

Narrative Ethics and Alterity in Adichie's Novel *Americanah*

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Abstract: In her article "Narrative Ethics and Alterity in Adichie's Novel *Americanah*" Nora Berning analyses Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's novel through the lens of a narrative ethics of alterity. Focusing on the notion of alterity, Berning argues that a specific turn-of-the-century ethics emerges in contemporary fictions of migration in general and in intercultural novels in particular. An ethical genre in its own right, such twenty-first century fictions as *Americanah* generate a particular kind of ethical knowledge that revolves around questions of identity and alterity and around individual and collective perceptions of self and other. By addressing the interplay of "the ethics of the told" and "the ethics of the telling" in the novel, Berning contributes to a conceptualization of narrative ethics of alterity in fictions of migration highlighting their ethical and political value in an age of migration and globalization.

Nora BERNING

Narrative Ethics and Alterity in Adichie's Novel *Americanah*

Literary responses to cultural, political, social, and historical developments in the twenty-first century are not necessarily explicitly ethical in terms of their topics which include, but are not limited to such topics as the 9/11 attacks, the oil crisis, the financial collapse, and natural catastrophes. These contemporary literary fictions, however, are in fact often characterized by an ethical outlook: they acquire ethical meaning, first and foremost, through their formal features rather than their content. In the postmodern experiential context, the ethical outlook of literary fictions cannot be reduced to the interplay of content and form. Also important is "the experience of alterity, of the otherness of others" (Nünning, "The Ethics" 47) as central to (narrative) ethics. Against this background, it seems intuitively just to approach twenty-first century literary fictions such as Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's novel *Americanah* from the perspective of narrative ethics albeit with a specific focus on identity and alterity. Adichie's novel reveals that the ethical values tied to such concepts as identity and alterity can be experienced through the ethical positioning of the characters, in particular the female protagonist, Ifemelu. Hence, in my analysis of the narrative ethics of alterity in the novel I focus on characters and events ("ethics of the told") and the values underlying the narrator's relation to the characters ("ethics of the telling").

For the purpose of my study, "narrative ethics" refers to "the intersection between the domain of stories and storytelling and that of moral values. Narrative ethics regards moral values as an integral part of stories and storytelling because narratives themselves implicitly or explicitly ask the question, 'How should one think, judge, and act -- as author, narrator, character, or audience -- for the greater good?'" (Phelan <<http://www.lhn.uni-hamburg.de/article/narrative-ethics>>). James Phelan's definition suggests that there are at least four different positions in the narrative communication *qua* ethical dialogue: 1) analyses of narrative ethics can focus on events and characters, their (inter)actions, conflicts, choices, and motivations ("ethics of the told"), 2) analyses can deal with text-internal matters, that is, narrative techniques and the value systems underlying certain discursive structures or regimes ("ethics of the telling"), 3) analyses that concentrate primarily on text-external matters and zoom in, for instance, on the author's ethical responsibilities ("the ethics of writing/producing"), and 4) narrative ethics can probe into ethical issues related to the reception and the reader's engagements with narratives ("the ethics of reading").

My objective is to demonstrate by way of Adichie's novel *Americanah* that a new, specific turn-of-the-century ethics emerges in novels whose authors' preoccupation is intercultural alterity. Alterity, in this sense "has a fundamental relation to the other, which calls into question the very notion of identity itself: the identity imposed on us, the identity for which we search, the identity we claim for ourselves" (Vassallo and Cooke 16). I show in what ways intercultural novels are particularly well suited for probing into states of otherness which lead to a questioning of the self. The narrative form of the intercultural novel induces the reader to come to terms with the notions of self and other and "to comprehend contradictory positions, making alterity more acceptable and moving towards an 'ethics of alterity'" (Nünning, "Ethics" 372). The ethical impetus of the intercultural novel rests on the triangular entwinement of alterity, self, and ethics: precisely because the intercultural novel's concern with otherness is not something that comes in the form of "packaged goods" (Müller 10), it is ethically connected to the acts of writing and reading. Further, I discuss the narrative ethics of alterity in contemporary fictions of migration through a close reading of Adichie's third novel *Americanah*. Adichie's novel is best understood as a creative and experiential space within which an ethical dialogue with alterity unfolds. Through its aesthetic reflection upon norms and values and the felt encounter with alterity, the novel projects visceral ethical knowledge: "It is knowledge that is beyond reason, that is of the emotions, and that is so intuitive as to seem bodily knowing" (Hale 903). Bodily knowing does not tag along with a fixed moral message. Rather, it is subject to constant revision and renegotiation. The felt encounter with alterity in the novel is the precondition for the reader to apprehend otherness and to envisage a here and now different from the present.

Adichie contributes to the emergence of a new kind of narrative ethics at the heart of which are the construction and dissemination of an ethical knowledge that revolves around norms and values related to such concepts as identity and alterity and individual and collective perceptions of self and other. In the intercultural novel, these concepts form an integral part of the (im)migrant's quest, that is, Ifemelu's (and by extension also Adichie's) search for ethnic, cultural, and national belonging within the global trajectories of Africans and US-Americans. By unraveling the narrative ethics of alterity in the novel, it becomes possible to put questions about the ethics or "ideology of form" (Jameson 141) to the fore. These questions play an important role in theorizing and conceptualizing the narrative ethics of alterity in intercultural novels. The intercultural novel is part of a growing canon of migration literature dealing with, and responding to, the social changes of the twenty-first century and to the possibilities and challenges linked to "the age of migration" (Weingarten 250). In this context, the form of the novel is often conceived as enabling cultural translation. Artistic license serves as a catalyst for a narrative ethics of alterity. Through the "freeplay" of signifiers (Derrida 7), the novel creates

the possibility for its readers to engage in "a process of 'other-making'" (Sanders 4). In its function as an other-maker, migration literature lends itself well to a "new ethical theory" (Hale 899).

New ethicists such as Judith Butler, Geoffrey Harpham, Derek Attridge, and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak see the form of the novel, in general, and that of the intercultural novel, in particular, as being inherently politicized. What follows from this is that narrative ethics in the intercultural novel includes, but is not limited to, the politics of narrative. It is informed by other discourses and social practices inseparable from the social, cultural, political, and historical context in which a particular work is embedded. *Americanah* is part of a corpus of intercultural novels characterized by a global, borderless topography typical of the so-called "transitional book" (see Walkowitz). In these books, the ruptures and fissures linked to the difficult process of cultural translation are foregrounded. Writers of migrant literature such as Adichie, who belong to the third or fourth generation of Nigerian novelists (depending on the categories used), seek to shed light on the cultural or social dynamics behind such processes of translation. Current scholarship in literary and cultural and postcolonial studies produced an impressive amount of studies on such notions as identity and alterity and interculturality and there are numerous studies, for example, on contemporary Nigerian novelists (see, e.g., Nwakanma; Tsaaior). However, critical readings of *Americanah* are few and far between and Yogita Goyal's study "Africa and the Black Atlantic" is the most detailed and accurate account of *Americanah*. Goyal defines it as a postmodern update of Ama Ata Aidoo's 1977 novel *Our Sister Killjoy* and thus locates it within a larger tradition of postcolonial writing. Goyal's reading of Adichie's novel adds not only to a better understanding of Ifemelu's race blog and the narrative itself, it also depicts "how black Atlantic concerns and US-American conceptions of race are reshaped and transformed in relation to the history of the postcolonial state and its own itineraries of hope and despair, migration and return" (xvi). Intercultural novels such as *Americanah*, Goyal argues, represent a specific cultural moment in African literature in relation to such key issues as race, migration, travel, and the global turn. As the title of Adichie's novel suggests, *Americanah* is a hybrid in more than one sense of the word: Ifemelu, the *Bildungsroman* protagonist is the newly "Americanized" woman from Africa who writes a blog about race in the U.S. and discloses the ideological discourses surrounding migration from the point of view of a "Non-American Black" as she likes to call herself.

Like the protagonist, Adichie also divides her time between Lagos and the U.S. East Coast. Moreover, Adichie shares with Ifemelu not only some of the experiences described in the narrative (e.g., a fellowship at Princeton), but she is also a code-switcher in the sense that she mixes the literary style of the Great American novel with that of the contemporary Nigerian novel and Ifemelu switches codes in the classical linguistic sense. A proxy for identity, language in both instances is a metaphor for handling more than one identity. This becomes particularly apparent in the story when Ifemelu trades Igbo proverbs with Obinze. But also at other points in the narrative the reader can observe a mixture of standard English and Igbo, which evokes the impression of a simultaneous retention and rejection of one's native language and culture. The fact that Nigerian literature has always responded in one way or another to its contemporaneity, that is, to current developments in the political history of the country, becomes apparent when one considers Obi Nwakanma's categorization of modern Nigerian literature in three to four movements. In contrast to the latest generation of migrant writers, the first generation consisted mainly of nationalist poets such as Dennis Osadebe or Nnamdi Azikiwe. For these authors, poetry served as a means to establish the nation-state. The works produced by the second movement of writers, the late modernists, including Chinua Achebe, Christopher Okigbo, and Wole Soyinka, are all shaped by the colonial experience and the search for a coherent narrative of the nation.

The predominance of the theme of the meaning of nation continues to play a significant role in more recent works of novelists belonging to the third and fourth generation of writers, but the relationship between the writer and the nation in these works is more ambivalent. Although contemporary novelists are driven by the same cultural factors of migration, exile, and displacement, the novel functions now as a means to challenge the meaning of nation. Contemporary fictions of migration emanating from Nigeria are typical in this regard because the latest generation of writers exposes attitudes, values, and fears related to the postcolonial experience. Adichie, like other emerging novelists belonging to the third or fourth generation, is part of a global canon of novelists whose works feature characters with hyphenated identities oscillating between the global and the local. The characters depicted in these novels are not so much preoccupied with national belonging than with ethnic and cultural belonging. The intercultural novel written in English by Igbo writers of both genders radiates between collective identity and autonomous subjectivity: "the Igbo experience within the postcolonial nation state replicates the need to establish and maintain these domains of difference and identity, in part only to create community within its dispersed communities" (Nwakanma 10). The close relationship between migrant literature, subjectivity, and ethics is of central importance to contemporary intercultural novels written by Igbo women writers in two respects. First, these new feminist voices in Nigerian literature grant the story of women a place in contemporary fictions of migration and, thus, put women Igbo traveling identities into perspective. Second, Igbo women writers such as Adichie succeed

in delineating a narrative ethics of alterity that is related simultaneously to questions about agency, gender relations, sexuality, and national politics.

Like Adichie's first two novels (*Purple Hibiscus* and the historical novel *Half of a Yellow Sun*), both of which are representations of the national imaginary, *Americanah* is characterized by a reflection upon real historical events in Nigeria (e.g., the military dictatorship that came to an end in 1999) and in the United States (e.g., the 9/11 attacks in 2001) and social problems (e.g., racism, economic plight, dislocation) linked to these events. The events enable the reader to situate the novel and its value system in an actual historical and cultural context. The intercultural novel is, therefore, to a greater extent than any other type of literary fiction, a "cultural imaginary" (Claviez xxviii) shaped simultaneously by a representative and a transgressive potential. Adichie also uses metropolitan tropes to develop a new border poetics that hinges on the cosmopolitan values and transborder claims of Nigeria's educated and privileged middle class. What reads like a romantic novel about Ifemelu's relation to Obinze is in fact a social novel about race, which instantiates social identity through its very form. *Americanah* is a twenty-first century social novel in the sense that it functions as a riposte to what Goyal calls the "unworldliness of the American novel" (xii). In contrast to the introspective stance of the post-9/11 novel, *Americanah* is supposed to signal to the reader that Adichie distances herself from such self-referential discourses and inward-oriented fictions. By inserting discussions of other novels in her own novel and by staging a critique about reading, writing, and the act of interpretation both with regard to novels and other forms of writing (e.g., blogs), Adichie advances a critique of contemporary US-American fiction and books, "how they're read, and what they do or fail to do in the world" (Goyal xii). Moving between regions and territories, the intercultural novel refuses to accept any sort of hierarchy of values. With *Americanah*, Adichie undermines the generic conventions of the typical immigrant novel that leaves no room for an alternative to self-alienation. Towards the end of the novel, Ifemelu returns home not because she is forced to, but because she wants to. Adichie thus achieves two things: she problematizes US-American concepts of race and she creates a twenty-first century form of the intercultural novel that anticipates "its own reception as a new kind of black novel" (Goyal xiv) that functions as a critique of an association of African literature with trauma or injury.

A variant of the intercultural novel, contemporary fictions of migration can be seen as a response to the hybrid experiences and forms of life of migrants from all over the world. In the globalized landscapes of literary and cultural production, contemporary fictions of migration aspire to become a new World Literature (on this, see, e.g., Dagnino; Sturm-Trigonakis). A particular type of intercultural literature, fictions of migration exude polyphony and dialogicality on the level of form and content. The co-existence of different discourses and perspectives in such novels forecloses any sort of determinism or dogmatic cultural discourse. Rather, the narrative structures of such novels "are in accord with a Levinas-inspired ethics, which has moved away from the prescriptive dimension of traditional humanist values towards a more tentative and open postmodern ethics" (Nünning, "Ethics" 372). The ethical impetus of contemporary fictions of migration and their focus on questions of alterity demand a novel way of theorizing and conceptualizing ethics in the twenty-first century, one that puts emphasis on the category of narrative. Whereas literary ethics is more broadly concerned with the intersections of literature and ethics or moral theory, narrative ethics focuses on the relationship between a narrative's form and its underlying value system. Narrative ethics of alterity goes a step further and conceives of the narrative's interest in otherness as a structural element, i.e., as a narrative principle that exceeds the level of content. The shifting basis of narrative ethics as the attempt to lay bare "the ways in which the imaginative staging of other lives ... provides a forum for the enactment of the dialogical interdependence between self and other, and beyond that of the irreducible difference and alterity of the other which is central to ethics" (Zapf 173) paves the way for a conceptualization of literary studies, in general, and narratology, that is, the theory and analysis of narrative, in particular, as a fundamental precondition for positive social change.

The claim that fictions of migration play an important role for a twenty-first century ethical narratology whose preoccupation is alterity is based on the new ethicists' postulate that "new" fiction is a forum for "new ethical" interpellation and transaction. I do not suggest that either narrative ethics or fictions of migration represent an entirely new theory or genre, but I argue that in "cross-mapping" such contemporary fictions of migration as Adichie's novel *Americanah* and the theoretical work that concerns new ethicists and ethical narratologists, it becomes possible to open up new vistas and interpretive pathways for narrative ethics of alterity and fictions of migration understood as a potent ethical force. The method of "cross-mapping" (Bronfen 136) is congenial in this regard, because it is built on the idea of co-reading, a creative way of interpreting and reading different discourses side by side in order to reveal similarities between them. With regard to ethics and aesthetics, this means that although they form part of two different domains, they need not be seen as incompatible. Rather, they should be conceived of as two different, yet interrelated, discourses addressing similar problems. In *Ethics: An Essay on the Understanding of Evil* Alain Badiou argues that there is no such thing as ethics in the abstract. The same applies to aesthetics and, more specifically, to the aesthetics of alterity, "which derives from the politicized struggle between art and its ideological instrumentality" (Hale 900). The narrative mode is an instance of the concrete ethical emplotment of alterity in a certain

social, cultural, political, and historical context. Narrative and by implication ethics is always already tied to language. This is true in many ways for fictions of migration, which are mediated and in this way reflect "the indissoluble connection between ethics and the human subject" (Zapf 173).

The novelistic aesthetics of alterity (the ways in which alterity is narrated in the novel) implies literary forms of self-making and other-making that encompass a deliberate and self-chosen alterity, a desire to be 'other'" and "a rejection of the 'reference group'" (Vassallo and Cooke 17). *Americanah* is a contemporary fiction of migration that emphasizes the fact that alterity can be sought out and imposed at the same time. This double bind adds to the novel's transgressive potential because it complicates not only the "tellability of experiences, events, wishes or desires" (Neumann and Nünning 6). It also reminds us that the narrative construction of self and other is not a value-free endeavor but is "guided and constrained by culture" (Neumann and Nünning 9). Further, the notion of "relational identity" (the conceptualization of identity as contextual and fluid, as emerging from the individual's relationship to an other) plays an important role in Adichie's novel. Ways of self-making and other-making are so closely connected to each other in contemporary Nigerian literature that Nwakanma speaks of narratives of "bi-identity" (13). In *Americanah*, the protagonist's 'bi-identity' is a result of endorsing and rejecting US-American values at the same time. This becomes evident when considering the central role hair plays as a metaphor for race in the U.S. and as a marker of difference in the novel. Given the fact that there are no hair braiding salons in Princeton, Ifemelu has to take the train to that "shared space of ... Africanness" called Trenton (103). At the hair braiding salon, "they would, she was sure, talk about her after she left ... They would laugh with derision, but only a mild derision, because she was still their African sister, even if she had briefly lost her way" (103).

What the above example shows is that the making of one's own identity is relational both in the interpersonal sense and in the intercultural sense. It is relational insofar as Ifemelu grows through her relationship to other subjects. Ifemelu's own sense of her marginality is closely connected to color and race. The metaphor of traveling identities is particularly apt for an investigation of the cultural dynamics of racial identity because it highlights the non-intrinsic nature and context-dependent structure of identity. In her role as famous race blogger Ifemelu never gets tired of pointing out that she started being Black the day she entered the United States. At a dinner party in Manhattan, at the time when Barack Obama ran for president, Ifemelu insists that race continues to be an issue in the U.S. people do not dare to talk about openly: "When you are black in America and you fall in love with a white person, race doesn't matter when you're alone together because it's just you and your love. But the minute you step outside, race matters. But we don't talk about it ... We let it pile up inside our heads and when we come to nice liberal dinners like this, we say that race doesn't matter because that's what we're supposed to say, to keep our nice liberal friends comfortable. It's true. I speak from experience" (291). In her blog, "Raceteenth or Various Observations About American Blacks (Those Formerly Known as Negroes) by a Non-American Black" (4), Ifemelu, as insider-outsider, speaks frankly about race in a way that lets Obinze, her Nigerian lover, assume Ifemelu has become an other. The blog posts sound "so American and so alien" (374) to him that he is afraid of having lost Ifemelu to the US-American other and that she might have lost her true self, buried forever under "a head-bobbing, ever-smiling, over-enthusiastic kind of manic optimism that bored him, because it was like a cartoon, without texture or depth" (371).

The prominence of the theme of alienation is no coincidence in *Americanah*. Alienation and alterity are two sides of the same coin: "The link between the two is the implicit notion of otherness, and whether this 'othered' subjectivity is defined initially by 'alienation' or by 'alterity', embedded in both states is always already the condition of 'being other'" (Vassallo and Cooke 17). Through the character of Ifemelu, Adichie proposes not only a new discourse about race that complements the frame of the Black Atlantic, as put forward in Paul Gilroy's study, but she also, through her narrative ethics of alterity, suggests alternative ways of self-making and other-making that are not complicit with global capital. Helen Vassallo and Paul Cooke describe these alternatives as "a way of asserting *being* and of refusing *conditioning*" (19). Adichie's contribution to 'asserting being' and 'refusing conditioning' lies in her attempt to re-historicize the notion of blackness and to rethink the Atlantic frame.

At a key moment during her stay in the U.S., namely on the day she meets Blaine on the train, Ifemelu decides to stop pretending to be someone else, "someone specially admitted into a hallowed American club, someone adorned with certainty" (3). When she talks to the woman behind the Amtrak counter, Ifemelu stops faking a US-American accent because she realizes that "she had taken on, for too long, a pitch of voice and a way of being that was not hers" (175). She feels alienated from her own self when she notices that the borders of her life in the exilic margins are being determined for her. Through the interaction with others, Ifemelu learns to question not only the lives of other people, but also her own life, values, and world-views. She starts to feel "irrevocably altered by America" (17) to the extent that everything her mother tells her on the phone "seemed suddenly foreign to her, and home itself a distant place" (159). When Ifemelu returns to Nigeria after having lived in the U.S. for fifteen years and starts to see Obinze again, who, owing to his experiences as a deported asylum seeker in the United Kingdom, has also changed considerably, Ifemelu perceives things differently: the place, the people, all of which seems remotely familiar to her. This process of othering points to a

paradoxical reversal: while Ifemelu was once full of ambitions to become a US-American citizen, she is confronted with a bunch of wealthy people in a newly democratic Nigeria upon her return, most of whom now deem the US-American educational system bad. Or, to give but one more example, while Ifemelu used to complain about the heat waves in the U.S., it is the humidity in Lagos that she cannot cope with when she returns to Nigeria. That it might be difficult for Ifemelu to cope with what was once familiar to her is something that her aunt had already foreseen. Many returnees have difficulties with adapting to a way of life that was once their own. In contrast to Obinze, Ifemelu sees herself as a returnee who can always go back to the U.S., which is why "she felt suddenly, guiltily grateful that she had a blue American passport in her bag" (390).

Going back to the U.S. would not only be a form of self-betrayal and a way of fleeing (even further) from one's own self: it would destroy Obinze's and Ifemelu's plan of a shared future. In the presence of the other who is from the same place, Obinze and Ifemelu do not need to explain themselves. In the U.S., Ifemelu only has this feeling once, namely when she participates in a meeting of the African Students Association. In this context, Ifemelu bonds with other Nigerians, Ugandans, Kenyans, Ghanaians, South Africans, and so on with whom she exchanges stories about Africa. Together, they make fun of US-Americans, but they also derive pleasure from mocking Africa. Ifemelu senses renewal and, as a result, begins to entertain ideas about alternative forms of life and later even the idea of going back to Lagos. Adichie thus succeeds in deconstructing the frame of the Black Atlantic in that she depicts alternative ways of self-making and community-making, which cater to the different histories of colonization and the heterogeneity of the Black diaspora. Obinze makes similar experiences, although in a different environment. For some time, he pretends to be someone else and, as a result "felt a hollow space between himself and the person he was supposed to be" (27). Such similarities in Obinze's and Ifemelu's lives are depicted as "good omens" (61). One could arguably conceive of their reunion at the end of the novel as an allegory of a democratic way of being and living together in a non-dictatorial political system, a way of refusing to live in a cross-cultural relationship (in which a lot of time is spent on explaining).

It is towards the end of the novel that its transgressive potential and dialogue with moral theory becomes most visible. Susan Andrade notes that Adichie's first two novels "name a relation" (94) between national, familial, and gender politics. This is also the case in *Americanah*, in which the reader encounters a fully developed woman character, Ifemelu, whose political actions are geared toward positive social change. The fact that Ifemelu writes a blog about race fits well into the bigger picture, as blogging serves as a metaphor for the intricate relationship between private and public central to ethics and is seen as a democratic medium capable of fostering positive social change. The new border poetics that Adichie establishes in her novel thus exceeds the thematic and cannot be reduced to the level of content. Rather, the ways in which the ethics of the told and of the telling come together in the novel must be conceived of as a structural principle, as a conscious decision and strategic choice for narrating alterity. As narrative strategy, otherness is an integral element of Adichie's border poetics, which oscillates "between dissent from and complicity with sociopolitical norms and, through its ethical interpellation, provokes readers to assess how they relate to these norms" (Banita 23).

That literary studies and the humanities find themselves -- once again -- in a crisis of legitimation is something that cannot be dealt with in detail in this article; however, I quote from Liesbeth Korthals Altes's *Ethos and Narrative Interpretation: The Negotiation of Values in Fiction* because it underlines what I am arguing for in my study: "a renewed urgency to legitimize both literature and literary studies -- criticism and theory -- by foregrounding the ability of both to elicit reflection about values, rationality, or morality, reflections considered vital to culture at large as well as to individuals" (15). Twenty-first century literary fiction, as I hope to have demonstrated in this article, functions as an experiential, metacognitive space that elicits paths for meaning and identity making. A philosophical experiment, or what I mean by ethical genre, fictions of migration are predisposed for reasoning about values, norms, and world-versions in the age of globalization. Literary fictions like Adichie's *Americanah* remind us of the ethical and political value of twenty-first century fiction in the sense that they both display and interrogate contemporary forms of life, thus "promoting explanatory models that help make sense of the diversity of life, and imagining the 'unity' that might be desirable in a human life" (Harpham 33). The forms of life that Adichie depicts in *Americanah* deviate from fixed life plans. Rather, ruptures, fissures, and discontinuities take center stage in the novel. Despite the presentation of primarily disrupted lives, the novel, through its form, manages to preserve a sense of wholeness and continuity. Fiction, in other words, has the power to not only represent and reflect on life plans: it can actively construct and shape life plans and endow them with coherence and meaning.

What follows from this is that the ethical and political value of literary fiction transcends the level of manifest content and is rooted in a conceptualization of the fictional text as an other. Reading and writing, in this context, are practices of ethical and political positioning and interpellation. It is on the basis of these practices that readers start to challenge the limits and possibilities of their own lives. Literature as "life experiment" has its own limits: ethics and literature's transmission of values are not generalizable beyond the work in question: it is the role of literary studies and criticism to intervene in this process of constant revision and negotiation by illustrating that twenty-first century literary fic-

tions are "symbolic representations of complex life processes, whose ethical force consists precisely in their resistance to easy interpretation and appropriation" (Zapf 173-74). Any sort of ethical criticism or ethical narratology that adopts too celebratory an approach makes itself vulnerable to the criticism of a naïve view of literature as a catalyst for empathy and an understanding of literary studies as consisting primarily in revealing literature's great political import. However, in contemporary societies that are becoming more and more differentiated, the relevance of literary scholarship and criticism should not be limited to the study of the text, the values and norms it presents or to processes of production and reception as political acts in their own right. What is equally important is that literary scholars invest time in highlighting the positive social value of literature itself and ask themselves what are the crucial questions that literary criticism should attend to in the twenty-first century. Only if we, as literary scholars, "listen" to the ethical and political value of twenty-first century fictions by giving particular attention to recent literary responses to some of the most pressing contemporary problems will it be possible to reclaim the legitimacy of literary scholarship and criticism as an indispensable tool and precondition for social change in a world that seems to be more attentive to weapons than words.

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