

SIGRID NUNEZ'S MINORITY COSMOPOLITANISM
AND THE ETHICS OF INTEREST

DOMINIKA FERENS¹

ABSTRACT

In 1996, the Association for Asian American Studies embraced an unknown mixed-race author named Sigrid Nunez as a promising new voice, awarding her the literature prize at the annual conference in Washington, D.C. The book that brought Nunez this distinction was *A Feather on the Breath of God*, a fictionalized memoir whose first two sections focused on the narrator's Chinese Panamanian father and German mother respectively. But Asian Americanists soon lost interest in Nunez because henceforth she wrote about unraced or white narrators and protagonists, and she sought inspirations far beyond Asian America. This paper examines two recent novels by Nunez, *The friend* (2018) and *What are you going through* (2020), within the framework of the transnational turn in American Studies. Arguably, Nunez's prose may be productively read through Susan Koshy's (2011) notion of "minority cosmopolitanism" because it converses with a cosmopolitan imagined community and interpellates anguished strangers into a "public", as defined by Michael Warner (2005). Like much of her earlier work, these two novels are meditations on the nature of interest: Can it be an ethical response to the anguished other? What exactly does it do? What triggers, holds, and extinguishes it? Is it a limited resource that must be dispensed cautiously? Who deserves it and who does not? How does interest help to sustain both its subject and object?

Key words: Sigrid Nunez, interest, transnational turn, minority cosmopolitanism, suicide, anguish

1. Introduction

This paper examines the recent fiction of Sigrid Nunez within the framework of the transnational turn in American Studies and provides evidence for the continuing usefulness of Susan Koshy's notion of "minority cosmopolitanism." Due to a resurgence of racism in the U.S. and financial cuts in the humanities, the field of ethnic studies has become embattled in recent years and, therefore,

¹ Dominika Ferens, Uniwersytet Wrocławski, dominika.ferens@uwr.edu.pl;
ORCID: [0000-0003-4231-1686](https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4231-1686)



less receptive to literature that does not overtly contribute to the well-being of racial minorities by exposing racism, depicting strategies of resistance, or rewriting history from minority perspectives. Analyses informed by the notion of intersectionality continue to show how racial discrimination compounds disadvantages caused by class, immigrant status, gender, sexual orientation, and disability. Little room remains in ethnic studies for other subject matter, and hence, for the prose of the mixed-race Nunez, who is profoundly interested in intersectionality but often sidesteps race. In fact, her idiosyncratic subjects match the research interests of neither Asian American nor white literary critics. There is, however, a way to reclaim Nunez's writings for both Asian American and American studies if we read them as an expression of minority cosmopolitanism. This is an attempt to do so by a Polish Asian Americanist emboldened by the transnational turn.

2. (Lack of) interest in Nunez's writings

Nunez was born in 1951 in New York City, to a German immigrant mother and a Chinese-Panamanian immigrant father, who had met in Germany at the end of World War II. Raised in a housing project on Staten Island, she went on to study English as a scholarship student at Barnard, and then creative writing at Columbia. Although she wrote fiction since college, she did not publish her debut novel until her forties and received little recognition until she was in her sixties. Not commercially successful enough to support herself through writing, Nunez was nonetheless highly valued as a creative writing instructor at Columbia, Princeton, Amherst, Vassar, Syracuse, and UC Irvine among others (*Sigrid Nunez*).

For a brief period in the 1990s, Nunez's fiction was embraced by Asian American Studies scholars because it examined her relationship with her Chinese-Panamanian father. But they lost interest when she went on to write about ambiguously raced and white characters, the war in Vietnam, black-white relations, and human-animal relations. Although critical whiteness studies gained ground in the 1990s and Kimberlé Crenshaw's theory of intersectionality became mainstream, the shades of whiteness in Nunez's fiction and her nuanced observations about the way mixed race, immigrant status, class, age, gender, and sexuality intersect did not coincide with current scholarly interests. Having come of age at the height of second-wave feminism, Nunez could have written more overtly feminist work. Instead, contrarily, she peopled her works with flawed female characters and naïve narrators who did not practice sisterhood consistently. Probably due to her minority sensibility and "minor" subject matter, her writing passed under the radar of academics working on broadly understood contemporary American literature. At times, she explored subtle modulations of narrative voice and techniques of fragmentation that precluded commercial success. At other times,

she worked with popular genres like historical fiction (*The last of her kind*), fictionalized biography (*Mitz: The marmoset of Bloomsbury*), and speculative fiction (*Salvation City*). Although her finely crafted, irreverent memoir of Susan Sontag, *Sempre Susan* (2011), was well received, it was not until *The friend* (2018) won the National Book Award that reviews began to proliferate in the US and abroad—yet still hardly any literary criticism.²

It is not surprising that, after decades of waiting for critical recognition, Nunez made the workings of interest³ central to her writing. In *A feather on the breath of God*, she looks at what happens when husbands and wives, as well as parents and children, lose interest in one another. *For Rouenna* is a study of belated interest bestowed by a middle-aged woman writer on a female Vietnam war veteran keen on telling her story—interest withheld until the war veteran commits suicide. *The last of her kind* problematizes a white activist's compassionate interest in blackness. *Mitz* and *The friend* can be read as meditations on the mutual interest of humans and animals. *Sempre Susan* focuses on Sontag's inexhaustible voyeuristic interest in human lives and the arts as a source of her vitality. Finally, Nunez's two recent novels, *The friend* and *What are you going through* ask: Can and should interest be an ethical response to the anguished stranger? What exactly does it do? What triggers, holds, and extinguishes it? Is it a limited resource we have to dispense cautiously? Who deserves it and who does not? How does it help to sustain both its subject and object? I want to argue that Nunez's prose, characterized by such idiosyncratic interests, may be productively read within a transnational framework because it converses with a transnational imagined community and clearly interpellates dispersed anguished strangers into a "public", as defined by Michael Warner (2005: 67–114).

3. Racial minority writers and the transnational turn

Since the early 2000s, Shelley Fisher Fishkin, Donald Pease, John Carlos Rowe, and many other Americanists have worked to overturn "the national paradigm of the United States as a clearly bounded geographical and political space" (Fishkin

² Nunez's astute observations of human-animal relations in *Mitz: The marmoset of Bloomsbury* and *The friend* did receive some attention (see Latham 2012, Layne 2014, Guyer 2020). A German scholar (Fachinger 2010) examined the German mother—American daughter relationship in *A feather on the breath of God*. I attempted to bring out the psychological complexity of Nunez's novels using theories of affect (Ferens 2015, 2016). Published in 2020, Tara K. Menon's review article titled "The steadfast attention of Sigrid Nunez" (2020) in the *Sewanee Review*, encompassing eight of Nunez's books, comes closest to my readings.

³ My understanding of interest as an affect aligns with that presented by Silvan S. Tomkins (2008) in *Affect, imagery, consciousness* (185–202). While I realize that interest sometimes overlaps with such concepts as attention, curiosity, and empathy, I use it here to bring out an overarching theme in Nunez's work, where this word appears with uncommon frequency.

[2004](#): 22). Convinced of the need to make “transnational perspectives more central to American studies”, so as to foreground the “multidirectional flows of people, ideas, and goods” (24), Fishkin was instrumental in the establishment of *The Journal of Transnational American Studies* in 2009. In a similar vein, in 2006 Wai Chee Dimock spoke out against the dominant practice of reading American literature solely in its national context and promoted “widely dispersed geographies” as an alternative to American exceptionalist narratives, which tend to overemphasize the English Protestant root of American culture over other roots (1-6). Dimock wrote the ambitious study *Through other Continents: American literature across deep time* to demonstrate that American literature, written in particular moments and places, may commune across space and time with intertexts that are either unrecognized or dismissed by literary criticism circumscribed by the idea of America.

Dimock’s exhortation is, among other things, a call to cosmopolitanism addressed to literature scholars. Difficult to put into practice because it requires uncommon erudition, cosmopolitanism additionally does not sit well with scholars in minority studies. As Susan Koshy pointed out in 2011, cosmopolitanism had been anathema or at best

tangential to ethnic studies scholarship. The political claim that founded ethnic studies was a demand for the recognition of minority cultures in the nation. This founding rationale has produced a lingering ambivalence in the field toward denationalizing literary figures and trends. Additionally, cosmopolitanism’s desire to recast identities in transnational frames and even to question the idea of identity has sown wariness about its political valence and efficacy for antiracist projects oriented to domestic contexts. (Koshy [2011](#): 592)

Koshy blamed cosmopolitanism’s Eurocentric bias for its unpopularity with ethnic studies scholars, pointing to “the marginalization of race, ethnicity, and non-Western cultures in discussions of cosmopolitanism” (Koshy [2011](#): 593-4).⁴ To rescue the notion of cosmopolitanism while correcting the bias, she proposed the term *minority cosmopolitanism* “to refer to translocal affiliations that are grounded in the experience of minority subjects and are marked by a critical awareness of the constraints of primary attachments such as family, religion, race, and nation and by an ethical or imaginative receptivity, orientation, or aspiration to an interconnected or shared world” (594). I find Koshy’s notion of minority

⁴ King-Kok Cheung’s *Chinese American literature without borders: Gender, genre, and form* (2016) is a paradigm of transnational studies, representing the kind of cosmopolitanism that looks to Asia rather than Europe. According to Ali Behdad, Cheung “provincializes both Euro-American and Asian-American literary studies through deft crossings of cultural, linguistic, and literary boundaries, demonstrating the powerful and productive functions of cross-pollination” (Cheung [2016](#): cover blurb).

cosmopolitanism useful for thinking about Nunez, who made a strategic choice to identify with a transnational community of writers, rather than with a race, ethnicity, or nation.⁵ While Nunez often communes in her work with Europeans, in fact her frame of reference includes other continents. I will consider the consequences of this choice for her career, and the way it has shaped her writing.

To contextualize Nunez's cosmopolitan affinities, I propose a brief look at the history of American minority writers' relation to the transnational. Paradoxically, dispersed geographies and time scales have long been imposed on racial minority subjects in the United States: on account of their skin color, they have rarely been allowed to forget "where they came from," even if their families have lived in the US for generations. Native Americans have been viewed as relics of a noble ancient race on the verge of extinction, African Americans—as being a stone's throw away from "darkest" Africa, and Asian Americans as inassimilable "Orientals," forever loyal to despotic Asian rulers or endowed with exotic mystique.

Writers of color in the US have long been expected to study their own ethnic groups and link them to distant places and times. While some resisted this form of racial profiling, others readily acknowledged their connection to distant places. The African American poet Countee Cullen asked, "What is Africa to me" in "Heritage" (1925), wondering why he should have to identify with a continent which for him evoked little more than clichés (Cullen 1954: 104). A Harvard graduate versed in Greek, Roman, and British poetry, Cullen used classical forms, not blues or jazz rhythms, to challenge his readers' racist assumptions. By contrast, the Chinese English Canadian Winnifred Eaton/Onoto Watanna, living in early twentieth-century New York, saw both the commercial and the critical value of thinking transnationally. On the one hand, she supported her family by writing bestsellers set in an imaginary "Japan." On the other, she used "Japan" to stage racial conflicts that could not be addressed in the American context (Ferens 2002: 154–170). Other writers of color reached across oceans, continents, and eons to complicate the reading public's understanding of geopolitics and national ideologies. For instance, in the short stories of Winnifred Eaton's sister Edith Eaton/Sui Sin Far, Chinese migrations back and forth across the Pacific overlap with British colonial networks extending across Canada to the Caribbean (Chapman 2016: xxiv–xxviii; Ferens 2002: 49–110). Zora Neale Hurston and Paule Marshall were among the first to stretch American literature to include the Caribbean, with its layered history of

⁵ The narrator of *A feather on the breath of God* recalls: "In college, at the beginning of every semester I received an invitation to join the Asian American society. ... Genes. Blood. Soil. Why should I feel a deeper pain on hearing that the Black Forest is dying than on hearing about the dying forest in the Adirondacks. And what is this strange feeling inspired by the photograph in a magazine: a group of smiling Asian-American children: *Those Asian whiz kids!* Pride? — a reference to the controversial *Time Magazine* cover story presenting Asian Americans as a model minority (see Brand 1987).

British colonialism, the slave trade, and African cultural survivals. Maxine Hong Kingston inserted Chinese legends and storytelling traditions into *The Woman Warrior*. Its twin novel, *China men*, undermined the story of “the winning of the West” (Roosevelt [1889–1896](#)) by celebrating the role of Chinese laborers in this process, from Hawaii and California to Alaska. Gloria Anzaldúa revised the story of “the winning of the West” yet again by claiming the languages, cultures, and territories north and south of the Rio Grande as her own in *Borderlands/La frontera*.

But for the most part, writers of color were appreciated for representing people who looked like them in the U.S. and on other continents, an expectation that persists. For instance, literary critic David Cowart, best known for his studies of (white) postmodern literature, valorizes the novels of, among others, Lan Cao and Wendy Law-Yone as *vehicles for Eastern philosophies*. After several references to Confucianism, at the high point in his analysis of Cao’s *Monkey Bridge*, Cowart explains that “the emphasis on karma here—so important to Asian consciousness—corrects for any tendency an American audience may have to read monoculturally. Americans lack a sense of karma, but for the Vietnamese it amounts to a kind of ‘ethical chromosome’ . . . as much a part of our history as . . . DNA” (Cowart [2006](#): 170). Law-Yone’s *The coffin tree* gives Cowart yet another pretext for delving into orientalism: “Every immigrant,” he argues, “undergoes a death, and the period during which he or she struggles to be reborn, to be reincarnated as the citizen of another country, resembles the *Bardo*, or process of torment and confusion described in the *Tibetan Book of the Dead*” (Cowart [2006](#), 182). By retreating to a world of religious metaphors and cross-cultural analogies, Cowart manages to deflect attention from the fact that the torment experienced by Law-Yone’s protagonists takes place not in the *Bardo* but in the purgatory of a racist modern-day American society.

When the Japanese American Karen Tei Yamashita used fiction to think about peoples, territories, and histories unrelated to her ethnic heritage, she found it difficult to publish her work (Murashige [2000](#): 323). Eventually, her magical realist novel *Through the arc of the rainforest*, about a South American country caught up in globalization, was brought out by Coffee House Press in 1990, but it was initially ignored by both Asian American and white critics, much like Nunez’s prose published in the same period.⁶ It was only with the publication of her grand novel set in Los Angeles and Mexico, *Tropic of Orange* (1997), that Yamashita’s willful cosmopolitanism came to be appreciated (Ferens [2024](#): 25–26).

Today, wariness of cosmopolitanism is presumably a thing of the past. Writers like Teju Cole, an American of Nigerian descent, claim the world as their oyster.

⁶ Eventually, however, Yamashita’s reception changed, and not only did she make an enormous impact on Asian American Studies, but in 2021 she also received the National Book Foundation Medal for Distinguished Contribution to American Letters.

Asked recently by an interviewer, “What have you been reading lately?” he replied without hesitation, “I’ve been immersed in Greek tragedy Otherwise, it’s been poetry: *To 2040* by Jorie Graham, Saskia Hamilton’s *All souls*, and the last volume by Adam Zagajewski are the last three things I’ve bought” (Cummins). But although writers may seek inspiration where they will, literature scholars of color have their own interests and concerns arising from the current moment. The persistence of systemic racism in new guises, as well as the cuts in funding for ethnic studies programs and services, have forced them to, first and foremost, take care of “their own.” Thus, what has actually happened since Dimock appealed for a spatial and temporal expansion of critics’ horizons is a stricter compartmentalization of literary and cultural criticism within minority studies, and a tighter focus on crises affecting particular minorities and their countries of origin, to the exclusion of more dispersed geographies and time scales. Consequently, less comparative work is being done than before. Form is of secondary importance and authors who do not demonstrate sufficient interest in “their own” risk being ignored. As Koshy puts it bluntly, “in ethnic canons, writers with a cosmopolitan focus are treated with salutary neglect—counted in bibliographies and anthologies but infrequently accounted for in research” (Koshy 2011: 592–593).

In effect, writers of color continue to face “a huge temptation and pressure to turn [themselves] into a walking placard for historical wrongs,” as Cole put it succinctly. “It so happens that I am interested in how history is terrible, but I’m also interested in not having that be the only thing that gets narrated” (Cummins 2023). Had Cole not made his reputation twelve years earlier with *Open city*, a contemporary Black flaneur’s account of New York, Random House might not have been interested in his new unformatted novel *Tremor*. “‘Experimental’ isn’t quite the right word,” says Cole. “I write perfectly lucid sentences—but I wanted to give myself a chance to make something that could fail. I don’t know that people are doing enough with their freedom as writers—to keep doing this 19th-century thing bores me” (Guardian 14 Oct. 2023). As a rule, the five big publishing houses listed on the stock exchange, which control the American literary marketplace, do not take risks on little-known authors’ projects that might fail.

4. Asian America vs Nunez’s “dispersed geographies”

In view of the above, it is not surprising that Nunez’s books all but failed, time and time again; even those written in a conventional realistic mode barely registered with the reading public. It is, in fact, surprising that Nunez continued telling her odd stories until her eighth novel, *The friend*, received the National Book Award in 2019. Yet when Nunez broke into mainstream publishing (*The Threepenny Review*) in 1989 with the story “Chang,” she did not seem doomed to failure. *The Iowa Review* brought out another story, “Christa,” in 1991.

Then in 1993, “Chang” was reprinted in the milestone *Charlie Chan is dead: An anthology of contemporary Asian American fiction* edited by Jessica Hagedorn. The two stories, which focus on the narrator’s Chinese Panamanian father and German mother respectively, then became the first two chapters of a fictionalized autobiography, *A Feather on the breath of God*, published by HarperCollins in 1995. This book, which had gestated for decades, articulated the complexities of mixed race and contributed to its cultural visibility at a crucial historical moment. In 1996, the Asian American Studies Association embraced Nunez as a promising new voice, awarding her the literature prize for *A feather*. In 1997, in response to years of campaigning, the US Census guidelines on racial classification were changed to include the mixed-race category. Both the literary marketplace and the field of Asian American literature were willing to make room for the voice of a minority within a minority. “Chang” was widely anthologized as an Asian American text.⁷

From that point on, Nunez published nine more books and many stories, but to Asian Americanists her career proved a disappointment because, having once written about the experience of a mixed-race daughter of a Chinese Panamanian immigrant father, with whom she shared neither a language nor interests, she never returned to the subject again. The disappointment with Nunez is most apparent in Jennifer Ho’s study of literature by several mixed-race authors *Racial ambiguities in Asian American culture* (2015). Although Ho insists that “the study of Asian American literature should be virulently antiessentialist,” she draws a firm line when it comes to authors who, in her words, write fiction “without an attention to any legible or discernible Asian American community” (Ho 2015: 135), and who do not “push[] the boundaries of Asian American epistemology” (Ho 2015: 141).⁸ By this she implies that since Nunez does not overtly challenge racial injustice, her prose is of no interest to Asian Americans. The only other extended analyses of Nunez’s fiction by Asian Americanists are a chapter in Stephen Sohn’s *Racial asymmetries* (2014) and Tara K. Menon’s review essay “The steadfast attention of Sigrid Nunez” (2020). Menon and Sohn value Nunez and show that she is neither naïve about nor oblivious of race. Yet Sohn, much like Ho is primarily interested in tracking all traces of race consciousness in Nunez’s fiction, and very little else.

⁷ See, for example, Hong, ed., *Growing up Asian American*. Avon Books, (1998), and Hara and Okja Keller, eds., *Intersecting circles* (1999).

⁸ Ho seems confident that an “Asian American epistemology” exists. Susan Koshy undermines such certainty in her well-known essay “The fiction of Asian American literature”, pointing to “the tension between the need for political identity and the need to represent the conflicted and heterogeneous formation we call ‘Asian American.’ These needs are antagonistic to each other only if we work from the assumption that there is a ‘real’ Asian American identity to which our vocabulary and procedures can be adequated” (Koshy 2011: 491).

Even had a positive mixed-race identity existed when Nunez came of age, she might not have wanted to embrace it. Her birth was a side effect of World War II, which, quite improbably, brought together an eighteen-year-old German woman schooled under the Nazi regime and a US soldier—an undocumented half-Chinese immigrant—who had enlisted in the military to secure citizenship. Nunez's parents initially had no language in common, and when they moved to the US, the differences between them, aggravated by past traumas, poverty, and disappointment, led to a protracted war in the family. The autobiographical stories "Chang" and "Christa" suggest that because neither parent was able or willing to renounce their cultural values, Nunez and her sisters suffered from an excess of ethnic identity. The fact that the family lived in a predominantly white housing project on Staten Island, far from the Chinatown community where her father worked, must have made it difficult for Nunez to absorb his heritage the way she absorbed her mother's. In the story "Chang," she describes the German mother's appropriation of the Staten Island apartment and the methodical erasure of her husband's culture:

In our house there were no Chinese things. No objects made of bamboo or jade. No lacquer boxes. No painted scrolls or fans. No calligraphy. No embroidered silks. No Buddhas. No chopsticks among the silverware, no rice bowls or tea sets. No Chinese tea, no ginseng or soy sauce in the cupboards. My father was the only Chinese thing, sitting like a Buddha himself among the Hummels and cuckoo clocks and pictures of Alpine landscapes. (Nunez [1989](#): 7)

The mixed-race daughter's passion for literature further alienates her from her working-class father: "I never saw my father read, except for the newspaper," she recalls. "I am sure he could not write with fluency in any tongue. The older I grew, the more I thought of him as illiterate. Hard for me to accept the fact that he did not read books. Say I grew up to be a writer. He would not read what I wrote" (Nunez [1989](#): 8). Meanwhile, the mother conveys to her daughters a respect for European culture, which fills the home not just with the likes of "cuckoo clocks and pictures of Alpine landscapes," but also "romances and historical novels, books about Germany (mostly about the Nazi era), a volume of Shakespeare, tales from Andersen and Grimm, the *Nibelungenlied*, Edith Hamilton's *Mythology*, poems of Goethe and Schiller, *Struwwelpeter*, the drawings of Wilhelm Busch" (Nunez [1989](#): 8).

The singularity of the above passages from *A feather* shows that Nunez could not have possibly produced a fictionalized ethnography of "her own" community because she had none. Her cosmopolitanism, to borrow the words of Susan Koshy from another context, "emanates from not being at home in the world" (Koshy [2011](#): 608). Unable to mediate family conflicts caused by cultural difference, Nunez evidently embraced writing as a form of agency and a mode of

reflecting on difference. This might explain why her primary identification is with people who write compulsively, and who do it well—not just her formidable mentors but also authors whose books fill her shelves and the reading lists for her creative writing courses.

While studying English at Barnard and creative writing at Columbia, she was mentored by the stern and hard-to-please Elizabeth Hardwick.⁹ Fresh out of the MFA program, she worked as an editorial assistant at Putnam and the *New York Review of Books*, and then as Susan Sontag's assistant. Aspiring to the world of the New York literati, she hovered on its margins, developing a distinctive minoritarian subjectivity. "I mean, here I was, always on the outside. ... An outsider, but young—which meant everything—and, you know, in the midst of all these people," Nunez said in an interview with Wyatt Mason. All the while, she was already being drawn into the vortex of a parallel cosmopolitan universe: "Here comes mail from W.H. Auden that we opened. ... We were permitted to read Auden! Think about it! The whole world was there to be involved with—without any real responsibility or expectations" (Mason [2023](#)).

5. Geographies of grief

The whole world is within arm's reach for the narrator of Nunez's *The friend*, an author and creative writing instructor like Nunez, who surrounds herself with books from many continents and epochs. In the shelter of her rent-controlled New York apartment, she converses in a quiet, intimate voice with a white male friend—a former mentor and, briefly, also a lover—who has just committed suicide. Both had entered late middle age when the friend—who had lost authority and prestige—retired and shortly afterwards ended his life. Rather than lionize the friend, the narrator gently exposes his inability to adjust to an American culture in which he can no longer seduce admiring female students, yet her overwhelming grief at the loss of the friend does not ease until the final pages of the novel. Reviewers aptly describe *The friend* as "light, musing, curious" (Gornick [2018](#)) and "charming" (Khatib & Alter [2018](#)), and insist that Nunez's prose "comforts" and "uplifts" (Soderlind [2018](#)). They do not mention that the lightness is merely a counterpoint for the relentless, punishing grief that rips the narrative to pieces. The existence of such grief is signaled in the novel's first cosmopolitan gesture. In the opener, the narrator invokes Cambodian women war refugees, who had witnessed atrocities in the 1970s and apparently "cried

⁹ In the memoir *Sempre Susan*, Nunez recalls Hardwick as both supportive and willing to crush her female students' faith in their work based on her personal taste: "bad, every word of it not worth writing" is how Hardwick dismissed a draft that would become part of *A feather on the breath of God*, which would go on to win awards (Nunez [2011](#): 111).

themselves blind” or “suffered from blurred or partial vision,” a fact noted by California physicians (Nunez 2018: 1). “This was the last thing you and I talked about while you were still alive”, the narrator says to her dead friend (Nunez 2018: 2), yielding to a frightening fantasy as she weeps: “I kept blinking, but my eyes wouldn’t clear. I thought of the women who’d cried themselves blind. I blinked and blinked, fear rising” (Nunez 2018: 3).¹⁰

In addition to addressing the friend and recalling random snatches of their conversations about writing, teaching, and suicide, in an effort to fathom his abrupt decision, the narrator communes with notable figures who share these thematic interests (see Fig. 1). Michael Davidson explains the importance of doing this kind of work across “deep time” in his review of Wai Chi Dimock’s *Through other continents*:

Reading literature through such large spatio-temporal categories requires what Ferdinand [sic] Braudel calls a ‘scale enlargement’ that ‘changes the threshold of differentiation, raising the bar so high that what once looked like huge differences now fall below the line’. . . . Scale enlargement amplifies possible correspondences between elements and diminishes local distinctions and exceptions that restrict potential affiliations. (Davidson 2007: 306).

Natalie Ginzburg	Ursula Le Guin	Franz Schubert
Hans Christian Andersen	Henry de Montherlant	Arvo Pärt
The Grimm Brothers	Joan Didion	Miles Davis
Nicholas Baker	Janet Malcolm	Johann Sebastian Bach
Stevie Smith	Rebecca West	Prince
Samuel Beckett	W. G. Sebald	Adele
Ted Bundy	John Updike	George R. R. Martin
Georges Simenon	Isak Dinesen	Franz Kafka
Edith Piaf	Czesław Miłosz	Greta Garbo
Gustave Flaubert	Christa Wolf	Yo-Yo Ma
Simone Weil	Sigmund Freud	Laurie Anderson
Virginia Woolf	Edna O’Brien	Leo Tolstoi
John Keats	Milan Kundera	Ludwig Wittgenstein
Lawrence Olivier	Flannery O’Connor	George Bailey
St. Therese	Henry James	Vladimir Nabokov
Jean Cocteau	Philip Roth	Joy Williams

¹⁰ In her study *Refugee lifeworlds: The afterlife of the Cold War in Cambodia* (2022), Vietnamese Canadian author Y-Dang Troeung offers an in-depth analysis of the phenomenon of blindness without a physiological cause, experienced by numerous Cambodian immigrant women in California.

Louise Bogan	Garrison Keillor	William Shakespeare
W. H. Auden	Charles Augustin Sainte-	Plato
George Steiner	Beuve	Seneca
Honoré de Balzac	Adrienne Rich	Heinrich von Kleist
J. M. Coetzee	Charles Baudelaire	Henriette Vogel
Karl Ove Knausgård	J. R. Ackerley	Gavin Ewart
Otto von Bismarck	Robert Graves	Karl Kraus
Manfred von Richthofen	Rainer Maria Rilke	Michael Herr
T. S. Eliot	William Congreve	Elmore Leonard
Samuel Beckett	Franz Liszt	Serge Koussevitzky

Fig. 1. Historical figures mentioned in *The friend*, in the order of appearance.

The narrator refers to things these historical figures wrote and did with the kind of familiarity with which one might quote a friend or neighbor, sometimes to throw light on an insoluble problem, but just as often to show how, ironically, their relations with others fell short of their reputation and lofty ideas. While the writers listed in Figure 1 mostly hail from the Western world, Figure 2 shows that the geographic range of the narrator's references is actually much greater.



Fig. 2. Geography of *The friend*

The suicides examined by the narrator span three continents and two millennia. Many more nameless suicides appear on the pages of *The friend*.

France
 Georges Simenon's daughter
 suicides in Gustave Flaubert's fiction

Germany	
	the suicidal Prince in "Rapunzel" by the Brothers Grimm
	Rainer Maria Rilke's daughter
	Ludwig Wittgenstein's three brothers
	Heinrich Von Kleist and Henriette Vogel's suicide pact
Sweden	
	a Russian victim of human trafficking, who commits suicide, portrayed in the biopic Lilya 4-Ever
United Kingdom	
	Virginia Woolf
	J. R. Ackerley
United States	
	an unnamed poet who taught in the same classroom as the narrator
	Hazel Elizabeth Hester (Flannery O'Connor's mentee)
Roman Empire	
	Christ

Fig. 3. Geography of suicides in *The friend*

Rather than a show of erudition, these references are structurally important. As the narrator's thoughts circle around questions about what drove her friend to suicide and whether he would still be alive had she and others shown more interest in his predicament, she keeps running into aporia. Whenever she loses her train of thought, she casts around for something else she has read that might be relevant. From the micro-narratives about suicide embedded in *The friend* it becomes apparent that, next to terminal illness, the lack of others' interest and attention is a common reason why people take their own lives, but the stories are unique and yield no lessons.

6. Grieving across the boundaries of animal species

Feeling abandoned by her friend, the narrator lavishes her attention on his equally bereaved dog, Apollo, who becomes her companion of choice, provokes the narrator to think about grief across animal species, and provides comic relief. While the thoughts of foreign writers are accessible to the narrator through language, the dog is truly foreign, as is she to him. "Poke. Woof. I turn my head. Apollo's gaze is deep, his mismatched ears sharp as razors. He licks my face and does the cha-cha thing again. He wags his tail and for the thousandth time I think how frustrating it must be for a dog: the endless trouble of making yourself understood to a human" (132). Distant yet close, enveloped in their shared mourning, woman and dog become "*two solitudes that protect and border and*

greet each other” —Rilke’s definition of lovers (Nunez [2018](#): 136, emphasis in the original). By paying attention to each other as objects of curiosity, they slowly recover from the stupor of mourning. Imperceptibly, the referent of the pronoun “you” in the narrative shifts from the dead friend to the living dog. But all along, the reader, in his or her solitude, has tentatively occupied the “you” and enjoyed communing with the narrator, even if jolted now and then out of this privileged position by references to dead mentor or the dog Apollo. The reader has felt “protect[ed] and border[ed] and greet[ed]” by the narrator—an achievement of the text that, to some extent, accounts for its critical and commercial success.¹¹

7. From the planetary to the human scale

Nunez’s next novel, *What are you going through*, returns to the parallel themes of crisis and the deficit of interest/attention, but this time multiple human crises compete for the narrator’s attention with the imminent death of the planet due to the folly of humans. The central problem is an ethical one: Whose torment should the narrator pay attention to? The planet’s? People’s? Which people’s? This theme is underscored by the novel’s form which follows a pattern of distraction and refocusing of attention. Its first-person narrator, who apparently notes down disjointed thoughts as they come to her, is also an elderly writer like Nunez. Even when she does not address anyone in particular, her voice is as informal and intimate as the narrator’s in *The friend*. Her mind often circles back to threads that trailed off twenty or thirty pages earlier, so that competing thoughts puncture the narrative present. What guides the narrator’s attention is interest in the suffering of human and non-human others, whatever its cause.

There are fewer transnational references in this novel than in *The friend*. At the same time, its frame of reference is, in a sense, planetary rather than just cosmopolitan. The world of the novel rapidly expands in the first chapter, when the narrator methodically summarizes for ten pages a public lecture on the Anthropocene. “I went to hear a man give a talk,” is how the novel begins. “Our world and our civilization would not endure, the man said, because they could not survive the many forces we ourselves had set against it” (8). Those forces include fossil fuel extraction, weapons of mass destruction, the proliferation of far-right

¹¹ For instance, the sense of being embraced by Nunez’s narrators is evident in Dwight Garner’s [2023](#) review in the *New York Times*: “I am committed, until one of us dies, to Nunez’s novels. I find them ideal. They are short, wise, provocative, funny—good and strong company.” *The friend* has been published in over thirty countries and has won numerous awards (*Sigrid Nunez Homepage*). A film adaptation directed by Scott McGehee and David Siegel has already been announced (Vardhan [2024](#)). Meanwhile, Nunez’s *What are you going through*, adapted for the screen by Pedro Almodovar as *The room next door* ([2024](#)), premiered at the Venice Film Festival and won the Golden Lion.

regimes, the subordination of human life to technological corporations, and the culture of self-care that prevents humans from seeing the approaching catastrophe. Since there is no way to repair the damage, the man ends, we must “learn how to ask forgiveness and to atone in some tiny measure ... And to learn how to say goodbye” (16). Irritated by what she interprets as the lecturer’s arrogance, the narrator focuses on reading his face for signs of the genuine anguish beneath his “calm, cadenced sentences” and “dispassionate mask” (Nunez 2020: 12). Having spoken the last word, the lecturer exits the lecture hall without taking questions, as if uninterested in what his stunned audience has to say in response. If this speaker (whom the narrator later reveals to be her former lover) hoped his speech would create a “public” that would fight for change, to use a term coined by Michael Warner (Warner 2005: 125–158), he manages to get the attention of the audience but not to hold it beyond the span of the lecture, for he fails to create a “social space of encounter” conducive to “reflexivity” (Warner 2005: 90). Based on the comments overheard by the narrator as she leaves the auditorium, we see that the listeners did not “recognize themselves” (Warner 2005: 118) as the public being addressed by the talk. Neither they nor the narrator will circulate the speaker’s discourse of planetary disaster because it denies them agency. By recounting the episode at length, Nunez asks the reader to go through a similar process of disidentification from the public postulated by the lecture.

In the course of the ensuing narrative, the narrator turns her back on this disturbing experience and faces a series of mundane human crises, one of which she is reluctantly drawn into for the remainder of the novel. Whereas the lecturer’s stated intent is to leave his listeners “utterly *consumed* with dread” (Nunez 2020: 14, emphasis in the original), the narrator works to overcome this existential dread by taking an interest in what human and non-human others are going through. One could say that this affective plot makes *What are you going through* parochial rather than cosmopolitan—for the narrator escapes from the planetary political sphere to the sphere of interpersonal relations—but the novel is anything but parochial or naively sentimental.

8. The ethics of interest

The novel’s title, used as a refrain throughout the text, is a translation of a passage from the work of Simone Weil, a French Catholic philosopher of Jewish descent: “*Quel est ton tourment?*” (Nunez 2020: 97), which literally means “What torments you?” or, less dramatically, “What are you going through?” Weil’s assertion that “the love of our neighbor in all its fullness simply means being able to say to him, ‘What are you going through?’” (Nunez 2020: 1) leads the narrator (and by extension also the reader) to listen intently to those in anguish and absorb their stories unjudgmentally, whether the things that torment them seem serious

or trivial. In fact, the novel is a collage of laments absorbed by the narrator, which compete for the dubious prize of being “the saddest story I have ever heard”—another refrain (Nunez [2020](#): 31, 35, 42, 195)—borrowed from Ford Maddox Ford’s *The good soldier*. Among the tormented characters is an elderly woman whose cat died; a middle-aged woman who is ashamed to show her aging body at the gym; a mother whose grown daughter has hated her since early childhood; an adult woman ignored by her widowed father; six Catholics in an Austrian documentary titled *Jesus, you know*, who agreed to be filmed while praying aloud; a Bulgarian wife unloved by her husband (189–194); and an elderly neighbor whose sole companion is FOX news (93). In a state between wakefulness and sleep the narrator even hears a stray cat tell its woeful story. Despite the somber subject matter, the novel abounds in slapstick comedy and wry humor. For instance, the narrator’s effort to follow Weil’s ethics by befriending a cranky elderly neighbor turns with time into a dreaded ritual over muffins and coffee. After visiting her for several months, the narrator admits, “I found myself actually afraid of her, when her voice was raised in anger and she glowered at me from her humpbacked position [as if she] was going to headbutt me across the coffee table. ... I felt increasingly stuck in a position that seemed both perverse and grotesque” (96). Although the narrator has no illusion that her paying attention to other people’s laments makes any difference to them, she listens with avid interest.

The only case in which her interest does make a difference is that of an old college friend, a woman who is dying of cancer and needs someone to keep her company as she prepares to take her own life. When the college friends’ plans comically backfire time and time again, the two women start referring to their project as “Ethel and Lucy do Euthanasia” (Nunez [2020](#): 203). Their mutual interest sustains them both as death approaches, and seems to genuinely ease the dying woman’s bitterness at her life ending prematurely (Nunez [2020](#): 172–173). “I’m losing my voice, she said. (She had been talking non-stop for hours.) And you must be sick of hearing it”, the friend says to the narrator, who thinks, “In fact, I was riveted. Indeed, so riveted was my attention on her every word that it felt as if there were something indecent about it” (161). Attentiveness, the expression of interest, is thus shown to be a mode of exercising agency in the face of crisis.

By contrast, the narrator’s ex who gave the impassioned lecture at the beginning of the novel, and who makes two more brief appearances, reveals that his own “interest in things has been shrinking for years. ... I haven’t read a novel in, oh, I can’t even say how long” (Nunez [2020](#): 140). “I’ve become something of a monomaniac, it’s true. These days I only write and lecture about one thing. ... Even if people do hate me so much that they make death threats” (Nunez [2020](#): 141). “How could he have lost interest completely?” the narrator wonders

(Nunez [2020](#): 140), meaning: how could he have lost interest in what others are going through?

A cosmopolitan through her wide-ranging reading practice, Nunez invokes Weil's call to listen to the anguished other unjudgmentally and to overcome self-interest—a practice that underlies most of her work. If the narrators of Nunez's nine books have one thing in common, it is that they are avidly (though not uncritically) interested in people who suffer shame, anguish, and dejection: gay men and their wives, aging men with a latent sense of entitlement, immigrants, soldiers and combat nurses, prison inmates, taxi drivers, and evangelical Christians. Most of these characters are unraced, which does not make them white by default. Occasionally a character is described as black, Vietnamese, or Jewish. "Attention must be paid," thinks the narrator of *What are you going through* (Nunez [2020](#): 86), perhaps echoing Linda Loman from Arthur Miller's *Death of a salesman* (Miller [1998](#): 40). This ethical stance seems firmly linked to Nunez's minoritarian sensibility; Weil merely helped her to articulate ideas she had been working out independently throughout her life.

9. Pushing the boundaries of Asian American epistemology

Interest, which guides attention, seems to be a limited resource. The whole point of having an innate capacity for interest, as psychologist William James pointed out, is to not treat all external stimuli as equally important; to discriminate so as to be able to examine the world one segment at a time (James [1890/1918](#): 402–403).¹² Asian American critic Min Hyung Song argues for an "ethics of generosity," by which he means "acting in a way that is contrary to maximizing self-interest" (288), but he warns against being indiscriminate. For "if we do not say no, we will have nothing to give to those we care deeply about saying yes to" (290). By contrast, Nunez suggests that interest is generative, in the sense that it can animate and sustain both its subject and object. Thus, it may not be as limited a resource as James and Song suggest.

Since for Nunez race is just one among many potential causes of anguish, her prose seems irrelevant from the perspective of ethnic studies, established in the 1970s to examine "race ... and power. ... an intellectual project with roots in ... the quest for social justice" (Ramirez [2014](#): 1059–1060). Race is undeniably a

¹² In Chapter XI of *The principles of psychology*, on the interrelated concepts of interest and attention, William James explains: "Millions of items of the outward order are present to my senses which never properly enter into my experience. Why? Because they have no *interest* for me. *My experience is what I agree to attend to*. Only those items which I *notice* shape my mind—without selective interest, experience is an utter chaos. Interest alone gives accent and emphasis, light and shade, background and foreground—intelligible perspective, in a word" (James [1890/1918](#): 402–403)

source of ongoing injustice and thus needs attention. Yet there can be no social justice program for daughters ignored by their fathers, unloved wives, lonely retirees, or people with terminal cancer. “*Othered*. Who is more so than the dying?” (Nunez [2020](#): 123, emphasis in the original). Such experiences cut across time and space, race, class, gender, and nationality. The people who experience them will never form a self-conscious “subaltern counterpublic” of the kind postulated by Nancy Fraser and Michael Warner, or a group identity. They will never recognize themselves through public discourse as a counterpublic and “act up” (Warner [2005](#): 124), unlike “members of subordinated social groups—women, workers, peoples of color, and gays and lesbians” (Fraser qtd. in Warner [2005](#): 118), who are of interest to ethnic studies, gender studies, and queer studies. The international recognition Nunez’s novel have received since 2018 suggests that multitudes of strangers do recognize themselves in them as a public. Arguably, these works serve as a repository of the “saddest stories” of every caliber, told by those who cannot form a counterpublic. People of color, including people of Asian descent, are surely among those readers. Thus, by addressing problems that are not covered by the social justice agenda Nunez does “push the boundaries of Asian American epistemology,” to use Ho’s words again (Ho [2015](#), 141).

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