



Introduction: Postmodernism, Then

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From our contemporary vantage point, a case can certainly be made for the predictive or, perhaps, programmatic power of David Foster Wallace's 1993 essay "E Unibus Pluram: Television and U.S. Fiction." In this essay, Wallace posits a shift away from the postmodern irony of authors such as Don DeLillo, Mark Leyner, and Thomas Pynchon and towards a literature of sincerity that would be pioneered by a younger generation of writers raised with television.¹ And, indeed, in contemporary US literary culture, one can locate a shift away from "ironic watching" and towards the embrace of "single-entendre principles" almost everywhere: *McSweeney's Quarterly Concern's* emo-sincerity, the ethnic bildungsroman's emphasis on multicultural identity as upward mobility, Jonathan Franzen's social realism, *n+1's* enthusiastic recuperation of "high" cultural critique, novelists such as Michael Chabon's heartfelt embrace of genre fiction, and the memoir's ascension of best-seller lists, to name a few (Wallace 81). At the same time, alongside this concerted, professional abandonment of postmodernism's signature affective stance in recent North American literary enterprises, postmodernism has begun to drop out of academic discourse as well. While at least since 9/11 critics have been routinely declaring that postmodernism is, now, over, in the last five years an increasing number of critics have also begun to question whether postmodernism was ever a significant aspect of postwar American literary culture. It is these contemporary abandonments of postmodernism that provide the occasion for this special issue of *Twentieth-Century Literature*: the position papers and essays that compose *Postmodernism, Then* take the partial if not total eclipse of postmodernism in both contemporary American literature and literary criticism as the condition of possibility for returning to the category of the postmodern. In so doing, this special

issue explores how postmodernism means, when it can be thought of as not only the present but also the recent past, not only a synonym for the postwar condition but also an instituted critical fiction, not only what comes after the close of high modernism but also as a strain of modernism, not only a unifying category that contains all late twentieth-century literature but also one aesthetic among many.

As Andrew Hoberek notes in his introduction to the *After Postmodernism* special issue of *Twentieth-Century Literature*, declarations of the decline of postmodernism have become enough of a critical commonplace that it has now become something of a critical commonplace to even cite this fact (233–34). And, as Brian McHale elucidates in “1966 Nervous Breakdown; or, When did Postmodernism Begin?,” declarations and interrogations of the actual start-date of postmodernism have become equally commonplace (391–93). Of course, the expression of uncertainty about the beginning or end of postmodernity has been a standard feature of periodizing accounts of postmodernism at least since David Harvey prefaced his foundational *The Condition of Postmodernity* by asserting that “it does not matter whether postmodernism is or is not on the way out” (ix). Indeed, as Bill Brown suggests in “The Dark Wood of Postmodernity (Space, Faith, Allegory),” this recursive process of relocating the periodizing breaks that define postmodernity can, itself, be understood as part of the logic of postmodernism (734–35).² And, accordingly, the infinite revisability of postmodernism as a periodizing concept can then be understood as an iteration of the malleability of a postmodernist aesthetic—an aesthetic that underwrites those studies that Ursula Heise describes as ones in which “certain sets of postmodern theories and philosophical perspectives (usually, but not always, influenced by one of several strains of French poststructuralism) . . . [are] brought to bear on texts and artworks not necessarily associated with [the post-1960] period” (966). From this perspective, the contemporary eclipse of postmodernism might, then, register as its ultimate triumph, as methods of reading or aesthetics once thought to be specifically tied to the postmodern era are now disseminated as reading practices in many, even all, historical periods, and as standard reference points for contemporary art and literature.³

More recently, the declarations and redeclarations of the ends of postmodernism have begun to be eclipsed by accounts of modernism, American literary history, and, most notably, postwar US literature and

culture that not only abjure the employment of postmodern critical modes, but also either mount critiques of postmodernism or abandon it altogether as a periodizing concept or theoretical coordinate. This set of developments is made most apparent by the absence of an entry for either “postmodernism” or “postmodernity” in two recent reference volumes of American cultural and literary studies: Bruce Burgett and Glenn Hendler’s *Keywords for American Cultural Studies* and Greil Marcus and Werner Sollors’s *A New Literary History of America*. In *Keywords for American Cultural Studies* terms such as “globalization” and “postcolonialism” seem to demarcate the late twentieth- and early twenty-first centuries, yet in this volume these terms also refer back to earlier national and transnational moments, thus side-stepping the issue of postmodernism. In *A New Literary History of America*, late twentieth- and early twenty-first-century culture is atomized, and larger periodizing categories are rarely invoked. Instead, the volume focuses on individual writers, artists, and works. To be sure, these volumes’ approaches differ. Burgett and Hendler’s *Keywords for American Cultural Studies* dislocates the contemporary through the use of terms such as “globalization”—in her entry on that keyword, Lisa Lowe critiques globalization’s common usage, to describe the late-twentieth and twenty-first centuries, because “it obscures a much longer history of global contacts and connections” (120). Marcus and Sollors, by contrast, break the contemporary into individual figures and discrete movements, seemingly disconnected from larger periodizing categories. For example, Hal Foster’s entry on artist Robert Rauschenberg’s 1968 essay “A Museum of Language in the Vicinity of Art” discusses the “textual turn in art of the 1960s that parallels the more celebrated version of this turn in theory and philosophy” (947). But whereas in his 1979 essay “Earthwords,” Craig Owens famously identifies Rauschenberg’s essays as a marker of the “transform[ation of] the visual field into a textual one” that “is coincident with, if not the definitive index of, the emergence of postmodernism,” in *The New Literary History of America*, the “textual turn” described by Foster registers as less of an aesthetic shift than a stylistic choice made by Rauschenberg and some other individual artists and writers (45–47).

The abandonment of postmodernism that is exemplified by reference volumes such as *Keywords for American Cultural Studies* and *A New Literary History of America* is in no way limited to such general approaches to US literary history. Rather, more direct versions of this abandonment characterize an increasing number of studies of twentieth-century

and post-1945 literature. Driven by the “New Modernist Studies,” the category of modernism has become quite elastic in recent scholarship. Modernist critics have convincingly dismantled the high/low divide, pushed modernism back into the nineteenth century and forward into the late twentieth century and demonstrated the value of turning to periodicals rather than discrete texts to map modernism as a more complex, varied aesthetic and historical period.⁴ Often in support of this expansion of modernism, studies of contemporary literature have also increasingly set aside “postmodernism” as an organizing category. Concretized in the *After Postmodernism* special issue of *Twentieth-Century Literature*, and present in a number of other works that preceded and followed it, critics have begun to think of the contemporary moment as no longer postmodern.⁵ In fact, recent studies have positioned the decade of the 1990s as the end or exhaustion of postmodern aesthetics, as well as the site for the emergence of contemporary literary styles that seem to critique and posit alternatives to postmodern aesthetics.⁶ Along with this reevaluation of the contemporary against the postmodern, another set of recent studies of postwar literature and culture has emphasized the ways in which postmodernism was never, in fact, the dominant cultural logic or literary rubric of the late twentieth century. For example, works by Michael Clune, François Cusset, James English, Amy Hungerford, Caren Irr, Alan Liu, Sean McCann, Mark McGurl, and Ted Striphas have focused on institutions such as creative writing programs, literary prizes, religion, the presidency, copyright law, the free market, the publishing industry, the information economy, and the English Department’s ties to a specific form of reading as determining forces in post-1945 literature and literary studies.

One of the effects of these approaches to post-1945 literature has been to displace postmodernism as an explanatory category in the name of more pragmatic institutional histories, circulation studies, sociological inquires, and reception models. For Sean McCann and Michael Szalay, this shift marks a rejection of New Left politics and, by extension, postmodernism, for it entails a recognition that many of the concepts and theories central to postmodernism—the poststructuralist theory of language, Foucauldian understandings of discipline and the subject, Althusserian accounts of compromised agency, and gender/queer theory’s emphasis on the power of the “unspeakable”—are, in fact, not radical ideas but rather “cherished and ultimately comforting folklore of the late

capitalist economy” (460). At the same time critics like Sianne Ngai and Ursula Heise have produced accounts of the postwar period that dispense with postmodernism as an explanatory category while retaining it as an aspect of their analyses of the contemporary condition. In essays such as “Merely Interesting” and “Our Aesthetic Categories,” Ngai extends David Harvey’s claim that modernism and postmodernism are “diverging responses to a single process of modernization” by describing our ongoing modernity as one characterized by “aesthetic categories” that “cut across modernism and postmodernism” and which cannot, therefore, be usefully or accurately described as either modern or postmodern (951-53). And whereas the “ecocritical insurgency” that was consolidated by the 1995 publication of Lawrence Buell’s *The Environmental Imagination* was largely organized against postmodernism’s instituted eradications of nature, in *Sense of Place and Sense of Planet* Heise identifies a set of characteristically postmodernist features of post-1960 novels as literary modes of engaging with the scenarios of ecological risk and global connectedness that, on her account, characterize the postwar period (17-67).

In terms of periodization, these new approaches to post-1945 literature often find continuity where advocates of postmodernism find rupture. Citing Wendy Steiner’s “Postmodern Fictions, 1970-1990” as a foundational text in her essay “On the Period Formerly Known as Contemporary,” Amy Hungerford argues that the last decade of postwar literary criticism is characterized by works that identify the postwar period not as the supercession of modernism, but as the “triumph” of “modernism’s aesthetics” (418). Indeed, the two most important periodizing studies of the last decade, Walter Benn Michaels’s *The Shape of the Signifier* and Mark McGurl’s *The Program Era*, both identify the post-1945 period as a continuation or extension of modernism. In *The Shape of the Signifier*, Michaels argues that the theoretical framework of postmodernism—the dual commitment to the materiality of the text and the primacy of the subject position—is, in fact, a postwar iteration of a modernist problematic: the imbrication of concerns about the ontology of the artwork with a distinctly modern notion of identity. Both here and in subsequent essays, such as “Going Boom” and “The Un-usable Past,” Michaels then also identifies postmodernism as the still active cultural style of a neoliberalism that works to project the world postwar America wants neoliberalism to have produced (a world organized by subject positions and divided into identities) rather than the world it has actually

produced (a world structured by economic inequality). In *The Program Era* McGurl redistributes a number of more and less agreed upon descriptions of the characteristic formal and thematic features of postwar American fiction—including those that are regularly identified as being definitive of postmodernist fiction—in order to document how the postwar literary field is structured not by the emergence of postmodernism but by the fact that modernist principles of writing were “institutionalized as another form of original research sponsored by the booming science-oriented universities of the Cold War era” (4). McGurl then identifies the aesthetics usually identified as postmodernism as one of the three “relatively discrete but in practice overlapping aesthetic formations” (32) that compose “the totality of postwar American fiction,” and he suggests that this particular formation is best described as “technomodernist” (42) (rather than postmodernist) in order to both register its engagement with information technology and to reassert its “obvious continuity” with interwar literary modernism. In his recent essay “Ordinary Doom: Literary Studies in the Waste Land of the Present,” McGurl further argues that “the return of the rhetoric of ‘modernity’ and the partial eclipse of ‘postmodernism’” (337) in recent criticism is an aspect of the emergent recognition that “the contemporary” is best described as the current stage of an ongoing modernity (342–43).

As Hungerford also notes, whereas the field of postwar American literature is, for the most part, still structured by the “reigning bifurcation of contemporary fiction into the ‘postmodern’ avant-garde” and “realist” writing of “women and people of color,” studies such as Michaels’s and McGurl’s follow on Steiner’s to the extent that they demonstrate how “a reading of experimentalist novels . . . must be . . . integrated with a discussion of realist writing” (411).⁷ To the extent that this is the case, a parallel development can be traced in the field of African-American literary studies. Following on Phillip Brian Harper’s 1994 study *Framing the Margins: The Social Logic of Postmodern Culture*, in which he argues that “the fractured subject” that many critics identify as a hallmark of postmodern culture “has long formed a staple element of minority literatures” (Dubey 21), Madhu Dubey’s 2003 study *Signs and Cities: Black Literary Postmodernism* demonstrates how anti-realist postwar African-American fiction performs a version of the cultural and historical labor that critics continue to arrogate to realist modes of minority literature. Moreover, in making her argument for the utility of postmodernism

as a periodizing concept in regards to African-American literary and cultural studies, Dubey develops Harper's argument that the social marginalization that underwrites the modes of postwar minority literature is, itself, a "condition of possibility for postmodern culture" (Dubey 21). These locations of the postmodern as an amplification of, rather than a departure from earlier moments in literary history are, then, continuous with Kenneth W. Warren's *What Was African-American Literature?* which argues that "African-American literature"—a field concretized under the sign of postmodern and poststructuralist theory in works such as Houston A. Baker's *Blues, Ideology, and Afro-American Literature* and Henry Louis Gates's *The Signifying Monkey*—is itself a construct of an aesthetically and politically modernist notion of literature's relationship to the social world (1-43).

These recent shifts in how critics understand postmodernism also register in the work of one of the major theorists of postmodernism, Fredric Jameson. Charting his work from *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* to the present, one notices a movement away from thinking of postmodernism as an unreadable and vertiginous system to the positing of a "singular modernity" and, most recently, a renewed interest in the dialectic—something that Jameson's earlier work suggested had stalled out in postmodernism but, it seems, is now moving again. In *Postmodernism*, Jameson critiques the historical amnesia and cognitive vertigo dominant in late capitalism, famously positing that postmodernism signals an impasse, a cultural logic that annihilates both history and utopia with its celebratory consumerist and technological ideologies. Unable to map the present, we must await a "new political art" that can achieve

a breakthrough to some as yet unimaginable new mode of representing [the world space of multinational capitalism], in which we may again begin to grasp our positioning as individual and collective subjects and regain a capacity to act and struggle which is neutralized by our spatial as well as our social confusion. (54)

In *A Singular Modernity*, Jameson adjusts this construction of postmodernism by setting it into relation with modernism. In that book, Jameson supplements his account of postmodernism by characterizing "interwar modernism" as a largely "American invention" of the "years following World War II" (164-65, emphasis added). He then characterizes

both this “late modernism” and the recent critical investments in it—the same investments that Hungerford, McGurl, and others identify with the eclipse of postmodernism—as expressions of a regressive “ideology of modernism” (210) which is, itself, an aspect of a continuing postmodernity. Following that invocation of singularity (itself a concept seemingly inaccessible from within the postmodern landscape Jameson outlines in the 1990s), Jameson turns to utopia in *Archaeologies of the Future*, arguing that a “post-globalization Left” can now engage in utopian thought as a negation of the world market’s “invincible universality” (xii) under the “slogan of anti-anti-Utopianism” (xvi). These movements away from a totalizing, rigid construction of late capitalism and toward a sense of the political possibilities that allow for the construction of alternatives to late capitalism have, in recent years, been followed by *Valences of the Dialectic* and *The Hegel Variations*, both of which aim to recuperate the dialectic for the contemporary moment. Indeed, Jameson concludes a recent essay on Marx’s *Capital* with nothing less than a slogan of his own—“Cynicism of the Intellect, Utopianism of the Will!”—that makes clear his increasing emphasis on action as a necessary complement to thought in our contemporary moment (“A New Reading of *Capital*” 13).

While Jameson’s method differs greatly from that practiced by most of the critics mentioned thus far, the shifts in his thinking over the past two decades also reflect the same story of postmodernism’s role in literary studies that we have been tracing elsewhere. In the 1990s, postmodernism is unquestionably dominant, only to be offset by a stronger notion of modernism in the 2000s. In recent years, Jameson’s work signals a further shift into the contemporary, as he returns to some of Marxist critique’s first principles—the dialectic and utopia, and to foundational texts—Hegel’s *Phenomenology of Spirit* and Marx’s *Capital*. Here and elsewhere the contemporary now signals renewed possibility. At the same time, both Jameson’s 1984 essay and 1991 book on postmodernism are now generally regarded as *loci classici* of American accounts of the postwar period. As critics like Phillip Wegner continue to extend the specific account of the postwar period that these works initiated, the “postmodernism” that these works consolidated also continues to serve as the basis for a range of critical studies of postwar American literature and culture. In their introduction to *The Way We Read Now* special issue of *Representations*, Stephen Best and Sharon Marcus identify the publication of Jameson’s 1981 book *The Political Unconscious* as the

key episode in the institutionalization of the mode of interpretation—“symptomatic reading”—that, in their account, continues to characterize postwar American literary and cultural criticism. Of course, many other contemporary movements in literary criticism and theory similarly draw from the theoretical tradition established under the category of the postmodern. These include the influential posthumanist accounts of the postwar period advanced by critics such as Donna Haraway and N. Katherine Hayles, who assume the basic features of Jameson’s account of postmodernism while inverting his critique of late capitalist technology by prioritizing the development of technology over that of capital. Extending this mode, Cary Wolfe’s advocacy of a particularly Derridean construction of posthumanism and scholars, such as Brian Massumi, who draw on the works of Gilles Deleuze and other theorists to posit virtuality and affect as central terms in contemporary culture, retain much of the theoretical and aesthetic discourse first introduced under the name of the postmodern.

Moreover, the influence of French philosophers Alain Badiou and Jacques Rancière, along with other European thinkers like Giorgio Agamben, Zygmunt Bauman, Antonio Negri, and Paolo Virno, in the past decade point to the continuing relevance of postmodern theory to contemporary literary studies. In his introduction to the *PMLA* special section on “Literary Criticism for the Twenty-First Century,” Jonathan Culler makes the argument that the future of literary criticism will be, if not necessarily Derridean, then one that was at least made available by “the theory revolution” (914). In the same special section of *PMLA*, Richard Klein argues for a specifically Derridean future for literary criticism—a future which seems to be taking shape in works such as Rei Terada’s *Looking Away* and Anne-Lise François’s *Open Secrets*—and in their *Theory Now* special issue of *South Atlantic Quarterly*, Grant Farred and Michael Hardt present a collection of essays on the states of theory in contemporary literary studies that, at the very least, demonstrates the resilience of the link between theory and emancipatory politics for many critics. There are then also recent studies such as Rey Chow’s *The Age of the World Target* and Lydia H. Liu’s *The Freudian Robot* which employ renovated versions of poststructuralism in order to recalibrate the relationship between poststructuralism and modernity: Chow through an account of the interdependent institutionalizations of comparative literature, area studies, and poststructuralism in the postwar US academy;

Liu through an account of interwar literary modernism, deconstruction, and cybernetics. In these theory-inflected strains of contemporary literary and cultural criticism, postmodernism, then, is alive and well, even if it is not always invoked by name.

At the same time, there are a number of critics who have proposed new programs for doing literary critical work that are explicitly pitched as alternatives to the now instituted modes of criticism associated with postmodernism and backed (most often) by poststructuralism. In the introduction to *The Way We Read Now*, Best and Marcus propose that the mode of “surface reading” they delineate in their essay “broadens the scope of critique to include the kinds of interpretive activity that seek to understand the complexity of literary surfaces—surfaces that have been rendered invisible by symptomatic reading” (1). In *Graphs, Maps, Trees*, Franco Moretti heralds the “disappearance of the text” and proposes a mode of “distant reading” backed by “a materialist conception of form” which attends to units both far smaller and far larger than the individual work (92). Wai Chee Dimock’s *Through Other Continents* abandons both poststructuralist and historical-materialist modes of reading while renovating the protocols of close reading in order to read American literature across deep time and, hence, outside of the temporal and spatial constraints imposed by the nation state (1-6). While these programs differ significantly from one another, what they have in common—and what they also have in common with the periodizing or period-specific projects of critics such as Hungerford, McCann and Szalay, McGurl, and Michaels—is that they are backed by diverse invocations of “form,” invocations that are conceived of as rejections or departures from postmodernism. In recent essays such as “The Politics of a Good Picture” and “Neoliberal Aesthetics: Fried, Rancière and the Form of the Photograph,” Michaels has made an explicit, programmatic, version of this argument for form and against postmodernism. In these essays Michaels has positioned form against multiculturalist, identity-focused approaches to literature dominant in the past two decades: here, the return to form promises actual engagements with both history and the contemporary moment that bypasses what are, by now, quite familiar and, for Michaels, quite obviously ineffective claims about literature’s role in troubling social hierarchies.⁸

From the perspective of this special issue of *Twentieth-Century Literature*, what needs to be noted here is that a shift away from tired

liberal politics and towards a reinvigorated notion of form also motivated early critics and theorists of postmodernism in the 1960s and 1970s. For example, in an account of what she called the “new sensibility” in a 1965 essay in *Mademoiselle*, Susan Sontag claims that contemporary art, ranging from Samuel Beckett, William S. Burroughs, and Robert Rauschenberg to the Supremes, Budd Boetticher, and Jean-Luc Godard, “demands less ‘content’ in art, and is more open to the pleasures of ‘form’ and style . . . is also less snobbish, less moralistic—in that it does not demand that pleasure in art necessarily be associated with edification” (303). This argument against content is also key to John Barth’s well-known 1967 essay, “The Literature of Exhaustion.” Central to any account of metafiction, Barth’s advocacy of “virtuosity” and exuberance at the possibilities offered by exhaustion rests on the novel’s obsolescence and the ways in which this frees the writer to focus on form rather than content. In Barth’s essay, metafiction signals a revitalization of the novel as the novelist is able to examine the text’s own status as an object in the world: “A novel is as much a piece of the real world as a letter” (145). Accordingly, for Barth and Sontag, postmodernism inaugurates a renewed attention to form, one that is, perhaps, instructive for our contemporary moment, when critics are similarly troubled by literature’s, and the English Department’s, changing, even receding, role in the twenty-first century.⁹ Indeed, the argument could be made that returning to form is, in a way, returning to postmodernism, but a postmodernism that looks quite different than the version ultimately dominant in English Departments in the 1990s. At the same time, in the optic introduced by the recent work we have been discussing in this essay, it could also be claimed that this return to form recasts the turn to form that characterized the advent of postmodernism as something other than the advent of postmodernism: as an extension of modernism, as an aspect of the postwar system of American fiction, as a component of emergent neoliberalism, or as an aspect of a contemporary aesthetic that has yet to be adequately described.

By briefly sketching the question of form at postmodernism’s emergence in the US, we hope to gesture to some continuities between what we see as two camps in recent scholarship on late twentieth- and early twenty-first-century literature and culture. On the one hand, postmodernism still retains the explanatory force that it once did for scholars who draw heavily on theory and who look to literature for moments of disruption, resistance, and utopian imagining. On the other

hand, postmodernism is reduced or abandoned by critics who turn to institutional histories of post-1945 literature and who see in that literature continuity with, and the institutionalization of, modernism. Both of these approaches hinge upon competing accounts of literary form and its connection to the social world. Accordingly, we believe that a reevaluation of postmodernism might be useful for thinking of form today, especially since early critics of postmodernism found themselves to be equally uncertain and divided about what forms and functions literature might take in the late twentieth century. We can look back now to that speculation and uncertainty with a degree of familiarity, as postmodernism itself becomes a question, again, rather than a dominant category.

At the very least, what these divergent approaches to post-1945 literature make apparent is that, at present, the question of the postmodern is a peculiarly pressing one. Did postmodernity ever begin? Is it now over? Has it been replaced by the contemporary or superseded by the global? Does the postmodern provide a rubric for conceiving of new aesthetic and political practices? Is it a term that remains necessary for the current discourse in postwar US literary studies? Was postmodernism an instituted critical fiction? Was it a major or minor aspect of postwar American literature and culture? Is the postmodern just modernism, after all? Does the postmodern now mark out the basic condition of life in the early twenty-first century, rather than an aesthetic vanguard? However the question of the postmodern is posed, it is clear that it remains central to any adequate conception of both the present moment and its immediate past.

Postmodernism, Then features position papers and essays that hazard answers to these questions. The title of the special issue is meant to signify doubly. First, “Postmodernism, Then” refers to postmodernism as the recent past, as the “then” to which we are the “now.” Second, “Postmodernism, Then” is our questioning response to the current critical discourse about post-1945 literature. What does postmodernism mean to us now? What is living and what is dead in postmodernism today? When planning the special issue, it was our intention to solicit position papers and essays that would posit different answers to these questions. The position papers are shorter arguments, polemics, and reflections on postmodernism and how we might conceive of it today. The longer essays engage with literary texts in more detail and chart emergent

literary forms and how they engage with, inform, and depart from key concepts in postmodernism. When taken together, the essays collected in *Postmodernism, Then* challenge us to think about and take seriously the claims of postmodernism at this moment, when we can begin to chart postmodernism as “then” to our “now.”

Notes

1. David Foster Wallace’s “E Unibus Pluram: Television and U.S. Fiction” was originally published in *Review of Contemporary Fiction* 13.2 (1993): 151–94.
2. Other influential periodizing accounts of postmodernism include Anderson’s genealogy of the term from the early twentieth century to the 1990s, DeKoven’s case for the 1960s as the site for postmodernism’s emergence, and Huysen’s account of postmodernism’s critiques of and departures from modernism.
3. For instance, Jean-François Lyotard’s foundational postmodern critique of “metanarratives” has been absorbed into literary studies under the heading of the New Historicism, and postmodern art’s frequent critique of the museum—as theorized by Douglas Crimp—has itself become a mainstay of the contemporary art museum, with its emphasis on interactivity, site specific installations, and critique of the high/low divide.
4. For a gloss on the “New Modernist Studies,” see Mao and Walkowitz’s definitional essay. Notable anthologies of scholarship in the New Modernist Studies that exhibit the above-mentioned critical impulses include those edited by Ardis and Collier, Caughie, Doyle and Winkiel, and Mao and Walkowitz.
5. While Hoberek’s *After Postmodernism* special issue solidified postmodernism’s waning influence in literary criticism, this shift can also be seen earlier, in many of the short essays in Hoberek’s 2001 “Twentieth-Century Literature in the New Century: A Symposium.” Hoberek prefaces the symposium essays with an account of the new choice that scholars of twentieth-century literature have in the twenty-first century:

we can now construe ourselves as either historicists or contemporarists, depending on our taste. That is, we can either continue to study new literature, or else we can devote ourselves to the twentieth century as a completed historical period (ceding new work by Rushdie or Morrison, Ai or Stoppard, to our colleagues in twenty-first century lit, or else treating it as an embarrassing coda, somewhat like Faulkner’s post-World War II novels). (9)

Hoberek’s reference to Faulkner points to the periodizing function of the category “modernism,” and, by implication, the question of postmodernism’s

usefulness as a period marker for the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. At this moment, one cannot imagine the successful formation, or even the desirability, of a “Postmodernist Studies Association” that would mirror the Modernist Studies Association. Instead, groups implicitly organized against the periodizing claims of postmodernism, Post45 and ASAP (The Association for the Study of the Arts of the Present), have begun to serve that function.

6. Recent scholarship that locates the 1990s as a hinge point between postmodernism and the contemporary moment includes Adams, Cohen, Green, Heise, Steiner, and Wegner.

7. Of note in this regard is the way in which a number of recent accounts of postwar, contemporary, and even postmodern literature seek to replace characteristically postmodernist features with features that are routinely associated with ethnic literature. Rachel Adams does this sequentially in her essay “The Ends of America, The Ends of Postmodernism,” insofar as the “American literary globalism” she describes as following postmodernism is, essentially, an expanded version of ethnic American literature. Ursula Heise does this synchronically in her essay “Postmodern Novels,” insofar as her argument is that postmodernism needs to be understood as a response to mass media that consists of an effort to capture or preserve “oral culture”—which is, itself, a longstanding description of the central project of ethnic American literatures. We are indebted to Maria A. Windell for this insight.

8. For example, in “The Politics of a Good Picture,” an essay on Jeff Wall’s 1982 photograph *Mimic*, Michaels reads the photograph as “[asserting] the irreducibility of form to affect,” which, in the photograph, is [split between class inequality, a formal relation, and racial discrimination, an affective relation (183). That is, for Michaels, this irreducibility is something that is often present in aesthetic objects, but it is often neglected, ignored, or conflated with affective content by critics who read texts through a multiculturalist methodology.

9. While this brief gloss deals with literary—and, novelistic—form, the same tracing could be accomplished for the question of modernism’s relation to postmodernism, a connection that is central to Ihab Hassan’s 1971 “paracritical bibliography” of postmodernism. Hassan claims that postmodernism is “the change in Modernism” (190) but also that postmodernism operates through “Anarchy,” a radical departure from modernist “Authority” (205). In Hassan’s early accounts of postmodernism, we see the history to contemporary debates about the efficacy of postmodern politics as well as postmodernism’s connection to or rupture with modernism. Removed from the critical imperative to advocate for (or, against) postmodernism that motivated Hassan and other critics, our contemporary moment offers a unique vantage point by which to reevaluate the stakes of postmodernism.

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