the LIMITS OF *critique*

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CONTENTS

In Short

Let me now pull together the various strands of my argument in order to be as explicit as I can about what I *am* saying and what I am *not* saying. Complete transparency is, of course, impossible. Meanwhile, as we've seen, a prevailing ethos encourages scholars to impute hidden causes and unconscious motives to the arguments of others, while exempting themselves from the same charge: "I speak truth to power, while you are a pawn of neoliberal interests!" Nonetheless, I will clarify, to the best of my ability, my *conscious* premises and intentions.

My conviction—one that is shared by a growing number of scholars—is that questioning critique is not a shrug of defeat or a hapless capitulation to conservative forces. Rather, it is motivated by a desire to articulate a positive vision for humanistic thought in the face of growing skepticism about its value. Such a vision is sorely needed if we are to make a more compelling case for why the arts and humanities are needed. Reassessing critique, in this light, is not an abandonment of social or ethical commitments but a realization, as Ien Ang puts it, that these commitments require us to communicate with intellectual strangers who do not share our assumptions.[1] And here, a persuasive defense of the humanities is hindered rather than helped by an ethos of critique that encourages scholars to pride themselves on their vanguard role and to equate serious thought with a reflex negativity. Citing the waves of demystification in the history of recent thought

(linguistic, historicist, etc), Yves Citton notes that they share a common conviction: the naïvety of any belief that works of art might inspire new forms of life. We are seeing, he suggests, the emergence of another regime of interpretation: one that is willing to recognize the potential of literature and art to create new imaginaries rather than just to denounce mystifying illusions. The language of attachment, passion, and inspiration is no longer taboo.[2]

This book, moreover, is not a screed against disagreement, objection, or negative judgment. (I have engaged in all these activities in the preceding pages.) "Social criticism," writes Michael Walzer, "is such a common activity—so many people, in one way or another, participate in it—that we must suspect from the beginning that it does not wait upon philosophical discovery or invention."[3] On this point, Walzer is entirely right. The act of criticizing, as I noted in chapter 4, is an everyday aspect of our being in the world. There will always be reasons to object to things that we dislike and would like to change: social arrangements, philosophical beliefs, cultural representations, political ideas or institutions, and various mundane details of our lives. There is no question of giving up disagreement—an impossible scenario in any case. The belief that disagreement must be couched in the form of "critique" to attain legitimacy, however, is a peculiarly modern and Western prejudice.

The subject of this book, then, has been a specific genre of writing: the rhetoric of suspicious reading in literary studies and in the humanities and interpretative social sciences generally. Rather than being synonymous with disagreement, it is a specific *kind* of disagreement—one that is driven by the protocols of late twentieth- and twenty-first-century academic argument. Critique, in this sense, is the hardening of disagreement into a given repertoire of argumentative moves and interpretative methods. There are, to be sure, significant differences between critical and theoretical frameworks: critique, as we have seen, is not one thing but an eclectic array of philosophical tenets, political ideologies, and modes of interpretation. Yet an exclusive focus on these differences prevents us from seeing what forms of critique have in common: shared ways of thinking about the function of the critic and the merits of art, as well as a prevailing disposition that Christopher Castiglia, in an inspired coinage, calls "cri-

tiquiness": an unmistakable blend of suspicion, self-confidence, and indignation.[4]

Castiglia urges us to rescue and revitalize critique by disengaging it from critiquiness—to shrug off the mantle of knowing skepticism by embracing a renewed sense of idealism, purpose, and utopian possibility. A hopeful critique, he suggests, offers a way of breaking the stalemate of contemporary criticism. I confess to being less sanguine than Castiglia that the difficulties of critique can be resolved in this way; they are, in my view, not only attitudinal but also methodological and theoretical. Let me now try to draw together, in schematic form, what I see as the most salient of these difficulties.

Its one-sided view of the work of art. Critique proves to be a remarkably efficient and smooth-running machine for registering the limits and insufficiencies of texts. It also offers a yardstick for assessing their value: the extent to which they exemplify its own cardinal virtues of demystifying, subverting, and putting into question. It is conspicuously silent, however, on the many other reasons why we are drawn to works of art: aesthetic pleasure, increased self-understanding, moral reflection, perceptual reinvigoration, ecstatic self-loss, emotional consolation, or heightened sensation—to name just a few. Its conception of the uses and values of literature is simply too thin.

Its affective inhibition. Critique cannot yield to a text—a process that it perceives as a form of shameful abasement or ideological surrender. As we have seen, its affective stance is far from uniformly negative; critique can inspire a fervent sense of solidarity against a common enemy, the engrossing stimulation of an interpretative game, and an admiration for the cunning maneuvers of the contradictory text. But its overriding concern with questioning motives and exposing wrongdoing (the moral-political drama of detection) results in a mind-set—vigilant, wary, mistrustful—that blocks receptivity and inhibits generosity. We are shielded from the risks, but also the rewards, of aesthetic experience. I have tried to show that a fuller engagement with such experience does not require a surrender of thoughtfulness or intellectual rigor: that, in spite of warnings to the contrary, the alternative to critique does not have to take the form of "belle-lettrism" or mindless effusion.[5]

Its picture of society. Critique's stance of againstness, whether expressed in a digging down for hidden truths or a more ironic stance of "troubling" or "problematizing," also molds its conception of the social. Power is exposed as the invariant and overriding principle of social meaning; whatever is valued by the critic must somehow resist or defy this principle. The result is a zigzagging between categories of inside and outside, center and margins, transgression and containment, as critique tries, like a frantically sprinting cartoon rabbit, to outrun the snapping jaws of its own recuperation. (Its affinity with utopian thought is entirely congruent with this logic; affirmation can only exist in a radically disjunctive relationship to a fallen present, i.e., in a far distant future.) That art works are linked to other social phenomena, however, is not a sign of their fallenness but a precondition of their existence: to reprise Latour, "emancipation does not mean 'freed from bonds,' but *well*-attached." The degree to which these attachments are enabling or limiting (or both) is not something to be known in advance; it requires empirical investigation, a willingness to be surprised, and attention to as many actors as is feasible.

Rather than invoking the familiar picture of "literature in society," then, ANT directs our attention to the many actors with which literature is entangled and the specifics of their interaction. The specific, in this sense, is not to be confused with the local. Networks, after all, can extend over very long distances, and ANT does not prevent us from engaging many of the issues that are lumped together under the label of globalization. That a plastic card issued in Des Moines can conjure money out of an ATM in Vladivostok tells us something important about the internationalization of finance. It does not, however, authorize us to draw conclusions about the late-capitalist manufacturing of global subjectivity—not, at least, without patient and empirically grounded demonstrations of how economic links are translated, revised, transformed, or ignored as they connect with other modes of existence.

Its methodological asymmetry. In diagnosing the insufficiencies of a work of art or an intellectual argument, critique explains these insufficiencies by invoking some larger frame. It looks behind the text for some final explanation or cause: social, cultural, psychoanalytical, his-

torical, or linguistic. The text is *derived*, in a fundamental sense, from something else. Critique itself, however, remains the ultimate horizon—it is not an object to be contextualized but is itself the ultimate context. (The call to "historicize" critique or to engage in a critique of critique does not affect this logic; critique now takes itself as its own object, while reinforcing the supremacy of its own method.) It is in this sense that critique seeks to transcend the limits of other forms of thought, seeing its gambits of distancing and self-questioning as a means of forever remaining one step ahead. By treating critique as one language game among others, with its own routines, gambits, and conditions, and as one mood among others, defined by a certain ethos or disposition, I have tried to weaken the force of this presumption of epistemological or political privilege.

In summarizing these objections, it may also be helpful to underscore the criticisms I have *not* made—given a tendency to lump together the agendas of various "postcritical" thinkers. I am not, for example, persuaded that critique is a form of symbolic violence wreaked on hapless and helpless literary texts that are in need of our protection. I have no quarrel with interpretation, even though I favor description; nor am I drawn to a language of textual surfaces over depths. I have also not leveled a certain kind of political complaint: namely, that critique is a form of faux-radical posturing that has failed to achieve any substantive goals. Rather, its role in the formation of new fields of knowledge from feminism to postcolonial studies to queer theory strikes me as crucial—even though critique's distrust of co-option and institutions means it is not always well placed to assess its own impact. That critique has made certain things possible is not in doubt. What is also increasingly evident, however, is that it has sidelined other intellectual, aesthetic, and political possibilities—ones that are just as vital to the flourishing of new fields of knowledge as older ones.

These and similar concerns are now being voiced across a variety of disciplines. I have briefly alluded to the writings of sociologists and social theorists—from Michael Billig to Luc Boltanski—who are struggling against the grip of critique. In fields from political theory to art criticism, critics are experimenting with alternatives to demystification: here I have benefited especially from the writings of Jane

Bennett and James Elkins. Meanwhile, some feminist scholars are reassessing the language game of doubt: feminist theory has more interesting things to do, they venture, than to question prereflective habits and demonstrate the ungrounded nature of belief. For these thinkers, ordinary language philosophy offers the most compelling alternative to an ethos of constant suspicion—one that is inspired by a very different view of the politics of language.[6]

In literary and cultural studies, these questions seem especially pressing—no doubt because engaging with a text has the potential to be an animating encounter rather than just a diagnostic exercise. Michel Chaouli puts it well: the literary work discloses itself in the reader's experience of it—such that an effacement of that experience, in the name of analytical rigor and detachment, also fails to do justice to the work. At the same time, of course, what counts as experience is neither self-evident nor infallible but is revised and remade as we encounter texts that address us in some way. Chaouli marvels at "the lengths to which we go to keep at bay the force of artworks, the same artworks whose ability to snap us out of our torpor drew us to them in the first place. How curious it is that we dig wide moats—of history, ideology, formal analysis—and erect thick conceptual walls lest we be touched by what, in truth, lures us."[7]

Talking about the force and the lure of art works need not commit us to breathless effusions or antipolitical sentiments. It can open the way to a renewed engagement with art and its entanglement with social life—in such a way that texts are no longer typecast as either heroic dissidents or slavish sycophants of power. And here literary theory would do well to reflect on—rather than condescend to—the uses of literature in everyday life: uses that we have hardly begun to understand. Such a reorientation, with any luck, might inspire more capacious, and more publicly persuasive, rationales for why literature, and the study of literature, matter.

In a previous book, I took a preliminary stab at such an exercise. There I made a case for what I called neophenomenology—a sustained attention to the sheer range and complexity of aesthetic experiences, including moments of recognition, enchantment, shock, and knowledge. Such experiences speak to academic as well as lay prac-

tices of reading; they connect us to our lives as social beings, while also inviting us to reflect on the distinctive qualities of works of art: what spurs us to pick up a book or to become utterly engrossed in a film. We cannot hope to do justice to these qualities, I argued, as long as we remain in the thrall of a suspicious hermeneutics. Sometimes serious thinking calls for a judicious decrease rather than an increase of distance—a willingness to acknowledge and more fully engage our attachments.

Responses to the book were not unsympathetic, but some readers expressed a certain puzzlement—as if I had somehow failed to grasp the self-evident rigor and intrinsic sophistication of critique. I had not adequately explained to myself or others, it became clear, why this deference to a particular methodology struck me as misguided. *The Limits of Critique* is my attempt to remedy this deficit and to settle some unfinished business. As the title suggests, I have tried to show why reading critically—or what I have preferred to call reading suspiciously—should not be taken as the ultimate horizon of thought. It has no a priori claims to philosophical rigor, political radicalism, or literary sophistication. It is one way of reading and thinking among others: finite, limited, and fallible.

As a critic schooled in suspicious reading, I am hardly immune to its charms, yet I have tried, as much as possible, to avoid being drawn into a "critique of critique." That is to say, I have described widespread modes of argument without making imputations about hidden motives, diagnosing symptoms and anxieties, or attributing the rise of scholarly methods to larger social pressures or institutional forces that my fellow critics have failed to understand. Meanwhile, I have tried to avoid critiquiness by opting for different shadings of style and tone. In short, I have leaned to the side of criticism rather than critique.

Such an attempt, to be sure, can have only a partial success. To object to or disagree with critique is to be caught in the jaws of a performative contradiction; in the act of disagreeing with certain ways of thinking, we cannot help being drawn into the negative or oppositional attitude we are trying to avoid. For this reason, I wish to draw a firm line under these concluding words. Having clarified, to the best of my ability, the reasons for my dissatisfaction with critique, I want to

move on: to try out different vocabularies and experiment with alternative ways of writing, to think in a more sustained and concentrated fashion about what other moods and methods might look like. The point, in the end, is not to redescribe or reinterpret critique but to change it.

NOTES

Introduction

1. Helen Small, *The Value of the Humanities* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 26.
2. Amanda Anderson, *The Way We Argue Now: A Study in the Cultures of Theory* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005).
3. Kevin Lamb, "Foucault's Aestheticism," *diacritics* 35, no. 2 (2005): 43.
4. Like most scholars working in this area, I am indebted to Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's essay "Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading, or, You're So Paranoid, You Probably Think This Essay Is about You," in *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003). Other works I have found especially helpful in the course of this project include Toril Moi's *"What Is a Woman?" and Other Essays* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001) and her current manuscript on literary criticism and ordinary language philosophy; Linda M. G. Zerilli, *Feminism and the Abyss of Freedom* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005); the "Surface Reading" issue of *Representations*, edited by Steven Best and Sharon Marcus, as well as Marcus's *Between Women: Friendship, Marriage, and Desire in Victorian England* (Princeton,: Princeton University Press, 2007); Heather Love, "Close but Not Deep: Literary Ethics and the Descriptive Turn." *New Literary History* 41, no. 2 (2010): 371–92; Jane Bennett, *The Enchantment of Modern Life: Attachments, Crossings, and Ethics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001) and *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010). I have

also learned much from the work of Graham Harman and of course am deeply influenced by the work of Bruno Latour.

5. Bruno Latour, "Why Has Critique Run Out of Steam? From Matters of Fact to Matters of Concern," *Critical Inquiry* 30, no. 2 (2005): 225–48.
6. Steven Marcus, "Freud and Dora: Story, History, Case History," in his *Freud and the Culture of Psychoanalysis* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1987).
7. Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987).
8. On this point, see also Günter Leypoldt, "Singularity and the Literary Market," *New Literary History* 45, no. 1 (2014): 71–88.
9. Nikolas Kompridis, "Recognition and Receptivity: Forms of Normative Response in the Lives of the Animals We Are," *New Literary History* 44, no. 1 (2013): 1–24. As Kompridis remarks, receptivity should not be confused with passivity—nor does it presume that readers are blank slates or "ideologically innocent." See also Nikolas Kompridis, *Critique and Disclosure: Critical Theory between Past and Future* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2006), pt. 5, chap. 2.

Chapter 1

1. Michael Roth, "Beyond Critical Thinking," *Chronicle of Higher Education*, January 3, 2010. The argument is recapitulated in his *Beyond the University: Why Liberal Education Matters* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2014).
2. Judith Fetterley, *The Resisting Reader: A Feminist Approach to American Fiction* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1981).
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4. Chantal Mouffe, *Agonistics: Thinking the World Politically* (London: Verso, 2013), 96–97.
5. Claudio E. Benzecry, *The Opera Fanatic: Ethnography of an Obsession* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013), 3.
6. Peter Sloterdijk, *The Art of Philosophy: Wisdom as a Practice* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012), 12.
7. David Rodowick, *Elegy for Theory* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2013).
8. Catherine Gallagher and Stephen Greenblatt, *Practicing New Historicism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 9.

9. François Cusset, *French Theory: How Foucault, Derrida, Deleuze, & Co. Transformed the Intellectual Life of the United States* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008), 83.
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11. Jonathan Flatley, *Affective Mapping: Melancholia and the Politics of Modernism* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2008), 5.
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14. Bruno Latour, "The Politics of Explanation: An Alternative," in *Knowledge and Reflexivity: New Frontiers in the Sociology of Knowledge*, ed. Steve Woolgar (London: Sage, 1988).
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16. Ian Hunter, "The Time of Theory," *Postcolonial Studies* 10, no. 1 (2007): 7. See also his "Spirituality and Philosophy in Post-Structuralist Theory," *History of European Ideas* 35 (2009): 265–75, and "The History of Theory," *Critical Inquiry* 33, no. 1 (2006): 78–112.
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19. Rita Felski, "From Literary Theory to Critical Method," *Profession* (2008): 108–116; see also David Bordwell, *Making Meaning: Inference and Rhetoric in the Interpretation of Cinema* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1991).
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21. Deidre Lynch, *Loving Literature: A Cultural History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2014), 10.
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Deep: Literary Ethics and the Descriptive Turn," *New Literary History* 41, no. 2 (2010): 371–91, and "Close Reading and Thin Description," *Public Culture* 25, no. 3 (2013): 401–34; Stephen Best and Sharon Marcus, "Surface Reading: An Introduction," *Representations* 108, no. 1 (2009): 1–21.

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36. Kearney, *On Paul Ricoeur*, 14, 140.
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41. Hitchock's film has proved highly controversial, not least because of its ending. See, for example, Richard Allen, "Hitchcock, or the Pleasures of

Metaskepticism," *October* 89 (1999): 69–86; Rick Worland, "Before and after the Fact: Writing and Reading Hitchcock's *Suspicion*," *Cinema Journal* 41, no. 4 (2003): 3–26.

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58. Liu, *The Laws of Cool*, 33.

59. Lorraine Daston and Peter Galison, *Objectivity* (New York: Zone, 2010), 52.
60. Pierre Bourdieu, "The Historical Genesis of the Pure Aesthetic," in *The Rules of Art: Genesis and Structure of the Literary Field* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996). See also Andrew Goldstone, *Fictions of Autonomy: Modernism from Wilde to de Man* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).
61. Here, however, Bourdieu conflates the historically specific notion of autonomous art with aesthetics *tout court*. People of different social backgrounds experience aesthetic pleasure from things that are not autonomous art works.
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63. Walzer, *The Company of Critics*, chap. 11.
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Chapter 2

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Chapter 4

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45. Luc Boltanski and Laurent Thévenot, *On Justification: Economies of Worth*, trans. Catherine Porter (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006).
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Chapter 5

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5. Wai Chee Dimock, "A Theory of Resonance," *PMLA* 112 (1997): 1061.
6. Bruno Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993), 75.
7. Harris, *Untimely Matter*, 2.

8. Jennifer Fleissner, "Is Feminism a Historicism?" *Tulsa Studies in Women's Literature* 21, no. 1 (2002): 45–66.
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11. Bruce Robbins, "Afterword," *PMLA* 122, no. 5 (2007): 1650. See also Eric Hayot's insightful "Against Periodization," *New Literary History* 42, no. 4 (2011): 739–56.
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13. Compare, for example, Latour's rejection of reductionism with the theory of articulation in cultural studies as "an attempt to avoid reduction." The latter is well described in Jennifer Daryl Slack, "The Theory and Method of Articulation in Cultural Studies," in *Stuart Hall: Critical Dialogues in Cultural Studies*, ed. David Morley and Kuan-Hsing Chen (London and New York: Routledge, 1996), 112–27.
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17. Ibid., 40.
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33. Richard E. Palmer, "The Liminality of Hermes and the Meaning of Hermeneutics," http://www.mac.edu/faculty/richardpalmer/liminality.html.
34. Adam S. Miller, *Speculative Grace: Bruno Latour and Object-Oriented Theology* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2013), 109.
35. Latour, *Reassembling the Social*, 245.
36. The wording in this paragraph overlaps with my essay "Latour and Literary Studies," *PMLA* 130, no. 3 (2015).
37. Marielle Macé, "Ways of Reading, Modes of Being," *New Literary History* 44, no. 2 (2103): 214. This essay contains excerpts from Macé's book

Façons de lire, manières d'être (Paris: Gallimard, 2011), translated by Marlon Jones.

38. Richard Kearney, "What Is Carnal Hermeneutics?," *New Literary History* 46, no. 1 (2015).
39. Macé, *Facons de lire*, 192, 190.
40. For other helpful discussions of this point, see Cristina Vischer Bruns, *The Value of Literary Reading and What it Means for Teaching* (New York: Continuum, 2011); and Jean-Marie Schaeffer, "Literary Studies and Literary Experience," trans. Kathleen Antonioli, *New Literary History* 44, no. 2 (2013): 267–83.
41. Yves Citton, *Lire, interpréter, actualiser: Pourquoi les études littéraires?* (Paris: Éditions Amsterdam, 2007).
42. Citton, *Lire, interpréter, actualiser*, 155–56.
43. Deidre Lynch, *Loving Literature: A Cultural History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2014), 14.
44. Latour, *Reassembling the Social*, 236.
45. On this question, see Thom Dancer, "Between Belief and Knowledge: J. M. Coetzee and the Present of Reading," *Minnesota Review* 77 (2011): 131–42.
46. As John Guillory remarks, "Scholarly reading can be said to preserve within it an encysted form of lay reading, a necessary recollection of the pleasures and rapidity of lay reading." See "How Scholars Read," *ADE Bulletin* 146 (Fall 2008): 12.
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48. Marcus, *Between Women*.
49. Daniel Carey, "The State of Play: English Literary Scholarship and Criticism in a New Century, "*Cadernos de Letras* 27 (December 2010): 19.
50. Felski, "Latour and Literary Studies."

In Short

1. Ien Ang, "From Cultural Studies to Cultural Research: Engaged Scholarship in the Twenty-First Century," *Cultural Studies Review* 12, no. 2 (2006): 190.
2. Yves Citton, *L'avenir des humanités: Économie de la connaissance ou cultures de l'interprétation* (Paris: La Découverte, 2010), 133.
3. Michael Walzer, *Interpretation and Social Criticism* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1987), 35.

4. Christopher Castiglia, "Critiquiness," *English Language Notes* 51, no. 2 (2013): 79–85. See also Steven Maras, "Communicating Criticality," *International Journal of Communication* 1 (2007): 167–86.
5. The aesthetic, moreover, also has an ethical dimension. As Jane Bennett points out, experiences of enchantment are not reducible to critical accusations of mindlessness or naïve optimism: rather, they are a means by which we come to experience wonder and pleasure in the world and to care deeply about its condition. Jane Bennett, *The Enchantment of Modern Life* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), 10.
6. *New Literary History* 46, no. 2 (2015), special issue, "Feminist Interventions."
7. Michel Chaouli, "Criticism and Style," *New Literary History* 44, no. 3 (2013): 328.

INDEX