

Cultures of Empathy

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During the European ‘migrant crisis’ of 2015, a Hungarian journalist was recorded tripping a refugee father and child fleeing police, and in the ensuing public outrage over her breach of journalistic distance and lack of empathy she lost her job. In 2021, the image of a Spanish Red Cross volunteer comforting a migrant on a beach in Ceuta went viral and resulted in her being targeted and abused online for what was seen by some as an excess of empathy. The vast reach of the #BLM and #MeToo movements and the rise of anti-#BLM and #MeToo backlash exemplify the complex ways in which empathy, generally understood as the ability to tune into the experiences and emotions of others, currently plays a major role in social relationality and public discourses. Theorists such as Nussbaum 1997, Hoffmann 2000, and Segal 2018 see empathy as a necessary condition for moral development (e.g., in moral reasoning and moral judgement), while feminist scholars favour “a more empathic, less rule-based approach to human interactions” (Koehn 1998) and encourage “feminist empathic identification that builds connections across boundaries of difference that divide women” (Gray 2011). Empathy—what Blankenship (2019) calls “rhetorical empathy”—can be taught or at least promoted through exposure to narratives told from diverse vantage points. The fostering or nurturing of empathy plays a critical role in global citizenship education. Based on the ethical effects of narrative on readers, many school boards recommend Harper Lee’s *To Kill a Mockingbird* (1960), due to Atticus Finch’s empathic qualities while discouraging or even banning other fictional works.

Empathy, however, also has its detractors. The idea of “narrative empathy” has been challenged (Keen 2007). Especially in the Global North, emotional responses may be limited to a voyeuristic thrill that stops short of engendering actual social change or advancing social justice. As Pedwell (2014) puts it, empathy has become “a Euro-American political obsession.” In addition, in our polarized cultural moment, empathy for empathy’s sake may encompass “extreme acts of violence as well as many forms of accepted everyday behaviour” (Breithaupt 2019). Empathetic gestures can, in fact, correspond to a fantasy of interpersonal or group identification and contribute to obscure systemic inequalities (Gaines 2017).

This special issue on *Cultures of Empathy* aims at analysing the forms and effects of empathic interactions in language, literature, and culture. From the rhetoric of empathy to “empathic vision” (Bennett 2005), empathy will be subjected to critical scrutiny. To this purpose, we find very useful Keen’s definition of narrative empathy as “the sharing of feeling and perspective-taking induced by reading, viewing, hearing or imagining narratives of another’s situation and condition.”

Contributions might address, but are not limited to:

- Teaching and learning empathy: conditioning empathic responses; reading and emotional response.

- The language of empathy: styles of communication and conversation, empathetic narrative techniques.
- Affective relationalities, emotional contagion, mutuality and interdependencies in cultural texts, particularly in interspecies and intercultural contexts.
- Cognitive and affective dimensions of empathy in contraposition to false empathy, hyper-empathy, and sympathy.

Detailed proposals (up to 1,000 words) for full essays (7,500 words) as well as a short biography (max. 100 words) should be sent to the guest editors by 30 November 2022: Pilar Cuder-Domínguez (picuder@uhu.es), Ana Cristina Mendes (anafmendes@gmail.com), and Erzsébet Barát (zsazsa@lit.u-szeged.hu). This issue will be part of volume 28 (2024). All inquiries regarding this issue can be sent to the three guest editors.