

The Ethos of Narrative: Telling/Writing, Listening/ Reading, Communication, and Caring

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My main research interest lies in the field of theories of reading and reader-response. Being a feminist scholar, I am also interested in research in all fields that show how the perspectives and experiences of women can bring to light important aspects that have been obscured or underestimated by prevailing androcentric theories. Specifically, I argue that there is a connection between reading and the ethic of care which feminist scholars have found in the moral deliberations of women, and that this connection has important implications for the social and cultural work done by narratives.

I was born in Manila in August 1942, a few months before the bombing of Pearl Harbor, and the Japanese invasion of the Philippines. My parents were middle class professionals. I was the eldest of six children. I studied chemical engineering at the University of the Philippines, and after a brief stint at the Philippine Atomic Research Center, I left for graduate study at the University of Virginia (UVA), USA. I belong to a generation of young educated Filipinos who left the Philippines in the 1960s and 70s to pursue educational or professional goals in the USA. At UVA, I received master's degrees in Chemical Engineering (1965) and in Mathematics (1969). I worked briefly at a General Motors plant in Columbus, Ohio, before returning in 1972 to academia to pursue graduate studies in English. I received my Ph.D. in English at Ohio State University in 1980, taught at the University of New Hampshire from 1979 to 1997, and then at Purdue University from 1997 until my retirement in 2014.

My personal life developed apace with my professional life. David Schweickart and I met at UVA, and we married in 1966. It is an interracial marriage. David is white, I am Asian. Neither of us knew at the time that we were committing a crime in the state of Virginia (the landmark supreme court decision in the Loving case came in June 1967). My daughters were born in 1968 and 1972. Both have their own stories to tell about growing up Asian-American in the United States. My own immigrant experience gave me a first-hand lived understanding of the concepts of hybridity and dual subjectivity.

Two factors led me to specialize in the new field of criticism and theory. The first was my training in engineering and mathematics, which gave me a penchant for puzzle solving. The second was my involvement in the women's movement, which had captured the hearts and minds of many women students and faculty at Ohio State. The women's movement and the nascent discipline of Women's Studies raised many compelling issues and thus, opportunities for groundbreaking research. I had an inkling that working in that area would be a good career path.

In the summer of 1981, I met Elizabeth Flynn at the School of Criticism and Theory at Northwestern University. She invited me to work with her on a collection of essays that was eventually published as *Gender and Reading: Essays on Readers, Texts, and Contexts* (Johns Hopkins UP, 1986). At the time, studies of reading and reader-response as well as studies of gender were beginning to make an impact on the academy. It was exciting to work at the intersection of these two fields.

Feminist criticism was initially focused on canonical texts written by male authors. I was particularly impressed by Judith Fetterley's account of the damaging effects of the androcentric American literary canon on women readers (*The Resisting Reader*, 1978). According to W.E.B. Du Bois, African Americans experience a split between their racial identity and their identity as Americans. This double consciousness is oppressive because the culture of racism makes the two identities incompatible. Judith Fetterley applies the same idea to the experience of women reading androcentric literature:

To be excluded from a literature that claims to define one's identity is to experience a peculiar form of powerlessness—not simply the powerlessness which derives from not seeing one's experience articulated, clarified, and legitimized in art, but more significantly the powerlessness which results from the endless division of self against self, the consequence of the invocation to identify as male while being reminded that to be male—to be universal, to be American—is to be *not female*. (xiii)

It occurred to me as I read Fetterley that as a Filipino-American woman trained in reading and teaching literature written by British or American men and women, married to a white American man, and mother to Asian-American daughters, double-consciousness is a fact of my personal and professional life. Double consciousness can be (often is) problematic, but I could not bring myself to think of it as necessarily oppressive. Let me be clear: I understand the oppressive double-consciousness Du Bois and Fetterley describe. Once in a while, I become acutely aware that in the eyes of the dominant culture, I am other. But most of the time, I enjoy and value the cognitive and moral insights made available to me by the duality of consciousness that is part of my lived experience.

In the summer of 1975, I had the good fortune to attend Fredric Jameson's seminar at the Institute of Marxism and Culture, at the University of Minnesota in St. Cloud. One of the themes of this seminar was the concept of dialectical thinking. Jameson made the distinction between antinomies and dialectical contradictions. Antinomies are abstract binaries, like mathematical contradictions, not amenable to resolution; for e.g., an integer is either odd or even. Dialectical contradictions are real and concrete, signaling problematic situations that need to be worked out theoretically and practically. Thinking dialectically, for example, of the self/other opposition, one would see that neither pole is fixed. In the specific case of reading, the self/other opposition is central to the problem of meaning: is meaning objectively in the text, or did I make it up from my own subjective resources and experiences? Thinking dialectically, one would see that it does not pay to strive for a reading that is uncontaminated by the reader's predilections, nor is it fair to say that the reader can make up meaning as she pleases. Instead, one should think of meaning as the product of the dialectical interaction between self and text, where self and text pass into each other, making and remaking each other. The difference between self and other persists and motivates every interpretation.¹ The method of dialectical thinking I got from Jameson bolstered

¹Jameson offers a comprehensive treatment of dialectical thinking in *Valences of the Dialectic* (2009).

my intuition that being able to maintain a duality of consciousness is a good thing, and encouraged me to recognize this as a feature of the reading practices that I admire.

Eventually feminist scholars turned their energies to the vast but understudied literature written by women. My essay, “Reading Ourselves: Toward a Feminist Theory of Reading” (in *Gender and Reading*, 1986), uses Adrienne Rich’s reading of Emily Dickinson as a model for a practice that portrays meaning as the product of the dialectical interaction between Rich and the Dickinson she reads into/out of the poems (31–62). Rich’s reading is double-voiced. She devotes half of her intellectual and imaginative resources to the work of giving voice to Dickinson’s poems, and the other half to maintaining her own voice. Eventually, I will argue that this model is applicable to reading in general. While I was working on *Gender and Reading*, I was captivated by two other research areas: the first was Jürgen Habermas’s theory of communicative action (*Moral Consciousness and Communicative Action*, 1995).² The second was Carol Gilligan’s elaboration of the ethic of care discernible in women’s moral deliberations (*In a Different Voice*, 1982) and Nel Noddings’s structural analysis of the caring relation (*Caring*, 1984).

According to Habermas, when we speak we implicitly make three validity claims: an intelligibility claim, a truth claim, and a normative claim. For example, when I say that “Women and men are equal,” I am implicitly claiming that this statement is intelligible to speakers of English, that it is true, and that it is morally right to say so. Habermas is concerned primarily with truth and normative claims. He argues that such claims cannot be decided by monologic reflection. This means that on my own, I cannot determine whether a truth or moral claim is valid. Validity claims can only be vindicated through discussion with others under conditions of domination-free discourse where no force operates except the “unforced force of the better argument,” or what Habermas calls an “ideal speech situation.” In other words, truth and moral validity are neither subjective nor objective—they are intersubjective.

In the cognitive dimension, Habermas’s theory is consistent with the principle underlining the peer review process for scientific and academic research. In the moral dimension, he presents his “discourse ethics” as a revision of Lawrence Kohlberg’s theory of the five stages of moral development (Habermas 116–171). Kohlberg associates the highest stage with the ability to think of moral issues in terms of universal principles of justice. Discourse ethics incorporates a dialogic component at each stage, and at the highest “postconventional” stage, which Kohlberg identifies with the ability to think of morality in terms of universal principles of justice, Habermas adds the ability to evaluate normative claims in domination-free discussions with all others who have a stake in the issue. Habermas’s theory is persuasive because it appears to fold familiar ideas of free speech, democracy, truth, and justice into a neat cogent package. Unfortunately, women scored significantly lower than men in empirical tests of Kohlberg’s model. For Carol Gilligan, this anomalous result is proof of gender bias—Kohlberg’s model may give a good account of the moral consciousness of men, but it is at odds with the way women reason about moral issues. The finding of gender bias applies by extension to Habermas’s discourse ethics.

Habermas is aware of the criticism of Gilligan and her colleagues.³ He attributes their argument in favor of a different ethic of care more fitting to the moral consciousness of women

²See also, Habermas, Jürgen. *A Theory of Communicative Action. Vol. 1: Reason and the Rationalization of Society*. Translated by Thomas McCarthy, Beacon Press, 1984.

³Habermas says in a footnote that Gilligan’s book was published after he had finished his own book. His response to Gilligan is based on her earlier articles, “In a Different Voice: Women’s Conception of Self and Morality” in *Harvard Educational Review*, and “Development from Adolescence to Adulthood: The

to two problems. The first is the failure of his critics to distinguish between justification of norms and their application to concrete lifeworld situations. Of course, according to Habermas, the proper application of discourse ethics requires a careful, prudent, context-sensitive “hermeneutic effort,” but not additional forms of moral reasoning (181–182). The second problem has to do with the failure to “distinguish clearly between moral development and ego development,” between the ability to reason about norms and the ability to translate these norms into action. Again, studies of the personality traits that would enable people to behave in accordance with their moral principles are certainly necessary, but not a morality of care different from a morality of justice (182–184).

Other feminist scholars have written critically about Habermas’s model of discourse ethics.⁴ My own contribution to the discussion draws from Nel Noddings’s structural analysis of the caring relation and from studies of reading. Studies of reading led me to see a fundamental error in Habermas’s definition of communication. Habermas makes the mistake (a common one) of defining communicative action as speaking. When voice is taken to be the sign of action, then silence becomes the sign of non-action, and listening becomes indistinguishable from doing nothing. It makes sense in a speech-centered model to specify the equal distribution of free speech rights as the condition for fair and reasonable discussion. But since communication cannot happen unless someone is listening, the equal distribution of free speech rights is a necessary but insufficient condition for ideal discourse. One must also stipulate the obligation of discourse participants to give each other a fair hearing. It becomes clear, when we consider written discourse, that there are two modes of communicative action, the expressive mode of writing (or speaking) and the receptive mode of reading (or listening). Studies of reading foreground the intricacies of the receptive mode of communicative action that are often obscured by speech-centered models.

In Habermas’s model, communication is a symmetrical relationship between two speakers. I speak, you speak. While I speak, you must be silent; and I will do the same when you speak. The reciprocity of speakers fits in with (dominant, androcentric) ethical theories built on the symmetrical relationship between two equivalent individuals (e.g., two consenting adults), each with equal right to the same role, that of speaker. This, of course, overlooks many asymmetrical relationships—between parents and children, between someone needing help and someone able to give it, and as it turns out, between writers and readers, as well as speakers and listeners. In fact, the symmetrical reciprocity of the speech model of communication covers two asymmetrical intervals of communication—I speak, you listen; you speak, I listen. To understand communication and, by extension, all human interaction, we need to understand the asymmetric interactions on which all equality and reciprocity are built.

I was especially drawn to Nel Noddings’s analysis of caring because I recognized the analogy with reading. Noddings’s defines caring as an inherently asymmetrical relationship between two people in different roles, the role of one caring, and the role of one cared-for. I am one-caring; you are one cared-for. Eventually, you may be one-caring, and me one cared-for. But every interval of care is asymmetrical. Noddings attributes three elements to the role of one-caring. The first is “engrossment,” or concerted attention to the cared-for. By using the word

Philosopher and the Dilemma of Fact,” with J. M. Murphy, in *New Directions for Child and Adolescent Development*.

⁴See, *Feminists Read Habermas*, edited by Johanna Meehan, especially “From Communicative Rationality to Communicative Thinking: A Basis for Feminist Theory and Practice” by Jane Braaten (139–161), “Feminist Discourse/Practical Discourse” by Simone Chambers (179), “The Debate over Women and Moral Theory Revisited” by Seyla Benhabib (203), and “Discourse in Different Voices” by Jodi Dean (229).

“engrossment,” Noddings resists the usual idea of “empathy,” or identification as the basis of understanding and caring for another. “Engrossment” strives for an intersubjective connection that preserves difference. It is not conditioned on seeing the other as essentially like oneself. The second element is “motivational displacement”: one-caring deploys her cognitive, emotional, and moral resources in the service of the completion of the projects of the one-cared for. The third element is a duality of consciousness that enables the one-caring to preserve an independent perspective (30–37).

The similarity between the role of the reader to the role of one caring is obvious in the situation of a teacher reading a student paper. In submitting her paper to me, the student is implicitly asking me to make the effort to advance her communicative project. My job is to understand what the student is trying to say—to give her paper a careful, fair reading, and to offer ideas for how she can improve her work or develop her ideas further. The first element of my role is “engrossment.” I need to focus on what the student is trying to say, not on what I would say if I were in her shoes. The second, “motivational displacement,” refers to the work—cognitive, moral, and psychological—that I must do in the service of the student’s communicative project. Finally, I must maintain a dual perspective—one devoted to the student’s project, and the other to a critical perspective that allows me to assess her work and to make useful suggestions for improvement. Obviously, things could go wrong. I could be too self-involved, incompetent, lazy, dismissive, inattentive, unresponsive, overbearing, unjust. But because the interests of another person are involved, it matters that I try to read ethically. The above argument can be extended to reading in general.

The asymmetry of the caring relation requires a redefinition of reciprocity. According to Noddings, reciprocity does not require “the identity of gifts given and received” (74). For caring to work, the cared-for must accept and acknowledge care, then he “must turn freely toward his own projects, pursue them vigorously, and share accounts of them spontaneously. This is what one-genuinely caring wants but never demands” (75). “The one-caring for a fully participating cared-for is sustained and invigorated, and her caring is unlikely to deteriorate to ‘cares and burdens’” (72). Of course, it is good for caring to be mutual: I care for you, and at another time, under the right circumstances, hopefully you will care for me. But this mutuality is not always necessary. A could care for B; B could care for C; C could care for D, and so on (in other words, caring is something that is paid forward). In a culture of care, there is a good chance that someone will care for A. In the case of reading, a writer I read (e.g., Noddings) does not need to reciprocate by reading my work. It would be fantastic if she could write me a personal note expressing her appreciation for my careful reading of her book (Noddings passed away in 2022), but it is enough for my work to advance the conversation on the ethic of care. More generally: if A reads B carefully, B does not have to read A, but she could read C, C could read D, and so on. In a culture of careful reading there is a good chance, that A will get a careful reading of her work.

Both Gilligan and Noddings associate the ethic of care to the moral consciousness of women. However, it does not follow that women care and men don’t or are not able to. In fact, all of us can, do, and have to care. I think the ethic of care is basic to everyone’s moral sense. The problem is that, unlike the ethic of rights, the ethic of care is currently not backed by extensive and authoritative studies and research, nor by legal and political theory and practice. As a result the ethic of care appears largely inchoate, indecisive, emotional, and morally unreliable in discourses dominated by rhetorical authority of the ethic of rights. (For example, the complicated ethic of care Carol Gilligan found in the moral deliberations of women contemplating abortion have been largely marginal to the public discourse on abortion in the US, where the debate is framed as a contest of rights—the right to life of the unborn versus women’s reproductive rights. People on both sides of the debate take advantage of the political and legal

force of the rhetoric or rights. They may make emotional appeals to care, but they know that winning arguments need to be based on rights.)

Let me conclude with some comments about the ethos of narrative. We know that telling stories is important, and that justice requires that everyone have equal opportunity to tell their own stories. Telling my story is a way to realize my personal, cultural, and social identity, a way of talking about what matters to me. But telling is only one half of the equation. In telling my story, I address others, who I hope are willing and able to give my story a good hearing—to understand and care for what matters to me. But why should I expend the effort of listening or reading stories that may not have any immediate relevance to me? What do I get from taking the trouble and the risk of putting my subjective resources in the service of someone else’s communicative project? The answer, following my argument above, is that reading stories is like being one-caring. Reading gives me the opportunity to exercise the cognitive, moral, and emotional abilities of being one-caring to another. It helps me maintain my fitness to care.

When I was teaching, like many others, I made an effort to include a diversity of texts in my reading list because I was persuaded by the arguments that the literary curriculum should be inclusive and diverse. At the end of each semester, I felt that my effort in undergraduate courses had been mostly unsuccessful. Often I had to contend with the resistance of my mostly white students. Even when they were being dutiful, they rarely got beyond deciding that discrimination is bad, expressing sympathy for the victims, and appreciating the good things in their own lives that they had previously taken for granted. My research on reading and the ethic of care gave me another way to think of the results of my efforts, and additional reasons to persevere. True, a diverse reading broadens the educational horizon—it offers students the opportunity to learn about and interact with experiences and perspectives different from their own. But more than this, reading sets them up in a caring relation with diverse communicative projects. It offers them the opportunity to exercise and strengthen the cognitive, moral, and emotional skills needed to act as one-caring for others across social and cultural categories of difference. Even when they were only going through the motions, my students were still exercising their care muscles. Learning to read different kinds of stories carefully and with pleasure is one important way to develop and strengthen a culture of care.



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