

## Method as Practice

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### Abstract

Given the diversity of objects and objectives of research in the field and recent debates about method, there should be a more robust conversation about the concrete practices of analysis and interpretation that are pursued in American studies in Germany and beyond. This forum brings together ten scholars who tackle the question of what exactly it is that we do when we engage in reading, analysis, and interpretation. On the one hand, the participants of this forum question core assumptions behind the methods of literary inquiry as it is often taught. The result is a renewed awareness of their own positionality as academic participants in larger fields of cultural interaction. On the other hand, each statement proposes new ways to conceptualize interpretation, affirming the role the situatedness of researchers plays in the production of scholarship. Several contributions strongly reaffirm or challenge past methods, while others place the methodological question in the context of neoliberal structures in higher education. Still others propose ways to move forward that combine existing approaches and add new means of engagement with cultural texts. In different registers, these statements help chart the affordances of critical inquiry and depart from an understanding of interpretation as objective, repeatable, and disembodied.

**Key Words:** method; literary analysis; postcritique; close reading; archives

### Introduction: From Method Wars to Method as Practice

ILKA BRASCH AND ALEXANDER STARRE

Understanding method as practice means to identify methods retrospectively. As writers in the multifarious disciplines of the humanities, we rarely spell out a set of rules and zealously adhere to them. Instead, scholarship often navigates a set of ideas taken from theory, which is itself an umbrella term that at times obfuscates the cross-disciplinary influences that define humanities scholarship. After all, it is through

the concept of theory that fields such as philosophy, sociology, history, literary studies, cultural studies, gender studies, television studies, film studies, and so forth become intricately intertwined.<sup>1</sup> Method, then, at least partly describes the manner in which theory comes to bear on the practicalities of analysis. In journal articles, academic books, or essays, these practicalities often come to be termed an “approach” rather than a set of “methods.” The difference is relevant because “approach” seems to signal the writer’s momentary order of business. An approach is usually tailored to a specific subject or concern, often to a specific object of analysis and/or argument. Instead of identifying and then committing to a single, repeatable theory—a tendency to which poststructuralism also inadvertently lent itself, as Rita Felski argues in *The Limits of Critique* (25)—writers shift their approaches from subject to subject or article to article. As a result, method should be understood as something that is constantly in flux, something that evolves, that sometimes reconsiders and hardly remains constant. Writing about method therefore also entails a moment of introspection: Writers reflect on the elements their approaches have in common, on practices they share with others, and the ways in which old and new theories impact these approaches. In concert, the eight statements collected below bear testimony to this process.

The relationship between theory and method has not always been clear in the recent debates about method. When Felski coined the term “method wars” in 2014, she wrote: “If the era of high theory was followed by an entrenchment of historicism, we are now in the midst of the method wars” (Introduction v). Her statement makes it appear as if current conversations or debates about methods resulted from a lack of “high theory,” when, in fact, theories multiplied in the twentieth century and continue to do so today. Additionally, describing this multiplicity as a “war” casts a negative light on something that could just as easily be read as positively productive; that is, an increasing rejection to put individual theorists on a pedestal in favor of more diverse forms of scholarship. More recent approaches and theories that are highly self-reflexive and introspective such as autotheory, speculative history, or Afropessimism, come not coincidentally from Black scholars and scholars of Color (among them Christina Sharpe, Saidiya Hartman, and Frank B. Wilderson) who deploy them in order to address cultural, social, and political power dynamics. Looking back, the New Critics’ insistence on the intentional fallacy and Roland Barthes’s later designation of the author as dead opened a corridor toward the prescription of an apparent universality that negates the relevance of authorial diversity. Henry Louis Gates, Jr., described this tendency already in 1988 when he noted in *The Signifying Monkey* that the methods that were designed to read Western texts are “culture-specific” and “temporal-specific, and they are text-specific as well” (xxii). A rejection of what used to be “the Canon” thus also requires a wider range of methods; nevertheless, we still feel a need to position ourselves toward the New Critics, as Ruth Mayer’s

<sup>1</sup> Note that some of these fields have stronger “cores” than others. For instance, American studies, like Atlantic studies, is much more cross-referential than philosophy or sociology, which have stronger internal ties—which is a descriptive difference, not a qualitative one.

and Katrin Horn's accounts below indicate. A reflection of method in practice as well as a concurring mode of introspection thus also entail adding an understanding of critical Whiteness to the history of theory and its impact on method.<sup>2</sup>

Paradoxically, recognizing and learning about one's own method also takes a method. Introspection takes place through the awareness and interpretation of one's own language, for instance. Naturally, but again paradoxically, Felski noticed a recurring pattern in scholarship she was reading when she identified a "hermeneutics of suspicion," and Sheila Liming, in turn, close-reads the language Felski uses in *Hooked* when she reignites the method wars in her review in the *Los Angeles Review of Books*. In performing an analysis that Felski would term suspicious on Felski's own work, Liming essentially forces a moment of introspection onto her. As Maria Sulimma's contribution below charts in more detail, such moments of introspection are often the result of input from reviewers or editors. To be clear: Self-reflection occurs on different scales. Sometimes it is the details of language and composition that reflect a scholar's positionality. Other times, introspection entails large-scale considerations of the way in which someone's own life impacts their interpretive labor (consider Carsten Junker's contribution in this regard). In both cases, reflections on method—especially when they are addressed in scholarship—reveal the individual writer's perspective. Therefore, understanding method as practice also helps to counter the rationale of objectivity and repeatable readings that continues to obfuscate the positionality of the scholar. Of course, this objectivism (or positivism) is closely entangled within university contexts in which humanities scholars feel prompted to justify their work in comparison to STEM fields.<sup>3</sup> As the ongoing debate around method—including some fierce recent skirmishes on academic Twitter—shows, as much as the "method wars" are about the hands-on scholarship being produced, they are also about real and perceived threats to the humanities within increasingly corporatized universities, an issue that Tim Lanzendörfer, Martin Lüthe, Stephen Shapiro, and Maria Sulimma address.<sup>4</sup>

In fact, between the crisis discourse of the humanities at large and the attitudinal differences voiced in the extensive body of commentary dealing with the critique / postcritique divide, many recent pieces veer away from considering method in any practical detail.<sup>5</sup> As such, David Kurnick comments on the much-cited essays and books by Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, Stephen Best, Sharon Marcus, and Rita Felski: "Although it has become common to refer to this miniature tradition as about method, these essays offer not new ways to interpret texts but new ways to feel about ourselves when we do" (351). Jonathan Kramnick concurs in another recent piece: "what is missing from our talk about method is method, our actual on-the-ground procedures of reading and interpretation" (219). Why is it so hard, though, for scholars in the humanities to stay on topic when it comes to method?

<sup>2</sup> On this point, see Tompkins.

<sup>3</sup> Quite accurately, the STEM acronym is now increasingly replaced with STEAM to incorporate the arts.

<sup>4</sup> For a brief overview of these specific debates on academic Twitter in early 2021, see Len Gutkin's online column for the *Chronicle of Higher Education* from February 22, 2021, which includes a short interview with David Kurnick on the topic.

<sup>5</sup> For a sustained analysis of postcritical scholarship and its investment in critical attitudes (instead of methods), see Lanzendörfer and Nilges 501-08.

John Guillory holds that considerations of method, though recently important, historically had little to do with defining the humanities as a set of academic disciplines: “As disciplines, their institutional being is characterized not only by a method (or methods), but more fundamentally by a curriculum, a program of study. The notion that the object of study is a matter of indifference, that the humanities are defined rather by a method, is only a professional deformation of our moment” (28). However, Guillory’s assessment begs a follow-up question: What happens when the object(s) of study in one such discipline multiply in unprecedented ways? In American studies, the objects we study today certainly seem to demand new methodological thinking—objects such as multi-platform narratives, cross-media texts, participatory products designed to spark creative conversations on social media, works in progress, such as open-ended serials, podcasts, and computer games, but also earlier textual forms like newspapers and periodicals that are only now becoming readily available in newly scanned web archives or large-scale databases. And what if a discipline attempts to include in its objects of study the actions of readers and consumers as well as the multiple forms of agency that a participatory framing of culture implies?

The deployment of cultural studies methodologies, in the humanities in general and in American studies in particular, has led to an expansion of the scope of research beyond the confines of authors, creators, and works to include audiences and consumers. Furthermore, the sociological imagination of actors and networks has infused many fields and subfields in the humanities that look for participatory engagement. Likewise, the singularity of artworks now sits comfortably (or uncomfortably?) alongside the material entanglements of inscription media or technical devices, as addressed in more detail by Alexander Dunst. Archives—digital or analog—provide us with expansive accounts of the lives and afterlives of cultural creations. These new, newly configured, or newly accessible focus points of ongoing research demand specifically tailored approaches that can be correlated and assessed as developments in method as practice. The critical and imaginative practices proposed by Saidiya Hartman, which include critical fabulation, speculative history, close narration, and documentary poetics as forms of methodological practice, constitute perhaps the most pointed example of the process, as these methods counter the gaps in the archive that result from centuries of violence. Method here results not first and foremost from an interest in how research should be done, but in how it *can* be done at all.

This forum brings together ten scholars who tackle the question of what exactly it is that we do when we engage in reading, analysis, and interpretation. On the one hand, the participants of this forum question core assumptions behind the methods of literary inquiry as it is often taught. The result is a renewed awareness of their own positionality as academic participants in larger fields of cultural interaction. On

the other hand, all of the statements propose new ways to conceptualize interpretation—ways which take into account how the situatedness of researchers influences the scholarship they produce. Several contributions strongly reaffirm or challenge past methods, while others place the methodological question in the context of neoliberal structures in higher education. Still others propose ways to move forward that combine existing approaches and add new means of engagement with cultural texts. In different registers, each statement helps chart the affordances of critical inquiry and departs from an understanding of interpretation as objective, repeatable, and disembodied.

## Literary Studies, Work, and the Discipline of Method

TIM LANZENDÖRFER

What is the work of literary studies? I do not mean what is it that we *do*, day in and out. I mean, what societal use-values does literary studies produce? What good does it do?

Right now, I think, it produces none, and nothing good. But what societal use-values *could* we produce? That depends on what we understand our method to be, and how we understand the work of that method. I think we can make more people into better people, more political people. We can have a societal educative goal as a discipline, if we attend to method. The only meaningful shape for literary studies comes from method. Method disciplines: it makes the discipline, it asks us to be disciplined, it emphasizes that our work is structured work. Discipline is “a body of knowledge and set of methods” (Collier 16). Per the *OED*, discipline is “a body of rules for conduct or action” and names the “school or method of instruction” (“Discipline, n.” def. 6, 5a) that we adhere to, but it also gestures to our institutionality in the contemporary university, the fact that you even can take instruction and degrees in (American) literary studies.

I am suggesting that our disciplinarity in all these dimensions is tied to method. Method is understood as a means to identify what we do, but also of how we fit usefully into society. “We are (mainly) teachers who misrecognize ourselves as (primarily) researchers” (West-Pavlov); and “teaching literature’ means, above all, teaching *methods*” (Collier 6; emphasis in original). I will polemically go one step further: one method, close reading. I want to insist on the importance of close reading, and on close reading as method. In fact, I will champion it as the one and only useful method we have, the only method that produces a societal use-value. As a method, close reading does seem slightly reactionary.<sup>6</sup> Why do I claim it is societally useful, then? In part I do so because, yes, it does give us (some) of what Ruth Mayer below calls “methodic rigor,” but in a very specific sense. Close reading offers “every reader the tools to

<sup>6</sup> Klaus Benesch raises the point about close reading’s apparent misplacedness as a response to the demands of the neoliberal university, specifically as a means of escaping from the demands of the system (42–43), drawing on an idea of close reading as a “highly regulated method” of reading (42; my translation). By some contrast, Jonathan Kramnick points out that close reading is not a matter of a method of reading, but a learnable writing skill, a way of joining ideas together. I draw on both of these points.

challenge critically and rigorously the authority of any other” (Wegner 46). This allows us to imagine a situation in which there is genuine communion over the text: everyone can “occupy the same plane as readers, refusing appeals to authority and referring only to the text itself. [A]nd the possibility might ensue of the ‘minimal communism’ of a real and productive dialogue” (47). I am arguing this because we find ourselves increasingly confronted with a society without common frames of reference, caught up in fake news and alternative facts. Klaus Benesch is correct to say that the “mere closeness to language [...] does not create the necessary openness and flexibility required to oppose *Querdenker*” (42–43; my translation).<sup>7</sup> But I think that training in the practice of close reading and its necessary adjunct practice of discussion as equal readers is what might: training in close reading as debate, in interpretation as argument. And it might do so precisely because literary studies is unimportant, because nothing in anyone’s life hinges on our reading of *Moby-Dick*.

Unless we have a method, we do not have a discipline, nor can we justify our continued existence as a discipline. Conversely, though, the boundaries of the method are the boundaries of the discipline. “Literary studies” carries an object in its name, but we need to decenter this object. Literary studies is not defined by an elusive object (the “literary”), but by a method: by close reading. If you are doing it right, if you are doing it with the right method, it does not matter whether you are doing literary studies with Disney films, HBO series, video games, podcasts, pictures, or Dan Brown. If you are opening spaces for the minimal communism of an attentive and evidence-based debate at eye level, you are doing useful work.

Close reading can produce a stance of openness to argument and evidence, especially about issues that are not factually resolvable. The engendering of arguments about literary texts is the central good of critical work, and making it widely available should be the educational focus of our work. We need to produce use-values as a discipline, because we are a discipline, and can only ever be a discipline. As Marx and Engels put it in *The German Ideology*:

For as soon as the distribution of labour comes into being, each man has a particular, exclusive sphere of activity, which is forced upon him and from which he cannot escape. He is a hunter, a fisherman, a herdsman, or a critical critic, and must remain so if he does not want to lose his means of livelihood. (47)

To admit to the need to produce useful work is not a surrender to the logics of capitalism. We are already neoliberal. We are already producing use-values (third-party funding, mostly), just not use-values to society at large. There is no “richtiges Leben im falschen” (Adorno 59).<sup>8</sup> No matter what we do—whether or not we are societally useful—we are caught in the market system. Disciplinarity itself and the need for

<sup>7</sup> “Querdenker” is the common name for extremist protestors against the governmental measures instituted to prevent the spread of COVID-19 in Germany since 2020, often involving COVID denialism and right-wing ideology. The name plays on the idea of lateral (“quer”) thinking (“denken”).

<sup>8</sup> “There is no right life in the wrong one” (Redmond).

method is a consequence of the distribution of labor; close reading will not let us escape this distribution of labor, but it will let us make the most of its constraints. We are all critical critics, and will remain so. The question is whether we can turn our discipline into societally useful work through an attention to the usefulness of the method of close reading to make open, self-critical readers. I think we can, and if so, we surely must try.

## Against Method

RUTH MAYER

In 1975, the philosopher of science Paul Feyerabend published his study *Against Method* in which he called for the substitution of rationalism in science by anarchism, claiming that “the only principle which does not inhibit progress is *anything goes*” (23; emphasis in original). In the course of this argument for an anarchic and free-floating science (and history of knowledge), Feyerabend characterized method as the expression of an institutional bias vis-à-vis originality and creativity, akin in its workings to totalitarian subjugation. Wikipedia comments drily: “Some have seen the publication of *Against Method* as leading to Feyerabend’s isolation from the community of philosophers of science” (“Against Method”). In terms of career planning, the publication seems not to have worked out.

In view of this prehistory, the title of my contribution to this forum might sound a bit daring. But then, I am not a scientist, and I actually share the scientific skepticism vis-à-vis Feyerabend’s far-flung generalizations. Still, what applies to the sciences need not necessarily shape the humanities. Two circumstantial observations flow into this assumption: first the requirement raised by some instructors in my department that students write a “theory and method” section in their term papers. This almost invariably leads to the declaration that the student is going to use close reading as a method, often combined with what is called New Historicism, which then turns out to be any sort of contextualization, or Structuralism, which then turns out to be close reading. The other observation is that I tend to do the same, if on a somewhat more sophisticated level. When forced to write the methodology part of research proposals I tend to name “close reading” (or narratology) and various approaches engaging in contextualization or comparison (New Historicism, Media Archaeology, Actor-Network Theory) as my go-to methods. Then I hope that nobody will challenge me on this. And up to now, nobody ever did, because most of my colleagues do the same thing.

Now there are some fortunate few among us who work with qualitative empirical approaches or fieldwork techniques or other methods gleaned from the social sciences, and what I have to say here is not for

them. They have a method. But most of us, I claim, do not. We work with theories, such as New Historicism or Media Archaeology, whose major representatives have all, at some point or other, distanced themselves from the allegation that they provide methodological orientation. What about close reading, then? This is a method, is it not? It is steeped, after all, in hermeneutic techniques of interpretation and reliant on the toolbox of rhetorical figures, tropes, and narratological devices which we can bring to bear on texts in order to find out how they work.

But close reading, Mark Hewson reminds us most helpfully, came into being as a core principle of literary analysis at a time when scholars and critics were determined to distance themselves from the sciences and from the very idea of literary studies as a field of scholarship. Whereas methods aim to establish structures through which each researcher becomes “a mere functionary, completely replacable by others” (26), tearing “reason away from the power of the subjective dimension, and [...] make it ‘objective,’” as Hans Blumenberg wrote (qtd. in Hewson 26), close reading operates as a means to reveal the various possibilities of a text, performatively unfolding it in dimensions that are disclosed in the course of the analysis as unique insights. The results of these readings should be comprehensible, but they need not be repeatable. In fact, their fascination consists in their specificity and in the fact that later scholars can revisit them but will not need to draw on them in order to contribute to the field or discourse.

This is, at least, the recognition that Mark Hewson sees at the outset of the New Critics’ initial “resistance to scholarship” (31). In the wake of New Criticism’s rise to hegemonic power in literary studies, however, this resistance would decline, and a “methodological imperative” (38) would seek to ascertain scientific research principles of repeatability and exactitude for the enterprise of literary analysis. In the course of this development, the “disciplinary” dimension of literary studies became foregrounded, with close reading serving as the index of the discipline’s quasi-scientific rigor. This is how close reading as a practice came to be fortified with the prohibitive instructions formulated by William K. Wimsatt and Monroe C. Beardsley as the intentional and the affective fallacies—and turned into a method. Taken together with close reading, the New Critical injunctions not to speculate about the author and not to identify with narrator or characters seem to determine much of what we are doing in cultural and literary studies even today.

The debates that Hewson maps are half a century old and rely on parameters that have been rightfully challenged for decades. Obviously, to try and seek one methodological gold standard across the field of the sciences and the humanities does not seem to be the most productive route to scholarly efficiency. But especially in the standardized formats of third-party funding applications and in the neoliberal university at large, methods continue to function as trans-disciplinary fetishes, as Maria Sulimma and Stephen Shapiro point out below. This may also be why I am so skeptical about Tim Lanzendörfer’s claim that a discipline

needs a method. Perhaps communities and traditions are more important for disciplinary coherence than methods, at least if we understand methods along the lines mapped out above.

Let me review this against the backdrop of what I actually do when I work. Here is what I do: I regularly review large quantities of texts, since I am working—among other things—with the periodical culture of the 1910s. In other words, I have to read a great many very eclectic and dramatically under-researched magazines. When I do so, I do not follow a method, but rely on techniques of skimming and skipping—accident and contingency rule supreme. I look at the material without initially knowing what interests me or what I am looking for. Then something intrigues me, I get caught; I find more of the same (or not), read on, return, review, compare. None of this is very systematic until I get to a point when I see (or believe to see) knots or clusters or coagulations in the wide mass of material under review. I do make use, of course, of technical vocabulary and formal and structural terms in order to describe what I see, but they serve as shortcuts to express and address observations rather than as methodical tools that would allow others to repeat my interpretive experiments. And why should they?

Finally, I have come to rely more and more on the two fallacies that the New Critics came to agree upon: affective engagement and speculations about authors' intentions (using "authors" in the widest sense, given the often anonymous or collective authorship of the works I research). Obviously, this is not the end of my interest or the limit of my engagement, but I do notice that my first affective responses (complete with the circumstances of the first viewing and reading, and the material quality of the texts under investigation; see Katrin Horn) play an enormously important role for how I end up reading a text. And I do think a lot about *why* things were written as opposed to how I experience or read them. Actually, taken together, these two questions may well frame my work more deeply than anything else. This is, of course, a set of concerns that harmonize closely with what has been framed as the affective turn—and perhaps my piece is also meant as a warning not to smother this turn by enveloping it in methodological terms. There seems to be a need, after all, in our field, to distill methods from theories, thus making them manageable and applicable but also depleting them of their originality and radicalism.

So this is a disclosure—and a plea—to accentuate and address what we are really doing, instead of pretending to a methodic rigor that seems to be more an ideal (or chimera) than a reality. Katrin Horn, below, calls for a scholarly "un-training," and I second this wholeheartedly. This is, perhaps, one of the hardest things to teach my students, who want to follow a method so very much. But it is also a liberation, and it allows us to foreground the very modes of reading and writing that make us engage with literature or the arts in the first place: instinct, intuition, emotional needs, and affective dispositions.

## **“Needs to Be More Explicit about the Methodologies...”: Reluctance, Collaboration, and Vulnerability in Research Processes**

MARIA SULIMMA

A friend of mine once asked me to “translate” her American studies project into methodological terms, to tell her what methodology she was employing. My friend was—rightfully!—confident about her scholarship but insecure about how to “package” it. This insecurity seems ingrained in the humanities; we are reluctant to break down our methods into quickly understandable chunks of two to three sentences. The quotation in my title is an actual reviewer response to my book proposal. This person was likely looking for brief name-dropping of methodological schools that I follow. My contribution here argues that so often issues of methodology boil down to issues of how to communicate about what it is that we do when we do research.

I am interested in how we do scholarship alone and together, specifically within the neoliberal university geared toward third-party funding and interdisciplinary collaboration that, at the same time, emphasizes competition to the extent of describing established scholars without tenured positions as “cogs” to the system, as a controversial video by the German Federal Ministry of Education and Research did, sparking protests using the hashtags #IchbinHanna and #IchbinReyhan. Hence, my contribution is not about methods to yield academic analysis but about the practices of research that allow for conversations about methods.

I draw on my experience as a member of two interdisciplinary research groups at different universities: the DFG-funded Popular Seriality Research Unit, which ran from 2010 to 2016 ([www.popularseriality.de](http://www.popularseriality.de)), and the City Scripts Research Group, funded by the Volkswagen foundation since 2018 ([www.cityscripts.de](http://www.cityscripts.de)). As a disclaimer, most people in our field do not write dissertations or habilitations in the context of such research groups. I further hope my collaborators, past and present, will not feel mischaracterized or misrepresented.

Three different aspects of research processes stand out when thinking about how collective and interdisciplinary research may offer us guidance on how to communicate with each other: reluctance, collaboration, vulnerability.

### *Reluctance*

The interdisciplinarity of American studies in Germany was what drew me to the field as a graduate student, yet this strength of our discipline is something we do not tend to have many conversations about. At the 2019 meeting of the GAAS on the topic of “U.S.-American Culture

as Popular Culture” at the University of Hamburg, those of us working in cultural studies were surprised when colleagues presented papers in which, for instance, a television series was analyzed like a novel without any consideration of the ways in which the specific commercial reception and production contexts of U.S.-American television shape the form of serial television (on which there is a robust body of work in American studies in Germany).

To give a different example, since the so-called narrative turn, urban social sciences have become much more open to exchanges with the humanities but tend to lump literary and cultural urban studies together with qualitative approaches in the social sciences. Yet, we may be reluctant to protest, to communicate our methods and approaches, foremost because this is hard work, likely messy, and delays research. As bell hooks reminds us in *Teaching Community: A Pedagogy of Hope* (2003), universities foster such reluctance on all hierarchical levels:

Like many professors, I naively believed that the more I moved up the academic ladder the more freedom I would gain, only to find that greater academic success carried with it even more pressure to conform, to ally oneself with institutional goals and values rather than with intellectual work. (23)

Regardless of one’s career stage, competitive university structures are too often sites of performance rather than learning. Sites which give us incentives to fake it (until we make it), to nod along and not admit that we do not know something, have not read someone, or still do not understand some concept. Collaborative research processes, however, depend on us “confessing” such weaknesses and figuring out when people with different disciplinary backgrounds *think* they are speaking about the same thing but are not.

### *Collaboration and Vulnerability*

Specifically within the German context, third-party funding is a highly sought commodity and becomes a kind of currency with which universities and individuals compete for positions or resources. Collaboration and interdisciplinarity are keywords without which no funding application can succeed. But they are more often window dressing than descriptions of research processes. Such applications turn academics into what is often called *Beutegemeinschaft*, a hunting party seeking funding to then retreat and till their own field in peace. The day-to-day business at most universities may even prevent interdisciplinary collaboration because it is so time-intensive. In both of “my” research groups, the foundation for such laborious collaboration is the friendship among senior researchers (and I am including postdoctoral researchers in this category). While academic friendship across disciplines may produce exciting scholarship, it is by definition an exclusive, individualized relationship and not a fix for systemic pressures.

From such friendships, we can take the mutual care, interest, and willingness to share with one another—even if someone else may get more credit for collectively developed concepts—as the core of such collaborative research. This includes conversations about who needs to get credit, who will benefit from being the author listed first in a collective publication, or from representing the group at an event. Such conversations are hard, but as our colleagues published in the collection *Who Can Speak and Who Is Heard/Hurt?* (2019) demonstrate, this kind of care is necessary to understand the systemic and personal constraints that individuals work under. Its editors write,

it appears that the inability of the German Humanities to *retain* a robust percentage of students of color for doctoral studies, and, even more so, for an academic career beyond the PhD, may have to do with the university's general and the Humanist disciplines' particular failure to *bear* people of color, causing many of them deep *hurt*. (Arghavan, Hirschfelder, and Motyl 11; emphasis in original)

When I think about our current working conditions, especially during COVID-19, there is a quote by Sara Ahmed that I often go back to:

[R]esilience is a technology of will, or even functions as a command: be willing to bear more; be stronger so you can bear more. We can understand too how resilience becomes a deeply conservative technique, one especially well suited to governance: you encourage bodies to strengthen so they will not succumb to pressure; so they can keep taking it; so they can take more of it. Resilience is the requirement to take more pressure; such that the pressure can be gradually increased. (189)

Ahmed describes how in the name of resilience our bodies are schooled to adjust to increasing pressure, and this is something especially true for work within academic institutions. Let me end with a plea against such resilience and toward creating communicative structures in which we can speak about the physical, mental, or social conditions under which we produce our research, and how these conditions impact the methods we adopt. Collaborative research projects, especially interdisciplinary ones, can be spaces that experiment with ways to communicate vulnerability. So, while the hunt for third-party funding embodies many of the ills of the neoliberal university, the research collectives it enables can produce new scholarly practices, including conversations about methods.

## Algorithmic Neoliberalism's Bonfire of Semiotics

STEPHEN SHAPIRO

Every question about method is fundamentally one about the legitimacy of the speaker's right to invoke and deploy disciplinary authority. This power to make truth-statements requires, in turn, access to institutional resources and privileges, the material fixed capital that produces employment and promotion within the academic machine. No wonder that non-host-nation American studies scholars have a heightened awareness (and anxiety) about method, especially in a moment when the Humboldtian research university seems to be evaporating beneath our feet as it metamorphosizes into a managerial, neoliberal one that combines concentration of power among high-salaried, senior management, structured insecurity, drop deadline competition, and submission to perceived entrepreneurial attitudes. Perhaps the challenge is not whether we do *this* or *that*, but how to respond to a more constitutive transformation of the academy and its modes of expression.

While there are numerous features of neoliberalism, a few are paramount. First, the collapse of liberalism's binary separate sphere conceptions, such as public and private, and the division between the citizen-subject and those cast into forms of social death as exchangeable objects, such as women, non-Whites, proletarians, and sex-gender dissidents. Second, the move from a pastoral state of biopolitical oversight which legitimized itself through the promise to deliver forms of security, including the protection of international borders as well as domestic policies of social welfare, education, and employment regulation, to a necropolitical, "live and let die" State that tolerates risk, mortality, and individual damage through a Neo-Malthusian social eugenics where those non-competitive, non-"excellent" individuals can be acceptably thinned out from the herd. Third, a move from mid-term planning and long-term infrastructure investments to policies favoring short-term gain amidst an increasing reliance on fictitious capital.

Yet, while neoliberal strategies do propose a significantly different configuration of the relations among State, national, and world markets; the enmeshed polity and those excluded from this category; and the management of social reproduction, including cultural communications; neoliberal policies are not best seen as a sequential replacement for Keynesian / Fordist liberalism. Not only did liberalism and neoliberalism emerge as responses to the Great Depression and the rise of Nazi and Fascist far-right movements, they have always co-existed, depending on each other's twin-like existence. The relative dominance of the two has shifted in response to ongoing capitalist crises over what are now three Kondratieff waves, each roughly forty to sixty years, in ways Sharae Deckard, Liam Kennedy, and I have previously detailed (Kennedy and Shapiro; Deckard and Shapiro).

Key for us today, however, is neoliberalism's third phase, which emerges from the 2008 / 2011 financial crash. There is not space here for a full-scale review of the post-2008 changes, except that it is from this time that neoliberal tactics finally began to not only dominate liberal apparatuses, but also became capable of mounting a full-scale re-engineering of these apparatuses, especially through the advantages of time-space compression, delivered through increased internet speed and computational power that have substantively changed labor practices and forms of social interaction.

One feature of this has been the advent of algorithmic-dependent, large-scale customization, exemplified by additive manufacturing (3D printing) that can make parts in ways that are no longer restricted by the need for the standardized molds that reduce costs through economies of scale, required by modern or Fordist-era manufacture, from the beltline of automobile production to the massification of high-rise, containerized housing. Because additive manufacturing can link data files to on-site fabrication, it can produce idiosyncratic objects as easily as ones of mechanical reproduction, since fabrication costs remain more or less the same, whether one item or one million are made.

What does the loss of normative models mean for the communicative frameworks within which American studies is housed, especially as the field was itself largely forged from massifying techniques for post-war teaching of an increased number of students that depended on a set of epistemological molds (period and genre seminars, a formulaic canon, and so on)? Architectural studies scholar Mario Carpo situates this problem in the context of the rise of so-called artificial intelligence, in which he claims that machine learning is a myth, an anthropocentric metaphor. From the Enlightenment-era's promulgation of empirical science we have sought reductionist equations that can make a complex world manageable in an easily cognizable fashion, for example,  $E=mc^2$ . These kinds of compression equations emerge from the nineteenth-century search for social science "laws" that could simply clarify and predict human behavior. Complexity was removed in favor of condensed certifications.

However, computers today do not have the limits of memory that humans do, and consequently they do not require compression equations, even as "digital humanities" often seeks to valorize itself through claims about the revelation of new simplifying formulas. Instead, algorithmic processes are free to operate through brute computing by searching for every variation until an operable product is found. The answers are often found through the abandonment of causative equations to correlative ones, the "like" or similarity of association, which exemplifies the shift towards what I call "correlative power." This form of power is different from the productive power that Michel Foucault spoke of in the context of liberalism's disciplinary placing of people in categories and parcelization of knowledge into academic disciplines based on the pro-

fessed expertise of a certified technocratic manager (Shapiro). Yet, the purpose of an algorithm is precisely to remove the mediation of human evaluations, and, as such, it also departs from the requisite compression technologies of molding mediation, including language itself. Here I mean, of course, the compression equations associated with semiotics as an epistemological tool that came of age through the Fordist era of mass humanities education.

Partly because the linguistic turn has been so influential in the post-war academy and so fundamental to many of our critical theories, it is difficult to imagine cultural studies beyond the paradigm of representation, of encoding and decoding. But consider Dominique Cardon's explanation about the algorithmic mechanics of machine translation. In the 1980s, engineers and linguists sought to code software based on the combination of dictionaries and abstract, syntactic rules so that machine translation would operate through the use of formal reasoning to translate one passage into another language. The machine translation exemplified by Google has abandoned the semiotics of abstract rules in favor of context statistics. Rather than translate one foreign signifier into another by word and rule, Google trawls through its digitized corpus of books to find similar two- or three-word clusters and then uses these prior translations to estimate what might be the most probable meaning. Machine translation rejects semiotic claims that meaning is differential. In the new algorithmic milieu, meaning is correlational.

As more and more communication operates through social networks based on algorithms, our familiar techniques for analyzing texts become less effective, as well as our responses to the rise of right-wing, post-truth formations, which simply register the arrival of a post-semiotic world. As Tim Lanzendörfer counterintuitively, but correctly, suggests, the search for a "method" may miss the political challenge entirely. Our familiar mode of critiquing the signification of right-wing expression has been through methods exemplified by Roland Barthes's use of mythologizing semiotics, such as Barthes's noted reading of the Black colonial soldier saluting the French flag. But are these effective strategies in an age of memes, which operate through the correlative association of ironic algorithmicity, rather than semiotically?

What then becomes of those other reductionist knowledge compression technologies like academic disciplines, genre distinctions, and even forms like the novel that function similarly to modernist architecture and Fordist large-machinery's molds? What does it mean to teach in semiotics, when our students listen in algorithmic associations? What, then, are we talking about when we talk about American studies today?

## “M. E. T. H. O. D, Man!”: Hip Hop Studies and the Method Wars

MARTIN LÜTHE

In an introduction to the *New Literary History* issue on “Interpretation and Its Rivals,” Rita Felski writes:

If the era of high theory was followed by an entrenchment of historicism, we are now in the midst of the method wars (the martial metaphor seems appropriate, given that tempers can run surprisingly high). What does it mean to read a text, scholars are asking, and are there other things we can do with texts besides interpreting them? Critics are debating the merits of close reading versus distant reading, surface reading versus deep reading, and reading suspiciously versus reading from a more receptive, generous, or postcritical standpoint. The focus has shifted from theoretical claims or empirical arguments to matters of method and mood, style and sensibility—in short, the various procedures and practices that inform our encounter with a text. (v)

Whether or not we agree with the legitimacy of the martial metaphor, Felski’s introduction and her contributions to debates around methodologies in literary studies have been controversial and carry some weight. Additionally, they have sparked debates and even scholarly feuds. These call-and-response debates about methodology—for example, Felski vs. Sheila Liming—also strike me as expressions of a generational conflict driven by the access to cultural capital in our fields. In that sense these intense disagreements remind me of what hip hop culture calls “having beef,” as in the feud between LL Cool J and Canibus, which started over a microphone tattoo and a feature track in 1998. Not only that, but Liming’s recent critique of Felski in the *LA Review of Books* also tackles issues related to the structure of our “business” (of education), especially regarding the limited economic resources and a younger generation’s precarity within the business. I use this resemblance to hip hop culture to reframe the “method war” as “method beef.”

As a transnational and interdisciplinary endeavor, the field of hip hop studies shares a set of crucial problems and complexities with the discipline of (German) American studies, especially when it comes to analyzing and teaching more than a text itself. Hip hop scholars have also demonstrated a keen awareness of the racially charged hierarchies that force us to question our own positionalities as scholars—often White European—vis-à-vis our object(s) of inquiry and within academia itself. While hip hop as a movement has insisted on the agency of its practitioners, on doing things and on creating, the field of hip hop studies has, at the same time, rightly insisted on its lasting institutional marginalization within the academy (much like other fields invested and grounded in the popular—see also Maria Sulimma’s piece above on the performative elements of academia and the challenges these pose

to younger scholars studying popular culture). This matters to a debate about methods because certain concerns will never be mainstreamed in our fields to the extent that debates about the right reading of canonical novels are. Rather, these concerns will continue to be considered peripheral intellectually, institutionally, and physically. In hip hop and hip hop studies, the body matters, performance matters, the racialization of bodies and voices matters and—ultimately—we might need a bigger debate about processes of inclusion and exclusion in our field of North American studies. Processes of exclusion are indeed methodological!

So, what is the benefit of reframing “the method wars” as hip hop studies’ “beef” with the disciplinary and disciplining qualities of the problem of methodology? Let us first consider a crucial function of having “beef”: “Beefing” generates interest; it garners attention; it sells. It usually is as much about ideas—or skills—as it is about regimes of attention within the respective communities. It thus matters that hip hop epistemologies have participated in and shaped a variety of fields since hip hop has hit Harvard, but of course they are never what “we” as Americanists have in mind when we talk about the methodology of the field.

If postcritique is only now grappling with the interstices of text and context, hip hop studies has done so since its inception. Tricia Rose’s foundational text *Black Noise: Rap Music and Black Culture in Contemporary America* (1994) not only introduces hip hop as a scholarly object but raises a variety of intersecting concerns that are methodological in that sense. The passage on “flow, layering, and rupture” encapsulates the methodological aspirations of Rose’s *Black Noise*:

What is the significance of flow, layering, and rupture as demonstrated on the body and in hip hop’s lyrical, musical, and visual works? Interpreting these concepts theoretically, one can argue that they create and sustain rhythmic motion, continuity, and circularity via flow; accumulate, reinforce, and embellish this continuity through layering; and manage threats to these narratives by building in ruptures that highlight the continuity as it momentarily challenges it. These effects at the level of style and aesthetics suggest affirmative ways in which profound social dislocation and rupture can be managed and perhaps contested in the cultural arena. Let us imagine these hip hop principles as a blueprint for social resistance and affirmation: create sustaining narratives, accumulate them, layer, embellish, and transform them. (39)

First, on the level of object (or text) Rose treats the body, the lyrical, the musical, and visual as inherently entangled to the point where the text / context divide disappears as a meaningful binary. Second, instead, she then has these spheres intersect with her three theoretical-methodological prisms of flow, layering, and rupture. They sustain, accumulate, and anticipate the breaks and ruptures. Third, none of the above becomes meaningful unless used “as a blueprint for social resistance.” Crucially,

the social that Rose is interested in is produced and policed by experiences rooted in racialization (with its ultimate pseudo-neutral signifier of Whiteness). A “method beef” might provide more than a rhetorical chance for us to take scholarly debates seriously as “ruptures,” especially those that are framed as methodological but that might be motivated beyond method: whether generational, driven by the status within “the game,” and/or by our inertia to hear and include more voices into the kinds of “debates” we consider to be foundational for our field.

## Methods and Manuscripts: On Pursuing American Studies in the Archive

KATRIN HORN

This forum entry offers some thoughts (in the form of questions) on reading intimate, unpublished, and/or unfinished texts as a methodological challenge in American studies, specifically as pursued in archives. These questions circle around matters of closeness (rather than close reading) and of participation (by scholars, archivists, correspondents, and many others), and thus also touch on the degree to which our training in literary studies actually equips us for working with non-literary texts.<sup>9</sup> These questions and concerns are guided by my own experience of familiarizing myself with new objects of study—primarily letters—and supplemented with references to debates about surface reading within American studies and about affect within archival studies.

After years of telling my students that “the author is dead” as a metaphor to help steer them away from the intentional fallacy (and thus train them in the method of unaffected close reading), it was only in 2018 that I considered the death of the author in the tangible sense of opening a manuscript that I know I can only read because the person who has written these words and touched these pages is not alive anymore. The “tactile and direct approach to the material,” as historian Arlette Farge has put it, “the feel of touching traces of the past” (15) is for many scholars a crucial part of the physical experience of working with manuscripts. Is it part of its method as well? Recent work in critical archival studies would suggest that it is. Maryanne Dever, for example, in her recent book *Paper, Materiality and the Archived Page* stresses the importance of being attuned to the materiality of the archival record. This begs the question: How do I (as a scholar of American studies) weigh the ever-important, ever-required textual evidence that I have been trained to look for as part of “close reading” in either the absence of text (because of lost paper material) or the overwhelming presence of material evidence? A central case study for Dever are letters from Greta Garbo to Mercedes de Acosta which had been dismissed by most as “containing nothing much” because of their trivial content

<sup>9</sup> A conversation spawned by our shared work on this forum—yet going beyond what space and thematic focus would have permitted to elaborate on in this writing—has been on the definition of “text.” Whereas I understand “text” in the tradition of cultural studies as anything a culture has produced, Tim Lanzendörfer assumes a narrower definition of text which would exclude letters and other serialized, fragmentary, or unpublished forms of cultural expression (in which case, the question of differing takes on the applicability of close reading would be a moot point since [close] reading necessitates a text).

(and thus not meeting the textual expectations of “love letters”). Dever, by contrast, wants to “extend [her understanding of archival evidence] beyond the written text of a personal correspondence to encompass, for example, the volume of correspondence or paper present” (19). As such, the number of letters exchanged and their mode of preservation would be just as, if not more important to our understanding (not reading) of them as their content.

Letters not only gain meaning differently, i. e., through their sheer volume, they also function differently than the literary texts we have been trained to read. Maybe most importantly, they do not have an idealized or implied reader but an *intended* reader—the person with whom the author entered the “epistolary pact” (Cécile Dauphin qtd. in Lyons 173). That person is clearly not me, which brings ethical as much as practical concerns. And those, too, circle around the issue of participation. As letters lost their “public nature and function” (Dever 117; see also Spacks 70–71) during the nineteenth century, they increasingly employed what Elizabeth Susan Wahl calls in a different context a “language of intimacy” (1). Understanding their idiosyncratic phrases and obscure references therefore necessitates a level of biographical knowledge that is usually unnecessary for interpreting texts meant for public consumption, and which instead requires scholars to immerse themselves in the intimate knowledge networks from which these communications emerge. Life writing in manuscript form thus also seems like a particularly fitting case for Stephen Best and Sharon Marcus’s suggestion of surface rather than symptomatic readings. Whereas the “hermeneutics of suspicion” would look at gaps to see what repressed meaning lies beneath, the gaps in letters refuse to become this laden with meaning as they are often simply “unwritten’ because [some things] go without saying” (Stoler 3).

Furthermore, the single letter is—at least in most cases of purely private communication—not actually “the text” with which I am concerned. It only gains its meaning as part of a larger correspondence. Hence, those of us trained in literary studies need to “un-train” yet another aspect of method: attention to plot. Even without the gaps left by missing responses (which are almost impossible to avoid), letters are perhaps uniquely resistant to coherent narratives since “the correspondence has a plot of which the letters themselves could not be aware” (Karlín xii; see also Spacks 69). While we may be tempted to read these letters as a continuous story, they were written and received often with long gaps of time in between. Moreover, the letters’ metadata—the dates and places added above the salutary lines—often provide even more crucial evidence of “the plot,” and thus the correspondents’ cultural agency, than the letters’ content.

Participation is key to the methods required by working with manuscripts also in a completely different sense: I am not working on my own. The material is too vast and the access too complex. Rather than sitting down with the annotated scholarly edition of a finite text to begin my

“reading,” I have to ask reference librarians and archivists for support. Colleagues, student assistants, and software help with the transcription of letters that sometimes seem impossible to read. I exchange scans with other scholars who used their limited time in the same manuscript reading room to scan other parts of a collection. Lots of people thus “participate” in the research “I” ostensibly produce. And those are only the people I know—the collaborators addressed also by Maria Sulimma—whose work I can acknowledge, praise, or sweep under the carpet. But what about those people whom I do not know and whose contribution (and motivation) I cannot ever fully assess, namely those who only show up in the finding aid as “gift by”?<sup>10</sup> While they are rarely acknowledged, their decisions might shape my research more than almost any other factor. Contingency (as Ruth Mayer’s contribution also highlights) thus creeps into my research in ways that have a bearing on my method: Intentional fallacy or not, we usually proceed from the assumption that the texts with which we work are presented to us in the way the author planned for them to be consumed by a public audience. I cannot say the same for manuscripts.

In these and myriad other ways, my encounter with manuscripts has challenged me to rethink, or at least make myself aware of, some of the core assumptions and methods my discipline has taught me. Just like some letters on the page are resistant to my attempts to decipher them, manuscripts at large are resistant to my methods of reading. I am thus left to wonder how to best do justice to the aggregated meaning encountered in letters, journals, and similar cultural artifacts which are defined by their embeddedness in communicative networks and their openness to revision and addition (rather than their formal finiteness). One thing of which I am sure, however, is that as genres of intimacy they ask for different scholarly methods of reading closely than the detached mode of close reading.

## Beyond Close and Distant: Computation, Literary Sociology, and the Place of Interpretation<sup>11</sup>

ALEXANDER DUNST

In one of his later essays, Stuart Hall criticized what he called the “overwhelming textualization of cultural studies” (273), warning that its political vocation depended on studying culture’s intersection with, among others, “institutions, offices, agencies, classes, academies, corporations, groups, ideologically defined parties and professions” (271). Hall also acknowledged that this institutional perspective had remained problematic, indeed that it had proven impossible to come to an adequate account of “culture’s relations and its effects” (271).

<sup>10</sup> A finding aid is a “description that typically consists of contextual and structural information about an archival resource” (SAA). Part of the contextual information provided there concerns the records’ provenance and acquisition, which might be described as “gift by” followed by the names of individuals and date. I have not yet come across a finding aid that explained the motivation of these individuals or how they themselves came into possession of these records.

<sup>11</sup> This short paper is adapted from the introduction to a forthcoming book, *The Rise of the Graphic Novel: Computational Criticism and the Evolution of Literary Value*, to be published with Cambridge University Press in 2022.

In what follows, I contend that digital methods have the potential to furnish this elusive account of culture's relations. Perhaps more controversially, I argue that the digital humanities represent an opportunity to return to the political vocation of cultural studies. Building on the work of Katherine Bode, the first part describes distant and close reading as two variants of largely decontextualized scholarship. The second part highlights an alternative approach, what I will call situated reading: Rather than focusing on the text as the ultimate source of meaning, this method uses sociological information and relational databases to *model* literary systems—or, in Hall's words, "culture's relations and its effects."

### *Beyond Close and Distant*

In the version that remains best known to literary critics, the digital humanities pursue an approach called distant reading. This rhetorically compelling but conceptually unfortunate phrase enacts a number of problematic dichotomies that distinguish distant from close reading according to its adherents: quantitative versus qualitative, empirical versus critical, and computational as opposed to hermeneutic scholarship.<sup>12</sup> Intended as a descriptive term, quantity often morphs into a prescriptive goal, a race for ever bigger datasets that shows obvious parallels with the efforts of large software companies. Scholars who study rarer artifacts will never accrue enough data for distant reading, whether they focus on minor languages, niche formats, or historical acts of opposition.<sup>13</sup> Despite their reputation, then, many digital humanities projects are not concerned with distant reading. Instead, they employ digital affordances to preserve, analyze, and disseminate smaller sets of cultural objects or practices.

The two related dichotomies of empirical and critical, computational and hermeneutic, similarly give way upon closer scrutiny. For scholars like Hall, no contradiction existed between empirical observation and critique. One built the foundation for the other. Like every experimental approach, computation also demands interpretation. In particular, experimental results necessitate a form of sustained reading that attends to the ambiguities and contradictions of statistical patterns but embeds them within a theoretical framework. Computation does not replace the hermeneutic circle but becomes part of its function, positioned between the formulation of hypotheses and the interpretation of results (Sculley and Pasanek 417–22).

Historically speaking, distant reading flows from the confluence of two scholarly practices—New Criticism and humanities computing. As Katherine Bode points out, there is a deep affinity between distant and close reading: the notion that texts are singular, stable entities and the central source of literary meaning. As a consequence, texts are often read in isolation from their physical manifestation and socio-economic

<sup>12</sup> See Moretti, "Conjectures" (2000) for the original coinage of the term distant reading, which envisioned a method for understanding world literature's "system in its entirety" by focusing on phenomena either smaller or larger than the individual text (57). A recent reiteration of these oppositions can be found in Moretti, "The Roads" (2020).

<sup>13</sup> Some of the observations in these passages were first published in a previous paper (see Dunst).

context (Bode 92). With roots stretching back to the 1940s, humanities computing developed tools and methods for the analysis of written documents. This new area of study also emphasized the text, now a digital entity. Implicitly or explicitly, humanities computing distanced itself from a concern with social contexts and the analysis of gender, race, class, and sexuality.<sup>14</sup> Most computational methods enable the sophisticated analysis of large collections of linguistic data, but they pay much less attention to their social entanglement. The distinction between qualitative and quantitative in the debate over distant versus close reading therefore obscures that both fail to construct literature as a socio-historical system.

<sup>14</sup> Martha Nell Smith comments: "When I first started attending humanities computing conferences in the mid-1990s, I was struck by how many of the presentations remarked, either explicitly or implicitly, that concerns that had taken over so much academic work in literature—of gender, race, class, sexuality—were irrelevant to humanities computing" (4).

<sup>15</sup> For sample visualizations, a search option, and download of the entire database see: <https://groups.uni-paderborn.de/graphic-literature/gncorpus/corpus.php>.

<sup>16</sup> For a helpful discussion see Léger-St-Jean and McGettigan.

<sup>17</sup> In this sense, "distant reading" never left close reading behind. Despite Moretti's protestations, the statistical patterns observed in digital literary studies depend on interpretive acts to become meaningful. These patterns act as prompts for the strong interpretations that established Moretti's reputation. Without these, it is doubtful that his digital scholarship would have ever found as many readers. But methodologically, it is the absence of more finely grained models of literature that necessitated the dichotomy of close and distant. Contra Moretti, it is possible to both affirm the necessity of interpretation and close reading and to assign them a more localized position within the project of literary history.

### *Situated Reading*

Over the last few years, I worked on a book that studies graphic narratives published in North America since the 1970s as a literary field. This project drew on contemporary accounts of cultural capital to *model* the social elevation of this publication format. Thus, the aim consisted of capturing the characteristics and contexts of a cultural object and structuring this information in ways that enable computational analysis. Central to this model are the links between 270 retro-digitized graphic narratives and a relational database that contains metadata for each of these volumes: page length and author information, color and size, reprints and film adaptations, translations, academic citations and review ratings.<sup>15</sup> The databases that contain and relate these tables of information provide a foundational but frequently overlooked tool of computational study. They also allow scholars to establish lateral networks that provide connections beyond a focus on individual authors and titles; each entry and every link becomes an access point to the entire system.<sup>16</sup>

In comparison with Franco Moretti's distant reading, which seesaws between micro- and macroanalysis, this multi-leveled network means that individual texts lose importance.<sup>17</sup> Instead, the focus of interpretation becomes the literary field and its component parts. In studying the rise of the graphic novel, these components were subgenres and stylistic strategies, colors and shapes, textual and visual complexity. What I call situated reading employs computation to analyze cultural objects in their socio-historical contexts, specifically, the relation between aesthetic production and social reproduction. Situated reading emphasizes the construction of fine-grained models of cultural phenomena, semi-independent in their logic yet embedded within larger media ecologies and political economies.

Beyond close and distant, there is an urgent need in the study of literature and culture today for complementary scales of reading that focus on the middle strata of culture, from minor genres to specific cultural institutions (English 12-13). Pragmatically, such a mid-level method al-

lows for a form of modeling that can represent, if never fully account for, the complexity of existing phenomena. These mid-level phenomena mediate between the abstract poles of society at large and the instance of the literary text (Frow). They do so neither by extrapolation nor by relying on the notion that the individual text *expresses* larger concerns. Rather than aiming to analyze the entirety of literary history, it is in analyzing these mid-level phenomena that we may encounter the complex, even contradictory, evidence that allows us to revise established interpretations and grand theories.

## **Rethinking the Authority of Experience: Mobile Field Noting as a Method of American Diversity Studies**

CARSTEN JUNKER

What I am offering to contribute to this conversation are considerations less about method than simply about a mode of thinking. My impulse comes from reconsidering the status of *experience* in American literary and cultural studies. I am distinguishing here between experience as an object of study and fleeting day-to-day experiences beyond academic work. The latter can become significant in approaching the work we do. My take on method as practice comes out of, and speaks back to, a project concerned with demographic diversity in scenarios of inequality, including the unequal share that individuals and groups have in institutional power. In such a project, the status of experience has been of central concern as an object of research. Well-known examples would be writings by marginalized writers and activists. Consider, for instance, the appeal to the authority of experience the authors of the groundbreaking 1977 “Combahee River Collective Statement” make: “We have spent a great deal of energy delving into the cultural and experiential nature of our oppression out of necessity because none of these matters has ever been looked at before” (20). For the self-identified Black feminist lesbian socialist women who are speaking up here (19), experience is a source of knowing about oppression and the means to validate their intervention in “racial, sexual, heterosexual, and class oppression” (15). Long canonized in American studies, the statement continues to be an important reminder of the epistemic status and critical potential of experience.

But while experience can serve as a crucial object of analysis, most practitioners of American studies disregard their own day-to-day experiences as part of their work. I assume many Americanists do not document the experiences they make on an everyday basis, especially not the fleeting ones. Generally, we rarely ever include ethnographic methods in our work, like picking up a pen and paper and taking field notes, as is common practice in anthropology. We hardly ever overtly

explain the impact of our experiences on the procedures we use when we approach our material (and the protocols of third-party funding applications, addressed in this forum by Ruth Mayer and Maria Sulimma, certainly do not encourage it). When it comes to the interpretation of literary and cultural texts—bracketing reader-response theories or empirical audience research here—daily experiences beyond academic work are largely considered irrelevant. Their potential as a building block in method is under-examined. The object-bias of experience corresponds to a methodological lack of reflecting on day-to-day experiences, a lack that results from continuing claims to scholarly objectivity and the assumption that scholars are disembodied observers. I assume most researchers do not necessarily consider themselves observers who are also participating in what they observe. But anyone who observes also participates in experience, especially when questions of diversity and inequality are concerned. We all speak from specific locations; our complicated subject positions shape our experiences. And we all have day-to-day experiences in a practical sense. We have bodies; we embody our knowledges.

Personal day-to-day experiences beyond academic work do not have to become the new objects we study, but they can present an important reference point for the contextualization of common methods of analysis, such as textual or film analysis. To me, this is because experience has the potential for interference. It can interfere with my theoretical assumptions. It can be a corrective to my theorizing. That is something that does not seem to be acknowledged enough. But how can we integrate experience in our work? What does it mean to be working from experience, to reflect on one's own personal experience as an interference with theory? To give a prototypical example: when I did archival work as a German Federal fellow at the Kluge Center at the Library of Congress in 2019, I took notes of day-to-day events beyond my academic work there, notes that had no direct connection to what I was there to work on, of chance encounters in situations generally not researched. I took notes of observations I made when I went places and got into conversations with people—an auto-ethnographic method I call “mobile field noting.” I took notes, rough and tentative ones, for instance, of the neighborhood in which I lived, around Gallaudet University, which has a thriving Deaf community. These notes touch on issues of ableism and exclusion as discussed in disability studies, but largely they address issues of belonging (to different linguistic groups in this case) and the counter-normalization of a self-empowered, highly diverse community that to me seemed extremely convivial and welcoming, not least to hearing people like me. Other notes I took on going out to a number of gay venues bespeak issues of self-segregation. Instead of experiencing an inclusive atmosphere, I noted how queer openness and messiness gave way to self-exclusion and homonormativity. The notes I took highlight my participation in the scripting of normative

subjectivities; they address tensions I sensed between anti-identitarian calls of much queer theorizing and the normalizing protocols of life in capitalism, challenging my own assumptions about anti-categorical approaches to embodiment.

Taking notes on day-to-day experience beyond academic work while on the move—mobile field noting—has the potential of a self-reflective, auto-ethnographic mode of thinking. It can help to acknowledge and consciously incorporate embodied experience. Mobile field noting is about going sideways and seeing the unexpected. It invites us as researchers to be surprised and overcome a distinction between a supposedly proper inside of research and an outside of it. There is no disembodied knowledge production, no fading out of work when we leave our desks. The focus of mobile field noting lies on situations that, for some of us, may usually not count as reference points in research but can throw into doubt seeming certainties of theorizing. Being mobile can supplement our common methods when we relate such experiences back to scholarly questions and categorizations. Mobile field noting can help us step out of paradigms.

## Outro: Practices of Writing

ILKA BRASCH AND ALEXANDER STARRE

Looking back, this multi-voiced forum on method may create the impression that the unifying tendency usually implied in discussions about method (“how do *we* approach this research problem”) does not quite hold under contemporary conditions in the field that is American studies. The insistence on individualized, situated, self-reflexive perspectives and methods fine-tuned for particular research objects (“how do *I* approach *this* problem”) seems to entail disunion and methodological laxity. In a lucid discussion of method for students of American studies, Philip J. Deloria and Alexander I. Olson recently wrote: “In American Studies, we have to support our conclusions as best we are able, and to accept that at least some of what we do has the creative quality of art, deeply influenced by our own subjective selves” (122). Fittingly, when Americanists write about method, the result is often anything but methodological, as when, to pick just one example, the queer studies scholar Elizabeth Freeman confesses in a longer description of her research practice: “I’ve always described my method to students as slow, blind, groping in the dark [...]” (16). Nevertheless, discussing our methods proved to shed light on what exactly it is that we do when we do what we do. For instance, Maria Sulimma’s suggestion that TV series should not be analyzed as though they were novels—without a consideration of production and reception contexts and an awareness of televisual affordances such as seriality but also camera, lights, or audio

track—sparked the reverse question of whether novels can be read without taking similar factors into account. Two insights can be derived from conversations among the contributors of this forum in the lively margins of a Google document. First, comparing approaches to the study of different cultural forms helps to identify assumptions we bring to their study. Second, the methods of American studies in Germany seem to organize around the study of literature and, at times, display a certain reluctance to adopt or engage with methods and approaches tailored toward the study of television or hip hop, for instance.

While, at times, these forum contributions seem to suggest that each scholar will deploy their own particular method that cannot possibly be replicated, it is still the case that in concrete practice this method pluralism is often counterbalanced by the ubiquity of a basic interpretive skill: close reading. Deloria and Olson in their advice to students call close reading “a useful starting point” (128), and Freeman describes how in her projects she always begins with “finely grained close readings of imaginative and documentary texts” (16). The contributions to this forum stress the allure of close reading, which, as Barbara Herrnstein Smith notes, was never one method among many but has been “virtually definitive of the field” (58). Yet, the forum shows that close readings are neither repeatable nor disembodied, and the method does not remain static across divergent interests, such as nineteenth-century letters, hip hop, or digital datasets on graphic narratives. Thus, even with regard to close reading, the slipperiness of method as a conceptual bracket around certain practices reappears because the labor going into such close readings and the practical steps taken to refine them are mostly opaque. Their visible side will be a written account, inserted in a journal essay or a book chapter. As such, the method of close reading is inseparably entangled with scholarly writing to the degree where “I admire your reading of *xyz*” always in effect means, “I admire your writing about *xyz*.” A similar uncertainty informed the comments the authors shared among themselves: Tim Lanzendörfer argued that the practice of skimming and skipping described in Ruth Mayer’s statement in fact represented a method, whereas Mayer saw the term “method” itself as opposing the contingency involved in skimming and skipping. Whereas to Mayer “method” describes a curtailing of possibilities and a clinging to the New Critics’ insistence of scientificity—that is, a systematization understood in terms of its negative implications—Lanzendörfer considers “method” and “close reading” more open terms that include a range of interpretive matters that, in concert, make the discipline, and make it socially and politically valuable.

There has been noticeable change not only in the way scholars *read* but also in how they *write*. In an *English Language Notes* special issue from 2013 titled *After Critique?*, Mike Witmore notes that

Literary criticism over the last decade has, for example, become more self-consciously eclectic, even curatorial in its outlook and self-presentation. One sees this move toward curation not simply in contemporary journal

articles and university press offerings, but in para-academic ventures such as *Cabinet* magazine, which highlights the aesthetic choosiness that goes into selecting objects of study. If exhibitions or iTunes playlists can be made, so too perhaps academic projects. (141)

Since Witmore's diagnosis, more of these para-academic outlets have opened shop, including the *Los Angeles Review of Books* and the *Post45* online clusters but also numerous blogs and podcasting projects. Conversely, as we hope this forum shows, academic journals continue to host forms and formats that veer away from the traditional academic article. This does not mean that established formats like articles and books have run their course; rather, it means that method debates have pushed literary studies and related disciplines toward exploring new patterns and temporalities of writing and publishing.

In recent years, the journal *PMLA* has used its "Theories and Methodologies" section as a space for scholars to discuss the practical impact of various conceptual developments in the field as well as their connectivity with regard to the infrastructural shifts in English departments and in the humanities more generally. Reflecting on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and the escalating crises of anti-Black violence, ecological degradation, and higher education defunding, Kyla Wazana Tompkins declared in the pages of this *PMLA* section in early 2021: "These are not method wars: these are resource wars. Every 'war,' if we even want to use that term so loosely from here on out, is going to be a war of resources pretending to be something else" (419). It is remarkable that a matter as dry as methodology currently triggers some of the most urgent prose written by literary and cultural studies scholars.

We have attempted to counterbalance the singular nature of each personal method statement with a collaborative mode of writing, opening the editing and revision process of the manuscript to everyone involved. Along the way, the conceptual tagline "method as practice" took on a much more literal meaning. The published version of this forum is perhaps emblematic of the field's response to the multiplicity of forms and media we study but also to the evolving forms and media in which we write, edit, and publish.

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