

What Is and Isn't Changing?

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Close versus distant. Form versus history. Generality versus difference. Critique versus postcritique. These are just some of the polarities through which the last decade's critical debates have expressed themselves, sealed in a millennial pressure cooker of financial crisis, technological upheaval, nationalist upsurge, and environmental precarity. Claims have varied: Are literary scholars too arrogant for their own good or just too paranoid or suspicious? Do we focus so much on small differences that we miss the big picture? Hallow theories long past their shelf life? Or are we just lousy readers of the literary objects we once thought we knew? Crucially, the "we" invoked by such polemics asymmetrically positions *writers-who-know* in relation to *readers-who-don't*—while enjoining the latter to fall in with new fraternities of the initiated. Such exhortations have counseled us to change or die. Join in or face irrelevance.

At their most egregious—epitomized by Bruno Latour's (2004b) widely read "Why Has Critique Run Out of Steam?"—these jeremiads promote blatant self-trumpeting in the form of sermons. Latour's essay combined the deadpan earnest of a postcritique prophet with martial metaphors and the balletic scourging of a savior dispensing flails to his acolytes. To be sure, the wider polarization it encouraged took familiar

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forms as it permeated peer-reviewed journals, annual conferences, and fun cocktail parties. Less obviously, its special propellant was the new social media, with all the unselfconscious attention-jockeying, image-shaping, and “influencing” that sometimes entails.

That the call to choose sides was proffered in the name of making humanists great again (or some such ennoblement) was an irony already becoming apparent when Donald Trump rose to power. The 2008 financial crisis had pushed undergraduate students toward business and STEM degrees, even as Thomas Piketty’s *Capital in the Twenty-First Century* (2014) climbed the *New York Times* best seller list and Hollywood’s adaptation of Michael Lewis’s book on the subprime mortgage racket, *The Big Short* (2015), won critical and commercial acclaim. The following year Trump’s ascent may have signaled that the impulse to pit new against old, youth against maturity, or to promote any other platform for schism was as shortsighted as Latour’s (2004b: 228–29) denial of any “real difference” between conspiracy theories and “a teachable version” of Pierre Bourdieu’s social critique. As David Kurnick (2020) shows, one of the least desirable features of postcritique has been its tendency to traffic in characterology, as if a theory’s truth claims were rooted in *ad personam* stereotypes. “Let me be mean for a second,” Latour (2004b: 228) wrote in *Critical Inquiry*, in a telling request that long outlasted its specified duration. Nonetheless, if self-aggrandizing provocation and divisiveness were already on life support three years after Trump’s election, the arrival of COVID-19 must surely have put them on strict stay-at-home orders.

That, at any rate, describes the kind of thinking that motivated a special issue titled “What Is and Isn’t Changing: Critique after Post-critique.” As the subtitle suggests, the coeditors recognized that a certain kind of intrahumanities culture clash had taken place during the previous decade. But they also sensed that the roles of militant crusader, polarizing scold, and mod disrupter were giving way to different modes of address. If in some sense anti-postcritical, these more flexible attitudes call on critics neither to return to the past nor to ignore new ideas and inspirations. Rather, underlying their reflexivity and dialogism is the perception that the “we” addressed as too arrogant, suspicious, anti-quarian, identity conscious, or what have you has never actually existed. The work of literary scholarship, that is, has been, and remains, more differentiated and intellectually diverse than such caricatures allow.

Since no special issue on this topic could be comprehensive, the starting point for “What Is and Isn't Changing” was a compelling sample. The pages that follow incorporate voices from nineteenth-century French and postcolonial literature, African American studies, contemporary poetry, Victorian studies, and world-systems, queer, and Marxist modes of analysis. The five essays and two responses take up subjects from historical fiction to artificial intelligence, genre theory to collaborative authorship, while exploring such formal vantage points as Saidian textualization and Aristotelian epideixis. In the mode of *MLQ*'s longstanding commitment to literary history, they examine works by Mark Doty, Arthur Conan Doyle, Gustave Flaubert, M. G. Vassanji, and the pseudonymous anarchist collective Luther Blissett. Their diverse entwinements of formal and political analysis within and across fields, methodologies, histories, and scales of analysis put paid to the idea that twenty-first-century literary criticism divides into simple polarities. Rather than formalists battling historicists, or postcritics stamping out suspicion or context, the tensions at play in these reflections on change tend to constellate around complicated questions of worldedness, historicity, and globality. Though these may be manifest in genre (as when a nineteenth-century French bildungsroman speaks to the “events” of the present, or a historical novel set in Kenya lays out the conditions of a complex “in-between”), other fault lines speak to language or method.

Foremost among the former is the role translation continues to play in debates over “world” literature. Literary comparatists such as Emily Apter—concerned about the translations on which world literature has depended—have highlighted translation failure. Tracking words and concepts that were significantly distorted as they passed into English, Apter (2013: 9) has sought to restore a sense of linguistic intractability. In a similar vein, Simon Gikandi (2017) has examined the moments of deliberate untranslatability that interrupt the easy assimilation of African fiction into world literature. When Europhone African writers insert African words in their works, the linguistic encounters they create offer a lived experience of discontinuous spheres.

Writing in this special issue, Eleni Coundouriotis makes untranslatability a condition for the incommensurability of contemporary African historical fiction and the dominant paradigm of world literature today. Patrick M. Bray, in foregrounding a French theory of the historical event

whose literary counterpart is Gustave Flaubert's *L'éducation sentimentale*, offers his own translations to *MLQ*'s readers, spotlighting interlingual transfer as a dimension of his interpretation and practice. Yet, for the Warwick Research Collective (WReC) (2015: 27), "the insistence on multilinguisticity" risks an "unambiguous fetishism of language." In their essay for this special issue, they discuss the collectively authored *Q* (Blissett 1999) but pass over the fact that their primary source is an English translation of an Italian work. Responding to WReC, Sangeeta Ray discerns a missed opportunity to engage translation as a dimension of the collective authorship that, according to their analysis, makes *Q* so revolutionary.

Although we coauthors do not propose to settle this debate, we note that emerging notions of *posttranslation* have begun to complicate Apter's intervention and Ray's concern about the dominance of English. Describing interlingual transfer as an "older definition of translation," Susan Bassnett and David Damrosch (2016: 296) argue that "sharp distinctions between originals, translations, versions, and rewritings need to be jettisoned." By showing how the diverse global and historical situations of a single language entail intralingual effects, posttranslation challenges the coherence of monolingualism in its conventional form while turning differences between inter- and intralingual translation into matters of degree (Zethsen 2009: 798). One imagines that in the years ahead comparatists like Apter will continue to join postcolonial scholars in emphasizing the risks and occlusions of dominant languages, while posttranslationists complexify terms such as *English*. This may be less an insurmountable clash than an opportunity to clarify the stakes of one's position in different situations.

The same proposition—clarification rather than clash—may also apply to methodologies, such as book history or periodical studies, that integrate sociological practices into literary criticism. A decade ago, in the introduction to "New Sociologies of Literature," James F. English aligned the growing interest in the history and sociology of the book with a Latour-influenced turn to network theory, which, as English (2010a: xvi, xv) saw it, was "discrediting . . . the explanatory power of 'the social'" that underwrites the "now-exhausted program of critique." If that correlation made eye-opening reading in 2010, the present moment is ripe for reexamination. To begin with, Roger Chartier, the *Annales*-school

book historian whose scholarship permeates the field, is neither averse to social explanation nor even keen to replace (“close”) hermeneutics with (“distant”) emphases on production or circulation. To the contrary, his classic *L'ordre des livres* (1992) “combines textual criticism, bibliography, and cultural history” to pose a fundamentally critical question: “How did increased circulation of printed matter transform forms of sociability, permit new modes of thought, and change people’s relationship with power?” (Chartier 1994: 3).¹ As a contributor to Stephen Best and Sharon Marcus’s special issue “The Way We Read Now,” Leah Price (2009: 135) merges Chartier’s focus on circulation with the anthropologist Arjun Appadurai’s interest in “things-in-motion.” Though Price is amenable to networks in general, her turn from texts to books accentuates social embeddedness of the kind that Latour’s actor-network-theory (ANT) sets out to displace.² Indeed, Price’s call for individual book histories (like most of the essays in this influential special issue) does not actually privilege surface over depth. Still less does it press against interpretation, context, historicism, Marxist theory, Michel Foucault, or any other flashpoint of the intrahumanities *Kulturkampf*.

Perhaps the most lasting legacy of Best and Marcus’s (2009) embrace of surface was its evolving partnership with *descriptive reading*, another “sociological” intervention foregrounded in English’s (2010b) special issue. As elaborated by Heather Love (2010: 375), in dialogue with the sociologies of Erving Goffman, Latour, and Louis Quéré, descriptive reading is a “method of textual analysis” that “take[s] its cue from observation-based social sciences.” These fields, Love explains, entail “practices of close attention” that, in relying “on description rather than interpretation,” do not “engage the metaphysical and humanist concerns of hermeneutics.” At stake for Love, then, is an antihermeneuticist

¹ For his reaffirmation of this approach, and reflections on how to advance and improve it, see Chartier 2007.

² On his aversion to social explanation, especially as developed in the critical sociology of Pierre Bourdieu, see Latour 2005. For a strong counter to the aspersions Latour casts at Marxist theory, see White 2013. As Jennifer L. Fleissner (2017: 103) notes, Latour’s *Critical Inquiry* essay expanded an argument “against humanists’ allegiance to critique” that had animated his work since the early 1990s. For an account that situates this anticritical animus in the persistent rivalry between Latour and Bourdieu, see Schinkel 2007: 708. Latour, Schinkel writes, seeks “a complete redefinition” of the epistemological and ontological principles that Bourdieu laid down for a critical sociology during his forty years of publication.

and thus posthumanist practice that (in a clear nod to Latour) sets out to curb the “ethical heroism of the critic” (381). Yet, as Lauren M. E. Goodlad and Andrew Sartori (2013: 607) argue, Love’s endorsement of “distant reading” on such grounds—like that of Best and Marcus—offers no evidence for the assumption that quantitative methods combat “critical heroism.” Indeed, that unproved belief “paradoxically established” Franco Moretti as the onetime “hero of an antiheroic practice.” For Carolyn Lesjak (2013: 274n106), moreover, the posture of “circumventing” a residual metaphysics through “flat description” falls short of a dialectical engagement that would both “allow for” and “radically reposition” the “place of the human.”

Writing in this special issue, Tim Dean identifies a “new descriptivism” born of “multifarious connections with affect theory, actor-network-theory, object-oriented ontology, new materialisms, and the digital humanities.” This shared genealogy creates a family resemblance not only between “surface reading,” “descriptive reading,” and postcritique but also between postcritique and “reparative reading”—the practice Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick (1997) sketched in her often-cited “Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading.” Contrasting that essay to Latour-influenced postcritiques, Goodlad and Sartori commended Sedgwick’s call for “a fresh, deroutinized sense of accountability to the real” pursued through diverse paths of inquiry (2). “Now as then,” they wrote, “we need a committed resistance to routinization, not a new set of routines” (Goodlad and Sartori 2013: 609). Yet, whereas Sedgwick’s push for diversity anticipated intellectual vigor, her brief case for reparative reading launched a rather different path. Kurnick (2020: 560, 562) associates the practice with a “misdescription” of truth claims in favor of “melodramatic dualism” and “covert characterology.” Dean comparably notes how Sedgwick’s analogy likens literary interpretation to “the internal psychodrama of the Kleinian infant.”

Dean’s alternative is the very different description (in effect, *re-description*) that becomes especially palpable when critics turn from novels to poetry. Since poems deliberately proliferate meaning, one cannot “read” them without interpreting. The history of Western poetry offers compellingly “epideictic” theories of description, rooted in the “poetry of praise.” As Kenneth W. Warren puts it in his response to Dean’s essay, when poetry both describes and values “without subordinating the

former action to the latter," it models "what criticism might do." Dean's epideixis thus invites greater attention to poetry even while pointing to the poetics at work in all semantically rich textual media (novels, drama, film, podcasts, and so on).

For those working in periodizing frameworks, the most visible effect of postcritique has likely been the persistent sallies against the New Historicism of the 1980s and 1990s. As Goodlad puts it in this issue, over the last twenty years, "coincident with a cratering market for humanities scholars, concerns that the New Historicism is too synchronic have stoked anxieties that historicism of any sort is synchronic." Rita Felski (2011: 575–76), invoking Latour, has likened the use of historical context to "a box" while aligning that practice with "a ubiquitous academic ethos of detachment, negativity, and doubt." Historicization, according to Caroline Levine (2017: 633, 638), involves an "antigeneralizing imperative" that limits "the scope of the humanities" to reacting to the status quo rather than "designing and building . . . political alternatives." Levine's point is partly that Foucauldian genealogy encourages paralysis in the face of power, an effect that, as Carolyn Williams (1999) has shown, has less to do with Foucault's writing itself than with the form it took in the literary criticism of twenty years ago—what Sedgwick (1993: 15) called "kinda hegemonic, kinda subversive." But Levine also misunderstands the twofold enterprise of dialectical materialism that, as Lesjak (2013: 246) makes clear, seeks out "the positive Utopian impulses that lie along negative critique."³

That diverse historicisms flourish in postcolonial studies is, as Ray notes in her response, hardly surprising in a field committed to *postcolonial* conditions of possibility. Debates in this area tend to center on how, not whether, to grapple with historicity, ranging from genealogies of power/knowledge to the historical materialisms of Fredric Jameson, Benita Parry, and Immanuel Wallerstein, among others. One reason, perhaps, that Said's legacy continues to thrive is his penchant

³ Levine's (2015) nods to Walter Benjamin, Fredric Jameson, Georg Lukács, and Raymond Williams—usually to allege the limits of their ideas—ignore the various ways that these exemplary Marxist aestheticists articulated the interrelations of form and history precisely to envision bold alternatives to the status quo. For the argument that Wallerstein's world-systems theory can help humanists sharpen their ethicopolitical work, see Robbins 2011.

for working “contrapuntally” across such multiple ways of knowing. Through deliberate “atonality,” Bashir Abu-Manneh (2018: 12) observes, Said turned “Auerbach’s cultural humanism . . . into a global critique of imperialism.” Since then, scholars such as Bhakti Shringarpure (2019: 107) have advanced the historical understanding of postcolonial studies’ formation during the Cold War, arguing that certain literary forms blunted the field’s critical edge.⁴ On this view, Cold War aesthetics privileged the lone dissenting figure on a moral adventure, elevating familiar forms such as the bildungsroman at the expense of “formally baffling works and figures” (107). Jed Esty (2016) takes an even longer view, noting how debates over the artistic merits of realist literature (“realism wars”) have cropped up during transfers of hegemonic power from the late Victorian and Cold War eras through the millennial present. For Amitav Ghosh (2017: 79), it is modernist aesthetics that marginalized “writing of the kind in which the collective had a powerful presence.” In WReC’s epigraph from *The Great Derangement*, Ghosh observes that “the idea of the collective has been exiled from politics, economics, and literature alike” (80). As they make their double-edged case for *Q*—a collectively wrought historical novel about collective history—WReC’s other key interlocutor is Raymond Williams (1989: 151–52), who wrote, “You cannot understand an intellectual or artistic project without also understanding its formation.” Such *formation*, WReC elaborates in this issue, involves “the set of relations and practices, collectively engaged and not always documented.”

WReC’s essay is thus one of several in this special issue to demonstrate that *historicization* is not reducible to localized particularity, indifferent aesthetics, or pure reactivity. Exploring the formative and formal dimensions of collaborative writing, WReC looks at *The Miners’ Next Step* (1912), the work of an anonymous collective of miner-activists that they liken to the avant-garde manifestos of the period. Coundouriotis’s essay on Vassanji’s (2003) novel *The In-Between World of Vikram Lall* explores how style bespeaks historicity and vice versa. As Warren writes, Coundouriotis shows how readings of historical fiction like Vassanji’s “cannot count as an interpretation without engaging the entanglements of

⁴ Works that help establish postcolonial studies as a product of the Cold War include Popescu 2010, Rubin 2012, and Westad 2005.

history.” Bray presses the linkage between history and aesthetics still further; in an essay that (implicitly) draws the limits of sociological description, he holds that literary art and language afford the most cogent—and, perhaps, the only—access to historical events. As his analysis opens on “new political identities” such as the *gilets jaunes* (yellow vests), Bray’s theory of the literary-historical event “rejects false dichotomies of formalism and historicism.”⁵ Goodlad’s analysis of Doyle’s prescient (yet deeply contemporaneous) meditation on data-centric intelligence closes with a call for a Hippocratic oath for humanists. In doing so, she is guided by Fernand Braudel’s claim that the work of *longue durée* historiography is to cultivate awareness of temporal plurality: an outlook she adopts inside and beyond the study of literary genre.

Of course, projects like these may strike the author of *The Limits of Critique* (Felski 2015: 152) as feeding the “tsunami of context-based criticism” that her book seeks to “halt.” By contrast, we—not prophetic *writers-who-know* but the fallible coauthors of this introduction—perceive compelling practices that go well beyond merely “plac[ing] one’s] bets on the explanatory force of the C-word” (152). Perhaps historicism is resilient, not because it provides contexts for “draw[ing] out what a text fails—or willfully refuses—to see” (1) but because, as Goodlad (2015: 293) puts it, historicization “is that aspect of the critical enterprise which strives to illuminate the concrete conditions from which our aspirations spring and in which they either take root or fail.”

Consider how seldom the subject of climate change rallies the postcritical imaginary. There is, of course, Latour’s provocative claim (repeated by Felski) that climate change denial, in the manner of any conspiracy theory, is but an “absurd deformation” of the critic’s own arsenal (“our weapons . . . our trademark: *Made in Criticalland*” [Latour 2004b: 230; see Felski 2015: 45]).⁶ That gambit notwithstanding, one hardly expects to encounter surface readings of net carbon neutrality, or environmentalists urging literary scholars to rein in “the kudzu-like proliferation” of “their hypercritical style” (Felski 2015: 10). Rather,

⁵ On the yellow vests, a French working-class movement that organized in 2018 under the sign of this identifiable garb, see Fassin and Defossez 2019.

⁶ Notably, ecocritics interested in Latour’s ontological thinking often cite *Politics of Nature*, in which Latour (2004a) himself (at least in the English translation) uses *critique* quite generically. As will be demonstrated below, the book thus makes it easy for scholars to distinguish Latour’s ontology from his postcritical polemics.

when ecocriticism engages existential crises at a planetary scale, it looks for multidisciplinary inquiry and generative debate. In doing so, we contend, it suggests a model for critique after postcritique.

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At its starting point in the 1990s, ecocriticism sought commonsense transformations of method and object in response to environmental damage and political impasse. Recalibrating assumptions about background, Lawrence Buell (1995: 88) moved literary setting to the fore and recast realism as an aesthetic enabling the “recuperation of natural objects.” Among the next wave of critics, Timothy Morton’s *Ecology without Nature* is especially noteworthy for this introduction. As a world-building intervention, the book significantly adapts Latour’s ontological thinking while eschewing his postcritical agenda.⁷ Instead, Morton (2007: 177) enjoined scholars to “engage the ideological forms of the environment”—including ecocriticism—without “lashings of guilt and redemption.” Defining his special use of *ecocritique* as both “critical and self-critical,” Morton called this “the proper sense of critique, a dialectical form of criticism that bends back upon itself” (13). By contrast, Felski (2015: 117), in a chapter satirically titled “Crrritique,” describes “a hotchpotch of figures of speech, turns of phrase, moral dramas, affective nuances, stylistic tics and tricks.”

Because Morton’s effort to dissolve the ontological boundary between culture and nature is situated as a variation on critique, not proof of the latter’s exhaustion or derangement, the door is wide open to dialogue and debate. One may turn productively from *Ecology without Nature* to Dana Luciano’s (2016: n.p.) work on the nonhuman, which borrows from queer theory to place the *rock*, “the oldest planetary medium,” in conversation with two very different media: *plastic* and *assholes*. Invoking Leo Bersani’s (1987) “Is the Rectum a Grave?,” Luciano explains its relevance for anti-anthropocentrism: “Dissolving the fantasy of the bounded sovereign self becomes . . . a point of departure leading to other ways of being in the world.” Equally, one might turn from Morton to the world-systems theorist and sociologist Jason W. Moore. His *Capitalism in the Web of Life* also demonstrates how Western dualities such

⁷ Morton is among those ecocritics to cite *Politics of Nature*.

as subject/object and nature/culture underwrite the instrumentalization of the environment, producing what Moore (2015) calls “Cheap Nature.” Moore’s “web of life,” defined as “the creative, generative, and multi-layered relation of species and environment,” replicates certain anti-anthropocentric and antihierarchical dimensions of a flat ontology. Nonetheless, his Marxist and Wallersteinian analysis simultaneously rests on conceptions of the web as an ongoing “historical process.” Moore shows how capitalism’s profession to harness “Nature” on behalf of some supposed good (such as growth) reduces the “web of life” to a pliant form. But once the web is understood to entail the biological and geological damage that capitalism disowns, one perceives the dialectic through which “humans make environments and environments make humans” (4, 2–3).

Postcolonial scholars, it is worth remembering, were among the first to bring historicization to bear on environmental questions. As Upanmanyu Pablo Mukherjee (2006: 144) suggests, just as postcolonial studies must “consider the complex interplay” of environment and culture, so environmental studies must “trace the social, historical, and material coordinates of categories such as forests, rivers, bio-regions, and species.” Tackling the challenge of making the course of environmental degradation visible and present, Rob Nixon (2011: 22–23) turns to the “writer-activists” who were taking up the cause of “slow violence.” In a rather different intervention—one that intersects with Latour’s ontological thinking (but not with his postcritique)—the postcolonial historian Dipesh Chakrabarty (2009: 201) proposes that “anthropogenic explanations of climate change spell the collapse of the age-old humanist distinction between natural history and human history.” Chakrabarty thus makes global warming a “unique challenge” to postcolonial theory’s “ontological modes” of subjectivity and agency (Huggan and Tiffin 2015: 80). Building on Chakrabarty, Morton, and the political theorist Jane Bennett, Cajetan Iheka (2018: 17–18) has developed an “aesthetics of proximity” that links humans, animals, and the abiotic environment to enliven a distinct Afrocentric environmental imagination that has gone under the radar (15, 132).⁸

⁸ Both like and unlike Nixon, Iheka is drawn to the environmental justice movement. His syncretic method creates new directions as well as new tensions for postcolonial studies: upholding “resistance from the ground” but (in contrast to Nixon)

In yet another recent study, Jennifer Wenzel points out how Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's (2003: 72) substitution of *planet* for *globe* contributed to the ecocritical turn. Wenzel's (2020: 21) "reading for the planet" defines reading as *rescaling* ("mapping the elastic geographies that shape proximity and distance"). In doing so, she charts a course between Chakrabarty's ontological collapse and Moore's dialectics while mediating debates between postcolonial studies and world literature. According to Wenzel, as climate change discourse plays up the reversal of North and South—with the South's history of impoverishment now representing the North's eco-apocalyptic future—what is needed more than ever is "a long view of capitalism's expansion *through the production of inequality and unevenness*." If "World Literature discourse" largely ignores this perspective, so too, Wenzel suggests, does Chakrabarty's elongated deep time of the species. To release climate change from the "conjoined histories of carbon and capital," she warns, is to turn it into "one more opportunity to forget colonialism and empire" (37).

While the conjunction of carbon and capital connects Wenzel (2020: 30–31) to Moore, the same topic occurs in the ecocritical writing of political theorists such as William E. Connolly. In *Climate Machines, Fascist Drives, and Truth* Connolly (2019) looks to Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari for an ontological pluralism that does not shrink from critique, making fascism, climate change, and inequality part of the same constellation of "agencies and forces." Detailing some of the components, he names "extractive capitalism," "democratic constituencies whose identities and interests are tied to carbon extraction," "glacial melts," "growing regions of drought that recoil back on populations," "refugee pressures," "deforestation which feeds upon itself" (propagating zoonotic viruses in doing so, we might add), and "neofascist reactions" (7).

Clearly, the ecocriticism of our day crosses disciplines, fields, theoretical paradigms, histories, and ontological layers. It can be Americanist or postcolonial, historiographical or philosophical, Marxist or nonhuman, feminist or queer. As unpredictable as it is efflorescent, ecocriticism so described answers Sedgwick's call for fresh and deroutinized

questioning the inevitability of violent action (Iheka 2018: 132). For an indigenous approach to anti-anthropocentric criticism that also puts colonial resistance front and center, see Simpson 2017.

engagements of the real. And while not all ecocritics are dialecticians, the “Utopian impulses” at stake range from posthuman pleasures and climate activism to the end of “Cheap Nature” and Cheap Labor alike. Like all robust polemics, the work in question invites debate over methods, truth claims, modes of evidence, and political priorities. Yet, in doing so, it also encourages reflection, cross-pollination, interdisciplinary encounter, and the measured appreciation of the new.⁹ By contrast, the moralizing posture of postcritique, especially in its Latourian idiom, calls on readers to scrutinize allegiances and correct defects. Such calls are demonstrably less likely to deroutinize practice than to install new routines. For rather than vanquish paranoia, they incite it.

Consider Benjamin Morgan’s essay on the Anglo-Caribbean decadent novelist M. P. Shiel. Consulting *Capitalism and the Web of Life*, Morgan (2016: 629) finds Shiel’s apocalyptic fin de siècle novel *The Purple Cloud* (1901) “draw[ing] close to” Moore’s (2015: 5) call for “a new language” of world ecology “that comprehends the irreducibly dialectical relation between human and extra-human natures.” Comparing Moore and Shiel, according to Morgan (2016: 611), demonstrates the need not only for *longue durée* histories of industrialization but also for “the planetary imaginaries that developed in relation to it.”

Because *The Limits of Critique* never specifies how (or even if) such historicizing literary critique can escape the pitfalls so extensively adduced, Felski leaves her readers to wonder (perhaps feeling anxious and paranoid all the while). Does Morgan’s interpretation of *The Purple Cloud* mark a fruitful engagement between text and context (as this introduction contends)? Or does it confirm Felski’s (2015: 122) diagnosis of an outbreak of “willful or perverse counterreading” that “brings previously unfathomed insights to light” in place of the “reconstruction of an original or intended meaning”? And if critique were to illuminate a text’s “original or intended meanings” with some “previously unfathomed insight,” how would we know? Who gets to judge the difference (if there is one) between the “critique” Felski satirizes and the “critique” she insists that she does not seek to dismantle? Indeed, when Felski writes that humanists find it easier “to defend the value of literary

⁹ As Elaine Freedgood and Michael Sanders (2016: 119) warn, the “pressure for newness is one of the scourges of our neoliberal moment” and, even in academic work, becomes readily subject to a “cult of the ‘new.’”

study by asserting that it promotes critical reading or critical thinking” (4), she seems not to notice that *critical thinking* is not a suspicious term of art invented by Marx or the Frankfurt School but a broad term for *intelligence* important to disciplines from psychology and logic to philosophy and computer science (4). To put this another way, Felski never says where the limits of critique begin and end.¹⁰

Conclusion: What Has and Hasn't Changed

In 2003, in a stocktaking moment one might compare to this special issue, *Critical Inquiry* gathered its editorial board to discuss the journal and convene a symposium titled “The Future of Criticism” (*Critical Inquiry* 2004). Struck by the antiwar protests that, despite their vast scale, had failed to halt the invasion of Iraq, W. J. T. Mitchell (2004: 327) asked what theory could do “to counteract the forces of militarism, unilateralism, and the perpetual state of emergency.” Provoked by a dismissive *New York Times* article, “The Latest Theory Is That Theory Doesn't Matter” (Eakin 2003), he advised the newspaper to add *immediately* to the title; “the long *durée* of patient, protracted struggle,” Mitchell (2004: 328) wrote (with some ambivalence), “is what theory must face up to today.” With the “great era of theory . . . behind us,” are we, Mitchell queried, in “a period of timidity” and “empirical accumulation”? Having “backed off” from “its sense of revolutionary possibility,” has theory “undergone a ‘therapeutic turn’ to concerns with ethics, aesthetics, and care of the self” (330)? Mitchell's own response to these questions was a *medium theory*, “somewhere between the general and the particular,” which in

¹⁰ The online *Oxford English Dictionary*, citing an early appearance in the *Critical Review* in 1815 (on the subject of Lucretius's poetry), defines *critical thinking* as “the objective, systematic, and rational analysis and evaluation of factual evidence in order to form a judgement on a subject, issue, etc.” As such blurring of terms suggests, the salient weakness of *The Limits of Critique* is its never defining the key term as distinct from the assessment of its supposed limits. The resulting reduction of *critique* to disapproving suspicion ignores a history of complex meanings, beginning with its origins in Greek (denoting a capacity for judgment and discernment) and extending to the reflexive and dialectical qualities Morton identifies. As During (2020) puts it, critique, since the early modern period, has provided a “structuring condition” for the humanities, enabling them to mark out a cultural space distinct from business and partisan politics even if “the humanities have by no means been consistently critical of dominant social values and institutions or, indeed, uninvolved in commerce and politics.”

place of high-theoretical abstraction would cultivate specificity and the “specific object of research” (332). Today’s peace movement, he added, is a “bourgeois coalition, dedicated to . . . the mundane virtues of a decent standard of living, freedom from violence and coercion, and the defense of the environment” (334). “The great rhetorical liability of the would-be radical Left,” Mitchell explained, was “that most of the language of wars of liberation, emancipatory struggle, freedom, and democratization” had been “appropriated by the Right” (334–35).

Notably, for all the difficulty of, in Frances Ferguson’s (2004: 369) words, “imagining a way of actually doing something that would be useful”—the “whispering” about fascism (Mitchell 2004: 327), the risk “of becoming predictable and uniform” (Daston 2004: 361), the admissions of scholarly fallibility (Gilman 2004)—not a single contributor to the symposium thought to lay blame on critique. Whereas the prevailing sentiment suggested that *theory*, especially in times of war, must steel itself for “protracted struggle,” the idea that *critique* was counterproductive, arrogant, paranoid, or negative never appeared. Thus, as *theory*’s ambitions took on a modest cast in the face of world-scale reaction, *critique*—in defense of living wages, sustainable energy, the rule of law, or more visionary alternatives—was left to do its level best, aided perhaps by theoretical specificity and calls for interdisciplinarity. Only Teresa de Lauretis (2004: 368), asserting that the time was ripe “to break the piggy bank of saved conceptual schemata and reinstall uncertainty in all theoretical applications, starting with the primacy of the cultural and its many ‘turns,’” called for forceful revision. The observation is all the more noteworthy in that the same issue of *Critical Inquiry* included an essay (not part of the “Future of Criticism” cluster) at the head of the table of contents. The author was Bruno Latour.

As we know, for all its militant rhetoric, Latour’s critique of critique came to a boil years before 9/11 and the war on terror, so called.¹¹ Nonetheless, the currency and appeal of postcritique in the years that followed bear on *formation* in Raymond Williams’s sense. The “crucial theoretical intervention” of cultural studies, Williams (1989: 151–52) wrote (with no need of diatribes on context), does not conceive formations as the “context” or “background” for an artistic and intellectual project. Rather, “the crucial theoretical invention” was cultural studies’

¹¹ For example, see During 2020: 244, Fleissner 2017, and Schinkel 2007.

“refusal to give priority to either the project or the formation”—“the art or the society”—in the effort to grasp their “*common* disposition.” Could it be that postcritique’s short *durée* bespeaks such a disposition? Is it the intellectual project of that uneven but brief interregnum between the close of George W. Bush’s second term (coincident with the 2008 financial crisis) and the rise of Donald Trump?

Though they were hardly an absolute victory for hope and change, the Obama years gave all but the most severe humanists in the US academy *something* to be thankful for. To be sure, as many observed (and still more recognized), these were years in which inequality worsened, racism intensified, drone programs operated, trade agreements proliferated, and big-tech monopolies turned personal data into fuel for a mass surveillance economy (all while public education and sustainable energy continued to look like burdensome stepchildren from the outlook of a largely dominant neoliberalism). Clearly, much has changed since *Critical Inquiry*’s 2003 symposium: not least the growing interest among humanists in the use and abuse of digital technologies, the perils of climate change, and the rise of fascist and white nationalist movements in the United States and elsewhere. Nonetheless, completing this introduction in 2020, we are struck by the commonalities with the post-9/11 era and by the mismatch between the disposition of our times and the postcritical project. The signs of a renascent “dialectical form of criticism that bends back upon itself” may be long overdue.

As Ray avers in this issue, the mere fact that postcolonial scholars retain their allegiance to history and politics “does not mean that the field is static.” It means only that “the particular political conditions under which literature is produced, circulated, and read can never be dismissed.” What has not changed, writes Warren, though it has intensified “since the 1980s,” concerns “the political and ideological stakes of literary writing and scholarship, and, indeed, the very status of interpretation.” For both Ray and Warren, these observations of continuity neither admit defeat nor avert the future. They are, rather, expressions of value akin to Dean’s epideixis.

Though many of our projections will surely be blind, wrote Raymond Williams (1989: 151), as scholars contemplating the future of criticism, “we need to be robust rather than hesitant,” because “our own input into” the future—“our sense of the directions in which it should go”—will “constitute a significant part of whatever is made.” Alongside the

contributors to this special issue, in concert with the ecocritics we have cited, and in solidarity with scholars in many other fields that inspire future possibility—disability studies; psychoanalysis; new media studies; the curating of digital archives; new outlooks on time, space, and place; financialization studies; indigenous studies; and more—we look forward to learning from the past, engaging the present, and articulating some “sense of the directions” in which the future of critique “should go.” In doing so, we hope that these new movements in critique will not forget to bend back on themselves.

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