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A FEW LIES: QUEER THEORY AND OUR METHOD MELODRAMAS

BY DAVID KURNICK

“We have been telling a few lies”: the words mark the end of what we could call the overture of Leo Bersani’s 1987 essay “Is the Rectum a Grave?”¹ The lies Bersani is referring to are, in the first place, the dignifying fantasies gay male activists have spun about the necessarily liberatory consequences of same-sex attraction. Right-wing politics, he has just reminded us, consort quite nicely with some men’s “marked sexual preference for sailors and telephone linemen.”² He is about to tear off into what for some of us, more than thirty years later, remains a famous rebuttal of Dennis Altman’s claims for the gay bathhouse as a space of Whitmanian democracy. Bersani begs to differ: “Your looks, muscles, hair distribution, size of cock, and shape of ass determined exactly how happy you were going to be during those few hours[.]”³ Such deflationary rhetoric is, of course, one of Bersani’s hallmarks. But he’s not alone in it. In fact, uncomfortable truth-telling constitutes a central tradition in what we have for a while been calling queer culture.

Think of Amber Hollibaugh and Cherríe Moraga’s landmark 1981 piece “What We’re Rolling Around in Bed With: On Sexual Silences in Feminism,” which expresses impatience with the “lofty,” “delicate” way lesbian sex was being discussed in their activist circles and calls for a feminism that would accommodate “dykes who wanted tits.”⁴ Think of Susan Stryker’s 1994 essay on the “monstrous” nature of transgender identity, in which she writes as “a self-mutilated deformity, a pervert, a mutant,” or of Robert Reid-Pharr’s 1996 remark that “if you believe the propaganda, it would seem that every time a fag or dyke fingers a vagina or asshole is a demonstration of queer love and community.”⁵ Think of José Muñoz’s 1999 definition of disidentification as an acceptance of the “politically dubious or shameful” aspects of sexuality, or Michael Warner’s claim from the same year that in queer culture “no one is beneath [abjection]’s reach, not because it prides itself on generosity but because it prides itself on nothing. The rule is: Get over yourself.”⁶ Think of Heather Love’s 2007 insistence on the dark appeal of “ambivalence, failure, melancholia, loneliness,” or, just yesterday, Andrea Long Chu’s claim that the “lesson of political lesbianism as a

failed project” is that “nothing good comes of forcing desire to conform to political principle.”⁷ Many minoritarian critical traditions emphasize the insights you glean from specific social locations. But this strain of queer comment has an identifiable flavor, derived from its pleasure in saying what you shouldn’t and characterized by the volatility of its address: the proximate audience is almost always members of the group in question, but the risk of this talk is that you can’t be sure who’s listening. To give all of this its technical name: it’s difficult to think of a contemporary field of critical theory whose rhetorical arsenal relies so centrally on the speech act of *calling bullshit*.

The philosopher Harry Frankfurt, the most recent theorist of the concept, will tell you that one implication of holding that some things are bullshit is a belief that others are not: his 2005 bestseller *On Bullshit* was followed in 2017 by *On Truth*. My quick tour of forty years of queer truth-telling is meant to establish the investment of that critical tradition in making truth claims—we might say the essential seriousness of that tradition, its claim, as Stanley Cavell would put it, to have meant what it said. But in the disciplinary histories we have been telling ourselves in literary studies lately we have slighted the seriousness of that tradition, in part through a too-hasty assimilation of queer theory’s concerns to what is commonly understood to be post-structuralist or deconstructionist skepticism about truth. For some of us to whom the history of queer criticism matters, its supposed post-structuralism is far from its most salient feature; the description of queer theory as always and everywhere devoted to values of instability and “play” is one way of trivializing its claims.⁸ But I want further to suggest that this trivialization is of a piece with a widespread, discipline-internal rhetoric of disregard for the work of literary criticism itself. To do so I want to explore three signal texts of the burgeoning tradition of disciplinary self-scrutiny taking up ever more space in the daily work of literary study. I want to beg the reader’s patience in recurring to Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s “Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading: Or, You’re So Paranoid, You Probably Think This Essay is About You” (first published in 1997 under a slightly different title), Stephen Best and Sharon Marcus’s “Surface Reading: An Introduction” from 2009, and Rita Felski’s 2015 book *The Limits of Critique*. For all the voluminous commentary these pieces have generated, the structuring role queer thinking plays in them has remained opaque.⁹

This essay proceeds historically backward through these pieces, tracing what I can only call the symptomatic place of queerness—as theme, as theory—in each. I claim that they share an inattention to

the seriousness of queer theoretical critique, and that this inattention is related to their vision of literary study as also in some fundamental way characterized by bad faith. Although it has become common to refer to this miniature tradition as about method, these essays offer not new ways to interpret texts but new ways to feel about ourselves when we do. Or, to put this a bit more strongly, they give us powerful images of what kind of people we are when we interpret: more than a new hermeneutics this work has popularized a series of character sketches of the academic critic. Those sketches are vehemently, even melodramatically, binarized, and they have given us an entertaining and misguided, pop-psychologized way to talk about our discipline. It's my sense that their tropism toward melodrama is determined in part by what Amanda Anderson has analyzed as the "outward-facing" nature of much commentary on the humanities: even when directed primarily to an academic audience, these texts register the pressure of a broader public by introjecting that public's anticipated indifference or hostility into their style and rhetoric.¹⁰

One of my claims then is that the bad feelings in which the method conversation are awash are themselves distorted reflections of the diminished standing of the humanities in general and of literary criticism in particular. The method debates suggest that the blame for that loss of prestige lies not on external factors but on the failure of other scholars—aggressive critique-mongers, depth-obsessed symptom-hunters, paranoid pattern-makers—to appreciate literature properly.¹¹ Seen in this light, these debates emerge as the latest chapter in the history of "loving literature" analyzed by Deidre Lynch in her book of that name. When eighteenth-century readers and critics began to think of literature as something it was possible to love, Lynch shows, the process entailed a personification of literature and an ethicalization of readers' relation to it: literature was an object you could do right by—and one you could castigate others for failing in their moral and affective duty towards. Lynch spells out some of the consequences of such ethicalization in terms pertinent to our method debates, and suggestive of the relevance of queer thought to them: "There can be something irksomely normalizing," she writes, "about the way people inside and outside academe mobilize the concepts of love and aesthetic pleasure and invigilate others for signs of the passion that they present both as ethical obligation and as index of psychological normality."¹²

One would like to think that, however many of its finer points have gone missing, one of queer theory's most basic (not to say banal) claims—namely, that there is more than one way to love—would have

had a more serious effect on our method conversations. But in those conversations, the range of emotional stances critics are understood to take toward the objects they treat is forcefully restricted. In giving a history to the contested issue of how best to love literature, Lynch also helps make sense of why this particular question has so magnetized our method conversations—which is why, little as I agree with these pieces’ portrait of literary study, I read them above all as expressions of disciplinary anxiety, and literary study’s embattled prestige is after all our shared plight. One of the ironies I want to draw out is that such a sympathetic perspective only becomes available through the kind of interpretive attention these pieces unite in finding outmoded, irrelevant, even psychically damaging and morally blameworthy. Further, I want to suggest that despite their slighting of queer commentary’s truth aspirations, our method conversations reveal that one thing queer thought and literary criticism have in common is their vulnerability to being thus disregarded, to being taken as fundamentally facetious or as uninterested in making claims on the realm of shared truth.

My sense that an accounting of queer theory’s past remains both important and elusive finds confirmation even in work that celebrates its contributions to literary study. Queer theory plays an intriguingly heroic role, for example, in two thoughtful recent attempts to re-narrate the history of professional literary criticism. Both Joseph North’s *Literary Criticism: A Concise Political History* (2017) and Timothy Aubry’s *Guilty Aesthetic Pleasures* (2019) present forceful rejoinders to literary criticism’s self-understanding—North by arguing that the discipline has been beholden for decades to a “historicist/contextualist” scholarly paradigm that sits comfortably with neoliberal ideology and betrays the mission of criticism as a project of political and moral pedagogy, Aubry by claiming that the disavowal of aesthetic value has left critics with no robust way to recognize the pleasure we clearly take in artistic and analytic projects.¹³ In both books, queer literary criticism is named as an exception to these patterns—for precisely opposite reasons. North thinks queer theory escaped the deadening assumptions of the scholarly paradigm because of its political orientation (what he calls its “responsibility to the needs of a fairly well-defined larger formation outside the academy”) while Aubry thinks that same body of work has been nearly alone in “asserting nonpolitical criteria of value and in affirming experiences that exist outside the traditional political sphere.”¹⁴ One can agree with aspects of each of these claims and yet feel that something of the texture of queer theory escapes both. This is probably because, like many passionately pursued intellectual projects, queer theory’s

commitments are complex: contributing to historical knowledge as part of a devotion to the flourishing of specific groups, suspicious of attempts to politicize perverse pleasures and aware that political action is necessary to defend those pleasures. Queer theory is far from unique in straddling a multiplicity of ethical and scholarly orientations, but its unacknowledged centrality in our method conversations suggests that its case may be exemplary. This essay is, necessarily, all over the maps North and Aubry draw for us. It partakes of a scholarly-historicist impulse insofar as it tries to recall a misrepresented piece of our recent disciplinary history, but it understands that excavation as motivated by moral and political goals. And it concerns the slighting of a body of work that I find deeply pleasurable, not least because of the political pressure under which it has been created.

I can affirm that no existing literary critical methods were harmed in the making of my analysis, and no new ones employed. My point is that the characterology underwriting our current method conversations has a history, even if it remains unacknowledged, and that literary analysis is a good and even necessary tool for uncovering that history and reckoning with our disciplinary phantasms.

At the end of *The Limits of Critique*, Felski offers a summary of the book's argument, and it sounds quite measured: critique should not go away but merely make room for new modes; literary critics should stay affiliated with the left; we should refrain from condescending to lay readers, and write with more varied tones and styles. My sense is that Felski offers this inoffensive coda as a counterbalance to the foregoing, deeply partial portrait of everyday literary criticism. That portrait emerges less in the book's explicit proposals than in its imagistic and rhetorical infrastructure. This infrastructure provides the book's polemical tone and accounts for a considerable portion of the readerly pleasure it affords and, I would hazard, the success it has enjoyed; we could say that infrastructure turns Felski's book outward, toward an audience that is receptive or wants to imagine itself receptive to a cartoonish vision of the professional academic. The book repeatedly describes the critical reader as a certain kind of person: small-minded, dogmatic, uptight, and yet also grandiose. In Felski's words, the critic is "mistrustful," "fearful of being duped"; she "feeds off the charge of her own negativity"; she is a "nay-say[er]," committed to "shopworn" ideas, "ping pong[ing] between moments of hubristic defiance and

crestfallen despair” as she realizes the impossibility of ever being critical enough.¹⁵

One key passage ridicules the assumptions that supposedly have the professoriat in their grip. No names are named, but that doesn’t lessen the vehemence of the portrait.

Crrritique! The word flies off the tongue like a weapon, emitting a rapid guttural burst of machine-gun-fire. There is the ominous cawing staccato of the first and final consonants, the terse thud of the short repeated vowel, the throaty underground rumble of the accompanying *r*. “Critique” sounds unmistakably foreign, in a sexy, mysterious, pan-European kind of way, conjuring up tableaux of intellectuals gesturing wildly in smoke-wreathed Parisian cafés and solemn-faced discussions in seminar rooms in Frankfurt. (*LC*, 120)

This is satire, and its status as humor might seem to protect it from the form of skeptical attention I want to give it. But it’s worth attending to this as a mode of argument. Of what is this a caricature? Literally, of course, the passage doesn’t say that critical readers believe themselves to be “sexy, mysterious, pan-European,” or spend time in France or Germany, or pronounce this particular word in this particular way—like a cartoon Nazi, or Pepé Le Pew.¹⁶ Presumably this is a caricature not of our actual social or intellectual lives but of our ego-ideals—the miniature Adornos and de Beauvoirs we have perched on our shoulders. Some of us may indeed have glimmers of such familiars, but I do not think these are the primary imagoes under whose aegis we conduct our work in the defunded, under-enrolled but chronically overcrowded literature classrooms of the neo-liberalized university.

For the closest approximation to an image of that work, we need to turn to the close reading that opens Felski’s passage, the “guttural burst of machine-gun-fire,” the “ominous cawing staccato,” and so on. The lines are interesting both because they are so overperformed, and because they are so indefensible *as* a close reading. There is of course no reason why the “r” in “critique” should be more “throaty” or “underground” than the “r” in “croissant” or “credit score” or “crisis of the humanities”—or why the vowel sounds in “critique” should be perceived as “terse” and “thudding” in a way that the identical sounds evidently are not when they occur in “wimpy” or “bikini” or “Milli Vanilli.” Felski’s close reading is in fact a parody of close reading, and one of its functions is to suggest that there are no criteria by which to distinguish an arbitrary close reading from a convincing one. What’s more, the passage is effectively booby-trapped: if you take your skills

as a critical reader seriously enough to read Felski at all critically, the passage is waiting with a disparaging image for the ridiculous figure you cut: and who do you think you are—Roland Barthes?

You don't need to be Roland Barthes to ask the entry-level questions I have put to Felski's close reading. All you need is a belief that literary interpretation, despite its entanglements with the fantasies of the interpreter, is subject to rational debate and standards of evidence. I would wager that this is a working pedagogical premise of most readers of this essay—as indeed it is a premise of *The Limits of Critique*, which includes a thoughtful discussion of Paul Ricoeur that reminds us that the coiner of the term *hermeneutics of suspicion* in fact stressed the many moods in which interpretation happens, and argued for a vision of hermeneutic practice in which the interpreter's opacity to herself is no barrier to the pursuit of truth.¹⁷ But what Felski's book carefully demonstrates in one place it rhetorically demolishes in another. The passage I've quoted counts on us lacking a sense of the complexities of interpretive moods—or counts on our failing to object when she suggests we do. In associating the bread-and-butter method of the undergraduate literature classroom with delusional hubris, Felski's characterology is a coded but legible expression of disciplinary contempt. This is the more startling because Felski's previous work has not only belied such characterologies but explicitly named and, well, critiqued them: "Exaggeration always sells better than nuance," she remarked ruefully in *Literature After Feminism* (2003), a book devoted to rebutting polemical accounts of literary study that had depicted feminist critics as dogmatically uninterested in questions of aesthetic value and pleasure.¹⁸ "I often find myself seething and sputtering when I come across another supposedly objective account of my field that depicts all feminist scholars as hysterical harpies or grim-faced zealots. But there is little to be gained by stooping to this level of argument."¹⁹ It's impossible to feel that the author who thus skeptically surveyed the utility of polemical exaggeration in fact has the contempt for literary study that her most recent work conveys. But her rhetoric in *The Limits of Critique* is drawn to the performance of that contempt; I want to say her rhetoric does not take what literary scholars do seriously.

Something related happens with the odd status of queer criticism in the book. This oddness has first of all to do with Felski's alignment of queer theory with the project of aestheticism. We are told that queer theory's interest in the figure of the dandy has bequeathed to contemporary criticism a "debonair stoicism [that] combines knowing distance with aesthetic flair and the verbal flash of wit and aphorism";

Felski continues, a bit darkly, that this combination is “appealing to a certain intellectual temperament” (49). In a recent response to *The Limits of Critique*, Heather Love notes that “new queer work on everything from area studies to queer nature to mass incarceration does not owe a debt to the dandy,” and points out that the long association of queer commentary with affect studies belies Felski’s portrait of a field operating under the sign of cool detachment (points that Felski readily concedes in her reply to Love).²⁰ This genealogy might well be pushed further back: at least a decade before the word “affect” achieved discipline-wide currency, the AIDS catastrophe had given criticism the thing itself. Revisit the prominent critical work produced in gay/lesbian studies in the ’80s and ’90s, and it’s striking, if entirely unsurprising, how frequently the names of the recently dead are invoked in the writing of D.A. Miller, Kobena Mercer, Douglas Crimp, Jeff Nunokawa, Carolyn Dinshaw, Robert Reid-Pharr, Patricia White, Cindy Patton, Bersani, Philip Brian Harper, Lee Edelman, Eve Sedgwick, David Halperin, Robyn Wiegman, Thomas Yingling—not only in the objects of their inquiry but in the matrix of their acknowledgments, footnotes, dedications. The dominant affects are sorrow and rage, and when style or wit are deployed, as they often are, they are scored with those emotions.

That these facts don’t figure in Felski’s book means that hers is an affectively distorted history, where the feelings that can be celebrated are mostly good feelings and the documentable cathexes—and political commitments—that have led critics to their positions are rendered invisible. Among the dead whom queer theory invokes is of course Michel Foucault, who figures in that body of work not only as a key inspiration but sometimes as an object of mourning and a subject of feeling.²¹ In neither role—as a primary interlocutor for queer theory, as the most prominent gay intellectual killed by the plague—does Foucault appear in *The Limits of Critique*. Instead Felski characterizes Foucauldian critics as devoted to a “willed impersonality” that “screens out any flicker of emotion [and] tamps down idiosyncratic impulses” (*LC*, 48)—a description that ill suits not only the critics I have named but Foucault himself, who opened “The Lives of Infamous Men” by saying that his work there is informed by “my taste, my pleasure, an emotion, laughter, surprise, a fright or some other feeling, whose intensity perhaps I would have difficulty in justifying now that the first flush of discovery is past.”²² Felski’s caricature of the moods of the discipline requires not only the deletion of the historical trauma that underwrites queer theory’s origins as an academic field, but the

severance of the field from Foucault and an affect-drained, sexless vision of his own motivations.

One consequence is that even Felski's favorable remarks about Foucault are inadvertently trivializing. Near the end of her chapter on suspicion, she counters Michael Walzer's charge that Foucault espouses a "lonely politics" by adducing "the multitudes of his followers, disciples, devotees, fans and enthusiasts" (*LC*, 50). This list of near-synonyms never hints at Foucault's more straightforwardly "political" aspects: his work for prisoners' rights and in the antipsychiatry movement, his interest (expressed in late interviews with the gay press) in forms of homosexual community, the importance of his thought for AIDS activism.²³ Although Felski explicitly characterizes Foucault (and Foucauldians) as studiously detached, her list here evokes a consumerist fandom redolent of the dandyism she attributes to queer theory (in this it echoes, consciously or not, Pierre Hadot's claim that Foucault's late turn to the "care of the self" was "*too* aesthetic" and thus "a new form of Dandyism, late twentieth-century style").²⁴ My point is not to deny that Foucault's black turtlenecks and aphoristic flair were deliberately cultivated effects, or that style and wit can be deployed for political purposes. But the intellectual who explored the care of the self also devoted his final lectures to the topic of classical *parrēsia* or truth-telling—that is, to the "theme of commitment" and the institutional and political conditions under which a speaker can affirm that "I must myself be implicated in what I say."²⁵ These varied interests will surprise us only if we are wedded to a simplified characterology that sees in Foucault only a detached ironist, and in those who take inspiration from him only aspirant cool-kids. The point is important enough if we want to do justice to this particular thinker—and more so if we're seeking an inventory of queer theory's attitudes and a serious account of the character of criticism.

Queer theory's strange status in Felski's account is further signaled by the sole paragraph that deals substantively with it. In that paragraph, she heralds recent work in queer studies that moves beyond critique: she lists, uncontroversially, Sedgwick's work on affect, Muñoz's interest in Blochian utopianism, and Love's investigation of sociological description—and then cites Best and Marcus's "Surface Reading" (*LC*, 30). That essay briefly addresses Sedgwick's work, but it does not frame itself as an intervention in queer studies, and apart from the identities of the

authors, the rationale for its inclusion in Felski's list is hard to see. But queer themes are in fact centrally at stake in the essay, if in an opaque way. The essay, as is well known, presents itself as a diagnosis of and a call for a new kind of reading that it claims is beginning to upstage symptomatic reading. I have no dispute with many of the concrete methodological claims made here—that knowledge workers need to be reminded of the sensuous dimension of texts, that interpretation can involve fantasies of omnipotence, that suspicion can become a bad habit. These claims do not involve a fundamental reorientation in interpretive method. But the essay presents methods less vibrantly than it does personalities.

While there is considerable overlap between Felski's critical reader and Best and Marcus's symptomatic reader, the latter cuts a possibly more sinister figure. Symptomatic readers, we are told, are "attached to the power [their method imputes] to the act of interpreting, and find it hard to let go of their belief" in their correctness.²⁶ They cleave to demystifying protocols that will seem "superfluous" (SR, 2) to anyone with an internet connection. They "equate their work with political activism" (SR, 2) and see themselves as possessing "the power to confer freedom" (SR, 18). They imagine the task of criticism as "wresting meaning from a resisting text or inserting it into a lifeless one," "a strenuous and heroic endeavor, one more akin to activism and labor than to leisure" (SR, 6). They are "masterful" and "resisting" when encountering texts (5), on which they carry out "suspicious and aggressive attacks" (SR, 11); they envision themselves engaged in an "agon with the ideological text" (SR, 17) and their metaphors for what they are doing are accordingly "violent" (SR, 15). Surface readers, by vehement contrast, simply want to say something "accurate and true" about literature (SR, 16). They have a "modest" sense of their work (SR, 11), and embody "a true openness to all the potentials made available by texts" (SR, 16). They stand for "objectivity, validity, truth" (SR, 17); they are "curious" about emerging digital methods (SR, 17), and "receptive[]" (SR, 18) to what the text is trying to say. They eschew mastery and are "nonheroic" (SR, 17). Most insistently—a form of this claim is made twenty-one times in sixteen pages—they "attend" to the text; they pay "attention" to it.

Best and Marcus say that they are not writing a polemic, and indeed the genre that seems more pertinent here is melodrama. In one corner: violence, aggression, mastery, delusions of grandeur; in the other, modesty, openness, attention, curiosity, receptiveness. With positions so morally overdetermined, it is easy to see on which side

we are expected to line up, harder to see the intellectual meaning of a choice so motivated. The opposition is moreover exaggeratedly gendered: one critic, emphatically masculinized, threatens to overpower a vulnerable text to whose actual content he pays no heed—unless another critic intervenes to rescue it, to attend to it with the modest, patient responsiveness of the perfect mother or nurse. Indeed, in tracing out this gendered logic it becomes clear that the scenario the essay sketches has three players, and is in fact a triangle: a vulnerable feminized text caught between a rapacious masculine critic on the one hand and a gentler feminized critic/companion on the other. The structure resembles the plot of Henry James's *The Bostonians* as told entirely from the perspective of Olive Chancellor; it puts the valorized literary critic in the role of the understanding and sympathetic woman who aims to rescue another woman, desirable and apparently helpless, from her crappy boyfriend—a program that despite its high quotient of fantasy has also been known to succeed in the real world. Anyone who knows *The Bostonians*, of course, knows that Olive's trip is quite as heavy as Basil's, and that the self-proclaimed objectivity and disinterest of the sympathetic and understanding woman is a cover for her fierce erotic investment.²⁷

What kind of critic have I become? To stick with Best and Marcus's terminology, I have "rewrite[ten]" their essay according to my script, claimed to see something there that they have not advertised or made fully explicit (*SR*, 3). I have evidently put myself on the side of the symptomatic readers. And yet: I believe what I have done is, precisely, *attended* to the surface of their text, paid attention to its imagistic patterning. Nor does this seem to me such a counterintuitive reading after all; the figurative pattern I have described is so exaggerated that what seems strange is that we haven't thought to notice it. In the terms Best and Marcus offer, my identification of the hidden script of "Surface Reading" should count as aggression, an arrogant display of knowing better than the text. There is, undoubtedly, some truth to this characterization. But my reading also makes me like the essay better. For starters, the fantasy structure I've outlined seems no more disqualifying to me than the fantasies underwriting my own work, or yours. Indeed, the very outlandishness of the scenario is compelling: what seemed melodramatically overdrawn as an account of literary method seems newly interesting when taken as an account of the multifarious ways we fantasize about what we do with texts.

Moreover, my scenario puts the essay in some illuminating critical contexts—contexts in fact supplied elsewhere by these very critics and

informed by their legibly queer commitments. The essay's gendered scenario specifically recalls Marcus's important 2002 essay "Fighting Bodies, Fighting Words: A Theory and Politics of Rape Prevention," which contests what she calls the "rape script" underlying much work in rape prevention: this script, Marcus argues, follows "gendered grammars of violence" that predispose us to perceive male bodies as invulnerable and female bodies as violable.²⁸ The point may sound academic, but the essay concludes with the resoundingly practical suggestion that rape prevention material include information about "the fragility of erections and the vulnerability of male genitalia" to counterattack.²⁹ The essay is a brilliant analysis of the power of gendered logics to shape our politics and our thinking—which makes it all the more ironic that "Surface Reading" inherits a version of this logic, in which all texts are figured as violable and any hermeneutic attention as implacably penetrative. Meanwhile, Best's recent book *None Like Us: Blackness, Belonging, Aesthetic Life* considers work on the history of slavery composed under the aegis of a "melancholy historicism" he connects with the influence of Toni Morrison's *Beloved*.³⁰ Objecting that in this critical work "Morrison's ethic . . . has been transformed into a method" and feeling "promot[ed] . . . to an axiom," Best proposes, through references to Edelman and Bersani, an anti-redemptive historicism that he associates with the estranging recalcitrance of Morrison's 2008 novel *A Mercy*.³¹ In asking us to separate ethics from method, Best is cautioning us against assuming that what we do to texts need conform to what we should do to people—a crucial insight that takes its distance from the sentimentalized psychology that underwrites the metaphors of "Surface Reading."

My point is less to catch these scholars in contradictions than to point out how those contradictions make this much-discussed essay emblematic of our current method conversations: insofar as what it says we do differs so markedly from what we in fact do, "Surface Reading" is representative of a willingness among literary critics to generalize imprecisely, and with a certain masochistic gusto, about what the practice of literary criticism looks like. That in this case that imprecision concerns queer forms of knowing points to a larger irony, which is that the very notion of surface reading has a recognizably queer lineage. Best and Marcus cite Susan Sontag's call in "Against Interpretation" to replace a hermeneutics with an "erotics of art," but don't mention that Sontag was embedded in a queer culture when she made it (*SR*, 10).³² Nor do they note that Sontag's claim emerged from an intellectual tradition that has had a homosexual bent since aestheticism:

this tradition reaches back to Pater's rhapsodies on the textured surfaces of sculptural fragments and Wilde's admonition that "those who go beneath the surface do so at their peril," and encompasses a whole "shallow" style in the visual arts—Andy Warhol's silkscreens, Rauschenberg's collages, and Jasper John's flags and targets can serve as metonyms here—as well as, in literary criticism, the resistance to depth psychology in Barthes, Bersani, Richard Poirier, Robert Garis, Halperin, and others.³³ It also includes the Foucault who wrote that sexuality is not a "furtive reality that is difficult to grasp, but a great surface network."³⁴

"Surface Reading" doesn't flag this queer genealogy. Indeed, the essay claims that queer commentary relies on just the methodological toolkit they are trying to leave behind—a claim substantiated by a brief discussion of Sedgwick's *Epistemology of the Closet*. But the description of that book, and of the tradition for which it serves as a proxy, is crucially inaccurate. *Epistemology*, they write, "showed that one could read a text's silences [and] gaps . . . as symptoms of the queerness . . . absent . . . from its pages" (SR, 6); queer criticism in general, they claim, is interested in what the text says only to the extent that it can be read as "the sign of a deep truth of a homosexuality that cannot be overtly depicted" (SR, 3). But it was precisely the *presence* of homoerotic energies at the heart of "Western culture as a whole" (as *Epistemology's* opening sentence puts it) that Sedgwick's book was devoted to elucidating.³⁵ Homosexuality is emphatically not the "deep truth" Sedgwick attributes to literary texts in *Epistemology of the Closet*. Homosexuality is not even her subject: that is of course the *closet*, a historically specific form that Sedgwick repeatedly and memorably calls a "spectacle" and which she identifies in a series of objectively identifiable speech acts and narrative patterns (EC, 213). The success of Sedgwick's book depended on its ability to elucidate something demonstrable and visible in the text (a masterful close reader, Sedgwick is an extraordinarily odd choice to support the claim that queer criticism is uninterested in what texts say). Her analysis compels our assent not because she ignores the text but because she attends to it so well that what she sees there can no longer remain invisible. Indeed, one burden of her argument was to suggest that the textually vivid evidence of gay desire needed to be rescued from the active unseeing that is one dimension of homophobia. That at least, was her avowed goal, and it is significant that Best and Marcus are uninterested in this central aspect of Sedgwick's project. But this failure to do justice to the truth claims of queer theory is, I hope to

have suggested, closely connected to a disavowal of how literary critical method functions.

The final irony I want to draw out is that it is Sedgwick herself who authorized such misdescription of her work, and of the intellectual tradition of which it is such a key part. This authorization first occurred in “Paranoid Reading,” an essay that has come to live almost wholly in our accounts of it. It is often cited, accurately, as the origin point for our current method conversations (both Felski’s book and Best and Marcus’s essay name its central role in encouraging a turn in literary study’s language of self-justification). I want to claim in this last section that Sedgwick’s piece did several consequential things to our disciplinary conversation: it installed a binary, as fully sclerotic as anything Lukács proposed in the 1930s, at the heart of our so-called method debates; it authorized that binary as a covert characterology; it encouraged a confusion about the difference between mood and method, and the relations between them (differences and relations of which Sedgwick herself is elsewhere a superlative analyst), and to that extent instantiated a turn away from questions of literary interpretation in favor of questions of spiritual or psychological bearing. Finally, it positioned queer theory firmly on the wrong side of its polarized view of literary study, effectively inaugurating the amnesia about that field to which I have tried to draw attention.

Sedgwick’s essay is marked by the performative contradiction—the discrepancy between rhetorical effect and self-report—that characterizes our method conversations generally. Early on, she poses a rhetorical question: how is it that paranoia has become the “uniquely sanctioned methodology” of antihomophobic inquiry?³⁶ The presumption that paranoia *is* the sole accredited method of queer critique is not defended (nor is paranoid methodology defined, a point to which I’ll return). Indeed, a few sentences later, Sedgwick approvingly cites Bersani to the effect that “paranoia is an inescapable interpretive doubling of presence.”³⁷ The line occurs in an essay on *Gravity’s Rainbow* collected in Bersani’s *The Culture of Redemption*, and in that context it is followed by the remark that there appears to be “no escape from the paranoid structure of thought” in Pynchon’s novel.³⁸ That observation is then followed by a line encapsulating the general thrust of Bersani’s work, which for decades before Sedgwick’s essay appeared had been interested in sidestepping the fixated scripts of paranoia: “There may,

however, be another way to think about this”—and indeed, in *The Culture of Redemption's* opening essay, Bersani turns to the work of Melanie Klein (the source of Sedgwick's titular terms in "Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading") to assist him in theorizing this resistance.³⁹ Sedgwick's citation of Bersani, far from supporting the notion of paranoia's unchallenged centrality in queer thought, would seem better suited to the acknowledgment that nonparanoid ways of knowing had long been internal to that tradition.

That to my knowledge this premise-deflating moment in Sedgwick's essay has not been remarked certainly has something to do with the charismatic authority of her writerly persona. That authority is bolstered here by a covert characterology, a habit of talking about interpretive choices in terms of personalities that this essay bequeathed to the tradition I've been examining. I call this characterology covert because Sedgwick denies that the paranoid and the reparative should be taken as psychological types. She emphasizes that for Klein, the paranoid and the depressive are "*positions . . . as opposed to, for example, normatively ordered stages, stable structures, or diagnostic personality types*" (PR, 128); later she repeats that she discusses these positions as "*critical practices, not as theoretical ideologies (and certainly not as stable personality types of critics)*" (PR, 128). But the rhetoric of the essay does not seem to know about these caveats. Often this operates at the relatively quiet level of personification: "Paranoia knows some things well and others poorly," (PR, 130) Sedgwick writes, and "the way paranoia has of understanding anything is by imitating it and embodying it" (PR, 131). But elsewhere the pathologizing implications of the personification are openly embraced:

Like the deinstitutionalized person on the street who, betrayed and plotted against by everyone else in the city, still urges on you the finger-worn dossier bristling with his precious correspondence, paranoia for all its vaunted suspicion acts as though its work would be accomplished if only it could finally, this time, somehow get its story truly known. That a fully initiated listener could still remain indifferent or inimical, or might have no help to offer, is hardly treated as a possibility. (PR, 138)

Sedgwick's simile for paranoid *practice* here is of course a paranoid *person*: vehicle has crashed into tenor, in a move that blithely contradicts her stated desire not to let the essay's psychoanalytic vocabulary shade into psychoanalytic diagnosis. By the time we reach Sedgwick's description of a figure she calls "the Foucauldian paranoid" (PR, 132) or her characterization of paranoid reading as "cruel," "contemptuous"

and “ugly” (*PR*, 144), it is difficult to separate this argument about hermeneutic method from a characterology, even a demonology. The contrasting terms in the essay—“pleasure and nourishment” (*PR*, 137), “epiphan[y]” (*PR*, 147), “surprise” (*PR*, 146) and “love” (*PR*, 128)—complete this deeply binary structure while doing little to return us to questions of interpretation that are supposedly the object of discussion.⁴⁰

I am by no means the first to remark this tension between the essay’s self-conception and its performative force. Robyn Wiegman, for example, notes the essay’s investment in “believing it has side-stepped the sovereign agencies and mastering hermeneutics that it pins on paranoid reading alone,” and observes that “[w]hen it comes to the matter of the critic’s investment in herself . . . the widely heralded distinction between paranoid reading and reparative reading is not one.”⁴¹ Lee Edelman similarly has claimed that “reparativity . . . repeats the schizoid practice it claims to depart from,” and asks whether anyone has “ever missed the aggression of the subtitle’s joke (who could, when it interpellates so pointedly everyone who reads it?).”⁴² But Edelman’s rhetorical question is perhaps too generous to the essay’s readers, who if they have registered its aggression seem mostly to have done so in the mode of denial. In the process, they have also denied the many places in the essay where Sedgwick openly announces her aggression, insists on the inextricability of paranoid and reparative modes, and celebrates the pleasures of critical work she understands as paranoid. But I have been arguing that these qualifications do little to contradict the essay’s tropism toward a melodramatic dualism—a tropism that begins with its sloganistic title. In a searching discussion of Sedgwick’s essay, Jennifer Fleissner reminds us that the relevant terminological distinction in Klein’s work is between the paranoid and the *depressive* positions—the latter being the place from which reparative projects begin.⁴³ Sedgwick’s title silently modifies her source text, taking a terminological doublet (paranoid/depressive) that it is hard to conceive of as an opposition and transforming it into a dramatically moralized binary (paranoid/reparative)—a move that has decisively inflected the essay’s reception: it is difficult to imagine a program of “depressive reading” enjoying the *PR* success that “reparative reading” has found.

There’s a further reason to regret Sedgwick’s simplification. It replaces an attitude or psychic state (the depressive position) with a project (the work of reparation)—and thus encourages the confusion of psyche and method that marks our current so-called method conversations. There are no doubt connections to be drawn among

a critic's psychic orientation toward the world, the hermeneutic tools she deploys when engaged in literary interpretation, and the effect the reading she produces has on readers, students, and the discipline for which her words may become decisive. But those relations are tortuous, and Sedgwick is elsewhere one of our best theorists of the twisty affective energies that flow between a psychology and a text, a text and a method, a reading and an audience: in her notion of the periperformative, for example, she made a crucial addendum to J.L. Austin's catalogue of performative categories. Periperformatives are the utterances that congregate "around" or in the neighborhood of other speech acts: they "refer to or describe explicit performatives," often with an affective or ethical or political charge orthogonal to the original utterance: thus one can refuse to take a dare seriously, express boredom when confronted with a threat, or voice outrage in the face of a promise.⁴⁴ (One of Sedgwick's most powerful examples concerns her own relation to Proust: the effect of his novel's insistence on the emptiness of worldly success, she memorably wrote, was to galvanize her own ambition "to want to publish visibly, to know people, make a go of it, get a run for my money.")⁴⁵ I can think of no better category than the periperformative to describe the incomprehension and sometimes irritation with which I, for example, respond to the hortatory, cheeriness-mandating critical tradition that has grown up in the wake of "Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading"—a tradition that sometimes appears to operate as if the announcement that one speaks reparatively were sufficient to repair anyone in hearing range.

It's not just people that need repair, of course, but the world. The relations between that urgent project and literary hermeneutics are obscure, and variable. One little-remarked fact about Sedgwick's essay is that it gives no concrete examples of how a reparative reading of a text might differ from a paranoid one (no sense, in other words, of how *reading* is specifically at stake in her title's opposition). Every time I have returned to the essay I am startled to remember that the inaugural example of an object that can be "read" paranoiacally or otherwise is not a poem or film or genre but the world-historical fact of AIDS. Sedgwick opens the essay recounting a conversation with Cindy Patton concerning rumors that HIV had been cooked up by the U.S. military. Patton's arresting comment: "I just have trouble getting interested in any of that" (*PR*, 123). Suppose, she continues, "we were sure of every element of a conspiracy"—that the U.S. government finds the lives of Africans, African Americans, gay men and drug users dispensable, that the military spends money researching ways to kill innocents; that

catastrophic change doesn't bother those in power: "What would we know then that we don't already know?" (*PR*, 123) Patton's response suggests to Sedgwick that the hypothetical knowledge that the virus was manmade would be "separable from the question of whether a given AIDS activist intellectual or group might be best used in the tracing and exposure of such a possible plot" (*PR*, 4). In other words, one powerful implication of the anecdote is that it's not clear that a paranoid world-view enjoins you to *do* anything different from what you were already doing.

It may of course be therapeutically useful not to get carried away with the paranoid possibility. "I just have trouble getting interested in any of that" is an eminently reasonable attitude to assume for purposes of self-care, although it's important to note that the attitude in no way discounts the possible truths glimpsed from the paranoid position. But Patton's statement is self-consciously *not* a prescription to change the strategies—we could say the methods—of AIDS activism. Getting condoms distributed, making tests available, getting drugs developed, getting them into bodies, fighting and shaming the entities that refuse to prioritize those goals—clearly, Patton says, these things will need doing regardless. Obviously, the AIDS epidemic is a very different object from a literary text. But precisely this discrepancy helps us see two things: first, that Sedgwick's psychically inflected terms have more to do with emotional states—with sets toward the world—than with literary reading, and to that extent have served to shift our focus *from* reading; second, that when our method debates invoke queer theory they have found it difficult to hold in mind the historical specificities that gave rise to that work in the first place. Sedgwick's essay appeared in 1997, a year after the protease inhibitor drug cocktail began the dramatic, still criminally partial, transformation of the AIDS epidemic in many North American communities; by the time it was republished essentially unaltered in the 2003 collection *Touching Feeling*, that transformation had been underway for the better part of a decade: a hot chronology indeed for those communities most concerned. These facts make it the more curious that while AIDS is an *example* in the essay—in fact a privileged one—it is never considered there as a historical *condition* for the moods of queer criticism. As we've seen, that historicization instead cedes to a characterology. Rather than adopt that characterology, we might note the way it functions here to obscure the historical conditions of its articulation.⁴⁶ Whether and how literary critics choose to remember the height of the AIDS epidemic in North America is no doubt a small item in the scheme of things. But it would

be one of the weirder and less defensible side effects of our method conversations—it would in short be bullshit—if the rehearsals of our recent disciplinary history became an occasion for forgetting the role of AIDS in queer thought.

I've said that Sedgwick's concept of the periperformative is useful in making sense of our method conversations. Those conversations are, after all, speech-acts about prior speech acts of literary criticism, and their distortions are well captured by Sedgwick's interest in the ways periperformatives fail to line up with the energy of the original utterance. And if "Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading" is, as I've claimed, a tendentious periperformative "around" existing criticism, the criticism it most encourages us to dismiss is Sedgwick's own. The essay repeatedly indicates that when she says paranoia has been "completely constitutive" for queer criticism she is "very much including [her] own" work in the description (*PR*, 146). These gestures of self-inculcation have clearly been significant for the essay's reception, and because they have licensed such a consequential shift in our disciplinary self-understanding, it's worth asking whether they are warranted. In my understanding *Epistemology of the Closet* and *Between Men* are tremendously convincing bids to add to collective knowledge, contributions to a shared store of human truth. The social objects of which these books offer such searching accounts—male homosocial desire, the sexual closet—are brimming with paranoid fantasy, but there is no relevant sense in which the interpretive method informing the books could be thus characterized. The paranoid invents structures where none exist; the world he sees is a dark diagram of his projective fantasies. But is there any reason to take Sedgwick's analysis of male homosocial desire less seriously as an account of a real object in literary and social history, than, say, René Girard's analysis of mimetic desire (by which of course Sedgwick was partly inspired)? Any reason to take her phenomenology of the closet as making fewer claims on the truth than, say, Stephen Greenblatt's explication of early modern self-fashioning? To claim otherwise is to misrepresent Sedgwick's own prodigal gifts as a critic—and insofar as she represents the best of what remains a professional habitus, it is to misrepresent the profession generally.

I am not sure that the ability of good criticism to make such claims on truth has any specifiable or fully articulable relation to the

psychological state of the critic. This is something I learned from Sedgwick, who, in the last of the axioms that opens *Epistemology of the Closet* addresses the investments that led her, a straight woman, to devote her formidable analytic attention to an anatomy of the gay male closet. “*The paths of allo-identification are likely to be strange and recalcitrant,*” she writes. “*So are the paths of auto-identification*” (EC, 59). Sedgwick elaborates: “The grounds on which a book like this one might be persuasive or compelling to you . . . are unlikely to be its appeal to some *bienpensant*, evenly valenced lambency of your disinterested attention. Realistically, it takes deeply rooted, durable, and often somewhat opaque energies to write a book; it can take them, indeed, to read it” (EC, 59). This is a portrait of the literary analyst—as filled with murky, strange, vital and obscure motives—that our melodramatized method conversations disavow. What if she meant it? What if it’s true? Accepting that possibility would mean that in interpreting Sedgwick’s work we should begin by according it the psychic density as writing it never ceased to claim for itself. More generally, it would mean that we can stop awaiting the arrival of some fantasized trip-less criticism.

I think I know the kind of thing Sedgwick has in mind when she writes that her early work is devoted to paranoid modes of knowing. The opening paragraph of *Epistemology of the Closet* thrills and discomfits with its totalizing chutzpah:

Epistemology of the Closet proposes that many of the major nodes of thought and knowledge in twentieth-century Western culture as a whole are structured—indeed fractured—by a chronic, now endemic crisis of homo/heterosexual definition. . . . The book will argue that an understanding of virtually any aspect of modern Western culture must be, not merely incomplete, but damaged in its central substance to the degree that it does not incorporate a critical analysis of modern homo/heterosexual definition. (EC, 1)

For a long time I couldn’t take these sentences exactly seriously. It didn’t seem they could be quite in earnest. “Western culture as a whole?” “structured?” “central substance”? Now I notice the precision of the claim: it’s “many” modes of thought (and not every single one) that are structured by homo/hetero difference; it’s not absolutely required that we pay attention to this fact, but to the extent that we want to understand Western culture fully, we should. The precision in no way undermines the breathtaking scale of the claims. These are the sorts of sentences that led Michael Warner to say that queer theory

is characterized by “an aggressive impulse of generalization.”⁴⁷ These sentences mean to be taken seriously. It seems to me now that what excites and perturbs about these lines is not their overreach so much as their plausibility. What if she meant it? What if it’s true?

Taking those questions seriously means refusing to caricature the truth ambitions of queer theory—which in turn means resisting the moralized characterology through which we have been reflecting on our critical practice. The best reason to do this is because it is not our personalities or our psyches or our characters that have led to the depreciation of the humanities’ stock. The causality seems to me pretty clearly to run in the opposite direction: our current tendency to talk about our disciplinary woes as a set of personality problems is the real heroic fantasy, a last-ditch attempt to imagine that we can adjust our position in the world with a change of attitude. The catastrophically constricted job market for English Ph.D.s, which conveys the culture’s contempt for our skills in the clearest terms, can stand here for the material conditions that have contracted the mental and rhetorical space any of us enjoy when talking about the increasingly niche activity of literary criticism. But especially under those conditions, we should be wary of introjecting a rhetoric that offers an impoverished account of what it means to pay attention to texts, a disavowal of the ways aggression and affection and much else can be bound up in any serious reading, and an inattentive account of what major figures have said and of the conditions in which they said it. We have been telling a few lies.

In resisting that habit, recalling queer theory’s truth ambitions can assist. That theory, after all, insisted that in our current configurations of power, any subjectivity that could be exposed could be mobilized as shameful, even as it noted that sexually stigmatized subjects were particularly vulnerable in specifiable and analyzable ways. The writers I quoted at the outset disagree with each other about almost everything, but I think they would concur in the statement that one of the affordances of queer culture is an education in the twin projects of getting over yourself and of taking yourself seriously, even so. Now that literary critics are themselves rapidly becoming bearers of stigmatized identities it would seem more urgent than ever to attend to that lesson.

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NOTES

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¹ Leo Bersani, *Is the Rectum a Grave?*² and *Other Essays* (Chicago: Chicago Univ. Press, 2010), 12.

² Bersani, *Is the Rectum a Grave?*, 12.

³ Bersani, *Is the Rectum a Grave?*, 12.

⁴ Amber Hollibaugh and Cherríe Moraga, “What We’re Rolling Around in Bed With,” in Hollibaugh, *My Dangerous Desires: A Queer Girl Dreaming Her Way Home* (Durham: Duke Univ. Press, 2000), 63, 80.

⁵ Susan Stryker, “My Words to Victor Frankenstein Above the Village of Chamounix: Performing Transgender Rage,” *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 1.3 (1994): 246; Robert Reid-Pharr, “Dinge,” *Women and Performance* 8.2 (1996), reprinted in *Black Gay Man: Essays* (New York: New York Univ. Press, 2001), 86.

⁶ José Esteban Muñoz, *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics* (Minneapolis: Minnesota Univ. Press, 1999), 12; Michael Warner, *The Trouble With Normal: Sex, Politics, and the Ethics of Queer Life* (New York: Free Press, 1999), 35.

⁷ Heather Love, *Feeling Backward: Loss and the Politics of Queer History* (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 2007), 146; Andrea Long Chu, “On Liking Women,” *n+1* 30 (2018): 59.

⁸ For a recent example, see François Cusset’s *The Inverted Gaze: Queering the French Literary Classics in America*, which characterizes *queer* as devoted “to the uncertainty of play” (against the drab identity-fixing of *gay*), and then gives this play an eroticized cast with a host of labored double-entendres (“Tempting fissures appear in the façades of our academies”; “we need to learn to *take* the text, *turn* it over, *penetrate* it, play with its sex, slip ours into it,” and so on). Cusset’s book includes no mention of AIDS or feminism, to take just two of the obvious precipitating contexts for the emergence of queer theory. Note the tonal contrast with Karen Tongson’s recent insistence that, while queers excel at fantasy, play, and projection, “our fantasies are forged . . . from the facts of our shared intelligence, which are far from being untrue even if they aren’t always grounded in what is verifiable fact.” François Cusset, *The Inverted Gaze: Queering the French Literary Classics in America*, trans. David Homel (Vancouver: Arsenal Pulp Press, 2011), 17, 27; Karen Tongson, *Why Karen Carpenter Matters* (Austin: Univ. of Texas Press, 2019), 93.

⁹ In a 2013 piece addressing our supposed post-critique moment, Catherine Gallagher claims that the method conversations rely on slighting “the accomplishments of the disowned past” (Catherine Gallagher, “The Ends of History: Afterword,” *Victorian Studies* 55.4 [2013]: 690). Her focus is on New Historicism’s interest in the complexities of British national consciousness, especially during the imperial expansion of the Victorian period. Her insight might equally apply to queer studies (some of the signal examples of which of course emerged from Foucault-inspired New Historicism).

¹⁰ Amanda Anderson, *Psyche and Ethos: Moral Life after Psychology* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 2018), 88. “The relation between the [public-facing and field-internal speech acts about the humanities] can be hard to discern,” Anderson writes (88).

“The arguments internal to the field tend to cite exhausted scholarly modes in need of overhaul, or to call for a radical shift required by historically evolving forces or hitherto unacknowledged ontological conditions. The public-facing arguments tend to be more modest, more liberal” (88). Anderson urges us to allow considerations of normative value to figure more overtly in field-internal conversations, and to acknowledge that those values already operate there. As my defense of queer commentary’s truth-telling ambitions indicates, I’m in agreement on this point. I’d only amend her picture to suggest out that the public-facing-ness of state-of-the-field talk makes itself visible in internal caricatures of our work as well as in liberal defenses of it.

¹¹ Anahid Nersessian remarks on the dynamic whereby our method conversations take up “combative postures that merely mirror attacks on the field and direct them internally.” Anahid Nersessian, “Who Cares?” *Arcade: Literature, Humanities, and the World*, 2015, (<https://arcade.stanford.edu/content/who-cares>).

¹² Deidre Lynch, *Loving Literature: A Cultural History* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 2015), 12–13.

¹³ Joseph North, *Literary Criticism: A Concise Political History* (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 2017), 3.

¹⁴ North, *Literary Criticism*, 171; Timothy Aubry, *Guilty Aesthetic Pleasures* (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 2019), 15.

¹⁵ Rita Felski, *The Limits of Critique* (Chicago: Chicago Univ. Press, 2015), 33, 35, 130, 149, 146. Hereafter abbreviated *LC* and cited parenthetically by page number.

¹⁶ Michael Warner comments on the continental resonances of the English term:

Kant’s English translators used the French word *critique* to translate the German word *kritik*, thus creating within English a difference between *criticism* and *critique*. This may have been done to capture the special sense of *kritik* in Kant as (in Walter Benjamin’s phrase) “an esoteric term for the incomparable and completed philosophical standpoint”; but its subsequent usage is much broader. Ever since, critical reading has been identified with an ideal of critique as a negative movement of distanciation, whether of disengagement or repudiation. (“Uncritical Reading,” in *Polemic: Critical or Uncritical*, ed. Jane Gallop [New York: Routledge, 2012]: 24)

Warner may be right that any invocation of “critical” reading entails these Kantian postulates; I am less sure the English term summons the full range of Europhilic (that is, comically pretentious) associations Felski suggests—especially when we are talking about the practice of “literary criticism,” which operates connotatively, as Warner notes, at an even further distance from Kantian “Kritik.”

¹⁷ See Felski, *The Limits of Critique*, 30–34. On Ricoeur’s interest in “a writing in which critical demystification and phenomenological encounter [are] fused,” see Zachary Samalin, “Plumbing the Depths, Scouring the Surface: Henry Mayhew’s Scavenger Hermeneutics,” *New Literary History* 48.2 (2017): 387–410, 405. Samalin’s main concern in this essay, not incidentally, is to locate the origins of “depth” hermeneutics in a variety of material and intellectual nineteenth-century contexts, and to insist how little of the “sheer variety of nineteenth-century profundities” is captured by a binary opposition between surface and depth (391).

¹⁸ Felski, *Literature After Feminism* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 2003), 3.

¹⁹ Felski, *Literature After Feminism*, 6.

²⁰ Heather Love, “Critique Is Ordinary,” *PMLA* 132.2 (2017): 367. See also Felski, “Response,” *PMLA* 132.2 (2017): 384–391, especially 390.

²¹ See, for example, David Halperin's *Saint Foucault: Towards a Gay Hagiography* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1997), which explores the ways Foucault's reception was colored by his sexuality and death, and Carolyn Dinshaw's *Getting Medieval: Sexualities and Communities, Pre- and Postmodern* (Durham: Duke Univ. Press, 1999), which reads Foucault's surprisingly warm correspondence with the historian John Boswell in terms of a gay communitarian impulse.

²² Michel Foucault, "Lives of Infamous Men," in *The Essential Works of Foucault, 1954–1984, Volume 3: Power*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: New Press, 2000), 157.

²³ On all of this, see Halperin, *Saint Foucault*, 21–31.

²⁴ Pierre Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life: Spiritual Exercises from Socrates to Foucault*, trans. Michael Chase (Malden: Blackwell, 1995), 211.

²⁵ Michel Foucault, "Parrēsia," *Critical Inquiry* 41 (2015): 226, 247.

²⁶ Stephen Best and Sharon Marcus, "Surface Reading: An Introduction," *Representations* 108.1 (2009): 1. Hereafter abbreviated *SR* and cited parenthetically by page number.

²⁷ Lisa Duggan's *Sapphic Slashers* identifies the triangle between two women and a man as one of the key scenes of American modernity; that Duggan's book focuses on a case in which the jealous woman murdered her female lover suggests that the scenario I've identified in "Surface Reading" may have its unsavory undercurrents. Duggan mentions *The Bostonians*, along with Gertrude Stein's *Fernhurst*, D. H. Lawrence's *The Fox*, and Radclyffe Hall's *The Well of Loneliness* as "novels [that] featured elements of the lesbian love murder narrative." *Sapphic Slashers: Sex, Violence, and American Modernity* (Durham: Duke Univ. Press, 2001), 187.

²⁸ Marcus, "Fighting Bodies, Fighting Words: A Politics of Rape Prevention," in *Feminists Theorize the Political*, ed. Judith Butler and Joan W. Scott (New York: Routledge, 1992), 392; 399.

²⁹ Marcus, "Fighting Bodies, Fighting Words," 400.

³⁰ Best, *None Like Us: Blackness, Belonging, Aesthetic Life* (Durham: Duke Univ. Press, 2018), 15.

³¹ Best, *None Like Us*, 71.

³² Her journals give a vivid a sense of the social contexts of the "erotic" for the Susan Sontag of the 1960s: the florid sexual taxonomies of the dyke bars in the Tenderloin, a Greenwich Village awash in lesbian triangles worthy of the pulps. See Sontag, *Reborn: Journals and Notebooks, 1947–1963* (New York: Farrar Straus Giroux, 2008).

³³ Oscar Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, in *The Complete Works of Oscar Wilde: Stories, Plays, Poems, and Essays* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1989), 17. See also Richard Poirier, *The Performing Self: Compositions and Decompositions in the Languages of Contemporary Life* (Oxford Univ. Press, 1971) and *The Comic Sense of Henry James: A Study of the Early Novels* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1960); Robert Garis, *The Dickens Theatre: A Reassessment of the Novels* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1965) and *Following Balanchine* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1995); and Halperin, *What Do Gay Men Want? An Essay on Sex, Risk, and Subjectivity* (Ann Arbor: Univ. of Michigan Press, 2007).

³⁴ Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, Vol. 1*, trans. Richard Hurley (1976; New York: Vintage, 1978), 105. For a partial analysis of this tradition, see Nicholas de Villiers, whose 2012 book *Opacity and the Closet: Queer Tactics in Foucault, Barthes, and Warhol* (Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 2012) resists what he calls "the ideology of depth" (184). Didier Eribon explicitly draws a line from English aestheticism to Foucault's thinking: "All the themes that one finds put forward by Pater, Symonds,

or Wilde can be found again in Foucault.” *Insult and the Making of the Gay Self*, trans. Michael Lucey (Durham: Duke Univ. Press, 2004,) 248.

³⁵ Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1990), 1. Hereafter abbreviated *EC* and cited parenthetically by page number.

³⁶ Sedgwick, “Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading, or, You’re So Paranoid, You Probably Think This Essay is About You,” in *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performance* (Durham: Duke Univ. Press, 2003), 138. Hereafter abbreviated *PR* and cited parenthetically by page number. The essay originally appeared in slightly different form as the introduction to the collection *Novel Gazing: Queer Readings in Fiction* (Durham: Duke Univ. Press, 1997).

³⁷ Bersani, *The Culture of Redemption* (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1990), 188. Sedgwick cites Bersani’s phrase at *PR*, 126.

³⁸ Bersani, *Culture*, 188.

³⁹ Bersani, *Culture*, 189. The first chapter of the book, “Death and Literary Authority: Marcel Proust and Melanie Klein,” argues that both authors are indebted to a fixated, redemptive thinking that also contains the seeds of a contrary impulse “to desymbolize reality [as] the precondition for reeroticizing reality” (28).

⁴⁰ An investment in a dualism that doesn’t acknowledge itself as one, and a tendency to cast dualisms as characterologies, were durable impulses in Sedgwick’s work, a fact best emblemized by a posthumously published piece responding to papers by two practicing analysts, Jeffrey R. Guss and Stephen Botticelli. Faulting what she describes as Guss’s investment in masculinity, Sedgwick creates a fanciful typology differentiating young men who would be well served by Guss’s therapy (“Youth A”) from those for whom therapy with Guss would be “less successful” (“Youth B”). The imaginary men grouped as Youth A are “gay but not queer”; those described as Youth B are “queer, though they might not be so sure of being gay.” The former identify easily with maleness and male privilege; their forms of interaction with women are “conventional” and “limited”; “[r]edefining identities and fooling with categories, in general, are not among their pleasures and needs, however much anal sex may be.” The latter group, by contrast, is described in lavish novelistic detail and with Sedgwick’s trademark wit: Youth B may have been punished for his effeminacy, or “for interests or attainments that are just eccentric (bicycles, ancient Greek)”; he “may go through a hyperreligious phase” and is interested in the experience of older people, “sharing a grandmother’s bedroom, hanging out (if hyperreligious) with the nuns”; he is fascinated by “transsexual stories, as if sure that those carry some personal message, if only it can be defined”; his relations to his mother “may grow richer over the decades—as it did for Wilde, Proust, Warhol, and even the brilliantly masculine Walt Whitman”; finally, “redefining identities and fooling around with gender categories provide lifelong, tonic, and challenging nurturance to Youth B’s imagination.” Sedgwick winkingly acknowledges the partisan nature of her binary by saying that although her description of Youth B may “look like a covert personals ad,” in fact it “celebrates friends long present” in her life. But this typology’s most bewildering feature is its insouciant suggestion—very much against *Epistemology of the Closet*’s first axiom, which famously unfolds the variety of ways “people are different from each other” (*EC*, 22)—that *this* need go with *that*: Axiom 1 reminds us that there is no reason why a man’s firm sense of his gayness (or of his masculinity, or of his pleasure in anal sex) would impossibilize a close relationship with his mother, or signal an investment in masculine dominance; or why only men with less definitive gender identifications and sexual orientations should have intellectual lives worth mentioning, or can be friends with older people, and so on. That

Sedgwick's rigid categorical structure faults gay "Youth A" for failing to enjoy "fooling around with categories" is only the most flagrant of its ironies. "Anality: News from the Front," in Sedgwick, *The Weather in Proust*, ed. Jonathan Goldberg (Durham: Duke Univ. Press, 2011), 176–77.

⁴¹ Robyn Wiegman, "The Times We're in: Queer Feminist Criticism and the Reparative Turn," *Feminist Theory* 15.1 (2014): 19, 18.

⁴² Lauren Berlant and Lee Edelman, *Sex, Or the Unbearable* (Duke Univ. Press, 2014), 44.

⁴³ Fleissner writes that "in the years since Sedgwick's essay, the reparative mode has become much more associated with the very opposite of the 'depressive': with, rather, the same apparently untroubled, self-avowedly depthless cheeriness we see in Latour" (Jennifer L. Fleissner, "Romancing the Real: Bruno Latour, Ian McEwan, and Postcritical Monism," in *Critique and Postcritique*, ed. Elizabeth S. Anker and Felski [Durham: Duke Univ. Press, 2017], 116). Fleissner's aim is to remind us of subtleties in Sedgwick's analysis glossed over in such simplifications—in particular the depressive position's realist commitment to working with the recalcitrant facts of the given world. I would just note that the simplification was first performed by the essay's own rhetorical and titular self-framing.

⁴⁴ Sedgwick, "Around the Performative: Periperformative Vicinities in Nineteenth-Century Narrative," in *Touching Feeling*, 68.

⁴⁵ Sedgwick, *Epistemology*, 240.

⁴⁶ In "Melanie Klein and the Difference Affect Makes," Sedgwick notes that her earlier essay

overlooked the crudest, most contingent, and probably also most important reason why paranoia seems so built into queer theory as such. To quite get that, I think one has to have experienced gay life in the 1980s and early 1990s, when queer theory was still a tentative, emergent itinerary. That was also the moment when AIDS was a new and nearly untreatable disease. ("Melanie Klein and the Difference Affect Makes," *South Atlantic Quarterly* 106.3 [2007]: 638).

The acknowledgment does not alter her diagnosis of the status of paranoia in queer thought (rather than a reflexive habit, one might have thought this history would render queer theory's alleged paranoia utterly rational), nor does it mention that AIDS did appear in a key role in the earlier essay, but as topic of analysis rather than as conditioning historical fact.

⁴⁷ Michael Warner, "Introduction," in *Fear of a Queer Planet*, ed. Warner (Minneapolis: Minnesota Univ. Press, 1993), xxvi.