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## Contemporary, Inc.

IT IS, IN ONE WAY at least, a good time to be contemporary. In the past ten or so years, the study of contemporary literature and culture has amassed an impressive sum of institutional currency, paid in the usual forms of new professional organizations, journals, conferences, book series, and—such as they are—job searches.<sup>1</sup> So too has the philosophical idea of the contemporary only recently “begun to emerge into the critical daylight,” as the philosopher Peter Osborne points out, bringing with it a “recent rush of writing trying to make some minimal theoretical sense of the concept.”<sup>2</sup> Yet perhaps the most unmistakable sign of the contemporary’s ascendance as a scholarly category is that it has now become a subject for the contemporary novel.

This is not so surprising. Indeed, one of the first things to notice about the range of Anglo-American writers who, through channels of legitimation ranging from classroom syllabi to academic journals to crossover magazines, have become exemplars of the quality that English professors vaguely but confidently call “contemporary”—writers like Teju Cole, Maggie Nelson, Ben Lerner, and Tom McCarthy—is that they are all intensely aware of literature’s intimate relationship to academic work. McCarthy, one of the most frequently taught and talked about English-language writers of the twenty-first century, offers an especially illuminating case study in the current entwining of contemporary literature and contemporary criticism. As both a Man Booker Prize-nominated novelist (for 2010’s *C* and 2015’s *Satin Island*) and a published literary theorist (2006’s *Tintin and the Secret of Literature*), McCarthy is not only a ubiquitous topic of conversations at literature conferences; he has also become, in recent years, a speaker at those same conferences, giving keynote addresses at the Louisville Conference on Literature and Culture in 2012 and at the Society for Novel Studies in 2016. If McCarthy’s public career reveals the increasingly permeable boundary

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ABSTRACT This essay traces the century-long history of contemporary literature as a field of study in English departments. Showing how prior debates about the scholarly status of contemporary literature coincided with both changing disciplinary methodologies and the changing political landscape of the university, the essay argues that prevailing anxieties about the study of the contemporary today are central to explaining the emergence of a new kind of contemporary novel. REPRESENTATIONS 142. Spring 2018 © The Regents of the University of California. ISSN 0734-6018, electronic ISSN 1533-855X, pages 124–44. All rights reserved. Direct requests for permission to photocopy or reproduce article content to the University of California Press at <http://www.ucpress.edu/journals.php?p=reprints>. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1525/rep.2018.142.5.124>.

between writers and critics in the contemporary moment, his novels narrate the consequences of this new professional permeability. In McCarthy's hands, the contemporary novel has become an opportunity to reflect on the academic category of the contemporary itself. Halfway through McCarthy's most recent novel, *Satin Island*, the narrator, a former academic turned "corporate anthropologist" named U., travels to Frankfurt for a conference. "The theme of the conference," we are told, "was—for once!—not The Future. It was The Contemporary." For U., this trending topic is

even worse. It was, of course, a topic to which I'd been giving much thought: radiant now-ness, Present-Tense Anthropology™ and so forth. But I wasn't ready to give all that stuff, all those half-formed notions, an outing. Besides which, I'd started to harbour doubts about their viability. These doubts themselves, I told myself in the days before the conference, were what I'd air. To air the doubt about a concept before airing the concept itself was, I thought, quite intellectually adventurous; it might go down well.<sup>3</sup>

To think about the contemporary, McCarthy suggests, is to think mainly in "half-formed notions." That is because, as U. realizes, the contemporary is an essentially empty category: its uncertainty precedes its content. Imprecise and unformed, the contemporary brooks no positive definition; it can be expressed only in terms of one's "doubts" about its "viability" or existence.

U.'s conference presentation is, to that end, all doubt and little notion. "The Contemporary," U. tells his audience, is "a suspect term." It is not a stable historical period so much as "a constantly mutating space," less a fixed moment than "a *moving ratio* of modernity." The constant movement and mutation of the contemporary means that it is "misguided" to make "periodic claims" about it, since such periodizing claims "can't be empirically justified" (100). The absence of any empirical or historical grounds for talking about the contemporary means that the term is, at best, only a placeholder for future inquiry. As U. puts it in the last lines of his talk, "What we require is not contemporary anthropology but an anthropology *of* The Contemporary." If U. is not entirely sure what he means by this ("*Ba-boom*: that was my 'out,'" he admits cynically), neither is his audience; his talk is, we are told, "met with silence" (101).

Yet that silence may have a familiar ring to it. While U.'s lecture may fail to engage its intended fictional audience, it should still capture the attention of many members of its nonfictional audience, for whom it will evoke, with impressive precision, the recognizable language and familiarly awkward experience of the academic conference. In short, these pages of *Satin Island* are as much a staging of literary criticism as they are literature. As such, they are our first hint of a novel—and, as I'll argue over the course of this essay, of a moment in the history of the novel—that strives to be not only a novel but

also a commentary on the disciplinary frameworks that, in the Anglo-American academy, determine how something becomes a “contemporary” novel in the first place.

Why does *Satin Island* consider the contemporary such a suspect term? And why does the novel see fit to express those suspicions in the setting of an academic conference? The real lesson of this scene is that the novel’s doubts about the contemporary have to do, above all, with the term’s institutionalization. The target of McCarthy’s satire is the fact that such a patently “suspect” and paradoxical term could become the grounds for an entire professional discipline. That discipline is, in fact, what U.’s lecture is all about: not just in the sense that it reads like literary theory, nor simply in its bemused suggestion that the contemporary requires its own method of study (“an anthropology of The Contemporary”), but above all in the fact that such a suggestion, along with almost every other idea U. sets forth in his talk, has been stolen directly from an actual academic—in this case, from the anthropologist Paul Rabinow, whose 2007 book *Marking Time* happens to carry the subtitle, *On the Anthropology of the Contemporary*.<sup>4</sup> That McCarthy voices his own “doubts about” the category of the contemporary primarily through the voice of Rabinow, and that Rabinow’s voice comes to the reader in the context of a professional conference, makes clear that what the novel ultimately finds most dubious about the critical concept of the contemporary is its connection to the institution of contemporary academia.

In this way, *Satin Island* invites us to think about how the contemporary became a scholarly category in the first place. In doing so, the novel allows us to put its own intellectual misgivings about the contemporary in historical context—a context in which they turn out to be only the latest chapter in an institutional history of the contemporary that is, more than anything, a history of doubts about the viability of its study. This essay is about that history, and how it has shaped literary study in US English departments since the start of the twentieth century. The pages that follow reconstruct the history of contemporary literature by isolating three key moments in its consolidation as a field of study in English: first, literary historians’ suspicion toward contemporary literature in the early twentieth century; second, the official institutionalization of contemporary literature that took place between the end of World War II and the political and intellectual upheavals of the 1960s; and third, the heightened prestige acquired by contemporary literature in the midst of the neoliberal restructuring of the twenty-first-century university. Told through these three field-shaping moments, the story of contemporary literature’s institutional legitimation turns out to be inseparable both from the history of the English department’s evolving disciplinary identity—from the founding practices of literary history to the era of high theory to the recent transmutation of criticism into its own kind of

literary genre—and from the history of the university’s volatile political situation. Showing how debates about the study of contemporary literature have served to register the anxious response of English as a discipline to questions about its role both in and beyond the university, I argue that the professional and methodological worries that continue to cling to the contemporary as a field of study are the key to historicizing what currently counts as the contemporary novel.

The history of the study of contemporary literature begins, in a decidedly uncontemporary twist, around 1895. That was the year a professor at Yale College named William Lyon Phelps proposed what he claimed to be “the first course in any university in the world wholly confined to contemporary fiction.”<sup>5</sup> According to Phelps, the proposal created quite a stir; in newspapers across the country, he recalls, “my harmless little pedagogical scheme was discussed—often under enormous headlines—as a revolutionary idea.”<sup>6</sup> Self-aggrandizement aside, the course proved at least too revolutionary for Yale, where Phelps’s fellow professors said they would fire him if he continued to teach the course.<sup>7</sup> He did not teach it again. Yet the controversy intrigued him. Several years later, he defended the course in his book *Essays on Modern Novelists*, which concluded with a chapter titled “The Teacher’s Attitude toward Contemporary Literature.” There Phelps maintained that “in every age, it has been the fashion to ridicule and decry the literary production of that particular time” (253). Skepticism toward one’s contemporaries was in no way a contemporary phenomenon. Still, Phelps was frustrated to see such skepticism shaping intellectual inquiry in his own contemporary moment. “Why should the study of the contemporary novel and the contemporary drama be tabooed,” he wondered, “when in other departments of research the aim is to be as contemporary as possible?” (249). Sensitive to the cultural value of “the classics,” Phelps nevertheless envisioned a model of study in which appreciation for classic works of literature could go hand in hand with the reading of contemporary works: “A teacher cannot read every book that appears; he cannot neglect the study and teaching of the recognised classics; but his attitude toward the writers of his own time should not be one of either indifference or contempt” (255).

Despite his impassioned defense of the field, however, Phelps could not help but acknowledge two major and possibly insurmountable obstacles to the study of the literature of one’s own time. First was the question of quality. It was probably true, Phelps granted, that “most recent and contemporary fiction is worthless” (246). The issue of aesthetic value was, in turn, inseparable from a larger problem, which was the absence of the historical distance necessary to accurately judge that value. “The only test of the real greatness of any book,” Phelps conceded, “is Time” (252). That test, of course, is rigged; contemporary books are always going to fail it. As Phelps

wrote, “Those who live one hundred years from now will know more about the permanent value of the works of these [writers] than we do” (257). Now having about a hundred years of distance from which to look back on Phelps’s own book—a book that includes chapters devoted not only to Thomas Hardy and Mark Twain but also to Hermann Sudermann and Alfred Ollivant—it is hard to disagree. In this way, Phelps unwittingly fell victim to the very risk his colleagues were unwilling to take: the risk of being wrong about which works of contemporary literature would turn out to transcend their particular contemporary moment. What one person sees as the Age of Ollivant may well turn out to be the Age of Hardy; what begins as an innocently mistaken value judgment risks appearing, in retrospect, a fundamental misapprehension of history. Even advertisements for Phelps’s book admitted the practical difficulty, and potential for embarrassment, involved in making these sorts of judgments about one’s present moment. One ad from 1910, striving to explain why Phelps’s book would be especially valuable to lay readers, can also be read as a word of warning to the author himself: “Critics are rarely abreast of the time and there is nothing so difficult to obtain as authoritative information on events of the day.”<sup>8</sup>

The dearth of “authoritative” accounts of contemporary literature was not simply a matter of intellectual pride. It was also a question of scholarly method. In the early twentieth century, literary study was still a resolutely historical discipline. There was thus an irreducible tension between the historical study of literature and the not yet historical conditions of the contemporary. This explains the lingering suspicion surrounding the field of contemporary literature. As John Crowe Ransom lamented in his famous 1937 essay, “Criticism, Inc.”: “Here is contemporary literature, waiting for its criticism; where are the professors of literature?” But Ransom knew full well where the literature professors were: in their offices writing literary histories, a methodological framework from which the contemporary was excluded perforce. If contemporary literature “is barely officialized as a proper field for serious study,” Ransom explained, that is because “it is hardly capable of the usual historical commentary.”<sup>9</sup> The inability to offer historical commentary on contemporary literature kept the field marginalized through the first half of the twentieth century. As Gerald Graff explains in his history of the English department, “The hostile reaction to Phelps’s course at Yale was characteristic, and academic interest in the literature of the present or recent past was at best hesitant and sporadic.”<sup>10</sup>

It was only after World War II, as classes in twentieth-century literature became both increasingly available and increasingly well enrolled, that, in Graff’s words, “an institution that had once seen itself as the bulwark of tradition against vulgar and immoral contemporaneity was now the disseminator and explainer of the most recent trends.”<sup>11</sup> Despite the intensity with

which the contemporary had been debated in the preceding decades, the teaching and study of contemporary works of literature was, by midcentury, an accepted facet of the discipline. The 1950s and 1960s evince a distinctive burst of institutional energy directed toward the contemporary, as anthologies like *Essentials of Contemporary Literature* (1954), *The Creative Present: Notes on Contemporary American Fiction* (1963), and *On Contemporary Literature* (1964) appeared alongside a new journal of record, *Wisconsin Studies in Contemporary Literature*, founded in 1960. (The journal shortened its name to the pithier, and less regionally specific, *Contemporary Literature* in 1968.) In the ensuing years, a cohort of soon to be widely known scholars published books on contemporary fiction, including Ihab Hassan (*Radical Innocence: Studies in Contemporary American Writers*, 1961), Marcus Klein (*After Alienation: American Fiction in Mid-Century*, 1964), Robert Scholes (*The Fabulators*, 1967), Tony Tanner (*City of Words: American Fiction 1950–1970*, 1971), and Jerome Klinkowitz (*The Vonnegut Statement*, 1973).

What explains this abrupt about-face on the value of “contemporaneity” in literary study? There are several factors to consider. We might begin with the looming presence of World War II as a moment of perceived historical rupture. In the face of barbarism and civilizational break, the consolidation of a more up-to-date canon of literary achievement would have offered much-needed evidence of the survival of human civilization. Another consequence of the war was more institutionally specific. The GI Bill enabled millions of war veterans to enroll in American universities. From the perspective of such a radical reimagining of both the mission and makeup of higher education, it is not hard to see why this was the moment when an older and stiffer idea of the literary canon would come to be supplemented, if not supplanted, in the classroom by works of literature that bore a more immediate relevance to the lives of a much larger, and much different, student body.

Alongside these changes in both the ideology of cultural preservation and the reality of student demographics was a basic transformation in the very idea of what it meant to be modern—a transformation whose most immediate consequence was the founding of the academic field of modernism. Indeed, modernist and contemporary literature entered the academy more or less simultaneously, a convergence that makes sense once we recall that these two terms—“modern” and “contemporary”—had for centuries functioned as synonyms. When the word *modern* began, only around the mid-twentieth century, to denote not the novelty of the present but the fixity of a particular literary past, *contemporary* took its place as a keyword for marking off the living history of the immediate moment. The etymological history of the divergence of *modern* from *contemporary* thus doubles as a disciplinary history. Consider the near-simultaneous founding of two major journals devoted to the study of twentieth-century literature: *Modern Fiction*

*Studies* in 1955 and *Wisconsin Studies in Contemporary Literature* in 1960. A few decades earlier, these two titles would have been basically interchangeable. By the middle of the 1950s, however, they served to mark off two newly separate fields of literary study. For its part, *Wisconsin Studies in Contemporary Literature*, as the journal's editors explained in a note introducing the inaugural issue, was "devoted to a consideration of the new literature since World War II."<sup>12</sup> *Modern Fiction Studies*, by contrast, devoted four of its first seven issues to individual authors—Joseph Conrad, Ernest Hemingway, Virginia Woolf, and William Faulkner—who best represented the newly canonized status of pre-World War II modernism. The relation between the founding gestures of these two journals (themselves but minor moments in the broader history of the consolidation of literary periods) shows how the midcentury invention of modernism both justified and required the cultivation of a separate field of study devoted to more recent, or more "contemporary," literature. Justified, because the institutionalization of modernist studies helped create the conditions for studying twentieth-century literature (and fiction specifically) more widely. Required, because the very existence of modernism as a literary period rested on the assumption that it could be distinguished from the not yet periodized literary culture of the contemporary moment that followed it. Viewed in this way, we can see contemporary literature as both a product of the study of modernism and a retroactive rationale for modernist study. As the new name for the too-close history of the present, the contemporary helped secure the critical re-imagining of the modern as "modernism," a period now closed off from the endlessly regenerated novelty of the current moment, and thus newly open for scholarly analysis.

We can further understand the new kind of historical closeness named by contemporary literature by looking at a more literal kind of proximity that began to be cultivated within the space of the English department during the 1950s and 1960s. This was the new shoulder-to-shoulder, or at least office-to-office, proximity of professional readers of literature with professional writers of it. Such a reconfiguration of departmental space was what a 1964 special issue of *Wisconsin Studies in Contemporary Literature* referred to as "the increasing influences which writers, critics, and scholars have upon one another as they tend to establish themselves on campuses."<sup>13</sup> What the title of that special issue called "Scholars, Critics, Writers, & the Campus," Mark McGurl has more famously dubbed the program era: the era when postwar fiction became predominately shaped by masters programs in creative writing, which assimilated the work of fiction writing into the space of the modern research university. As McGurl argues in *The Program Era*, the "meta-fictional reflexivity of so much postwar fiction" can best be explained by reading it in relation "to its production in and around a programmatically analytical and pedagogical environment."<sup>14</sup> The teaching of creative writing



thus gave rise to a body of writing shaped by a self-conscious fixation on the fate of creativity within the university—that is, on the tension between writing as creative act and writing as curriculum.

McGurl offers an unrivaled account of what happened to fiction once fiction writers became students and professors. Less attention has been paid, however, to how this institutional transformation ran both ways: that is, to what happened to the profession of literary criticism once literature professors began to share a department with so many literary producers. If the program era marks the moment when creative writing became intensely aware of its new relation to the institution of the university, it also marks the moment when literary criticism became aware of its new obligation to study all that creative writing. This obligation is nothing less than what is now called contemporary literature. The decade of the 1960s saw not only, as McGurl recounts, the “explosion” of new university-based creative writing programs across the United States but also the emergence of new journals, monographs, and courses dedicated to proving that contemporary literature could and ought to be the subject of serious academic study.<sup>15</sup> The premise of this new field of study was neatly summed up by Richard Kostelanetz in his introduction to the 1964 edited volume *On Contemporary Literature*. “Despite scattered opinion to the contrary, there exists, let me suggest, a contemporary literature that is worth the most serious attention.”<sup>16</sup> Both the belief and the announcement of the belief that contemporary literature was a field worthy of scholarly consideration cannot be understood outside the context of a new generation of critics who now shared office space with contemporary writers.

The widespread scholarly interest that McGurl’s work has prompted in continuing to study the relation between writers and the campus thus remains incomplete if we fail to consider how the institutional presence of creative writers altered the critical premises of literary study. The complex nexus of scholars, critics, writers, and the campus identified in 1964 by the editors of *Wisconsin Studies in Contemporary Literature* indicates an early awareness that the institutionalization of creative writing was in the midst of transforming not only the form of literary writing but also the practice of literary criticism. As such, the story of the program era is not just the story of how creative writing programs shaped contemporary literature. It is also the story of how such programs helped create the very category of “contemporary literature.” The study of contemporary literature turns out to be the program era’s decidedly uncreative twin: the place where metafictional reflection on institutional enclosure morphed into scholarly reflection on how the confines of the institution might finally symbolize—if not directly produce—the outline of a whole systematically analyzable literary period.

How exactly were the assumptions underlying literary study transformed in these years? To the extent that the study of living writers suddenly seemed

authorized by the sharing of institutional space, that authorization belied a deeper intellectual and methodological shift in English departments. This was the decisive moment in the history of the discipline when an earlier generation of historical scholars was displaced by the New Critics, ushering in a methodological sea change marked by the radical (if short-lived) devaluation of historical context as a critical aspiration.<sup>17</sup> At the heart of the battle between literary historians and literary critics was, as Graff puts it, “the assumption . . . that the saving power of the humanities could be rescued only by divorcing the humanities from history.”<sup>18</sup> The distancing of the humanities from historical study provides a last and vital piece of institutional context for understanding the rise of contemporary literature. The possibility of studying living writers rather than dead ones depended, at bottom, on the reimagining of literary study itself as a practice that was no longer synonymous with the study of history.

Thus, even as the study of contemporary literature became an increasingly uncontroversial function of English departments, the field continued to provoke debates about the role of historical method in literary scholarship. This debate was staged with particular vehemence by Horace Gregory in his 1964 polemic “Second Thoughts on the Teaching of Contemporary Literatures.” The renowned poet and classicist did not mince words. “Is the idea of teaching contemporary literature to undergraduates a fearful mistake?” he asks in the essay’s first sentence. His answer: “I am certain that it is.”<sup>19</sup> In Gregory’s view, the teaching of contemporary literature resulted not only in confusion among students but also in a lack of analytical rigor among humanities professors. The misguided attempt to study contemporary literature is one reason, according to Gregory, that “the criterion for serious scientific research in our universities is of a higher reach and deserves more respect than comparable studies in the Humanities” (24). The substandard status of humanities research is exemplified by interest in contemporary literature, which traded vetted historical knowledge for the superficial “urgencies of ‘keeping up-to-date’” (18). “To look for meanings in contemporary writings before we know the tradition out of which they came,” Gregory insists, “creates more confusion than can be dispelled in four years of teaching.” Luckily, the way to resolve the confusion is simple: students “could well afford to drop college courses that offer contemporary literature in favor of deeper studies in traditional literatures” (25).

Gregory’s brief for the literary past is also, unmistakably, a rejection of the university’s present—a present that was at exactly this moment being radically reshaped through the student activism and campus agitation of the New Left. Indeed, the enemy of Gregory’s essay is not simply the canonization of contemporary works of literature but also the politicization of culture that he saw informing students’ interest in those works. As aesthetic appreciation was

replaced by “political and sociological approaches” to literary study, Gregory claims, “The ideas which had once sustained Liberal teaching of literature . . . were compromised by flirtation with Marxian ‘historical necessities’” (21, 22). Gregory’s sense of the collusion of contemporary literature with political radicalism (here coded as “Marxian”) offers a revealing glimpse of how debates about literary study in the 1960s were inseparable from the emergence of a new kind of campus politics. The divide between the “urgencies” of contemporary literature and the defense of the cultural past is also the divide between radicalized students and reactionary professors. This divide is clearly a source of alienation on Gregory’s part. To him, the humanities students of his day look more like “future members of totalitarian political cults” (24). In response to the frightening politicization of his students, Gregory attempts (no less implausibly) to reclaim the meaning of the word *radical* itself: the search for cultural traditions, he writes, “is always radical: it leads one to the very roots of Western culture, to Greco-Roman drama and poetry, to the Hebrew scriptures and the Four Gospels” (25). These competing radicalisms—of campus activism on one hand and scholarly traditionalism on the other—show how the emerging divide between students and faculty in the era of the New Left was mediated in surprising but hardly inexplicable ways by the field of contemporary literature. Through the rejection of a university that he perceived as having become ahistorical and instrumentalist in multiple ways at once, Gregory suggests that what was most controversial about contemporary literature was its presumed alliance with new forms of campus leftism. If the study of contemporary literature was not itself an explicitly political program, it nevertheless burst onto a campus scene in the midst of sufficient upheaval that the field’s resistance to traditional scholarly assumptions could be taken (or merely mistaken) for an analogous kind of political commitment.

While the political conservatism of Gregory’s polemic against contemporary literature did not necessarily have a widespread influence on literary study in subsequent decades, the deeper conceptual premise of his argument—that the history of the present is not the proper purview of scholarship—certainly did. Pitting the knowable past against the unknowable present, Gregory articulated a key tension that, though it may have started as political allegory, has since become a methodological truism. The absence of historical distance on our own present is one of the main reasons that the contemporary has long been, in Gordon Hutner’s words, “a *déclassé* period among literary historians.”<sup>20</sup> What makes the contemporary such a “*déclassé*” historical period is the fact that it is neither historical nor a period. Unfinished, ongoing, and altogether too close, the contemporary’s history remains to be written, while its status as a period waits to be retrospectively bestowed. This much was clear even to contemporary

literature's most enthusiastic defenders in the 1960s. Kostelanetz worried about how "literary historians of the future will look upon 1944–1964," while Hassan acknowledged that "the crystal ball in which future [literary] reputations are revealed remains a blank, lucent space."<sup>21</sup> The blank, unknowable space of the future's judgment on the present remains a no less vivid worry for scholars of contemporary literature today. Thus has Amy Hungerford observed that, even several years into the new millennium, some critics of post-1945 literature still "evin[c] discomfort at writing about the literature of the late century."<sup>22</sup> Indeed, such discomfort is evident even in as confident a cultural history as *The Program Era*. "How can I offer this book as an account of an era," McGurl wonders, "when that era has evidently not yet concluded—indeed, is perhaps best thought of as having just recently gotten fully underway?"<sup>23</sup> Critics' lingering unease with the absence of critical distance is hardly unwarranted. We don't know which contemporary books will matter to future scholars; we don't even agree on which books count as contemporary to begin with. There is more than just the self-aggrandizement of presentism to suggest that contemporary literature truly is harder to account for than the literature of other periods. It's enough to make the presumed coherence of a phrase like "the contemporary novel" start to sound, as Tim Bewes has suggested, "almost outrageous."<sup>24</sup>

Yet despite its apparent outrageousness, the study of contemporary literature is now a fully institutionalized practice, one that has undergone a significant boom since the start of the twentieth-first century even as it represents the culmination of a disciplinary history that extends back significantly farther. From this perspective, the category of the contemporary may be less important as a conceptual paradox than as a practical revelation about the nature of literary study since the middle of the twentieth century. Situated at the intersection of critical self-awareness and critical distance, the field of contemporary literature exemplifies the competing legacies of formalism and historicism that have organized the study of English for the last sixty years. Marking out a literary period in which the very status of history is called into question, the contemporary crystallizes the unspoken truth of a discipline defined not simply by the historical study of literature but by the perpetually debated question of what the relationship between literature and history really is. Contemporary literature, in short, is nothing less than the English department's bad conscience.

Evidence of this bad conscience has proliferated since the 1960s, not just in discussions about the feasibility of studying contemporary literature, nor even in well-worn debates about New Criticism and New Historicism, but also in the emergence of the institutional discourse known as theory. From Jacques Derrida to Michel Foucault to Fredric Jameson, a half-century's worth of influential theorists has struggled with the structural difficulties

of reading and writing the history of the present. As Jameson put it in his 1979 essay “Marxism and Historicism,” the “ultimate dilemma” of critical thought “turns on the status of the present and the place of the subject in it.”<sup>25</sup> In literary theory, this is a dilemma that has remained largely unresolved. From Foucault’s “history of the present” (which is in fact a defense of studying the past<sup>26</sup>) to Derrida’s critique of presence, the preeminent figures of late twentieth-century literary and cultural theory have emphasized the fundamental elusiveness of the present: its resistance to being historically analyzed, clearly demarcated, or consciously thought. The present persists in critical theory mainly as absent cause or missed encounter, an invisible but inexorable limit to thought as such. Thus, at the very moment that the literature of the present was beginning to be more widely studied, the rise of theory in literature departments served to institutionalize a certain skepticism about the historical and ontological status of the present.

Theory’s skepticism toward “the present”—whether in the form of the history of the present or the metaphysics of presence—has persisted even as scholars across a range of disciplines have turned their attention to the topic of the contemporary. In *Marking Time*, for instance, Rabinow’s call for a new anthropological approach to the contemporary is surprisingly evasive. “The anthropology of the contemporary,” he writes, “has seemed to me best done by doing it.” Rabinow is well aware that this tautological definition is unlikely to satisfy many readers. The absence of a more satisfying definition is, he says, part of his point. “Well-meaning interlocutors . . . have asked me to explain what I mean by the notion” of the contemporary, he tells us. But Rabinow is not interested in offering a full explanation. Instead, his book represents an attempt at “acknowledging these requests” for explanation “while at almost the same time refusing to honor them fully.”<sup>27</sup> Through this blend of acknowledgment and refusal, the practice of an anthropology of the contemporary turns out to rest not on the stable foundation of a clearly defined contemporary, but on a tactical unwillingness to define it.

It is not only the anthropology of the contemporary but also the art history of it, we find, that relies on such a refusal. In *What Is Contemporary Art?*, Terry Smith sets out to dispute the idea that contemporary art “cannot be subject to generalization” even as he admits that, within the contemporary moment, the generalizing work of “periodization may no longer be possible.”<sup>28</sup> Caught between the desire to generalize and the reluctance to periodize, Smith hesitates to offer a single definition of contemporary art: “We are *not* talking about the arrival to succession of one, all-encompassing contemporary style” (256–57). Instead, he seeks to formulate some more general principles for understanding both contemporary art and the contemporary period. For Smith, “*Contemporaneity*”—the complex, inescapable experience of being in time—“*is the fundamental condition of our*

times" (255). Contemporary art, in turn, can best be defined as art "*created within the conditions of contemporaneity*" (256). Like Rabinow, Smith cannot think the contemporary without flirting with tautology. Moreover, the sheer scope of Smith's notion of contemporaneity (a condition he sees "manifest in the most distinctive qualities of contemporary life, from the interactions between humans and the geosphere, through the multitude of cultures and the ideoscape of global politics to the interiority of individual being" [255]) means that the term begins to seem less a definition of the current moment than an expression of the overwhelming experience of being hopelessly immersed in that moment. What is contemporaneity, in fact, but a word for everything happening all around us all the time? In this way, *What Is Contemporary Art?* epitomizes the unresolved tensions that underlie the study of the contemporary: between the need to make generalizations and the reluctance to do so; between the desire to periodize and the worry that periodization itself has become, in some novel historical sense, an unviable critical act. While Smith wants to resist a wholly indiscriminate view of contemporary art as "most—why not all?—of the art that is being made now," he nevertheless ends up conceiving the contemporary as at once indefinable and inescapable. "In the aftermath of modernity," Smith writes, "art has . . . only one option: to be contemporary" (1).

It is finally the philosopher Giorgio Agamben who goes farthest in affirming the ineffability of the contemporary. In his frequently cited and deeply inconclusive essay "What is the Contemporary?," Agamben suggests that being contemporary is not a matter of gaining insight into one's present; it is, on the contrary, a way of grasping the present's constitutive darkness. "To perceive, in the darkness of the present, this light that strives to reach us but cannot—this is what it means to be contemporary," proclaims Agamben.<sup>29</sup> What it means to be contemporary, in other words, is to perceive the impossibility of perceiving the contemporary. This impossibility is confirmed by the essay itself, which offers multiple, conflicting definitions of "what it means to be contemporary": it is a missed encounter ("It is like being on time for an appointment that one cannot but miss" [46]), an obscured vision ("The contemporary is the one whose eyes are struck by the beam of darkness that comes from his own time" [45]), a temporal paradox ("To be contemporary means . . . to return to a present where we have never been" [52]). At one point, Agamben remarks that "contemporaries are rare" (46); at another, he insists that "we are, despite everything, contemporaries" (47). Borrowing metaphors from an eclectic range of discourses—including archaeology, astrophysics, and neurophysiology—Agamben's interdisciplinary attempt to clarify the meaning of the contemporary ultimately serves only to keep things obscure. In this way, reading Agamben's essay can itself feel a bit like reading a "beam of darkness." Yet if these proliferating definitions keep us in the dark, that perhaps makes

Agamben's point all the more clearly: to be contemporary is to confront, across the disciplines, our inability to define the contemporary.

From anthropology to art history to continental philosophy, then, the contemporary remains a strange currency: one whose value lies less in the term's capacity to confidently mark out the present than in its description the difficulties involved in doing so. To be sure, the contemporary carries with it quite real limitations. Anyone who has tried to say exactly what time frame they mean by "contemporary"—post-1945? post-1973? post-2000?—understands this. Given the basic fuzziness of the term, no less than the deeper conceptual and methodological conundrums it poses, it is easy to see why one would be driven to conclude that the contemporary may simply be indefinable.<sup>30</sup>

That is certainly how the concept continues to circulate in literary studies. If critics frequently make reference to "the contemporary novel," they invoke it not as a fixed historical or stylistic category—in the fashion of the modernist or the postmodernist novel—but as a vaguely deictic gesture; a wave of the hand used to signal some indeterminate span between *around now* and *roughly the last fifty or so years*. When we speak of the contemporary novel, we bespeak a constitutively empty category. There simply is no paradigmatic contemporary novel; the phrase indexes exactly zero intrinsic concerns, forms, or features—except perhaps for the vague metacritical sense that these are the novels that literature scholars today feel they are supposed to have read. For those invested in the inviting openness of its study, this mix of cultural injunction and formal emptiness may well be part of the category's allure. Here Terry Smith's self-conscious struggle to define contemporary art would seem to be not only emblematic but unavoidable.<sup>31</sup> It does sometimes feel like a fool's errand to try to pin down the defining literary form of a twenty-first-century moment that is inarguably crisscrossed by a not insignificant number of historically distinctive styles (the popularity of genre fiction, the resurgence of realism, the rise of autofiction, to name only a few).

While there may be no single aesthetic paradigm for understanding the literature of the contemporary moment, this essay has sought to show how we may understand the current prominence of the contemporary in somewhat different terms: not as an aesthetic paradigm at all, but as an institutional one—as a critical discourse or academic value that does not emerge out of individual texts so much as circulate around them, dictating the terms on which they're read. To view the contemporary as an institutional value that is currently more valuable to literary study in English than it has ever been before is, in turn, to be able to pose a somewhat more pointed question about contemporary literary history. That question is no longer the daunting, and possibly unanswerable, What kind of novel is the contemporary novel? It is, rather: What happens to the novel form once novels begin to see themselves as inextricable from the academic discourse of the contemporary?

This, I want to suggest, is precisely the question McCarthy's *Satin Island* helps us answer. And it is not only *Satin Island*. The features that make McCarthy's novel aesthetically distinctive—its refusal of fictionality, its embrace of theoretical meditation as narrative form, and its attention to the socially structuring force of the university—also serve to link it to a series of well-received, widely read, and swiftly canonized English-language texts from both sides of the Atlantic: these include Teju Cole's *Open City* (2011), Sheila Heti's *How Should a Person Be?* (2012), Ben Lerner's *Leaving the Atocha Station* (2011) and *10:04* (2014), Rachel Cusk's *Outline* (2015), and Maggie Nelson's *The Argonauts* (2015). In simplest terms, these texts indicate recent fiction's turn away from the very category of fiction; they demonstrate how the contemporary novel has begun to reimagine itself as less novelistic and more essayistic. "That's what we . . . hate about fiction," Nelson writes in *The Argonauts*.<sup>32</sup> Exemplars of what we might call *critical fiction* or the *theory memoir*—or simply what the back-cover blurb for *The Argonauts* dubs "auto-theory"—these are texts that blur the line not only between fiction and autobiography but also between creative and critical writing.<sup>33</sup> In these works, literary theory has been transformed from a collection of culturally circulated names and concepts (as in the work of a prior generation of postmodern novelists) into an aspirational narrative mode.<sup>34</sup> Passing allusions to theorists have been replaced by extended episodes of theoretical reflection, whether it's Ben Lerner's Benjaminian meditation on the messianic "world to come" or Teju Cole's de Manian riffs on blindness and insight or Maggie Nelson's critique of Lee Edelman's critique of reproductive futurism. (Lerner's first novel, *Leaving the Atocha Station*, goes so far as to incorporate material from the author's own previously published *boundary 2* essay.)

What drives all of these works is the recoding of literary language as theoretical discourse—the reformatting of the novel form as an essentially critical enterprise. And what each of these writers understands is that such an enterprise has its own peculiar literary form, a form that is primarily shaped by the reading lists, working conditions (the thinly fictionalized narrators of *10:04* and *Outline* are both academics, as is the nonfictionalized narrator of *The Argonauts*), and reserves of cultural capital that are located specifically in university English departments. This, finally, is one thing the contemporary means in the contemporary novel: an acute awareness of the critical institutions—academic jobs, journals, classrooms, and theories—that dictate not just *how* but also *which* novels get read.

At once adopting and parodying the language of literary criticism, these contemporary novels offer us a vision of the novel form in the midst of rethinking its relationship to the cultural space of the university. This relationship is especially worth attending to considering that the history of contemporary literature's institutionalization, as I've sketched it in the preceding pages,



has turned out to be inextricable from the history of the social and political upheaval of the university: from the effects of the GI Bill to the rise of the New Left and now, of course, to the process of neoliberal corporatization that is again remaking the university before our eyes. Viewed through the lens of these epochal adjustments to campus life and work, the problem of contemporary literature can ultimately be understood to reassert itself today not simply as an impetus to rejigger the canon, but, more pressingly, as the grounds for asking how plausible it is to think of literary study itself as a way of intervening politically in one's wider contemporary world.

For their part, contemporary writers are not optimistic on this score. In the case of many of today's most exemplary novelist-critics, the conversion of the novel into criticism has served as a platform precisely to lament the distance between writing and political intervention. In *The Argonauts*, Nelson attends a Pride protest in Oakland and thinks, "I've never been able to answer to *comrade*, nor share in this fantasy of attack. In fact I have come to understand revolutionary language as a sort of fetish." "Perhaps," she concludes—with echoes of Horace Gregory—"it's the word *radical* that needs rethinking."<sup>35</sup> In *10:04*, the narrator makes dinner for an Occupy Wall Street protester and ends up chastising himself for failing to live up to "the possibility of collective politics": "So this is how it works, I said to myself . . . : you let a young man committed to anticapitalist struggle shower in the overpriced apartment that you rent and, while making a meal you prepare to eat in common, your thoughts lead you inexorably to the desire to reproduce your own genetic material within some version of the bourgeois household."<sup>36</sup> And in *Satin Island*, U. fantasizes about "turn[ing] Present-Tense Anthropology™ into an armed resistance movement" (137), only to have his girlfriend disabuse him of the youthful naiveté of his image of the revolutionary hero: "It isn't revolutionaries and terrorists who make nuclear power plants melt and blow their tops, or electricity grids crash, or automated trading systems go all higgledy-piggledy . . . —they all do that on their own" (140). Defeated in his ambitions to transform his scholarship directly into "armed struggle" (139), U. instead chases an inscrutable dream he has to Manhattan, "armed with nothing more than an idea" (178). In all of these cases, we find writers distancing themselves from political radicalism through the very acts of writing and theorizing. If this kind of skepticism about the political utility of writing sounds familiar to readers of this journal, it should; it was, after all, one of the most hotly debated essays of the past decade that similarly questioned the tendency of "literary scholars to equate their work with political activism." "Literary criticism alone," the authors of "Surface Reading" concluded, "is not sufficient to effect change."<sup>37</sup> As McCarthy, Lerner, and Nelson go to great lengths to insist, neither is contemporary literature.

This wariness about literature's capacity to change the world goes hand in hand with a world of literature and its criticism that is itself in the midst of dramatic change. A certain sense of political futility shared by writers and critics is thus only one part of a more complicated story the contemporary novel has to tell about how the political and economic pressures felt by contemporary writers are connected to the changing nature of the contemporary university—and, most specifically, to the university's newly intensified obsession with studying the contemporary. This is the story McCarthy sets out to tell in *Satin Island*. Even before the narrator, U. (evoking of course not only the universality of *you* but also the institution of the *university*), finds himself speaking at a conference on The Contemporary, his job is already to study it. Having left academia for the corporate world at the start of the book, U.'s new job is to "lay bare some kind of inner social logic" (23), to "*name* what's taking place right now" (63), to make "the very concept of 'the age' . . . thinkable" (44). His job, in other words, is to define the contemporary. There are two primary ways that the simultaneously corporate and scholarly project of making the contemporary thinkable is taken up by U. First, he is employed by his company to play an unspecified role in the similarly unspecified "Koob-Sassen Project," meant to stand in as a Google-like attempt to categorize and control the entirety of the world's information. Second, U. is personally tapped by his boss to take on the individual task of writing "the Great Report," which is to serve as "the First and Last Word on our age" (61): the definitive history of the contemporary moment. Needless to say, the Koob-Sassen Project is never explained, and the Great Report never written. Still, we begin to get a sense of what McCarthy is up to simply in the parallel between the two projects. In its aspiration to sum up the entirety of the contemporary moment, the Great Report does not sound all that different from the Koob-Sassen Project, which is to say that, for McCarthy, the scholarly attempt to theorize the present is not in the end distinguishable from the corporate attempt to monetize it.

One way to describe *Satin Island*, then, is as a novel about the moment at which universities and corporations have become indistinguishable. This would seem to be the implication of McCarthy's extended emphasis on the institutional pressures that give rise to literary theory. What most appeals to U. about his hero Claude Lévi-Strauss is not the content of the anthropologist's ideas but his canny professional ability to invent an entire school of anthropological thought; that is, to turn himself into a successful brand. On the other hand, *Satin Island* may simply be a novel about the moment when corporations have made universities irrelevant. "Forget universities!" U.'s boss tells him when he's hired (62). The way corporations allow us to forget universities in McCarthy's novel is not just by poaching their employees and adopting their methods but also by coopting their theorists. U. first makes

his name at his new job by using ideas pilfered from Gilles Deleuze, Alain Badiou, and Lévi-Strauss to sell—naturally—Levi Strauss jeans. To describe the creases in the jeans, for instance, “I stole a concept from the French philosopher Deleuze: for him *le pli*, or fold, describes the way we swallow the exterior world, invert it and then flip it back outwards again, and, in doing so, form our own identity. I took out all the revolutionary shit (Deleuze was a leftie); and I didn’t credit Deleuze, either” (33). As McCarthy reminds us, the popularization of poststructuralist theory has gone hand in hand with the erasure of its leftist origins in late-1960s France. And it is not just corporations that have simultaneously coopted and whitewashed theory in this way. It is also novels like McCarthy’s. In this way, *Satin Island* draws a link between the formal *incorporation* of theory that has turned contemporary fiction into criticism and the literal process of *corporatization* that is currently reshaping—in part by depoliticizing—the professional conditions for producing critical thought in universities.

In *Satin Island*, the vanishing point between the corporate and academic worlds is, finally, the concept of the contemporary (a fact rendered more or less unmistakable at about the moment when Rabinow’s theory of the contemporary is transformed into a TED talk). *Satin Island* sees itself as implicated in these worlds as well. And so the solution the novel cooks up for extricating itself from them is ultimately to reject the entire question of the contemporary—or at least, the possibility of answering that question. Seeking to establish its distance from both academic and corporate culture, McCarthy’s novel suggests that what distinguishes the literary sphere of novels like this one is freedom from the burden of having to worry about what the contemporary actually is. The story of the novel, such as there is one, is the story of U.’s progressive loss of faith in the possibility of *any* method or theory that would truly be capable of understanding the present. As U. informs us, “I’d begun to suspect—in fact, I’d become convinced—that this Great Report was un-plottable, un-frameable, unrealizable: in short, and in whatever cross-bred form, whatever medium or media, *un-writable*” (126). Given the impossible amount of information an account of the contemporary would have to include, and given the impossibly omniscient perspective that writing it would seem to require, *Satin Island* ultimately chooses to give up on the dream of historical self-knowledge that it may never have taken that seriously to begin with. The novel ends with U. “suspended between two types of meaninglessness,” staring out from the Staten Island ferry terminal at “scores of wakes, crossing each other in irregular and tangled patterns. *Networks of kinship*: the phrase flashed across my mind; I snorted with derision” (186, 187). This derisive snort constitutes the novel’s most decisive gesture: the unmistakable sign that U. has finally overcome his devotion not only to Lévi-Strauss but also to the entire academic

project of finding meaning in the fragmented patterns and relations that hold together the contemporary world. Affirming not meaning but “meaninglessness,” not legible networks but random interactions, U. casts his lot with the “irregular and tangled” and finally uninterpretable experience of a contemporary moment that he now believes no one can successfully decode.

*Satin Island* is thus several things at once. It is a novel about the academic and institutional contexts for studying the contemporary. It is a novel that questions the intellectual value of that course of study. And it is a novel that epitomizes—as is demonstrated by the rapidly growing number of scholarly articles on it (my own now included)—what it means for a work of literature to be contemporary at this particular historical juncture. What, ultimately, can this set of overlapping designations tell us about the current fate of the contemporary as both a disciplinary problem and a period of literary history?

At once typifying the essayistic form of the contemporary novel and questioning the critical concept of the contemporary, *Satin Island* prompts us to read contemporary literature as an ambivalent aesthetic response to its own unprecedented cultural and economic enmeshment in the institutional protocols of literary criticism. Such protocols are, after all, precisely what make writers like McCarthy, Nelson, Lerner, and Cole fixtures of a contemporary literary establishment that now depends as much on the critical selection of novels as on the production of them.<sup>38</sup> It is no wonder that, in response to such circumstances, literary form would find itself with little choice but to adopt the formal conventions of the very professional discourse that not only schools its writers but also decides its historical fate. But it is also no coincidence that literary form would come to resemble literary criticism at precisely the moment when the fate of the university itself has likewise been cast newly into doubt.

As Nelson puts it in *The Argonauts*, hers is a book written both within and against “a culture committed to bleeding the humanities to death.”<sup>39</sup> Such a culture of the university in crisis finally explains the remarkable appeal of this type of contemporary novel to academic readers, who see in it the fulfillment of the great unrealized dream precious to so many scholars in the age of the institutionally precarious humanities: to defend the humanities by writing literary criticism that readers beyond the academy might actually choose to buy and to read. The contemporary symbiosis of literature and the institutions of its study thus runs both ways; the popular writer’s aspiration to write theory is paralleled by the erstwhile theorist’s aspiration—faced with the increasingly quantified conditions of professional success—to be more popular. If Tom McCarthy can discourse on Deleuze and Lévi-Strauss and still make the Booker Prize shortlist, why not us? If Maggie Nelson can discuss Judith Butler and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick and still produce a *New York Times* bestseller, why can’t we? Integrating literary criticism while refusing literary

classification, today's definitively contemporary writers may be said to reflect back to literary critics their own professional anxieties about the study of the contemporary: the worry that the field is at once too near to us to be firmly classified and still too far from the world to be recognized as relevant to it.

## Notes

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1. The two major professional organizations for the study of contemporary literature are Post45 (founded in 2006) and the Association for the Study of the Arts of the Present (founded in 2007), each of which has since spawned a peer-reviewed journal (*Post45: Peer Reviewed* and *ASAP/Journal*). At roughly the same time, book series devoted specifically to the study of contemporary literature and culture were inaugurated at Stanford University Press (Post45), Columbia University Press (Literature Now), the University of Iowa Press (The New American Canon), and Princeton University Press (20/21; now defunct).
2. Peter Osborne, *Anywhere or Not at All: Philosophy of Contemporary Art* (London, 2013), 17.
3. Tom McCarthy, *Satin Island* (New York, 2015), 99–100.
4. See Paul Rabinow, *Marking Time: On the Anthropology of the Contemporary* (Princeton, 2007). McCarthy notes in the acknowledgments to *Satin Island* that he has “freely and shamelessly lifted” Rabinow’s “thoughts on the notion of ‘the contemporary,’” though he does not specify what has been lifted or from where.
5. Quoted in Gerald Graff, *Professing Literature: An Institutional History* (Chicago, 1987), 124.
6. William Lyon Phelps, *Essays on Modern Novelists* (New York, 1910), 245.
7. Graff, *Professing Literature*, 124.
8. Page-length advertisement published at end of C. T. Winchester, *A Group of English Essayists of the Early Nineteenth Century* (New York, 1910).
9. John Crowe Ransom, “Criticism, Inc.,” *Virginia Quarterly Review* 13, no. 4 (Autumn 1937), <http://www.vqronline.org/essay/criticism-inc-0>.
10. Graff, *Professing Literature*, 124.
11. *Ibid.*, 206.
12. “A Note on Policy,” *Wisconsin Studies in Contemporary Literature* 1, no. 1 (Winter 1960).
13. Editorial note, *Wisconsin Studies in Contemporary Literature* 5, no. 1 (Winter-Spring 1964): 4.
14. Mark McGurl, *The Program Era: Postwar Fiction and the Rise of the Creative Writing Program* (Cambridge, MA, 2009), 47–48.
15. McGurl, *The Program Era*, 25.
16. Richard Kostelanetz, “Contemporary Literature,” in *On Contemporary Literature*, expanded edition, ed. Richard Kostelanetz (New York, 1969), xv.
17. See Graff, *Professing Literature*, 195–208.
18. *Ibid.*, 179.

19. Horace Gregory, "Second Thoughts on the Teaching of Contemporary Literatures," *Wisconsin Studies in Contemporary Literature* 5, no. 1 (Winter-Spring 1964): 18.
20. Gordon Hutner, "Historicizing the Contemporary: A Response to Amy Hungerford," *American Literary History* 20, no. 1–2 (Spring–Summer 2008): 420.
21. Kostelanetz, "Contemporary Literature," xxvii; Ihab Hassan, "The Character of Post-War Fiction in America," in *On Contemporary Literature*, 44.
22. Amy Hungerford, "On the Period Formerly Known as Contemporary," *American Literary History* 20, no. 1–2 (Spring–Summer 2008): 418.
23. McGurl, *The Program Era*, 28.
24. Timothy Bewes, "Temporalizing the Present," in "The Contemporary Novel: Imagining the Twenty-First Century," ed. Timothy Bewes, special issue of *Novel: A Forum on Fiction* 45, no. 2 (Summer 2012): 159.
25. Fredric Jameson, "Marxism and Historicism," in *Ideologies of Theory* (London, 2008), 478.
26. See Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York, 1995), 31.
27. Rabinow, *Marking Time*, 1.
28. Terry Smith, *What Is Contemporary Art?* (Chicago, 2009), 1, 256.
29. Giorgio Agamben, "What Is the Contemporary?," in *What Is an Apparatus?*, trans. David Kishik and Stefan Pedatella (Stanford, 2009), 46.
30. For more on the conceptual paradoxes posed by the contemporary, see my *Contemporary Drift: Genre, Historicism, and the Problem of the Present* (New York, 2017), 1–5.
31. Of course, there are real differences between the two fields of study (and their respective cultural objects) that I do not wish to gloss over. My point here is simply to observe that the challenges involved in defining and theorizing the contemporary are in significant ways continuous across both medium and method.
32. Maggie Nelson, *The Argonauts* (Minneapolis, 2015), 82.
33. This process of blurring reaches its apotheosis in the newest books by Teju Cole (*Known and Strange Things: Essays* [New York, 2016]), Ben Lerner (*The Hatred of Poetry* [New York, 2016]), and Tom McCarthy (*Typewriters, Bombs, Jellyfish: Essays* [New York, 2017]), all of which are undisguised works of literary criticism.
34. For an overview of how theory influenced postmodern novelists at the end of the twentieth century, see Judith Ryan, *The Novel After Theory* (New York, 2012). For accounts of the relation between theory and the contemporary novel different from the one I am offering here, see Nicholas Dames, "Theory and the Novel," *n+1* 14 (2012): 157–69, and Mitchum Huehls, "The Post-Theory Theory Novel," *Contemporary Literature* 56, no. 2 (Summer 2015): 280–310.
35. Nelson, *The Argonauts*, 27.
36. Ben Lerner, *10:04* (New York, 2014), 47.
37. Stephen Best and Sharon Marcus, "Surface Reading: An Introduction," *Representations* 108 (Fall 2009): 2.
38. In an essay titled "'The Contemporary' by the Numbers," the organizers of a real-life conference on The Contemporary recount the work of sorting through the 135 proposals they received for the conference in order to calculate a provisional canon of what faculty and graduate students in US English departments think contemporary literature is. The three most-cited novelists in the proposals? Ben Lerner, Tom McCarthy, and Teju Cole. See Sarah Chihaya, Joshua Kotin, and Kinohi Nishikawa, "'The Contemporary' by the Numbers," *Post45: Contemporaries*, February 29, 2016, <http://post45.research.yale.edu/2016/02/the-contemporary-by-the-numbers/>.
39. Nelson, *The Argonauts*, 114.