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Suspicious Minds

Critique as Symptomatic Reading

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THE ENDS OF CRITIQUE

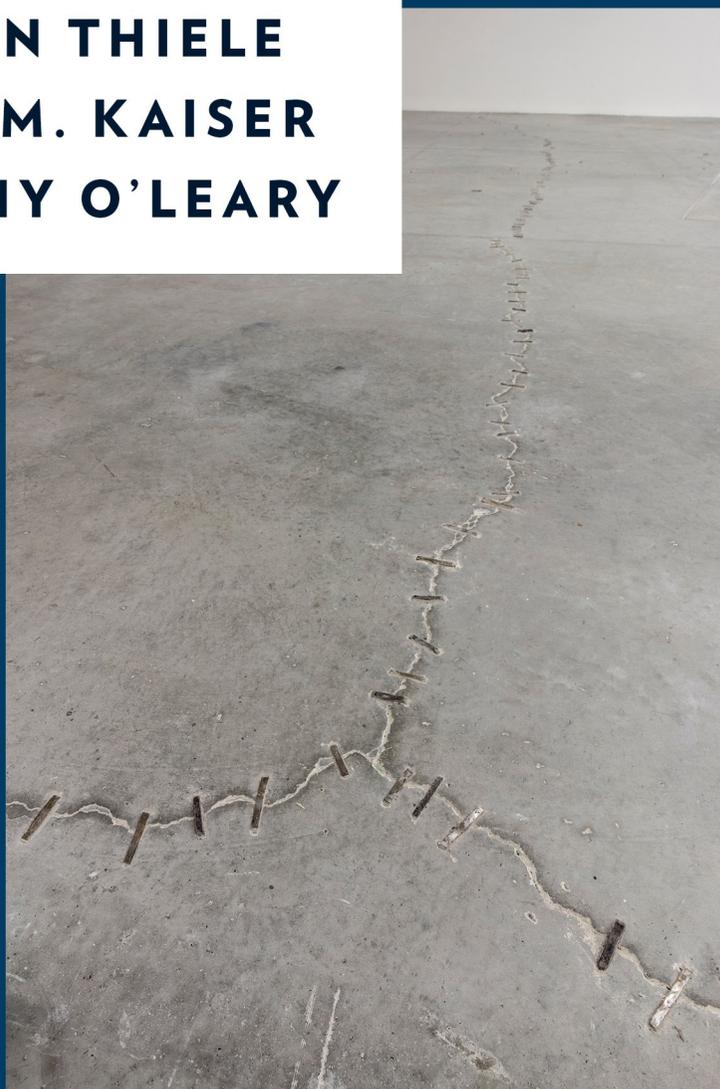
METHODS, INSTITUTIONS,
POLITICS

EDITED BY

KATHRIN THIELE

BIRGIT M. KAISER

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The Ends of Critique

New Critical Humanities

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Contents

| | |
|---|-----|
| Acknowledgments | vii |
| Introduction | 1 |
| <i>Birgit M. Kaiser, Kathrin Thiele, and Timothy O’Leary</i> | |
| PART I: VISIONS OF CRITIQUE | |
| 1 “After Humanism?”—Time and Transformation in Critical Thinking | 19 |
| <i>Kathrin Thiele</i> | |
| 2 The Most Difficult Task: On the Idea of an Impure Pure Nonviolence in Derrida | 41 |
| <i>Leonard Lawlor</i> | |
| 3 The Changeability of the World: Utopia and Critique | 57 |
| <i>Sam McAuliffe</i> | |
| 4 Seeking Intelligent Life in the Time of COVID-19, or, Thinking “Epicritically” | 77 |
| <i>Jennifer A. Wagner-Lawlor</i> | |
| PART II: CRITICAL READING | |
| 5 Suspicious Minds: Critique as Symptomatic Reading | 97 |
| <i>Esther Peeren</i> | |
| 6 The Ends of Critical Intimacy: Spivak, Fanon, and Appropriative Reading | 117 |
| <i>Birgit M. Kaiser</i> | |

| | | |
|--|---|------------|
| 7 | Critical Vivisection: Transforming Ethical Sensibilities | 139 |
| | <i>Timothy O'Leary</i> | |
| PART III: INSTITUTIONS AND TECHNOLOGIES | | |
| 8 | Unwinding the Abstraction of Whiteness | 161 |
| | <i>Shannon Winnubst</i> | |
| 9 | How Not to Be Governed Like That by Our Digital Technologies | 179 |
| | <i>Mercedes Bunz</i> | |
| 10 | Defective Institutions: or, Critique | 201 |
| | <i>Jacques Lezra</i> | |
| | Index | 219 |
| | About the Contributors | 223 |

Suspicious Minds

Critique as Symptomatic Reading

Esther Peeren

In 2019, the World Health Organization listed “vaccine hesitancy” as one of the top ten threats to global health (WHO 2019). That same year, there were several measles outbreaks the likes of which had not been seen for decades in, among others, the United States (1,282 confirmed cases in the calendar year, 128 of which required hospitalization) and Samoa (5,697 confirmed cases between September 1, 2019, and January 6, 2020, of which eighty-three were fatal). In 2021, with no end to the global COVID-19 pandemic in sight but various vaccines approved, whether enough people will want to be vaccinated is a matter of great concern (COCONEL Group 2020; Pylas 2021). A BBC article by Michelle Roberts (2019) entitled “Vaccines: Low Trust in Vaccination ‘a Global Crisis’ ” refers to people’s lack of “trust” and “confidence” in vaccination programs, especially in higher-income regions, despite “overwhelming evidence” of their effectiveness. The article cites a WHO immunization expert as saying that the best way to tackle vaccine hesitancy is “to have health workers really well trained and able and ready to recommend vaccinations based on scientific truth.”

The WHO’s use of the euphemistic term “hesitancy” obfuscates that part of what is at stake is an outright refusal to vaccinate on the part of an increasing number of people—a refusal that many actively seek to propagate by spreading misinformation on social media.¹ “Hesitancy” downplays the entrenchment of the problem both at the individual and the social level. This makes the solution proposed by the expert in Roberts’s article seem feasible even though it disregards the fact that the problem is driven precisely by a lack of trust in institutions, health workers, and “scientific fact” as trumping fraudulent science, anecdotes, feelings, and intuitions. Another term often used, including in scientific articles, is “vaccination controversy” which, like “climate change debate,” suggests parity between two sides in a rational

disagreement, rather than acknowledging the fact that only fringe scientists contest the overall benefits of vaccination programs or deny that climate change is not only real but man-made; or, in Sylvia Wynter's term (to be discussed below), Man(2)-made.

Far from seeing in the current “post-truth” era, in which anti-vaxxers and climate change deniers thrive, a reason to proclaim the end of critique, as Bruno Latour did in his 2004 article “Why Has Critique Run Out of Steam?,” I believe that what is called for is a re-intensification of critique through a return to symptomatic reading. Rather than foregoing suspicion and a political stance in favor of a “new modesty” that recoils from casting critics as “warriors” and refrains from looking for hidden or multiple meanings in texts (Williams 2015), the above vignette makes clear that we need to ask what euphemisms like “vaccine hesitancy,” “vaccine controversy,” and “climate change debate” imply and are symptoms of, and how they stand in the way of preventing and addressing disease outbreaks (including COVID-19) and environmental collapse. It is necessary to insist on the difference between, on the one hand, popular and scholarly caricatures of critique either as absolute relativism, doing away with truths and facts, or as violently imposing a particular politics on a defenseless, nonpolitical text; and, on the other, critique as a situated engagement with a text or world that is always already political and that accommodates various readings, but not just any one. With regard to our world in crisis, the end (as in aim) of critique in the latter mode is to provide a diagnosis of what is going on and to envision potential cures (or at least modes of care) from a position of implicatedness. Critique, we might say, should act like a vaccine in making the critical condition of the world a part of us in order not to let it destroy us, in order to ensure a living-on that is a “living-with” (Haraway 2) rather than a living-off others—vaccine refusal, after all, is predicated on taking advantage of herd immunity.

In 2004, Latour, in the above-mentioned article, famously wrote:

Wars. So many wars. Wars outside and wars inside. Cultural wars, science wars, and wars against terrorism. Wars against poverty and wars against the poor. Wars against ignorance and wars out of ignorance. My question is simple: *Should we be at war, too, we, the scholars, the intellectuals? Is it really our duty to add fresh ruins to fields of ruins? Is it really the task of the humanities to add deconstruction to destruction? More iconoclasm to iconoclasm? What has become of the critical spirit? Has it run out of steam?* (Latour 2004, 225, emphasis added)

Citing a Republican strategist who advised those in his party to keep pointing to the “lack of scientific certainty” (226) about the man-made causes of global warming, Latour worried that his own emphasis on the “social construction of scientific fact” and his desire to “*emancipate* the public from prematurely naturalized objectified facts” (227, emphasis in text) had backfired. He speculated that there may not be any difference between the fanciful explanations offered by 9/11 conspiracy theorists and the way critique—of which the rather incongruous threesome of Jean Baudrillard, Thierry Meyssan, and Pierre Bourdieu are presented as the “French field commanders”—mobilizes a “deep dark below” to put into question what people take to be natural or self-evident (229). In the face of this apparent indistinguishability² and of the way critique supposedly humiliates both those who believe in the agency of objects and those who believe in their own agency, Latour’s answer to the question of whether scholars and intellectuals should wage war appeared to be a firm “no.” This does not mean, as some have argued, that he advocated getting rid of critique altogether. In fact, his proposal was to make critique *more critical* by eschewing debunking and deconstructive modes (associated with the “fact” and “fairy” positions) in favor of assembling, protecting, and caring ones (associated with a “fair,” realist, constructivist position) that would, crucially, not evoke associations with waging war and avoid creating “new ruins.”³

Yet, in a 2018 interview with Ava Kofman of the *New York Times*, headlined “Bruno Latour, the Post-Truth Philosopher, Mounts a Defense of Science,” the idea of critique-as-warfare returns with a vengeance as Latour insists that climatologists “must recognize that, as nature’s designated representatives, they have always been political actors, and that they are now *combatants in a war* whose outcome will have planetary ramifications” (Kofman 2018, emphasis added). It is not just climatologists who are called upon to take up arms; Latour also posits, in relation to the rise of alternative facts, that it is “a greater understanding of the circumstances out of which misinformation arises and the communities in which it takes root [that] will better equip us to *combat* it” (Kofman 2018, emphasis added). This idea of combating misinformation would no longer seem to preclude, and might even require, the type of debunking critiques dismissed in 2004 together with the idea of the scholar as having to be at war.

In *Down to Earth: Politics in the New Climatic Regime*, to which the *New York Times* interview refers, Latour specifies the war in question as declared by former U.S. president Donald Trump when he withdrew from the Paris Accord, and as being waged “over what constitutes the theater of operations” (2018, 3). Significantly, this identifies the war as one declared by retreat, by refusing to take action even as the ruins of climate change were piling up. The epigraph to *Down to Earth* puts the focus on reading

by quoting Jared Kushner, Trump's son-in-law, as saying: "We've read enough books." This could be taken and was probably meant by Kushner to suggest that the time had come to stop studying the situation and to take action (albeit not, of course, on climate change). However, given Trump's infamous admission that he does not read much of anything, and Kushner's statement being taken from a *New York Times* opinion piece by Sarah Vowell (2017) that ends with the affirmation "as with literally every other kind of book, I will never, ever read enough of those," it seems fair to take Latour's epigraph, contrary to what it proclaims on the surface, as an exhortation to keep reading. Because, when it comes to climate change, not doing anything is itself an act of war that needs to be exposed as such and to be countered by critique.

Scholars across the humanities, social sciences, and natural sciences are—increasingly in conversation with each other—presenting incisive readings of this war's "theater of operations" and of how to fight it. A particularly strong salvo is fired by a 2017 volume edited by Anna Tsing and others entitled *Arts of Living on a Damaged Planet: Ghosts/Monsters*, which is also cited by Latour (2018, 116n36). The volume seeks to imagine radical, creative, non-anthropocentric "arts of living" that will enable survival in what are designated as "troubled, illegible times" (Tsing et al. 2017, G10). A partial legibility is restored to these times by presenting, as noted on the cover, "entangled histories, situated narratives, and thick descriptions" of ghosts and monsters—the titles of the two parts into which the volume is split and that work toward each other from the cover, which does not have a defined back or front, to meet in the middle.⁴

Ghosts and monsters, as "figures hiding in plain sight" (M176), resist immediate and full apprehension, necessitating an active attentiveness to their possible presence and a close, careful engagement with the "forms of noticing that crosscut forms of knowledge, official and vernacular, science and storytelling" (M176) that they point to—for ghosts and monsters *always* point beyond themselves and are never (just) what they seem. The editors of *Arts of Living on a Damaged Planet* consider ghosts as the haunting (disruptive and elusive) "traces of more-than-human histories through which ecologies are made and unmade" (G1), and say of monsters that "on one hand, they help us pay attention to ancient chimeric entanglements; on the other, they point us toward the monstrosities of modern Man" (M2). Ghosts and monsters, then, are at once symbols and symptoms of the current planetary crisis that so many people are determined to deny. Ghosts and monsters indicate the need, in the war identified by Latour, to assess and assert the realities on the ground, as well as the status of this ground, by "re-describing the dwelling places that have become invisible" (Latour 2018, 94), an act that manifestly (or, rather, *manifestingly*) goes beyond mere description and involves looking—closely,

intently, symptomatically—for what escapes notice at first sight or is deliberately obfuscated.

In what follows, I will read Latour's turn to redescription as an indication that critique-as-deconstruction has not run out of steam and is, in fact, more needed than ever, particularly in challenging, as the contributors to *Living on a Damaged Planet* do, the idea of "modern Man" as abdicating responsibility for the climate crisis while nonetheless considering humankind's survival its main stake; elevating itself over all other species and materialities; and purportedly but never actually including all *homo sapiens*. Without this combative debunking of "modern Man" that is not afraid of generating debris, the current war of the worlds—"there are now several worlds, several territories, and they are mutually incompatible" (Latour 2018, 26)—is unwinnable.

A deconstructive critique of "modern Man" is, of course, nothing new. In the spirit of redescription—which, as Latour's own redescription of Europe at the end of *Down to Earth* shows, inevitably involves going back over the past—I will return to two important milestones in the history of this critique: Jacques Derrida's 1968 "The Ends of Man" and Sylvia Wynter's 1984 "The Ceremony Must Be Found: After Humanism." Both these texts symptomatically read "Man" as a historically and culturally specific construction that has taken different, but always exclusionary forms. Wynter's 2015 follow-up "The Ceremony Found: Towards the Autopoietic Turn/Overturn, Its Autonomy of Human Agency and Extraterritoriality of (Self)Cognition," which revisits the territory of her earlier text and recalls Derrida's in taking his question "But who, we?" as its starting point, is specifically concerned with the intersection between climate change/global warming and the reign of a particular genre of Man: Man(2) or *homo oeconomicus*. This reign is exposed and subverted by Wynter's explicitly demystifying critique, which sets out to reveal—slowly, carefully, insistently, repetitively—what is "*normally unseeable*," namely the fact that the climate crisis is not due to "*generic 'human' activities*" (2015, 137, 140, emphases in text) but to the "continued enactment and replication of this now neo-Liberal monohumanist conception" (2015, 238) that is the current version of Man(2). Against the background of the recent backlash against close and especially symptomatic reading in literary studies, in which Latour has been mobilized as an ally, I take Derrida and Wynter—together with the Latour of *Down to Earth*—as affirming the need to remain suspicious of what seems self-evident (who "we" are, who "man" is, what form "the world" has, what a war is and how it is to be declared and waged), as well as to remain alert to ghosts and monsters—to what may not be apparent at first glance and what, symptomatically, points beyond itself.

FROM READING SYMPTOMS TO UNCRITICAL DESCRIPTION

When it was first espoused by the New Critics in the mid-twentieth century, close reading was positioned against what Cleanth Brooks calls the “heresy of paraphrase,” or the idea that it is possible to “formulate a proposition that will say what the poem ‘says’ ” (1975, 198). According to Brooks, “as his [*sic*] proposition approaches adequacy,” any reader would find,

not only that it has increased greatly in length, but that it has begun to fill itself up with reservations and qualifications—and most significant of all—[. . .] that he has himself begun to fall back upon metaphors of his own in his attempt to indicate what the poem “says.” In sum, his proposition, as it approaches adequacy, ceases to be a proposition. (198)

Close reading thus entailed a rejection of modes of criticism that assumed that a text’s singular meaning could be straightforwardly read off the page and summarily relayed. As involving, instead, a “respect for the stubbornness of texts,” taken to demand a detailed examination of the multiple, complex meanings and effects yielded by the intertwinement of their form and content (and, later on, also their context and that of their readers), close reading was long considered the “sine qua non of literary study” (Culler 2010). In the 2000s, the emergence of distant reading, most notably in the work of Franco Moretti (2013), provided a machine-assisted supplement to close reading but did not fundamentally challenge its position as the preeminent form of critique. More recently, however, close reading as symptomatic reading has been attacked as sidelining aesthetic experience and ordinary readers; harboring unrealistic or hubristic expectations about literary studies as a form of political activism; and disrespecting the text.

Stephen Best and Sharon Marcus present the most pugnacious and influential argument against symptomatic reading in their programmatic introduction to a 2009 special issue of *Representations*, titled “The Way We Read Now.” There, they define symptomatic reading as

a mode of interpretation that assumes that a text’s truest meaning lies in what it does not say, describes textual surfaces as superfluous, and seeks to unmask hidden meanings. For symptomatic readers, texts possess meanings that are veiled, latent, all but absent if it were not for their irrepressible and recurring symptoms. (Best and Marcus 2009, 1)

It is difficult to think of any actual literary scholar who would consider textual surfaces as “superfluous” or who would seek, as is implied here, *only*

to unmask hidden meanings—and that includes those identified by Best and Marcus as symptomatic readers, like Fredric Jameson, Jacques Derrida, and Louis Althusser. In addition, it is hard to see how pursuing meanings that, while being “veiled, latent, all but absent,” nevertheless yield “irrepressible and recurring symptoms” that presumably present themselves to the reader can be considered critical overreach. Similar overstatements and incongruities pervade Best and Marcus’s account of symptomatic reading as a masterful, even violent practice in which the critic reads meanings into the text in order to make a political point, while disregarding what the text manifestly says.

In place of the straw man of symptomatic reading that Best and Marcus contest, they propose surface reading, also called descriptive or just reading (in the sense of simply/only reading). Focusing on “what is evident, perceptible, apprehensible in texts” on their surface (Best and Marcus 2009, 9), this mode of reading, per Ellen Rooney’s brilliant takedown, “celebrates obviousness” and “disavows reading’s own formal activities” (2010, 116), in what might be considered a return to the “paraphrastic heresy” (Brooks 1975, 200). Surface reading not only ignores the difficulty of determining and putting into a proposition what is “evident, perceptible, apprehensible”—as Rooney points out, this may be “a matter of what one looks for, where one stands, and what one expects to see or desires” (2010, 123)—but also the impossibility of establishing where the surface of a text begins and ends, not least because the linguistic sign itself, as Saussure showed, is layered.⁵ When do we leave the surface of a text? When we read (some of) the text as metaphorical or allusive, when we take into account the multiple or changing meanings of certain words, when we pursue the “irrepressible and recurring symptoms” breaking through to the surface of the text, or when we consider something that is not in the text as nevertheless relevant to its interpretation?

Just how restricted Best and Marcus’s notion of the surface of a text is becomes clear when they propose to let “ghosts be ghosts, instead of saying what they are ghosts *of*” (2009, 13, emphasis in text). Since, as I have already noted, a ghost is, quite literally, the remainder of something else—this is its very definition!—it demands, on the surface if you will, a suspicious reading that asks what this something else is. Best and Marcus’s description of a surface as “what insists on being looked *at* rather than what we must train ourselves to see *through*” (2009, 9, emphasis in text) does not hold when a ghost, a symptom, or a habitual liar and master of distraction like Trump enters the stage. At that point, surface reading’s claim to modesty is revealed as originating in a dangerous naïveté—about how language, reading and especially description work⁶—and as resulting in political apathy.⁷ The call for surface reading absolves readers from having to take responsibility for their reading—for bringing something to the text (including a certain suspicion) and

doing something with it and with the ghosts and monsters that may lurk in it, something that exceeds not only objective description but also aesthetic enjoyment or enchantment.

A strident call for the revaluation of enchantment—as what supposedly draws ordinary readers to literature—over “an attitude of vigilance, detachment, and wariness (*suspicion*)” animates Rita Felski’s (2015) book *The Limits of Critique* (3, emphasis in text). While she is also critical of surface reading, most of Felski’s arrows are aimed at symptomatic reading as the privileged method of what she mockingly calls, in the title of her fourth chapter, “Crrritique.” Describing crrritique as “fl[y]ing off the tongue like a weapon, emitting a rapid guttural burst of machine-gun-fire” and as “a negative act” of “againstness,” Felski presents it as unduly combative, much like the mode of critique challenged by Latour in his 2004 article, which she alludes to (2015, 120–129). Those who practice crrritique are considered party poopers in that, even when things appear to be going well, they refuse to stop being suspicious: “[crrritique] demonstrates, again and again, that what might look like hopeful signs of social progress harbor more disturbing implications” (Felski 2015, 129). In its political optimism and trenchant resistance to what Haraway (2016) might call “staying with the trouble,” *The Limits of Critique* marks itself as a distinctly Obama-era text: pre-Trump, pre-Brexit, pre-Bolsanaro and pre-peak-Modi. In light of the current championing of nationalist populism by many world leaders and the resurgence and global spread of the Black Lives Matter movement after the brutal police killing of George Floyd in Minnesota in 2020, the above quote and Felski’s dismissal of crrritique’s “conviction that [incremental] change is actually harmful in blinding us to what remains undone” makes crrritique sound visionary and Felski positively Pollyannaish (2015, 129). Similarly, read from the present, Felski’s stated aim of “bringing critique down to earth and exploring new modes of interpretation” that are “postcritical” (2015, back cover), which entails the espousal of an “affective hermeneutics” that embraces “the language of enchantment, incandescence, and rapture without embarrassment,” comes across as an uncannily accurate description of the hermeneutical stance taken by hardcore Trump supporters, especially in its evocation of rapture’s evangelical homonym (2015, 178, 175).

For my purposes, it is important to note that Felski calls upon Latour and, more broadly, on actor-network-theory (ANT), to support her argument against “militant reading” (2015, 1). Best and Marcus, too, claim Latour as an ally in their quest against “the excessive emphasis on ideological demystification” (2009, 18). In view of Latour’s opposition to critique’s “explanations” of “the things really close to our hearts” in the 2004 article (243), this is hardly surprising, and the apparent affinity between his work and that of advocates of surface and postcritical reading is further strengthened by the way the title

of his 2018 book echoes Felski's notion of "bringing critique down to earth." However, as I already indicated at the beginning of this chapter, Latour's turn to redescription as part of his combative engagement in the current war of the worlds, which is also a war of words, suggests that his work can no longer be seen as diametrically opposed to symptomatic reading. In fact, given its implicit declaration by Trump's withdrawal from the Paris Accord, the very diagnosis of this war *as* a war depends on symptomatic reading.

Looking closely at "Why Has Critique Run Out of Steam?" shows that already in that text Latour employs a language of depth and seeing-through that is at odds with Best and Marcus's commitment to staying on the surface. Thus, in the discussion of Alfred North Whitehead as the embodiment of the "fair position" that Latour is advocating, Whitehead is described as trying "to get *closer* to [facts] or, more exactly, to see through them the reality that requested a new respectful realist attitude" and as proposing "to dig much further into the realist attitude and to realize that matters of fact are totally implausible, unrealistic, unjustified definitions of what it is to deal with things" (Latour 2004, 234–244, emphases in text). Here, matters of fact are what, on the surface (or perhaps hovering above the surface), impede the perception of matters of concern; what is on or hanging over the surface needs to be seen through, dug into—in other words, penetrated—in order to expose matters of fact as deceitful (as clouds to be dispersed) and to make it possible to gather together matters of concern.

Against Latour's assertion that "the critic is not the one who debunks [. . .] but the one who assembles," then, there seems to be a necessary stage of suspicion and destruction: the "powerful descriptive tool" that will deal with matters of concern and that will "protect," and "care" is predicated on an operation that may well be called deconstructive (2004, 246). Upping the suspicion quotient of my reading of the 2004 text, I might also highlight the contradiction between Latour's statement that the "direction of critique" is "not *away* [from] but *toward* the gathering, the Thing" (246, emphasis in text) and the fact that the two examples given of the thing to be taken as a matter of concern are the "shower of debris" signaling the Space Shuttle Columbia disaster (234) and the 2003 military strike against Iraq, both violent, shocking events of ungathering, dispersal and, quite literally, ruin.

In *Down to Earth*, Latour initially describes the "narrative" that "obscurantist elites" have kept "the scientific knowledge" about climate change secret in order to maintain their dominance as one that "appears implausible" and resembles "a conspiracy theory" (2018, 21). However, unlike in 2004, when conspiracy theories and deconstructive critique were both dismissed as sharing an excess of suspicion, now, in a footnote, Latour cites Luc Boltanski's idea that conspiracy theories "sometimes correspond all too well to reality," while referring to Nancy MacLean's book *Democracy in Chains* as making

it “tempting to believe this” (2018, 113n21). In the main text, moreover, Latour acknowledges that the narrative about obscurantist elites “is not impossible to document” and that “in the absence of flagrant evidence, the effects themselves are quite visible” (2018, 21, 22). These effects, including “the epistemological delirium that has taken hold of the public stage” since Trump’s election and the pervasive chaos of the Trump administration, are seen to demand a reading capable of undoing the denial or denegation of “the proverbial ‘elephant in the room’ ” that is “the enormity of the [climate change] threat,” while at the same time not dismissing the understandably suspicious attitude of those deceived by Trump and the rest of the obscurantist elites (Latour 2018, 23).

Latour insists that the present situation of human-induced climate change is, to “a stunning extent [. . .] unprecedented” and therefore requires new stories (2018, 44). However, his formulation already indicates that there are indeed precedents: something that is to a stunning extent unprecedented is not wholly so. In addition, the story he turns to next is in fact an old one, namely Edgar Allan Poe’s “A Descent into the Maelstrom” from 1841. For Latour, this story about a sailor observing the aftermath of a shipwreck of which he is the only survivor stresses the necessity, if survival is to be an option for us now, of

paying close attention to all the wreckage as it drifts; such attention may make it possible to understand suddenly why some of the debris is sucked toward the bottom while other objects, because of their form, can serve as life preservers. (44–45)

It is difficult not to read this as an endorsement of close reading in the symptomatic mode, since it advocates a tracing of the debris beyond the surface of the water. Instead of being admonished to turn away from warfare, it seems, the critic is now urged to fight in a no longer avoidable war that has put the earth’s very survival at stake, and to do so using a form of critique that combines construction and deconstruction, care and distrust. What is undone in the process is the spurious opposition of construction—aligned with care and fairness—and deconstruction—aligned with distrust, destruction, and a lack of realism (through the figure of the fairy)—that governed “Why Has Critique Run Out of Steam?”

In *Down to Earth*, the aim is not just to describe what is happening but to uncover the reasons why and to redirect the situation. What complicates this effort is that two descriptions of the world are, according to Latour, in competition: a planetary or Galilean vision that proposes a view from nowhere—“to know is to know from the outside” (2018, 68, emphasis in text), from far above the surface—versus a Lovelockian view (named for James Lovelock,

who formulated the Gaia hypothesis) from the inside or from below. The latter view's proponents "consent to *face up to an enigma concerning the number and nature of the agents at work*" (77, emphasis in text), which include "metamorphoses, processes, entanglements, and overlaps" (76). What the world *is* and how it is properly apprehended, then, is not something that simply appears on its surface to a disinterested or enchanted reader, but an effect of the different modes of reading applied to it. The Lovelockian view that Latour privileges is not descriptive but explicitly interpretative; it confronts the reader of the world with an enigma—something inscrutable—that has to be faced up to, however unsettling. The innumerable agents at work in the enigmatic system of engendering engaged by the Lovelockian view point beyond themselves, in a symptomatic, ghostly manner, to "questions about descendants and forebears" (87). In this system of engendering, the world is never just there, in the present, on the surface, but is becoming, throwing up ghosts of which it needs to be asked what they are ghosts *of*, what pasts (precedents) and futures (afterlives) their hauntings indicate.

Latour's key message about critique in *Down to Earth*, consequently, concerns the need to "*generate alternative descriptions*" of "what makes up the Earth for us" (2018, 94, emphasis in text). The notion of alternative descriptions already separates description from any notion of objectivity, as does the addition of "for us." Alternative descriptions are not paraphrases, but redescriptions aimed at revealing what has "become invisible" (94). They are acts of "unpacking [. . .] before recomposing" and thus deconstructions/reconstructions of territory that proceed "from the bottom up" with "the configurations [. . .] travers[ing] all scales of space and time" (95). Only through alternative descriptions, Latour contends, can an understanding be gained of the "causes and effects of our subjections," of which the capitalist system of production and its seductive narrative of modernization have made us "lose sight, in the literal sense" (96). The emphasis that *Down to Earth* places on returning obscured elements to visibility through redescription belies the alleged closeness between Latour's project and those of Best and Marcus, and Felski.

Latourian redescription must be recognized as, in all but name, a form of symptomatic reading that is not just about going deep, but also about going wide (following horizontally *and* vertically oriented traces), and that involves a deconstruction that is always also a reconstruction. The same is true of the mode of reading advocated by Donna Haraway in *Staying with the Trouble* (2016) under the name of string figures (SF). SFs involve "promiscuously plucking out fibers in clotted and dense events and practices"; following these fibers to "find their tangles and patterns," tangles and patterns that are seen to demand a response, a going-with; and "passing on and receiving, making and unmaking, picking up threads and dropping them" in "surprising relays" that

are never done (3). SFs manifest as a suspenseful, symptomatic reading/writing “without guarantees” (Spivak 2004, 532) that, like Latour’s redescription and the explicit deconstructions of Derrida and Wynter to which I turn now, hopes to shape a new shared world no longer dominated by man.

DERRIDA AND WYNTER: FROM REREADING TO REWRITING

Derrida’s “The Ends of Man” and Wynter’s “The Ceremony Must Be Found” and “The Ceremony Found,” in having much to say about reading, are important precedents of Latour’s redescription and Haraway’s SF. Most importantly, these three texts all underline the importance of looking beyond the obvious, which is so often the normative, comfortable, and conservative. Derrida’s “The Ends of Man,” the most substantial section of which is titled “Reading Us,” focuses on what it means to read others, ourselves and the notion of man attentively, accountably, comprehensively, fairly, ethically, but also critically. Early in the text, Derrida describes Sartre’s translation of Heidegger’s *Dasein* as “human-reality” as a “monstrous translation in many respects, but so much the more significant” because it takes away the “metaphysical presuppositions” of *Dasein* (1982, 115). Sartre’s misreading, then, was also a productive rereading that did away with a certain humanism without rejecting humanism altogether. As Derrida notes, in Sartre, “the unity of man is never examined in and of itself” (115). For Derrida, it is only in *Nausea* that Sartre “takes apart” the humanism he elsewhere espouses, through his critical portrayal of the character of the Autodidact who sets out to read the “world library (which is really the Western library [. . .]) in alphabetical order by author’s name, and in areas where he is able to love Man [. . .] in the representation of men, preferably young men” (115n4). The Autodidact can be considered a predecessor of the surface, descriptive or postcritical reader who looks no further than what is presented to and enchants him. Derrida’s discussion of “the reading or the nonreading of Heidegger” in postwar France by Sartre and others makes clear that what is reproachable is not so much reading-as-nonreading, which may take the reader in the right direction (away from humanism), but rather the seemingly comprehensive, systematic, respectful reading of the established world library on which *Nausea*’s Autodidact embarks, in its refusal to read beyond the *anthropos*, the West and the patriarchal.

This does not mean that nonreading—which refers both to not reading at all and to reading “poorly” (Derrida 1982, 119)—is excused completely: Sartre’s productive mistranslation remains “monstrous” and the “‘first reading’ of Hegel, Husserl, and Heidegger” in France is seen to have had harmful

consequences in overlooking the critique of anthropologism present in these philosophers' work (119). Yet, at the same time, nonreading is understandable, at least when it can be attributed to certain works not having been accessible to a particular audience. Thus, Derrida acknowledges that *Sein und Zeit* was "the only partially known work of Heidegger's at the time" (115) and that Hegel's *The Phenomenology of Spirit* "had only been read for a short time in France" (117).

The corrective rereadings that Derrida pursues in "The Ends of Man" are designed to highlight both the inadvertent "confusion" (120) and deliberate "falsification" (124) that made "the Hegelian, Husserlian, and Heideggerian critiques or *de-limitations* of metaphysical humanism appear to belong to the very sphere of that which they criticize or delimit" (119, emphasis in text). These are symptomatic readings that clearly convey a sense of superiority and mastery, of Derrida being a better reader than those he critiques. However, by emphasizing the way in which texts tend to be read in service of the problems posed by the context of reading, Derrida leaves open the possibility that his readings, too, could be exposed as mistaken or misleading in another time and place.

Significantly, for Derrida, reading Hegel, Husserl, and Heidegger properly entails "taking into account" (a phrase that returns three times) how reading appears in their texts—or, in Heidegger's case, how the meaning of Being is read off (*abgelesen*) certain entities that "interrogate themselves about the meaning of being" (125–126). Derrida calls Heidegger's description of this process in *Being and Time* a "protocol of reading" that reveals itself as symptomatic:

The process of disengaging or of elaborating the question of Being, as a question of the *meaning* of Being, is defined [by Heidegger] as a *making explicit* or as an interpretation that makes explicit. The reading of the text of *Dasein* is a hermeneutics of unveiling or of development. If one looks closely, it is the phenomenological opposition "implicit/explicit" that permits Heidegger to reject the objection of the vicious circle, the circle that consists of first determining a being in its Being, and then of posing the question of Being on the basis of this ontological pre-determination. This style of a reading which makes explicit, practices a continuing bringing to light, something which resembles, at least, a coming into consciousness, without break, displacement, or change of terrain. (126, emphases in text)

Taking *Dasein* as a question to be read (or reread) and realizing that this reading (or rereading) is not descriptive, not a taking in of what is simply there (before the asking of the question), but rather an act of "unveiling or development," a "continuing bringing into light," is what reveals "that *Dasein*,

though *not* man, is nevertheless *nothing other* than man” (127, emphasis in text) and what ultimately makes clear how Heidegger’s text participates in the “destruction of metaphysical humanism” (134). This, in turn, can only be remarked “if one looks closely” at Heidegger’s text, if it is read in a way that recognizes the “subtlety and equivocality” of Heidegger’s argument, the overlooking of which—by not reading closely enough—is what “authorized all the anthropologicist defamations in the reading of *Sein und Zeit*, notably in France” (127).

Derrida’s endorsement of a close reading that looks beyond the obvious or literal also manifests in his emphasis on “the dominance,” in *Being and Time*, “of an entire metaphysics of proximity” that would be misread if seen as “an insignificant rhetoric” (130), as well as in his insistence that Heidegger is not truly read (fully, fairly, responsibly) unless “the prevalence given to the *phenomenological* metaphor,” which makes its appearance in “all the varieties of *phainesthai*, of shining, lighting, clearing, *Lichtung*, etc.” (132, emphases in text) is noted. The reason why it is necessary to go beyond the obvious and literal is because that level—of what Best and Marcus would call the surface of the text—is precisely where human and man, in “the language of the West,” can continue to appear as essentially the same (133).

Toward the end of his text, Derrida does warn that adopting the strategy of “using against the edifice the instruments or stones available in the house, that is, equally, in language” means that “one risks ceaselessly confirming, consolidating, *relifting* (*relever*), at an always more certain depth, that which one allegedly deconstructs” (135, emphasis in text). Here, he acknowledges that deconstruction, which requires an attentive, symptomatic reading beyond the literal may also more deeply embed that which it seeks to dislodge or make tremble. This, however, is no reason not to deconstruct in this manner or in the alternative manner of placing oneself outside, which carries its own risks; what is needed, according to Derrida, is “a new way of writing” that combines these two deconstructive modes (135). At this point, rereading makes way for rewriting, but it is clear that this rewriting is predicated on ethics of reading that posits it as attentive, accountable, and inevitably political, and on a practice of reading closely that moves beyond the literal and obvious.

Wynter’s “The Ceremony Must Be Found” and “The Ceremony Found” echo Derrida’s endorsement of close, symptomatic reading, despite barely mentioning reading. In the first text, Wynter argues for the need to establish a new *Studia Humanitatis*, something that she argues, following Kolakowski, can only happen through an act of heresy, since “everything that is new grows out of the permanent need to question all existing absolutes” (1984, 21). This constitutes a plea for continuous suspicion, as every “rewriting of knowledge” subsequently establishes “new orthodoxies,” which should become

subject to critique in their turn (22). What results is not destruction, a trail of ruins, but an infinite process of “destructuring/restructuring” (23).

Reading—or, rather, rereading—comes into play in Wynter’s discussion of the Renaissance heresy that brought the original *Studia Humanitatis* into being. She notes that, for Erasmus, the sacrilege consisted in a desire “to get back to a reading of the original text, uncontaminated by some of the later interpretations, back to the simple piety of the early father and to the original Greek texts believed to be able to elucidate pristine meanings” (28). Erasmus, then, is painted as somewhat of a surface reader, a believer in pure meanings that become accessible when looking at the words on the page only, rather than at marginalia and commentaries. While this may appear to have been about assuming a position of modesty in relation to the text, Wynter is quick to note that what it heralded, in effect, was a power grab in which the formerly taken-for-granted authority of theology was replaced by “the authority of the lay activity of textual and philological scrutiny” (28) and the “new template of identity” of “Natural Man” (29). This new template would soon come to seem equally self-evident and unassailable, or, in Wynter’s neologism, “lawlikely” (38).

The ceremony that Wynter’s title insists must be found would destructure-restructure the valuated binary oppositions (man-woman, culture-nature, white-black, order-chaos) cemented by the new form of Man, no longer subordinated to the divine. The emergence of the so-called New Studies in the humanities in the 1960s did not amount to such a deconstructing-restructuring because, as a result of “our non-consciousness of the real dimensions of what we were about,” they remained focused on demanding inclusion in the existing *Studia Humanitatis* (38). In order for the real problem—the irrevocable, foundational exclusion of women and black people from Natural Man (later termed Man(2))—to be “brought into unconcealedness” (39), a “suspicion of something automatic functioning beyond the conscious control of the human” was needed (43). Where literary critics had played the role of “theologians” in keeping the “imaginative schemas” of Man(2) “free from aesthetic pollution,” Wynter calls for them to begin acting instead as “*rhetoricians*” and “*diagnosticians*” (51, emphasis in text), or, in other words, as symptomatic readers. Literary criticism is assigned the task of operationalizing suspicion through a practice of rereading: “re-reading the texts from the perspective of their configuring function in the rhetoric-symbolic processes of human auto-speciation constitutes for literary criticism its Copernican epistemological break” (52). Only through such re-reading can a new *Studia* be built, one that would not pretend to be *the* truth, but that would present itself as a symptomatic reading from an “‘outer view’ which takes the human rather than any of its variations as Subject” (56). This “outer view,” for Wynter, is not the Galilean view from nowhere but a Bakhtinian exotopic position that is “at once inside/outside the

figural domain of our order” (56) and thus one of immanence, reconcilable with the Lovelockian perspective advocated by Latour.

In the second part of Wynter’s manifesto “The Ceremony Found,” her account of the “fictively constructed and performatively enacted different *kinds of being human*” (2015, 196n20, emphasis in text) is all about trying to make these genres readable (and, consequently, rewritable or redescrivable) for those who enact them, to whom they normally remain opaque because acknowledging their fictiveness would cause “*entropic disintegration*” (227, emphasis in text). The problem Wynter identifies is one of nonreading as not “correctly identifying” narration as narration (216): instead of factual, the world as we see it, is narrative and fictive, yet it does not appear to us as something that requires interpretation. In fact, we ourselves deliberately construct it as something that is self-evident and, as a result, incontestable:

Each respective fictive *We* can normally never know its no less, always-already cosmogonically chartered order of social reality and/or autopoietic living system *outside* the *genre*-specific perceptual categorization system or mode of knowledge production that each societal order needs for its own enactment and stable replication as such a reality. (238, emphases in text)

That we cannot “normally” know our reality outside of the specific way in which we narratively constitute it, or even see that it is narratively constituted, does not mean that we can never do so, for “*that which we have made we can unmake and consciously now remake*” (242, emphasis in text). Such unmaking-remaking, however, requires an effort of suspicion. It requires that we read opacity—a reading that can only be a penetrating, piercing, and painful symptomatic one, for rendering opacity legible as obfuscation requires repudiating the imperviousness of the “nothing to see here” that it shows us.

At the level of the literal or descriptive, the way in which mankind—within the “neo-Liberal-monohumanist *genre* of being hybridly human *Man(2)*”—is “*rhetorically overrepresented as if it were that of human-kind*” remains inaccessible (222, 216, emphases in text). For Wynter, as for Derrida, working with(in) language, exploiting its depth and width (its capacity for metaphor and metonymy), is key to rendering this overrepresentation accessible as an overrepresentation that produces seemingly “*naturally dysselected Others*” (216, emphasis in text) and to make it possible for those Others to challenge it. Thus, one of the tools of Wynter’s proposed “*Autopoietic Turn/Overtun*” is semantic inversion practiced from a “‘gaze from below’ perspective” as in Bob Marley’s song lyrics, which have to be read beyond the literal to reveal the Rastafarian “*counter-cosmogony*” (207, emphases in text). Aimé Césaire’s “new science” likewise proceeds through “an original handling of the word” that is not immediately

obvious but requires study (209) and is therefore a “science of the *Word-as-the-code*” (244, emphasis in text), where the word is never simply what it seems, and where the flesh, in turn, becomes legible as “*code-made-flesh*” (245, emphasis in text).

Both Derrida and Wynter would reject “just reading” in Best and Marcus’s sense because they are interested in reading justly, righteously, *for* something (ultimately, a better, more just world) that will not come about if texts are simply accepted and deferred to at face value—especially when, as Frantz Fanon (1968) so powerfully shows, for those dysselected from the category of the human, their own face, in appearing masked, already casts doubt on what such face value would be. Symptomatic reading is required if we are to stop taking the construed opacities that keep humanism in its current non-ecumenical form globally dominant—and that allow this humanism to “guard against the very recognition of its direct threat to the continued livability of our planetary habitat” (Wynter 2015, 234)—for the simple surfaces they present themselves as.

As Latour (2018) makes clear, the threat to our planet is now so great that a refusal to take action by a world leader like Trump has to be read, suspiciously, as a declaration of war. Of course, if we are to take symptomatic reading seriously, the figure of war itself should also not be taken for granted. That Latour’s use of this term is strategic becomes clear from a short piece he wrote for *Critical Inquiry* on the COVID-19 pandemic entitled “Is This a Dress Rehearsal?” in which he tests the hypothesis that “the health crisis prepares, induces, incites us to prepare for climate change” (2020). After arguing that it does not in fact do so, given that state responses to the pandemic have relied on an outdated form of biopower and unfolded along national lines (neither of which would be effective against climate change), Latour declares the “figure of the ‘war against the virus’ ” so often invoked during the pandemic, including by Trump, “unjustified” (2020). Instead of signaling a return to the stance that critics should not involve themselves in warfare, this “unjustified” war is set off against a war that Latour believes is both justified and necessary—the one against “those who make war on us without declaring war on us” in which “the battle fronts are multiple and cross each of us” (2020). Thus, in another instance of symptomatic reading on Latour’s part, the war that is called a war is exposed as not a war or not the main war to be fought, while the war that has not been declared is revealed to be the one that matters. What this suggests is that the figure of war is not, for Latour, a descriptive label, but a way to redescribe both the COVID-19 pandemic and

climate change; the figure of war functions, in other words, as a symptom marking not the end of reading, but its beginning.

Similarly, in relation to the issue of “vaccine hesitancy” with which I started this chapter, a symptomatic reading would not stop at pointing out the euphemistic nature of this term. It would also focus on the reluctance to aggressively counter a movement increasingly driven by privileged white subjects prepared to spread misinformation and to weaponize concern about vaccinations in black and Global South communities prompted by long histories of “medical racism” (Morgan 2021). Such reluctance is particularly concerning in the context of a global pandemic that is disproportionately taking and affecting non-white lives. At a time when more and more people are seduced by the hermetic, self-satisfied readings of the world proffered by conspiracy theories, it is vital to counter proclamations of the end of critique with mobilizations of critique in the form of symptomatic readings that maintain a suspicion even of themselves and, consequently, an openness to the possible validity of other and future (re)readings. The ends of this form of critique would be to challenge the self-evidence of the genres of being human-constructed and lived in the past and present, which have so thoroughly devalued certain human and all nonhuman lives, and to propose new genres of being posthuman/decolonial that would make for a more equal, more inclusive, and more sustainable future.

NOTES

1. The WHO’s definition of “vaccine hesitancy” as “the reluctance or refusal to vaccinate despite the availability of vaccines” exposes the term as a euphemism (WHO 2019). On the anti-vaccination movement’s use of social media, see Wilson and Keelan (2013); Smith and Graham (2019).

2. I write “apparent” because this indistinguishability seems overstated, especially in the supposedly shared “punctilious demands for proof” (Latour 2004, 230).

3. While Latour’s explanation of why the fact and fairy positions have failed to convince is apt, the critical gestures he associates with these positions are not representative of any serious forms of deconstruction, which, rather than being only about “*subtraction*” (Latour 2004, 248, emphasis in text), are also about addition, in moving, for example, from either/or to both/and.

4. The page numbers in the Ghosts part are prefaced by G; the page numbers in the Monsters part by M.

5. See Baskin for a trenchant Marxist critique of surface reading that insists on the “constitutive interrelation between surface and depth” (10).

6. See Rooney’s painstaking account of how description “partially creates the reality it ‘describes’ because description depends on the immersion of both subject and object in a whole social process” (2010, 11); and Brinkema, who, in a dazzling

reading of Audio Porn (porn videos narrated for the blind and visually impaired), makes clear that “description is not passive but predictive, [. . .] its energetic line is apt to fill out formulas, always running ahead in an attempt to imagine and produce its object—which of course means it can—in minor, irrelevant, but profound ways—be totally at odds with that which it describes” (2019, 5).

7. In a footnote, Best and Marcus do acknowledge that “there remain things that government powers go to extraordinary lengths to keep hidden, to keep as state secrets, ‘extraordinary rendition’ being one of them. A hermeneutics of suspicion in which understanding requires a subtle reading of the situation thus remains readily pertinent to the work of critique” (2009, 19n2). Yet, even here they cannot bring themselves to explicitly—on the surface—endorse close or symptomatic reading, using “subtle” instead.

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