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New Literary History, Volume 53, Number 1, Winter 2022, pp. 161-180 (Article)

Published by Johns Hopkins University Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/nlh.2022.0006>



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Postcritique and the Problem of the Lay Reader

Tobias Skiveren

IT'S BEEN A FEW YEARS NOW SINCE RITA FELSKI announced her call for a “postcritical reading,” and it’s been even longer since the various turns to “reparation,” “surface reading,” and “description” sparked the initial debates about the ways we read, or should read, now.¹ For more than a decade, literary scholars have been arguing among themselves about whether to read with or against the grain, to stand in front of the text or to dig below appearances, to always historicize(!) or to prefer not to. The “method wars,” as these disputes have been dubbed, are indeed not over, and yet, as a decade of methodological quarreling comes to a close, it might be time to pause for a moment, lay down arms, and evaluate the state of the debate and its preliminary outcomes.

To be sure, many scholars are more aware today of the predictability and reductionism of certain modes of critical analysis. It speaks to the success of the postcritical wing that a figure like Bruce Robbins, one of the most vocal critics of Felski’s seminal book *The Limits of Critique*,² now feels the need to credit his peers for avoiding “the tedious question of whether a given text is commendably critical of neoliberalism or uncritically reflective of it.”³ The comment is dropped as a casual remark in a recent review essay, but its presence, I believe, is indicative. Even to the advocates of critique, grand claims about a given work’s subversive potential are going out of fashion, and the binary scheme of thumbs-up/thumbs-down to the hidden politics of a text can now appear tedious as well as reductive. That being said, the critique of critique had larger goals. Its aim was not only to complexify a suspicious mode of analysis that had apparently lost its element of surprise.⁴ More so, the methodological pushback was motivated by a wish to counter analytical dogmatism by, in the words of Felski, “freeing up literary studies to embrace a wider range of affective styles and modes of argument” (*LC* 3). In this context, “postcritical reading” was presented as an umbrella term that could guide us away from “the kinds of arguments we know how to conduct in our sleep” and toward new modes of analysis that were not uncritical, but in some sense had moved beyond critique (*LC* 173). Felski has subsequently voiced concerns about how some scholars have used her neologism as a catch-all term that ignores methodologi-

cal or political disagreements between herself and other literary critics who are suspicious of suspicion.⁵ Yet one can hardly blame people for taking such terminological liberties, given Felski's own reluctance to define "postcritique" in anything more than negative terms in *The Limits of Critique*, while explicitly handing over the job of filling out the specific semantics to future literary scholars (LC 173). Now, however, after numerous articles, books, and special issues discussing these topics, one might expect such a semantic to be available.⁶ What, in short, does a postcritical reading look like?

The answer to this question, though, is not yet self-evident, even to those of us who have followed the intense debates up close. We are quite far, I think, from having a method as distinct and operationalizable as those developed under the banner of critique. What has emerged from these discussions, nonetheless, is a set of recurring focal points that can offer guidance and advice. A significant part of the debate, for instance, has centered on the possibility of developing alternative spatial metaphors to steer practices of literary analysis away from critique's injunction to *dig deep* or *look beneath* the words on the page. Instead, some scholars suggest studying textual surfaces; others urge us to position ourselves in front of the text; and still others argue for abandoning the language of spatiality altogether (LC 12).⁷ Running parallel to these debates on "depth," another influential line of discussion has pivoted on the advantages of refocusing from negative to positive affect. Echoing Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's famous shift from paranoia to reparation, several figures suggest remolding the affective dispositions of critique by, for example, recasting literary criticism as a practice of hope that retains optimism in times of disappointment, whereas critics on the opposite wing have, in response, defended attitudes of pessimism and aggression.⁸

While such proposals for new spatial metaphors and affective dispositions have been subject to extensive commentary and debate, less attention has been paid to a third recurring topic that proves just as significant to the postcritical project. I am thinking here of the habitual reassessment of a practice we might call "lay reading." For many years, lay reading was dismissed as naive, too vicarious to really appreciate the aesthetic and formal dimensions of texts, and too immersive to be properly critical. But today, numerous scholars inspired by the methodological debates are dropping the old elitist disdain in order to explore the various affective, institutional, and experiential dimensions of nonacademic reading with renewed interest and commitment.⁹ In fact, the ambition here has often been to reevaluate this type of reading by acknowledging, for instance, the value and significance of amateur criticism and so-called "bad read-

ers.” Some have called for a revolution of the ordinary, others again for an unlearning of academic habits of reading.¹⁰

Resonating with this last phrase in particular, Winfried Fluck notes in a recent assessment of Felski’s book that the main ambition of post-critique is to “transform interpreters back into readers.”¹¹ While Felski herself denies this claim, arguing that such a move would be “professional suicide,” I think Fluck is not wholly wrong here, in the sense that the convergence of academic criticism and lay reading remains a dominant trend in the work springing from postcritical discussions.¹² Even so, Felski’s reservations are easy to follow. What is the point, potential students might ask, of enrolling in literary studies departments if the only thing you learn is nonacademic reading skills that you can acquire on your own? In any case, the fact that a scholar like Fluck can misread the intentions of Felski and co. indicates that the current academic fascination for nonacademic reading faces a rather tricky question: how do postcritical scholars reevaluate practices of lay reading without becoming lay readers themselves?

In this essay, I want to argue that an attachment to lay reading not only fuels the current emergence of countertrends to critique, but also threatens the survival of the postcritical project. This is so because the reevaluation of lay reading works as a double-edged sword. On the one hand, it helps break down barriers between literary studies and a broader public by reengaging nonprofessional practices and experiences that have hitherto often been found unworthy of academic attention. But as a methodological lodestar, lay reading, on the other hand, risks undermining the academic status of the postcritical scholar. In what follows, I make my case by studying how the figure of “the lay reader” structures central claims on both sides of the debate.¹³ First, I will show how the defense of lay reading counters an elitist tendency in critical scholarship to regard such modes of reading—and those who value them—as politically dubious. Having credited its importance in critiquing critique, I then try to make clear how the attachment to lay reading also complicates the formation of viable alternatives to critique. The methodological innovations springing from these debates, I argue, often take lay reading as some sort of methodological ideal, which, in turn, obscures the distinction between academic scholarship and the practices of nonprofessional readers. The attachment to lay reading, then, might explain, to some extent, why postcritique appeals to some scholars as an alternative to critique. But looking forward, we may need to redirect our intellectual efforts if we want to prevent postcritique from running out of steam.¹⁴

Critique: How to Distinguish Academics from Fans

What is lay reading to professional literary critics? What role did it play in the rise of postcritique? And what are the stakes involved in its invocation in present disputes? The history of lay reading in literary studies is long and complex. It reaches back through medieval ideas of laity to Aristotelian poetics (and beyond) and evolves constantly in conjunction with more recent academic ideals and taboos, from the idea of an affective fallacy to that of allegories of reading.¹⁵ But in another sense it is also quite simple. Throughout most of its modern institutional existence, the field of literary studies has repeatedly framed the lay reader as its constitutive Other: the excluded subjectivity against which the proper literary critic defines himself. As Merve Emre has argued recently, the institution of literary studies consolidated its academic identity in the postwar US by distinguishing “bad readers” from “good readers” in ways that favored the appreciation of aesthetic qualities and made touchy-feely identification an academic no-go.¹⁶ To be a proper literary critic, the logic went, was to cultivate a formalist sensibility and leave the banality of vicarious immersion to the lay reader. While this dichotomy might still be at play in many literary studies departments today, what designates a “good reader” has also shifted over the years. With the advent of Marxist theory and US adaptations of “poststructuralism” in the 1970s and 1980s, there arose a new zeitgeist that professed the radicality of critical methodologies along with their associated attitudes of suspicion, skepticism, and political indignation. In the words of Nicholas Holm—who, in turn, draws on the words of Pierre Bourdieu—the elites of higher education are no longer distinguished by an “aesthetic disposition” that enables them to discuss the literary originality of William Shakespeare or the specific configuration of narrative devices in James Joyce’s oeuvre; nowadays, cultural capital seems to be signaled instead by means of a “critical disposition” that is more concerned with evaluating the subversive or activist potential of a given cultural object, the extent to which it subverts hierarchies of race and gender, reproduces neoliberal assumptions, and so on.¹⁷ To be sure, many literary scholars have sensed this shift in atmosphere; but even in terms of sheer quantity, formal methods are just not as popular as they used to be, while social, theoretical, and critical approaches have been on the rise for years.¹⁸

The “quiet transformation of literary studies,” as some have called this development, does not mean, however, that literary scholars have stopped defining themselves in opposition to the “bad reading” of lay readers.¹⁹ Like its aesthetic predecessor, Holm writes, the critical disposition often

functions “as an exercise of privilege that distinguishes between those who have access to cultural criticism as a mode of interpretation and those who do not.”²⁰ And yet, as the semantics of “good reading” have shifted, so has the meaning of its negative counterpart. No longer naïve because of her banal identifications and poor literary taste, the lay reader is now cast as a politically dubious figure. “The ordinary reader,” Fredric Jameson snorted in *The Political Unconscious*, concerns herself too much with the literal meaning of texts, thus failing to see that “if everything were transparent, then no ideology would be possible, and no domination either.”²¹ The figure who was once viewed as a philistine unable to appreciate the real artistry of literature comes across in an era of critique as an ideological pawn subjected to forces beyond her comprehension.

What, then, does this historical reciprocity of good and bad reading have to do with the rise of postcritique and its adversaries? While the predictability of certain modes of critical analysis surely helped inspire the call for methodological revisioning, the movement of postcritique also caught on because of a growing dissatisfaction with this long-standing tradition of dismissing the lay reader. Heather Love gets it exactly right when she argues that the main target in Felski’s “book is not critique but elitism, which she identifies in both leftist vanguardism and belletristic defenses of literary value.”²² What drives *The Limits of Critique*, in other words, is the effort not only to produce new methods but also to undo highbrow conceptualizations of good and bad reading. This is also the case, I would argue, for much of the scholarship that has emanated from these discussions.

Consider, for instance, Melanie Micir and Aarthi Vadde’s recent work on “amateur criticism.” By directing attention to the casual, minor, or ephemeral types of writing traditionally excluded from the purview of literary studies—such as editorial notes, diary entries, and Instagram posts—Micir and Vadde stress the value of developing alternative lines of inquiry that bring “unprofessional postures and exploited workers back into focus” in order to rethink “what expertise is and where it lies.”²³ Or take Emre’s above-mentioned work on the “paraliterary,” which similarly—though critical toward many postcritical trends—suggests a renewed ethnographic interest in “bad” writers and readers “with little to no social value to the institutions of literature and the guardians of literary culture.”²⁴ While the inclusion of lowbrow texts and their readers is certainly a key part of postcritique’s anti-elitist impulse, one might also note the careful attention paid to readability by this group of scholars. On several occasions, Felski has commented on this effort, airing her admiration for Richard Rorty’s ability to convey complex philosophical arguments in ways that resonated with large audiences.²⁵

Toril Moi, another key figure in this context, even ventured a critique of the attitude of “just being difficult” that allegedly prevails in many strands of poststructuralist literary studies, from queer theory to new materialism (*RO* 150–71).²⁶

On the critical wing, not much credit has been given to these attempts to include lay readers as potential audiences, objects of concern, or even as rich sources of expertise. Yet this does not mean that the defenders of critique have been indifferent to the status and role of lay reading. In fact, the dichotomy between good and bad readers appears to be an essential rhetorical figure in several of the recent attempts to contest the postcritical critiques of critique. While many examples could prove this point, let us return to Robbins, who undoubtedly qualifies as one of the most prominent exponents of its logic.

In several articles, comments, and reviews, Robbins has expressed strong reservations about the postcritical trend, in particular the picture it offers of the work carried out in contemporary literary studies. The postcritical argument “puffs itself up by expanding its range of targets so as to take in nearly the whole profession,” he writes, adding with evident skepticism, “as if anyone had ever proposed that literary studies *had* only one purpose and that critique was it.”²⁷ In the exact same pieces of writing, however, Robbins also makes a series of high-flown arguments for the value of critical methods that seem to make these very same methods the name of the game of “the whole profession.” No longer an optional mode of analysis among many, critique, in these arguments, comes to represent *the* dividing line between good and bad reading, distinguishing the detached professional critic from the naïve enthusiasm and consumerism of the lay reader. “Critique,” he writes, “goes with the territory. Professionally speaking (for better or worse, this distinguishes us as academics from fans as well as from most reviewers, belletrists, and other adjuncts to the publishing industry), talking about literature entails an edginess or distancing ourselves from the values of the society around us If it [Felski’s project] were to succeed, what would be the result? Perhaps a criticism that is closer to fandom, a profession that is closer to the industry’s dollars-and-cents metric and its rhetoric of helpful and largely positive advice to the would-be consumer.”²⁸ Notice the methodological dogmatism of this passage. One cannot abstain from established critical methodologies, it seems, without moving from the terrain of professionalism to the industry of fandom and consumerism. Critique, by this line of thinking, not only goes with the territory; it becomes the only legitimate mode of analysis. Although Robbins clearly does not agree with the postcritical project, he nevertheless, then, seems to confirm its central claim, insofar as he

depicts critique as crowding out alternative forms of intellectual life by positioning itself as essential to the discipline as a whole, while excluding any alternatives as amateurish *as well as* politically suspect. Lay reading is equated with the logics of consumption, and appreciating such modes of reading accordingly means being a victim of, or actively complicit with, capitalist ideologies.

Meanwhile, framing postcritical endeavors as symptoms of neoliberalism has become the go-to reaction for many advocates of critique. Worried about the ongoing corporatization of higher education, a significant group of scholars extend Robbins's polemic by framing postcritique as an institutional threat that wants to eradicate the last thing holding neoliberal forces at bay. "The humanities without critique," Jeffrey R. Di Leo objects in another polemic, "are nothing more than a service industry in the neoliberal academy."²⁹ In such a scenario, Bruno Penteadó reiterates, the only role left for the humanities would be "to train neoliberal subjects who can *simply* acknowledge what things are like, thus perpetuating capitalist ideologies and ensuring that exploitation grows exponentially to profit maximization."³⁰ While the idea that postcritique wants to completely eradicate critical methodologies from the curricula of literary studies clearly qualifies as a straw man, it is certainly legitimate to ask if the time is right to turn down the volume of critical scholarship in order to make room for alternative forms of intellectual life. A number of other scholars have addressed this issue, often adding references to the election of Donald Trump to the mix.³¹

However, these objections build on a one-sided view of politics that fails to acknowledge that intellectual methods other than critique might be politically progressive. "Moving beyond critique," as Love has also noted, "is not a matter of moving beyond politics."³² Such a view can only be sustained if one equates the distinction between critique and postcritique with a schism between the political and apolitical. While this equation is false in my view, it must be acknowledged that the political implications of the postcritical argument are underdeveloped, appearing only sporadically or implicitly in the writings of its advocates. In the work of Micir and Vadde, for instance, one has to scrutinize their footnotes to discover that the idea of amateur criticism "draws attention to the very conditions that made a Trump victory possible: public distrust of increasingly corporatized institutions; raced and gendered inequities inherent in establishing expertise; the collapse of communication across credentialed and uncredentialed populations."³³ In times like these, then, redirecting the concerns of literary studies toward nonprofessional modes of reading need not be apolitical, let alone dubious. By reevaluating the practices, attitudes, and experiences of readers outside the university,

postcritique's work on lay reading can just as easily be perceived as a way of bridging social gaps by allowing academic research to get in touch with a broader public instead of simply framing this public as needing rescue by the knowing literary critic.

The figure of the lay reader, in other words, is a central bone of contention in the current attempts to critique critique. Feeding into larger discussions about the role and legitimacy of literary studies and the humanities as such, it divides the debate into two disparate camps with very different conceptions of academia's relation to politics. For advocates of critique, literary scholars can only be politically progressive if they distinguish firmly between themselves and lay readers in need of saving. The postcritic, by contrast, perceives this distinction as an obstacle to democratic participation and egalitarianism. By looking more closely at the figure of the lay reader in these debates, we might begin to see why its antagonisms have been so hard to resolve.

Postcritique: How to (not) Distinguish Academics from Fans

So far, I have been arguing that an attachment to lay reading underpins much of the current pushback against critique and that this attachment conflicts with a tendency in critical scholarship to define itself in opposition to nonprofessional readers. Having acknowledged the anti-elitist potential of reevaluating lay reading, it is time now to have a closer look at its implications for the formulation of alternatives. What does the attachment to lay reading mean for postcritical efforts to advance new modes of inquiry?

For some of the scholars inspired by the postcritical debates, lay reading is simply approached as yet another object of study. As noted, Micir and Vadde as well as Emre turn to lay reading as a way of expanding literary studies' traditional reservoir of subject matter.³⁴ Other scholars, in contrast, adopt the figure of lay reading to pursue a more ambitious project. Rather than adding new empirical ground to an existing field of research, lay reading, in these cases, is taken as a methodological ideal for rethinking and renewing the practices of *academic* reading. Here, a wide range of features that typically characterize nonprofessional readers are elevated and celebrated as forgotten virtues. Yet, as I will argue, this move also brings with it significant challenges: if literary scholars take lay reading as a methodological ideal, how will they avoid renouncing their status as academics?

For a start, let us consider the trope of “unlearning” in recent attempts to envision what a postcritical reading would entail. While exceptions certainly exist, many of the scholars following Felski’s call seem to voice the idea that knowledge, habits, and skills acquired through academic training need to be in some sense untaught in order for a postcritical reading to emerge. Two indicative instances of this trend can be found in recent work by Elizabeth Anker and Cara Lewis, who almost simultaneously published similar postcritical reflections on Ali Smith’s *How to be Both* (PR 16–42).³⁵ Analyzing this novel as an allegory of the pros and cons of academic reading, Anker and Lewis both argue that Smith’s text can be used as a “playbook” or “manual” for the aspiring postcritical reader (PR 18, 29; B 133). This is so, they seem to claim, not because it depicts a scholar in the making, but because it depicts the unmaking of a scholar. Using the protagonist’s mother, a former academic specialized in art history and gender studies, as a “spokesperson for various stock positions within academic theory,” Smith’s novel features numerous scenes in which the interpretive regimes of academia fail in various ways (PR 25). In encounters with art, these regimes mute or silence the intensity of aesthetic response; in encounters with personal grief, they reduce the emotional texture of lived experiences to an intellectual puzzle (PR 30–31; B 139, 141). In this way, the novel dismantles the attitude of “hermeneutic superiority” that “stifles and discounts crucial vectors of lived engagement” and encourages us to return, instead, to the lay reader’s untamed, immersed, even transcendent experiences with artworks (PR 19–20, 33; B 139, 141). By reading Smith’s novel as a manual, then, one ultimately learns “a type of unlearning: a forgetting of the habits of reading academic criticism inculcates” (PR 20).

By this logic, postcritical literary studies would need to be founded on a pedagogical paradox of sorts or, we might say, a didactic of unschooling. If such a program were to be pursued, however, it would surely affect the professional identity of the postcritical reader. In the event of its realization, what would distinguish those schooled in unschooled encounters with literature from those not schooled at all? What, in essence, would keep the postcritical literary scholar from turning into just another lay reader? Neither Anker nor Lewis reflect explicitly on this methodological impasse, but they both offer claims that might be potentially helpful here. At the very least, their essays suggest that the scholarly habits of critique should not be completely unlearned after all. “One temptation in recent debates about postcritique,” Anker writes, echoing Felski (*LC* 173), “has been to construct another false binary, placing the postcritical in an opposing relationship to the critical” (PR 35). Riffing on Smith’s title, both Anker and Lewis claim that *How to be*

both, in fact, transcends such binaries, engendering instead a position of “bothness” (PR 39; B 144). For Lewis, this is the case because the protagonist’s mother, while “disavowing” her academic schooling, allegedly continues to acknowledge the importance of critique (B 139). For Anker, on the other hand, Smith does “both” because the book adopts a style that itself affords interpretations of extra layers of meaning (PR 33). In both cases, then, the process of unlearning seems to be a process of remembering as well: we do not need to drop our critical skills in order to dismantle academic habits of suspicious reading.

In one sense, this is obvious, and yet in another sense, it seems incoherent. On the one hand, Anker and Lewis encourage the aspiring postcritical reader to return to the intuitive experience of the lay reader by unlearning critical methodologies. On the other hand, they remind the postcritical reader to be critical in order, it seems, to avoid being conflated with the lay reader. These conflicting guidelines would confuse anyone willing to follow them, but they also come close to reproducing Robbins’s methodological dogmatism, insofar as critique, once again, becomes the one feature that distinguishes academics from fans. Such tropes of unlearning, then, ultimately imply a didactic of unschooling that either conflates the academic with the nonprofessional reader or reinstates the hegemony of critique.

Admittedly, the publication of these two essays on a very similar topic only months apart looks like a curious coincidence. But one might also argue that their simultaneous emergence is evidence of a larger intellectual trend, as shown by some of the other postcritical proposals for alternative modes of reading that have surfaced in recent years. While tropes of unlearning rarely figure as openly as they do in Anker’s and Lewis’s essays, the conflation of academic and lay reading is a recurring theme. Rather than arguing explicitly for a return to the bliss of lay reading, other scholars have tried to move beyond critical methodologies by reconceptualizing reading in ways that account for the practices of professional *as well as* nonprofessional readers. In these cases, the attachment to lay reading manifests itself as a terminological influence on the conceptual innovations that are supposed to guide aspiring postcritics. As a result, however, “reading” morphs into a generic abstraction that, in my view, muddles the differences between engagements with texts inside and outside the university.

In his innovative essay “Method Reading,” for instance, Lucas Thompson seeks to advance the postcritical project by proposing “method acting” as a generative metaphor for the process of reading: a “method reading” of sorts.³⁶ “This metaphor,” he explains, “takes literary texts as invitations to engage in a particular kind of activity, wherein the reader

does not merely identify with, develop sympathies for, or even recognize herself in a fictional character, but actually *performs* as someone else” (MR 295). In this way, Thompson elaborates, the metaphor of method acting accounts for how we typically describe experiences of reading: “We act out speech, feelings, and perceptions from within another character in the same way that a gifted method actor brings to life a fictional being with her own body” (MR 296). Following this logic, “method reading” reframes literary texts as scripts to be enacted rather than surfaces to be penetrated, and in so doing “allows us to avoid many of the interpretive hazards of suspicion and critique” (MR 317). I quote here at some length to provide a clear sense of Thompson’s suggestion, but I also want to highlight some symptomatic instances of the ambiguous use of personal pronouns in his essay. For who exactly is the “we” invoked in these phrases? Professional literary critics? Lay readers? Both?

The “we” who are now supposedly allowed to let go of their critical methodologies can only be academic literary critics, whereas the “we” who are called upon to act out the inner life of a literary character could in essence be anyone. The former refers to a specific group of readers, the latter to all readers or, in Thompson’s own generic abstraction, “the reader.” The referent, it seems, oscillates back and forth between literary scholars and readers in general, and so does the essay’s postcritical proposal. Who exactly is supposed to be doing this “method reading”?

To be fair, the semantic sliding of these pronouns might be deliberate to some extent. At any rate, Thompson notes in passing that he hopes his metaphor can be “useful and generative for students, for nonprofessional readers, and for us as critics” (MR 295). By doing so, he aligns himself with a general tendency in postcritical scholarship to emphasize what unites academic and lay readers rather than what sets them apart.³⁷ As Felski argues in her latest book *Hooked*, the practices of schooled literary critics have certain affinities with lay reading, just as no lay reader is completely unschooled.³⁸ Yet, while such arguments may be valid, they nevertheless do not contribute much to the project of developing postcritical methodologies. And the same goes for Thompson’s suggestion: in trying to address the interests of both lay readers and academics, his metaphor moves away from the specific practices of academic scholarship to account for general processes of reading shared by both groups. “Method reading,” then, may provide new ways to perceive the generic practice of reading, but it tells us very little about how to study literary texts within academia.³⁹ It is symptomatic that Thompson’s own brief analysis of George Saunders’s novel *Lincoln in the Bardo* (2017) follows the lead of Anker and Lewis and interprets the narrative allegorically as a metafictional reflection on the nature of

reading, instead of demonstrating how his methodological innovation should actually be put to use.⁴⁰

Thompson, of course, is not alone in his effort to advance alternatives to critique by reconceptualizing reading in general. One of Thompson's key references, Moi, has argued a similar case in her latest book *Revolution of the Ordinary*. Here, Moi launches a skeptical assessment of the alleged hegemony of a Saussurean framework in contemporary literary studies, not least the critical methodologies associated with its poststructuralist adaptations, which, the argument goes, have enfolded literary scholars in an aura of theoretical superciliousness and textual distrust.⁴¹ Turning instead to the writings of Ludwig Wittgenstein, J. L. Austin, and Stanley Cavell, the book claims that an alternative conceptualization of language could reinvigorate literary studies and help scholars to move "beyond the hermeneutics of suspicion" (RO 175–95). If we swapped Saussurean textualism for ordinary language philosophy, Moi argues, language would no longer be perceived as a system of differential signs, but as the pragmatic use of words in particular contexts. Accordingly, literature would no longer be a symptom of larger discursive formations, but an intentional and expressive act with words, and reading would no longer take the form of a symptomatic exposé of the literary text's relationship to a given society, but work as a practice of acknowledgment that prompts one to listen and learn from the work at hand. By switching philosophical foundation, in other words, we might be more prone to drop our habits of suspicion and instead, in Moi's own phrasing, "emerge from our shell and open ourselves up to the experience offered by the text" (RO 221).

Or so the logic goes, at least. As in the case of Thompson, I am not wholly convinced that the "practice of acknowledgment" presented here as an alternative to the hermeneutics of suspicion denotes a specific academic methodology at all, and surprisingly, neither does Moi herself (RO 196–222). In fact, she explicitly rejects the notion that literary studies should be defined by "competing methods" (RO 178). However, setting aside the inconsistencies of suggesting alternatives to the hermeneutics of suspicion without believing in methodological rivalry, my primary concern is the way in which the attachment to lay reading influences Moi's proposal. Like Thompson's metaphor, Moi's redescription of reading as a practice of acknowledgment seems to include the practices of academic as well as lay readers, and like Anker and Lewis, her book continually frames ordinariness, the everyday, and common sense as suppressed forces that, if released, would "revolutionize" literary studies, as her title suggests. "Aesthetic experience," she stresses, "is ordinary experience," and in order for literary scholars to pay their proper respect to such

experiences, they need to immerse themselves in the fictional worlds of literature like “most people” (RO 219, 215). Yet there are no ordinary readers in Moi’s book, while philosophers, ironically, are plentiful, though thankfully, they often read like ordinary readers. One of Moi’s idols, Simone de Beauvoir, serves as an example: “Beauvoir reads as ordinary readers do. She has the intellectual self-confidence to know that she won’t lose her powers of discernment and critique by allowing herself to be immersed in the world of a novel. A suspicious reader can’t read in this way” (RO 220). To move beyond the hermeneutics of suspicion, it seems, is to read like nonacademic readers: immersed in the adventures of the text, absorbed by the uncharted experiences it presents, and accounting for these experiences by expressing them if they are deemed to be important (RO 218). But in that case, what would distinguish a literary critic who is revolutionized by the ordinary from a lay reader?

Certainly, Moi does not believe that literary scholars should renounce their status as academics or that education is insignificant. She explicitly notes (in very generic phrasing though) that aesthetic experience requires “special insights, knowledge, skills, and judgment” (RO 219), just as she also highlights the fact that as literary scholars we not only read, but also write (although we should do so, here, with the “powers of ordinary language”) (RO 221, 171). At one point, she even encourages us to read literature “in much the same way as we read theory”: we should zoom in on “concepts, study the examples, circle back to passages that appear to illuminate them, look for the arguments, the contradictions, the exceptions” (RO 217). And yet, we might ask, how does this emphasis on academic skills align with the invitation to read like ordinary readers? After all, it’s a difficult task to simultaneously read literature like theorists *and* most people. Developed to capture two very different ways of engaging with texts, Moi’s concept of reading seems to me too generic to visualize in practice. As in the case of Anker, Lewis, and Thompson, then, the attachment to lay reading in *Revolution of the Ordinary*, while certainly sympathetic and praiseworthy, ultimately complicates the formation of viable academic alternatives to critique.

Beyond Lay Reading?

At the center of the current postcritical debates, I’ve been suggesting, sits a lay reader. From one side, she is blamed for the ills of neoliberalism; from the other, she is admired for her intuitive immersion in the worlds of literary texts. While I have a certain amount of sympathy for the latter position, I propose to relocate this reader from the center to

the periphery of the postcritical project. Though the attachment to lay reading might have opposed elitist lines of critical reasoning, it has also, as we have seen, come to obstruct the development of viable alternatives to critique. In some cases, it entails a didactic of unschooling that strips literary critics of their status as academics; in others, the attachment to lay reading leads to generic accounts of reading that fail to provide distinct strategies for scholars specifically.

To be clear, I do not mean to disqualify the study of lay reading altogether (although such investigations would perhaps fit better in a field called “reading studies” rather than literary studies).⁴² Neither am I neglecting the significance of relating academic knowledge to people outside the university in respectful ways. In fact, it should be a constant struggle for any academic to present her findings without arrogant superciliousness, while at the same time insisting on the special status of her insights. What I *am* saying, though, is that the figure of the lay reader is currently preventing our postcritical innovations from being easily distinguishable as academic practices. In this effort, I believe, we will have to look elsewhere.

And here I suggest we lift our gaze from the quarrels of literary studies and cast a glance at some of the parallel discussions in related fields. The schism between critique and postcritique that I’ve been scrutinizing is not exclusive to our discipline but emanates from a larger conflict in the humanities and social sciences sparked by the spread of what Jasbir Puar has accurately termed “poststructuralist fatigue.”⁴³ As the methodological novelty of debunking social constructs began to fade around the turn of the millennium, scholars from all kinds of disciplines started to question the adequacy and predictability of poststructuralist maneuvers that had previously seemed so eye-opening. Outside of literary studies, however, this questioning did not result in a return to lay reading but in the development of so-called “affirmative” types of scholarship, leading ultimately to the emergence and consolidation of fields like “affect studies,” “posthumanities,” and “new materialism.” Many scholars in these fields insist on the necessity of supplementing critical methods with alternative approaches that attend to positive affect such as, for instance, enchantment, charisma, and joy.⁴⁴ Others, in response, condemn these alternatives as politically naive and point instead to the progressiveness of killing joy and debunking happiness.⁴⁵ And yet, while the polemical positioning might seem familiar, the moves beyond critique in these fields have nevertheless taken rather different methodological directions, some of which, I believe, may also work as points of orientation for a postcritical literary criticism.

To conclude my essay, I want to briefly highlight one of these directions by tapping into the resurgent interest in Benedict de Spinoza exhibited by thinkers such as Jane Bennett, Elizabeth Grosz, Brian Massumi, and Rosi Braidotti. As many readers will be aware, these figures all reinterpret Spinoza's monism (through Gilles Deleuze) to assert new, speculative ontologies of nonhuman forces and affective intensities.⁴⁶ It is less acknowledged, however, that they also find inspiration in Spinoza for their efforts to move beyond critique, especially his so-called "ethics of joy" and its emphasis on productive encounters with the world.⁴⁷

The notion of *potentia* is key here. In Spinoza's philosophy, it refers to a specific type of power that augments capacities to act by affecting bodies in ways that let them *do more* (think, for instance, of the effects of a stimulating lecture or of access to health care). By contrast, *potestas* denotes powers that diminish capacities to act: powers that entrap and capture, that tie bodies up to hold them down (like paralyzing viruses or structural racism). These two powers, moreover, not only transform the agency of bodies but also alter their affective states. Put schematically, the capture of potestas, Spinoza argues, results in sadness, whereas the augmentation of potentia conversely leads to joy. From this logic follows the now widely held idea in contemporary affect studies that our affective life obeys not an inner will or psyche but the various inflictions imposed by the powers around us. Yet, for Spinoza, this realization does not mean that we should simply succumb to the whims of our passions. Conversely, as Braidotti stresses, Spinozian ethics urge us to pursue adequate *knowledge* of ways to reorganize our environments so that potestas gives way to potentia.⁴⁸ In this line of thought, positive affect is engaged as an object of study that can provide new ideas for setting up a better future, rather than a mood or disposition that influences the interests of the academic persona of the scholar.⁴⁹

In my view, postcritical literary scholars would benefit from joining the affirmative experiments of recent Spinozists. The alternative to critique would thus not be to read like lay readers but to investigate literary texts with the aim of understanding which environmental patterns, forms, and affordances free bodies up to a life of joy. Critical methodologies have made literary scholars highly skilled in discussing the finer nuances of structures of oppression in literary texts. Now would be the time to become equally skilled in discussing what literary texts may tell us about the powers we might want to nurture instead. To get there, we could cultivate a mode of analysis that takes literature as a laboratory for exploring what kinds of habitats afford potentia. We could even call it *potentianalysis*.

At this point, some readers might object that the distinction between critiquing potestas and affirming potentia relies on a simplistic binary. Critique, after all, does not only break down but also builds up. In response to Bruno Latour's use of the hammer as a metaphor for the destructive nature of critique, for example, several scholars have pointed out that people use hammers for building *as well as* dismantling.⁵⁰ In principle, I would agree. Every critique of the present, by its very act of negation, points to alternatives that are yet to be realized, and in reverse, every affirmative proposal for a new mode of organization implicitly condemns the status quo.⁵¹ Yet, as much as these propositions may hold true in theory, it is less easy in practice to combine critique and affirmation into a one-size-fits-all methodology that takes dismantling and building to be, essentially, one and the same. As Brian Massumi remarks, while some studies certainly do both, no study can completely avoid the question of dosage: how much time and effort do I put into dismantling compared to how much time and effort I could put into developing viable alternatives? "Foster or debunk," Massumi stipulates: "It's a strategic question."⁵²

To myself and others inspired by the postcritical debate, it is clear that literary studies has been dosing unevenly for many years. I believe, however, that to remedy this imbalance we are better off studying the workings of potentia rather than striving to relegitimize the practice of lay reading. As a corrective to the denunciations of critique, such an inquiry would dissect how settings affect characters in favorable ways in order to draw out what environments we should encourage. What would happen if we recast "postcritique" as a banner for *that* kind of endeavor? Would it encourage approaches that analyze literary texts not to show how neoliberal capitalism has failed, but to conjecture how to realize societies of welfare, care, and trust? How about a postcritical decolonialism that focuses not on undoing Eurocentrism but on coming up with new ways of fostering environments of hospitality? Or, maybe, a postcritical form of science fiction studies that reads fiction not as mirrors of the deficiencies of the present but as guidelines for possible technofutures worthy of pursuit?

Such efforts, while increasing, are still a rare sight.⁵³ And they will remain so, I believe, if postcritics continue to frame lay reading as critique's primary alternative. Yet, there are other ways of moving beyond the hermeneutics of suspicion, some of which can allow us to justify our status as academics and to defend the importance of academic knowledge as a means of building a better future. Let's pursue those instead.

NOTES

I want to thank Rita Felski for generous feedback on earlier versions of this article as well as Stefan Kjerkegaard, Dan Ringgaard, Jakob Rosendal, Nicolai Skiveren, Soo Ryu, and all (other) colleagues at the *Centre for Literature Between Media and Narrative Research Lab* at Aarhus University for contributing in various ways to its development and finalization. I'd also like to credit Toril Moi who helped me realize how to write for an international audience during my stay at Duke University in the spring of 2018, and Bruce Robbins with whom I had a seminal discussion at *The Hermes Consortium for Literary and Cultural Studies* in 2016. My final thanks go to Anne-Marie Mai who played a key role in bringing these debates to Denmark. And oh yes, my funding: The writing of this article was supported by the Independent Research Fund Denmark (9055-00034B).

1 See, for instance, Rita Felski, *The Limits of Critique* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 2015) (hereafter cited as *LC*); Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity* (Durham, NC: Duke Univ. Press, 2003); Stephen Best and Sharon Marcus, "Surface Reading: An Introduction," *Representations* 108, no. 1 (2009): 1-21; Timothy Bewes, "Reading with the Grain: A New World in Literary Criticism," *differences* 21, no. 3 (2010): 1-33; Best, Heather Love, and Marcus, "Building a Better Description," *Representations* 135, no. 1 (2016): 1-21; and Elizabeth S. Anker and Felski, eds., *Critique and Postcritique* (Durham, NC: Duke Univ. Press, 2017).

2 See, for instance, Bruce Robbins, "Not So Well Attached," *PMLA* 132, no. 2 (2017): 371-76; and Robbins, "Cosmopolitanism and the Historical/Contextual Paradigm," in *Context in Literary and Cultural Studies*, ed. Jakob Ladegaard and Jakob Gaardbo Nielsen (London: UCL Press, 2019): 17-36.

3 Robbins, "Everything Is Not Neoliberalism," *American Literary History* 31, no. 4, (2019): 845.

4 For takes on surprise and predictability as central topoi in postcritical debates, see Nirvana Tanoukhi, "Surprise Me If You Can," *PMLA* 131, no. 5 (2016): 1423-34; and Winfried Fluck, "The Limits of Critique and the Affordances of Form: Literary Studies after the Hermeneutics of Suspicion," *American Literary History* 31, no. 2 (2019): 229-48.

5 Felski, "Both/And: A Response to Winfried Fluck," *American Literary History* 31, no. 2, (2019): 249.

6 See, for instance, *Religion & Literature* 48, no. 2 (2016); *American Book Review* 38, no. 5 (2017); *PMLA*, 132, no. 2 (2017); and *American Literary History* 31, no. 2 (2019). Additionally, at The University of Southern Denmark, Felski has led a four-million-dollar collective research project on "The Uses of Literature: The Social Dimensions of Literature," which is currently in its final stages.

7 Best and Marcus, "Surface Reading: An Introduction"; and Toril Moi, *Revolution of the Ordinary: Literary Studies After Wittgenstein, Austin, and Cavell* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 2017), 175-95 (hereafter cited as *RO*). For a critique, see Joshua Landy, "In Praise of Depth: or, How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Hidden," *New Literary History* 51, no. 1 (2020): 145-76.

8 See, for instance, Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling*; Christopher Castiglia, *The Practices of Hope: Literary Criticism in Disenchanted Times* (New York: New York Univ. Press, 2017); Eric Hayot, "Then and Now," in *Critique and Postcritique*, 279-95; and Felski, "Good Vibrations," *American Literary History* 32, no. 2 (2020): 405-15. For critical responses, see Jeffrey R. Di Leo, "What is Critique without Pessimism? Postcritique, Neoliberalism, and the Future of the Humanities," *The Comparatist* 43 (2019): 6-25; and Robbins, "Fashion Conscious Phenomenon," *American Book Review* 38, no. 5 (2017): 5-6. This affective schism has been particularly salient in feminist and queer literary criticism. See, for instance, Love, "Truth

and Consequences: On Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading,” *Criticism* 52, no. 2 (2010): 235–41.

9 As such, postcritique revives older traditions of reader-response criticism, although, as Jane P. Tompkins has argued, the inclusion of emotionality, subjectivism, and impressionism in this type of work may only be one of “appearance.” See Tompkins, “The Reader in History: The Changing Shape of Literary Response,” in *Reader-Response Criticism: From Formalism to Poststructuralism*, ed. Tompkins (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1980), 224.

10 Merve Emre, *Paraliterary: The Making of Bad Readers in Postwar America* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 2017); Melanie Micir and Aarthi Vadde, “Obliterature: Toward an Amateur Criticism,” *Modernism/modernity* 25, no. 3 (2018): 517–49; and Anker, “Postcritical Reading, the Lyric, and Ali Smith’s *How to Be Both*,” *Diacritics* 45, no. 4 (2017): 20 (hereafter cited as PR). For similar points, see *The Critic as Amateur*, ed. Saikat Majumdar and Vadde (New York: Bloomsbury, 2020).

11 Fluck, “The Limits of Critique and the Affordances of Form,” 236.

12 Felski, “Both/And,” 251.

13 In that sense, this essay covers an understudied figure in the method war’s “characterology.” See David Kurnick, “A Few Lies: Queer Theory and Our Method Melodramas,” *ELH* 87, no. 2 (2020): 349–74.

14 Here I am obviously paraphrasing Bruno Latour, “Why Has Critique Run out of Steam? From Matters of Fact to Matters of Concern,” *Critical Inquiry* 30, no. 2 (2004): 225–48. His phrase has been a recurring topic of reflection in these debates. See, for instance, Robbins, “Not So Well Attached,” 373; and Jane Gallop, “Has Postcritique Run Out of Steam?” *symplokē* 28, no. 1–2 (2020).

15 Nicholas Watson, Jocelyn Wogan-Browne, Andrew Taylor, and Ruth Evans, eds., *The Idea of the Vernacular: An Anthology of Middle English Literary Theory, 1280–1520* (University Park: Penn State Univ. Press, 1999); William Kurtz Wimsatt Jr. and Monroe Curtis Beard-sley, “The Affective Fallacy,” *The Sewanee Review* 57, no. 1 (1949): 31–55; and Paul de Man, *Allegories of Reading: Figural Language in Rousseau, Nietzsche, Rilke, and Proust* (New Haven, CT: Yale Univ. Press, 1979). For an account of this history of reading, see Karin Littau, *Theories of Reading: Books, Bodies, and Bibliomania* (Cambridge: Polity, 2006).

16 Emre, *Paraliterary*, 1–4. For a more general take on the dialectics between professionalism and amateurism, see Marjorie B. Garber, *Academic Instincts* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton Univ. Press, 2001): 3–51.

17 Nicholas Holm, “Critical Capital: Cultural Studies, the Critical Disposition and Critical Reading as Elite Practice,” *Cultural Studies* 34, no. 1 (2020): 152.

18 Andrew Goldstone and Ted Underwood, “The Quiet Transformations of Literary Studies: What Thirteen Thousand Scholars Could Tell Us,” *New Literary History* 45, no. 3 (2014): 359–84.

19 Goldstone and Underwood, “The Quiet Transformations of Literary Studies,” 359.

20 Holm, “Critical Capital,” 144.

21 Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell Univ. Press, 1981), 60.

22 Love, “Critique is Ordinary,” *PMLA* 132, no. 2 (2017): 365.

23 Micir and Vadde, “Obliterature,” 543.

24 Emre, *Paraliterary*, 256.

25 See, for instance, Felski, “Thinking Aloud: Rita Felski,” interview by Matthew Wickman, *BYU Humanities*, April 13, 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MwV-dIVNRKI>.

26 For Moi’s specific target, see Jonathan Culler and Kevin Lamb, eds., *Just Being Difficult: Academic Writing in the Public Arena* (Stanford CA: Stanford Univ. Press, 2003).

- 27 Robbins, "Not So Well Attached," 371; Robbins, "Fashion Conscious Phenomenon," 5.
- 28 Robbins, "Not So Well Attached," 372.
- 29 Di Leo, "What is Critique without Pessimism?" 22.
- 30 Bruno Penteadó, "Against Surface Reading: Just Literality and the Politics of Reading," *Mosaic: An Interdisciplinary Critical Journal* 52, no. 3 (2019): 95. For related points see Frida Beckman, "The Paranoid Style in Postcritique," *symploke* 28, no. 1–2 (2020): 37–49.
- 31 See, for instance, Susan Stanford Friedman, "Both/And: Critique and Discovery in the Humanities," *PMLA* 132, no. 2 (2017): 344–51; and Diana Fuss, "But What about Love," *PMLA* 132, no. 2 (2017).
- 32 Love, "Critique is Ordinary," 369.
- 33 Micir and Vadde, "Obliterature," 548n60.
- 34 See also Felski, *Uses of Literature* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2008).
- 35 Cara L. Lewis, "Beholding: Visuality and Postcritical Reading in Ali Smith's *How to be both*," *Journal of Modern Literature* 42, no. 3 (2019): 129–50 (hereafter cited as B).
- 36 Lucas Thompson, "Method Reading," *New Literary History* 50, no. 2 (2019): 295 (hereafter cited as MR).
- 37 See for instance Felski, *Uses of Literature*, 14.
- 38 Felski, *Hooked: Art and Attachment* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 2020). For similar arguments about the practice of lay reading in literary studies, see Rachel Sagner Buurma and Laura Heffernan, "The Common Reader and the Archival Classroom: Disciplinary History for the Twenty-First Century," *New Literary History* 43, no. 1 (2012): 113–35; and Derek Attridge, "In Praise of Amateurism," in *The Critic as Amateur*, 31–48.
- 39 For the essay's most specific suggestions for possible modes of investigation, all of which pivot on experiences of reading, see Thompson, "Method Reading," 313.
- 40 As Doug Battersby has also noted, exemplary readings are sparse in this field of scholarship. See Battersby, "Reading Against Polemic: Disciplinary Histories, Critical Futures," *The Cambridge Quarterly* 49, no. 2 (2020): 103–23.
- 41 Note that Moi herself once played a key role in this dissemination: Moi, *Sexual/Textual Politics: Feminist Literary Theory* (London: Methuen, 1985).
- 42 And, indeed, work of this kind already exists in subfields such as literary anthropology, narratology, and book history. See, for instance, Adam Reed, "Literature and Reading," *Annual Review of Anthropology* 47 (2018): 33–45; Paul Dawson, "Real Authors and Real Readers: Omniscient Narration and a Discursive Approach to the Narrative Communication Model," *Journal of Narrative Theory* 42, no. 1 (2012): 91–116; and David Miall, "Empirical Approaches to Studying Literary Readers: The State of the Discipline," *Book History* 9, no. 1 (2006): 291–311.
- 43 Jasbir Puar, "'I would rather be a cyborg than a goddess': Becoming-Intersectional in Assemblage Theory," *philoSOPHIA* 2 no. 1 (2012): 49.
- 44 Brian Massumi, "On Critique," *Inflexions* no. 4 (2010): 337–40; Jane Bennett, *influx & efflux: writing up with Walt Whitman* (Durham, NC: Duke Univ. Press, 2020): xix–xx; and Bennett, *The Enchantment of Modern Life: Attachments, Crossings, and Ethics* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton Univ. Press, 2001); Jamie Lorimer, "Nonhuman Charisma," *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 25, no. 5 (2007): 911–32; and Rosi Braidotti, *Posthuman Knowledge* (Cambridge: Polity, 2019).
- 45 Clare Hemmings, "Invoking Affect: Cultural Theory and the Ontological Turn," *Cultural Studies* 19, no. 5 (2005): 550–51; Paul Rekret, "A Critique of New Materialism: Ethics and Ontology," *Subjectivity* 9, no. 3 (2016): 225–45; Sara Ahmed, "Happy Objects" in *The Affect Theory Reader*, ed. Melissa Gregg and Gregory J. Seigworth (Durham, NC: Duke Univ. Press, 2010): 50; Ahmed, *The Promise of Happiness* (Durham, NC: Duke Univ. Press, 2010); and Ahmed, *Living a Feminist Life* (Durham, NC: Duke Univ. Press, 2017).

- 46 See, for instance, Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham, NC: Duke Univ. Press, 2010); Elizabeth Grosz, *The Incorporeal: Ontology, Ethics, and the Limits of Materialism* (New York: Columbia Univ. Press: 2017); Massumi, *Parables for the Virtual: Movement, Affect, Sensation* (Durham, NC: Duke Univ. Press, 2002); and Braidotti, *Posthuman Knowledge* (Cambridge: Polity, 2019). For a take on this field's relation to literature and fiction, see Tobias Skiveren, "Fictionality in New Materialism: (Re)Inventing Matter," *Theory, Culture & Society*, 2020, doi.org/10.1177/0263276420967408.
- 47 Benedict de Spinoza, *Ethics*, ed. and trans. Edwin Curley (1677; London: Penguin Classics, 1996). For this phrase specifically, see Braidotti, *Posthuman Knowledge*, 151.
- 48 Braidotti, *Posthuman Knowledge*, 213.
- 49 See, for instance, Castiglia, "Hope for Critique?" in *Critique and Postcritique*, 211–29; *L* 20–22; and Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling*, 123–51.
- 50 See, for instance, Benjamin Noys, "The Hammer of the Gods: Critique, after all," in *The Value of Critique: Exploring the Interrelations of Value, Critique, and Artistic Labour*, ed. Isabelle Graw and Christoph Menke (Frankfurt: Campus Verlag, 2019): 31–43.
- 51 On this point, see also Castiglia, *The Practices of Hope*, 2–3.
- 52 Massumi, *Parables for the Virtual*, 13. For opposing views in affect studies, see Lauren Berlant and Lee Edelman, *Sex, or the Unbearable* (Durham, NC: Duke Univ. Press, 2014): 41–47.
- 53 Though often framed as part of the critical tradition, inclinations toward this branch of postcritique can be found in Anna Kornbluh, *The Order of Forms: Realism, Formalism, and Social Space* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 2019); Alex Zamalin, *Black Utopia: The History of an Idea from Black Nationalism to Afrofuturism* (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 2019); Amanda Ellen Gerke et al., eds., *The Poetics and Politics of Hospitality in U.S. Literature and Culture* (Leiden: Brill, 2020); Josephine Donovan, *The Aesthetics of Care: On the Literary Treatment of Animals* (New York: Bloomsbury 2016); and Caroline Levine, "Model Thinking: Generalization, Political Form, and the Common Good," *New Literary History* 48, no. 4 (2017): 633–53. I have also myself experimented with this kind of approach: see Skiveren, "The Doxa of Dignity: Dying well with Susan Sontag and Maria Gerhardt," *Literature and Medicine* (forthcoming).