
Introduction

The Landscape of Empathy

This book presents and charts the fraught terrain of empathy—in U.S. literature and law—specifically as it relates to “the enemy” at two historical moments: the Japanese Americans after the December 1941 bombing of Pearl Harbor, and the Muslim men captured and detained in various locations in the current U.S. “global war on terror.” It poses the question “What will it take to generate a national ethos in which our construction and identification of ‘the enemy’ is carefully considered rather than hasty, informed by empathy rather than driven by unexamined antipathy, accompanied by scrupulous interrogation of our assumptions and actions rather than based on complacent faith in our institutions?” Empathy combines affective and cognitive components; in empathy one does not simply *feel for* (as in sympathy) but rather one *feels with* another individual or group.¹ One recognizes the complex realities of others’ lives and subjectivities and the inextricability of one’s world with theirs.

The Japanese American internment of the 1940s and the current indefinite detention of Arabs, South Asians, and Muslim Americans are similar in their violation of basic constitutional guarantees. The targeted groups (based on race for the former and religion for the latter) in both instances have been constructed as national threats and their detentions justified by questionable applications and interpretations of existing laws.²

The examination of empathy that follows in these pages serves two purposes: first, to move readers to appreciate the intricacies of empathy’s emergence and manifestation, and second to encourage an application of this heightened appreciation for and knowledge of the complexities of empathy in the specific particulars of lived realities and in law and policy.

The literary analyses in this book illuminate the crevices and deep histories in the landscapes of empathy; the discussions of law foreground the ways in which lawyers have understood and drawn on (or not drawn on) empathy in the service of their clients (Japanese American internees and Muslim detainees). The language of law, once erected, can become formulaic, can become enshrined and dominate one's thoughts and actions in much the same way that built structures can eclipse the unbuilt structures that could have occupied the same space and which, perhaps, were strongly desired by certain populations whose voices were not heard. The unbuilt, says Arjun Appadurai, could be regarded as "once futures"; I submit that when we forfeit opportunities for empathy we regrettably reject possible desirable futures.³

Empathy requires significant imaginative labor. The representations of and actions in behalf of interned Japanese Americans and detained Muslims and Muslim Americans by creative writers and lawyers is a central concern of this book. The literary writers discussed do not necessarily *advocate for* the targeted groups; rather, the value of their writings lies in the texture and complexity they provide to deepen the public's understanding of these groups. Similarly, the lawyers working in behalf of the detainees may or may not be responding empathetically to their clients; their involvement in these cases may be a matter of principle—their commitment to certain inviolable, as they perceive it, norms of due process. The *consequence/outcome* of their adherence to ideals may be that their clients benefit, but my discussion does not take as its starting point any presumption of empathy on the part of the attorneys. In fact, the relationship between the lawyers' decision to offer their services pro bono and the sentiment of empathy is precisely what I seek to examine. Creative writers and lawyers occupy antipodal positions on the spectrum of participatory democracy: in the privacy of the creative mind versus the public space of a courtroom; in the unofficial medium of literary expression versus the official language of legal decisions.

I explore whether lawyers' fealty to legal language yields a textured terrain of humanity. How does their labor of employing the letter of the law compare with the eloquent description that Richard Wright gives of the act of writing and the empathetic energy creative writers call into play as they imagine themselves into the consciousness of their characters and into the contours of their varied lives? In "How Bigger Was Born," Wright (1989a) explains his process:

It was an act of concentration, of trying to hold within one's center of attention all of that bewildering array of facts which science, politics, experience, memory, and imagination were urging upon me. . . . I was pushing out to new areas of feeling, strange landmarks of emotion, cramping upon foreign soil, compounding new relationships of perceptions, making new and—until that very split second of time!—unheard-of and unfelt effects with words. . . . That is writing as I feel it, a kind of significant living. (xxx)

A kind of significant living. I am interested in understanding this phrase and in seeing how creative writers and lawyers perform a kind of significant living as they connect empathetically with their characters/clients through a vital grappling with language, albeit different kinds of language.⁴

In May 2009, President Barack Obama introduced the notion of empathy into general and widespread circulation by describing a key quality his nominee for the Supreme Court would possess: “You have to be able to stand in somebody else’s shoes and see through their eyes and get an idea of how the law might work or might not work.”⁵ But as Ronald Dworkin (2009) observes in his analysis of the confirmation hearings of Judge Sonia Sotomayor (Obama’s nominee), neither the public nor the senators on both sides of the political spectrum nor the nominee herself had the courage or honesty to acknowledge that the law (i.e., the Constitution) does indeed require interpretation and that this interpretive act is rooted in every judge’s philosophical orientation to the Constitution. Sotomayor’s emphatically declared “fidelity to the law” is, argues Dworkin, an “empty statement,” which “perpetuate[s] the silly and democratically harmful fiction that a judge can interpret the key abstract clauses of the United States Constitution without making controversial judgments of political morality in the light of his or her own political principles.”⁶ The public, Dworkin argues, has a right to know the parameters of a judge’s constitutional philosophy (for instance, what the judge understands by *due process* or *cruel and unusual punishment* or *equal protection of the law*), and confirmation hearings are a rich opportunity for the people to engage the abstract principles of the Constitution to see how they apply to current realities. The principles of the law, particularly constitutional law, were left deliberately abstract by the framers precisely so that subsequent generations could arrive at their meaning for their specific historical context through a process of deliberative exchange of ideas and shared discourse.

Dworkin holds that empathy is a desirable quality in a judge. The value of his explanation is that it illuminates the nexus between the individual and the institutional (in this case, the legal) and shows how a practice of empathy can be negotiated within established social and political structures. He argues:

It plainly helps a judge not only in finding facts but in formulating law to be able empathetically to understand the law’s impact on people of different kinds. . . . [B]eing a woman helps a judge understand the horror of a strip search for a teenage girl. Being a Latina may give a judge a better understanding of the crucial moral difference between racial discrimination poisoned by prejudice and race-sensitive policies aimed at erasing that prejudice. A judge with that understanding would reach a better interpretation of the Constitution’s equal protection clause than a judge without it. (2009)

In light of this complex relationship between the empathetic individual and structures of institution, Candace Vogler’s (2004) question is particularly apt:

“Given a shared practical orientation that treats the individual person as the fundamental unit for ethics, how ought one to respond to a man-made injustice that is neither any one person’s fault nor the sort of thing that any one person can remedy?” (32) She reminds us that “It is hard to navigate the ethical from the first-person perspective when you are registering horrors (however inchoately, however unwillingly) that can be neither laid on any individual’s doorstep nor laid to rest by any individual’s act” (40). Further, one might ask, what is the individual’s responsibility not just in responding to injustice but also in ensuring that injustice does not occur in the first place? Put another way, how do corrective and preventive empathy look, and where and how do they originate?

By invoking Vogler, I do not mean to privilege the individual as the site of transformative action or preventive posture against injustice. I heed, too, Wendy Brown’s (2002) caution that a preoccupation with the individual (the bastion of liberalism) facilitates the emergence and hegemony of structural injustice and inhibits our awareness of “what liberalism cannot deliver, what its hidden cruelties are, what unemancipatory relations of power it contains in its sunny formulations of freedom and equality” (420–421). And, finally, I register my agreement with Lauren Berlant’s suspicion of a politics of private feeling. Nonetheless, I refuse to abandon the individual as a valuable terrain of analysis: private feeling is worthless only if treated as isolated and discrete; however, it can provide the ground for a necessary and urgent understanding of the national ecosystem—the formal institutions (including legal, educational, economic, political, religious, and domestic), cultural forums, and informal social customs—and multiple contextual webs in which this private feeling is situated and implicated. Precisely because we fail to study the complicated and contested dynamics within which empathy lies latent, we are unable to facilitate its emergence and dissemination.

My engagement with empathy insists that we be cognizant of asymmetrical power relations. Empathy cannot simply be a sentiment to be dispensed (along with self-congratulations) by the group or individual in power to a subordinate individual or group. I explicitly reject the sort of empathy that functions as tawdry feel-good sentimental armor and a guilt-absolving palliative that inhibits and substitutes for necessary action. James Baldwin’s (1953) scathing critique of Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*—that it enables delicate and well-meaning (white) women to cleanse themselves with a good cry—is not altogether unfair. Though Baldwin rather unjustly links the “wet eyes” of sentimentality, which he describes as “the ostentatious parading of excessive and spurious emotion” (326), with an “aversion to experience” and “fear of life” (326), his trenchant distrust of empathetic *display* is worth heeding.

The speaker of Mitsuye Yamada’s poem “To the Lady” (1998, 40–41) responds forcefully to an interlocutor in San Francisco who wonders why the Japanese Americans did not protest or resist when they were led off to internment camps in 1942 (following the Japanese army’s bombing of Pearl Harbor)

and imprisoned until the end of World War II. The speaker's address to the "lady" of the poem's title is sorrowful, bitter, enraged, and deeply despairing. One can "hear" the frustration and imagine the clenched teeth as the speaker hurls at the woman a response that excoriates the thoughtlessness of her question. The speaker's anguish at the lady's ignorance and her inability to empathize is palpable.

Yet in fairness, one must also acknowledge that the woman, in wondering why the Japanese Americans did not resist their forced removal, displays a rudimentary empathy in that she imagines Japanese Americans as possessing a self-worth and dignity akin to hers. The implication of her question is that *she* would have protested such treatment. But beyond this granting of their similarity to her, there is little evidence of the lady's capacity to apprehend the vast difference between her sociopolitical position and that of the internees, a significant difference that kept most Japanese Americans from challenging the government's arbitrary abrogation of their constitutional rights. Moreover, even if the woman had been able to understand the asymmetrical power between them, her empathy would still be deficient, because it is devoid of action. Yamada's poem makes the point with forceful sarcasm that good sentiments cannot stand alone. Empathy, to be worth anything, must be accompanied by meaningful intervention. The speaker's assertion to the lady in San Francisco—"YOU would've / come to my aid in shining armor / laid yourself across the railroad track / marched on Washington / . . . / written six million enraged / letters to Congress" (41)—might be more correctly read as an implicit challenge in which the unspoken question to the lady is, "Would you have come to our aid, and, if yes, then what form would this aid have taken?" In the chasm between the perspectives and experiences of the poem's speaker, on the one hand, and those of the lady, on the other, unfolds the complex landscape of the intersection of empathy and power in the United States.

In the early years of North American settlement, the Native Americans were considered dangerous; the next group to be characterized in this way were the "resistant" or "rebellious" slaves; following them were various groups of Asian immigrants, culminating in the 1942 internment of 120,000 Japanese Americans; then there was the Communist scare of the 1950s fanned by Joseph McCarthy (whose anticommunist legacy lived on in the decades of Cold War politics through the 1980s); today the group deemed the enemy includes Muslim Americans and foreign nationals of identifiable Muslim descent. This list of groups deemed to be threats is by no means exhaustive, but these specific groups have constituted the *principal* source of danger at the historical moments noted. The absence of empathy for these groups, at the moments when it mattered the most and would have had the most impact, resulted in courses of legal action and formulations of policy that in later years we have come to reconsider and even, in the case of the interned Japanese Americans, apologized for and compensated monetarily for losses the victims suffered.⁷ However, even delayed empathy is by no means easy to stimulate, particularly

if it necessitates self-interrogations or a national probing of assumptions about attitudes and behaviors we consider valuable.

Why We Need Empathy

A focus on empathy may seem misplaced at this historical moment of heterogeneous subjectivity and postmodern rejection of the Western enlightenment notion of the primacy of the rational individual. Skeptics of my project would assert that the priorities of diverse peoples differ vastly and are shaped by the very particular social, cultural, economic, and historical forces that operate where they live. However, like Jürgen Habermas (1993), I hold that empathy is desirable; it is essential, urgent, and imperative, particularly now, when we recognize the existence of multiple value systems and the plurality of contexts within which individuals construct their subjectivities. The more divergent the sociocultural and political contexts that generate values, “the more sharply do forms of life and life projects become differentiated from one another” (90), and thus the more critical it becomes to “coexistence, and even survival, in a more populous world” (91) that we engage in a communicative discourse leading to “shared interpretations.” The kind of empathy that this book advocates requires hard work—unflinching introspection, honest interrogation, complex analysis, and courageous risk-taking. Habermas describes the ideal situation leading to shared understanding: “The fusion of interpretive horizons at which . . . every communicative process aims should not be understood in terms of the false alternative between an assimilation ‘to us’ and a conversion ‘to them.’ It is more properly described as a convergence between ‘our’ perspective and ‘theirs’ guided by learning processes” (105).

But what Habermas takes as a fundamental starting point (i.e., *symmetrical relation*) of the “learning processes” that lead us toward one another is precisely what I caution we cannot and should not assume. The failure of “discourse-ethics” and the floundering of empathetic exercises occur precisely because of the *asymmetry* in the positions of the actors involved. The individual or group or nation in the position of greater power does not recognize the other actor(s) as equal in the exchange, and so the adjustment of perspectives and the reassessment of positions is not undertaken with full commitment or a genuine desire to come to a shared understanding.

How, then, does one bring to bear on an asymmetrical relationship the necessity of a full communicative discourse? Slavoj Žižek (2005) insists that the “first ethical gesture is . . . to abandon the position of absolute self-positing subjectivity” (138) and to acknowledge that we are always constituted by our relationship with the Other. Both Žižek and Habermas exhort us to realize as well that we and Others are shaped by the contexts in which we exist; the implication, particularly with Žižek, is that the individual be willing to acknowledge that “I am already nontransparent to myself, and I will never get from the Other a full answer to ‘who are you?’ because the Other is a mystery

also for him/herself” (2005, 138). He stresses the vulnerability and fragility of our humanness and the humanness of Others. Žižek’s appeal is compelling:

What makes an individual *human* and thus something for which we are responsible, toward whom we have a duty to help, is his/her very finitude and vulnerability. Far from undermining ethics (in the sense of rendering me ultimately nonresponsible: “I am not a master of myself, what I do is conditioned by forces that overwhelm me.”), this primordial exposure/dependency opens up the properly ethical relations of individuals who accept and respect each other’s vulnerability and limitation. . . . Confronted with the Other, I can never fully account for myself. (138)

Yet over and over again, individuals and groups with and in power have shown themselves unwilling and unable to envision themselves in humble and vulnerable relationship to those over whose lives they exercise control. They persist in self-assured certainty and see no reason to alter their perspective. I would agree that we ought to “be” the way that Habermas and Žižek urge us to be; but there is no formulaic way of achieving that end. Rather, each situation requires its own delicate choreography of interaction of persons and exchange of ideas.

Our truncated forms of discourse (televised election debates, judicial confirmation hearings, and campaign commercials, for example) do not enable any meaningful give-and-take of perspective; what is required is a radical extension of what Ronald Dworkin recommends as a long-term corrective to our defensive insularity as a nation and our complacent and uninterrogated comfort in our democracy: namely, the overhaul of our high school classrooms and how we teach the urgent issues of deliberative democracy. I have argued elsewhere that we need to reimagine the United States as an integral part of a community of nations;⁸ American individualism and American exceptionalism are seductive narratives, but they have blinded us to our vulnerabilities and allowed us to persist in our delusional certainties not only about ourselves but also about Others. In the spaces of democratic discourse (including classrooms, neighborhood gatherings, town meetings, places of worship), we would do well to cultivate the attitude Žižek (2005) describes of acknowledging one’s own “impenetrability” and recognizing the Other not as a fully known or knowable being but “in the abyss of [his or her] impenetrability and opacity. This mutual recognition of limitation thus opens up a space of sociality that is the solidarity of the vulnerable” (139).

Two Airport Stories: The Political Architecture of Empathy

Martha Nussbaum (2001) explains empathy as an exercise of “the muscles of the imagination, making people capable of inhabiting, for a time, the world

of a different person, and seeing the meaning of events in the world from the outsider's viewpoint" (431). In any situation, these imaginative muscles are differentially exercised, and the outcomes can vary dramatically, depending on who exercises them, to what extent, and when. I begin my discussion of literary texts and their treatment of empathy with two brief memoirist accounts of airport experiences. Through these vignettes, one becomes aware of the supplications that certain players must undertake to elicit empathy and the postures of indifference and/or inflexibility that other players can persist in maintaining. One also sees how the individual and the institutional intersect.

In the first, "Gate 4-A," Palestinian American poet/essayist Naomi Shihab Nye (2007) narrates a hopeful resolution to an airport situation in which an Arabic-speaking elderly woman is distraught because she mistakenly believes that the flight she is scheduled to take has been canceled. The author-narrator is at Albuquerque International Airport awaiting the departure of her delayed flight when she hears an announcement over the PA system: "If anyone in the vicinity of Gate 4-A understands any Arabic, please come to the gate immediately."⁹ Arriving there, the narrator finds that "an older woman in full traditional Palestinian embroidered dress, just like [her] grandma wore, was crumpled to the floor, wailing loudly." In her halting Arabic, the narrator quickly determines from the woman the reason for her distress; then, launching into full empathetic mode, the narrator clarifies to the older woman that the flight's departure has simply been delayed and that she will eventually get to her destination (El Paso) in time for a scheduled medical procedure; she then calls and assures the woman's son (who awaits her in El Paso) that she will stay by his mother for the rest of the time. In the two hours that they spend waiting together at the gate, they call the woman's other sons, the narrator's Palestinian father (who speaks to the old woman in Arabic), and several of the narrator's Palestinian poet friends. By now, the elderly woman is comfortable, happy, and expansive, and she distributes Palestinian cookies to all the women sitting at the gate. The airline officials bring out free beverages, intensifying the air of goodwill and camaraderie. The narrator glows with optimism about the possibility of a "shared world."

The arc of this short anecdote moves from difference to sameness, from distance to nearness, from incomprehension to understanding. The Arabic woman's strangeness morphs into hospitality, as she distributes the cookies to the women and encounters no refusals. From being the outsider, she becomes the caring host; from being the unfamiliar figure of the "wailing" Arab, she becomes the recognizable figure of the caring grandmother. Her transformation is made possible by the Palestinian American narrator, who facilitates the Arab woman's relabeling as a familiar type and enables the temporarily disoriented Arab woman to return to balance and calmness and reenter the universally recognizable role of grandmother.

What is most noticeable about this shared airport community is that it foregrounds women. The elderly Arab woman offers her cookies to the women at the gate, and none of them refuses: "not a single woman declined one. It

was like a sacrament. The traveler from Argentina, the mom from California, the lovely woman from Laredo.” In addition, two young girls also traveling on the same flight bustle about distributing the apple juice that the airline makes available to the waiting passengers. The narrator describes an idealistic female community free of suspicion, all covered in the sweetness of “powdered sugar.” The only hint she gives of a flawed world beyond this idyllic gate community is contained in the line “Not a single person in this gate—once the crying of confusion stopped—seemed apprehensive about any other person.” What is left unsaid is that the Arab woman’s age and her being female soften the strangeness with which she might have initially been viewed by the other passengers at Gate 4-A.

Also left unnarrated are the details of how the narrator succeeds in dispelling the apprehension of the other waiting passengers and creating the link between them and the older woman. That the narrator helps the elderly Arab woman is clear. She succeeds in changing the woman’s demeanor from nervousness to comfort, from anxiety to laughter. We do not learn what the narrator said to the other waiting passengers to soften their initial apprehension, whether in fact she said anything at all, or whether her presence and her obvious comfort with both the Arab woman and the gate personnel gave her a certain kind of authority and made her acceptable as the bridge between the waiting female passengers and the older Arab woman.

We know that the narrator actively creates a virtual community for the older woman through the many phone calls she makes to various Palestinians, including the woman’s sons. Through these calls, the narrator reminds the Palestinian woman that she is not alone. The phone calls transport a familiar community into the airport space and perhaps give the woman confidence that she is surrounded by a protective and welcoming network. Her offering of traditional Palestinian cookies is perhaps a manifestation of this confidence and comfort.

Nye paints a romanticized portrait of the airport space. There is no criticism of the other passengers’ initial insularity, no commentary on the power dynamics and regulations that contribute to the travelers’ inability to see the possibilities of transforming the impersonal space of an airline gate into an opportunity for rich cultural exchange and human connection. The paradox of airports is that though they bring together in close proximity an impressive array of diverse peoples from diverse cultures, they are not designed to encourage these diverse peoples to engage in any kind of meaningful interaction. Rather, as Mika Aaltola (2005) points out, “an airport is a place where one goes to collect a sense of identity. A vital ingredient of the airport experience is that one goes there to see who one is in the worldwide *Who’s Who*” (274). And the more subordinate one’s position in the “hierarchical world order-imagination of the airport” (275), the more attentive one must be to fulfilling carefully one’s part in the “morality play” of the airport and “demonstrate faithful adherence to procedures, signs, orders, and types” (269).

As Aaltola (2005) observes, “the airport turns into a place of reverence” (269), and the “political pedagogy inherent in airport performance” (270) requires one to execute faithfully the script that reinscribes local, regional, and global hierarchy. Within the context of expected performance, the older Arab woman’s gesture of outreach and friendship in distributing the cookies is understandable. She, the outsider, has to be the supplicant and prove that she comes in friendship. Especially as an Arab woman, she is expected to deliver a certain kind of conciliatory performance. And she complies. It is she who wishes to put the other passengers at ease, she who seizes the opportunity to enlarge her embrace and expand her community to include not just the Palestinians she reaches through the phone but also these cultural strangers. Even if one were to defend the other passengers’ hesitation to initiate contact with her as stemming from their lack of familiarity with her customs, one cannot deny that their privilege (whether of race, language, social class, or national origin) frees them from the expectations of performance.

By contrast, the elderly Palestinian woman does what none of the other passengers contemplates or even feels moved to do: she offers a part of herself to the others. The narrator’s use of the word *sacrament* to characterize the woman’s giving of cookies and the other female passengers’ acceptance of them is significant. By consuming these cookies, they incorporate this Palestinian woman into their own beings and briefly awaken to their and her humanity. The empathetic effort in this situation has been almost entirely one-sided—from the Arab woman to the other female passengers. Granted, there is no antipathy on the part of the other waiting passengers, but there is also little they do beyond passively accepting her efforts at connection.

The second essay is by Indian American Varun Sriram, a twenty-something former television sports broadcaster who worked in Missoula, Montana, for three years. He explains that his skin color and physical features are such that people perceive him to be a member of several ethnic groups, including Brazilian, Arab, Italian, and Mexican. Sriram writes of his experience at the Ronald Reagan airport in Washington, D.C., in April 2009.¹⁰ As in the Nye piece, the specific airport location is the airline departure gate; Sriram, too, has been informed that his flight to Denver, en route to Missoula, has been delayed by ninety minutes. He takes a seat in the waiting area by the gate and smiles at two women—one black, the other white—whose seats are near his. He notices that the gate is crowded, and he notices as well that there are a number of “unattended” bags, whose owners are not in obvious sight. Feeling hungry and not inclined to board the aircraft on an empty stomach, Sriram is tempted to get a pizza at the stall he sees nearby, and he contemplates whether he should pick up his bag and walk with it to the pizza stall or leave his bag behind and quickly purchase the pizza and return. He is aware of the constant warning announcements: “Please do not leave your bags unattended at any time. Please report any suspicious looking items to security.” At this point, Sriram decides on the following course of action: “I take a look around and see two bags on top

of a seat a few feet away from me, their rightful owner nowhere in sight. ‘No big deal,’ I think to myself. Rules are meant to be broken. I put my book back in the bag, place the bag on my seat, and walk no more than 100 yards to get myself a slice of pizza.” When he returns to his seat, he finds his bag missing. He looks at the white woman to find out what has happened, and she says, “I called security to take your bag because I didn’t think you were coming back.” Sriram informs us that the other unattended bags he has noticed earlier are all still where they were when he left. With ten minutes to go for his flight’s departure, he is panicked. Then he sees a security guard walking away from the gate carrying his bag. Sriram hurriedly yet respectfully approaches him, apologizes for having left his bag unattended, and describes its contents to the satisfaction of the security guard who, fortunately for Sriram, returns the bag to him.

Thus far, Sriram adheres to a familiar script. The white woman “reads” him with his four-day unshaven brown face as potential terrorist, sees his bag as a potential weapon, and notifies the security guard, singling out his unattended bag from all the others in plain sight at the gate. But at this point, Sriram launches into a surprising act of empathetic identification with the white woman even though, he says, he felt both “anger and embarrassment” for the brief panic he suffered as a result of her thoughtless prejudice:

Was she watching without me noticing, studying my every move? Did she consult the other people sitting around me before having my bag removed? Were they threatened by me too?

As I thought more and more about it, I began to wonder if I was assigning prejudices to people that didn’t actually exist. After all, I did leave my bag unattended, which is an airport no-no. What if there actually *was* something dangerous in my bag. Isn’t it better to avert disaster at the risk of offending one person? Yes—there were other unattended bags in the area that did not get picked up, but maybe she didn’t notice them when she called security to take mine away. I guess I will never know.

Sriram both acknowledges his “minor” transgression of leaving his bag unattended and makes a genuine effort to imagine the white woman’s position. One could read this empathetic identification in one of two ways—as a genuine complexity and maturity of perspective indicative of his humility and thoughtfulness. Or one could read it as an act of psychological survival and a desire to confirm his full membership in the nation-state: perhaps he needs to see her action as rationally determined rather than motivated by irrational prejudice against the color of his skin and his unshaven face so that he can continue to have faith in “his” nation, seeing in her act not the manifestation of its institutional structures of racial profiling but the misguided act of one individual. The security guard’s act of returning his bag without undue fuss also facilitates his sense of essential fair play by the nation’s agent of power.