

Introduction

It would be more interesting to learn of an experiment with or through a concept, where the concept and experiment come into the world together, not one chasing the other and trying to settle it.¹

The impetus for this project is rooted in our conviction that existing models of criticism privilege and sustain prevailing hegemonies— and thus that critical form is in urgent need of intervention and innovation. The ambition of this venture is to disrupt traditional modes of academic criticism by publishing disruptive, experimental critiques.

We are calling our publishing project *Manifold* because, first, experiments have the potential to create unlimited, manifold, new forms; but also, and especially, because the forms themselves might be understood to *be* manifolds. In math, a manifold appears to change shape as the dimensional variable increases. A two-dimensional manifold is just a shape drawn on paper, carefully shaded in. However, in three, five, or seven dimensions, that same original shape proliferates into a fluted trumpet, a starburst, a mathematical peony in full bloom:



We can visualize, then, how critique could approach its object if it was understood to be subject to multiplying dimensions: with the substitution of a mere dimensional variable, its shape morphs from, for example, a flat two-dimensional essay, written and published in conformity with traditional academic formulae and discourses, into a layering of multiple approaches and perspectives on the original “object” of critique.

This multiplicity throws into relief just how effective restricting the dimensionality of a critique can be at perpetuating entrenched authority: it can only be done in this way, in this order, approved by these people, published by those people, and counted toward tenure by another set of people, with each limiting factor foreclosing the view of the object until it folds politely into something easily handled and shelved. Enforcing these rigid boundaries hinders academic production and stunts critical thinking.

We recognize that even when critics take more formal risks, these experiments are so much whistling into the wind: with the exception of projects authored by academic “stars,” publishers generally relegate heterodoxies to the rejection pile.

1. Fred Moten, “From cooperation to black operation: A Conversation with Stefano Harney and Fred Moten on *The Undercommons*,” April 2016, <https://transversal.at/blog/From-cooperation-to-black-operation>.

So we begin the intervention with writing and publishing, form and production. Free of regulation, liberated from inherited models, critique is instrumentalized into a tool for disrupting systemic power structures—not by rejecting academic criticism, but by unsettling and re-forming it. We don't yet know the full range of forms these experiments will yield, but a peony in full bloom has surely outgrown the shelf.



In order for what seemed permanent to now reveal itself as provisional, it might help you to have experienced a few significant threats to the fixedness of things.²

But even as the subject of our critique is academic, its origins are personal—the constraints of the shelf regularly chafe, such as when a member of a faculty committee suggested to one of us that she needed to “earn the right to experiment,” as if promising a treat reserved for good girls who followed the rules. For emerging academics, in particular, these “suggestions” come down with the targeted force of hammers, an authority nearly impossible to resist without also foreclosing on a career. And it isn't just the critic who is hammered and molded, whittled away: traditional criticism, often as not, does a certain kind of violence to the very works of art it seeks to illuminate. As Susan Howe so perceptively noted,

The issue of editorial control is directly connected to the attempted erasure of antinomianism in our culture. Lawlessness seen as negligence is at first feminized and then restricted or banished.³

So it was perhaps a self-preserving impulse that led us to conceive of *Manifold*, but what galvanized us was the revelation that, once we started talking about our project, so many other people felt its necessity, too. As we worked on this collection, we took special delight in the disruptions of our contributors, each new shape the manifestation of experiments as individual as they are formal: his trumpet, her starburst, their peony.

But, unbeknownst to us, there was another looming disruption, one that even in our most dystopian fever dreams would have been inconceivable—and it has disrupted precisely those parts of the academic system that we would have wanted to persevere: the community, embodiment, sitedness, and inter-relationality of being in the same place, of seeing people and being seen. These pieces occupy a liminal space: written before we all retreated in the face of a global pandemic, they will nevertheless be released into a world ordered by a different, more existential, set of constraints.

As we sit in asynchronous isolation, waiting for the pinwheel on our laptops to stop spinning, for conferences to be rescheduled, for classes and committees to meet on campus instead of in Zoom rooms, for publications to be peer-

2. Anne Boyer, *A Handbook of Disappointed Fate* (New York: Ugly Duckling Presse, 2018).

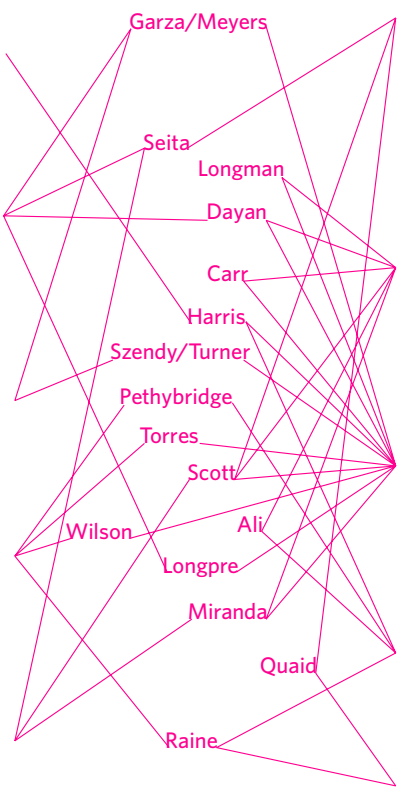
3. Susan Howe, *The birth-mark: unsettling the wilderness in American literary history* (Hanover, NH: Wesleyan University Press, 1993), 1.

reviewed and sent on their way to a dusty obsolescence...it occurs to us that maybe nothing will return to the way it was, and that it shouldn't. Especially in this time of online teaching and pedagogical reformulation, this could be the moment that changes the equation from functional—one discrete solution—to differential: that is, one that considers change, movement, dimension.

Like manifolds, the critiques collected here are differential equations that narrate uncertainty and change instead of specifying solutions. They refuse assimilation, morph from critique into object for critique, stage incursions into camouflaged hegemonies, and multiply dimensions. They bloom, manifestations of critical thought made manifold.

**"EXPERIMENTAL CRITICISM"
HAS MANIFOLD POSSIBILITIES:**

- Hypercriticism**, or an exploitation of hypertextual possibilities
- Deconstructed/** unconstructed criticism, which might allow the reader to disrupt teleological form by "shuffling" the various components of the critique as she reads
- Multi-lingual** criticism of a multi-lingual or translated text
- Experimenting with **genre** by using traditional literary forms in the critique instead of limiting them to being objects of criticism
- Performative** criticism, in which a critical engagement is performed or has performative utterances



Dialogical criticism, whereby texts (literary and historical) are put in dialogue which each other—both conceptually and physically on the page—with minimal mediation by the critic

Subjective criticism, in which the critic juxtaposes personal narrative with traditional explication in order to acknowledge the difficulty of true objectivity in criticism

Multi-disciplinary critique, which subjects the object of critique to the conventions of multiple critical disciplines simultaneously

Objectified critique, which, in the act of interpreting the object of critique, creates a new object

Pedagogical criticism, whereby the critique blends boundary between critical thought and pedagogical application