



Prospective criticism: on private and public things

Anna Kornbluh

ABSTRACT

Waxing about the futures of criticism endogenously clangs hollow in the midst of exogenous omnicrisis. Instead of worrying about the next big thing in literary studies, this essay suggests, we should be asking if there are particular tools that criticism offers that may allow us to transform the conditions of criticism's demise. This essay offers two possible answers: 'objectivity', defined as a form of thought and knowledge particular to both criticism and literature, and 'composition', the critical understanding of the constructive function of ideas and forms. This essay deploys these concepts in an argument for the need of critics to recognise and put to work their common work and visions together with other publics whose survival is at stake in the destruction of the university, the enclosure of reason and reflection, and the rendering disposable of ever wider swathes of humanity. The question of how we make critical arguments emerges here as a crucial aspect of the ways in which critics and their ideas are able to engage with the foundational questions of their work precisely by aligning it with wider publics and thus by probing their function as a public good and for public interest.

ARTICLE HISTORY Received 14 July 2022; Accepted 10 February 2023

KEYWORDS Literary criticism; objectivity; composition; mediation

Literary criticism has no future unless there are big changes in the present. Ruthless privatisation has undermined humanistic inquiry and imperilled the university, constraining the practice of criticism both materially and ideologically. Criticism requires the slow time of reading, the social idea-making in deep teaching, and the speculative wondering for writing. None of those needs are met in the go-go pressure cooker of defunded education, contingent academic labour, exorbitant student debt, and multi-decade economic stagnation – nor are the prospects promising in an atmosphere of increasing concentration of cognition-compromising carbonisation. Can criticism reverse the privatisation that is foreclosing its future? Not directly. But indirectly, criticism can practice publicisation as alternative: it can argue to and for convoked publics who share values other than those of privatisation, preparing those publics to act in common. Those values support the free play of faculties for reading, writing, and imagining which defies

enclosed vocational training or profit-seeking; they affirm, study, and wield the social force of representation; they prize the sharing of languages, objects, interpretations, and arguments; they foster free association with creative works whose partial autonomy opens onto utopia.¹ These sharings, sociabilities, and freedoms are the public and collective calling of criticism.

This fundamentally anti-private dimension of criticism must now be revived creatively and through solidarity. Even though the right words can only do so much² to combat the economic and cultural machine of plutocratic theft and governmental dysfunction allied against critical knowing in the present, criticism that looks out for its own future – prospective criticism – has its place. Criticism can underwrite power-building to oppose privatisation by composing values and their deliberative holding in common, articulating big ideas to guide and ignite practical tactics, functioning as what political theorist Bonnie Honig calls a ‘public thing’: an ‘infrastructure’ for ‘action in concert’.³ But critics have to want to do this work. Of late, big ideas and healthy infrastructure have proven hard to come by, with vanguardist innovations explicitly promoting the diminishment of criticism on grounds ranging from quantification and rapid-uptake surface reading to critical realism, flat ontology, postcritique, and autotheory.

To emphasise the critical choice between private things and public things, this essay tracks the private currents in present criticism, and then speculatively proposes more public futures. Schematising the present trends as ‘subjectivism’ and ‘dissolutionism’, it outlines future directions in objectivity and composition’.⁴ In concluding, it considers a possible bridge between this present and future, the case of what we might call ‘the new public criticism’. Rallying precariously outside the profession, the new public criticism channels between the few fully-employed literary critics and the many underemployed, collating a community of educated contemplators who have been systematically robbed of prospects for equitable professional posts, but who practice criticism in its publicising project of sharing, free play, and connection. Affirmative, evaluative, and convocative, criticism without the university is unsustainable, but it exemplifies how criticism within the university might reactivate its publicising agencies, and thus more adequately steel constituencies to confront privatised liquidation.

Two currents: subjectivism and dissolutionism

As the vise of technocratic reason has tightened outside the university, calculative and positivist ways of knowing have prevailed inside it. Quantitative over qualitative. No to interpretation, yes to distributed empiricism. Not only through passive conformity, but also through active avant-gardism, the leading lights of contemporary literary criticism have championed these empiricisms, fashioning critical epistemologies often congruent with

structural privatisation. Affect theory, computational humanities, cognitive approaches, and new materialisms would seem to have little point of contact as methods and domains: affect theory studies the fleeting forces of noncognised experience like mass paranoia or individual attachments; cognitive approaches image the literary brain with magnetic resonance; digital humanities mines text corpuses for keywords and phrases; new materialisms track the vibrancy of nonhuman agents. Despite these disparate inquiries, a shared orientation toward the empirical – the experienceable, the calculable, the material – propels these epistemic formations. While some of these empiricisms scale up, on the whole this epistemic energy reroutes older disciplinary emphases on literature as cultivation for social benefit or literature as unique mode of social knowing into scaled down interest in literature as occasion for experience, which is often detailed in its concrete, phenomenological situatedness. Thus does criticism refract hegemonic empiricism as individualised subjectivism.

Subjectivist literary criticism locates critical knowledge in the mind or perception of the subject, explicitly embracing methodological pluralism.⁵ Accordingly, it also reconceives the literary object, foregrounding ‘aboutness’, a subject-matter subjective-experience paradigm that construes literary representation in an anti-representational way, as intrinsic content independent of figuration or interpretation. Literature qua mediation that solicits analysis is supplanted by literature qua immediate stimulus that prompts identification: we know what this is ‘about’, we see or don’t see what’s in it. Texts ‘about’ ourselves spring affect, texts ‘about’ topics abet topic modelling, texts ‘about’ the other stimulate empathic serotonin, texts ‘about’ animals and rocks propagate vibrant materialism. The philosopher Stephen Yablo defines aboutness as ‘the relation that meaningful items bear to whatever it is that they are *on* or *of*, or that they *address* or *concern*’ (italics original). Aboutness increasingly steers the production and consumption of literary criticism, through expansive ‘literature and _____’ programmes (medicine, environmental science, business ethics) that Merve Emre calls ‘post-disciplinary’,⁶ and that position literature as essentially, prepositionally topical – on, of, addressing or concerning subjects – rather than as conjuratively oblique. Extensive data informatics, cognitive processing, and linguistics research take ‘aboutness’ as their core question, and so too do ordinary literary and cultural studies pre-occupied with content, plot, surface, instant messaging, and proprietary voices. Moreover, subfields, fields, canons, and disciplines routinely amalgamate through the mechanics of aboutness. Already almost thirty years ago, Eve Sedgwick lamented this consumerist demand for identification and aboutness: ‘the single most controversial thing in several undergraduate (queer studies) classes has been *that they were literature courses*, that the path to every issue we discussed simply had to take the arduous defile through textual

interpretation'.⁷ Noting insidious effects of this resistance to literature – to mediation that thwarts immediate uptake because it tenders ambiguity and demands interpretation – Kandice Chuh worries: 'Aboutness is an instrumental analytic; it enables a quick determination of relevance that is also a determination of time-worthiness, as in, is this lecture or book worth my time'.⁸ Chuh also helpfully connects this resistance to administrativism:

a rubric like Asian American literature announces its subject matter as the Asian American rather than the literature. In brief and crude terms, aboutness indexes the specific ways in which race operates within the modern regime of truth as it structures the academy;⁹

it furnishes a prevailing framework for assimilating noncanonical literature into critical study while slighting its literariness, those metaphoric tenors that make a work resonant and irreducible to its author's biography or its context of emergence.

If continuous with old structures like racialisation, canonisation, consumerism, and positivism, then, this preference for aboutness has also found new urgency in recent heightened awareness of perilous crises. Ecocide, racist fascism, and imperial rot foment an imperative for instant messages. Where is the 'serious fiction' directly depicting climate crisis? Amitav Ghosh asks.¹⁰ Kate Marshall refers to this imperative as 'the demand for content',¹¹ Alain Badiou describes 'the passion for the real',¹² David Shields diagnoses 'reality hunger',¹³ and Byung-Chul Han shadows 'the transparency society'.¹⁴ An aboutness or subject matter literalism presents itself as the way for literature to intervene in a crisis-riven world. For many critics, this salient hunger is satiable with 'realism', which once again in this moment comes to name that content-heavy form-light perception-centering which Ian Watt first formulated in the 1950s.¹⁵ Realism today, Jed Esty, Heather Love, Colleen Lye, Ulka Anjaria and others appraise, parallels the 'reality-based forms' saturating the popular market like *The Real World*, *The Real Housewives*, and the too real *The Apprentice*, and involves prose stylings like 'a more stripped-down and less ostensibly self-conscious aesthetic',¹⁶ effecting an overall 'antiliterary quality of 'the facts speaking for themselves'.¹⁷ Beholding these anti-aesthetic and anti-literary realisms, critics have also calibrated their methods so as to mirror realism with realism. 'Realism' is thus what Stephen Best and Sharon Marcus call their programme for 'minimal critical agency'¹⁸ in the manifesto for surface reading, what Jeff Williams names a reading practice that punctures hubris, resigns political purchase, and demures to the immediately given in 'the new critical modesty',¹⁹ what the political theorist Jane Bennett borrows from literary sources to occasion the 'realism'²⁰ of new materialism, and what philosopher Bruno Latour enthuses as 'a more realistic realism' in his actor-network-theory.²¹

Criticism in thrall to aboutness, ‘antiliterary’ qualities, and the realistic accounting of realist emanations invests in descriptivism and situated response, setting itself the goal not of formulating higher order ideas with which other critical thinkers might agree, but of proliferating ‘horizontal’ and immanentist ledgers, of multiplying subjective accounting. The subjectivist empiricism which works as both a bid for literature’s relevance and an evacuation of literary specificity often swivels upon the identity of the author and the putative expressivism of their writing. This kind of subjectivism – the work is the author’s subjectivity, telegraphed, the author’s context xeroxed, the pressing subjects iterated – finds its counterpart in the phenomenological orientation of much recent criticism, for which the work is the reader’s subjectivity, mirrored, attached. Major and well-funded developments in the field have advocated the resignation of collectively learned specialised ways of producing knowledge about literature and the adoption of more intuitive, individuated, or embodied ways of responding to the literary work.²² Surface reading and the descriptive turn promise an attenuation of criticism into the effort ‘to describe texts accurately’.²³ Attachment theory and relatability studies explore how readers find themselves mirrored in texts, and how art asks for identification.²⁴ Weak theory and amateur criticism resign the distance and expertise of the critic, redefining literary criticism as modest hesitancy and deskilled satisfaction survey.²⁵ Postcritique and reparative reading promote intimacy with the object, setting down the tools of interpretation and theory in favour of a set of spontaneous affects construed against the mood of argument and training. Through these manifold innovations, criticism becomes not a specialised mode of interpretation, but an especially literate, specially lyrical endeavour of expression, an attunement to position and response, attachment and desire, humility and grace.

With the critic positioned as a desiring self, hungry for pleasure and connection, prowling for identification, and taking her own investments as evidentiary base, these methods come to ordain distinctive genres, more pliable than the traditional critical argument. Having disparaged generalisations and universals for a few decades, criticism now also laments expertise and distance, promoting instead modesty and partiality, relayed in the personal essay, life-writing, and the memoirised idiom of autotheory.²⁶ If it is observable that the vastly expanding market-share of memoir coincides with the political economic processes of privatisation, criticism might need to account for its own inclinations in this direction too. Subjectivism and charisma are the epistemic and characterological instantiations of the pervasive political-economic adjustment of privatisation. Speaking one’s truth, broadcasting one’s own voice, feeling seen are paramount virtues for literary production today. They are held, by producers, consumers, and critics alike, to be vivifying, transformative, transgressive, and, above all ‘real’ in an era of faux news, photoshop, and branded filters. Criticism for its part ranges too

close to this privacy. Whether revising standpoint epistemology or pursuing personal essays, whether eschewing theory to take up memoir or disdaining critique in favour of attachment, whether celebrating amateurism or pumping the empathy industrial complex, literary criticism in the present has a coherent programme of subjectivism. This is all well and good as situated knowledge, and probing ways of engaging with the world that are not quantified or uninterested. Modesty has its charms. But to the extent that these trends debunk the possibility for literary and aesthetic and critical theory to enunciate and evoke a public or collective, the attenuations, circumscriptions, and personalisations warrant worrying. Individualist, subjectivist, privatised criticism encloses the present; any future for criticism depends upon a counter to these privatisations in both the practical and theoretical registers.

Dissolutionism

Privatisation in criticism wears the literalistic guise of subjectivism, from empiricist aboutness to personalist memoirisation. A less familiar face of privatisation shows itself elsewhere in critical practice, in what Andreas Malm helpfully terms ‘dissolutionism’.²⁷ Long traditions in literary and humanist criticism enthuse unmaking and unbuilding, disruption, hybridisation, indeterminacy – in ways that have historically coincided with the levelling of public institutions, the fracturing of left power amid consolidation of right power, and the minoritarian securitisation of plutocracy. The fact of this coincidence does not often figure in histories of literary criticism and theory, but to consider the future of criticism we ought at least remark this material determination of its sundry and vogue flattenings. Sometimes they take the simple form of criticism defining its vocation as something less than knowledge production: as subjectivising, particularising, contextualising absorption in the individual work; as forswearing generalisations about medium, form, concept, or history; as problematising norms, universals, and institutions; as proliferating discrete impressions. Other times, they take the less simple form of extrapolating aesthetic qualities into political ideals: the celebration of formal nuance, irony, and paradox justifies the deferral of synthetic and affirmative operations; nothing is stable, the critic couldn’t possibly be so naïve or oppressive as to grant knowledge or values. As Mari Ruti summarises, the result of this extrapolation is that critics ‘have routinely valorized antinormativity; celebrated subjective decentering; devised radical templates of political mutiny; and shunned reason, agency, and autonomy’.²⁸ Circumscribing criticism as evanescent, customised, personalised, these refusals to engage in conclusive, evaluative, normative judgments or to hazard integrative positions inhibit different configurations of aesthetic-political interplay.

Out of these epistemic and aesthetic commitments have grown political commitments, binding literary criticism tightly to broader political and philosophical traditions for which it is often the disciplinary home in the U.S. In conflating formlessness with aesthetic virtue and epistemic nonviolence, criticism elevates it as freedom. Many strains of Foucauldian historicism, queer antinomianism, feminism, postcolonialism, and afropessimism share this faith in the formless, anatomising ad infinitum how existing social relations and political institutions are 'inherently unfixable and beyond resuscitation, reform, or rescue'.²⁹ This absolutism explicitly aims at distributing the specific political and contingent instantiation of, say, 'the state' into a trans-historical, dematerialised ether of abjection. Cataloguing these dispersive tendencies in a range of late twentieth century theory, Alex Woloch marks both their 'Olympian tone – which puts the critic, as a lone individual voice, at odds with the' 'inherently unfixable', and the habits of de-specifying and sweeping which 'blur away the political problems, and struggles, that are so evident at a slightly closer scale'.³⁰ Timothy Brennan and Joseph North similarly worry that the rise of academic theory has historically coincided with a consolidation of right-wing power, and that theory's dispensation has been to wither and repudiate the state, the law, the party as legitimate objects of political struggle, negating 'any politics seeking to enter or make claims on the state'.³¹

In the intervening years since Brennan made his formidable commentary on the 'anarchic sublime', this anti-political quality of a specifically literary theory has been even more explicitly embraced as banner. Thus Jack Halberstam aspires to 'Spin contemporary conversations about queer and trans politics away from notions of respectability and inclusion, and towards the anti-political project of unmaking a world that casts queers and trans people as problems'.³² Roberto Esposito's notion of the impolitical similarly repudiates channels of power and its sharing, of demands and their circulating: 'Politics cannot be conceptualized in positive form but only on the basis of that which draws its contours at its outer margin and which determines it negatively, constituting both its ground and its reverse side'.³³ And most influentially, Stefano Harney and Fred Moten submit their practices of fugitivity and study as flight from collective power:

We owe it to each other to falsify the institution, to make politics incorrect, to give the lie to our own determination. We owe each other the indeterminate. We owe each other everything. An abdication of political responsibility? OK. Whatever. We're just anti-politically romantic about actually existing social life. We aren't responsible for politics. We are the general antagonism to politics looming outside every attempt to politicise, every imposition of self-governance, every sovereign decision and its degraded miniature, every emergent state and home sweet home.³⁴

Pervasive antipolitics in literary theory ensue from formal biases against cohesiveness, wholeness, and conceptuality; epistemic and aesthetic dissolution inspires anti-political dissolution.

As these antipolitics indicate, nihilist versions of dissolutionism often absolutize and dematerialise states, laws, and power relations, and abnegate alternative formations or alternative affordances of political-institutional forms. When that kind of argumentation prevails, its ambition is indistinction: harm-seeking laser vision sees particular injustices impugn the notion of justice, turtles all the way down. A brilliant and much laurelled example of this indistinction is the discourse of 'university abolition' in the work of Stefano Harney and Fred Moten and their students / followers. Rather than distinguish between the institutional operations and effects of the university and the prison system, Harney and Moten recurrently assimilate the one to the other. In their essay 'The University (last words)' for instance, a research fellowship is directly likened to one of the most brutal of carceral practices, solitary confinement: 'The university is a fortress whose various appearances – refuge and refugee camp, writer's colony and colony – betray its deep, various, nefarious functions ... only in the university can winning a fellowship mean access to solitude ... a set of fantasies, ranging from transparency to blackening, held in relational solitary confinement that mistakes the restricted (re)forms of the academy's general population for the revolutionary force of a general intellectual metaeconomy'.³⁵ A lecture and teach-in on this essay takes the point even farther: in the middle of the largest protest movement ever to transpire in this country, a movement explicitly against police violence, they observe 'so much of our work is about how ... the vast majority of the policing that gets done in the university is done by administrators and faculty and not by the police forces'.³⁶ While there are countless critical pedagogy critiques and studies of the schools-to-prison-pipeline that would substantiate more subtle versions of these charges, juxtaposed to facts like the University of Chicago and Temple University have the largest private police forces in the country – and they actually shoot people – such flattening associations actively disarm the specific project of discrediting and defunding campus cops, through generalising everything on campus into policing. Malm decries this indistinction for the incapacity it begets; the point of such flattening is 'to ruin as much analytic equipment as possible'.³⁷ A vision that paints every human formation since the beginning of western inscription with the same condemnatory brush can have as its only outcome the aggrandising of the critic. In perpetrating these indistinctions, criticism forswears its task of cutting, instead rhapsodising dismantling when it could be honing the mantle of emancipatory structuration. Such theologies of the negative foreshadow and refract activist practice in the present omnicrisis, where insurgencies repudiate value assertions, anarchic rhizomes reject organisation, apathetic

floods refuse voting, and visions of total destruction decline positive constructions.

Theoretically speaking, dissolutionism has muted any composed proposing of good ideas from the very people who ought to be the most qualified to elegantly and righteously persuade. Scholars of literature and language, words and meaning and cultural production, should be some of the people the very most qualified to advocate for the wellbeing that flows from cultivating and honouring human gifts for creativity, to argue that all humans deserve education, healthcare, housing so that they can freely exercise their essential constructive drive, and to make these interventions in appealing statements. Instead, we have conflated normative value visions with violence, and framed scholarship and scholar-activism as problematising, destabilising, disrupting the very idea of values. Yet our talents readily extend to saying out loud what we value and why, to making cultural criticism that includes recommendations for what to value, thereby helping others to decide on their common goods. What comes after burning it all down, after indeterminacy and vibrant matter in the embers? Should not criticism risk synthesis?

Two pools: objectivity and composition

Having described present criticism as often subjectivist or dissolutionist, we can now entertain some counterpositions for the future. For the purpose of confronting the privatising logics of the present, let us consider some opposites: *objectivity* and *composition*. Using these terms counterintuitively may be a jolt; this section of the essay, in its prescriptive and notional junket, is necessarily speculative.

Both of these terms have quotidian definitions that tend to fall outside of literary criticism: objectivity is scientific reasoning, composition is artistic or technocratic skill. Yet they can creatively dub aptitudes of literature that are also aptitudes of criticism: a unique kind of thinking (an objectivity in the literal sense of *ob-jectum*, throwing in the way of, both towards and against, customary thinking) and a unique kind of making (putting together something more than was already available in the plainly phenomenal world). Practiced as the embrace of objectivity and composition, instead of subjectivity and dissolutionism, criticism could have different prospects.

Objectivity

Objectivity isn't a quality often associated with literature, and especially not with literary criticism, but if we reach outside ordinary connotations, objectivity might provide a framework for describing both literary knowledge and literary critical knowledge in ways that conduce to fortifying the public angle

of criticism. To define literary objectivity, we can draw upon nonliterary scholarly formulations as well as more broadly aesthetic ones. For historians of epistemology like Lorraine Daston, philosophers of ontology like Levi Bryant or Quentin Meillassoux, objectivity connotes independence from individual consciousness, personal investment, or embodied perception; pertaining to the object not the subject; the realm of matter without us, adequate to itself.³⁸ For proponents and critics of big data, discretised units of information are objective in that they are self-evident, mineable, and calculable. For Adorno, aesthetic objectivity is independence from ordinary meanings and ordinary exchange.³⁹ Where everyday life brims with reified values, instrumental reason, immediate relevance, and relatability, art has the power to object to all that, to throw itself in the way of official proceedings. In each of these formulations, an essential quality is the negation of the perceptive apparatus, the fullness of that which confronts perception. What we might mean by literary objectivity stems from this negation of ordinary subjective perception.

Objectivity ostends mediated literature's actuation of a specific kind of knowledge, the constitution of concepts in formal and aesthetic modalities rather than quantitative or linear, the production of ideas via the slow, integrative process of interpretation, the nonparticular, disinterested, generality of a point of view outside of our own banal phenomenality. Objectivity challenges the self-evidence of personal perspective, phenomenal epistemology, and quotidian logic, giving dimension to confabulated perspectives, the inexistent and possible, and extraordinary conceptuality. Regular objectivity relativises and contextualises hypotheses, testing them against diverse sources; literary objectivity sustains contradiction by pressing thesis and antithesis in suspension, fomenting synthesis while also retaining tensions. Literary works produce what otherwise lacks phenomenal or sensual instantiation, departing from the merely existent or self-evident, and thereby operating a point of view that could rightly make a claim to objectivity. In return, criticism that extols this objectivity pushes itself along outward spurs towards ideas that are of a higher order than subjective experience or subject-matter topicalism, towards shared and public potentials.

What does objectivity look like in literature? Keats calls it 'negative capability', Toni Morrison enjoins write what 'you don't know'⁴⁰; literature has the capacity not only to invent persons, nor even only to invent worlds, but to invent impersonal, antiphenomenal kinds of knowing. Perhaps the very starkest example of this is Free Indirect Discourse, famously labelled by Frances Ferguson 'the novel's one and only formal contribution to literature',⁴¹ which we can elaborate as the radical formalisation of impersonality, a uniquely literary, uniquely third-person facility for the production of antiphenomenal, unembodied, uncharactered mentation. The strange mode of consciousness that is free thinking starkly illustrates the publicising or

anti-personalising affordances of literature, but it is just one example of literary objectivity. We could also celebrate counter-factuality, multiplottedness, imagined geography, anonymous or first person plural narration, inanimate or nonhuman focalisation, inhuman temporal explorations. Each of these endeavours of departure from the experienceable and given world strive to actuate knowledge independent of verifiability, phenomenology, personalism – the independence at stake in objectivity. Beyond these creative departures, this objectivity obtains in the way that knowledge takes shape not through empiricism or sense-perception, not through fact-checking and evidence-marshalling, but through the speculative and ruminative work of reading and interpretation. As the novelist David Mitchell puts it, ‘A novel thinks things ordinary prose can’t *differently*. Its superpower is polyphony, with neat sidelines in nuance, complexity, and simultaneity’.⁴² Thinking differently, obliquely to prose and prosaic reason, throwing objects away from linearity and positivism so that conceptuality veers back elsewhere – objectivity is this arc of integration and strangeness and juxtaposition.

What does objectivity look like in criticism? Receiving oblique conceptuality is the critic’s task of appraising the object in the round. Criticism inclined to objectivity starts with the work’s objectivity, but requires an orientation open toward it – ‘the critic as host’, J. Hillis Miller welcomingly notes⁴³ – that depersonalises critical interest. When we appreciate capacities of the literary in excess of the empirical, we practice criticism as knowledge-making that emerges from resonating and layering, repetition, and displacement, as an alternative to knowing that emerges from iteration and positivisation, from experience or habit. Since literature is not expression, the work does not speak its own truth. But since criticism is also not expressivism, neither does the critic speak or translate that truth. Testifying less to the critic’s experience of the work than to the production of thinkable motifs via the work’s excision of experience, objective criticism commits not a flattening or decoding of representation, distilling it down, but a thickening or repeating of representation, building it out. Criticism remediates the work’s mediation: it details and consummates the work’s conceptuality, it receives the thought and runs with it, it requites literary objectivity with critical objectivity.

A work’s creative sensual thinking invites the critic to achieve a parallel ideation; a work’s wholeness and indwelling conceptuality instigates the critic to proffer complementary ideas. What can be learned from the work? What can be learned from the criticism of the work? Positively formulating questions and notions manifests idea-work necessary for connecting collectives. The critic Sianne Ngai exemplifies objectivity, learning from works across media and period, like Henry James’ fiction and David Robert Mitchell’s horror films, that unite in their ‘aesthetic registration of

uncertainty about value' in capitalism, and offering her interpretative labour as a contribution to the collective project to 'judge[] an entire system of relations based on the mismeasurement of wealth'.⁴⁴ Criticism of the aesthetic disclosure of capitalist relations aligns itself with the project to construct of society around less erroneous values. Exercising inquiry beyond the subjective, probing for values beyond the reified hegemonies, critical objectivity returns to criticism's intrinsic publicity.

Composition

Reciprocating literary objectivity with critical objectivity occasions the formulation of new ideas, a synthetic and constructive process graspable as 'composition'. In everyday academic conversations, in the hallways of the university, 'composition' denotes the skills of literary study technocratically severed from the literary: 'writing' without reading, 'writing' as student-centered voice-amplification, 'writing' as mastering pre-existing conventions, 'writing' as navigating the world. There are many layers of disjunction and dislike between professional critics and professional compositionists, narrated in several important histories of the profession,⁴⁵ and largely produced by the labour circumstances of general education and humanistic skill instruction. But there are reasons to overcome these disconnections: labour reasons, since most faculty now holding English PhDs are contingently employed as composition teachers, and also intellectual reasons, since writing is our common core medium and composing big ideas is common to literature and theory.⁴⁶ Composition is a basic literary process and a central competency for critics; reconceiving criticism as constructive – as putting things together, producing relations – renews the common ground of scholar-teachers of cultural production and scholar-teachers of the writing classroom. One of our narrow future avenues is the regrounding of the lauded skills we instil within the knowledge production that enables us to do so. Reading, thinking, and debating about the power of representation and the force of words is an essential dimension of writing instruction; humanists who claim composition, synthesis, and building things up as our expertise can fortify our constitutive place in the university.

As important as this ordinary connotation is, drawing upon more extended and figurative meanings of composition can illuminate its promise for critical practice, including a unified practice of criticism and composition instruction. Composition works as an umbrella term for art's putting-into-medium, whether arranging musical scores from notes and instruments, configuring balance, focus, and leading lines in a painting, or grouping words and sentences to relay ideas. Composition is the assembling and mixing of elements, images, and / or words into some alignment or construction in excess of what immediately appears; the mediation of objects

and phenomena into concepts. Composition confronts the entrenched critical posture of taking things apart with the vocation of putting things together.

Literature's composition has a different purpose than ordinary communicative verbal composition. The imaginative, figurative, allusive, inventive, subtle, and counter-intuitive uses of language and rendering of ideas cannot be perceived with the same tools as everyday communication and cannot be judged by the same standards. Responding to this bid for interpretation, criticism educes a kind of knowing that does not resolve into ordinary communication or ordinary calculation. To learn with a critic is to engage in interpretative free play, literate juxtaposing, and the volley of syntheses. What can you throw that sticks? What can you sound out that resonates? What do such provisional affinities then enable as publics and collectives and values?

Composed artworks think in their own ways, outside of conventional linearity, ideation, mentation. Receiving these thoughts requires interpretation, which is foremost an acknowledgement of composedness or madeness and then a responsiveness to this interjective making. Close Reading is a traditional practice of such responsiveness, because it embraces literary thinking, confronting literature not with a demand for direct relevance or relatability, but with a receptivity to literature's own demand for alternate kinds of conceptuality, salience, relationality. Literary criticism is funny because it makes such compositions in attending to such compositions; our writing is made out of reading. Reading moves slower than image-absorption or rapid-uptake, a process of integrating meaning from differentiation. Writing about reading moves even slower, meaning-making recollected in tranquillity and painstakingly transmuted into other meanings.

The burning present fuels relentless pressure for purportedly uncomposed works – for documentary, testimony, autobiography, autofiction, antifiction, and 'realism' as the ordained responses to a dehumanising fake-news anti-historical regime. Literary criticism's enthusiasm for autotheory, 'just reading', and epistemic realism at once mounts and endures this pressure.⁴⁷ But other aesthetic and representational modalities would be capacitating in these times, and other critical modalities would support those arts of composition. Speculative fictions help indict current regimes and envision alternatives; plural and collective fictions help deprivatise and deindividualise on the path to rehumanisation; figurative, allegorical, condensed, and displaced constructions slow down the rapid digestion of authentic reals, proffering absorption, uncertainty, and sustained attention as mental and social processes more adequate than immediate reflexes. Composition comprises broadly these departures and assistances. Imaginative exceeding of what immediately presents itself holds out lifelines to worlds and logics that might work better than this hellscape. Both creating and participating in

the purely originaive are exercises of making the world habitable. Anahid Nersessian has recently remarked that Marxian materialism and literature have in common the posing of a 'unique epistemological challenge' that asks 'us to commit our cognitive resources to phenomena that exceed perceptibility'.⁴⁸ More imagination rather than less, more representation rather than anti-representation, more mediation rather than immediacy – these are brighter futures for literary criticism and literary production.

Literary critical study of composition, of how things are put together, should guide a future endeavour of making things, not just taking them apart. 'Transformation' is a spine of social critique, the pursuit of justice through changing the order of things. We speak of 'transformative justice' as an alternative not only to punitive carcerality but to restorative restitution; we speak of 'personal transformation' as liberatory flourishing beyond the strictures of oppression; we speak of 'cultural transformation' as the goal of criticism. Cultural theory and literary studies can acknowledge this spine, etymologically embracing the notion of a change in form, composition, or structure. The critic Caroline Levine exemplifies composition, turning the study of how aesthetic forms are made into the study of how 'socio-political life it itself composed of a plurality of different forms', a madeness 'which affords the possibility of undoing them' but also of working to sustain them.⁴⁹ If one dimension of our knowing traces how things took on the form they did, then another dimension of this knowing catalyses things taking on other forms; aesthetic mediation poses not only an occasion for analysis but also sustenance for the goal.

*

Subjectivism and dissolutionism merge in a molar disassembly of discrete elements immanent unto themselves. Everything is as bad as everything else, everything is as agential as everything else. Criticism beholding this state of affairs can respond with reintroducing discriminations, distinctions, causations, and even hierarchies, and celebrating works which establish such composed frames, composed grounds, and composed ideas. If there is any future of literary criticism, it hinges on these mediations and the slow moving durational present of considering creations and amending them, finding words for what we gain from objectivity and composition, renewing again the practices of synthesising and distancing amidst annihilative calamities, making new collectives that can fight for the conditions that make more criticism possible.

Publicising criticism

Objectivity and composition are capacities of the literary that can ignite capacities of literary criticism in the future, making a place for itself as a rightful discipline of imaginative projection and surprising synthesis, of

writing as critical practice, of novel constitutions and thinking outside the box. Redesigns of university education, renovations of Gen Ed curricula, and redistricting of academic disciplines are all on the table for the coming years, accelerated by the Covid destruction. As these movements at their best have been narrated, they involve recentring research not only as spine of teaching but as vehicle of learning. They also involve reconfiguring core inquiry so that neither traditional disciplines nor traditional skills-training predominate. Instead, integrative fields like medical ethics, urban studies, design, data management, and climate solutions name the challenges of human existence in the present and pose inspiring avenues of solution. Literary Study is none of these fields, but almost all of them centre on interpretation, critical analysis, imaginative construction, the history of ideas and persuasion, compelling storytelling, and aesthetic pleasure; students can best participate in these fields through textual study and mediated inventiveness. A criticism that convincingly avows these faculties is better poised to nurture them in the administered world.

Obviously, none of these conceptual proposals will transform the material conditions for criticism. There is only the barest of possibilities that making arguments in new ways about new things will change hearts and minds such that people take power. Absent a significant redistribution of the power of assigning resources and configuring institutions, absent the unionisation and other political organisation-building that would effect that redistribution, interpretation and related practices of slow reading and communal meaning-making will not be on the university curriculum. Free the liberal arts for all; free college, so that the unindebted degreed are able to make choices about how to shape their careers and contributions. Beyond university study, objectivity and composition are also names for the operative dynamics in broadly built consensus movements with new goals for new deals. To have common ideals to which diverse constituencies can assent, to traverse narcissisms and unite in big syntheses – these are organiser skills, builder skills cultivated by literary engagement and literary criticism.

Setting this agenda for criticism inside the university and for the repurposing of the university that entails means, of course, working for there to be such a thing as a university. Perhaps the really remarkable feature of criticism at the present time is how much it is metamorphosing in and through university demolition. A surprising flourishing of criticism in the absence of sustaining material conditions for it provides a few concluding points for this prospective gambit. What we can deem ‘the new public criticism’ owes its distinctive idiom to the degraded professional conditions for critical labour, and it has managed to make of itself a shining exercise of criticism as the cultivation of publics.⁵⁰ Queer theorist Michael Warner formidably argues that ‘publics exist only by virtue of their imagining’.⁵¹ The imaginative exercises practiced in the humanities create public publics, bringing them in

to existence. Literature and philosophy orient us, public history and public art make communities – the performative, conjuring force of these activities comes before the publics, not after. Even as it starkly reflects the deteriorating conditions for our labour, the new public criticism is marvellously vibrant at making a public among itself, a colloquy for the critically inclined to conceive themselves as a mobilisable collective. What this public or collective will achieve is not yet clear and falls a long way from free college with equitable labour, but this ambit of criticism helpfully concretises the preceding speculations about objectivity and composition.

Defining the new public criticism as an endeavour of convocation without institution means assessing its material conditions, its style, and its audience, its practice. In brief, this criticism instantiates the vocation of criticism amid the ruins of the profession, a calling to practice when there are little or no infrastructures of compensation for it. Talk about disinterestedness! Public by virtue of lacking private reward, this is a criticism produced and consumed outside the circuits of routine commerce or professional capital; much of this labour is unpaid, its products unsold. Without romanticising accruing debt and crushing souls, we should espy these glints of a future public criticism waiting to emerge.

‘Emergent’ is indeed one way to tell the short history of this criticism. In a period defined by the dot com boom and the great recession and insurgent global fascism and in particular by the iphone (2007), and further defined by the catastrophic rescission of state and federal higher education funding and collapse of most of tenure stream jobs, a new mode of public intellectualism has scraped itself together. Much of this novelty pivots on new publishing venues, largely extra-mural and frequently founded by unemployed PhDs: *N + 1* 2004, *The New Inquiry* 2009, *Jacobin* 2010, *LARB* 2011, *Public Books* 2012. In suit, more traditional journalistic venues like *Huffington Post*, *Slate*, and *The Atlantic* have featured more academic cultural expertise. A qualified greater openness than conventional scholarly journals to nonwhite, nonmale critics, contingent and early career critics, and heretics also characterises this critical field.⁵² And accessibility in platform usefully enhances the publicising potential of this criticism’s form and content.

The labour conditions and smartphone substrate for this criticism result in a unique format. Most of the new public criticism takes short-form. Short, sweet: not only in total number of words but also in individual sentences and paragraphs, scrollable, written for reading on phonescreens. Short, process: fast, presentist, topical, composed for quick turnaround to coincide with the publication of a new poetry collection, airing of a series finale, headlining of a perennial theme; edited but not peer-reviewed. Short, punchy: more lively than academic writing, active voice, active verbs, lots of exclamation points or emphatic, exhortative tone. Shortness launches staccatic

consumption and circulation of this criticism, sparking new rhythms of quotidian collective exchange.

The knowledge produced by these inhospitable conditions and in this foreshortened span differs from subjectivist or dissolutionist, by virtue of the way it recovers aesthetic judgment as a contemplative process of imagining a social network or even community for whom the evaluation of the aesthetic object holds objectively. As Ngai glosses this constitutively social character of judgement, it 'refer(s) [] to the social matrix of others with whom we are compelled to share these feelings in public'.⁵³ Trafficking in such communalist judgements, the new public criticism often skews affirmative, in the sense of communicating enthusiasm for learning with tv, music, cinema, literature, and committing to sharing that equipment for living. After all, if one is going to persevere at length about something, stretching for words to remediate it, and do so for free, it better be a good something. Atop this recuperation of criticism's evaluative impetus and this affirmation of the object rests another ratification, of critical value added: interesting tv, books, and music made even more interesting in remediation by astute augmenters. That critical value defines itself differently from the applied expertise of political scientists and historians, who have been more often accorded a public platform to extend an immediate understanding of the real world with contextualising op-eds, political commentary, or pop-history lessons. Public interpreters wield something else, a way of accreting intensity, attention, and intermediation to show how anything may be read productively, to, with, and for anyone would like to learn from that kind of exfoliation. To take just the smallest smattering of examples: In *Post45*, Jane Hu's 'Race and Romantic Realism' describes a prevalent dynamic whereby socially aware white authors founder to plot marginal Asian characters in on the geopolitical map they avow constructs their intimate relations.⁵⁴ In *LARB*, Sheri Marie Harrison's 'New Black Gothic' formulates a name for a proliferating style that encompasses fiction, music, and film in a time of heightened awareness of extrajudicial killing.⁵⁵ In *boundary2O*, John Pat Leary's 'Innovation and the Neoliberal Idioms of Development' dives deep on the buzzword of economic transformation so that cultural consumers, ordinary workers, and everyday activists can relativise the paradigms that at once anchor and obscure their exploitation.⁵⁶ In *Public Books*, Will Glovin's 'The Global Grad School Novel' identifies the surprising overlap of immigration narratives and university fictions, tracking the common cause of academic uplift and diasporic bootstrapping.⁵⁷ Each of these and countless other works of new public criticism mobilise rich literacy and compositive analysis to evaluate artworks in order to give their readers language and frameworks for interpreting and appreciating the tropes, images, and genres that organise cultural experience, convoking a public equipped to sieve vast relations

and embrace critical pleasures en route to recognise structuring patterns and galvanising structural reformations.

Both optimistic and cynical appraisals regard this public as a hitherto inchoate nonacademic laymansphere. With the often open-access format suggesting that this criticism welcomes readers who differ from the subscribers to academic journals, and the tone of this criticism ringing teacherly,⁵⁸ teachable, and meant for students, that vision gains some traction. Yet it seems worth professing the more likely truth: that the public conjured by the new public criticism is precisely we critics ourselves. Even for those few of us with jobs, our exchange of ideas has been curtailed by the changing industrial conditions of labour including the slashing of programming and research budgets, extreme overwork, and prohibitively expensive database monopolies. For those critics without jobs or a path to the relative intellectual freedom of tenure, joining this hailed public takes an indispensable rhetorical step toward our much-needed class consciousness. Alternative venues are *for us*, to beneficially, fluidly, dynamically talk to ourselves. And while the compensations of this talking are far from job security, health insurance, or research funding, this conversation amongst ourselves hails critics as a social subclass and pursues criticism as public-building exercise.

Amid the wasteland of privatisation, such building up of publics vitally models collective ways of thinking, forging again the bonds between criticism and literature itself. Imagination and integration should be the mode shared between literature and criticism – our skills of understanding the power of composition turn also to the work of building. Like engineers and artists, public critics are ‘makers’, equipped for the task of constructing new togethernesses. Were literary criticism to prime these strengths, we would position the field to cohere more with the kinds of project and problem-based learning that occupy other disciplines, while maintaining the specificity of literary ways of knowing. Our ways are valuable because of their magical, deliberate excision of ordinary consciousness, ordinary mentation, ordinary phenomenality. Efforts to defend or reinvent literary criticism on the basis of the subjectivism of literary attachment, the expressivism of personal experience, the aboutness of literary content all continue to forfend this excision. Bearing down on the well-trodden critical path of dissolutionism precludes affirming big ideas for better collectives. In contrast, exalting in composition and revalencing objectivity can be techniques for taking a better distance, for enacting the separations and cleavages that differentiate criticism from obsequiousness, infatuation, or mirroring, while also inviting engagements. To respond prospectively, *for the future*, carries us to new experiences and the values and visions that can enable them, to the instituting and sustaining of ideas and norms beyond their relativising and upending, to the composing of relations and worlds. Materialising a future more public than private, prospective criticism embraces

projects organised in advance by the commitment to the surprise of art, the swerve of reading, the surge of writing, the summoning of comrades – all for the splendour of synthesis.

*

It comes to this. Waxing about the futures of criticism endogenously – what are its best ideas? what's the newest front in the method wars? what brilliance is incandescent? what is the latest special issue? – clangs hollow in the midst of exogenous omnicrisis. Are there tools of criticism that critics can use to transform the conditions of criticism's demise? This essay has tried to suggest two: objectivity, the unique literary knowing and the unique higher knowing produced in criticism; and composition, mobilising critical understanding of how ideas and forms and relations are made in the service of bolstering making, building, synthesising, sustaining. Taking a lead from the social work of aesthetic judgment as it is fleetingly practiced in precarious public criticism, critics must hail themselves as a subclass with shared visions and shared esteem on the way to getting in formation with other publics whose survival is at stake in the destruction of the university, the enclosure of reason and reflection, and the rendering disposable of ever wider swathes of humanity. How we make critical arguments is a small but essential component of that aligning. Let us say what we value, what is affirmable in culture beyond abjectification, why everyone should have access to art and to thinking with art and to doing so in classrooms and communities and institutions. We are the ones whose competencies compel us to strongly assert the truth that the universal historical fact of human creation of art and literature should have implications for the organisation of social life. Free inquiry and free college, with fair labour, is where literary criticism's future rests. Making ideas in this publicising vein, for the public good and public interest, is the critic's best move.

Notes

1. Chris Newfield calls this 'disinterested research' in *The Great Mistake: How We Wrecked Public Universities and How We Can Fix Them* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2016), p. 5. Geoffrey Harpham calls it cognitive freedom: 'however disciplined or channeled by scholarly protocols they may be, interpretation represents a moment at which cognition is not absolutely bound by necessity to produce a particular result.' *The Character of Criticism* (New York: Routledge, 2006), p. 8. Jameson is an astute thinker of these freedoms of art. For a recent cogent articulation, see Nicholas Brown's, *Autonomy: The Social Ontology of Art Under Capitalism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2019).
2. As Adam Kotsko reminds us, 'making the case' for the humanities is not the issue; the lack of political power is. 'Not Persuasion, But Power: Against "Making the Case"', Higher Education in the Age of Coronavirus Forum, *Boston Review*, 6 May, 2020. <http://bostonreview.net/forum/higher->

education-age-coronavirus/adam-kotsko-not-persuasion-power-against-making-case" [Date accessed: 12 February 2021].

3. Bonnie Honig, *Public Things: Democracy in Disrepair* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2017), p. 4.
4. It seems necessary to note at this outset that freestandingly, these trends and counterpossibilities have been concerns of my recent work. The synoptic schema in this essay therefore draws upon formulations and elaborations in *The Order of Forms: Realism, Formalism, and Social Space* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2019), as well as in latest and forthcoming essays on mediation, objectivity, and impersonality.
5. For a clean statement of this pluralism, inflected by analytic philosophy, see Jonathan Kramnick and Anahid Nersessian, 'Form and Explanation', *Critical Inquiry*, 43.3 (2017), pp. 650–69.
6. Merve Emre, 'Post-Disciplinary Reading and Literary Sociology,' What Is the Scale of the Literary Object, Edited by Rebecca L. Walkowitz, *Modernism/modernity* 3, Cycle 4, 1 February 2019. <https://modernismmodernity.org/forums/posts/post-disciplinary-reading-and-literary-sociology> [Date accessed: 12 February 2021]. See also Jeffrey J. Williams, 'The New Humanities', *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, 14 November 2019. https://www.chronicle.com/article/the-new-humanities/?cid=wsinglestory_40_8.
7. Eve Sedgwick, *Tendencies* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1993), p. 4.
8. Kandice Chuh, 'It's Not About Anything', *Social Text*, 32.4 (2014), p. 130.
9. Chuh, 'It's Not About Anything,' p. 132.
10. Amitav Ghosh, *The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016).
11. Kate Marshall, 'The Readers of the Future Have Become Shitty Literary Critics,' *b2o: the online community of the boundary 2 editorial collective*, 26 February 2018 <https://www.boundary2.org/2018/02/kate-marshall-the-readers-of-the-future-have-become-shitty-literary-critics/> [Date accessed: 12 February 2021].
12. Alain Badiou, *The Century* (Cambridge, UK: Polity, 2007).
13. David Shields, *Reality Hunger* (New York: Vintage, 2011).
14. Byung-Chul Han, *The Transparency Society* (Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press, 2015).
15. Ian Watt, *The Rise of the Novel: Studies in Defoe, Richardson, and Fielding* (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2001).
16. Ulka Anjaria, 'The Realist Impulse and the Future of Postcoloniality', *Novel: A Forum on Fiction*, 49.2 (2016), pp. 278–94. See also, Jed Esty and Colleen Lye, 'Peripheral Realisms Now', *Modern Language Quarterly*, 73.3 (2012), pp. 269–88.
17. Heather Love on Rankine, 'Small Change: Realism, Immanence, and the Politics of the Micro', *Modern Language Quarterly*, 77.3 (2016), pp. 419–45.
18. Stephen Best and Sharon Marcus, 'Surface Reading: An Introduction', *Representations*, 108.1 (2009), p. 15.
19. Jeffrey J. Williams, 'The New Modesty in Literary Criticism', *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, 5 January 2015. <https://www.chronicle.com/article/the-new-modesty-in-literary-criticism/> [Date accessed: 12 February 2021].
20. Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010), p. 18, 58.

21. Bruno Latour, *Pandora's Hope: Essays on the Reality of Science Studies* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), p. 15.
22. Felski's postcritical *Uses of Literature* project received one of the largest grants ever for a humanist: <https://news.virginia.edu/content/uva-english-professor-lands-large-danish-grant-explore-literatures-social-use>. The Michigan State Cognitive Lab has numerous foundation funders: <http://dhlc.cal.msu.edu/support/>. The Stanford Literary Lab has a variety of foundation, government, and corporate partners: <https://manifold.umn.edu/read/an-interview-with-mark-algee-hewitt-of-the-stanford-literary-lab/section/3f8228ae-c0a2-4f33-9689-2935f7eaa48a>. For a critical account of some of these funding trends, see, Daniel Allington, Sarah Brouillette, David Golumbia, 'Neoliberal Tools (and Archives): A Political History of Digital Humanities', *Los Angeles Review of Books*, 1 May 2016 <https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/neoliberal-tools-archives-political-history-digital-humanities/> [Date accessed: 12 February 2021].
23. Best and Marcus, 'Surface Reading.'
24. Brian Glavey 'Having a Coke with You is Even More Fun Than Ideology Critique', *PMLA*, 134.5 (2019), pp. 996–1011.
25. Paul K. Saint-Amour, 'Weak Theory, Weak Modernism', *Modernism/modernity*, 25.3 (2018), pp. 437–59.
26. For more reflections on autotheory, see Annamarie Jagose and Lee Wallace, 'Dictation: Autotheory and the Coupled Voice', *Arizona Quarterly: A Journal of American Literature, Culture, and Theory*, 76.1 (2020), pp. 109–39; Laura Kipnis, 'The Cringe Factor', in Michael Bérubé (ed.) *The Aesthetics of Cultural Studies* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2005), pp. 185–202.
27. Andreas Malm, *The Progress of This Storm: Nature and Society in a Warming World* (New York: Verso, 2017), pp. 186–90.
28. Mari Ruti, *Distillations: Theory, Ethics, Affect* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2018), p. 1.
29. 'Burn It Down: Abolition, Insurgent Political Practice, and the Destruction of Decency', *abolitionjournal*, 22 April 2018 <https://abolitionjournal.org/burn-it-down/> [Date accessed: 12 February 2021].
30. Alex Woloch, *Or Orwell: Writing and Democratic Socialism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2016), pp. xvii, xv.
31. Timothy Brennan, *Wars of Position: The Cultural Politics of Left and Right* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006), p. x. See also, Joseph North: 'Perhaps we can now see something of the dual political character of our period's governing injunction to 'historicize'. Insofar as it has led to a critique of the essentialisms and universalisms of an old elite, it has been palpably of the left. Yet insofar as it has also asked literary thinkers to give up the wider social function to which 'criticism', for all its many faults, at least aspired, and has taught them instead merely to observe the culture, however 'critically', by writing cultural theory and cultural history, it has been a depoliticization: in that sense, of the right. Only the first of these aspects of the historicist/contextualist paradigm has been well publicized'. North, *Literary Criticism: A Concise Political History* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2017), p. 12.
32. Jack Halberstam, 'Unbuilding Gender,' *Places*, October 2018 <https://placesjournal.org/article/unbuilding-gender/?cn-reloaded=1> [Date accessed: 12 February 2021].

33. Quoted in Bruno Bosteels, *The Actuality of Communism* (New York: Verso, 2011), p. 79.
34. Stefano Harney and Fred Moten, *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning & Black Study* (New York: Minor Compositions, 2013), p. 20.
35. Stefano Harney and Fred Moten, 'The university (last words),' unpublished essay, p. 4 <https://www.are.na/block/7921022> [Date accessed: 12 February 2021].
36. Harney and Moten, 'The university (last words),' video lecture, 9 July 2020 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zqWMejD_XU8 [Date accessed: 12 February 2021].
37. Malm, *The Progress of This Storm*, p. 186.
38. See Lorraine Daston and Peter Galison, *Objectivity* (New York: Zone Books, 2007); Quentin Meillassoux, *After Finitude: An Essay on the Necessity of Contingency* (New York: Continuum, 2008); Levi R. Bryant, *The Democracy of Objects* (Ann Arbor, MI: Open Humanities Press, 2011).
39. Theodor Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2013).
40. Toni Morrison, 'Write, Erase, Do It Over', Interview by Rebecca Sutton, *American Artscape Magazine* No. 4 (2014) <https://www.arts.gov/stories/magazine/2014/4/art-failure-importance-risk-and-experimentation/toni-morrison> [Date accessed: 12 February 2021].
41. Frances Ferguson, 'Jane Austen, Emma, and the Impact of Form', *Modern Language Quarterly*, 61.1 (2000), p. 159.
42. Mitch R. Murray, 'Thinking Polyphonically: A Conversation with David Mitchell', *Los Angeles Review of Books*, 11 September 2020 <https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/thinking-polyphonically-a-conversation-with-david-mitchell/> [Date accessed: 12 February 2021].
43. J. Hillis Miller, 'The Critic as Host', *Critical Inquiry*, 3.3 (Spring 1977), pp. 439–47.
44. Sianne Ngai, *Theory of the Gimmick* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2020), p. 273, 51.
45. Gerald Graff, *Professing Literature: An Institutional History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989); Robert Scholes *The Rise and Fall of English: Reconstructing English as a Discipline* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1999); Donna Strickland, *The Managerial Unconscious in the History of Composition Studies* (Conference on College Composition and Communication of the National Council of Teachers of English, 2011).
46. Jason Maxwell touches on versions of this point about big ideas in his argument that the age of theory has complicated the composition–literature opposition in English departments. See, Maxwell, *The Two Cultures of English: Literature, Composition, and the Moment of Rhetoric* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2019).
47. Sharon Marcus, 'Just Reading: Female Friendship and the Marriage Plot', in *Between Women: Friendship, Desire, and Marriage in Victorian England* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007), pp. 73–108.
48. Anahid Nersessian, *The Calamity Form: On Poetry and Social Life* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2020), p. 172.
49. Caroline Levine, *Forms: Whole, Rhythm, Hierarchy, Network* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015), pp. 14, 83. 'Sustainability' is a motif that interests Levine in her work in progress on both the climate crisis and the insufficiencies of literary undoing.

50. A recent forum on such criticism in the premier literary journal *PMLA*, 'The Semipublic Intellectual: Academia, Criticism, and the Internet Age' focuses on this criticism's genres and modes of authority, and its goal is 'to insist that this writing be recognized'. Lili Loofbourow and Phillip Maciak, 'Introduction: The Time of the Semipublic Intellectual', *PMLA*, 130.2 (2015), p. 444. In this forum, Evan Kindley perspicaciously situates this writing as a 'missing generation' of academics whose 'excess intellectual energy' 'online journalism [] is absorbing'. Kindley, 'Growing Up in Public: Academia, Journalism, and the New Public Intellectual', *PMLA*, 130.2 (2015), p. 471. The forum established a number of essential formulations extended here into further considerations of material conditions for criticism and its counter-private effects, and of affirmative aesthetic judgments.
51. Michael Warner, *Publics and Counterpublics* (New York: Zone Books, 2002), p. 8.
52. Kindley, 'Growing Up in Public.'
53. Sianne Ngai, *Our Aesthetic Categories* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2012), p. 44.
54. Jane Hu, 'Race and Romantic Realism,' *Post45*, Reading Sally Rooney Cluster, 15 June 2020 <http://post45.org/2020/06/race-and-romantic-realism/> [Date accessed: 12 February 2021]. Hu is a strong example of the para-academic quality of this critical practice, for she was established in impressive venues before becoming a graduate student and she has consistently published on a truly wide variety of cultural objects and theoretical / political questions.
55. Sheri-Marie Harrison, 'New Black Gothic,' *Los Angeles Review of Books*, 23 June 2018 <https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/new-black-gothic/> [Date accessed: 12 February 2021].
56. John Pat Leary, 'Innovation and the Neoliberal Idioms of Development,' *b2o: the online community of the boundary 2 editorial collective*, 2 August 2018 <https://www.boundary2.org/2018/08/leary/> [Date accessed: 12 February 2021].
57. Will Glovinsky, 'The Great Global Grad School Novel,' *Public Books*, 22 October 2018 <https://www.publicbooks.org/the-great-global-grad-school-novel/> [Date accessed: 12 February 2021].
58. Sharon Marcus makes this point about the pedagogical project of semi-public intellectual work. See, 'How to Talk about Books You *Have* Read', *PMLA*, 130.2 (2015): 474–80.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Copyright of Textual Practice is the property of Routledge and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.