

Pihlainen, Review of Taynna Mendonça Marino's doctoral dissertation

The doctoral dissertation by Taynna Mendonça Marino – *Empathy Beyond Anthropocentrism and Eurocentrism in Historical Theory* – undertakes a thorough rethinking of empathy as a category relevant to theory and philosophy of history and, more broadly, to the humanities in, as it puts it, conditions of “planetary crises” (13). Marino begins from a clear and motivated claim: typical uses of empathy have tended to reduce it to a narrowly cognitive and interhuman capacity, often unproblematically viewed as “putting oneself in their shoes.” This conventional view is flawed, in Marino’s reading, because: first, it is anthropocentric: it assumes humans are the only relevant subjects of empathic relations, and it thereby excludes engagement with nonhuman beings and what she calls “more-than-human” environments; second, it is Eurocentric: it reproduces a view of knowledge grounded in Western epistemologies and history, thereby limiting dialogue with Indigenous and other non-Western conceptualisations; third, it is intellectualist: it privileges cognition over affect and care, treating empathy as a matter of understanding, of “perspective-taking”, rather than as a broader ethical-political disposition and “practice of being with others” (21). Thinking beyond these limitations, the dissertation stakes its explicit ethical-political position thus: “empathy, when rethought beyond its intellectualist, anthropocentric, and Eurocentric formulations, offers historians a powerful ethical and epistemological tool to engage with a world in permanent crisis.” (9)

The dissertation sets itself the task of addressing such limitations by rethinking empathy as a disposition that can respond to the kinds of challenges claimed now to confront the discipline. The structuring formulations – *transcultural*, *transspecies* and *transgenerational* empathy – are at its conceptual core, with each of these three corresponding, roughly, to one of the identified weaknesses (although there is natural overlap between them in the argumentation). Transcultural empathy is proposed to counter Eurocentrism and to make possible a non-appropriative engagement between Western and Indigenous and “Other” epistemologies. Transspecies empathy is proposed to counter anthropocentrism and to enable historians to recognise animals and other nonhuman beings as beings toward whom a historical-ethical-political relation can (and should, she assumes) be sustained. Transgenerational empathy is proposed to counter presentism and temporal attitudes that characterise many

history debates; it aims to make possible an ethical relation to future generations, to those whose lives are bound up with our present actions.

Consequently, the “intentionally ambitious” (11) dissertation begins with an episode that is both historically situated and ethically-politically charged: Ailton Krenak’s 2019 intervention in the context of the Amazon rainforest fires, when he insisted that “the end of the world is not a metaphor” and criticised the reduction of the forest to a simple resource. The decision to start here sets the tone for the engaged tone of the dissertation, signalling that the goal is to approach history as an ethical-political practice embedded in ongoing planetary crises, in colonial continuities and in more-than-human interdependence. The introduction names these crises as “cascading” – genocide, ecocide, climate collapse – and asserts that a discipline conventionally concerned with neutrality (“a discipline of detachment” [12]) and holding an anthropocentric focus is inadequate for facing them.

The introduction, therefore, successfully realizes two things central to this evaluation. First, it makes clear that the dissertation is situated squarely within the theory and philosophy of history and that it seeks to intervene in the ongoing debates about representation and responsibility. Secondly, it already shows that the work has a coherent and nuanced argument that is pursued consistently throughout. It also notes explicitly the author’s own positionality – as a non-white woman from Brazil pursuing a doctorate in Europe – and, rightly, presents that positionality as a precondition for the work.

From a formal point of view, the dissertation is very well organised. After the introduction, Chapter 1, “The Role of Empathy in Contemporary Times,” establishes the conceptual and historical background to what Marino aptly refers to as empathy’s “polysemy,” as well as its problematic place in theory and philosophy of history (and, indeed, more broadly). Chapter 2, “Transcultural Empathy,” develops the first of her three main formulations by placing Western cultural theory and theory and philosophy of history (notably Dominick LaCapra) in sustained dialogue with Indigenous attitudes (largely here represented by the thought of Ailton Krenak), and by showing how empathy can (and should) be reconceived as an unsettling, “bridging practice” rather than a simple cognitive operation. Chapter 3, “Transspecies Empathy,” elaborates on the second formulation by drawing, among others, on animal studies, environmental humanities and Indigenous cosmologies to argue that empathy is not exclusively human and can be usefully extended to nonhuman beings. Chapter 4, “Transgenerational Empathy,” elaborates the final formulation, demonstrating how empathy can be oriented toward those who do not yet exist and how it may help historians overcome their conventional attitudes. Finally, Chapter 5, “Post-Anthropocentric Ethics of Empathy,”

advances a more general ethical-political proposal, arguing for a care-oriented and responsible approach to history. The Conclusion returns to the problem of humility, to the recognition of the limits of historical knowledge, and to the need to reframe empathy as “response-ability” – all this well bearing out the introductory hypothesis (“my hypothesis is that empathy is a form of care and enables responsibility” [10]) and satisfying the overall goal of the work (“I am most interested in the move from the epistemological use of empathy towards its ethical role, as a desirable mode of historically responsible engagement” [14]).

Throughout, the dissertation shows broad and well-integrated knowledge of relevant discussions. Chapter 1, “The Role of Empathy in Contemporary Times,” demonstrates that Marino is familiar with history of empathy as a concept; among her extensive readings, she traces its emergence from German aesthetics, where the idea functioned as a way of “feeling into” works of art and nature, and notes how this original breadth has been progressively narrowed in the modern period to a mostly cognitive, intersubjective activity. She further contextualises this narrowing in relation to discoveries in neuroscience (all the “empathy” debates following the identification of so-called mirror neurons; the extrapolations from which she rightly treats critically [99–100]), to diverse views in moral psychology, and to the discussions of it in hermeneutics and even (in a limited way) in historiography. In this mapping, she convincingly argues that theory and philosophy of history has largely adopted empathy as an instrument of understanding and ignored its affective, aesthetic and ethical-political dimensions.

In this first chapter, Marino also demonstrates a nuanced understanding of how empathy has been discussed in different disciplinary contexts: among others, as a way of historical knowing, as a moral or altruistic motivator (in moral psychology, where particularly the critique by Paul Bloom and Jesse Prinz is well presented and then in part appropriately bracketed), as an aesthetic experience, and, relatedly, as a future-oriented practice (in environmental humanities and climate activism, where empathy is used to orient us to “foster the sense of care for generations yet to come, counteracting the short-term thinking that is predominant in our time” (63). Her decision here to view empathy “as a relational and situational ability” (33) and then, further, to adopt Karsten Stueber’s notion of “empathy-related phenomena” shows excellent judgement: by refusing to be trapped in debates over one correct definition, she retains the flexibility needed to criticise some practices while retaining and expanding others. These decisions align appropriately with the explicit aims of the work: “My concern in this

dissertation is not about narrowly defining the concept of empathy, but understanding how this (these) complex phenomenon (phenomena) can be used in historical theory.” (32)

Beyond this, the dissertation shows solid knowledge of the ethical-political “turn” in theory and philosophy of history – the move, roughly from the 1990s onward, toward acknowledging that history writing is entangled with ethical-political commitments. In Chapter 2, “Transcultural Empathy,” the author shows she is conversant with Dominick LaCapra’s work on trauma, on “empathic unsettlement,” and on the care needed to avoid appropriating the other’s suffering (the core tenet of this “turn” relating to representational practices more generally). She understands where LaCapra’s intervention is located: as a corrective within Western discourse to overly identificatory or sentimentalist modes of “understanding the past.” She also reads LaCapra’s limitations correctly: his framework remains anthropocentric and, to some degree, Eurocentric, because the trauma in question is primarily human-to-human and located within Western historical experience (specifically the Holocaust). In this critique, the dissertation’s theoretical breadth extends to decolonial and Indigenous studies. Marino’s engagement with Krenak and other Indigenous thinkers is impressive. She is well read on the colonial histories that positioned Western humanism as universal, and refuses to assume that Western conceptual tools are the only or the best ones available. She points out that Krenak’s argument – that “humanity” is not a universal condition but a historically exclusive club tied to colonial expansion – is directly relevant to her own critique of empathy’s Eurocentrism, aptly asking, what would be “the point of continuing to affirm a notion of humanity that all along relegates other humans and nonhumans to the category of sub-humanity?” (79) In this way – articulating empathy as a “natural bridge,” as “an ethical, political and existential commitment that can build desirable relations and interactions with other beings and ways of being and knowing” (88) – the dissertation reminds how decolonial critiques of modernity intersect with debates on anthropocentrism and environmental destruction.

In Chapter 3, “Transspecies Empathy,” Marino demonstrates excellent familiarity with, among others, animal history (especially Éric Baratay, Gary Shaw, Erica Fudge), philosophy of science (Vinciane Despret), and ethology (Jessica Flack, Frans de Waal). She uses these sources to argue that empathy is a layered and situated capacity, and that it is therefore a mistake to treat human empathy as different in kind rather than degree. She also underlines the historiographical implications of these key distinctions, nicely condensing them into a key definitional question: “Is empathy about what it is like to be the other or what it is like to be *with* the other?” (111) The extensive reading supporting this chapter shows that she is more

than capable of moving across registers – biological, philosophical, historical – and to extract from all of them that which is theoretically and philosophically most pertinent.

Chapter 4, “Transgenerational Empathy,” further confirms Marino’s theoretical and philosophical abilities by drawing on trauma studies, climate justice debates and even speculative climate fiction. She is aware that historians already work with backward-looking forms of transgenerationality (e.g. postmemory of the Holocaust), but she postulates the need, also, for forward-looking, anticipatory forms (again, more as an attitude than a specific capacity), demonstrating “how empathy can help us to expand generational horizons beyond a sequence of homogeneous time units.” (118) Here, the discussion on imagination impressively refines the conceptual aims of the work. And by engaging Kim Stanley Robinson’s *The Ministry for the Future*, she further shows that she is comfortable treating non-traditional materials as conceptually productive within the theory and philosophy of history – an approach that is increasingly common in other fields, but still less so in history. Despite the obvious challenges of arguing for transgenerational empathy, this is perhaps the most convincing chapter of the dissertation, and needs to be especially commended, as does her key ethical-political point: “this form of empathy insists that the future is not a distant abstraction but a site of care already being woven into the present” (144).

Finally, the concluding Chapter 5, “Post-Anthropocentric Ethics of Empathy,” affirms her good knowledge of moral philosophy and ethics. She situates her argument in relation to the key traditions and argues that history has so far largely leaned toward the deontological and consequentialist. Her turn to an ethics of care and to vulnerability theory is well argued, and she integrates these insights without losing sight of history’s disciplinary goals.

In summary, the dissertation demonstrates excellent as well as appropriately contextualised knowledge across all the areas it touches. It does not overreach into more distant fields; for example, as noted, when it brings in neuroscience or speculative fiction, it does so modestly and to support rather than replace historical-theoretical reasoning.

By all these preceding criteria, the requirement that the dissertation demonstrate the candidate’s theoretical knowledge and expertise in the relevant disciplines is clearly fulfilled.

Beyond this, the independence of the dissertation is clearly discernible: in the formulation of the problem, in the conceptual architecture, in the selection and arrangement of sources, and in Marino’s insistence on treating empathy as an attitude and potential method, and, ambitiously and commendably, consequently “as a pathway to ethical responsibility” (134).

To break this down:

First, the formulation of the core problem is clearly original. Marino does not simply take the long-standing debate about empathy in history (e.g. “should historians empathise with past agents?” or even how that could be done) and regurgitate extant debates. Instead, she reframes the issue in light of contemporary challenges and asks what kind of empathic practice would serve a world in which humans are not viewed as the only subjects of moral concern and in which potential futures are being harmed by present actions.

Second, the approach serves the problem well with its explicit design of diagnosis, reformulations of the concept, ethical synthesis. Such tight problem–solution alignment is clear evidence of capable and independent scholarly thinking.

Third, the selection and use of debates and sources shows similar autonomy. Marinoa does not rely on a single school or a single thinker. Instead, she stages conversations across different domains – LaCapra with Krenak, Baratay with Despret, de Waal with Indigenous ontologies, trauma studies with climate fiction. These pairings are not standard; they are the result of deliberate choices serving the argument.

Fourth, Marino makes a theoretical and methodological move that is clearly her own: she treats empathy not only as the object of study but as a research stance aligned with grounded theory, “noticing” and “attentiveness.” This means she argues for a situated, responsive way of working – an approach that takes seriously the very capacities of attentiveness, responsiveness and care that she defends..

Finally, the tone is controlled and critical throughout. Marino is not blindly convinced by any of her sources but instead points out their shortcomings when necessary.

For all these above reasons, the dissertation clearly demonstrates the candidate’s ability to conduct independent work.

The originality of Marino’s dissertation lies in the fact that it does not limit itself to claiming that empathy is important and justifying that claim. Instead, it shows in detail why existing, conventional readings of empathy are insufficient and then proposes a structured analysis and reformulation that is conceptually elegant as well as oriented to extending our understanding of the theory and practice of history. At the risk of repeating some of the content description from above, it serves to trace this originality chapter by chapter:

The first part of the proposed reformulation is the insistence that empathy must be conceived of in transcultural terms. In Chapter 2, “Transcultural Empathy,” LaCapra’s idea of

“empathic unsettlement” is interrogated to see whether this Western, trauma-focused approach might support encounters with non-Western “worlds.” By putting LaCapra into dialogue with Ailton Krenak, Marino shows that even the best tools can easily remain bounded by an unexamined ontology in which “humanity” is a given. Krenak’s critique – that Western humanity is an exclusive and ultimately unsustainable construction – requires that empathy be able to bridge between very distinct thinking. The resulting notion of transcultural empathy is thus not simply empathy extended to another culture; it is empathy as an unsettling of one’s own epistemic and ontological presuppositions. This is at once a strong conceptual and methodological move.

The second part of the reformulation is the move to transspecies empathy, elaborated in Chapter 3. Here the originality is twofold. First, Marino inverts the standard methodological suspicion of anthropomorphism. Instead of treating projection onto animals as the greatest danger, she identifies the refusal to recognise nonhuman agency as a key anthropocentric bias. This inversion is important because it clears space for historians to attempt empathic reconstructions of nonhuman lives without being immediately disqualified. Second, she develops a layered account of empathy, drawing on de Waal’s biological model, that allows for gradations – from basic emotional contagion to more complex perspective-taking – and thereby supports the claim that empathy is not an all-or-nothing human attribute. The careful move from human-centred identification to a relational situatedness shows how this might be applied without collapsing difference and remaining attentive to the limits involved. This constitutes an original application of research in animal studies and neuroscience to specific problems in theory and philosophy of history.

The third reformulation, as noted, involves the introduction of transgenerational empathy. In Chapter 4 – perhaps the hardest to justify of these three reformulations – Marino identifies what she terms (after her reading of Robinson) the “tragedy of the time horizon”: the tendency of present agents (and by extension of historians) to fail to act on behalf of the future because the future is perceived as not existing. She argues that historians are more comfortable with empathic work that looks backwards (e.g. engaging with the inherited trauma of the Holocaust) than with looking forward. By introducing Indigenous notions of “ancestrality” – where ancestors and future generations form part of the same temporal fabric – and by reading *The Ministry for the Future* as an “imaginative scenario” (17) that trains “anticipatory affection” (142), she offers a way to better introduce future suffering to the historical imagination. Her metaphor of the “braid” and “braided temporalities,” in which the past, the present, the anticipated future, and the more-than-human world are interwoven, is an effective way to

conceptualise this. Here the originality is in the conceptual device, and in the way it brings together the three different reformulations: “To think history through this braided metaphor is to abandon the arrow of time, the succession of discrete epochs, and the linearity of progress. It is to listen for the echoes of silenced voices, to trace the reverberations of unfinished catastrophes, and to imagine futures that are not mere extensions of the colonial-capitalist present.” (148)

Finally, in Chapter 5, she demonstrates that these three components can be read to provide her “post-anthropocentric ethics of empathy,” grounded in shared vulnerability, relationality and care. The movement from diagnosis to the three formulations to her ethical synthesis is internally coherent and convincing. The dissertation does not, thus, simply apply existing research; it connects various bodies of scholarship in an original way to address a clearly articulated problem.

In this, the dissertation clearly satisfies the requirement of presenting an original solution to a particular scientific problem.

A key strength of the dissertation is in its coherence. From the opening image of the Amazon fires and Krenak’s statement, through the diagnosis of empathy’s limitations, to the elaboration of transcultural, transspecies and transgenerational formulations of empathy, and finally to the post-anthropocentric ethic, the work manages to present a strong and convincing argument (despite all the various directions and positions these debates could potentially introduce). Each chapter is motivated by what came before it, and each performs a focused piece of philosophical work. This is coupled with good theoretical and philosophical discipline: even when Marino moves into less traditional sources for theory and philosophy (speculative fiction, design exhibitions, animal case studies), she does so with a clear purpose and without drawing exaggerated conclusions. Along with the explicit recognition of her own situatedness and the measured ethical-political interventions she chooses to introduce, this all serves to produce an exceptional study.

One critical point that might be raised in the defence is the semantic stretching of the word “empathy.” Marino is clearly aware of this and attempts to contain it by the early decision to prefer “empathy-related phenomena” as her focus, and then moving, in the final chapter, from empathy more explicitly to care, responsiveness, and “response-ability.” Nonetheless, a more sceptical reader might ask whether – once “empathy” has been extended across cultures, species and generations – we are still dealing with the same concept, or if what is really being

proposed is a broader ethic of relational care that might be better named differently. Another equally small point is that (particularly in the Conclusion), there is some unarticulated sliding between the ethical and moral (e.g. “moral feeling,” “ethical imperative”), giving more room for an impression of normativity than the rigorous terminology and analysis elsewhere.

Regardless of these two minor notes, this is a convincing and impressive doctoral dissertation in the theory and philosophy of history. It is sophisticated in its argumentation and carefully executed, and it maintains its conceptual integrity despite exceptionally broad range. Given all this, the dissertation may, in my opinion, be considered for distinction (*summa cum laude*).

Alongside the dissertation, *Marino's other academic achievements* are substantial, with a remarkable number of presentations and strong international engagement. This pattern of activity supports the impression, already given by the dissertation, of a scholar working confidently across numerous linguistic, cultural and disciplinary boundaries.

Based on the above evaluation, I wholeheartedly recommend that Taynna Mendonça Marino be admitted to the public defence of the doctoral dissertation.



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