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## WHAT'S LEFT? MARXISM, LITERATURE AND CULTURE IN THE 21ST CENTURY

# Form at its Limits: Edward Said, Marxism, and the Valences of Critique

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In his 1936 essay 'Narrate or Describe', György Lukács writes: 'when a writer attempts as an observer and describer to achieve a comprehensive description, he must either reject any principle of selection, undertake an inexhaustible labour of Sisyphus or simply emphasize the picturesque and superficial aspects best adapted to description'. Nearly 80 years later, Bruno Latour would write that description is 'the highest and rarest achievement'. However differently these two thinkers conceive of description, the passages above seem to mark the crux of a contemporary problem for literary studies. The recent groundswell of methodological polemics on the one hand (Rita Felski, Heather Love, Stephen Best and Sharon Marcus) and formal polemics on the other (Caroline Levine, Anna Kornbluh, W. J. T. Mitchell) appears to be symptomatic of an anxiety about literary studies more generally. We might best be able to capture this anxiety in the form of a question: what exactly is it that we—literary scholars—do? This article argues that the (re)turn to form and the turn to post-critique are of a shared moment and derive from this shared concern. Further, and perhaps most crucially, we argue that no amount of surface topography nor formal ingenuity will answer the question that undergirds both. Rather, we argue that it is an attention to form at its limits that will serve our contemporary moment. As such, we turn to the work of Edward Said as a case study for literary criticism and theory that anticipates these contemporary debates and suggests various ways forward.

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*When a writer attempts as an observer and describer to achieve a comprehensive description, he must either reject any principle of selection, undertake an inexhaustible labour of Sisyphus or simply emphasize the picturesque and superficial aspects best adapted to description.*

— György Lukács, 'Narrate or Describe?' (1936)

*No scholar should find humiliating the task of sticking to description. This is, on the contrary, the highest and rarest achievement.*

— Bruno Latour, *Reassembling the Social: Introduction to Actor-Network Theory* (2005)

## Introduction

Conceiving of description as either an untenable ambition (Lukács) or *the* measure of a critic's success (Latour), the passages above—written nearly 80 years apart and by thinkers of expressly different commitments—mark out the crux of a contemporary problem for literary studies. Indeed, the recent groundswell of methodological polemics on the one hand (Rita Felski, Heather Love, Stephen Best, Sharon Marcus) and formal polemics on the other (Caroline Levine, Marjorie Levinson, Tom Eysers) appears to be symptomatic of an anxiety about literary studies more generally (see Felski, 2015; Love, 2010; Best and Marcus, 2009; Levine, 2015; Levinson, 2007; Eysers, 2017). We might best be able to capture this anxiety in the form of a question: what exactly is it that we—literary critics—do? This article contends that the (re)turn to form and the turn to post-critique are of a shared moment and derive from this shared concern. Further, and perhaps most crucially, we argue that no amount of surface topography nor formal ingenuity will answer the question that underwrites both. Rather, we argue that it is an attention to form *at its limits* (including and expanding on traditional Marxist formalisms) that will serve our contemporary moment. As such, we will first mark out the dominant positions of this debate by addressing both post-critique and the long legacy of Marxist literary criticism—understanding the former's rejection of literary politics as a provocation for a renewed and expanded critical modality more consonant with the latter—before

turning to a thinker whom scholars have less evidently situated at either pole of the dispute: Edward Said. Said's work, while rarely taken up by either Marxists or post-critical theorists, can, we will argue, be seen as deeply invested in the defining questions of each and so offers a method that pushes through the intellectual deadlock of the current moment.

While post-critique's elision of the politics of literature may at first appear capable of countermanding the perceived negativity of so-called suspicious hermeneutics, it no doubt remains inadequate to the historical-material conjunctures that produce that literature in the first place. To put it bluntly: post-critique's dream of the pleasures of attachment appears willfully disconnected from the immiserating present in which we are all forced to live. We aim, then, to remap Marxist literary criticism across a tableau of variously connected traditions askance—and sometimes even opposed—to its own self-identity. This type of dialogue will require a generosity of thinking that will, in turn, require specific conceptual and formal tools. These tools, we propose, come to us from a wide breadth of traditions, from Marxist literary studies to postcolonial theory, and find productive alignment under the rubric of form. Said's work enters to offer affirmative expression of a sustained formal attitude, deeply committed to the political stakes of the text at hand. While, at its most refined, Marxist criticism does this, Said's particular arrangement of formal-historical commitments still stands as urgent and exemplary. We essay here a sketch of this dialogue in the hopes of spurring on further investigation.

## **I. The Way We 'Read' Now**

In the fall of 2009, *Representations* ran a by-now notorious special issue entitled 'The Way We Read Now'. In the introductory essay, co-editors Stephen Best and Sharon Marcus introduced and detailed a new methodology for literary criticism. This essay took the form of a deflationary call to arms, asking that literary critics stop their 'heroic' hermeneutics (suspicious or otherwise), and begin to pragmatically, reasonably and simply perceive *what is* in the text. This attention to presence over absence—surface over depth—they argue, is 'surface reading' (Best and Marcus, 2009:

5). Surface reading thus emerges in opposition to a host of established schools of criticism, though Best and Marcus take Fredric Jameson as their synecdochic enemy. Indeed, 'Surface Reading' opposes the legacy of symptomatic reading and constitutes an especially presentist, though in no way isolated, argument. Since 'The Way We Read Now' (and its 2014 companion issue, 'Denotatively, Technically, Literally', co-edited by Elaine Freedgood and Cannon Schmitt), a particular moment in literary studies has come into view, one which Jeffrey J. Williams (2015) terms 'The New Modesty in Literary Criticism'. Williams rightly sees Best and Marcus's intervention as part of a larger trend that includes Franco Moretti's 'distant reading', Heather Love's revival of 'thin description', and a larger (though more polyvalent) return to formalism. These decidedly 'modest' proposals all gather around a rejection of symptomatic reading, ideological critique and the long, complicated history of deconstruction.

With the recent release of Rita Felski's polemic *The Limits of Critique*, this critical attitude seems to have coalesced into a subfield of its own, which Felski terms 'post-critique'. Post-critique, indebted to and including Susan Sontag's foundational 'Against Interpretation', Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's 'Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading', and Bruno Latour's 'Why Has Critique Run Out of Steam?', as well as other, more contemporary iterations, wagers that the way forward for literary scholars is to trace, map and describe the work at hand, rather than attempting to heroically '[wrest] truths from the hidden depths' (Best and Marcus, 2009: 13; see also Sontag, 1962; Sedgwick, 2003; Latour, 2004). In the words of Sontag (invoked favorably by Best and Marcus and Felski both), the task of the critic is to show 'that it is what it is, rather than ... show what it means'. The privileged element here is 'what it is'—being, not meaning. The perhaps obvious response would be this: if the text *is* what it is, why does the critic need to show us? The question is thus not only one of the relationship between surface and depth, but the relationship between interpretation and literary meaning as well. Heather Love (2010) elaborates on this paradigm, opposing 'depth hermeneutics' of meaning to methods of 'description' and 'literalism'. A turn to the literal collapses 'what it is' into what it means. Bracketing the seeming impossibility of a true literality of language (an onomatopoetic sign), Love posits description

instead as a liberating tool, drawing critics away from their overzealous interpretive spelunking into the considerably more modest light of day.

From this perspective, description can be taken as a certain especially robust form of post-critical methodology. Reading sociologists Erving Goffman and Latour as models for description along an 'antihumanist' bent, Love (2010: 381) suggests in her case study of Toni Morrison's *Beloved* that description evades 'the ethical heroism of the critic, who gives up his role of interpreting divine messages to take up a position as a humble analyst and observer'. Felski, on the other hand, implicitly turns description into a substitute for critique. 'My aim', she writes, 'is not just to describe but to *re-describe* this style of thinking [critique]: to offer a fresh slant on a familiar practice in the hope of getting a clearer sense of how and why critics read' (Felski, 2016: 2). This, at first blush, returns us to the organizing question of the present essay: 'what is it that literary scholars do?' But it also again elides the question of interpretation. Re-describing critique (not, as Felski is wont to insist, *critiquing* critique) offers nothing in the way of textual meaning. Rather, it posits an affective relation: Felski urges us to describe what she calls the *mood* of critique and the way readers form attachments to literary works, an implicit divergence from Love's antihumanism. Indeed, rather than mood and attachment, Love instead turns to Latour for 'a renewed empiricism' (2010: 382). The turn to empiricism—recalling a commitment to the programmatic scientism of certain digital methodologies—betrays a commitment to objectivity: a familiar trope of the de-centered human, but with a new twist. The 'humble analyst' is not just de-centered, but outside the frame entirely, able to observe with a disinterested discretion free from any socio-political commitments (Love, 2010: 381–2). What emerges, then, is an as yet incoherent methodology. Post-critical methods demand a retreat from depth, but fail to organize around any positive hermeneutic. We offer this *precis* of divergent and at times conflicting iterations of both description and post-critique in order to emphasize the difficulty of our present critical impasse. In order to further understand this terrain (and its significance for Marxist literary studies) we will now turn to a brief genealogy of Marxism's relation to form.

## II. History and Form

Description's valorized position in these post-critical currents strikes a resonating, if dissonant, chord in the long, irretrievably heterogeneous tradition of Marxist literary criticism. While description for thinkers like Best and Marcus, Latour, and Felski holds the potential for a more modest mode of literary engagement, for others located along the interwoven registers of Marxism and form, description has remained wholly inadequate. Lukács frequently figures as a touchstone here, evidenced most recently by a 2016 special issue of *Mediations*, which turned to the centenary of *Theory of the Novel* as an occasion, in editor Anna Kornbluh's (2016: 2) words, to 'honor simultaneously the historicizing endeavor and the theorizing gambit' of Lukács' early, still intensely relevant work. As Tom Eyers (2016: 85) added in his contribution on form as formalization—as a process rather than a set of procedures—*Theory of the Novel* remains a 'still-crucial' tool for developing 'a new way of thinking literary form'. For Eyers, history must be understood as already formal, 'already structured, never quite "content" to literature's "form"'. This echoes Jameson's (1971: 403–4) own insistence that 'content does not need to be treated or interpreted because it is itself already essentially and immediately meaningful[.] ... Content', Jameson writes, 'is already concrete'. As a throughline of Marxist literary criticism—from Lukács to Jameson to Eyers—form mediates the concrete (content); it makes intelligible the mounting wreckage of history.

Lukács' work, for Eyers and, by extension, for the present essay, continues to provide rich resources for expanding this history-form polemic by opening onto a set of relations between essence and life, between meaning and what Lukács (1970: 135) would come to call the 'intensive existence of objects'. In the radical reconfiguration of human connections by capital's alienating, quantifiable measurements—in short, by way of the processes of reification—modernity for Lukács has abandoned the formal essence immanent to life. The epic world has given way to the historical situation of the novel (modernity), where narrative mediates between the now-antipodal points of essence and life, form and history. Lukács (1970: 127) understood description as a narrative strategy emptied of temporal (more historically critical) movement, whereby the 'inner poetry of life'—the poetry of human beings in

struggle, so central to the epic construction—has been overtaken by the inevitable product of capitalism's 'dehumanization of social life [and] the general debasement of humanity': namely, the descriptive method.

In *Marxism and Form* Jameson (1971: 163) would consolidate and make commonplace reading Lukács along these lines by weaving the latter's work into the Hegelian fabric of the concrete and the abstract, the 'chief conceptual opposition within which all of Lukács' examination of literature has taken place'. For it is within the literature of the industrial age, Jameson (1970: 164) tells us, that 'the elements of the work begin to flee their human center: a kind of dissolution of the human sets in, a kind of centrifugal dispersal in which paths lead out at every point into the ... not-human.' For Lukács, these complexities and tensions—these dissolutions and dispersals—materialize at the level of narrative form: 'Lukács' work', Jameson (1971: 163) writes, 'may be seen as a continuous and lifelong meditation on narrative'. Narrative provides, Jameson (1971: 205) suggests, the condition of possibility for 'revolutionary practice itself, to depend on those privileged historical moments in which access to society as a totality may once again somehow be reinvented'. Thought this way, narrative organizes the world not *as it is* but rather *as it might be*: it supplies a 'formal sign', in Jameson's (1971: 205) words, to express 'historical substance'.

Jameson's reading of Lukács remains important for many reasons, not least because it helps us rethink the relation between history and form—and, by extension, Marxism and literature. Further, it makes clearer how the literary-formal valences of Lukács' work, further embedded within Marxist literary criticism by way of Jameson—along with others like Raymond Williams, Terry Eagleton and (before distancing himself from texts) Franco Moretti—take up a dialectical energy underdetermined by more ostensibly empirical, objectively determined critical strategies. We might, for example, think of Jameson's (1981: 61) 'distinct semantic horizons' in *The Political Unconscious* as formal categories operating within and unconsciously betrayed by narrative, as releasing those symptomatic pressures of what the work does not (and ultimately cannot) say. Williams' (1977: 187) own attention to what he called the 'problem of form' as a 'problem of the relations between social (collective) modes and individual projects' (one of many entanglements cultural materialism aims to



unravel) further shapes Marxist criticism around the contours of literary form by retrieving cultural production from the servient contingencies of a superstructure.

Beyond the boundaries of, though in many ways registering with, the conversations above, other important interventions into the history-form relationship have recently negotiated—to various degrees of success—the tensions between post-critique and Marxist literary criticism. Perhaps the most well-known foray into this interdisciplinary debate has come from Caroline Levine, whose recent *Forms* braids otherwise delineated literary and social forms, charting (for just one early example) *Jane Eyre's* first-person narration alongside its depiction of a 19th-century school's disciplinary order (2015: 2). For Levine (2015: 3), forms indicate an arrangement of elements, '*an ordering, patterning, or shaping*' of interwoven texts and contexts borne out by networks, hierarchies and rhythms. The reason Levine's text is so relevant to the present essay lies in its powerful synthetic claims. More than anything else, *Forms* is a work concerned with the relationship between aesthetics and politics, and the methodologies best suited to clarify such complex formal relations. Levine's (2015: xiii) ultimate wager is that 'literary formalists have precisely the tools to grasp this formal complexity and, with them, begin to imagine workable, progressive, thoughtful relations among forms—including containing wholes, rhythms of labor, economic, racial and sexual hierarchies, and sprawling, connective networks of capital'. Here we can see how Levine's formalism is deeply connected to Marxist commitments, all the while drawing on myriad related critical concerns. Indeed, Levine's formalism is perhaps best defined by its capacious reach. The point here is not to suggest that Levine fails to register antagonisms, contradictions or genuine disagreements among theoretical camps; rather, it is to suggest that she works to find points of connection so as to build new models for the theorization of aesthetic and political forms. With this effort in mind, we would like to take Levine as one model for critical work going forward, due in large part to her ability to speak freely among otherwise antagonistic voices.

Taking these disparate but interwoven currents as the shape of our contemporary literary-critical conjuncture, in the next section we would like to turn toward Edward Said, an often overlooked and unacknowledged precedent, crucial, we argue, to these

debates. It may seem perverse to take the antagonism between post-critique and Marxism as an impetus to return to Said's work, especially given his relative absence from either side. More perverse still that Said has never been affiliated with form—the term which we have thus far understood to connect the contemporary debate. However, our reading of Said will not only consider his relevance to the various disputes, but will also recast him as a critic deeply invested in the intersections between literature, politics and form. Thinking of Said as a formalist, or at least as a critic sharply attuned to formal problems, requires some explication, if not explanation. Still, if (as our argument goes) form is the category that pushes forward through the intellectual deadlock of the contemporary moment, Said's career becomes an exemplary case study in shifting commitments, unexpected arrangements and relentless critical energy. We will thus first consider Said's relationship to the question of form in order to suggest the moments in Said's work that we think are most relevant to the long history of Marxist critique. What will emerge, then, is a Said concerned with and crucial to contemporary debates, yet removed from his traditional home in various fields of historicism, most notably those related to post- and decolonial theory.

### III. The Forms of Edward Said

From early in his career, Said gestured toward a theory of literature by way of his second book, *Beginnings*; he further developed and refined this theory through various interventions, including *Orientalism*, *The World, the Text, and the Critic*, and—in what is perhaps his most unified and wide-ranging study—1993's *Culture and Imperialism*. These polyvalent works draw upon Foucauldian archeology, Lukácsian literary history and Birmingham School cultural analysis, and they cut across these critical schools with readings as attentive to dominant canons as they are to emergent, always shifting modes of analysis. The question remains, however: in what way is Said a formalist? We would like to suggest that Said produces several literary-critical models which might productively be called formal and which Said has to offer these contemporary frictions. To do this, though, will require thinking of Said less as a literary critic, and more as a literary theorist; it will require thinking of Said as a maker of concepts. This is somewhat counterintuitive, given Said's well-known

polemics against theory as such. Nonetheless, if we take theory as a mode of thinking that requires abstraction and speculation, political insight, and deep attention, Said's career is rife with theoretical commitments. Take, for just one well-known example, Said's (1978: 3) acknowledged debt to Michel Foucault in *Orientalism*, where, in his words, he 'found it useful ... to employ Michel Foucault's notion of a discourse, as described by [Foucault] in *The Archaeology of Knowledge* and in *Discipline and Punish*, to identify Orientalism'.

Said would later break with Foucault, though he would remain committed to thinkers like Antonio Gramsci, Raymond Williams and Theodor Adorno. The point here is not to trace an accurate bibliography of Said's influences and citations, but rather to identify his ongoing commitment to theoretical work in general. That is, Said may have broken with specific thinkers, but he never broke with the work of theory in general. Perhaps more importantly, it should not go unnoticed that the thinkers who remain so crucial to Said are, indeed, committed Marxists of various (if ill-defined) strains. This is not to suggest that, by proximity, Said himself was a Marxist; the relationship between Marxism and Said's work has already been undertaken by a number of valuable articles and monographs (see, for instance, Achcar, 2013; San Juan Jr, 2007; Howe, 2007). But while Marxist formalism and Said's formalism remain quite distinct, they are not distinct enough to merit the disciplinary fracture that has so often divided them. Said understands literature as formalizing historical discontinuity and so takes imperialism as his central paradigm. In his own words, imperialism is 'the determining political horizon of modern Western culture'. Marxist literary criticism understands literature as formalizing the uneven developments and contradictions of capital, and so takes the mode of production to be central. But the literary-critical insistence on form that drives both Saidian and Marxist analysis, we argue, provides a language for understanding how these histories (those of capital and of empire) manifest at the level of the text. More to the point, specific formal commitments operative throughout Said's work—namely, counterpoint and affiliation—take shape alongside the formal commitments of Marxist criticism.

Both of these formal projects bear more than an incidental relation to the post-critical turn detailed above. Indeed, 'how we read now' is also certainly a question of how we read *then*: implied in this rejection of past failures (the vulgarized triumvirate of Marxism, psychoanalysis, deconstruction) is the affirmation of new successes (surface, distant, descriptive reading). What is lost, then, is precisely the past intervention we suggest Said represents. In other words, to evaluate Marxist literary criticism *today* requires thinking dialectically about our past, not along partisan politico-critical lines, but from the position of totality itself. The difficulty of this task, of course, is self-evident, though Jameson (1971: 306) voices it nicely in *Marxism and Form*: 'the peculiar difficulty of dialectical writing lies in its totalizing character: as though you could not say any one thing until you had first said everything'. This totalization is, for Jameson, expressly formal. '[L]ike the other great contemporary philosophical systems', he writes, it is 'not a discovery of new content, but an innovation in form[.] ... Faced with the operative procedures of the nonreflective thinking mind ... dialectical thought tries not so much to complete and perfect the application of such procedures as *to widen its own attention to include them in its awareness as well*' (Jameson, 1971: 307). Dialectical thought appears as a grand process of concentric expansion, constantly absorbing the negative and incorporating it as structural necessity.

Unexpectedly, the 'ever-widening nets of exposition' particular to Jameson's understanding of the dialectic lead us directly to Said's methodological formulations throughout *Culture and Imperialism*. There, Said introduces and theorizes what he calls contrapuntal reading, or, to put it more simply, counterpoint. To read contrapuntally, Said (1993: 51) tells us, is to read 'with a simultaneous awareness both of the metropolitan history that is narrated and of those other histories *against which* (and *together* with which) the dominating discourse acts'. So, in the first instance, we can understand counterpoint to be methodological: it is a mode of a reading and interpreting, the cultivation of an awareness of the always already incomplete nature of discursive formations. At the same time, though, counterpoint is expressly political, with some more or less explicit commitments. Indeed, Said's

injunction demands that we read in terms of the metropole and its others, to read for the play of presence and absence that so defines any literary account. This may at first appear to be a broadly symptomatic approach. That is, a reader looks for the absence that would be constitutive of presence, and so understands what the text cannot speak (in another, more Jamesonian key, this absence might be called repression). The now-canonical example is Said's reading of *Mansfield Park*, where the Bertrams' plantations in Antigua are mentioned but never visited, appearing only gesturally, never taking predominance as *the* colonial form that makes available the entire world of *Mansfield Park*. Said (1993: 66) extends this example toward a methodological imperative grounded in the resistance to empire:

We now know that these non-European peoples did not accept with indifference the authority projected over them, or the general silence on which their presence in variously attenuated forms is predicated. We must therefore read the great canonical texts, and perhaps also the entire archive of modern and pre-modern European and American culture, with an effort to draw out, extend, give emphasis and voice to what is silent or marginally present or ideologically represented ... in such works.

While the passage above points to certain specific political engagements, counterpoint seems for us to contain within it formal possibilities that would allow Said to be read as a thinker of literature not only in its political and historical, but also aesthetic and theoretical, dimensions. Recalling Jameson's formulation above, this is not the discovery of new content, but rather an innovation of form. Said sees the literary object as having formalized a wealth of historico-political as well as aesthetic content, always already there, but borne out by a contrapuntal stratagem. As such, we elect not to take up directly any of Said's readings in *Culture and Imperialism* on the basis that they are for the most part brief, episodic and, to be sure, incomplete. This is not to take away from the agility of Said's readings, but rather to suggest that they themselves were suggestions—that the emphasis of the text is a formal understanding of the fact of empire and its permeating force.

R. Radhakrishnan (2012: 24) neatly glosses these valences of counterpoint in his *Said Dictionary*, writing that:

With the “contrapuntal” yoking together of Culture and Imperialism in his 1993 book, Said opens up a way of reading cultural texts that goes beyond the politics of blame and guilt[,] ... Counterpoint is structured in relationality, which is to say that it is intentional not arbitrary, a structural elaboration and not a fortuitous or un-self-reflexive mode of expression. The relationship acknowledges and valorizes simultaneously both independence and interdependence.

Radhakrishnan's emphasis on the conjunctive '*and*' here is crucial, in that it represents an effort to think about counterpoint holistically. This, in many ways, is an elaboration of Walter Benjamin (whom Said quotes favorably), for whom the simultaneity of culture and barbarism is taken as both primary and binding (Benjamin, 1969: 253–65). But there is something more, too, that we can glimpse in Radhakrishnan's reading. Reading contrapuntally involves a reading of cultural texts that refuses 'the politics of blame and guilt', in Radhakrishnan's (2012: 18) words, what Said calls elsewhere 'the rhetoric of blame' (1993: 18). What is crucial here is Said's effort not to dismiss artifacts of civilization as mere repositories of barbarism, but rather to read them contrapuntally, as forming a contradictory whole. This presupposes a certain theory of the work of art (and specifically for Said, the literary work). Here, while the work is whole, it somehow differs from itself, speaking from both sides of its mouth. Reading contrapuntally is a process attentive to relationality, to 'intertwined and overlapping histories' always already present in an otherwise calcified aesthetic whole (Said, 1993: 14).

For many critics, the connection between contrapuntal reading and dialectical thought goes unnoticed.<sup>1</sup> This makes sense, for counterpoint and the dialectic are

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<sup>1</sup> This is certainly not true across the board. Sophia McClennen, for instance, makes note of the (potential) relationship, but suggests that counterpoint is simply a 'less loaded term' (2004: 33). For his part, W. J. T. Mitchell understands Said's relationship to the dialectic and counterpoint in terms of his (Said's) humanism, writing that 'Humanism for Said was always a dialectical concept' (Mitchell, 2005: 462).

by no means homologous. Said himself thinks of his project as a broad *supplement* to other critical modalities, modalities that, in Said's account, too often overlook their complicity with imperial domination. Said is critical (though not dismissive) of such approaches, and so offers contrapuntal reading as a means of deepening these otherwise important projects. Said (1993: 56) writes, 'To read most cultural deconstructionists, or Marxists, or new historicists is to read writers whose political horizon, whose historical location is within a society and culture deeply enmeshed in imperial domination'. Discussing the difficulty of the contradiction between complicity with imperialism on the one hand, and theorizing a given sociopolitical position on the other, Said (1993: 56) recovers a certain crucial relationship between contrapuntal and dialectical thought:

My homemade resolution of the antitheses between involvement and theory has been a broad perspective from which one could view both culture and imperialism and from which the large historical dialectic between one and the other might be observed even though its myriad details cannot be except occasionally. I shall proceed on the assumption that whereas the whole of a culture is a disjunct one, many important sectors of it can be apprehended as working contrapuntally together.

Here, Said affirms that the categories of 'culture' and 'imperialism' are a part of a 'large historical dialectic', but that the details of such a dialectic cannot be observed, 'except occasionally'. The cultural whole is cast as 'disjunct', containing within it the seeds of disunity and non-identity that make something like *Mansfield Park* possible. Understanding this disjunct, Said tells us, requires counterpoint.

The relationship between counterpoint and the dialectic above is not entirely clear, particularly because the question of *which* dialectic (or perhaps, *whose* dialectic) remains uncertain. As we have already noted, Said addresses the great canon of dialectical thinkers variously throughout his work—Hegel, Marx, Lukács, Adorno and others—but when speaking of the dialectic more broadly, he leaves the specifics frustratingly absent. So while Said identifies culture and imperialism in dialectical relation—appearing

simultaneously and contesting, antagonizing and crystalizing in the work of art—he implies that this dialectic does not recover enough specificity and nuance to offer proper insight. That is, we require counterpoint to gather and make use of these details. This is, in Said's language, the imperative to 'deal with as much evidence as possible' (1993: 96). We would like to venture a first attempt at the distinction between counterpoint and the dialectic here, and why it is important for Said. While the dialectic establishes the correspondence between two categories, it does not account for 'myriad details'; put another way, the dialectic remains trapped in a dualism that produces its third term, but that third term then covers over the details that produced it. In turn, counterpoint recovers these myriad details by way of an attention to textual evidence and history *together*, the way they relate, appearing as antagonisms between labor and capital, or as a deconstructive aporia. This is why, in Radhakrishnan's language, counterpoint is a project of *elaboration* rather than rejection.

Accounting for these myriad details helps to embed (literary and other cultural) forms within broader networks of social and economic transformation, out of which narratives and aesthetic productions emerge. To think of these formal categories is to think of a set of contact zones, with forms, statements and other aesthetic elaborations on the one hand and, on the other, institutions, agencies, classes and other social forces. In Said's lexicon, it is to think of the possibilities of *affiliation*.<sup>2</sup> For Said, affiliation weaves the various discursive and objective positions critical activity animates within diverse and interconnected social formations, ushering in a complex model for thinking forms and the political work they do across texts and institutions, literary receptions, and political climates. For Said (1983: 174–5), affiliative registers enable 'a text to maintain itself as a text' by returning it to a range of circumstances—from the status of the author to conditions of publication; from diffusion and

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<sup>2</sup> Said's earliest discussions of affiliation can be traced back to the origins of secular criticism—a commitment to thinking at the peripheries of more dominant methodologies—and it figures throughout *The World, the Text, and the Critic*, a collection of essays which includes, among others, the now-canonical foray into 'American "Left" Literary Criticism'; much of our discussion of affiliation comes from this chapter, though it appears to varying degrees in other works as well, most notably *The Politics of Dispossession: The Struggle for Palestinian Self-Determination 1969–1994* (New York: Vintage Books, 1995).



reception to values and ideas tacitly assumed. In rendering legible the strands linking texts to societies, authors and diverse settings of cultural production, affiliation and the textual, *formal* conditions it assembles 'recreate the bonds between texts and the world' (Said, 1983: 175).

Outlined extensively in 1983's *The World, the Text, and the Critic*, affiliation takes up a negotiation between the new historicism with which Said has come to be so strongly associated and the mid-century formalisms out of which he intellectually emerged. For us, Said's employment of affiliation traces a distinct historical model positioned at the limits of the history-form relation, articulating a historical consciousness always in conversation with and inextricable from the ordering, patterning and shaping of form. In Said's (1983: 167) words, a work of literature cannot 'be apprehended or understood only formally', but 'certainly [it] exists to a considerable extent by virtue of its formal structures, and it articulates itself by means of a formal energy, intention, capacity, or will'. These formal energies and capacities, as we understand them, suture always shifting formal landscapes with the intractable totality of history by making meaning legible but not capturable, perceptible but not containable.

Said's break from a preassembled, more *filiative* criticism retrieves materiality from what he called 'the facile theories of homology' (Said, 1983: 174), which have tautologically linked texts simply by nature of their objective condition *as* texts. However, Said's answer to this draining of a text's transformative promises was *not* to sap its formal properties of their meaning, but to redraw these properties as meaningful in deciphering distributions of power across diverse levels of cultural agency and political history. In many ways, Said here echoes a cultural materialism developed out of the Birmingham school, led at first by Richard Hoggart and, later, by Stuart Hall, during the 1960s and 70s. Alongside the influential insights of Raymond Williams, this British New Left modification of Marxism complicated a so-called 'vulgar' base/superstructure by accounting for culture as itself a material formation with its own modes of production, power-effects, and social relations.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Work in and about cultural materialism is exhaustive, but for an especially sharp analysis of its background and development, see Eagleton (2008: 198–202).

Making this connection more explicit in his discussion of affiliation, Said (1983: 174) reminds readers that Williams' insights into words like *culture* and *society* have helped us identify how, during the 19th century, these words took shape around an 'affirmatively nationalist cast' by acquiring a more 'concrete, explicit significance only in the period after the French Revolution'. Also borrowing from Gramsci's concept of hegemony to suggest affiliative linkages between cultural objects and sets of social and political conditions guiding cultural production, Said (1976: 37) parallels both of these thinkers' concerns: 'Nothing in a text merely occurs or happens, a text is made—by the author, the critic, the reader—and it is a collective enterprise to a certain extent ... a text is a process, not a thing'. Tapping into an almost ontological register, Said (1983: 33) would further develop this claim in *The World, the Text, and the Critic*: 'any text, if it is not immediately destroyed, is a network of often colliding forces[;] a text, in its actually *being* a text is a being in the world'. The stakes of claims like these are high: form, we might conclude from Said, steers the historico-political energies of intellectual activity by charting interwoven processes of meaning-making and disclosing, through a 'network of colliding forces', a complex genealogy enmeshed in circumstance, time, place and society.

## Conclusion

*dialectical thought is in its very structure self-consciousness and may be described as the attempt to think about a given object on one level, and at the same time to observe our own thought processes as we do so[.]*

— Jameson, *Marxism and Form* (1971)

*it bears repeating that no matter how apparently complete the dominance of an ideology or social system, there are always going to be parts of the social experience that it does not cover and control. From these parts very frequently comes opposition, both self-conscious and dialectical.*

— Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (1993)

If what we have sketched here is true—that formalism acts as a way of thinking together otherwise antagonistic methodologies, and that Said's work proves

indispensable to such an act—then the question of relevance might still be fairly posed. We might ask, that is, in a properly Leninist key, what is to be done? Our sense is that we must take inspiration from Said not from his specific readings but in his practice, in his commitment to secular worldliness. This will mean departing from the petty antagonisms of habitual thought and the ideology of political purity. It will mean affirming Said's commitment to a text's political energies, to a careful working through of its parts. It will mean establishing a methodology of neither blame nor repression, but of thought itself, the properly literary thinking our discipline does so well. However one feels about materialist histories or the decentered human, about description or form, we might all agree that thinking with rigor about the relations between world and text, critic and institution—thinking with rigor about the legacies of Said—continues to be urgent, if not necessary, in 2018's climate of post-critique and post-truth.

But we cannot be content simply to recall and cite the past. The limitations of relying on dogmatic truisms in the place of rigorous—ruthless, even—critique have become all too clear. Rather, we must be willing and open to new conjunctures, new assemblages, new *affiliations* of thinking adequate to our specific historical moment. This will require a properly dialectical thought in Jameson's (1971: 340) sense of the term: 'in its very structure self-consciousness [dialectical thought] may be described as the attempt to think about a given object on one level, and at the same time to observe our own thought processes as we do so'. While the self-consciousness of the dialectic is crucial, meta-critical exercise has fallen closer to post-critical polemics than critical emancipation. Indeed, surface reading, description and all manner of post-criticality depend upon a self-reflexive position with regard to texts and modes of interpretation; they all depend on the question of how we read now. Said, then, offers a deeply critical reminder that the social fabric is never fully whole, with texts yoking together otherwise sprawling assemblages of time and place, history and form.

If, as Said reminds us, parts of the social experience will always fall outside the purview of, will always run aslant to the dominance of otherwise complete, totalizing ideologies or social systems, form (as this essay has sought to illustrate) remains

powerful in rendering legible the heterodox commitments these parts of the social experience necessarily take on.<sup>4</sup> We might here remember that other unexpected reader of Marx, Jacques Derrida (2006: 2), who fashioned the 'specters of Marx' as a 'population of ghosts with or without a people, some community with or without a leader[,] ... [I]f the specter is always animated by a spirit', Derrida continues, 'one wonders who would dare to speak of a spirit of Marx, or more serious still, of a spirit of Marxism. Not only in order to predict a future for them today, but *to appeal even to their multiplicity, or more serious still, to their heterogeneity*'. If we are to take seriously a commitment to the heterogeneity of Marx's thought—to the philosophy of Marx—we must dwell with new forms and thinkers that will make intelligible that enduring multiplicity. Only this commitment to a properly dialectical history of literary criticism can guarantee a politics adequate to a future radically other to our present, catastrophic conjuncture.

## Competing Interests

The authors have no competing interests to declare.

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<sup>4</sup> Said aligns closely here, we would add, with Williams' (1977: 125) description of dominant, residual and emergent cultural elements in *Marxism and Literature*: 'no mode of production', Williams writes, 'and therefore no dominant social order and therefore no dominant culture ever in reality includes or exhausts all human practice, human energy, and human intention'.

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