Notes

1. Michel Foucault, “What Is Critique?” in The Politics of Truth, ed. Sylvère Lotringen, trans. Lysa Hochroth and Catherine Porter (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2007), 41–81; 51. It should be remembered that Foucault does not align his own work with this definition of critique. His project, as he describes it, is to set aside the question of legitimacy in order to analyze the power-knowledge relations that shape all institutionalized practices, presumably including his own.


Pointing the Finger

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There is a risk, in entering the debate over hermeneutics, of assuming or appearing to assume that our methods as critics are entirely determined by our conscious decisions. If this were so, it would certainly make us the ideal addressees of polemics appealing to us to make one methodological choice or the other. We could rationally weigh the arguments on each side and, through the exercise of a will transparent to itself, choose for the greatest good. Then only the execution would remain: one would sit down at the computer keyboard and exhibit the method one had selected, as though sight-reading a piece of music. This is the kind of agency that Talal Asad identified as a central formation, which is in part to say wish, of the secular: one in which “conscious intention” governs choice, and where the question behind action is, “Given the essential freedom, or the natural sovereignty, of the human subject...what should human beings do to realize their freedom, empower themselves, and choose pleasure?”¹ Should they read suspiciously or affectively? What relation to texts would most free
and delight them? Suspicion, with its trust in exposure and its wish for freedom, has a reputation for being entangled with Enlightenment legacies. But the discourse on the state of the field—whether we defend suspicion, or rail against it—may deserve that reputation as well.

I begin this way in order to call attention to a double bind. Suspicious modes like the “pursuit of noncomplicity” that Robyn Wiegman has identified as central to American studies often involve some commitment to secular agency as Asad describes it. The critic measures herself and her subjects against the ideal of a will sufficiently independent from imperial ideology to intervene in history for the sake of empowerment, freedom, and the relief of pain. One might wish—as I do—to ease up on the pursuit of noncomplicity precisely in order to shed the secular commitments this mode seems to entail. While we idealize the unencumbered will, it is difficult to apprehend the lives of those for whom it may, on the contrary, have been a privileged form of action to disempower the self, allowing other agencies to inhabit one’s will: the clairvoyant who makes herself the instrument of the dead souls that communicate through her, for example, or the devotee who performs a ritual without deviation from tradition. But if one’s reason for renouncing the pursuit of noncomplicity is that one longs to be better able to tell off-secular narratives like these, then it becomes a problem that the state-of-the-field debate itself can easily become yet another shrine to the secular agent. The manner in which one makes, or calls for, a methodological change will matter. Appealing as it may be to urge oneself and others to a renovation of practices, how would one avoid reinstating the picture of critics as masters of their destinies through this very act of exhorting them—rationally, consciously—to change?

More practically, would reasoned exhortation work? I know that it was not through any single, deliberate choice that, in the course of graduate training as an Americanist, I adopted the pursuit of noncomplicity I now find myself faithfully practicing. Disciplinary conviction came more in the way the desire to marry comes to Virginia Woolf’s Orlando when she surfaces in the Victorian period: as a quivering over telegraph wires that would not yet exist for “twenty years or so,” more, an electricity that announces itself as an “extraordinary tingling and vibration all over her” until “all this agitation seemed at length to concentrate in her hands; and then in one hand, and then in one finger of that hand, and then finally to contract itself so that it made a ring of quivering sensibility about the second finger of the left hand.” My desire to be noncomplicit came shivering with the desires of others, and
with the future’s designs—those telegraph cables—on all of us. My critical acts are not entirely my own. This is good news and bad news: good news, in that the mysteries of methodological conviction may already affiliate me with those off-secular figures I am trying to approach; and bad news, in that it is not obvious how, other than by a contradictory and dubiously efficacious effort of will, I ought to capitalize on this affiliation.

Contradictions aside, it remains tempting (if not irresistible) to try to produce my own conversion through reasoned persuasion. Along those lines, I would suggest that the pursuit of noncomplicity is an impediment to understanding the casualties of nineteenth-century secularity in the following way. Complicity as critics tend to use the term involves a conscious will that is invaded and undermined, without its knowledge or consent, by something that comes from outside or from underneath: by an ideological seduction, perhaps, that collaborates with one’s own unconscious. One tries to bring such invading wills to light when one goes “on the hunt for what betrays [one’s] best intentions,” in Wiegman’s phrase; or when one searches for that which, as George Lipsitz put it in a critique of an essay by Leo Marx, “unwittingly colludes” with the naturalization of “war, empire, and inequality.” According to Wiegman’s perspicuous description, it is now “central to the operations of New Americanism” to undertake this continually renewed effort of “measuring the gap between critical aspiration and the failure that routinely accompanies efforts to fulfill it.”

However well-founded Lipsitz’s criticisms of Marx—and I find his essay persuasive—there are complications with the elevation of this maneuver to an ethos. The problem is not that New Americanists wrongly believe we alone can escape US power’s gravitational pull while our historical subjects succumb to it. On the contrary, as Wiegman points out, disabusing oneself of any such confidence in the agency one has achieved is among the field’s defining activities. The problem instead is that it has come to seem as though this “deeply comforting” measuring of the gap is the only tolerable—even the only ethical—way of living our inevitable entanglement with other, potentially hostile wills. Rival forms of comfort and self-preservation then tend to be disallowed or misrecognized merely as cases of complicity, enchantment, and false consciousness. In listing such rival forms, one could begin, as Rita Felski has done, with affective responses to texts. But it would be important to proceed to modes that are still less compatible with secular agency, such as inviting benevolent wills to inhabit the self in
spirit-mediumship, or tolerating possession by malevolent intelligences on the grounds that this ordeal might confer privileged knowledge of invisible worlds. One might say that American studies’ own long-standing wish to tell the history of excluded groups requires a reexamination of secularity’s epistemic exclusions as well; and that a too-exclusive valuing of a noncomplicit will risks interfering with this project.

I can tell myself all this in an attempt to start a new quivering of the fingers, and it probably does some good. Making a greater difference is the fact that, as Felski puts it, “the hermeneutics of suspicion is shifting from a mode of analysis to an object of analysis” for many critics. This is a telegraphic vibration of which I can avail myself. Also electrifying is the way in which others have been making complicity and noncomplicity into the objects of historical study, an inquiry that seems likely to speak back in productive ways to Americanists’ methods. This shift has been underway in some quarters for a while, for example in Jennifer Fleissner’s effort to understand critics’ equivocal agency in tandem with late-nineteenth-century maladies of the will in *Women, Compulsion, Modernity* (2004) and in the burgeoning interest in secularity following Asad’s *Formations of the Secular* (2003), where some work explicitly asks about the conditions of our own methods as it elaborates nineteenth-century genealogies; I am thinking here of Tracy Fessenden’s and John Modern’s recent books. With all this electricity in the clouds, lightning may well strike; but how to make the keyboard the equivalent of a tall tree on a hill? Self-urging seems a potentially contradictory mode—in that it risks reinstating the self-determined agent as its addressee—and besides, I fear it is too weak an engine to encounter something as ingrained as American studies’ field imaginary. When I sit down at my computer and strive to argue in such a way that complicity and noncomplicity do not keep or ga nizing my rhetoric, intention is not enough. The well-known pathways keep attracting me, despite all the will in the world.

What does seem just possible, though, is to undertake critical activity in a way that makes use of this sense of disempowerment. Asad describes, as one alternative to the secular agent, the stage actor who “tries to set her self aside and inhabit the somatic world of her character” so that her “agency consists not in the actions of the role she performs but in her ability to disempower one self for the sake of another.” What if one treated citation as this kind of agency, then trained it on the histories of complicity and its avoidance? The familiar practices of quotation and close commentary seem to me legible as a disempowering of the self in Asad’s sense, a lending of one’s rhetorical voice or typing fingers to
interlocutors real and fictional, dead and alive. Criticism’s creative work lies not only in its rhetorical arc but in such recitations, such performances of pointing to one thing after another—recitations that, as in the symphonies of new historicism, may never have been of a piece until the critic’s performance united them. Citation-as-performance might have the added advantage of being a practice hospitable to visitations from abandoned corners of the nineteenth-century past: from secularity’s discard pile of weak and encumbered wills. It might host them well because it might resemble some of them a little bit.

Take the example of mesmeric practice. Mesmerism, which caught on in the United States around 1837, dramatically staged the undermining of conscious agency. Mesmerists claimed, in a materialized analogue to Orlando’s metaphor of obscurely communicated intention, that an invisible fluid could be directed from an operator’s body into a patient’s by the exercise of the operator’s will; the will also was this fluid, this “tingling.” A pointed finger or an intense gaze, out of each of which the magnetic fluid obscurely flowed, could bring the patient, paradigmatically a female nervous invalid, under the control of the operator, often a physician. The operator could then work the patient like a puppet, mentally commanding her to raise her hand, or forcing her to misrecognize familiar objects. For worried observers, these powers, “dangerous to the morals of the community,” dramatized the possibilities of seduction, swindling, and the general collapse of agential integrity. For practitioners, there emerged from the same powers the possibility of an agency through disempowerment like what Asad describes.

Cynthia Gleason, a textile factory laborer and the first important US clairvoyant, developed an ability to diagnose illness precisely by virtue of the subjection of her will. Before a Pawtucket audience in December 1836, the mesmerist Charles Poyen entranced Gleason and placed her into sympathetic “rapport” with the rheumatic patient W. J. Winsor, meaning that Winsor’s will and feelings, instead of the mesmerist’s, now controlled her. In this state, Gleason discerned Winsor’s pains by undergoing them as passions in her own body. She prescribed rheumatic drops and then began a homily: “In following the course I have prescribed to you, you will receive some help; you will get along some time comfortably; but remember what I told you, you will never be cured.” As she went on “exhorting the patient to support his sufferings with courage and resignation,” while holding his hand in hers, “all the company was pressing around, listening in silence and amazement . . . there was not a dry eye in the room.” Submitting to the trance, Glea-
son disempowered herself in order to receive the passion of Winsor’s illness, recommending to him, and apparently inciting in the audience, similar gestures of pausing in submission and awe. The same practice that subjected Gleason also made her a capable gatherer of the vibrations in a room, and a capable transmitter of them.

Gleason’s agency inhered in this charmed circle of submissions that Poyen’s subduing finger started going: a circle made of her touching hand, Winsor’s suffering body, and the pressing crowd; a circle her performance emerged out of and then continued to create. It would be missing the point to force an answer to the question of whether Gleason did, or did not, eventually fashion her entranced rhetorical power into a more familiar form of self-determination. Instead, seeing her live this complicity with other wills as the marker at once of social unprivilege and of epistemic privilege—in that Gleason was a woman, a textile worker, a nervous invalid, and also a clairvoyant—one might be pointed back toward one’s own methods. There is a curious similarity between the self-disempowering performance of citation, which lends voice and keyboard to the concert of passages arriving from all over, and Gleason’s practice of being occupied by other wills. That affiliation might be a little off-putting; but perhaps it becomes more welcome when one considers that the weakness of Gleason’s will was as much a marker of her exclusion as those other qualities; that skeptics derided mesmerism for its insane belief that “the greatest wisdom, and the clearest sighted citizens of our republic, are on sick beds, and in the wards of lunatic hospitals.”17 In light of the history of secular agency and its exclusions, it may be at the (bed)side of the complicit will that New Americanism belongs.

Notes
3. I am influenced here by Asad’s argument in Formations of the Secular, chap. 2.
8. Ibid., 1836.
10. Ibid., 218.
In the Spirit of the Thing

Obi, Assemblage, Enchantment

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In one of the earliest texts of sociology, *Treatise on Sociology, Theoretical and Practical* (1854), the white supremacist Henry Hughes defines women, blacks, and insane persons as “subsovereign” individuals.¹ It would be hard for any reader of this journal not to recognize such a claim as a form of racist and discriminatory thought; surely we know that women, blacks, and insane persons are people too. But in the subprime present of late, late capitalism, we are learning something else as well: sovereignty is just not so sovereign anymore, even for those persons previously known as autonomous liberal subjects. Even for those persons previously known as literary critics. The star-making machinery of the English departments of the 1980s has become clogged with and co-opted by the assistant deanery and assessment effluvia of the neoliberal, managerially minded university.² The tide of the linguistic turn has long since ebbed, leaving English scholars beached on the shores of shrinking humanities divisions, searching for ways to increase traffic on their wordpress blogs and remain engaged in an educational endeavor with resonant communal dimensions beyond the accumulation of student loan debt.

At such a moment as this, “subsovereign” antebellum women, blacks, and insane persons may have something to teach us. As a number of well-circulated and highly debated essays on literary criticism today indicate, the figure of the heroic (sovereign) critic who excels at the revelatory, curtain-removing critical act seems to be under siege.³ The “paranoid reading” (Eve Sedgwick’s term) or “symptomatic reading” (Sharon Marcus’s and Stephen Best’s term) of the heroic critic is one that aims to expose hidden truths—to show the workings of power behind the cloak of culture. But exposure itself seems to have lost its cachet: