Roundtable

CONTEMPORARY STUDIES NETWORK ROUNDTABLE

The question of what is (and isn't) worth our attention is an enduring academic concern. It is also, perhaps, what's most at stake in the study of the contemporary. According to Rachel Carroll in her fascinating essay "How Soon Is Now: Constructing the Contemporary/Gendering the Experimental," if the contemporary is a periodizing term then it is also "a rather peculiar one because its object is constantly receding: Virginia Woolf will always be modernist, but Angela Carter will not always be contemporary."[1] Contemporary scholars are therefore always approaching their cut-off point, the moment when their subjects become, for want of a better word, historical. To quote Carroll again, the richness of contemporary scholarship is located in its ephemera: "its status as crucible of the near but as yet unfixed future." When studying the contemporary, that is, we read for hints of the cultural, political, and social forces shaping where we are but must accept that the most valued cultural objects of the present may not endure.

Time and attention also seem to be at the heart of Amy Hungerford's expansive and conversational *Making Literature Now*, in which the author tells five loosely connected "stories" about literary production, reading communities, and the often rapid process of canonization in North American writing. In each chapter, Hungerford dissects different networks through which contemporary literature, what she refers to as "the sausage of literary culture" (161), is made, engaging with the contemporary as a genre or

[1] Rachel Carroll, "How Soon Is Now: Constructing the Contemporary/Gendering the Experimental," *Contemporary Women's Writing*, 9, 1 (March 2015), 16–33, 19.

period but producing a book that "holds lightly" its objects of study. Like Carroll, Hungerford stresses the ephemeral nature of many literary communities and readerships, as well as the period's preferred forms, authors, and texts, and the volume gradually builds to a thrilling dissection of what is (and isn't) worth her own time, attention, and academic labour.

Writing in response to Hungerford's text, this roundtable is a conversation between four scholars of the twenty-first century. Three of its participants, Diletta De Cristofaro (DMU), Arin Keeble (Edinburgh Napier), and I, founded the Contemporary Studies Network (CSN) in February 2016 and one of our members, Judie Newman, is emeritus professor of American studies at the University of Nottingham.[2] As such, we, like Hungerford, are deeply invested in what it means to study North America "Now": Arin and Judie have written extensively about contemporary narratives of trauma and terror since 2001, while Diletta and I specialize in the temporalities, histories, and, in my case, soundscapes of the twenty-first century. As an organization, CSN runs interdisciplinary reading groups and networking events for scholars based in the Midlands and northern United Kingdom. A key aim of these sessions is to interrogate how criticism can help us account for the literary present and to encourage scholars at all stages of their career to engage with and incorporate new and emerging forms, which we might not ordinarily find the "time" to read, into their work.

The premise of *Making Literature Now* is, therefore, right up our street, both because we are a "network" of contemporary scholars and because we, as individual researchers and teachers, are implicated and interested in "the traffic between the multiple institutions of the literary world" (69). As Arin Keeble discusses below, Hungerford alternates between famous and comparatively "invisible" communities, all of which, she argues, add up to "a larger story" about the artistic and social forces "that are shaping our practices of reading" (72). Chapters 1 and 2 discuss the infamy of Dave Eggers, his publishing house, McSweeney's, and their journal, *Timothy McSweeney's Quarterly Concern* (1998–) in the context of what Mark McGurl, who provides Hungerford's volume with a blurb, famously defines as "the Program Era."[3] Chapters 3 and 4 then focus on comparatively understudied "technical craftspeople" (115) and "literary programmers" (117) who either author or develop the digital platforms that many contemporary authors and publishers, including Eggers, now use, alongside a discussion of two short-lived online communities, *Red Lemonade* and *Small Demons*, which appear, "at the time of writing, to be inactive" (170).

It is in the book's final chapters, however, that Hungerford's writing comes alive. Chapter 5's analysis of the critical "love" for Jonathan Safran Foer and chapter 6's refusal to read David Foster Wallace chimes with several recent essays about the prioritization of white men in the contemporary canon.[4] Unlike Judie Newman, who disagrees with Hungerford's dismissal of Wallace, I was gratified to see a strain of thought formalized here that is so often confessed by female scholars. Particularly considering the terms established by Hungerford's earlier essay, "On the Period Formerly Known as the Contemporary," it feels profoundly valuable for a senior academic to continue to challenge the "hierarchy of value in which the writing of mainly white male authors" is deemed "literary" by refusing to add to their readership.[5]

In much the same way, *Making Literature Now* is most successful when it reminds us of the difficulties of achieving "focal distance" from our contemporary authors.[6] We are, in Hungerford's words, much too short on time and attention for "a big chunk of work time [to] become a sunk cost" (161) in reading a writer we suspect we will dislike. Here, I was reminded of Peter Osborne's notion that "to claim something is contemporary is to make a claim for its significance in the actuality of the present".[7] The final chapters of *Making Literature Now* suggest that refusal can be a genuine intellectual strategy when it denies an author the significance of our attention. "What if," Hungerford writes, "we just stop talking about such a work before it matters that much to the culture at large? Stop reading it, stop teaching it, stop studying it?" (156). Here, of course, the book is stuck in a double bind. Heavily focussed on Eggers for the first two chapters, and ending with discussions of Foer and Wallace, the reader may feel misled when, after 170 pages, Hungerford concludes that we might (or should?) have refused to give these authors our attention. Still, the energy of these final chapters and

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[4] DFW is the preferred object of this criticism: recent academic critiques include Mark McGurl, "The Institution of Nothing: David Foster Wallace in the Program," *boundary 2*, 41, 3 (Winter 2013), 27–54; and John McGowan, "What Am I Missing? Infinite Jest and Its Cult Following," *Ethos: A Digital Review of Arts, Humanities, and Public Ethics* (Dec. 2013), at http://ethosreview.org, but Hungerford's rejection of Wallace is perhaps most understandable in the context of recent journalistic and personal essays. See Molly Fischer, "Why Literary Chauvinists Read David Foster Wallace," *The Cut*, 12 Aug. 2015, at www.thecut.com/2015/08/david-foster-wallace-beloved-author-of-bros.html; Deidre Coyle, "Men Recommend David Foster Wallace to Me," *Electric Lit*, 17 April 2017, at https://electricliterature.com/men-recommend-david-foster-wallace-to-me-7889a9dc6f03; Jessa Crispin, "Enough David Foster Wallace Already! We Need to Read beyond Our Bubbles," *The Guardian*, 21 April 2017, at www.theguardian.com/books/booksblog/2017/apr/21/enough-david-foster-wallace-already-we-need-to-read-beyond-our-bubbles.
[5] Amy Hungerford, "On the Period Formerly Known as the Contemporary," *American Literary History*, 20, 1–2 (Spring–Summer 2008), 410–19, 411.   [6] Ibid., 418.
[7] Peter Osborne, quoted in Carroll, 19.

what I read as their essential hopefulness about literary criticism suggest strategies for reading that critics rarely venture and *Making Literature Now* concludes with openness and possibility rather than dismissal and disdain.

Given the vast scope of *Making Literature Now*, several points also warranted expansion. The production and exploitation of positive affect is an unacknowledged constant here: as Hungerford argues, McSweeney's exists because of the "community feeling" (74) it produces in its readership, inspiring a subscriber to develop their iPhone app simply because he claims "I love McSweeney's, I love my iPhone" (30), while Foer makes "love" amongst his critics and Wallace becomes his "own greatest love" (148).[8] Although Hungerford criticizes the narrowness of the canon, the absence of more extensive examples from the women and minority writers of whom she rightly mourns the marginalization feels like an important oversight, as does a general dismissal of networked affect, which Hungerford seems to suggest, though not in any detail, falls flat against "affect generated in the physical world" (77).

The focus on time and attention that I stress here also runs parallel to a less developed thread on amateurism, privilege, and doing what you "love," which deserves further consideration, and which Diletta De Cristofaro explores in detail below. Indeed, I could read a whole book on the love of amateurism that Hungerford identifies here. The idea that Eggers and the staff at McSweeney's are "drawn to nonprofessionals" (45), most of whom are also white, male, and middle-class, made my skin crawl, particularly given Eggers's notion that he might mould a readership from "the 'lattice' of people with whom [he] wants to feel connected" (46). With many successes, then, but many more routes for future inquiry, *Making Literature Now* is a valuable provocation, in which Hungerford presents several icons of contemporary literary and publishing culture to ask who, if any, will endure.

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MCSWEENEY'S AS CASE STUDY

The impassioned closing paragraphs of Amy Hungerford's *Making Literature Now* have a defensive air, braced for critical response: "some of the sentences I've written here seem to beg for quotational misuse," she writes (166). This is

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8   This argument is explored in more detail in Louise Hill, "Affective Exchange: Amy Hungerford's *Making Literature Now*," *Los Angeles Review of Books*, 14 Dec. 2016, at https://lareviewofbooks. org/article/affective-exchange-amy-hungerfords-making-literature-now.

unsurprising as contemporary literary study is a contested field and Hungerford's approach is adventurous, using a case-study model that is unfamiliar in the emerging discipline. *Making Literature Now*, like other bold scholarly works, has some notable preoccupations and omissions within its stated aims; what the author calls "acts of choosing" (163). But while we can and should question the representativeness of its case studies, this monograph should be applauded for the routes and itineraries it maps.

Making Literature Now is really about the making of American fiction over the last fifteen years – poetry and other literary forms are mentioned only in passing and it deals exclusively with US production. It argues that to understand how literature is made now, we need to understand its "social worlds" or networks (4). Hungerford adopts, "in spirit" at least, a Latourian actor-network-theory-style approach as she sets out to elucidate the significance of causal links between writers, readers, teachers, editors, fans, and reviewers, as well as "nonhuman actors like books, apps, or delivery truck routes" (4). As stated, this is done through case studies, looking at independent publishing practices, Internet publishing, online engagement with literature, and the lives and work of three high-profile American authors. These are presented as "portals to a story about the networks through which contemporary literature is made" (1). The thread that links each case study is the independent publishing house McSweeney's, and its flagship magazine *McSweeney's Quarterly Concern*, established by Dave Eggers in 1998. This, I argue, represents a real strength of the book but also opens it up to a range of questions.

McSweeney's is ideal for examining what Hungerford calls the "fabric" of literary production. This is one of her most productive metaphors as it opens a rich discussion of the "value" of work by new or unknown writers. McSweeney's practice of publishing new authors alongside or with the endorsement of literary celebrities means it is a fertile archive. Hungerford is not so much interested in the questions, raised recently by Robert Eaglestone, about how academics might ascribe literary "value" or merit to new work.[1] Rather, she asks what the value is for new authors to publish in prestigious literary magazines like *McSweeney's Quarterly Concern*, and equally what the value of "minor" works is to contemporary literature more broadly. She interviews authors who were introduced to the public in early issues of *McSweeney's* to see how the exposure shaped their careers. Despite finding generally positive experiences, none of the individuals were flourishing as writers. Nevertheless, Hungerford ascribes significant value to the "workers" of literary production in the way they contextualize high-profile authors: "their

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[1] Robert Eaglestone, "Contemporary Fiction in the Academy: Towards a Manifesto," *Textual Practice*, 27, 7 (2013), 1089–1101, 1098.

work, and the work of others like them, provides a necessary fabric on which we might embroider in brighter thread the story of a figure such as Eggers" (14). This is mooted as an alternative to reading such authors "within a tiny canon" (14). The notion of recognizing and analyzing a wider fabric of literary culture also comes to bear in Hungerford's final chapter as she makes a case for not reading David Foster Wallace.

As *Making Literature Now* moves to digital cultures in its middle chapters, the "fabric" becomes more intricate, protean, and its value system more complex. These chapters cover interaction between authors and readers on the digital publishing platform *Red Lemonade*, and the user-generated content of fan site *Small Demons*, an interactive encyclopedia of literary allusion and reference. Chapter 4 looks in depth at an interactive novel conceptualized by McSweeney's stalwarts Eli Horowitz and Russell Quinn, called *The Silent History*, which uses GPS technology to involve readers in building the storyworld. Hungerford makes bold claims for this kind of fiction, suggesting it may lead to a "bifurcated methodological future" in literary scholarship, where a highly individual, participatory criticism is pitted against a digital humanities-style, scientific approach (94). These analyses remain speculative but point to fascinating possibilities.

However, the question that hangs over *Making Literature Now* even in these middle sections – the elephant in its critical room – is that of how representative McSweeney's is in terms of contemporary literary culture. Hungerford, of course, argues that it is: "it can be considered representative of a significant group of small publishing ventures made possible by a radical expansion of access to the technologies of publication after the advent of Aldus Pagemaker in the mid-1980s" (11). She goes on to suggest that McSweeney's embodies a wider resurgence of independent publishing characterized by an antielitist ethos rooted in DIY zine culture that also revels in the aesthetic beauty of print. This may be broadly true, but it is also the case that McSweeney's is commonly associated with a distinctive aesthetic. Stephen Amidon's description of the McSweeney's "brand" from 2008 exemplifies a set of stereotypes that have proven difficult to shake. Amidon wrote, "The ideal McSweeney's reader (or writer) lives in Brooklyn, wears interesting shirts, has a blog he works on in coffee shops, and knows it's cool to oppose globalisation but uncool to go on too much about it."[2] In other words, it is a hipster brand of literature. Amidon's "he" is certainly accurate in relation to earlier McSweeney's outputs and tendencies, despite

[2] Stephen Abidon, "Their Master's Voice: The Rise and Rise of Brand McSweeney's," *Sunday Times*, 3 Feb. 2008, available at www.thetimes.co.uk/article/their-masters-voice-the-rise-and-rise-of-brand-mcsweeneys, accessed 18 July 2017.

their efforts to be gender-neutral. There are also clearly some broad stylistic elements that bind some of the authors and works together; a studied kind of metafiction combined with an unapologetic earnestness is prevalent. Amidon describes this in a typical way: "a buzzing mischievous hipness, wrapped around a core of sentiment and hopefulness."[3]

These assertions are reductive and it is the case that McSweeney's, which has published many hundreds of writers, has evolved from what Hungerford acknowledges was a specific, masculine aesthetic: "recent issues of McSweeney's evince far less, if any, of the masculine play-space than the first issue did" (64). Indeed, the history of McSweeney's that Hungerford discovers goes some way toward debunking these associations but the diversity of her scholarly approach still outshines that of its core subject and there is a case, I argue, for looking at other independent presses. As a house that publishes perennial literary outsiders like Percival Everett, and award-winners like Claudia Rankine, while operating as a nonprofit committed to publishing new authors, Graywolf Press would have been ideal. Nevertheless, the singular focus on McSweeney's has real benefits. *Making Literature Now* is reflexive and clearly attuned to the strengths and weaknesses of McSweeney's, and is particularly critical of their participation in perpetuating a "masculine drift" in US fiction (62). Indeed, the focus on four men, Eggers, Wallace, Jonathan Safran Foer and literary entrepreneur Richard Nash, functions much more as a critique of this drift, than as a celebration of these figures. Ultimately, Hungerford uses McSweeney's as an effective focal point in relation to gender inequality, showing how it has exemplified both the problems and the ways of tackling them. For me, there is a lingering sense that *Making Literature Now* should have looked, comparatively, beyond McSweeney's. Nevertheless, Hungerford's case studies are rich, thought-provoking and entertaining.

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ONLY CONNECT? HOW TO SUCCEED IN THE BOOK BUSINESS

In 2010, penniless in Minnesota, but determined to raise the petrol money to attend a Muppets exhibition in Chicago, Amy Hocking reached for one of her seventeen unpublished novels and uploaded it to Amazon. Six months later she had made $20,000 and sold 150,000 books. She went on to sell more than 1.5

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[3] Ibid.

million books and eventually made $2.5 million, solely by self-publishing.[1] No agent, no editor, no sales force, no publishing house, no bookshops. Amazon was all the network she needed. The novel was *My Blood Approves*, a vampire story set in Minneapolis. Hocking is the polar opposite of the writers and publishers discussed in Amy Hungerford's *Making Literature Now*, published in the series edited by the Post 45 group, on whose board she sits. Hungerford advances the thesis that connectivity is the secret of publishing success, that affective links are all-important, and that writers succeed in large part because of the efforts of a host of influential intermediaries. The solitary Hocking, however, was not at all unusual. Of the top twenty-five best-selling authors on Kindle, only half a dozen had previously had a print deal with a major publisher, though some went on to do so (including Hocking, who eventually signed for Saint Martin's Press/Pan Macmillan for $2.5 million). Reading Hungerford's rueful description of the numbers of struggling writers who eventually gave up in favour of a day job, this reviewer yearned to shake them by the shoulders and tell them to leave their pride at the door, ditch the intermediaries and publish an e-book.

The fly in the critical ointment is, of course, the term "literature." Hungerford is interested in works which have literary pretensions, not market potential. One of her prime examples, Dave Eggers's journal *McSweeney's*, is actively opposed to a commercial emphasis. But are e-books so very different? They often sell for less than a cup of coffee. Most successful e-books are genre fiction – thrillers, horror, sci-fi, romance and works for young adults – often in a series where the first book is a loss-leader, sold very cheaply or even given away free. The issue today is not getting published; it is getting access to literary prestige. Self-published novels are not generally eligible for major prizes, and as James English established, it is prizes which build a literary reputation.[2] The rise of the prize is part of the struggle of power to produce value. What makes a work valuable is its circulation through an economy of exchange, via middlemen of all sorts, all "adding value." Writers of e-books rarely head the bill at literary festivals. The author of *My Blood Approves* did not share the pages of a prestigious literary journal with more famous writers and as far as one can tell her book has not been adopted as a core text on an Ivy League curriculum. Nobody – academic or otherwise – has legitimated her. Underlying Hungerford's account of how literature is "made" today is an anxiety common to many literary

[1] Ed Pilkington, "Amanda Hocking, the Writer Who Made Millions by Self-Publishing Online", *The Guardian*, 12 Jan. 2012, at www.theguardian.com/books/2012/jan/12/amanda-hocking-self-publishing, accessed 18 May 2012.
[2] James F. English, *The Economy of Prestige: Prizes, Awards and the Circulation of Cultural Value* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005).

academics. As Martin Eve demonstrates, cultural authority has leached away from university literature departments to such an extent that any number of recent novels have built that particular crisis of legitimization into their plots.[3] Given that 55,000 novels are published each year in America, a phenomenon termed "overproduction" by Hungerford, how is one to choose which horse to back? Which novel will repay the effort of reading it in intellectual and emotional terms? Which will be worth teaching to students? But as readers can we have too many novels, vampiric or otherwise?

This is not a new situation. As Hungerford notes, Franco Moretti analysed the slaughterhouse of literary history in relation to the nineteenth century, arguing that it would take many lifetimes to read all the books published in any one year between 1800 and 1900.[4] This is only a problem at an institutional level, where small canons are inscribed into the fabric of education, and the academic syllabus is at the mercy of the publishing industry. Chapters 5 and 6 explore how the success of celebrated novels was manufactured. Although Jonathan Safran Foer is considered not without merit, Hungerford dedicates considerable space to her refusal to read David Foster Wallace's *Infinite Jest*, to avoid reinforcing its success, largely because she sees it as potentially misogynistic. On these grounds the canon of literature would be extremely slim. Chaucer, Shakespeare and Milton would be unavailable in large parts, never mind Philip Roth or Saul Bellow. Would she have read it had it been shorter? (It comes in at more than a thousand pages, with ninety-six pages of endnotes, one running to seventeen pages.) Hungerford refused to read it *even to help her dissertation student who was writing about it*. Since Hungerford has not read the novel she cannot know whether it is misogynistic.

The case of *Infinite Jest* highlights the major weaknesses in Hungerford's account: the evidential basis for her conclusions is not strong enough, and contending arguments are not fully considered. Hungerford gives an interesting account of both McSweeney's and *McSweeney's* but the argument would have benefited from comparative evidence, especially more accounts of other small presses or journals, some of them also fostering close relations with writers. What about Look Out Books (which offers 50/50 profit sharing), the nonprofit Coffeehouse Press (which aims to be a connection between authors and readers, creativity and community, according to its website), or Dzanc Books (nonprofit, emphasizing innovative literary fiction, hosting a writer in

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residence)? Was *McSweeney's* typical? Its production values support the idea that it is actively counteracting the loss of aura which Walter Benjamin diagnosed in the mechanically reproduced work of art. But Alexander Starre provides a much fuller account in *Metamedia: American Book Fiction and Literary Print Culture after Digitization*, which devotes some seventy pages to *McSweeney's*, and to the ways in which American literature has reclaimed the book as an artistic medium, fusing narrative and design. Where Hungerford discusses well-known, even cult, writers, Starre considers both celebrated and lesser known authors, published between 2000 and 2010. The discussion of *McSweeney's* considers its social networks, creative coteries, book signings, release parties and public readings, together with a detailed account of the bibliographical themes of each separate issue – typography, page layout, the sequential ordering of pages, margins, and the irruption of the paratextual into the journal proper. Even the typeface (Garamond 3) comes in for scrutiny.[5] One wants this kind of breadth and detail to support a critical argument. A major focus for Hungerford is the fashion in which affect is fostered in relations between writers, publishers and readers. *McSweeney's* makes much of its own creative processes, translating readers into subscribers in the process. Indeed it is hard to feel anything but friendly towards Eggers's efforts on behalf of creative writing. But other evidence suggests that the fuzzy goodwill between writer and reader is less in evidence elsewhere. Kathryn Hume's thought-provoking *Aggressive Fictions* has a very broad evidential basis (some forty writers of recent fiction) and detects a prevalence of works driven by a desire to repel the reader, whether by size, complexity or narrative speed (Burroughs, Reed); complaint (Roth, Ozick, Dworkin); unmitigated gloom (McCarthy, Palahniuk); grotesque images (Katherine Dunn); or extreme sex and violence (Bret Easton Ellis and others).[6] A surprising number of recent novels make a reader feel attacked or abused by a writer who seems hostile. (Perhaps *Infinite Jest* is a case in point?) User-unfriendly writing of this type undermines Hungerford's argument for the primacy of affective networks and empathetic exchanges, and needed to be taken into account. Or at least mentioned.

Hungerford is much more interesting when she sticks to a case study, as in chapters 3 and 4, exploring virtual-media literary enterprises and thinking about the interface between what happens inside the novel and what happens outside it. Richard Nash's publishing website *Red Lemonade* featured virtual, workshopped fiction, offered free, along with a commitment to put readers

[5] Alexander Starre, *Metamedia: American Book Fiction and Literary Print Culture after Digitization* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2015).

[6] Kathryn Hume, *Aggressive Fictions: Reading the Contemporary American Novel* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2012).

first – authors made changes in texts to please them. As Hungerford notes, the author "has traded the work of traveling salesman for the work of professional ingratiator" (77). Nash was actually trying to sell software, and when that failed started *Small Demons*, a website where one could explore the people, places and things that occur in novels. The reader who wanted to drink Sam Spade's favourite cocktail could track down the recipe in *The Maltese Falcon* (1929) on *Small Demons*. Novels, as Hungerford astutely comments, lost all narrative muscle and became blocks of ice in which all sorts of things were preserved. Both websites appear to have been short-lived. Russell Quinn and Eli Horowitz were more successful in developing *The Silent History*, a novel entirely integrated into an app, released in daily instalments to an iPhone from 2012. Readers could also unlock and upload (and then contribute) "Field Reports," first-person witness accounts set in specific places, accessible only when the reader held the device within ten metres of the report's GPS location. No single reader could visit all locations and the book made sense without them, though the combination of fiction, geocaching and a nightmare version of New Historicism was certainly innovative. The novel was literally the product of the historical place in which it was made. But the project was not quite as user-friendly as it might seem. The content was not written by Horowitz, but commissioned from other writers strictly according to his daily plot outline. The app that Quinn developed limits the reader's access to the story. It is not possible to skip an instalment or to read ahead; the app's algorithm becomes the narrator, controlling the way we read. Writers of "Field Reports" have to follow six pages of precise instructions and will be rejected if they contradict the main storyline. The novel came out on paper in 2014 and its innovations tended to be seen as inessential add-ons.[7] It is this formal ephemerality, however, which makes Hungerford's detailed case study valuable.

Network analysis, currently on the ascendant in literary criticism, has much to recommend it, not least as a reaction against the creative-writing-workshop ethos, which has been construed as part of Cold War efforts to reinforce liberal capitalism by enshrining literary complexity as the product of individual, inner experience.[8] But to succeed it depends on both enough data and rigorous analysis thereof.

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[7] Kate Marshall, "Waiting for the Plague: A Field Report from Contemporary Serialization," *Iowa Review*, 44, 2 (2014), at https://iowareview.org/from-the-issue/volume-44-issue-2-%E2%80%94-fall-2014/waiting-plague-field-report-contemporary-serialization, accessed 1 Oct. 2018.

[8] Eric Bennett, *Workshops of Empire: Stegner, Engle, and American Creative Writing during the Cold War* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2015).

ANT CONTEMPORARY LITERARY STUDIES

In "Contemporary Fiction in the Academy: Towards a Manifesto," Robert Eaglestone identifies nine problems of contemporary literary studies, or, as he puts it, "nine not yet problems," on which the discipline needs to focus if it is to be a discipline at all; that is, a field of studies that is capable of self-reflexively turning to "its own founding ideas and processes."[1] One of these problems is that of the "'contemporary history of the book': the ways in which the business of publishing helps to shape and control contemporary fiction."[2] If in 2013 Eaglestone registered a dearth of research on these issues, three years later Hungerford's *Making Literature Now* is a fascinating and important intervention precisely in this aspect of the field.[3]

Hungerford's exploration of the "contemporary history of the book" is informed by Bruno Latour's actor-network theory (ANT).[4] Broadly conceived, Latour's argument is that there exists no domain of reality that can be defined as "the social" per se. Rather, the social is a "*type of connection*" and we have to "follow the actors themselves," including nonhuman entities, as they activate social networks.[5] Similarly, for Hungerford literature is a type of connection and Latour's actor-network theory, whose acronym frames the scale of the research involved in this approach,[6] provides the inspiration for her granular outlook: her study "tells the stories of … unknown participants, workers who are largely invisible to the public – including readers, writers, editors, book distributors, and scholars," "institutions and relationships," as well as "nonhuman actors like books, apps, or delivery truck routes" that make literature now (3–4). The focus on invisible, and often un(der)paid, figures in the production networks of contemporary literature is, I feel, the

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[1] Eaglestone, "Contemporary Fiction in the Academy: Towards a Manifesto", 1093, 1092.

[2] Ibid., 1096.

[3] Hungerford is not alone in this scholarly effort. On the intersection between the digital and contemporary publishing practices see, for instance, the already mentioned Starre, *Metamedia*; and Aarthi Vadde, "Amateur Creativity: Contemporary Literature and the Digital Publishing Scene," *New Literary History*, 48, 1 (2017), 27–51. See also Claire Squires, *Marketing Literature: The Making of Contemporary Writing in Britain* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2007) on the publishing of contemporary British writing.

[4] Bruno Latour, *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network Theory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005). For other applications of Latour's ANT to literary studies see, for instance, Rita Felski, "Latour and Literary Studies", *PMLA*, 130–33 (2015), 737–42; Felski, "Comparison and Translation: A Perspective from Actor-Network Theory," *Comparative Literature Studies*, 53, 4 (2016), 747–65; and Robert J. Meyer-Lee, "Toward a Theory and Practice of Literary Valuing," *New Literary History*, 46, 2 (2015), 335–55.

[5] Latour, 5, 12; emphasis in original.

[6] See Felski glossing Latour: ANT requires "close-up (myopic) investigation, exhaustive (workaholic) description, and close to the ground (trail-sniffing) analysis." Felski, "Comparison and Translation", 748.

greatest strength of this compelling book but also an aspect that needed to be situated more firmly in the current neoliberal context.

An ANT approach allows Hungerford to bring to the fore an economy that is based on affect. The case study to which she devotes a large part of her book, McSweeney's, is "in the business of human connection" (47), as encapsulated by some of the "rabbit holes" that structure *Making Literature Now*, from the subscription cards to the magazine, which "exud[e] personality" (1), signalling a "personal reception for even the most bureaucratic exchange" (47), to the mural in the basement of McSweeney's offices that celebrates the editor Eli Horowitz as the "beloved center" (32) of the publishing company and its network of workers. At the core of this particular "business of human connection" lies a DIY aesthetic that transpires from McSweeney's "making-of" stories analysed in chapter 1 – detailed accounts of each issue's costs and contributors. The message, Hungerford writes, is that "'there are many of us' already making art, many of us writing and making books; and if we would embrace the DIY ethic there could be many *more* of us" (26, emphasis in original). But this "fantasy version of artistic production" (27) does not tell us the whole story. For an economy based on affect means, too, precarious, and indeed unpaid, labour that not "many of us" can afford.

As Hungerford states, by tracing the networks of "minor or onetime players" that surround better-known writers, "we can begin to see what it means – humanistically, culturally, sociologically speaking – for the activity of creative writing and the technologies of publishing to permeate ranks of workers who cannot make a living from literature" (8). Thus, in her Introduction, Hungerford focusses on issue 12 of *McSweeney's*, devoted to twelve new writers, to begin teasing out the symbiotic relationship between celebrity writers and subsistence writers, who operate within a gift economy, receiving little or no money for their literary labour. On the one hand, subsistence writers have "sustained feelings of affection" (6) for the magazine which represents the hope that they will eventually be able to make a living from writing. On the other hand, and this is where the relationship risks becoming more vampiric, "celebrity writers and editors need the subsistence writer, for that writer's work provides the proof that the literary enterprise is truly dedicated to art rather than market" (7). Of the new writers featured in issue 12, the majority, despite providing the "novelty" and "authenticity" that legitimizes McSweeney's literary enterprise, failed to make a living from writing (12–13). In chapter 2, instead, Hungerford goes on to explore the success story of Deb Olin Unferth, who, thanks to Eggers's interest in her work and his willingness to publish it alongside his in *One Hundred and Forty Five Stories in a Small Box*, managed to become a professional writer. Once again, Hungerford reads this story through affect: the kindness that Eggers bestows on Unferth by allowing her to benefit from his celebrity (58), thus

further evidencing the social connection that is the material McSweeney's is made of (57).

That Hungerford spends considerably more time on Unferth than on the four writers from issue 12 she interviews – unnamed, except in a footnote – poignantly reinforces her point that "[i]nsofar as the failed or only briefly visible writers vastly outnumber the successful ones … their stories may lack both interest and individuality; the banality of failure doesn't make for good reading" (14). I, for one, would have liked to read more about their stories and the vampiric relationship Hungerford begins to tease out, especially within the context of the "cutthroat world of international capitalism" (17) that she mentions in her Introduction. For instance, can we trace a link between the avant-garde ideal of authentic art as being beyond commercial purposes and the "do what you love" mantra that, far from being liberatory, plays into the aspirational dynamics of neoliberalism, pushing us to provide labour for little or no economic gain in the name of love?[7] Has affect, in the shape of this mantra, driven these subsistence writers to write and towards *McSweeney's* itself, whose DIY ethos elides the fact that at the core of this literary enterprise is celebrity writer Eggers, who unlike them and because of this status, can afford to do what he loves? Insofar as Hungerford's study is about making literature *now* and insofar as what Franco Moretti calls the "slaughterhouse of literature" is not unique to contemporary writing, why not further bring into relief the neoliberal system that props up this phenomenon in the contemporary moment? In a book that is programmatically about literary work understood in the sense of "daily labor" (4) the absence of the current socioeconomic and political system from consideration seems an unwarranted omission.

Chapters 3 and 4 look at literature in the digital domain. Social networks, free labour and affect are once again the keywords of Hungerford's analyses. The website *Small Demons*, discussed in chapter 3, capitalized on the passion of readers who linked objects in novels with objects outside – information that could then be sold to corporations – receiving in return points and badges that showcased their expertise to the virtual community. In essence, *Small Demons* sought to market the cultural capital of the novel itself and "was banking on the fact that some people's self-conceptions are built around cultural expertise" (82), a much more vampiric incarnation of the relationship between professional literary workers and amateurs discussed above. Chapter 4 considers the "first novel entirely integrated into an app", *The Silent History* (93). Through its GPS technology, the novel–app "produces

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[7] Miya Tokumitsu, *Do What You Love and Other Lies about Success and Happiness* (New York: Regan Arts, 2015).

entirely new data about readers' behaviour" (111). Hungerford uses these data to construct the novel's "literary sociology" (112) and make visible the network of subsistence writers on which *The Silent History* relies: readers contribute to it by writing field reports attached to specific locations, thus allowing Horowitz to achieve his objective of a novel that could be experienced fully by travelling around the world. Hungerford's analyses are most intriguing when she speculates on how the practice of reading is changing with the Internet: she frames the Web as a "Massively Multireader commonplacing" (91), suggesting the revival of this seventeenth-century practice.

Hungerford's final chapters remain faithful to the spirit of ANT. She explores the networks that made the critical fortune of two well-known writers, Jonathan Safran Foer and David Foster Wallace, and turns to the labour of the critic as she questions the autonomy of the work of art from the behaviour of its author (142), making the case for "critical not-reading" (148). It is indeed in its dual focus on networks and labour, especially the invisible and ephemeral labour which Hungerford seeks to preserve in her "present-tense archive" against the creative destruction of capitalism (169), that lies the most provocative and fecund message of *Making Literature Now*.

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