The Limits of Empathy: An Interview with Marianne Noble

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On Borders and Biopolitics

racialized, classed, and patriarchal versions of heterosexuality; and shifting strategies of immigration control under neoliberalism, had not been addressed in the scholarship, and I felt that they needed to be. I believe that new logics of control were being formed, and new kinds of questions needed to be asked.

However, neoliberalism itself is not a singular project or program; rather, neoliberal projects and programs have been assembled in various ways in different places and moments, and are continually changing. So it's important to not reify neoliberalism and its modes of subject production and governance, which are certainly always changing. Instead, we need to historicize and problematize specific instances, which I did, in terms of immigration controls in the US at a specific moment.

The Limits of Empathy:
An Interview with Marianne Noble

Conducted by Rebecca Lane and Jeffrey Zamostny

Marianne Noble is Associate Professor in the Department of Literature at American University. She won a Choice Outstanding Book Award for her study The Masochistic Pleasures of Sentimental Literature, published by the Princeton University Press in 2000. Her current project is entitled Sympathy and the Quest for Genuine Human Contact in American Romanticism. She spoke on "The Limits of Empathy and the Promise of Sex in Walt Whitman and Julia Ward Howe" for the 2010 Spring Lecture Series of the Committee on Social Theory.

dC: How does social theory factor into your work? Can you tell us about your history with social theory?

MN: For my first book, I read a lot of poststructuralist theory, such as that of Lacan and Derrida. Lately, I have been reading other kinds of philosophy—Common Sense philosophy, phenomenology—as well as psychology. All of these should also be well-informed by social theory.

Actually, I think that a lot of psychoanalytic work would benefit from more social theory. Many psychoanalytic critics derive their theory entirely from Freud, and they don't look at culture at all, only to the family situation a child lived through that is now causing him as an adult to behave in whatever way he's behaving. But when I was five years old, I asked my mother, "Mom what do you do for a living?" and she said, "I'm a doctor." I said, "You can't be a doctor: you're a woman; you must be a nurse." This shows that if you just study the family, you cannot understand psychology. I was five; my mother was a doctor, and yet I believed that women could not be doctors. Obviously that message did not come from
my family. Where did that idea come from at that tender age? Well, in the storybooks that we were reading, like Richard Scarry, and on TV, all of the representations of doctors were male.

I use social theory to study the social origins of people’s thinking. One of the great things about literature is that it treats the development of characters in a social context. Harriet Beecher Stowe is someone whom I’ve published on recently, and she says her job as a novelist is to explore the psychology of characters by fleshing out their circumstances fully, with the whole community, the whole religious, historical, and cultural situation. That’s why I like literature. When I ask questions like—Why are people masochists? What causes good people to do evil actions? Or, what causes an evil person to behave charitably?—literature gives answers that I find fuller than those that would be given in a legal or economic answer.

DC: About the relationship between theory and history... How do you use theory in a way that doesn’t obscure the very specific context of history?

MN: I’m not sure I do. I’ve been called on the carpet for that. Some people have said, “How can you call this literature masochistic when the term hadn’t been invented yet?” and “How can you apply twentieth-century analyses of masochism to nineteenth-century literature?” Honestly, I’m not sure I entirely understand the question. Just because Foucault says the homosexual wasn’t invented until the 1870s, does that mean we can’t call Whitman a homosexual? And, can’t we use queer theory to discuss his writing even if he explicitly disavowed being a homosexual?

I do realize that theories can cause people to find what they are looking for. They did that for me. I was deeply steeped in Lacan and I saw glimmers of Lacan all over, and I spent a while trying to make them be what I thought Lacan said they were. It’s the Procrustean bed of theory. In an ancient Greek myth, Procrustes was an evil person. He had an iron bed. When people came to his house, he put them on the bed. If they were too small, he would stretch them until they fit the bed. And if they were too big, he would chop off their limbs until they fit the bed. The Procrustean bed of theory is that you stretch what you find to fit your theory, or chop off parts that don’t work. We do this all the time. Theory can be an intellectual straitjacket, though a very empowering straitjacket. It helps us see things, but it can distort our interpretations. You need to ask yourself, “Am I just distorting my evidence to fit my theory?” But on the other hand, without the theory, you might have remained at a more superficial level of thinking. Theory can take you deeper, but you need to be aware and skeptical of your insights. I guess the best way to avoid obscuring the context of history is to historicize. Know your period. Try not to make broad statements based upon a single text. Read more and know more. Immerse yourself in your period in a holistic way.

DC: When historicizing your work, what do you do with the notion of law? How do you understand law from a literary or cultural studies perspective?

MN: I understand law as the body of rules that govern civil society. Cultural studies engages with how people actually live. These are not always the same thing. For example, the dominant legal text in antebellum America was Blackstone’s *Commentaries on the Laws of England*, written around 1770. It’s a compendium of common law in England that served as the cornerstone of American law. One of the laws I have studied in Blackstone is the law of coverture, according to which a woman is legally “covered” by her husband. She is invisible to the law. All kinds of rules come out of this idea, such as that a woman cannot make a will because that would imply she has investments apart from those of her husband. But an important question is: how does this law make people think? Do women and men understand women as invisible? Does this affect, say, their sex life or their behavior in public? For this question, we can use literary or cultural studies.

DC: Much of your current work focuses on empathy and what you call genuine human contact, and you will soon be teaching a course entitled “The Limits of Empathy and Contemporary American Fiction.” What are, then, the limits of empathy?

MN: Empathy is feeling what another feels. It is a neural, immediate, and automatic response to another person. The limits are that you can think that you understand the other person when you don’t. When I was a child, I remember standing on the playground and having other children tease me. They were chanting and making fun of me. It was a very searing experience. But suppose I now hear people subjected to racial or sexual taunting. And suppose I think that I know what they are going through because I was teased on the playground. That is an example of the limits of empathy. Suppose I were to say, “You can get over it, buck up. I know exactly what you’re going through.” In fact, I don’t know what they’re going through. Their situation is different from mine. And the whole history and culture that comes into calling someone a nigger or a queer are very different from my being teased. I think that empathy is wonderful. Empathy is one of the most beautiful things about human nature. But if we don’t recognize other people’s differences and their unique circumstances, we really don’t understand them. And then we don’t help them. If I believe that my childhood taunting is the same as racial taunting, then I’m not going to try to pass laws against hate speech. I might just say, “Come on, toughen up. All children go through that.” Empathy must be coupled with a recognition of difference and a lot of listening to the other in order to be truly sympathetic.
The Limits of Empathy

dc: Since we’re talking about your new work on empathy, how do you see the relationship between this new work and what you have already written?

MN: Masochism is a quest for contact. One masochist I read said, “If you’re being hit, you know that you are not alone.” Masochists are seeking concrete and tangible signs of another person’s presence. Emily Dickinson has a number of poems in which she cherishes scars. One poem says, “Each scar I’ll keep for him / Instead of gem.” She is saying that he—whomever he was—scarred her, but she is going to call her scars gems because they are signs that he was there, proof that this guy came. The lover was there and then he left, and now she is suffering from emptiness and sadness. But she appreciates the sign that he was there. It is present, and though he is absent, the pain is present. It is an abiding proof that there was contact.

The new book is about other kinds of contact, ways that do not involve pain and suffering. I am exploring sympathy as an alternative and less violent, way of making contact.

dc: When you look at genuine human contact, is it between characters, or between character and author, or between character and reader? What kind of contacts are you looking at?

MN: I’m focusing on how contact is represented between two characters. I am interested in the question of author and reader too, and it feels like a shame to not write about that. I have a problem as a scholar, which is that my thinking is too lateral. I need to resist the temptation to add more examples and instead think more penetratingly.

dc: Is that why you incorporated science into your studies about emotion?

MN: That is a good example of my thought being lateral, actually. But having heard about the brain science of emotion, I didn’t think I could meaningfully talk about sympathy without thinking about it, because it seems to explain so much to me. I was supposed to be reading phenomenology, but I kept picking up these books on neuroscience. I always want to understand why people do what they do, and that is what neuroscientists are looking at. They tell us that the brain dictates more than we think it does. I loved a book by Christopher Frith called Making Up the Mind: How Our Brain Creates Our Mental World. And others by Marco Iacoboni, and Antonio Damasio and some others. These books explore various ways that the self is not in control of our thoughts. They are shaped or even determined by chemicals and neural wiring. I’m pretty persuaded that a lot of our thinking is made up by our brains. A wonderful book called The Echo Maker by Richard Powers explores that. Our brains are neurologically wired to interpret information and make decisions about what we see, and our brains continually adjust the visual information that we receive to make sense. For example, if we see a big car and a small car, our brains tell us that one is farther away than the other, even if one is really just smaller than the other. It makes these adjustments, and it’s very difficult, if not impossible, to overwrite some of that neural scripting.

My first book was about discourse and how desire becomes encoded on the body by discourse. I did not resolve this to my satisfaction in my book, but I’m not sure anybody can resolve it. Maybe discourse analysis can tell us how a woman might come to desire a strong, cruel man, but what creates the spasm in her genitals? How do we go from the discourse that constructs identity to a physical response?

dc: Within the field of literature, is it common to refer to science and focus on the body?

MN: It is becoming more common. For example, the most recent edition of the Norton Anthology of American Literature includes Richard Powers, who writes about cognitive neuroscience. He explores human motivation and behavior from a neurophysiological perspective, as well as from the perspective of other sciences. So judging from the Norton, clearly a lot of people in the field think this is a good trend. I am teaching it and I’m raising these questions. I know we’re not in a post-racial society, but I personally am interested in analyzing other aspects of identity in American literature. Identity politics, racial politics, have been extremely important, and I still study and teach them, but I think that the body and the embodied nature of emotion is a great new field.