Perspectives from the Narrative Conference

Chiara Pellegrini: Hello and welcome to this bonus episode of the Narrative for Social Justice podcast. During this episode, we are each interviewing a participant to the Narrative conference that took place in June 2022.We ask them about their paper, about the connections between their work and social justice, and at times about the conference in general.

[Chiara and Joonas]

Chiara Pellegrini: My name is Chiara Pellegrini and I'm chatting today with Joonas Säntti. So I'm here with Joonas. Do you want to introduce yourself?

Joonas Säntti: Well, hi everyone, my name is Joonas Säntti. I know it's hard to pronounce these Finish names with these strange dots. I'm from the University of Jyväskylä in central Finland and my thesis that I've been working on for what seems like millions of years by now, it concerns basically, a lot of the same issues that, for example, Chiara Pellegrini's thesis considers. That is to say ungendered or ambiguously-gendered narrators – in my case, both character narrators and the strange, or should I maybe say, anti-mimetic or unnatural type of narrative voices in fiction. And I'm very interested in general about the relationship between these kinds of anti-mimetic choices in the telling and how this relates to queer ans to queerness in narrative voices in general.

Chiara: So Joonas and I were on a panel together called "TransForming Narrative Studies," where we attempted to start a conversation about defining what trans narrative studies might be, and one of my big questions about it was how it overlaps with queer as well.

Joonas: I really loved our discussion there, and I was very happy that the audience wanted to really participate in it as well, and the exchange of ideas that took place there was very, very important. I also was very pleased that we have such different texts – and also texts not only in the literary sense that we were discussing at the panel. I think that there was this wideness of different genres, for example, considering literary texts alone: novels, poetry. And very different type[s] of novels, considering their narrative choices. How do fictions and narratives contribute to understanding and, also, in a positive sense, *un*understanding, kind of, queering the queer? And its readability and

how we come to recognize those things that we considered queer in the present cultural discussions.

Chiara: I think for me, the thing that I'm always interested in when it comes to narrative form, because I look at, in comparison to you, very mimetic or kind of quite realists texts, I'm interested in the kind of tensions between the intelligibility that narrative form can lend to specific identities or embodiments or modes of expression, but also the disruptions that embodied experience that is considered more widely than maybe it is normative culture can effect on narrative.

Joonas: But I think some of the texts you discussed also use very surprising forms of narrative, for example, was it Rumfitt?

Chiara: Yeah, Alison Rumfitt, *Tell Me I'm Worthless.*

Joonas: Yes, yes. I think that it uses, for example, the house or building as a sort of narrative voice.

Chiara: Yeah it is really interesting, right, that the House speaks, but then, it also, it speaks to characters, and it speaks through them. One of the interesting things about that book that I find is the kind of rapid shifts in focalization and in narrative voice that, at some points, you're not quite sure who is speaking there. And I think that the text is trying to voice a contradictory collective voice, that is dealing with the legacies of hate and violence that that plague or haunt the UK, because it's a horror novel ultimately so there's this haunting.

Joonas: Haunting us as a theme seems to be central to many dealing with queer and trans narratives for understandable reasons.

Chiara: Yeah, yeah, absolutely, and I think, and I find it interesting because at the conference, for example, I went to panels about horror. There was a panel called "The Situational Uncanny," which was very interesting. I think I asked if anyone had read this novel, and I kind of wanted to start a conversation about, I guess, how does the social horror and the supernatural horror, or the formal horror, how do they meet?

What did you think of other panels in terms of social justice? Did you think that there was an engagement with social justice over the course of the conference?

Joonas: Yes, I was actually, I think, I was positively surprised by the amount of political and contextual narratology that was presented at the Narrative conference, I think. I saw

very interesting takes on racial forms, for example, and on narratives in Instagram, for example, visual representation. In general, I was just really in agreement actually with something that James Phelan said during the speech to Robyn Warhol. James Phelan suggested that that it was feminism that sort of saved narratology and made it relevant for larger cultural discussions. Well, maybe it's a bit of a generalization, I don't want to suggest that everyone has to do political narratologies. But I think that even in general it is a kind of testament to this effect.

Chiara: I think there's a general acknowledgement that context and politics are central to narratology rather than being tangential. And I thought the last day, especially, we had a good gathering of queer discussion that happened across panels. In the morning, there was a "Queer Forms" panel, and then I went to the "Non-Normative Bodies," and then there was our panel, and it felt like, almost like a continuous conversation, which almost never happens at a conference.

The question we always ask our guests is, what does social justice mean to you? Which is a very difficult question, but I wonder if you want to venture some thoughts off the top of your head.

Joonas: For me personally in relation to, sort of, research that I'm doing, I think it relates a lot to questions of literature being able to be something that challenges our categories of thinking and challenges our supposed knowledge about words and, and the usefulness of our concepts. And I think that, in this sense, there's also a kind of, I wouldn't say conflict, but maybe a bit of tension between sort of narrative studies, that is, sort of more directly political and the sort of narrative studies and queer theory which is about about questioning our concepts. I very much understand the need to give due emphasis to care and commitment, for example. But also, I don't want to kind of lose, I don't want to put the idea of transgression, for example, in the queer sense of the word into some kind of past that we have moved away from into this present collectivity where we can all agree on what, who we are, and what we want to do, what our utopias are.

So I think that there's also this use still for a more, kind of, universalizing queer take that's not about certain identities necessarily but more about the potentiality of 'queering it' all in the sense that, for example, Sue Lanser writes about in the article "Queering Narrative Voice": I think it's also politically useful that we don't kind of accidentally ghettoize our projects – that they can relate to people across and not simply inside certain already-named stable political identities.

Chiara: Yeah, yeah that's a really good point, yeah I agree, and I do think that the implications of the kind of discussions that we've been having do spillover into, you know, narratology more in general, and just in the way that, you know, again, Phelan talked about how feminist narratology saved narratology. Political narratologies have broader implications for understanding narrative concepts, but also social notions and social relations.

Joonas: This book that I was presenting on, which is, which is kari edwards' experimental work of poetry *Succubus in my Pocket*, edwards typically signed their books 'no gender' and was a sort of anti-gender activist in the sense that – in a different sense than the word is now being used, for example, by far-right media. But, I kind of see this as an important question that doing a research on that book, I have to kind of constantly remember this, that when it comes to trans narratives about, for example, what it means to transition, what it means to move from one self to another self and how stable or permanent or how desirable that change is, that there is this level in that writing and in the politics very directly represented by the author in several instances, where they kind of resist this kind of commodified storytelling about the change of the self. And I think this directly also relates to very, very large discussions about, what's the relationship between genderqueer, and trans; and if I ever read the book as a genderqueer book more than as a transbook, what would I lose, you know.

Chiara: Yeah, yeah absolutely, and I think one of the big questions that was asked during our panel as well, which I thought was very generative, and I think Sue Lanser asked that, was, what is a trans narrative? And I guess a follow up question is, what does it mean to read a narrative as trans and not something else? So, yeah, that was definitely something that was opened up for me in that discussion as well.

[Carolin and Victoria]

Carolin Gebauer: Hi everyone! My name is Carolin Gebauer and I'm here today with Victoria Pöhls. Hi Victoria!

Victoria Pöhls: Hi Caro! Thanks for having me on the podcast!

Carolin: So great to have you here. Would you like to introduce yourself to our listeners?

Victoria: Yeah, sure. I am a researcher at the Max Planck Institute for Empirical Aesthetics in Frankfurt, in Germany. This is formally a non-university and nonprofit research organization dedicated to the empirical study of who likes what and why in the

arts, and right now there's a music department, the Department for Cognitive Neuropsychology, and the Department of Language and Literature, where I work. At ISSN some people might know me from my work on the Graduate and Contingent Faculty Caucus, where I am primarily in charge of the mentorship program together with Ella Mingazova. Yeah, this is where you might know me from already.

Carolin: Thank you! Yeah, that's a great program the mentorship program – so thank you so much for doing this important work for the Society. At the conference you were part of the panel "Migrant and Refugee Narrative," and you gave a presentation on "Long-Term Effects of Reading Refugee Narratives," which focused on the question on how the process of reading can or maybe can't change outgroup portrayal.

Victoria: Ya.

Carolin: Would you like to tell us a little more about your presentation?

Victoria: Yeah, so this presentation is part of my current project, which is at the same time my PhD project in comparative literature. And, as you said, I studied the effects that engaged literature can have on real readers, and there my focus is on fictional short stories from a refugee perspective. So on a very basic level, what I do is I have people come to the lab at the Max Planck Institute and they read two short stories, taken from a collection by the Iranian author Sam Rapithwin. He was an immigrant who came to Germany in the 60's and now lives in Canada. And he wrote the short story collection *Mein Deutsches Kind* – My German Child – in German and it comprises multiple stories, always refugee focalizers who are trying to settle in to Germany, in German society. And as one can imagine they face various challenges, a main one being racism, xenophobia, or stereotypically expectancies of German *Mehrheitsgesellschaft*.

And as a literary scholar, I see that, of course, the topic which gives voice to a disadvantaged minority group within society and informs readers who most likely have not experienced flight themselves about these problems, but I also see that the way that it is done stylistically, readers are encouraged to blend with these characters by sharing their perspective. And also the way pronouns are used in these texts: for example, we often find a change this 'I'-perspective in the narrative to a more inclusive 'we'-perspective that makes readers experience refugees not as this 'other,' this outgroup, but as a part of 'we,' and then there's often another shift from this 'we' to doubly deictic you, which I as a literary scholar would argue encourages readers even more to feel as if they were in the shoes of the refugee and they are experiencing directly what the refugee feels. So from a stylistical point of view I think there's a clear indication that these stories are trying to have some kind of impact on readers. And in

my current research I'm trying to find out if these hypotheses of having an impact are actually real, or if it's just something that literary scholars believe that texts can do. Because we all tend to believe that literary fiction is really powerful. Yeah, but maybe it isn't, or maybe there are limits to what fiction can do.

Carolin: Yeah, wow, that's super interesting! You talked about the use of narrative perspective, for example, and I'm also very much interested in the functions of narrative perspective and what kind of textual and also readerly effects are achieved by these narrative strategies. And, of course, when we interpret these texts, we always come up with hypotheses of how they might effect readers. Can you tell us a little bit about what you found out, about your results? So what did you find out when having these experiments with real flesh-and-blood readers?

Victoria: Yeah. So what I did in these experiments, is I tested multiple things but one of them was, I was interested if it would change their outgroup portrayal. So the way that they would speak or actually in the experiment write about refugees themselves after they have read these texts, because you get this inner perspective, you might be more inclined to see refugees as an individual and not as a part of the group as you normally see them if they are talked about in newspapers: you know, the flood of refugees is coming to Germany, so this is not an individual. But it's very different in the texts. Yeah, so I think that these texts are trying to make readers think about the problems and encourage them how to change their stereotypical views of refugees and this might show if they talk about refugees themselves.

What I actually found is that, compared to readers who did not read these short stories – so there was a control group, and they didn't read these short stories – what I found is that in their texts, first of all, they were asked to describe an image and write a short story about this image. And what you could see on this image is a snowman that gets destroyed by one person, and the other person is trying to rescue his or her snowman. And, first of all, what you see is that these participants, they sometimes – they can choose names, of course, for these characters – and some of them do and some of them don't. And what we find is that, if they have read the refugee texts, for example, they're much more likely to individualize the refugee characters on the picture in their story, so they either remember the names that we told them that these characters have or if they don't remember, they try to make up their own name. And then it goes on, you know with the characterization. They are much more likely to focus on the emotions of the refugee character if they have read the refugee text, compared to people who haven't. So, people who haven't, they just see this picture of refugees, but they haven't read the refugee story. They are, for example, if the German character destroys the snowman, they make up really good excuses why the German actor is acting like that

and making it appear as if it isn't that bad, as if the refugee most likely has done something bad to the German character, so he is just reacting, not really being vicious himself or herself, while this is something that we don't find so much in the stories of people who have read something about refugees.

Carolin: So, it seems like the results of your experiment, they seem to substantiate maybe or give evidence to this hypothesis that we have in the tree studies that reading fiction can change our minds and it can influence the way we perceive the world and the way we think about specific groups.

Victoria: Yes, definitely.

Carolin: So, this is really, really important. And in the context of this podcast which is interested in in the nexus between narrative and social justice, what would you say: how can we use these findings that we can gain from empirical research to maybe come up with a broader argument on the ethical and maybe also the cognitive value of reading narrative fiction? Do you do you think about this in your project and do you have any ideas about this?

Victoria: Yeah. Yes, of course, I mean, I think it's very interesting that these kind of counter-narratives, because I would say, this is, I mean from a minority perspective. And, yeah, we always talk about that it's very important that these voices are heard. And I think that we can see that at least some kind of impact is achieved if German readers can really better emphasize in this way with refugees after reading only two short stories. And I didn't mention this before, this other task is not directly after they read these two short stories but it's after two weeks of time. So, it really has this, I think, long-lasting impact that a minority group is seen a little bit different at least after some time after engaging with narrative. So I think in that way it can be, of course, not the only thing that we should think about if we think about social justice, but narratives, of course, could play a big role in fostering a more just society.

Carolin: Yeah. Yes, I would absolutely agree. And you focused on migration and refugees, but you also mentioned minority groups in general, so we could also transfer these ideas to different minority groups and different questions relating to social justice. So it's not just about migrants and refugees but, of course, …

Victoria: Definitely.

Carolin: … about different outgroups or marginalized groups, let's say.

Victoria: Yeah, I mean, many groups are devalued also by narratives. I mean, these are maybe the good narratives that we wish that people would read. But I mean there's also other kinds of narratives, where people are really devalued. So, refugees have been devalued by de-individidualizing them; but also homosexuals have been devalued by using language usually reserved for animals; women have been devalued by just not showing them as somebody who has intellectual thoughts. There are lots of films and narratives where they're just bystanders when ideas are exchanged. Yeah, so I think there's different kinds of narratives and as narrative scholars, we should maybe also try to see how these counter-narratives can be used to counteract these other more typical narratives that people are in contact with.

Carolin: Yes. Yeah. And I would also say that the results of the empirical research you're doing might also be interesting to other disciplines, right? It's also highly important for interdisciplinary work, I'd say, because it's not only interesting for literary studies, but it may also speak to others who are not necessarily working with narrative, but who find these findings very interesting and see that narrative can actually have an impact. And this is one of the reasons why it's so important to also focus on how narratives work and how narrative structures are also used by authors to create a certain effect.

Victoria: And maybe also, we could look at how different practices of, you know, post-narrative absorption could also enhance these effects. I mean, there's also not so much work done on this so far. So, if reading in a group or in a more school setting or university setting, if this can also enhance these effects – that would be also interesting to look at because, of course, there are limits to what literature can do. We also found this in the experiment: for example, very deeply ingrained biases cannot be changed – that was another finding that we had – but maybe this is only because, I mean, two short stories is not a big exposure. And so it would be really interesting for other discipline areas to find out if we couldn't have this effect by for example reading groups or talking about the text, giving people some more time for reflection. This could all enhance the effects of literature.

Carolin: Yeah. Great. Thank you so much, Victoria, for this short conversation and for giving us an insight in your work and recapitulate the presentation that you gave at the narrative conference. So, your presentation is still online, so if listeners would like to learn more about the experiment, please go to the conference website and watch the video. And is there a website where people can find you, if they're interested in your work and if they're interested in what you're doing?

Victoria: If you want to find out more about the general powerful effects that literary fiction could have: I started the Powerful Literary Fiction Network with a colleague from Sorbonne University, Mariane Utudji, and in this network we aim to bring together all kinds of people from all kinds of disciplines that are interested in the powerfulness, the impact that fiction and narratives can have. And if somebody listens right now who thinks this sounds interesting, then you can check it out. And we have a website with information about the network and the conferences we organize and our publications. And this website it's: https://p-lit.org. And they can find some more information.

Carolin: Great, yeah, check out this great project! Thank you, Victoria, for being here.

Victoria: Thanks, Caro. Thank you.

Carolin: It was so much fun. Thanks.

Victoria: Thank you.

[Angela and Yonina]

Angela Du: Okay, I have Yonina with me, who presented on a panel called "The Didactics of Sexuality." Is that right? Do I have that right?

Yonina Hoffman: Yeah.

Angela: Okay, great. Now you need it. You want to just introduce yourself to everyone–and I'm Angela Du.

Yonina: Hi, yeah. I'm Yonina Hoffman. I am going to be starting here for the fall term as Assistant Professor at the United States Marine Academy, and I got my PhD from Ohio State working on narrative voice and narrative rhetoric. My specialty is largely post-45 American fiction. But more and more I've been sort of allowing myself to dabble a little bit back into the 20th century and also into popular culture. And narratology has been something I've studied since day one. So I had a really wonderful time at the conference being able to apply some of my thoughts from narratology to a new domain, namely, online pornography.

Angela: Yeah, your talk was titled "Fictionality and Genre in Pornography's Fantasy Taboos." Can you just tell us a little bit about what you talked about?

Yonina: Yeah, absolutely. So I sort of, the talk had a lot of sort of balls in the air. Some of the mixed goals had to do with [?] fictionality and the definition of fictionality but also thinking about the ethics of fictionality as they pertain to certain genres of online taboo pornography. And so, because of that, genre was also a piece of the puzzle. And largely–I mean, my talk was titled "Fictionality and Genre in Pornography's Fantasy Taboos." Basically, what I wanted to argue was that in certain cases of sort of minimal narrative, which–porn is growing increasingly minimal and its engagement with narrative because it's more oriented around short clips for viewers to get sort of just a little bit of pleasure and move on, rather than a full-length film–but even in these cases of minimal narrative, fictionality can take place and, in fact, be central to the effects of porn videos. So, it's sort of like clearly separating out fictionality and narrative; or narrative elaboration. And showing that even, even though there's a really basic narrative and only, you know, two people have sex or–well, one of the domains that I looked at starts to dabble with the rape fantasy. That's because these are taboo, that even with the minimal narrative situation, fictionality is central to how we understand and how we engage with them, so that viewers know that these texts are inherently fictional when they come to them. There are a lot of really little cues but also the overarching awareness that to engage with this taboo ethically, it must be engaged with as a fictional domain and not as something in real life. So, I kind of went through a lot of different things around signaling of fictionality, the relevance of genre awareness to signaling fictionality, and talked a little bit about paratexts as well for that.

Angela: Did you maybe want to give an example either from the talk or from your research? I'm sure you had all kinds of like fun, weird examples that informed your thinking.

Yonina: Yeah, I started out actually engaging with the sort of strangely ascendant porn genre of step-sibling incest. In part, because it's been very strange launching over the last few years as this genre becomes more and more prominent online and wondering like why? And how does that work? And, you know, the sort of highly simulated dimensions by which these videos make very clear that this is not real life. So, one of my examples was this what's called fauxcest genre. And the other example that I use is a similarly, like, very, very fake genre called bait bus. Essentially, where a straight man is tricked into getting onto a bus by a sexy woman who says that they want to film some porn, and then once on the bus, he's blindfolded, and, you know, ends up, ends up not exactly being coerced but being seduced into gay acts. And so, you can tell in both of these that not just the fictionality but the fantasy element is very clear: that, not just that a taboo would be broken, but that those in the taboo want to break it.

So there's, in these particular cases, I think, the sort of added ethical dimension, that what's happening is ultimately consensual but sort of renegotiating the space around consent and what leads up to it. That's part of what makes these videos and their fantasies potentially problematic for production or for viewers, because they, they present a non-injurious exploration of something that in real life is very serious and, in fact, illegal.

Angela: I mean, I really liked your talk for its engagements with fictionality and putting it into conversation with desire; not necessarily saying that we know what the desires of viewers are but looking at how it shapes desire, engagement with desires, and the kinds of desires that are kind of given permission to by these videos. And also, at the same, as you've been saying, just the sheer amount of genre awareness for the producers of this kind of content and the actors in it–the necessity to have some kind of consent, even if it's, you know, problematic, or not entirely there, or not entirely stable, the idea that it still has to be there to some extent. And, as you know, our podcast is focused on issues of social justice in relation to narrative studies. And so, I was wondering if you could, even if it's just speculative, maybe talk a little bit more about the ethics of fictionality as you're thinking about it in relation to broader social justice issues. I know you had a couple of questions–you and all the panelists were given some questions to think about, about fictionality and what it enables or what it doesn't, the kinds of gray areas, the possible, "immoral" avenues that this could this type of fictionality could elicit–and so you know, maybe thoughts that you had during the Q&A or afterwards about that.

Yonina: Yeah, absolutely. I mean, so as I did my research for this talk, you know, I found, and this is no surprise, that the ethical debate is one that's very central in porn studies. And that there's this, of course, like, deep concern, even beyond the logistics of production, for the ethics of reception: that viewers would, perhaps, be influenced by viewing fantasies of illegal and "immoral acts." Quote, unquote, I mean, I hope you can hear the scare quotes around "immoral."

Angela: Yes.

Yonina: And that, you know, the viewers would then pursue the making real of this fantasy. So, I think that is the sort of persistent concern in all media studies. I mean, we don't just have that in terms of sexuality, we have that in terms of violence to: the sort of way that violent video games sort of anxieties of the late 90s and onward have gotten us to have some concern with how we engage with violence and how violent texts impact our cognition. So, I don't want to be facile and say there's no connection. Because I think precisely what makes this topic so interesting and so important is that

there is a connection, but that we don't exactly know what that connection is, and I think one of the things that we have to recognize is that the connection between fantasy and reality is going to be different for different people. And that even for an individual, from one moment to the next, the connection between fantasy and reality can shift. So, the most interesting and sophisticated work in the porn studies domain that I read was interested in investigating precisely those shifts in saying, "you know, look, if we're really going to talk intelligently about desire and pornography, um, we can't flatten it out: to say, this is a one-to-one relationship between desires and actions." And so, what I found most interesting, then, turning back to fictionality, has to do with more studies of how viewers actually think about what they're viewing. So kind of, taking a more reader reception approach.

And that is where some of the questions that I got in the Q&A started to go. I got a really wonderful question from Meng Chen Lang, saying, "I'm really interested in these shots that you provided of actual viewers on forums talking about how this is fake or whether or not this is fake. Because some viewers, you know, they become so absorbed in the fantasy they forget to remind themselves or even don't care to remind themselves that this is fake. And so, one avenue I think that the Q&A lead for future research is a lot more, pointing me to a lot more nuanced research into actual audiences, rather than ideal or intended audiences, to use the rhetorical theory terms.

But it also pointed me because of that, to the more complicated relationship between fictionality and reality, that there is this defense that is made, that it's just a story, and that readers can and should remind themselves, that it's just a story and be self reflective and self critical. And those were notes that I ended my talk on with the, you know, we–yeah, you know, what we can do that we can be conscious and thoughtful consumers and all of our media. But the fact that we have to choose to be that means that there will always be the danger that someone might no. And so, I think when we get into this kind of discussion, especially within a social justice framework, one of the things I think we have to accept is that there is no, there is no purity here, and that there is no fundamental way that we can defend, quote, unquote "dangerous" media, except to further the project of education, further the project of self-reflection, so that we can create a viewing and thinking audience that can kind of press pause when fantasy starts to jump a little too fast.

Angela: I mean, I think that's great. And I really like what you say about how, you know, there is no fundamentalism there, and it's something that is really useful to remind ourselves and our students, too, when engaging with issues of fictionality.

I'm also hearing that the "immoral" is a category that depends on fictionality to stand. And that just because something is fictional, or has a basis in fictionality, doesn't mean that it doesn't have social effects or effects that people would be quick to call real; that there's a kind of, there's something real about fictionality I guess, and that is sort of worth pursuing in projects like yours. I hope that you will take up some of this further research as you go along.

Yonina: Yeah, thank you. Um, I mean, one of the ways that I think the fictionality has the most sort of curious connection to reality is exactly here, where it meets with sexuality. There's a line that I really enjoyed, that I quoted at the end of my talk, a scholar named Todd, Cain says that fictional pornography has the potential to enlighten us about our own desires. And just simply the idea that one could be enlightened about what one wants–that is really part of what it means to be human, and to explore your own self as a human. To find your place is to, in a certain way, explore what you want more broadly. And the fact that we don't know what we want, both in sexuality and in life, I think further makes fictionality central to the human process.

Angela: That is so beautiful. I think we should end on that note. Is there somewhere that people can find you if they're interested in learning more about you and your work?

Yonina: Yeah, I'm on Twitter @Yonina and yoninahoffman.com.

Great. Thanks you so much.

Chiara Pellegrini: And finally, Torsa Ghosal talks to Aili Pettersson Peeker about empathy and entrainment, and this is Aili's answer.

[Torsa and Aili]

Aili Pettersson Peeker: Hello Torsa! Thank you so much for inviting me to this podcast and for all your work on it, and I'm just going to start talking. So, I got interested in researching narrative empathy, because I found the idea that reading literature can make us better at empathizing both intriguing and inadequate. People often claim or assume that imagining yourself in the position of a fictional character, will make you better at doing the same, with people in real life, and that this is a good thing. These interconnected planes seem to me to be simplifying both empathy and literature. So, to complicate things I started my research on narrative empathy by looking at narratives that invite readers to empathize with what we can call ethically problematic characters. So, for example, I was working on *Brief interviews with Hideous Men* by David Foster Wallace, which is a short story collection that, as the title may suggest, contains a lot of

ethically questionable characters, to put it mildly. And I was also working on *The Kindly Ones* by Jonathan Lethem, which is a novel told from the perspective of the Nazi perpetrator also (spoiler alert turn off your headphones if you're planning to read this novel) he kills his mother and wants to sleep with his sister. Both of these texts include instances of second-person narration and initially, I was very interested in how this narrative technique might invite or perhaps trick readers into feeling for these hideous men and how that would complicate the relationship between narrative and empathy.

Right now, my biggest beef with narrative empathy, however, is that it reinforces what I like to call the *individualist fallacy*. So, the individualist fallacy, as I see it, is the idea that an individual is a unified, stable, and essential unit that and it's an idea that underlies much of Western science and literature, including I think models of narrative engagement, the focus on how we empathize or do not empathize with fictional characters.

And this is where I think that *entrainment* concerned with useful, other models for how to understand the relationship between feelings and fiction. So, by entrainment, I mean the neural entrainment, I mean the process by which our brain become aligned with others' brains through external stimuli, for example, sounds of speech. This is also called brainwave synchronization, which I think is a term that explains it fairly well. It's all about how our brains on a neurological level synchronize to certain rhythms that we here. What is useful about entrainment for rethinking empathy is that it's a process of synchronization rather than mirroring. This is helpful because in discussions of empathy today, and particularly in interdisciplinary cognitive literary studies, we often talk about empathy as if it would be a mirroring of someone else's emotional state. This is in part due to the discovery of mirror neurons in the 1990s, and mirror neurons are these neurons in our brains that fire when we watch someone else doing something, for example, being pricked by a needle, in similar ways to how they fire if we ourselves would get picked by the needle.

Since the discovery of these neurons, the idea that we mirror someone else's emotion, when we empathize with them has gotten even more popular than it was before, which I think is a problem because the idea of empathy as mirroring reinforces that focus on the individual during the empathizing rather than the person they supposedly empathize with. So, in this way empathy actually appears to be pretty selfish a lot of the time, and empathy has actually been critiqued for being selfish and the past decade, particularly by feminists and cognitive scholars, such as Saidiya Hartman, Namwali Serpell, and Fritz Breithaupt.

And entrainment is useful as a way out of this critique, a way around this critique, because it opens up for new ways of thinking about how we relate to other human

beings, either through text or in real life. So, rather than a mirroring of another's emotional state, entrainment allows us to consider the coordination of consciousness. Because of this focus on a more relational process, it doesn't risk obliterating the other to the same degree as many instances of what's called *egocentric empathy.* And it also doesn't obscure the social context that any act of [existent?] to the same degree as the mirroring model. And so, because of this, I think entrainment rather than mirroring and more conventional models of empathy can be useful social justice related work. Because an understanding of empathy based on mirroring reinforces the centrality of the individual, it often obscures the power dynamics that shape any act of feeling with others, both and in real life.

So, in the case of narrative empathy, historically, and, I think, currently, it is often the case that the more powerful empathize with the less powerful. It's very often an asymmetrical process that reinforces asymmetrical power structures. Entrainment, however, doesn't equate two different situations in this way because it focuses on synchronous sessions and how individuals change. In this way, I think that a shift from mirroring to synchronization through entrainment adds nuance–very much needed nuance–to contemporary discussions of narrative empathy. So, I think that we need more models and more ways of understanding how real people interact with narratives in the world and that it's very important that these models take power structures into account.

Chiara Pellegrini: Thank you for listening to this episode of the Narrative for Social Justice podcast. You can reach out to us at our email address narrative4sj@gmail.com. We are also on Twitter @narrative4sj and our Facebook page is called Narrative for Social Justice.

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