Literary Studies after Postcritique: An Introduction

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Abstract

Proponents of postcritique persuasively show that any attempt to re-examine and restructure Literary Studies must begin by revisiting the discipline’s big concepts, ideas, and practices. And yet, we argue in this essay, the value of postcritique for the necessary project of recalibrating Literary Studies is less a matter of its ability to deliver a methodology that succeeds critique than of the insights into Literary Studies that the particular nature of postcritique’s vehement opposition to critique indirectly produces. The question is not whether or not postcritique in fact gets us to a literary criticism beyond critique. Instead, we ask how postcritique, both directly through its analyses and arguments and indirectly through the discussions about our discipline’s big categories and questions that it has created, contributes to the overall ongoing process of rethinking the fundamental methods and concepts of Literary Studies. If we examine some of its fundamental theoretical premises, we see that postcritique indeed asks vital questions. But we also find that it does so in a manner curiously detached from any actual practice of critique. What emerges when examining postcritique’s treatment of critique is a troubling kind of logic and rhetoric that might be described as academic populism. That is, although postcritique raises important, complex questions, it tends to propose answers that, as we show, are in both content and in rhetorical form less a matter of methodological urgency than of strategic crowd-pleasing.

Critique and Postcritique

Literary criticism is currently experiencing a moment of profound change and transformation. As Elizabeth Anker and Rita Felski put it in the introduction to their co-edited volume Critique and Postcritique, “[w]e are currently in the midst of a recalibration of thought and practice whose consequences are difficult to predict” (1). “Critique” and “postcritique” name the chief sides understood to be competing for prominence in Literary Studies: the older, entrenched practice of critique and the newer, revivifying practices of postcritique. Indeed, postcritique claims for itself an important role in a general effort to recalibrate Liter-
ary Studies, forwarding large-scale and widely discussed statements on “the past, present, and future of critique in literary studies and beyond” (i). As the proponents of postcritique persuasively show, any attempt to re-examine and restructure Literary Studies must begin by revisiting the discipline’s big concepts, ideas, and practices. In recent years, we have seen just such a return to the seemingly simple questions of our discipline that demand big answers, answers that in turn have complex consequences for our understanding of what we do as readers and scholars of literature: How do we read? Is there a form of reading that is particular to Literary Studies? What counts as interpretation? What kinds of things can we do with literature aside from interpreting it? What exactly links Literary Studies and the political? And what are the politics that are bound up with the answers to all of these questions? The future of Literary Studies is being determined by a new wave of attempts to answer the question that stands at the heart of any academic field conscious of its own immanent historicity and aware of the need to periodically revisit and update its basic operations: how do we do what we do, and why?

In this sense, then, postcritique does crucially important work. It asks where Literary Studies has been, it asks where it is now, and, by probing its possibilities and limitations, it asks where Literary Studies may move in the future. But the future of literary criticism after postcritique at which the title of this special issue hints, the future that postcritique seeks to open up but that it finds as yet difficult to predict, is not, we argue, in fact a matter of yet another series of “posts”: it will not be postcritical, nor post-postcritical. But this does not mean that we intend to simply declare that we have moved past postcritique. Rather, we wish to take the postcritical challenge seriously, but we would like to argue for a particular way of doing so that strikes us as productive. We locate the value of postcritique for the necessary project of recalibrating Literary Studies not directly in its ability to deliver a methodology that succeeds critique but rather in the insights into Literary Studies that the particular nature of postcritique’s vehement opposition to critique indirectly produces. The question is not whether or not postcritique in fact gets us to a literary criticism beyond critique: instead, we ask how postcritique, both directly through its analyses and arguments and indirectly through the discussions about our discipline’s big categories and questions that it has created, contributes to the overall ongoing process of rethinking the fundamental methods and concepts of Literary Studies. Tongue somewhat in cheek, we might say that the greatest value of postcritique for literary criticism may be found less in its assessment of our discipline and its established methods than in its status as a literary critical phenomenon itself, one which emerges and comes to prominence under specific historical conditions and the careful analysis of which yields insight into our cultural and disciplinary moment. Such a reading of postcritique is productive, we would suggest, because it does not sim-
Winfried Fluck offers a fair and accessible outline of Felski’s recent work that readers will surely find helpful. Fluck’s essay has also prompted a range of responses, including by Felski herself, which explore the wide-ranging stakes of the discussion between Fluck and Felski in a way that offers a practical example of the value of postcritical challenge as we describe it here: it encourages important debates about the state of our discipline and our methodological commitments as literary critics today. But while Fluck’s essay offers an engaging discussion of the relation of the work of Felski and Levine to the narratives of liberation in Literary Studies, our aim in this introduction is different insofar as we wish to contest the notion that Fluck’s essay extends: that postcritique offers a genuine engagement with critique by associating it directly and inseparably with the notion of a hermeneutics of suspicion.

We will seek to determine whether or not postcritique is able to successfully accomplish the task it carves out for itself: to recalibrate and reorient the field of Literary Studies. We are interested instead in the value of the postcritical challenge for literary criticism, which may not primarily arise from the challenge itself or in our reaction to it, but rather from analyses of and responses to the historical and disciplinary situation that gives rise to the postcritical challenge in the first place.

In what follows, we want to offer a brief history and an incipient historicization of postcritical reading practices as an important facet of the contemporary moment of conflict in Literary Studies. We will suggest that the rise of postcritique is necessarily tied to a number of socioeconomic and sociopolitical developments inside and outside of the academy, connections often only tenuously referenced by postcritical thinkers. Additionally, however, we want to speak to the theoretical premises of postcritique and suggest that while it asks vital questions, it does so in a manner curiously detached from any actual practice of critique. What emerges when examining postcritique’s treatment of critique is a troubling kind of logic and rhetoric that might be described as academic populism; that is, although postcritique raises important, complex questions, it tends to propose answers that, as we will show, are in both content and in rhetorical form less a matter of methodological urgency than of strategic crowd-pleasing.

1 Historicizing Postcritique

Postcritique names the contemporary moment’s sustained challenge to critique, understood by postcritics to be the hegemonic form of literary criticism. Critique’s own roots as the dominant form of (North American) literary criticism today lie in the theory revolution of the 1960s and, more specifically, in the profound influence that the work of the Marxist critic Fredric Jameson has had on the field since the 1970s. Jameson’s groundbreaking *The Political Unconscious* (1981) and its call for an Althusser-inspired symptomatic reading practice wedded ideology critique, close reading, and an avowed politics into precisely the form of critical reading that postcritics understand to be meant by critique, one which brings to the surface a text’s latent or obscured meanings, its ideological commitments (both conservative and progressively utopian), and its inherent contradictions. Felski, whose recent work is central to the postcritical debates, understands critique as fundamentally insistent on reading texts “against the grain” of their own (apparent) arguments and on assuming an antagonistic stance towards the text. Understood in this way, Felski argues, critique is a method of reading that can be described, following Paul Ricœur, as a “hermeneutics of suspicion” (*Limits* 1; emphasis in original).

Postcritique seeks to offer alternatives to what it understands to be an overly suspicious, antagonistic, politically-inspired but in fact inef-
ficacious reading practice. It echoes earlier twenty-first-century efforts to decenter critical practices of long standing (see North 124–94). Franco Moretti’s 2000 call for “distant reading” and data collection in lieu of individual interpretations—of close reading and hermeneutics—already anticipated a range of criticisms that form cornerstones of postcritique’s attack on critique (Moretti, “Conjectures”). In 2003, Hans Ulrich Gum- brecht argued that twenty-first-century literary criticism must turn toward a post-hermeneutic methodology, aiming for more “immediate” engagements with texts, demanding an engagement with the “presence” of our engagement with texts, a demand that anticipated the turn to affect, feeling, and other immediate approaches to texts that try to move beyond interpretation (Production). Reading itself is consequently understood differently in the context of the post-hermeneutic turn—not as the unlocking of meaning (as in ideological interpretation or various forms of historicization) but as what Gumbrecht elsewhere calls a reading for “mood” or an investment in “Stimmung” (“Reading”). In 2008, Felski, who has become postcritique’s most important voice, argued in Uses of Literature that suspicious reading should be supplanted by alternative ways of relating to the text. Much of the current force of the debate, however, emerges from a 2009 special issue of Representations entitled “The Way We Read Now,” and especially from the co-editors Stephen Best and Sharon Marcus’s groundbreaking introduction, “Surface Reading.” Published in the wake of a symposium on the twenty-fifth anniversary of the publication of The Political Unconscious, the special issue took an often radical stance against symptomatic reading practices, against plumbing the hidden depths of the text, and in favor of attention to the “surface.” Best and Marcus’s own initial catalogue of alternatives to critique suggests attention to the materiality of texts, renewed attention to the intricacies of literary language and to texts’ affective or ethical stances, and a fuller description or focus on literal meaning as ways forward (9–12). Following Best and Marcus, a number of thinkers have taken up the baton: in The Limits of Critique, Felski urges us to embrace a version of actor-network theory (and, somewhat paradoxically, a “renewed sense of idealism, purpose, and utopian possibility” [188]), Caroline Levine proposes expanding our definition of form to include the social, and Toril Moi challenges us to celebrate the singularity of literary experience.

All of these postcritical efforts—and many more could be listed—position themselves against what Felski describes as critique’s “obligatory” and increasingly meaningless “gestures of demystification and exposure” (Limits 115). Although they are a disparate group, postcritics share the belief that we should turn to closer, more intimate engagements with the text, to a purportedly truer and (popularly) more widespread way of reading. Not surprisingly, the various forms of post-hermeneutics that have emerged since the early 2000s have been frequently disparaged as anti-historical ways of reading, which has also given rise to great
suspicion regarding the politics of such methodologies (see, for instance, the special issue of *American Book Review* edited by Mullins). Of course, to champions of postcritique, the charge of anti-historicism constitutes little more than knocking on open doors, for their investment lies not in the defense of the historical and political status of the text but rather in defending the text itself. To those with an investment in critique, meanwhile, this defense of the text often amounts to an abnegation of the political tout court, leading to considerable debate (see Slaughter; Di Leo; Mullins, “Introduction”).

Postcritique thus figures as the climax of a longer turn towards post-hermeneutic Literary Studies, one which must be read against our own long historical moment. Admittedly, against its rather stringent reluctance to historicize, we are interested in postcritique, or perhaps better and more fairly, in the postcritical debate per se, as a historical symptom itself. Historicizing postcritique does not mean the triumphant unmasking of an “ideological enemy” that scholars like Felski associate with the tradition of critique (more on that below). Rather, we wish to understand the relation between the emergence and force of postcritique and the larger disciplinary, academic, and societal conditions in the context of which postcritics go to work. Why postcritique now? “Because critique” is but one of many possible answers, we would suggest, and other answers permit us a better assessment of where we are as scholars and readers of literature. Historicized answers to this question would help both critics as well as casual, non-professional readers and innocent bystanders understand why we are where we are in Literary Studies today.

Our desire for a historicization is, of course, somewhat fraught, both theoretically and practically. Theoretically, because historicization appears very much opposed to the very enterprise of postcritique (Best and Marcus 13). The very act of thinking the historical context of postcritique as a necessary background to understanding its meaning illustrates that we are partial to critique. Practically, because it is by no means clear that we can easily historicize the contemporary in the first place. What we hope to propose in the following is one possible reading of the sociopolitical and socioeconomic context of the rise of postcritique. The postcritical desire to dispense with reading strategies that may be understood as efforts at “unmasking” strikes us as a notable form of political detachment in the context of a renewed sense of crisis in the humanities and before the backdrop of the neoliberal world-system itself, which, as Mitchum Huehls has argued, seems to logically militate against any idea of critique’s oppositional stance.

Paradoxically, the entire postcritical enterprise has rested strongly on a historicizing impulse, linking a particular sociopolitical constellation in the contemporary directly with the postcritical intervention itself. It is therefore perhaps easiest to begin this discussion with a short review of the ways in which the postcritics have situated their own enterprise in sociopolitical terms. As Best and Marcus put it:
Those of us who cut our intellectual teeth on deconstruction, ideology critique, and the hermeneutics of suspicion have often found those demystifying protocols superfluous in an era when images of torture at Abu Ghraib and elsewhere were immediately circulated on the internet; the real-time coverage of Hurricane Katrina showed in ways that required little explanation the state’s abandonment of its African American citizens; and many people instantly recognized as lies political statements such as “mission accomplished.” Eight years of the Bush regime may have hammered home the point that not all situations require the subtle ingenuity associated with symptomatic reading, and they may also have inspired us to imagine that alongside nascent fascism there might be better ways of thinking and being simply there for the taking, in both the past and the present. (2)

In a similar vein, Felski asks:

What is the use of demystifying ideology when many people no longer subscribe to coherent ideologies, when there is widespread disillusionment about the motive of politicians and public figures, when ‘everyone knows’ that hidden forces are at work making us think and behave in certain ways? […] In such circumstances, familiar divisions between the savvy and the sappy, the critically enlightened and the sheeplike naïveté of the mass, lose their last shreds of purchasing power. (Limits 46)

Hermeneutics fails to serve a purpose where meaning is overt. A new way of reading is in order, this form of postcritical argument suggests, because the political situation which promoted symptomatic reading is past. In a new age, we require new ways of reading; this is the suggestion made in Best and Marcus’s call to look for “an affective and ethical stance” (10) in our engagement with literature, in Felski’s demand that we “embrace such themes as joy, hope, love, optimism, and inspiration” (Limits 152), or Moi’s call to “express our adventure” (221; emphasis in original) with literature.

These historicizations already do some work to reveal the limits of the postcritical intervention itself. In their introduction to Critique and Postcritique, Anker and Felski present their historicization as an agential reading of postcritique, one in which postcritique is not so much an “unwitting symptom of current exigencies,” but “an active and purposeful response to them” (19): a clear-eyed recognition of the contemporary moment, transmuted into reading strategies more appropriate to combating its ills, at least within the limited realm of Literary Studies. Two things are worth pointing out here: the first is that something may be both an active and purposeful response to the way things are (or are thought to be) and a symptom of its times. And second, postcritical historicization, like postcritical reading, is invested in the belief that access to things as they are is possible, and perhaps more peculiarly, that the things that can be obviously seen are also all there is. “You are missing the obvious,” postcritics seem to argue, “everybody already knows how bad things are, that all politicians are liars, that there is no escaping neoliberalism. You cannot ‘reveal’ that to people.” Postcriticism, in Anker and Felski’s account, sees the problems of our times and
develops, apparently detached from the push and pull factors which these problems bring to bear on the discipline, a non-ideological alternative to the existing, failing, reading formation, an alternative that highlights not that which everybody already knows but instead that which everybody should be focusing on.

On the one hand, then, postcritical arguments about the value of critique have resorted to a political historicization and a definition of postcritique’s value largely *ex negativo*: because the politics of the moment are not amenable to interpretation as the unmasking of hidden truths, we need to wean ourselves off critique. On the other hand, postcritical thinkers have also tied their intervention to a related but somewhat differently-centered historicization of the shape of the discipline. Postcritique is rife with anxiety about the future and present of the humanities. With Ellen Rooney, we might say that the “critique of critique” and the contemporary crisis of the humanities are coeval and inexorably connected” (127). Postcritical thinkers acknowledge as much. As Felski puts it, critique’s “skeptical regress” is “counterproductive, especially in the light of the current erosion of the humanities” (*Limits* 189). She suggests that “questioning critique” is “motivated by a desire to articulate a positive vision for humanistic thought in the face of growing skepticism about its value,” and that such a vision is “sorely needed if we are to make a more compelling case for why the arts and humanities are needed” (186). John Michael in turn argues that “critique may be said to have long defined the humanities as an academic enterprise. It is this version of critique that seems increasingly questionable today, as the humanities find themselves beset by a faltering sense of purpose on the one hand and increasingly skeptical public scrutiny on the other” (256). Likewise, Anker and Felski speak of the “urgency of crafting new rationales” (20) for the humanities as one of the imperatives of postcritical thinking.

There is a quasi-populist appeal to postcritique, one in which the postcritical version of professional reading’s proximity to non-professional reading is touted as an obvious means to exit the ivory tower on the first floor, delivered in language that is itself confined to surface usages and meanings as opposed to digging down into the messiness of terms like, say, value. When Felski speaks of value, one might argue, she often appears to mean whatever university administrations mean by value. And when Anker and Felski seek “rationales,” they appear to be speaking of something that others would more readily understand as sales-pitches. Instead of offering whatever public addressee they envisage a new rationale for critique and a more easily accessible vocabulary for inquiry, they appear to toss out the critical baby with the admittedly at times murky bath water. Without challenging the foundation of the crisis of the humanities or the absolute commodification of the very idea of education, these arguments for postcritique intimate the need for Literary Studies to become a more popular product for consumers (students and non-professional readers) and distributors (university
The point here is that if the limits of critique are limits of popular appeal, bound to a particular style of writing and an alleged dismissal of affirmative, affective connections created by the reading experience (as Moi argues), and if they are not failures of the theory as such, then critique is, at the very least, not wrong, but only off-putting. But then, the intellectually honest position would need to be a commitment to a “better” critique, not in what it says about texts but in how it communicates its findings. What we need is a better pitch for its (admitted) value, rather than a search for new theories; astronomy, after all, is really complicated, but it does not turn to astrology just because people really like horoscopes.

Carolyn Lesjak argues in this special issue that any effort to simply rethink the university is an insufficient response to the scale of the university’s radical remodeling under neoliberalism. It is no doubt not entirely fair to read postcritique as a market-conformist response to the problem of the humanities’ future. And yet, postcritique’s commitment to becoming more attuned to common ways of reading and avoiding an uncomfortable, obscure, and overly “academic” method that troubles readers with anger, negativity, and utopian pipe-dreams does exhibit parallels to the populist rhetoric and logic that is currently on the rise in other spheres. To be sure, it would neither be fair nor accurate (or helpful for the discussions at hand) to simply dismiss postcritics as populists. But we do wish to note with some concern the uncomfortable semblance of some rhetorical moves and logical choices that characterize postcritique as a version of such appeals in contemporary populism. And since postcritique is often concerned with style, tone, and attitude, it does seem fair to point out the troubling ways in which the tone of postcritique registers in the context of the rise of the new populisms. Thus, while much of postcritique’s effort to popularize the contemporary humanities is laudable and indeed necessary, we nevertheless do believe that such a rethinking of literary criticism’s public role must be undertaken more carefully than has been done so far, especially with regard to criticism’s place within the current socioeconomic and political climate.

Much of the anxiety about the contemporary state of the humanities is ineluctably tied to neoliberalism, and this is where we would chiefly fault the incipient historicizations offered by postcritique. The connections between the various strands of postcritical anxiety (the failure of trying to unmask bare-faced politics, the demise of humanities programs and their public failure to effect changes, the desire to understand politics in affective rather than structural terms) have been insufficiently theorized, especially where postcritical thinkers rightly point out that critique’s oppositional stance limits its ability to easily converse with the public. Precisely how postcritique would work better as a rationale for Literary Studies in the contemporary neoliberal moment, except as a surrender to it, remains unclear. And, possibly paradoxically, postcritique emerges at times as merely a gesture, one that remains as imprecise and without final consequences as the naïve utopian thought that postcritique likes to associate with critique. It is not enough, of course, to simply point to neoliberalism as a necessary backdrop of postcritical thinking, as though that relation itself had automatic explanatory power. When Anker and Felski argue, for example, that we need “a greater willingness to work within, while striving to modify, institutional structures both inside and outside the university” (19), one would need to see a more precise account of just how such efforts might work to be persuaded that postcritique offers more than a mere willingness to address problems that affect us all.
Postcritique has weathered significant shifts in the political climate. In the United States alone, the shift from the neoconservative administration of George W. Bush to the (neo)liberal Obama years to the violent shock of Donald Trump’s election may make it appear as though both its diagnosis has validity, as well as to suggest that its intervention has power no matter the immediate circumstances. These shifts seem to signal something fundamentally problematic about the postcritical diagnosis, offering insights into the limits of its centrist liberalism. Germinating in the middle of the neoconservative resurgence of the Bush years, then understood as bafflingly reactionary and incipiently fascist, it appears difficult to imagine the rise of postcritique, without the eight-year tenure of Barack Obama. There is reason to claim, we think, that without the political rise of Obama, the literary critical intervention of postcritique would not have been as powerful as it has been, because Obama’s rise opens critique up to questioning at a moment when it might reasonably be expected to struggle in liberal academia. After all, this is a moment when a radical cultural critique would perform the aim at 1980s neoliberalism and nuclear brinkmanship, or have served to at least tentatively resist the outside-less Western democratic liberal consensus of the 1990s or the warmongering and sheer ineptitude of Bush II, but rather at what appears to be something like the best we could possibly, realistically hope for. Critique at that moment must appear almost necessarily radical: must denounce the hopeful moment to point to its failings, must thereby, we might say, give aid and comfort to its enemies. Or at the very least, even if we do not buy this claim about what critique does, then this is still a moment when it can become permissible to champion a reading method that does not unveil and highlight complicities and simply indulges in the hopefulness of its present moment. Obama’s election becomes a moment when Literary Studies believes that it can start to get out of politics. After all, as Felski notes, “critique is a term associated with a progressively-oriented politics” (*Limits* 140); what use is it in progressive times, then? If it is “against,” as Felski insists, what can it do when the things that happen in the world are the things that its practitioners are for; or maybe at least what critique’s critics are for, and now take out on critique’s supporters? Or, more to the point perhaps, is this not a moment when we may reasonably pitch a mode of reading that pays attention to the text as an object solely on the grounds of our affective response to it, avoiding what Felski calls “moral judgment” (86) and instead surrendering to being “surprised, stirred, reoriented, replenished, or called to account” (114)? A moment in which it is fine to refuse to say something about texts and their meaning in the world, and only ever speak about ourselves and how we react to them—even if, as professionals, we drape this interest in concern for forms, networks, and aesthetics? Ideology critique, after all, is for ideologies we do not like.

For those eight years, it may have appeared sensible to turn to literature to ask, in Felski’s inauspicious phrase, “[b]ut what about love?”
limits 17). Felski means this question to be about our attachment to literature, an attachment which is certainly real but which at the same time appears to be inert: while it is possible to think through how such attachments are facilitated by text, you probably cannot ask what they mean (see Michaels; Brown). But meaning comes to be less important when things are generally good (at least when regarded from a position of liberal privilege that glosses over the everyday violence of those social problems whose presence in our midst we continue to ignore) and fundamental questions no longer appear as crucial. That is to say, while we could imagine this world to be on the right track—by and large, anyway, at least from within the limited purview of our own comparatively sheltered academic lives—it made complete sense to “shrug off the mantle of knowing skepticism by embracing a renewed sense of idealism, purpose, and utopian possibility” (Felski, limits 188)—embracing postcritique as we embraced Obama, in other words. There’s a coincidence at least, then, between the ascent in the political world of an idea that progressive forces have scored an important victory that, once again, sets us on the path of historical progress and the arrival of postcritique in academia as a force to be reckoned with. We are not arguing that because Obama, therefore postcritique; rather, because Obama, therefore surface reading is even worth discussing. Because Obama, therefore the question “but isn’t this politically anemic” did not quite catch on as thoroughly as it should have, because the accusation of political bloodlessness suddenly had far less of a bite; not because, as Felski and Best and Marcus have it, we are all already too jaded, but because we are all well aware that critique would now imply a criticism of one’s own softly left—in German terms, rather right—beliefs. Indeed, Trump’s presidency sets much of this in relief. It reveals the failures of Obama’s tenure; the failure to bridge the gap of race and class divergences and the failure to build a lasting coalition are as noticeable now as the stark failures of policy. Trump calls us to read postcritique against our political times and also enjoins us to turn to see Obama in a different light, too, to see how there is a suggestive connection between the way we parse the politics and the way we parse the texts of, and in, a time of hope. More than that, though. Lee Konstantinou, in a 2017 defense of critique, returned to Trump to justify, as it were, the need for critique. It may seem we do not need critique for Trump, even less than we needed it for Bush: with every tweet, we get the sense that there is no hidden agenda, no deep revelations possible. Everything is there on the surface. And yet, there is much below the surface when we examine the phenomenon of “Trump.” Many remain unable to develop good accounts of who voted for Trump and why, for example. The age of Trump is culturally, socially, and politically profoundly messy and complex, and requires deep analyses of, say, the causes of the new rightward turn and the reasons why new forms of xenophobia find traction, and so on. None of this is readily readable on the surface—it requires critique. The moment of Trump requires critique,
a form of academic inquiry whose origins lie in similar historical moments of danger in the twentieth century, including the rise of German fascism. Abandoning this tool in a moment of danger, the kind of moment, one might say, for which critique was created, means surrendering a significant aspect of our ability to understand our present and to create solutions that may help shape a better future.

2 “Method Wars” or Skirmishes about Attitude?

Postcritique, we have suggested, is a historicizable phenomenon: its effort to rethink Literary Studies must be understood in the context of its times. But, importantly, postcritique also bills itself as a project that strives to explore and re-calibrate contemporary literary criticism’s foundations and basic mechanisms. Indeed, Anker and Felski have suggested that the struggle between critique and postcritique is a facet of “method wars” (15). In the second half of this introduction, we would like to suggest that this is, in fact, a misnomer.

Among the most commonly cited points of departure for postcritique’s attack on critique is the idea of a “hermeneutics of suspicion,” which Felski borrows from Ricœur. What attracts her to Ricœur’s concept, Felski argues, is that it allows us to highlight an important but, in her mind, surprisingly unremarked methodological aspect of Literary Studies. In her essay “Critique and the Hermeneutics of Suspicion,” Felski writes: “Anyone contemplating the role of a ‘hermeneutics of suspicion’ in literary and cultural studies must concede that the phrase is rarely used—even by its most devout practitioners, who usually think of themselves engaged in something called ‘critique.’” The stated aim of Felski’s essay is to trace the terminological and methodological relationship between critique and the hermeneutics of suspicion. And yet, from the beginning of the essay, it is clear that Felski is less interested in working out a precise, detailed account of the possible relation between the terms than in attacking critique, an attack that may begin as a concern with method but that rather quickly turns into something else entirely. Felski’s essay begins by suggesting that it will offer an account of critique that examines what critique does based on what critique is. And what critique is, Felski argues, is a hermeneutics of suspicion. But is this actually the case? Can critique truly be understood accurately as a hermeneutics of suspicion?

“The ‘hermeneutics of suspicion,’” Felski explains, “is a phrase coined by Ricœur to capture a common spirit that pervades the writings of Marx, Freud, and Nietzsche,” a phrase that “in spite of their obvious differences” allows these thinkers to be grouped together in what Ricœur describes as a “school of suspicion.” Marx, Freud, and Nietzsche, Felski argues, “are the architects of a distinctively modern style of interpretation that circumvents obvious or self-evident meanings in order to draw out less visible and less flattering truths.” But while “Ricœur’s term has
sustained an energetic afterlife within religious studies, as well as in philosophy, intellectual history, and related fields,” Felski suggests, “it never really took hold in literary studies.” This should change, Felski argues, because the term identifies not only an important aspect of Literary Studies, but one of its dominant methodologies: critique (“Critique”). Indeed, as Matthew Mullins shows in some detail, the postcritical project in general and Felski’s recent work in particular rely centrally on the redefinition of critique as a hermeneutics of suspicion (“Are We Postcritical”). And since this initial association or redefinition is central to our ability to understand the postcritical position, it is helpful to revisit Ricœur’s definition of the term.

The concept of a hermeneutics of suspicion emerges in the context of Ricœur’s interrogation of the question of the “absolute validity of [the] object” (28), a question that scientists may bracket but that philosophers and those engaged in interpretation on Ricœur’s account cannot set aside. In *Freud and Philosophy: Essays on Interpretation*, Ricœur begins this particular interrogation of the act of interpretation by establishing a series of initial propositions. First, he argues, without belief in the validity of the object, interpretation would not have an occasion or enabling impulse. “[W]ould I be interested in the object,” he asks, “could I stress concern for the object, through the consideration of cause, genesis, or function, if I did not expect, from within understanding, this something to ‘address’ itself to me?” (28). It is the expectation of being spoken to, Ricœur suggests, that motivates the concern for the object, and it is “within understanding,” precisely through the process of interpretation itself thus conceived, that the object’s status is validated. It is for this reason, he thus concludes, that we should understand language in this sense as “not so much spoken by men as spoken to men” (29). A hermeneutics of suspicion, by contrast, describes an interpretive act that seeks to do away with the primacy of the object. For Ricœur, a hermeneutics of suspicion means something different than distinguishing between the surface meaning of an object (or text) and that which may be found through depth analysis, a distinction that is operative in a range of postcritical attacks on methods that seek to “dig down” for a text’s meaning. Rather, a hermeneutics of suspicion as initially described by Ricœur is defined by doubting whether an object exists at all and “whether this object could be the place of the transformation of intentionality into *kerygma*, manifestation, proclamation” (30). Such an interpretive relation to an object, Ricœur concludes, “is not an explication of the object, but a tearing off of masks, an interpretation that reduces disguises” (30). What Ricœur terms the “school of suspicion,” consisting, as Felski shows, of the works of Freud, Marx, and Nietzsche, is in his mind united by its common opposition to a “phenomenology of the sacred, understood as a propaedeutic to the ‘revelation’ of meaning” (Ricœur 32). But Ricœur puts this even more pointedly: what truly unites the interpretive methodologies of Freud, Marx, and Nietzsche, he writes,
is their “decision to look upon the whole of consciousness primarily as ‘false’ consciousness” (33) and a “general hypothesis concerning both the process of false consciousness and the method of deciphering” (34).

Notably, much of this section of Ricoeur’s book on Freud is dedicated to Marx. Similarly, Marxism and Marxist-inflected forms of Literary Studies are one of the main targets of postcritique, although postcritical attacks on critique are less invested in engaging with the wide range of frequently incommensurable and antagonistic flavors of Marxism, or even with the different kinds of Marxist literary criticism that have emerged in particular since the early twentieth century, than they are in attacking Fredric Jameson. Jameson frequently stands in not just for all of Marxism but for all of critique, and serves as literary criticism’s enfant terrible. And insofar as both postcritique as well as Ricoeur mostly take aim at Marxism in their account of a hermeneutics of suspicion, it is important to foreground the profoundly unstable basis on which this link of associations and supposed relations rests. Few Marxist critics would accept the claim that Marxism is invested in the idea of false consciousness. In fact, many of the most formative debates about Marxist methodology and interpretation, including the foundations of ideology critique as it has been understood since the middle of the twentieth century, were brought about precisely by the opposition to and desire to move beyond the attachment to the idea of false consciousness. From Louis Althusser and Theodor W. Adorno to the entirety of the post-Marxist challenge, the rejection of the idea of false consciousness forms a cornerstone of Marxist conceptions of consciousness, ideology, and interpretation. To suggest, therefore, that critique, which is often equated with or at least defined in close relation to Marxism, should be understood as a hermeneutics of suspicion, which is to say as a form of interpretation and as an account of consciousness that is wedded to the idea of false consciousness, is to disregard or indeed misrepresent entire large-scale methodological debates that shaped critique and critical theory as they exist today. To point this out, however, is not just to flag an error of definition or to engage in conceptual quibbling. Instead, it is to suggest that some of the most common moves that postcritique makes, including the suggestion that critique is a matter of unveiling hidden truths and exposing false consciousness, are based on mischaracterizations of the actual methodological basis and historical development of critique.

In the work of Althusser and thus also centrally in the work of Jameson, for instance, the insistence that ideology is precisely not to be understood as the simple veiling of truth but as the general process of the narrative construction of reality, as the basic condition for knowledge and interpretation that assumes that we are always already in ideology, is of the utmost importance. Critique does not engage in lofty promises to free us from ideology. It defamiliarizes us from and makes us aware of our life in ideology; it reads our ideological narratives and their different positionalities. There is no stepping outside of ideology. There is
only its interpretation. The idea of ideological unveiling, by contrast, is the playground of liberal centrism, which claims for itself the terrain of objectivity and common sense, a plane of interpretation and evaluation supposedly free from ideology that has time and again proven itself to be the most sturdy and unassailable ideological construct of all. Critique, by contradistinction, is committed to reading ideological positions, including its own, not as a matter of the tension or difference between truth and falsehoods, not as a matter of avowed surfaces and hidden depths, but as a complex network of knowing and reading the world and ourselves in it that is always shaped by myriad historical, material, and sociopolitical forces. This form of reading is then brought to literature, for literature is understood not only as a reflection of social or material surfaces but also and more importantly in its complex relation to lived reality.

The point here is not to defend Marxism or Marxist literary criticism. Rather, it is to understand more clearly what postcritique in fact means by critique. And insofar as critique is frequently understood in close relation to Marxist criticism, the association of critique with a hermeneutics of suspicion calls into question the degree to which postcritique truly engages in rigorously developed debates about differences in methodology. But precisely because critique is so centrally wedded to Marxism, the strongest version of critique is not incompatible with the postcritical position, but it is inextricably linked to postcritique’s impulse. That is, critique is always a matter of (Hegelian) negation, of a critical reflection on the mode of reading that accompanies the process of reading. As Jameson reminds us in Marxism and Form, dialectical thinking, especially the variant advanced by Adorno, is “thought to the second power,” that is, “thought about thinking itself” (45) and about the ways in which thought is bound up with particular historical contexts and thus rests on forms that are always in flux. Constant re-examination of its own foundations and operations is a fundamental aspect of critique, which is inseparable from its desire to constantly renew itself by questioning its basic assumptions. In this sense, then, postcritique may be understood as a helpful reminder of one of critique’s fundamental operations, namely the need to constantly interrogate its own conditions of possibility and its limitations. As Adorno reminds us, negativity is not only different from being negative; in crucial ways, it stands constitutively opposed to the kind of dreary negative style that postcritique associates with critique. “It lies in the definition of negative dialectics,” Adorno writes, “that it will not come to rest in itself, as if it were total. This is its form of hope” (406). Thus, since critique always necessarily engages in a critique of itself that is aimed at what we understand as self-reflexive “post-ness,” since critique should always interrogate its own presence in relation to the flow of history, and since the negativity of critique is in its most basic form nothing other than its own constitutive methodological restlessness that grounds it in dialectical thought, critique is always necessarily in some sense also “postcritique.”
And yet, as already indicated above, the problems regarding definitions and accounts of methodological differences are ultimately not the most striking aspect of Felski’s discussion of the relation between critique and the hermeneutics of suspicion. What is more troubling, we would suggest, is that the focus on her essay shifts away from a focus on methodology fairly quickly. As Felski sees it, critique has an attitude problem. Felski points out that her concern with “some of the qualities of a suspicious or critical reading practice” (“Critique”), in this essay as well as in her recent work more generally, is connected to the impression that critical practice champions “guardedness rather than openness; aggression rather than submission; superiority rather than reverence; attentiveness rather than distraction; exposure rather than tact” (*Limits* 21). “Suspicion” for Felski therefore designates both a methodological choice and what she describes as critique’s “muted affective state—a curiously non-emotional emotion of morally inflected mistrust—that overlaps with, and builds upon, the stance of detachment that characterises the stance of the professional or expert” (“Critique”). Felski’s analysis of critique changes registers, therefore, departing from a pure interest in methodological differences and turning toward a concern with critique’s tone, style, attitude, and affect. “That this style of reading proves so alluring,” she argues,

> has much to do with the gratifications and satisfactions that it offers. Beyond the usual political or philosophical justifications of critique, it also promises the engrossing pleasure of a game-like sparring with the text in which critics deploy inventive skills and innovative strategies to test their wits, best their opponents, and become sharper, shrewder, and more sophisticated players. (“Critique”)

But while critique is alluring, it is also characterized, Felski suggests, by a characteristic “againstness” that she understands as a “desire to take a hammer […] to the beliefs and attachments of others” (*Limits* 129). While the term “negativity” in the history of critique identifies a matter of methodology, namely the basic operation of dialectical thought that, as described above, is deployed in the act of critiquing as always also self-reflexive, Felski’s account of critique amounts to a notion of negativity that resembles more closely its more common, non-Hegelian definition—something purely negative. “The negativity of critique,” Felski writes,

> is not just a matter of fault-finding, scolding, and censuring. The nay-saying critic all too easily calls to mind the Victorian patriarch, the thin-lipped schoolmarm, the glaring policeman. Negating is tangled up with a long history of legislation, prohibition and interdiction—it can come across as punitive, arrogant, authoritarian, or vitriolic. (“Critique”)

No doubt, Felski is well aware of the intricacies of the concept of negativity in dialectical thought and in critique. We therefore do not understand such passages in her work as a failure to engage with the actual
history and meaning of the term itself. Rather, we find it striking that Felski intentionally switches registers, moving away from an engagement with critique’s methodology (negativity) and toward an attack on critique’s attitude (being negative).

This argumentative move, which turns a debate over methodology into a concern with the purported manner in which critique operates by suggesting that critique’s method is inseparably tied to a style that comes with an attitude problem, can also be found in other contributions to the postcritical debate, such as Christopher Castiglia’s essay “Hope for Critique?” Like Felski, Castiglia chastises critique for its negativity—and, again, negativity is not understood methodologically but attitudinally. “Through suspicion, critics become truth-tellers or, more accurately, naysayers, imagining themselves among the so-called radicals,” Castiglia writes (211). Citing Rebecca Solnit to set up the kind of “gotcha” move that postcritique elsewhere loves to disparage as an aspect of critical unmasking, Castiglia suggests that the suspicious style and self-aggrandizing radicalism of critique also ultimately poison the Left “with the sense of personal superiority that comes from pleasure denied” (211). “Those who reveal that the real truth is ‘pure bad news’ and who ‘appoint themselves the deliverers of it,’” Castiglia writes, citing Solnit, ultimately merely “substitute one untruth for another” (211; emphasis in original). And “given critiques of critical suspicion like Solnit’s,” he concludes, “it’s understandable that some today would like to leave critique in the past” (211). As for Felski, what creates the need to move beyond critique for Castiglia is less an actual matter of methodology than of perceived attitude. “What has made critique seem sour—in the sense both of unpleasantly dour and past its prime,” Castiglia suggests, “is not its desire to criticize social injustice, but its disposition, the attitude with which critique is approached.” “It may not be ‘critique’ that has outlived its usefulness,” Castiglia therefore concludes, “but the dispositions that have become customary, even mandatory, to carry it out” (211-12; emphasis in original).

Critique, in other words, needs an attitude adjustment, and postcritique is here to provide it. But the focus on critique’s attitude is profoundly unhelpful for the postcritical project of re-examining and recalibrating Literary Studies for our present and for our future, which, we agree, is as valuable as it is necessary. Some may find critique aggravating. Others may confuse dialectical negativity with being simply negative. But all this is ultimately beside the point. The value of an analytical method is not measured by its popularity or the degree of its niceness. And when it comes to ruthlessly critiquing the injuries caused by capitalism or by systems of exclusion and segregation that are, in part, laid bare by the work of literature that helps make thinkable the often abstract and unimaginable horrors that exploitation, poverty, and violent segregation have inflicted on humans, we need the uncompromising vigor of critique, which calls out injustices without hesitation.
Recent debates about the methodology involved in what has been termed computational Literary Studies modeled the striking ways in which positions that were once more significantly entrenched can move, inform each other, and lead to new, more productive conversations (see Algee-Hewitt et al.). The question of critique emerged frequently there, but, as the essays and commentaries that make up the Critical Inquiry forum on “Computational Literary Studies” indicate, discussion was ultimately characterized by rigorous, fruitful exchanges, not partisan sniping or, as one might suspect based on Felski’s characterization of critique, the sense that critique must remain the only game in town and ultimately trumps all other methodologies by shutting them down. Similarly, some of the most productive engagements with the affective dimensions of reading do not begin by decrying the dichotomous distinction between the critical and the uncritical, and they do not necessarily a choice between critique and postcritique.

Felski stresses the need for “a reinvigorated phenomenology of reading that elucidates, in rich and fascinating detail, its immersive and affective dimensions” (“Critique”). “This growing interest in the ethos, aesthetics, and ethics of reading is long overdue,” she writes, and suggests that such an orientation by no means rules out attention to the sociopolitical resonances of texts and their interpretations. It is, however, no longer willing to subordinate such attention to the seductive but sterile dichotomy of the critical versus the uncritical. (“Critique”)

But if we are indeed interested in the ways in which critical positions and methodologies are also orientations, as Felski suggests, then we must ask why postcritique participates in facilitating the rise of oppositionality, of dichotomies and binaries. Especially today, as mainstream dialogue and populist rhetoric reduce complex constellations to binaries and stark oppositions, why does postcritique love a dichotomy? If we are concerned with the question of the historical development of the “method wars” and with their relation to the current historical context, we cannot help but note the troubling ways in which the method wars as represented by postcritique replicate the binary rhetoric of much mainstream debate.

Indeed, we do not ultimately believe that things are as oppositional as the method wars at times wish to make them appear. When we examine the contemporary landscape of Literary Studies, we find more collaboration than divisiveness, more attempts at putting methodological differences into conversation with each other than insisting on binary distinctions, more debate than dichotomy. The work of some of the most exciting contemporary critics, including scholars like Anna Kornbluh, Rachel Greenwald Smith, Sean Grattan, and others—and including those assembled in this special issue—is so valuable and challenging precisely because it engages with the relationship between methodo-

or concerns over niceness or etiquette, concerns that have historically served to safeguard those in power from judgment.

“Defenders of critique,” Felski writes, “often downplay its association with outright condemnation” (“Critique”; in Limits, this becomes “[...] with negative judgment” [130]). For Felski, critique is aggressive, arrogant, and punitive. And at the very latest at this point in Felski’s line of argumentation, it becomes clear that the point of such attacks on critique is not to engage in a debate about methodology that truly aims to understand critique better in order to offer alternatives to it. Instead, we get a distorted caricature of critique, constructed as an object that invites attacks. No doubt, critique does condemn certain positions—fascism and populism, for instance. And it is no doubt also true that some defenders of critique have engaged in wrong-minded attempts at outright condemnation of postcritique. But simple condemnation is not a central aspect of critique.

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And it is also the latter aim that has long made the work of critics like Lauren Berlant so productive in this context. Berlant does deal in what may initially appear to be vehemently opposed or even dichotomous positions, but she does the difficult work of trying to put these positions into conversation with one another. In this way, her work proposes new ways in which concepts and positions that may seem incongruous may be brought together to move Literary and Cultural Studies forward, including some of the concepts that are involved in the “dichotomies” that Felski invokes, such as affect, emotion, and feeling, on the one hand, and history on the other (see Berlant).

It is difficult to escape the sense that we have moved quite far indeed from an academic debate about methodology and have instead entered a debate that is fueled mainly by individual bad experiences. The only critic whom Felski mentions in this section as an example of critique’s purported intolerance, arrogance, naiveté, and stupidity is Drew Milne, who offered a dismissive one-line response to postcritique (“‘To be postcritical is to be uncritical: the critical path alone remains open’” [Milne qtd. in Felski, Limits 147]). As the actual object of disagreement becomes increasingly nebulous, we are losing the sense that we are engaged in a method war. Are we seeing differences between academic positions here, or heated attacks on styles and attitudes that emerge out of previous interpersonal skirmishes to which we, the readers of these texts, are not privy?

“Critique does not tolerate rivals,” Felski declares. As she sees it, critique’s lack of tolerance emerges from its arrogance, its tendency to understand itself as “uniquely equipped to diagnose the perils and pitfalls of representation,” which leads it to “often chafe at the presence of other forms of thought.” But this “chafing” is for Felski more than just passionate or even heated debate. Rather, she believes that critique aims at “ruling out the possibility of peaceful coexistence or even mutual indifference,” insisting that “those who do not embrace its tenets must be denying or disavowing them” (“Critique”). According to Felski, critique’s credo is that “to refuse to be critical is to be uncritical,” which she understands as “a judgment whose overtones of naiveté, apathy, complacency, submissiveness, and sheer stupidity seem impossible to shrug off.” “Critique,” she ultimately concludes, “thinks of itself as exceptional. It is not one path, but the only conceivable path” (Limits 134–35). Felski seeks to convince readers of what she calls the “programmatic divisions between critique and common sense,” which, she argues, “have the effect of relegating ordinary language to a state of automatic servitude, while condescending to those unschooled in the patois of literary and critical theory.” “Perhaps it is time,” she thus proposes, “to reassess the dog-in-the-manger attitude of a certain style of academic argument—one that assigns to scholars the vantage point of the lucid and vigilant thinker, while refusing to extend this same capacity to those naïve and unreflecting souls of whom they speak” (“Critique”). Felski’s attacks on critique contain a distinct “writing from below” quality that construes critique as the methodology of the elite, of the angry political reader who approaches both texts and opponents from a lofty position of privilege, arrogance, and academic and theoretical superiority. Felski claims for herself and for postcritique the position of defending not only more common-sensical and enjoyable approaches to literature but also a common approach to literature that stands opposed to the elitist theorizing of critique. Felski’s embrace of the ordinary, the common, and the everyday resonates uncomfortably in a moment when appealing to the common and opposing the elitism of the purportedly dominant establishment are once again the calling cards of populist rhetoric.
3 The Aftermath of Postcritique

We remain committed to critique, it is no doubt clear by now, and we are in some ways suspicious. However, we are suspicious not because we recognize suspicion as our main methodological commitment, but rather because the quasi-populist postcritical insistence on dichotomies between positions and on the need to drain the negative, lofty, elitist swamp of academia by restoring our attention to more pleasurable common reading practices strikes us as a troubling version of what we believe remains a necessary project: to constantly re-examine and recalibrate Literary Studies. The basic impulse of postcritique should be defended, for it reminds us that it is a central task of Literary Studies to engage in self-reflexive work that asks how we are doing what we are doing and why and how we might want to do things differently given present conditions—this is also, as we have argued, the basic impulse of critique. And yet, while we wholeheartedly agree with the postcritical desire to value the literary, we believe that the way forward is not through rigidly enforced distinctions between methodologies construed as polar opposites, but rather through exchanges between methodologies. We would like to stress that the best version of critique today offers ways forward that are driven not just by analytical rigor and a dedication to engaging with the social and political problems with which literature is inevitably bound up but also by a sincere, genuine passion and love for literature itself. We point here to essays like Kornbluh’s “We Have Never Been Critical” (2017), which is as much a polemic as it is a genuine statement of loving dedication to the important work that the novel carries out in our time as a form of critique; or to essays like Timothy Bewes’s “Reading with the Grain” (2011), which mobilizes the tradition of critique precisely in order to take seriously the literary and to engage with it on its own terms by asking what form of reading the novel itself outlines when we understand it as a form of thought and how this form of novelistic reading can inform our critical methodology. Such versions of critique show a critical tradition and a methodology at its very best.

In this special issue, we gather six essays that, we believe, model critique at its best and indicate ways of recalibrating Literary Studies for our moment. Together, the authors in this issue show that critique is constantly engaged in a process of self-interrogation that seeks to ask how we can update our methodology to grapple with the challenges of both literature and Literary Studies under changed historical conditions. We begin with Carolyn Lesjak, whose essay “The Perils of the Present, Theory, and the University” wonders if, perhaps, “reports of the university’s death have been greatly exaggerated?” Lesjak argues that the so-called passing of theory reflects wider fears about the role of critical thinking within an increasingly corporatized university. Following Adorno’s notion of the “ripeness of decay,” Lesjak argues for the value of facing the domino effect of “deaths”—of theory, the humanities and
the university, ideology and Marxism, society and culture—head on, as ripe for thinking about the university of the future, which, as this string of deaths attests, necessarily entails thinking beyond the university. Against the prevailing academic winds, Lesjak suggests that an anti-humanist, revitalized Marxism offers the way forward for humanist study, given how irreducibly bound to the economy the humanities and the university are today.

Next we turn to Bewes, whose essay “What Does It Mean to Write Fiction? What Does Fiction Refer to?” examines the distinction between critical discourse and fictional discourse and proposes that there is significant ambiguity in this distinction, an ambiguity that plays a role in “the formal qualities not only of contemporary writing but of criticism” also. Bewes explores the possibility that the creative procedures and narrative modes of literary works might directly inform our critical procedures, and that the literary work might thereby act as a technology that enables critics to escape the role of the “commentator” that Michel Foucault anathemized in his reflections on critical discourse. Opening the theoretical gambit from Lesjak’s argument to fictional texts proper, Bewes reflects on the nature of the relationship between critical and fictional writing.

Clemens Spahr moves Bewes’s argument in a slightly different direction, turning from theory informed by texts to an examination of a text that is itself best understood in terms of critical practice. In his essay “Gary Shteyngart’s Super Sad True Love Story and Contemporary Reading Practices,” Spahr points out that Shteyngart’s novel paints the picture of a world that hates books, sending its two protagonists on a quest for literacy. The undercurrent of literacy that Shteyngart traces in even such a world, Spahr argues, stresses the epistemological function of literature in an “illiterate period.” In fact, Spahr proposes, literary expression becomes a condition for social connection and engagement. To Spahr, novels like Shteyngart’s cast into relief the limits of Felski’s insistence on focusing on “the transtemporal liveliness of texts” over and against their contextualization. Through his reading of Shteyngart, Spahr suggests that Felski presents us with a choice between two false alternatives: Shteyngart’s novel establishes a mode of engaged reading that is literary and social at the same time.

In the fourth essay, “Popular Genres and Interiority,” Andrew Hoberek examines the “broader potential” of the turn to popular genres—including science fiction, crime, and horror—in twenty-first-century fiction. Hoberek celebrates the power of genre fiction, with particular focus on the fantasy genre, to reject the dichotomy between realism and fantasy that has long served to confine genre fiction to a lower level of political and artistic value than realism. Instead of reading fantasy as a way to avoid the problem of realistic representation, Hoberek argues, following Kornbluh, we are able to trace its particular successes if we understand it as an effort to produce “a world other than what already
exists.” For Hoberek, genre fiction offers an important tool for refusing the limits of reification, dissolving those “ideological components of fiction” that mark the moment when fiction does not lead toward new worlds but rather “calcifies” into rigid ideology. Examining novelistic productions of individuals and of interiority, Hoberek ultimately argues that there is much to be gained by focusing less on tensions between different kinds of formalist criticism and more on the ways in which novelists themselves have turned to genre and interiority to uncover a whole archive of ways “to represent everything else in the world.”

In “Reading the Novel of Migrancy,” Sheri-Marie Harrison offers a definition of a form of contemporary novel that she calls the novel of migrancy. The term refers to a subset of the global novel in which the transnational movement of people, drugs, guns, and/or money, among other commodities, corresponds to the negotiation of permeable boundaries between genre, field, and habits of canonization. Among the significant features of the novel of migrancy is its eschewal of nationalist politics and priorities. In the same way that Bewes, Spahr, and Hoberek interrogate the possibilities of literature as a form of knowledge and in turn as a mode of critique, Harrison argues that, insofar as its “pERSISTENTLY mobile aesthetic commitments” are always already post-national, the novel of migrancy offers us “a mode of knowing (knowing language, knowing possibility, knowing sociality), precisely in the tradition of critique.” And because the novel of migrancy affords us ways of thinking material life beyond the nation, Harrison proposes, it also offers us a clear sense of the political work of its aesthetic mode: it is a “harbinger of [what] emerging forms of transnational organization” might look like.

We conclude with Lisa Siraganian, whose essay “Distributing Agency Everywhere: TV Critics Postcritique” broadens the analytical spectrum of the special issue to include contemporary TV culture and mass culture more generally in order to assess the value and the limits of the postcritical charge. Siraganian foregrounds aspects of both contemporary culture and current criticism, such as a widespread “preoccupation with agency,” which, she argues, is a distinctive development aimed at reconciling “individual intentions with the sense that agency has become unaccountably and dangerously diffuse.” Siraganian juxtaposes the treatment of the disjunction between intention and what she calls “distributed agency” in television shows with the work of critical positions including postcritique, surface reading, and the new materialisms. By doing so, Siraganian lays bare the shared essential commitments that unite these positions, in particular their reliance on the idea of “textual agency,” arguing that they ultimately render intention and interpretation incoherent. Siraganian showcases the limitations of postcritique’s account of categories like intention and interpretation whose roles in shows like Homecoming and Patriot only emerge through a commitment to authorial intention.
Works Cited


