empirical. So we might raise the question anew—the imagination of “things that might have been” seems in The Rhetoric tightly bonded to a realist logic—as to whether “things that might be” are contained within the scope of experiences we might plausibly imagine happening to us. Simply put, if we cannot “relate” to it, the situation the speaker puts before us falls flat. We might well react to it, but Aristotle says that our response and our receptivity will be less than if it were something we could imagine happening to us. Now what kind of moral does that teach, what kind of action can take place, given this new requirement for identification?

Aristotle’s basic premise regarding rhetorical effect and the emotions in the classical age—that we feel most strongly about and are most receptive to the stories or topoi that we could imagine inhabiting—is found as well in Adam Smith’s Theory of Moral Sentiments. Indeed, Smith’s text likewise connects this topic to the issue of social exchange and norms—feeling “the same” is a powerful force in social interaction. And Smith also turns his attention to the imagination and the kinds of imaginings made possible solely by feeling that one could be affected in similar ways that others are. Critically, in the course of his disquisition, the “original” situation that prompts our identification with the sufferer recedes into the background as our imaginations latch onto that event in order to launch a separate set of sensations in our own bodies. We can never actually feel the pain of others, but we can imagine what it must feel like. Smith even goes so far as to say that since we can
never empirically verify what the other is feeling, it really doesn’t mat-
ter what he or she feels. We dwell instead in our own imagined sense of what we, in the situation of the other, would feel. Indeed, in the following passage, “we” are channeled into the imagined body of the other person.

As we have no immediate experience of what other men feel, we can form no idea of the manner in which they are affected, but by conceiv-
ing what we ourselves should feel in the like situation. Though our brother is upon the rack, as long as we ourselves are at our ease, our senses will never inform us of what he suffers. They never did, and never can, carry us beyond our own person, and it is by the imagination only that we can form any conception of what are his sensations. Neither can that faculty help us to this any other way, than by representing to us what would be our own, if we were in his case. It is the impressions of our own senses only, not those of his, which our imaginations copy. By the imagination we place ourselves in his situation, we conceive our-
selves enduring all the same torments, we enter as it were into his body, and become in some measure the same person with him, and thence form some idea of his sensations, and even feel something which, though weaker in degree, is not altogether unlike them. His agonies, when they are thus brought home to ourselves, when we have adopted and made them our own, begin at last to affect us, and we then tremble and shudder at the thought of what he feels.Ω

One notes how this passage ends in sketching out the grey areas of this merging of self and other. This points to a key element in the problem-
atic examined in this study and which achieves full force in this concise statement from Smith’s text: “Sympathy, therefore, does not arise so much from the view of the passion, as from that of the situation which excites it. We sometimes feel for another; because, when we put our-
selves in his case, that passion arises in our breast from the imagination, though it does not in his from the reality.”∞≠ We cannot be the other, but we can try to imagine what her or his situation would make us feel like. However, we then need to ask, on what basis do we assume to be able to feel anything like they are feeling? What norms, assumptions, presumptions, what notions of mimesis, what norms of “human behavior” do we intuitively draw on to make sense of our bold statement that “we feel your pain”? Let me be clear—I am not suggesting that we should or that
we even could avoid such attempts at sympathy and empathy. My point, rather, is to examine closely the ethical and political nature of those acts of empathy, and conversely, those moments when we assume we cannot “relate.”

These concerns are evident as well (though not expressed in that fashion) in the social pragmatic of Smith’s treatise, which is made clear in the title of section 1: “Of the Sense of Propriety.” The key use to which these insights into sympathy are put is not unlike the one found in The Rhetoric: emotions, intersubjective feeling, identification are all considered in light of what kinds of social norms need to be maintained among individual emotions. Smith describes in detail how individual emotions are to be contained and disciplined by social norms—without this moderation, emotions can run amok in their excessive difference. And it is precisely through a complex process of imagining what others might think of our emotions that social emotional norms are installed in individuals. The following passage from The Theory of Moral Sentiments reminds us not a little of Sartre’s notion of the “gaze”: it is not that we actually believe someone is looking at us and hence we adjust our behavior, but rather that as social beings we have internalized the gaze of others and act as if someone were always watching us, as through a keyhole. Smith’s subject finds himself watching himself and “abating” the power of his emotions, abashedly, under the gaze of others.

As they are constantly considering what they themselves would feel, if they actually were the sufferers, so he is constantly led to imagine in what manner he would be affected if he was only one of the spectators of his own situation. As their sympathy makes them look at it in some measure with his eyes, so his sympathy makes him look at it, in some measure, with theirs, especially when in their presence, and acting under their observation: and, as the reflected passion which he thus conceives is much weaker than the original one, it necessarily abates the violence of what he felt before he came into their presence, before he began to recollect in what manner they would be affected by it, and to view his situation in this candid and impartial light.\(^1\)

All this is to enable the individual to ascertain the correct level at which to express his emotions. As with Aristotle, this has a pragmatic purpose—too much or too little will result in the individual not gaining the empathy of his audience: “He can only hope to obtain this by
lowering his passion to that pitch, in which the spectators are capable of going along with him. He must flatten, if I may be allowed to say so, the sharpness of its natural tone, in order to reduce it to harmony and concord with the emotions of those who are about him.”

Smith expresses the desired outcome of all this as being therapeutic for the individual, emanating from a Freudian super-ego: “Society and conversation, therefore, are the most powerful remedies for restoring the mind to its tranquility.” And yet the barely concealed complement to this curative imagined negotiation is also social tranquility. Individual emotions circulate dynamically and also smoothly; encounters, real or imagined, with an other’s pain, suffering, joy, happiness are, after an initial expansion, ultimately contracted, drawn back into the “proper” register. In the terms of this book, we find here a “delivery system”: a social discourse—that set of conventions for both communication and behavior—creates and maintains norms that convert otherness to same-ness. Extreme behavior on the part of the individual is tamped down and readjusted to the system of behaviors and emotional expression proper to society.

The Difference Requirement

The valuing of sameness in Aristotle and Smith contrasts sharply with literature’s privileging of difference, which gives the literary work of art an opposite role to play. Rather than holding to the values of rhetoric, which relies on sameness to realize its persuasive force, or those of Smith’s moral sentiments, which rely on sameness to understand and facilitate practical moral action, or even those of Sorenson’s “preservation of the species” theory, in which sameness is required for the empathy that will continue, precisely, “us,” literature is supposed to deliver us out of our “comfort zone.” Literature has another purpose—to become something else, something better: “The sole advantage in possessing great works of literature lies in what they can help us become.”

The tradition of regarding literature as a particularly powerful vehicle for conveying a sense of another’s life, and of believing that being put in touch with that dissimilar life is important for one’s moral growth, is well established and specifically attached to realist narrative. One of the most famous statements on the matter comes from George Eliot’s review essay on The Natural History of German Life (1895).
The greatest benefit we owe to the artist, whether painter, poet, or novelist, is the extension of our sympathies. Appeals founded upon generalizations and statistics require a sympathy ready-made, a moral sentiment already in activity; but a picture of human life such as a great artist can give, surprises even the trivial and the selfish into that attention to what is apart from themselves, which may be called the nearest thing to life; it is a mode of amplifying experience and extending our contact with our fellow-men beyond the bounds of our personal lot.15

What is noteworthy here is the manner in which Eliot uses this distinction in tandem with another distinction, this time between two different kinds of sympathy. Generalizations and statistics seem to belong to the conventional, learned forms of moral sentiment—they produce predictable results.16 Indeed, one almost gets the sense that they tap into a universal affective register: when presented with this or that statistic, one will likely react in this or that fashion, manifesting an already existing and eminently shared feeling. This is not so far from what we find in Theory of Moral Sentiments, where Smith very plainly states the need to “abate” excessive and potentially damaging emotional expression in order to adjust one’s emotional register to the social norm. However, the picture shifts with Eliot’s discussion of “great” art.

In the case of great art, there is nothing ready-made, already existing, part of a sentimental consensus, so to speak. Instead, we are presented with something outside ourselves and outside our conventional behavior. This is a potent force, affecting “even the trivial,” even “the selfish.” What are we presented with in great art, and why is this good? What we obtain through reading is a life not like our own and a life specifically beyond “our lot.” Not only does it not seem like what we have experienced, it also comes from experiences that are not likely ever to be ours at all. And that is the point of great art—it stirs in us a sense of difference, and this difference, if delivered well, in turn prompts us to reach beyond the ordinary sphere of our proper existence. This transcendence leads to a deeper and broader sort of empathy. And at that moment, we “become” something different, something inflected with otherness.

One of the most notable contemporary proponents of this view is of course Martha Nussbaum, who writes, “Literary works typically invite their readers to put themselves in the place of people of many different kinds.”17 Literature can help us appreciate “what is it like to live the life
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of another person who might, given changes in circumstance, be oneself.” While there is an unmistakable liberal tone to all this—literature puts us in touch with a wider range of experience, which causes us to be more tolerant because we now understand the lives of others as being imaginable as ours—there is also and no less a sense of acquisition and agglomeration. We are getting more out of this encounter.

Indeed, these sentiments reach a crescendo in a passage from Wayne Booth that sounds like nothing so much as the Twenty-third Psalm.

To dwell with you is to share the improvements you have managed to make in your “self” by perfecting your narrative world. You lead me first to practice ways of living that are more profound, more sensitive, more intense, and in a curious way more fully generous than I am likely to meet anywhere else in the world. You correct my faults, rebuke my insensitivities. You mold me into patterns of longing and fulfillment that make my ordinary dreams seem petty and absurd.

In each of these pronouncements we are led to the same conclusion—great works of literature deliver difference, otherness, that which is nonsimilar to us, all with the effect of making us better, richer, more moral, more tolerant, more sensitive to the world and the lives it contains. Critically, there seems to be a convergence of two different sorts of otherness: literature presents the worlds of others to us, leading us to inhabit those worlds and live those lives; concomitantly, the representation of this otherness is itself of a nature entirely different from the world of experience, and while it brings us closer to others, it cannot or does not reach complete deliverance, so to speak. It stands alongside, or apart from, life. As Eliot puts it, it is “the nearest thing to life.” In that sense, literature itself is otherness.

The Problem of Otherness

Even the most ardent proponents of the school that would have us read the lives of others radically different from ourselves are confronted by an essential problem: how much otherness is required? How much confounds us, rather than enriches us? How “different” can their “lot” be from ours before it recedes into unintelligibility? We become caught in a oscillating movement, identifying and de-identifying, weighing what we
can, and cannot, learn from. The encounter provided by literary texts involves both sameness and difference in an unpredictable relation. We cannot know in advance what this “other” actually is, or the circumstances in which they find themselves. Both similarity and difference may be deceptive, and in the working out of this ratio, we extend generosity, empathy, pity, but also perhaps distain, even contempt. This is not only, as Nussbaum says, “the political promise” of literature, but also the political problematic of literature. When she says, “It is the political promise of literature that it can transport us while remaining ourselves, into the life of another, revealing similarities but also profound differences between the life and thought of that other and myself and making them comprehensible or at least more nearly comprehensible,” the question I want to ask is, how are “they” comprehensible? If so, how so? How much? These are precisely political problems, and they just grow larger when we take it to the next level—that of the effect that this literary encounter is supposed to have on how we sense ourselves anew in the world and how we act given this new sensibility.

The adjudication of how much otherness we need to encounter and grapple with in order to be better people and how much will prove to be our undoing is, again, both a logistical one and a political problem. Booth himself finds a tension between otherness of a degree sufficient to present the occasion for learning, growth, and revaluing the world, and too much otherness. On the one hand, he openly acknowledges that “surely no beast [that] will prove genuinely other will fail to bite, and the otherness that bites, the otherness that changes us, must have sufficient definition, sufficient identity, to threaten us where we live.” Yet, on the other hand, that threat has to be tamed. Four hundred pages later in his stunning book, Booth admits, “I have had to play both sides of this street throughout these chapters: we must both open ourselves to ‘others’ that look initially dangerous or worthless, and yet prepare ourselves to cast them off whenever, after keeping company with them, we conclude that they are potentially harmful.” Indeed, as Booth says, we are playing both sides—of similarity of “situation” and lives beyond our lot. The line between the requirements of, on the one hand, similarity (rhetoric and Smith’s social theory) and, on the other hand, difference (modern literature) is not at all as clear as I have initially drawn it, for literature, it seems, demands both identification and difference at once. We find a vacillating dynamic between empathy and critique, sameness
and difference, that creates in the texts I examine a particular image of what it is to live with others in the contemporary world.

Let me sum up what we’ve learned thus far and then offer another possibility. First, there is the notion that we read to open ourselves to experiences that are not ours and will most likely never be ours, but by acknowledging that otherness as otherness, we both see its difference from us and are thereby enriched, and we also appreciate the complexity of the world. Second, there is the belief that we also may be presented with an otherness that, as true and formidable otherness, knocks us off our feet, sweeps away what Ricoeur calls “the stability of the same,” and leaves us on the canvas. How to know when to keep reading and when to close the book? The literary text will not tell us. It is itself of another world and is not constrained to make sense in the ways we are used to expecting of communicative objects. So why read?

Perhaps the search to find the “right” or necessary balance for the encounter with otherness, along with the related issue of transparency of meaning (“Once I have established the necessary and tolerable balance point of sameness/otherness, how do I know that I am actually understanding what is going on?”), is indeed an abysmal task and a question impossible to resolve. How does one codify and set conventions for encounters with others? What protocols can anticipate every kind of meeting between such vaguely defined entities as “same” and “other”? I suggest that rather than focusing entirely on meaning-making, and whether we get it or not, we should think of how literature engenders a space for imagining our relation to others and thinking through why and how that relation exists, historically, politically, ideologically. This in turn creates new forms of narration and representation, which I will put forward in analyses of four novels. Reading with this in mind would attempt to ascertain how and why our relationship to others is not natural or immutable, but rather the result of a number of complex and often contradictory forces, some that draw us closer, others that drive us apart. Notions of radical alterity are herein considered just as tentative as notions of universalism and unproblematic commonality. Ethically and politically we can imagine—indeed, we must imagine—that the lessening of otherness can be and is often not only desirable but also necessary—in fact, it happens all the time (and is often called coalition politics, or politics in general)—and that encountering difficult things can be crippling, again, not only spiritually but politically as well.
Put concisely, there is no way to say in advance what the proper response to alterity should be or what would be the grounds on which to judge the proper or complete deciphering of meaning. Rather, it is important to turn our attention to the purchase we make in the names of sameness, otherness, commonality, radical incommensurability, and so on. This gesture might well be called deconstructive. And it is in a careful attention to a newly invented, contemporary literary form that such imaginings and meditations are made possible, as the literary text, in refusing or at least deferring meaning, gives us pause to see more precisely our relationship to others—what enables or disables certain modes of connection and meaning-making. We should better attend to the historicity and contingency of social and collective identities as precisely intersections of both proximate and distant identities. The task is not only to measure the distance, but also to try to account for it. Literature, and more specifically reading literature, helps us fess up to our standards of measurement, our yardsticks, because the text takes us outside our usual habitations of meaning, sense-making, self-assurance. In this process, the way literature comes to be written in different, difficult ways shows its elastic powers, but also its breaking points. Sometimes the system is overwhelmed by the task of delivering too much otherness, of reconciling radically disparate actions that cannot be made into sense. We then are forced to ask why and how we set those limits.

For example, I regularly teach a course titled “Comparative Fictions of Ethnicity,” in which we read a number of different narratives, many autobiographical; we discuss how the authors articulate the idea of ethnic identity. We consider things like the difference genre makes when we read John Wideman’s *Brothers and Keepers*, which vacillates between the voice of the award-winning novelist John and his attempts to represent the voice of his convict brother, Robby, who is serving a life sentence for murder. We talk about how this attempt to convey otherness challenges the author to both convey it and let it remain a place of incommensurable difference. Having the class accept that doubleness was hard enough. But then we turned to read an autobiography titled *Restavec*, by a Haitian man named Jean-Robert Cadet. Cadet was born the bastard child of a Haitian prostitute and one of her white French clients. The narrative is harrowing, dwelling in poverty and disgrace and loathing and illiteracy. It is crudely written, and while we might sym-
pathize with the author, a real experiential distance is insisted on, making identification impossible. He comes to the United States, but no immigrant narrative of self-improvement takes place. After he enlists, he finds comradeship among African American servicemen, but he informs on them after they start smoking dope. How is this an admirable character? Many in the class simply hated the novel, despite all my attempts to get them to suspend their assumptions about what made a good piece of writing.

I could have insisted that the students read the story closely, and I did, but the usual way of reading for content left them unenthused. A different world was depicted in Restavec, and they didn't like it, and they were glad Cadet's lot was not theirs. I changed tack, asking them to consider what this dissonance could tell us about our relationship to otherness, to consider how that relationship was not inevitable, to consider what assumptions about narrative, about value, about ethics, about what a family is, about what an immigrant narrative was were overturned, or at least stymied, by Cadet's book, by both its form and content.

Yet the questions raised by this particular classroom experience—which, I think one has to admit, are often ours as well as we encounter particularly "difficult" texts—force us to revisit Aristotle, Smith, and others who place such emphasis on the notion that the situation of the character, speaker, audience, reader, and so on is the determining factor of the degree of empathy available and the launching point of the imagination as well, that is, that we must be able to imagine being in another's situation, and that imagining itself will then spur our imaginations in new directions. And literature ups the ante. In it, we are no longer seeking only common ground—situations we, too, might find ourselves in—but now also situations beyond our individual lots. This, again, is the oscillating dynamic engendered and problematized by literature. Furthermore, the degree to which these "situations" are similar or not is hard to discern these days, precisely because "globalization" seems to have "flattened" things out such that significant (in the minds of Friedman and his disciples) markers of difference no longer remain. More important, perhaps, the "situations" others find themselves in are often regarded by inhabitants of the First World, northern hemispheric regions as either indecipherable or negligible, that is to say, they are either beyond our ken, too saturated with difference, or that differ-
ence is not insurmountable under the logic of what I am calling our contemporary “delivery systems.” These systems either finally relinquish the notion of commonality and consider these particularly obdurate others to be unassimilable to our logic and reason, or they winnow out difference and bring the other to us in some now recognizable form. My focus thus shifts from the enrichment literature is supposed to bring into our lives by presenting us with the lives of others, and the supposedly enhanced empathetic powers it gives us, to the grounds on which we strike that encounter—how are such terms as *same* and *different* secured?

Both Aristotle and Smith, in their respective domains, consider situations to be critical for self-other identifications, but both are vague as to what would qualify as a situation. Does it simply refer to a plot element, like the loss of a parent or a perceived injustice? If so, how much detail has to be omitted for the situation to be general enough to solicit identification? In the next section I connect this problem to the ways in which contemporary thinkers have revisited Smith and deployed the imagination as the faculty by which to see in another’s life a “situation” that one might find oneself in, but in these cases that act of imagination is anchored in global material history, ethical action, and political practice. In the same spirit I examine closely the dynamic between the self and “others” (both in terms of characters and “other” situations) as read against and delivered through ready-made, already existing codified structures, discourses, and institutions. More specifically, I am interested in the ways certain assumptions about “all people” are embedded and manifested in institutional practices, and, critically, how literary narratives both comment on these assumptions and present variants, countermodels, critiques that thereby challenge “global” conceptualizations of “we humans.” This has, of course, a powerful effect on how we perceive others and act toward and with them.

Rethinking “Situation,” Delivering across Structures

Richard Sennett’s study of respect, *Respect in a World of Inequality*, draws on the sociological work of C. Wright Mills and Hans Gerth in an important manner. Specifically, he notes how their idea of “character” is based on “a person’s communication with others through shared ‘social
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instruments’—laws, rituals, the media, codes of religious beliefs, political doctrines.” For Mills and Gerth, character “is a capacity to engage the larger world which defines a person’s character; character can be thought of as the relational side of personality, and transcends the dictum that only face-to-face relations are emotionally gripping.” We might thus trace the formation of literary “characters” as developing from the mobilization and instrumentalization of these and other discourses and belief systems, not only as they interact with these structures and systems as individuals, but also as they interact with distant others in non-face-to-face encounters and imaginings, having these structures and discursive systems as mediating forms. We can thus have a clearer sense of not only how but also why others differ from us, or not, and when, precisely, we are to award “respect.”

This question is especially difficult, and important, when it comes to globalization. Luc Boltanski’s study of “distant others” makes this especially clear. He declares that in today’s world “distance is a fundamental dimension of politics which has the specific task of a unification which overcomes dispersion.” This “dispersion” is precisely the disunified world, the nonequivalent material histories of those unlike (to one degree or another) ourselves. Politics must bring together particular (and particularly different) situations, conveying them across a distance. And yet while Boltanski is emphatic about the need for an “imaginary demonstration” of unfortunates, he is scrupulously wary of this process. He notes two contradictory requirements: “On the one hand there is a requirement of impartiality, detachment (no prior commitment) and a distinction between the moment of observation, that is to say, of knowledge, and the moment of action. This requirement points towards the possibility of generalisation. On the other hand there is a requirement of affective, sentimental or emotional investment which is needed to arouse political commitment.” In other words, the lives and situations of others have to be regarded impartially, lest the prejudices, desires, blind spots of the observer skew her reading and assessment and actions one way or the other. But at the same time, regarding the other at such a distance might well obviate any affect, affect that would be necessary to compel the observer to act. We need both—but how can we arrive at a noncontradictory formula? Once again we find the fluctuation between identification and disidentification.

In order to get out of this quandary, Boltanski marshals forward two concepts. The first is “aperspectival objectivity”:
The relevance of the demand for public speech is due to the existence of a public sphere which is progressively constituted along with the conception of a politics of pity such that it is sometimes difficult to separate historically the two analytically distinct processes. The constitution of a public sphere and a definition of political legitimacy based on a conception of objectivity that emphasizes the possibility of an observation without any particular perspective are strictly interdependent. We know today that, among other possible conceptions of objectivity, this conception [aperspectival objectivity] which is often associated with the development of the sciences, and of the experimental sciences in particular, actually originates in the political and moral philosophy of the eighteenth century—from where science will take it fifty years later—and especially in Adam Smith’s attempt to reconstruct morality, together with the foundations of a morally acceptable politics, around the double figure of an unfortunate and an impartial spectator who observes him from a distance. Thus we turn now to an examination of the relationship between public sphere, spectacle, and aperspectival objectivity. We will then take up again the position of the spectator and endeavour to understand how we might reduce the tension between the demand for public speech and the prohibition of a description without perspective.

What Boltanski is seeking is a way to affect and leave open the possibility for public speech, a source of authorizing such an activity even as the constraint of objectivity remains. But if we are talking about “aperspectival” objectivity, then from where does the voice make its utterance, and, concomitantly, what kind of space is imagined in which that voice is heard? Boltanski remains within this spatial metaphor (of location, direction, perspective) to articulate his response to those contradictory demands.

Coupled with aperspectival objectivity we find something different, something deeply rooted to the subjective and now seen to enable an ethical intersubjectivity—it is the imagination, but the imagination tethered in a particular way.

The obstacle this distance creates can be overcome by means of a faculty however: the imagination. In the original situation the spectator is not involved in the scene of suffering he observes. Like the spectator affected by the sentiment of the sublime in the account given by Burke . . . , he is sheltered and fears nothing for himself. It is by incor-
porating distance that the possibility of aesthetic sentiments and moral
sentiments (still partially mixed up with each other in Hutcheson) must
be understood. In Smith, as in Hume, distance is overcome by a deliber-
ate act of imagination. The spectator represents to himself the senti-
ments and sensations of the suffering. He does not identify with him
and does not imagine himself to be in the same situation. As Smith
remarks in the chapter of The Theory of Moral Sentiments in which
he criticizes Hobbes and Mandeville, the spectator imagines what the
woman in child-bed may feel, but does not imagine himself actually in
the process of giving birth, and this excludes a Hobbesian interpretation
of pity which is based upon the possibility of experiencing the same-
reversals of fortune oneself and consequently on selfish interest. The
mediation of the imagination is important because it supports the moral
and social edifice without recourse to communal identification or to an
Edenic fusion.  

What we find is not a focus on “fusion,” the evaporation of the walls that
separate self and others, but rather a meditation on the mediation of
that relationship. That meditation is imaginative, but not fantastic. It
takes into consideration the real, material circumstances in which the
event is embedded and reflects back on the relation the sufferer and the
observer have to it. This meditation takes place within an engagement—
various forms of communication, among which is literature.

In order for imagination to play its role in the coordination of emotional
commitments, different persons must be able to nourish their imagina-
tion from the same source. To illustrate this topic, Smith frequently
refers to works of fiction and, in particular, to the feelings inspired in us
by the heroes of tragedies and romances. In an article devoted to the
links between impartiality, imagination and compassion, Adrian Piper
calls modal imagination that ability to imagine what is impossible and
not only what actually exists (or what has been directly experienced),
and he considers this ability indispensable to the formation and sharing
of pity in the face of the suffering of someone else. To understand this
ability we must have recourse to the “forms of expression” of myths,
tales, historical narratives, novels, autobiographies, songs, films, tele-
vision reports or fictions, etc., in which in particular we find descriptions
of the internal states of other people to which we can have no direct
access and which by that fact nourish the imagination of spectators when
faced with distant suffering.
Once again it is precisely the imagination that fills the gap between self and other; specifically, the imagination seems to finesse the requirement that, on the one hand, the situation of the other be imaginable to the self for its own habitation, and, on the other hand, that the situation of the other be beyond our lot. Once again, literature tests the conditions of each side of the coin, and I once again maintain the political ramifications of this vacillation. I return to the mediation of the discursive and material systems that argue that they can “deliver” others to us in a less problematic fashion. Contemporary literature, read in the ways I will suggest and illustrate, says that it’s not that easy, these days. I will specify a set of frames of reference, frames that seem to be neutral and natural, disclosing a common “form” of all human beings. I examine literary works of fiction to show how literature, read with specific ideas in mind, elaborates, extends, complicates, redefines, and sometimes even explodes these common forms as it discloses the poetics and politics of the vacillation between self and other across and in these delivery systems.

In what follows I show how discursive “delivery systems” precisely imagine relations between selves and others, and then how their relatively simple systems become less and less firm and stable as they interact with, and try to accommodate, a more radical sense of otherness produced in contemporary historical contexts. For example, I consider how, after all, one of the main things that is said to distinguish human beings from other living creatures is that we possess rationality, that is, that we can process the world and reflect on our place in it. Importantly, we can make choices informed by that rationality. So doesn’t “reason” provide us with an empirically verifiable commonness, and aren’t rational systems that work equally well for all people proof again of that common ground? If we can bracket all those minor differences that might complicate the system—like history, culture, gender, race—then we should have a powerfully efficient way of talking to each other and negotiating our preferences. But that pure formula for economic behavior, which I take as my example here, becomes sorely tested when different notions about rationality and reason start to compromise that model, and that splitting apart is evident in the very world of language saturated with the voices of newly enfranchised others.

I examine the notion that all human behavior can be understood according to notions of reason and rationality in chapter 1, “When Otherness Overcomes Reason.” In it I counterpose the powerful for-
mula of “economic behavior” that we find in rational choice theory to the history of literary realism, specifically as it has involved the incorporation of new, diverse, “other” peoples. How have both our ideas of rational choice and action and our modes of presenting them in literature been disrupted by new populations? After providing a short discussion of rationality, rational choice, and literary realism, I move to a discussion of how in his novel *Elizabeth Costello* J. M. Coetzee poses rationality and choice as the linchpins of the realist novel, then proceeds to methodically dismantle them, exposing them to ever increasing doses of otherness, the otherness of the anti-aesthetic, the otherness of the nonhuman, the otherness of race. The paradox here is how literature can both present radical otherness and simultaneously be disarmed by it. Following up on the questions “How much otherness is required for literature to have any traction at all, and how much pushes it over the edge?,” in this novel the answers to both are presented. The response proffered by *Elizabeth Costello* puts into crisis not only literature, but also literature’s ethical purpose (presenting the reader with otherness and thereby widening her or his moral scope). If in *Elizabeth Costello* the specifics of history and politics are muted, taking a back seat to a discussion of aesthetics and ethics, Coetzee’s explicitly historical and political novel, *Disgrace*, echoes exactly these issues in its representation of and meditation on the new South Africa and the precise moment when the balance of power shifts toward newly enfranchised blacks.

In chapter 2, “Whose Story Is It?,” I turn to the family, writ both at the local and national levels, and see what happens when strangers, particularly strangers of different races, enter and insinuate themselves into these domestic spaces, both forming a common bond and yet destabilizing as well those alliances built into family structures. In these microcommunal spaces we are formed and act as subjects; “family values” are persistently alluded to for both the consensus they seem to bring forward from national audiences that hear them every election year, and the assumed transparency they evoke between the two scales of social organization—what goes on in the family is a smaller version of our national sense of belonging. But what happens when that common ground of empathy and cohesion is shot through with otherness, and the family drawn into a destructive yet inevitable relation with the political world in the public domain? In chapter 2 I offer a reading of a second South African novel, Nadine Gordimer’s *My Son’s Story*, wherein
the empathetic is split and fissured, demanded at multiple and contradictory levels, as the characters meditate on what holds new others to themselves, and how familiar people, so similar to themselves, have become alienated from them. Politics, gender, sexuality, and race all act in concert to problematize this thing called coalition politics. In the end, it is art that takes on, perhaps reluctantly, the task of reunifying and conveying to the outside the new political world after apartheid.

The irony of *My Son's Story* is that the story is told predominantly from the point of view of the son, not the father. So why isn’t it titled, simply, *My Story*? Gordimer asks precisely these questions: how do stories circulate? Who takes ownership of them? How do they pass through this otherness, and to what effect? The protagonists of this novel are drawn together, despite differences of gender, class, age, and race, by three common interests, interests that are counterposed to each other: that of the family (and, by extension, the national collective), that of sexual desire, and that of the political (specifically, liberation politics). The suppression and resurgence of difference under the force of family loyalties, sexual desire, and liberation politics is presented via very precise literary structure, language, and emplotment. I look carefully at the ways Gordimer, in her public speeches, in her literary essays, and in this novel, outlines the hazards and necessity of crossing racial lines during this period of uncertain historical shift, what she calls, borrowing from Antonio Gramsci, “the interregnum.” It is precisely the period with which Coetzee is concerned in *Disgrace*. But I argue that the resolutions of the two novels are different in very important ways. Whereas Coetzee seems to give up on realism, as the new historical context has eroded the foundations of such a concept, Gordimer’s skepticism gives way to a bifurcation of art and political action, assigning each different roles.

My third example, Kazuo Ishiguro’s *Never Let Me Go*, comes from the world of the body, and biotechnical and educational systems. Again, we all seem to have corporeal forms that are not radically different. There is enough commonness that medical students can use the same models to learn the basic ways to diagnose and treat human bodies. But what happens when the seemingly unbreachable “self” of the individual human body gets intruded on by another’s body, part of which is inserted into one’s own for the sake of one’s very life? Here we are talking about organ transplants, as well as the delivery system that sets up that point
of exchange—the industry for organ harvesting, and the biotechnological, pharmaceutical, and medical systems that deliver an organ to its new body.

In chapter 3, “Art: A Foreign Exchange,” I critique Never Let Me Go, a sinister and morbid story of human cloning and unintended self-sacrifice. Parts of bodies are intermingled, organs harvested and re-planted in a radical and ethically problematic “encounter” with otherness. This particular delivery system has immediate connections to both life and death. I look at how historical changes in medical technologies have changed the barriers between discrete bodies, and how that technology opens up new understandings and imaginings of not only being with other bodies, but also sharing bodies. I draw on medical history and ethics, as well as the philosophy of Jean-Luc Nancy and his remarkable essay on his own heart transplant, and compare its handling of such concerns with that of Ishiguro’s novel. Yet even as we may be seduced by the novel’s wild and wrenching plotline, and its seeming artlessness (it is presented as simply the remembrances of a schoolgirl), it turns out that Art is everything. It is both the sign of humanness and a token of redemption.

Ishiguro himself makes this point, time and again, in his remarks on the novel; for him, the story he tells in the novel presents not an apocalyptic picture of an inhuman and dehumanizing brave new world, but rather an argument that art can save us from even the worst horror imaginable. I account for this discrepancy by bringing to the fore one key idea found in both the novel and in Ishiguro’s pronouncements on its composition—the idea of the contingency of history, and the ways in which such contingency informs what we call “moral luck.” Ishiguro’s famous notion is that there are no bad people, only people born with an ethical system out of step with their historical age. I use Never Let Me Go to explore this notion and the moral conundrum it offers. And just as in Coetzee and Gordimer, the deliverance of others is contingent on history; where in the latter cases this involved the rupture in apartheid, in Ishiguro it involves biomedical breakthroughs. In each instance, interaction with others is radically altered, and ethical choices are put into crisis.

This focus on art becomes more complicated in chapter 4, “Pacific Oceanic Feeling: Affect, Otherness, Mediation.” The source text for this chapter is the novel My Year of Meats, by the Japanese American author
and filmmaker Ruth Ozeki. I tackle the issue of mass communication and advertising, tracing how their particular schematizations of literacy, desire, need, and behavior may be read in cross-cultural and gendered manners, seeing how emotions and affect are wielded trans-Pacifically. I show in particular how Ozeki’s novel and her film, *Body of Correspondence*, share common concerns about affect and media. If we largely know the world via mass media, how do the various delivery systems of literature and television interact with the economic? In *My Year of Meats*, the economic is explicitly set forward in long disquisitions about the meat industry and pharmaceuticals, and I connect Ozeki’s concern with the transnational Body that ingests these commonly circulating and affecting materials to Ishiguro’s poetics and ethics of the body. I place the penultimate phrase of Ozeki’s novel, “that is the modern thing to do,” into strict scrutiny as a way to reflect back on all of the chapters of this study—what is the status of the modern, of the realist novel, of the pre-parcelized human body in today’s world and, specifically, in today’s literature? How can we retain, or restore even, a sense of ethics that both respects otherness and understands its complex residence in “common ground”? How can we then reimagine our own place there? In the conclusion I elaborate the question of contemporary forms of communication and make the case that it is a *reading practice* that can best help us maintain a critical eye toward the discursive production of “sameness” and “otherness,” and the consequences thereof.

Let me here briefly allude to the essay that I treat at length in chapter 3, Jean-Luc Nancy’s “The Intruder.” In this essay, Nancy begins by remarking on how he owes his very life to the fact that when his heart failed, medical science had opened up a “slot” of technological possibilities that included life-saving transplant techniques: “Less than twenty years ago, one didn’t graft, especially not with the use of cyclosporin, which protects against the rejection of the graft. Twenty years from now, it will certainly be a matter of another sort of graft, with other methods. A personal contingency thus crosses a contingency in the history of techniques. In an earlier age, ‘I’ would be dead; in the future, I would be a survivor by some other means. But always, ‘I’ finds itself tightly packed into a narrow slot of technical possibilities.”

In this volume I look at precisely the slot that is opened at a particular moment in South African political history, that liminal period that saw blacks and whites draw together in ways that put unprecedented pres-
sure on racial, political, and family loyalties, of inherited notions of “us” and “them.” Coetzee parallels that historical moment by looking at the tectonic shift that is created by conceptually and ethically displacing the animal-human binary, wherein the “nonhuman,” marked by its lack of reason, becomes less and less alien, and the possession of “reason” a more and more problematic definition of humankind. Gordimer’s text looks at how that same moment in South African history affected notions of gender, sexuality, and the family, as the barriers between black and white, public and private, opened up. In Ishiguro and Nancy, biotechnology and bioeconomies come to open up the heretofore sacrosanct human body to synthetic (re)production and commodification; within this “slot,” new possibilities of human trading in otherness, now converted to sameness, takes place unfettered by ethics and barely representable in the literary imagination. Finally, Ozeki’s text places us in an era wherein affect is delivered globally via new hybrid media that breach the barriers between private and public, information and entertainment, text and image and sound. Given the “information age,” what kind of glossy screen flattens our senses of dimension, depth, character into eminently substitutable data? How does the common digital denominator slot us into software-guided “social networks”?

Fundamentally, I am drawn back to this question: if literary narratives can still help us imagine others across global discourses regarding the commonly held properties of human beings (the mind, the heart, and the body), can they also exceed the ways those specific modes determine the shape and form of understanding, and, if so, does that offer us any greater or more potent way of not only imagining, but also thinking through being together in the world? How can we see both “others” and ourselves differently, in ways that live up to the promise and rationale for reading literature, at all? In that sense, we come back to and remain with the idea that literature itself is a kind of otherness, something that is, as George Eliot says, the “closest thing to life,” but not life itself. It is precisely that empathetic, imaginative, and critical relation to that thing outside itself that literature rehearses and models for our own selves.
Notes

Preface

2. Ibid.
3. Ibid.
7. These events led me to organize a conference on rational choice theory and the humanities, the papers of which are collected in “States of Welfare,” ed. Lauren M. E. Goodlad, Bruce Robbins, and Michael Rothberg, special issue of Occasion 2 (20 December 2010), which is available online at http://arcade.stanford.edu/. For more on the imagination, war, and terror, see my “Pre-emption, Perpetual War, and the Future of the Imagination.”

Introduction

2. Ibid., 64.
3. Ibid., 112
4. Ibid., 115.
7. Ibid., 25.
8. Ibid., 27.
10. Ibid., 7.
Chapter 1: When Otherness Overcomes Reason

4. Ibid.
5. Barthes, “The Reality Effect,” 142. In the course of his essay Barthes argues for the importance of precisely these digressions, delays, changes of direction, surprises, and incidental details.
7. Ibid., 134.
8. Ibid., 111.
9. Ibid., 112.