

# The 'close reading' of multicultural literature expands racial literacy, scholar says

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While the phrase "close reading" may not resonate for someone outside of an English department, Stanford literary scholar Paula Moya wants to reclaim the useful literary tool, especially when it comes to multicultural writers.

She defends close reading, a method of examining literature by paying heightened attention to the language, form, and details of a novel, story or poem.

By carefully examining the work of [writers](#) like Toni Morrison, Junot Díaz, and Helena Maria Viramontes, Moya builds a case that literature, when read closely, can help us better understand the multiracial world we live in and the interactions of race and ethnicity.

"Race is a complex, multivalent, and persistent social phenomenon. It's not going away and we need to do a better job of understanding and talking about it," Moya said in a recent interview.

## Portrayals of race

One way to find out more about how race operates as a phenomenon is to read multicultural works with careful attentiveness. When it comes to minority fiction, how we read is as important as what we read.

Moya draws from her years of working with social psychologists and

reading their research to better understand literature. But instead of conducting surveys or lab experiments herself, or turning to historical archives, Moya turns to readings of literature to present her findings about the ways in which race, ethnicity, gender and sexuality matter to people's lives.

Having written and edited numerous books on minority writers and the knowledge-generating significance of identity, Moya is deeply interested in the ways these writers grapple with race and ethnicity in their novels.

Her latest [book](#), *The Social Imperative: Race, Close Reading, and Contemporary Literary Criticism*, highlights the diverse range of multicultural writing by bringing together writers of color who might not appear, on the surface, to be compatible.

For instance, Moya examines the work of Audre Lorde, a lesbian, feminist, black poet from the 1970s alongside Junot Díaz, a contemporary, male writer of Dominican Republic heritage whose fiction has sometimes been criticized for being sexist.

Through a close reading of Díaz's short story "How to Date a Browngirl, Blackgirl, Whitegirl or Halfie," Moya is able to bring into discussion the narrator's attitudes toward women of different races. And by reading Díaz alongside women of color writers like Lorde, Moya discovers that Díaz is thinking in a "complex materialist way about the dynamics of racial identity."

## **Attention to context**

Moya argues that effective close reading should also rely on understanding the social, historical, political and cultural contexts from which a text emerges. Historically, the kind of literary criticism that championed close reading gained a reputation of being too focused on

the formal features while disregarding the social context in which a book was written, she added.

Literature by people of color is still generally "under-read," and this is another reason for championing close reading, Moya said.

Unlike the long tradition we have of writing about white authors, "we have a less historically deep tradition writing about writers of color. I want to give these writers the quality of attention that their work deserves," she said.

Moya focuses on minority writers like Díaz and Morrison, whom she describes as "wise writers" who think deeply and complexly about race, gender, sexuality and class.

"In their fiction, they take a question and then explore every angle of it. They are neither seeking an easy answer nor writing to soothe themselves. They are writing to understand weighty social issues and work them out in fictional forms," she said.

In addition, Moya sees herself as a literary critic who is developing deep friendships with these books and, by extension, with the authors.

"In order to do that, I need to sit with them, live with them, even develop a friendship with the work they have put out there. I need, in other words, to do the kind of intensive reading and re-reading that involves a heightened attention to literary language and form, considering them as semantic structures that mediate authors' as well as readers' perceptions of their social worlds," Moya said.

While her book primarily engages in a conversation with literary critics and the work they do, she does believe that a general reader can benefit tremendously from learning how to do close reading.

She would love it, for instance, if a book club reading Toni Morrison's *Sula* were to read her chapter on the ethical relationship of the self to others in *Sula* – "not to govern their understanding of the book but to help enrich it," Moya said.

## **Interdisciplinary literature**

Moya has worked across disciplines, with scientists and social scientists, to examine race. For many years she has taught the introductory course for Comparative Studies in Race and Ethnicity with Hazel Markus from the Psychology Department. They invite a range of faculty members from other disciplines like history, sociology and biology to discuss race. Teaching that course influenced her approach to literature because she witnessed how scholars in other disciplines used multiple methods to understand something.

According to Moya, literary critics often make the mistake of defending one particular method of looking at literature at the expense of another. She sees the role of the literary critic as that of a pluralist, one who can and should apply multiple methods to better understand literature.

"You can't understand ([race](#) or [literature](#)) through any one discipline," she said, also adding, "If you are really interested in learning more about something you are going to look at it by using various methodologies."

Provided by Stanford University

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