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Introduction: What Does American Literature Feel Like?

Thomas Constantinesco and Peter Lurie

- 1 Reading is a bodymind experience, one that confirms “the enmeshment of the mind and body” that recent disability scholarship has put to the fore (Schalk 4), yet one that also continues to testify to some of the politicized uses of the entrenched dualism between body and mind that idealist philosophy from Plato to Descartes and beyond has sought to establish.¹ The etymology of the word “reading,” and the long history of its practice, seemingly hinge on a bifurcation and an oscillation between the body and the mind, between “reading-as-decoding—a deciphering of the textual algorithm which has to do with the brain and the body”—and “reading-as-interpretation, where meaning making would be the preserve of the mind” (Constantinesco 151; see also Kalck below). That original “split” between “scanning” and “interpreting” a text (Constantinesco 151), however, might better be understood as naming “the inextricability of mind and body” (Schalk 4), wherefrom reading emerges as a site of corporeal cognition, of embodied ways of feeling as ways of knowing (Batt). The essays assembled in this special issue simultaneously share these assumptions and demonstrate their critical purchase, as they seek collectively to explore what Erica Fretwell calls, in the interview that concludes the issue, “aesthetic opportunities for thickening the web of meaning.”
- 2 This issue indeed takes its cue from Fretwell’s work on “the aesthetics of feeling,” particularly in *Sensory Experiments*, where she describes the reading of literary texts as “a sensitizing mechanism”: “not merely a representation but an amplification of experience,” since literary writing operates, in her account, as “a technology [...] that has the potential to reproduce—not copy but produce *more*—feeling and [...] to create more connections to the world by registering more differences in it” (28-29). Although Fretwell, in her interview here, complicates, and even contests, her own distinction between representation and (re)production, mimesis and creation, simulation and stimulation, it remains a useful heuristic, or at least a useful descriptor for the approach that the following essays adopt, as they endeavor to provide an account of

what American literature feels like, or rather—and perhaps more modestly—of what their curated samples of US texts from the nineteenth century to the present time feel like.

- 3 For our contributors are ultimately more interested in the aesthetics of the reading experience than they are in the ways feelings and affects might be represented within the texts they chose to examine. This does not mean, however, that they do entirely away with the work of representation, as our guiding question for this issue discreetly suggests. “What Does Literature Feel Like?” accents reading as a sensory or aesthetic experience, but it also foregrounds—in the seemingly inconspicuous word “like”—the labors of comparison, analogy, and catachresis that are at the heart of the literary craft and that remain the business of literary criticism. More pointedly, while it might be easy to overlook the word “like” in our title, it is perhaps the one that best encapsulates the project of this issue. “[S]imultaneously affective and analogous” (Snediker 18), “like” calls our attention to the aesthetics of figuration whereby literary texts create in their readers an embodied response that is not easily separable—if at all—from the critical interpretations they generate.
- 4 Ironically, one of the keys to this special issue may lie in the fact that two of its essays concern decidedly *unpleasant* feelings, feelings of *dislike* and even of *disgust*. Or at least, they describe a strain of literature that is ostentatiously designed to provoke discomfort or distaste. Samuel R. Delany, Chuck Palahniuk, and Brian Evenson figure centrally in the essays by Solveig Dunkel and Nawelle Lechevalier-Bekadar; these two contributors trace the ways these authors describe actions by which most readers would be morally affronted, if not made physically ill. Accounts of adolescent sexuality, necrophilia, incest, and the consumption of bodily fluids dominate works by these contemporary writers that may seem remote from considerations of aesthetics or academic scrutiny. Yet, absent the moralizing perspective that can accompany such observations, we might allow that writers such as Lechevalier-Bekadar and Dunkel treat here demonstrate, even elicit, precisely what Fretwell, writing recently in *PMLA*, calls “Sensitivity Training” (her own essay’s title). Citing Schiller, Maria Montessori, and Alexander Baumgarten, Fretwell directs readers back to late-eighteenth century thought in ways that have implications for our contemporary critical moment and for the questions she and others raise about our current “state of feeling” *apropos* reading, literary study, and the body.
- 5 One way that these views have been anticipated, and, we can say, that the work of this special issue follows, is the turn in US literary studies to embodiment—understood, once again, not so much as an impossible attempt to forego the mind, but instead as an effort to recognize the inextricability of mind and body. As we suggested at the start of this introduction, and as Travis Foster points out in his introduction to *The Cambridge Companion to American Literature and the Body*, embodiment as a critical focus found its initial traction by way of disability, an area of focus that early ableist scholars used to describe the ways that illness, suffering, or broadly speaking non-normative physical experience bore on authors’ creativity (1). That the works Dunkel and Lechevalier-Bekadar consider in their respective essays should themselves relate non-normative versions of sexual activity may not be incidental to their effort to ask, as we also do in this introduction, “What Does American Literature Feel Like,” even or especially if how it does so makes us feel uncomfortable. For what they and others in this issue challenge is effectively the mind/body, sense/thought, normal/non-normative divisions on

which reading and critical judgment have often depended and, in turn, enacted, and even weaponized to buttress hierarchies of race, gender, class, sexuality and ability. At the same time, our contributors—and we, here, in their wake—attempt to identify some of the distinctive contributions that American literature and Americanist literary criticism may offer to account for the functions of embodied experience, particularly the embodied experience of reading.

- 6 Claiming that “American literature has long born[e] witness to what we might call the all-at-onceness of [...] seeking to fill in the details of these prepositional relationships binding and separating our minds and our bodies, filling out representations of the self that cannot neatly divide into material and immaterial components,” Foster advances a long-standing, if also unprovable view about US writers and critics (2). Writers since D.H. Lawrence have often posited something more “genuine” or “true” than the British literary tradition, say. Yet Foster’s thinking, along with others’ on whom we draw, suggest a singularity to American literature and history that allows a perhaps unique purchase to claims of a certain dark American exceptionalism (see Lurie). If American racial history and discourse is any measure of these claims’ aptness—that is, the singularly dark fact of US history, traceable along points of white-native, -black, and -brown conflict up until our contemporary moment—then Foster’s next claim indeed seems apt. As he puts it, “Simultaneously, American literature and Americanist criticism have provided accounts for how unequal distributions of access and power shape even this most intimate of relationships between being and embodying” (2). Foster here recalls Du Bois’s double-consciousness, an idea Erica Fretwell uses to orient her own exploration of late nineteenth-century US literature in *Sensory Experiments*. Du Bois’s well-known model helps Fretwell and others, such as Édouard Marsoin, and Michael Thomas and Ronnel Berry below, point to race as an aspect of American social and cultural life on which the mind-body (or consciousness-sensation) separation is bridged.
- 7 Crucial in this respect is Foster’s acknowledgment of the work of foundational thinkers like Hortense Spillers. To trace in full her influence on Black, feminist, and/or disability studies is clearly beyond the scope of this introduction. Yet it is well within our purview to recall, as Foster and others have, that Spillers’ work makes clear *why* American literature and a focus on race in it has implications for understanding the body, particularly through the distinction she theorizes between “body” as a discrete entity and “flesh” as referring to an undistinguished mass of Black people, and notably Black women, barred from accessing subjectivity and/as embodiment (Spillers, 1987). As Foster further asserts, citing Spillers, “the teaching, theorizing, and thinking that come out of Black Study, as Spillers notes in a 2006 interview [...], occupy a central position for the study of American literature and the body more broadly. The conceptual resources of Black Study and Black feminisms provide ‘a discourse, or a vocabulary’ for Americanist work” (3).
- 8 That only two of the essays that appear in this special issue—by Marsoin on Melville and Thomas and Berry on James Baldwin—address race centrally hardly disproves the point. That is to say, the focus on embodiment that all of our authors here show is part of what US literary study of the last thirty years has emphasized. Beyond Toni Morrison’s now-canonical point in 1992 about the Africanist presence in the forming of the American literary canon, critics since then have rightly seen that Black, disabled, queer, or women’s “anterior” position to cisgender and white normativity points to the

coextensive reality of bodily and material experience with identity generally. Blackness and queerness *per se* are not unique in their emphasis on bodies within the social and cultural spheres.

- 9 What is also not unique to material and social reality today is the removal of the body from much lived experience. For any exploration of embodiment today must also acknowledge the ever-increasing domination of our lived experience by technology. Digital culture, social media, and the internet are the primary means by which people-as-subjects relate and learn about the world. Cyborg fiction has envisioned a post-technological order in which human beings function alongside or even within machinery in possibly salutary, even fulfilling ways (see, e.g., Tran). Nevertheless, American fiction that envisions what humankind can salvage after the apocalypse locates meaning still in the most desperate straits of subsistence living close to earth. The spareness of McCarthy's prose in *The Road*, for example, belies the intensity of a world stripped of the digital mode that most removes us from contact with ourselves as well as with others. Questions about what literature feels like or what we feel when we read are meaningful rejoinders to a post-1990s scenario that puts unrelenting pressure on how experience is mediated.
- 10 However, a perhaps more important frame for this special issue on the felt experience of literature, we speculate, is the backdrop of postcritique, following several decades now of diagnostic accounts of the exhaustion of the critical paradigm (e.g. Latour, Felski 2015), usually coupled with resounding calls to imagine reading otherwise, especially through such a renewed emphasis on affective attachments to literary works (e.g., Sedgwick; Marcus and Best; Anker and Felski; Felski, 2020). We mention this not as a way to suggest the overbearing influence of Rita Felski, Bruno Latour, or others. Rather it is to offer their thinking about discourse as another way of focusing on our felt encounter with literature or, at least, about literary study as more attentive to how texts operate than with exactly what they mean, particularly as those meanings had (for some time prior) seemed to scholars to amount to revealing oversights or limitations. (Notably the political or ideological limits of certain authors, individuals, or reading practices.) Recalling Felski's challenge in *Uses of Literature* that, "[w]e are sorely in need of richer and deeper accounts of how selves interact with texts" (11), we can say that the contributors to this issue take seriously the experience as well as the concept of the "self" and its phenomenological, somatic interactions with texts.
- 11 The affective turn (so termed) has sought to engage the senses in what Fretwell might call aesthetic education. Not in the Schillerian sense of "a civilizing function" (2023 144). But in (re)awakening readers to their own sensorium and embodiment as part of the meaning as well as the imaginative encounter with literature. If much of the work here as elsewhere focuses on embodiment and/as precarious or vulnerable subject-position, this is of a piece with Spillers' and others' claims, such as Saidiya Hartman. Hartman's *Scenes of Subjection* may be most salient here. For in her call for a move beyond symbolic efforts to redress enslavement and entrenched racism, Hartman urges us to consider African American—and thus, more broadly, American and pan-national—experience in its lived, material, fully embodied aspect. Removing Confederate monuments in American cities and protests for social justice are vital steps. But they are not sufficient to change Black lives or contemporary, shared experience.
- 12 Literature and its academic reception are in many ways removed from those very matters. As Fretwell lucidly asks, "What do everyday feelings have to do with

entrenched racial hierarchies?” (2020 2). A renewed emphasis on the body may furnish an example of what Fretwell reclaims the failed, late nineteenth-century science of psychophysics to posit: “a new theory of sense experience as a fundamentally creative endeavor that orients body-subjects to each other in ways that may reflect but might also refract dominant social formations” (2020 2). If developments in certain areas of the academy come back to ideas of “aesthetic education” that seize us or return us to our selves as sensing, feeling, and caring bodies, we may find a way back to the body as well as forward to a new body politic.

13 ***

14 The essays assembled here show a range of interests within US literature in terms of periodization, form, and genre, from the 1850s to the present, from narrative fiction to poetry and ballet dance, from sensational to sensual literature, and from New England regionalism to planetary science fiction. However, rather than arranging them chronologically—and even if our sequence effectively begins in the mid-nineteenth century—it seemed more productive to organize them following the kind of vantage that they provide on the common question that animates them all and that shapes this issue as a whole. Before we describe each essay individually, then, we want to provide an overview of these various perspectives and the rationales behind them. The first three essays, by Marsoin, Kalck, and Patoine, take what we might describe as a longer or broader view of their respective objects, mobilizing their readings of individual authors and texts (Melville, objectivist poetry and Frank Herbert’s *Dune*, respectively) to advance a series of claims about reading as a “sensory event” (Kalck) underwritten by an “epistemology of touch” (Marsoin) that may foster “empathetic” collectives, as well as help “experience[e] planetarity” (Patoine). The next two essays, by Dunkel and Lechevalier-Bekadar, function simultaneously as a pivot and as a bridge, focusing as they do on aversive reading experiences that center on the somatics of reading and the literary production of sensation, even as they probe the moral, aesthetic, and linguistic limits of literature. Finally, the last three essays by Thomas and Berry, Stefania Iliescu, and Adeline Chevrier-Bosseau extend the discussion of the mechanics of sensation and its ethical purchase by looking respectively at James Baldwin’s theory of the sensual, Don DeLillo’s perceptual modes and his theorization of embodied vision, and the congealed passion of Edith Wharton’s *Ethan Frome* and the translation of literary affects in and through choreography.

15 As we have already suggested, the first essay in this issue, by Édouard Marsoin, takes up questions of touch and the body—specifically the racial body—by way of a canonical, we might say *the* canonical text of American literature: Melville’s *Moby-Dick* (1851). “Squeezing Case(s) with Melville: A Haptic Reading of ‘The Whiteness of the Whale’” trains a meticulous eye on the novel’s famous chapter to offer a counter-reading of its well-known visual properties. The readerly “eye” in Marsoin’s account becomes the conduit for apprehending texture, the felt surfaces and material presence of whale spermaceti, surely, but also the implications for “feeling” the texture of color and even of whiteness-as-absence of color. He further challenges earlier readings of the novel and the chapter’s focus on vision by showing a conjoining of the senses that undoes their earlier hierarchy. In an extension of showing a new interdependence of sight and touch at work in the chapter, and most prominently in its final paragraphs, Marsoin argues that such a sensory reordering is of a piece with Ishmael’s undoing of racial hierarchy on the heterogeneous Pequod. Key to his reading is the role and phenomena

of becoming—the movement between seeing and knowing, or surface and substance (or origins or depth), a dynamic that belies the prospect of assigning a specific meaning—what Marsoin calls an “associated concept”—to an object (or a human subject, white or Black).

- 16 Moving from narrative fiction to poetry and from the mid-nineteenth century to the mid-twentieth, the next essay confronts texts by three US poets—George Oppen, Charles Reznikoff and Louis Zukofsky—writing after the trauma of World War II and taking up “the challenge to western aesthetics represented by the barbarity of Auschwitz.” In “Distance without Remoteness: The Objectivist Poetics of Nonmimetic Pain,” Xavier Kalck positions these poets’ works at one end of a historical trajectory that began in medieval Europe with the “invention of the reading subject as the model of the integrated self” and “ended in 1945 with its disintegration.” Surveying critical debates, within literary studies, about the materiality of embodied reading practices, and somewhat challenging their relevance, Kalck turns to the connate field of literacy studies and to the long history of meditative reading as an immersive, connective, healing practice for an always already embodied mind that it provides and which literary scholars, he argues, might do well to consider with greater attention. By contrast, the poems by Oppen, Reznikoff and Zukofsky that Kalck then proceeds to read closely all “explicitly refrain from mimetic embodiment [...] with the purpose of separating the reader from the text to the point that the reader becomes aware that this distance itself is made into the real subject matter of the text.” Through strategic distance, evocative ambiguities, and purposeful silence, Oppen, Reznikoff and Zukofsky demonstrate that there is no easy “translation from the materiality of literary texts to the materiality of the body or vice-versa.” Yet, Kalck concludes, this does not disqualify their efforts as “disembodied,” or “disengaged” poetry. Rather, their poetics of nonmimetic pain “suspend[s] the reader’s emotional response” in the hope of recovering meaning—and the power of language to access it—“when historical realities involve a collapse of representation.”
- 17 While Kalck reckons with the possibility of poetry, of literature, in the wake of the Holocaust, the next essay, “The Worm and the Ecologist: Experiencing Planetaryity with Frank Herbert’s *Dune*” by Pierre-Louis Patoine, considers the imperative of imagining anew human life’s relation to, and integration with, the life of the planet in the face of our contemporary “ecological upheavals.” To do so, Patoine turns to science fiction and to Herbert’s now classic novel *Dune* from 1965, asking a daunting question: how can reading allow us to experience “planetary processes happening beyond the scales of everyday life”? *Dune* sets up, Patoine shows, a pedagogy of “immersive reading” that trains readers’ “environmental sensitivity,” equipping them with “technique[s] of attunement” to their “geophysical, biological and possibly planetary environment.” While many of these techniques rely on somatosensory stimulations, they also activate readers’ imaginative capabilities by mobilizing the generic conventions on which the novel draws and which it combines, from medieval fantasy, to sensationalist literature and science fiction. Although *Dune*’s “colonial and imperial imaginary” might at first be viewed as an obstacle to the kind of environmental sensitivity that the essay seeks to delineate, Patoine convincingly argues that the novel, by including a critique of its own ideological configuration, nonetheless provides a fruitful “terrain on which to train our [...] [readerly] response-ability.”

- 18 The next pair of essays returns us to the province of all too human life, emotions, and sensations. In “Reading from the Guts: of Text and Disgust,” Solveig Dunkel investigates “undigestible fiction” and reads Faulkner as a bridge to the twenty-first century by way of the particular somatics of disgust. Her reading broaches the politics of reading by asking what accounts for “taste,” namely, that which we deem suitable as literature. Not quite a Flaubertian novel “about nothing,” Faulkner’s *Sanctuary* (1931), in Dunkel’s account, is the first example of what she sees as books that challenge the specifically commercial ends of the literary marketplace. Samuel R. Delany’s *Hogg* (written in 1969 and published in 1995) and Chuck Palahniuk’s *Haunted* (2005) extend *Sanctuary*’s explicit encounter with bodies and with their insides, an interior often made exterior or painfully exposed through laceration, penetration, or exchange. These bodily interactions exceed those of consumers and products in a manner, Dunkel avers, that compels attention to what determines literariness or readerly pleasure in an age shaped by the internet and marketing algorithms.
- 19 Nawelle Lechevalier-Bekadar also considers how the work of one particular writer, Brian Evenson, challenges literary categories or even what we call the provenance of art. She uses Julia Kristeva, Marco Abel, Gilles Deleuze and other theorists to describe a kind of immanent, textual violence, a prose that itself enacts a textual rupture beyond—or before—the often heinous actions the works describe. Her essay, “From Sensationalism to Sensation: Brian Evenson’s Affecting Texts,” sees in Evenson a variation on Francis Bacon’s vivid paintings of bodies that are ill-shapen or maligned, images that both enact and perform a sensationalizing effect. Echoing Kalck’s concerns, Lechevalier-Bekadar shows how Evenson’s fiction elaborates sensation—or the capacity to feel, to sense or apprehend a text with immediacy—as a means to bypass the security of representation or mediation themselves and, thus, restore readers to a position of salutary responsiveness and vulnerability.
- 20 In “Reading the Sensual in James Baldwin’s *Giovanni’s Room*,” Michael Thomas and Ronnel Berry extend Marsoin’s exploration of the contestation of racial hierarchies in *Moby-Dick* through a reading of Baldwin’s *Giovanni’s Room* (1956) as enacting forms of queer sensuality that strive to challenge the racism and homophobia that undergird the “system of reality” of the twentieth-century United States—and, arguably, our own. Reorienting lived experience away from such an oppressive system and towards “the sensual as a practice of knowing through feeling,” Thomas and Berry argue, holds the promise of a utopian togetherness uncoupled from the hegemonic ideal of racial and sexual normativity. The absence of Black characters in the novel, in fact, proves their point, as it enables Baldwin, not only “to reveal Whiteness as a social identity which lies at the heart of American identity,” but also to expose its profound association with heterosexuality. Refracted through the geography of expatriation that organizes the novel, the racialized and sexualized underpinnings of American Whiteness are seen to shape the protagonist’s “sense of reality,” which he struggles, and largely fails, to alter. Yet what the character fails to recognize is precisely, Thomas and Berry contend, what the novel teaches its readers to identify and to resist. On that account, the embrace of the sensual is indeed a way of knowing, and of beginning to undo, racial and sexual hierarchies.
- 21 Focusing on Don DeLillo’s post-2000 novels, Stefania Iliescu’s “A Sense of Time(ly) Seeing in DeLillo’s Later Novels” returns us once more to Marsoin’s opening essay, this time through a concern for the aesthetics of visibility. Centering her analysis on the

ekphrastic quality of DeLillo's writing, Iliescu demonstrates how, contrary to some of his earlier work and its elaboration of images as dangerous pathways towards hyperreality, his later fiction repeatedly mobilizes visual devices as "enhancers of sensory experience," rather than vectors of derealization. From *Cosmopolis*, *Zero K*, and *The Silence* to *The Body Artist*, *Falling Man*, and *Point Omega*, DeLillo "develops a rhetoric of seeing" that involves the readers' "sensing bodies" and elicits ethical questioning about readerly identification. Ultimately, Iliescu claims, DeLillo invites us to conceive of reading as "a practice which trains readers both in manifesting and withholding empathy" by requiring immersive work, what DeLillo himself described as the "pious effort [...] to see [...] the depths of things so easy to miss in the shallow habit of seeing" (2010 16-17).

- 22 Finally, Adeline Chevrier-Bosseau bridges the early twentieth and early twenty-first centuries as she too takes up the body, but the whole, mobile corpus in the act of dancing as an extension of the literary. Her "'Gestures of Air and Stone': Translating *Ethan Frome* into Dance in Cathy Marston's *Snowblind*," uses important work by Carrie Preston and others on Delsarte, the influential, contemporary thinker about expressive gesture, to show Edith Wharton's response to Isadora Duncan, Martha Graham, and other choreographers in her fiction. Chevrier-Bosseau then reveals how our own contemporary—the choreographer Cathy Marston—utilizes her dance adaptation of Wharton's novel to express the characters' unexpressed, often repressed feelings. Referring to what is buried in both the wintry New England landscape and what Chevrier-Bosseau herself calls the characters' "affective hinterland" of their feelings, she claims that Marston "pick[s] up on every little affective quiver in the text and immediately feel[s] how they could be danced," expanding how literature feels and how it makes readers aware of the characters' most subtle and profound emotions.
- 23 The issue concludes with an interview with Erica Fretwell, in which, building on her expertise as a scholar of the nineteenth century, she reflects on several of the questions that have animated our contributors' investigations around the somatic, and specifically haptic, dimension of reading. Doing so, she makes a compelling case for uncoupling sensation from the literary genres to which it has been traditionally attached in literary history (namely, sentimentalism and sensationalism) and for turning it, as we hope others will too in the wake of this issue, into "a framework [and, we may add, a method] for exfoliating the various semiotic layers of any text."

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NOTES

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