

## THEORIES AND METHODOLOGIES

# Aesthetic Education without Guarantees: An Introduction

NICHOLAS GASKILL AND KATE STANLEY

NICHOLAS GASKILL is associate professor of American literature at the University of Oxford and tutorial fellow at Oriel College. He is the author of *Chromographia: American Literature and the Modernization of Color* (U of Minnesota P, 2018) and a coeditor of *The Lure of Whitehead* (U of Minnesota P, 2014). He is writing a history of intensity as an aesthetic category and a study of pragmatist experiments in aesthetic education.

KATE STANLEY is associate professor of English at the University of Western Ontario. She is the author of *Practices of Surprise in American Literature after Emerson* (Cambridge UP, 2018). She is at work on a book project about pragmatism and pedagogy and an edited volume on William James and literary studies (with Kristen Case).

Chances are that if you're reading *PMLA* you have a stake in aesthetic education. We mean that in the broadest, most practical sense. You're a teacher, and your teaching, at least insofar as you teach literature, involves helping students respond to the many subtle and distinctive ways that literary works carry meaning. Like all educational endeavors, it's a matter of training attention, even more than relaying facts (though of course without basic knowledge regarding authorship, publication history, and political and social context, where would we be?). Aesthetic educators aim at equipping students with new perceptual skills: the ability to hear the tone of a narrative voice, to see the patterns in a poem, to recognize the assumptions buried in a word choice, and to apply all these skills and more to the wider frameworks in which they take on cultural, political, and philosophical significance. Literary study moves in many divergent directions, but it begins here, with the work of learning to activate, analyze, and ultimately do something with the styles of thinking and feeling that literature makes available. The essays in our section dwell in this beginning. They return us to a familiar scene—cherished all the more after years of online teaching—of teacher and students sitting together, straining to see something that at the start of class they sensed only vaguely, or not at all.

Ours, then, is a more hands-on version of aesthetic education than that found in the philosophical tradition associated with Friedrich Schiller, Matthew Arnold, and their readers. That tradition amounts to a subfield of aesthetic theory that focuses on the role of the arts in a life well lived, and though it has long guided reflection on the role of the humanities, it has been largely uninterested in the day-to-day work of teaching. There are no lesson plans in Schiller's *Letters on the*

© 2023 The Author(s). Published by Cambridge University Press on behalf of the Modern Language Association of America

*PMLA* 138.1 (2023), doi:10.1632/S0030812923000044

127

*Aesthetic Education of Man* (1795), nor is it obvious how to contrive one on Schillerian principles. Moreover, the speculative stories that he and others tell about aesthetic education—however influential in pitting the arts against various ills of modernity—rely too heavily on a general account of aesthetic experience to be of much use for understanding the specific qualities and techniques of particular artworks. That generality, when wedded to polemical aims, may account for the optimism of writers in this tradition, who sometimes write as if all it took to achieve the ennobling effects of culture is to drop the right poem in the room, step back, and watch as *Bildung* unfolds.

We teachers know that it's not that easy. Lessons sometimes fail; students, distracted by debt or a pandemic or anxieties about what lies on the other side of graduation, don't get to the reading; the novel falls flat, and discussion runs aground. Things don't always go to plan. And as for what students do with what we have taught them once they leave the classroom—well, that's an even trickier matter. There are no guarantees in the practices of aesthetic education, despite what the theoretical tradition implies. For that reason, we're not interested in making grand claims about beauty's special relation to freedom, or even about the critical function of the imagination. Such claims have their place, specifically as philosophical attempts to abstract aspects of aesthetic experience that challenge ingrained assumptions about, for instance, the nature of thinking or the scope of politics. But they are of a different order from discussions about how to enable students to experience works of art.<sup>1</sup>

Theoretical arguments about the benefits of aesthetic experience fundamentally depend on the too-often subordinated task of facilitating this experiential capacity. Poems don't do anything on their own. They need readers. At the very least they need readers who enjoy them enough to want to read them. (Even pleasure must sometimes be learned, as anyone who teaches anything other than the most immediately "relatable" texts knows.) And if the poem is thought to offer some critical insight, say about historical structures of feeling or possibilities of present perception, then

the reader must have the tools to recognize how that insight is staged. In short, the big-banner claims made for the moral and political effects of studying literature—of the sort that characterize contemporary defenses of the humanities no less than the Schillerian tradition—assume the practical tasks of teaching. They just don't explain them.

In this section, we bring aesthetic education back to the classroom, where it belongs. What changes when we approach the aims of literary study and the politics of aesthetics with teaching foremost in our minds? As Rachel Sagner Buruma and Laura Heffernan have argued in their book *The Teaching Archive*, the first thing that changes is the idea that teaching is separate from and subordinate to scholarship. Teachers of literature have frequently worked out their ideas in their classes, and they've done so with an ecumenical, whatever-works approach that belies the sharp divisions of methodological polemic. Another useful change: when we start with teaching, arguments about the politics of literature naturally turn to the institutional conditions of education. Those conditions vary; our own contributors teach at a range of public and private institutions inside and outside the United States, and the teaching they do could hardly be said to represent a single model of "the classroom." Keeping those conditions in view focuses attention on the professional site closest to the political changes affecting the discipline. Indeed, mounting pressures on departments brought on by reduced public funding and the canard that an English degree is an expensive ticket to nowhere have already directed professors back to the ground-level work of teaching. Maurice S. Lee, in his contribution to a state-of-the-field issue of *American Literary History* in 2022, reports "working less these days on publishing and more on new courses, less on academic talks, and more on ways to bring majors to the discipline" (208). He's not alone: one of the most remarkable, if untrumpeted, characteristics of that special issue is the frequency with which contributors invoke specific classroom practices to make their case for "the function of American literary criticism at the present time," as the editors' Arnoldian title has it.<sup>2</sup> Slowly, and against the entrenched hierarchy that pits

(masculinized) scholarship against (feminized) teaching, an archive of present teaching practices is emerging.

The essays gathered here approach aesthetic education from a variety of perspectives: some detail its history, some illustrate classroom techniques, others rethink some of the topic's inevitable subcategories, including judgment, elitism, and the nature of expertise. They occasionally disagree with one another. That's essential for us, because we don't want "aesthetic education" to become another counter in the endless game of disciplinary one-upmanship. We think it's more important than that. We're all teachers. We all have ways of bringing the texts we teach alive for our students. Our hope for this section is not that everyone will begin working from the same pedagogical playbook but that a serious discussion of classroom techniques will prompt teachers to reflect on what they already do, and then to give those reflections a more central place in our disciplinary self-understanding. We want to take stock of what aesthetic education has entailed, the better to learn what it might become.

What happens to our understanding of the aesthetic when it is paired with education? When we approach aesthetic response not as a given but as something cultivated and experimented with in the classroom? What elements of aesthetic theory prove most relevant when the task is to teach literature, and how do familiar tropes—about play, the social nature of judgment, or the entanglement of perceiver and perceived—assume new guises when taken to school?

To answer these questions, and to set the stage for the essays that follow, let's distinguish among the various terms that huddle within "the aesthetic." *Aisthesis* is a name for sensory perception. It's broad—so broad that it could well be said to encompass the "forming of the five senses" that Karl Marx famously called "a labour of the entire history of the world down to the present" (89). *Aesthetics*, as the term developed in the eighteenth century, narrowed the wide field of *aisthesis* to experiences of the beautiful and the sublime, initially without distinguishing between the

beauty of, say, a sunset and that of a painting. In the nineteenth century the term fixed more firmly on art, in part because artworks offer intensified—or at least objectified—occasions for sensory perception. Artworks, though, are not synonymous with aesthetic theory, for the simple reason that human practices of making are so old and diverse that they always exceed any attempt to philosophize about them. Whereas aesthetic theory generalizes about our experiences of art and elaborates the philosophical, moral, or political implications those experiences have, criticism directs itself to the singularity of artworks. *Literature*, as a term, is slippery, having changed over the centuries from denoting writing of all sorts to denoting a specific subfield, usually imaginative writing (Guillory, *Professing Criticism* 199–203). We'll stick with the modern definition here, not only because it covers most of what gets taught in English departments, but also because it singles out writing practices that foreground a basic tenet of aesthetic approaches to art: that how a text is shaped has everything to do with what it means, and that consequently the meaning of a work often inheres as much in its stylistic and formal elements as in its propositional content, as much in what it offers to be felt as in what it sets out to say.

If the politics of aesthetics in literary studies feel up for grabs right now, it's in part because sensory perception—the *aisthesis* in "aesthetics"—has been newly embraced. Scholars have treated aesthetics as "a problem of the colonial ordering of the senses," in Kyla Wazana Tompkins's formulation, and thus as a matter that encompasses "the forming, schooling, and historical disciplining of the senses" (421). Kandice Chuh has shown how that broad project demands attention not only to how the school itself bends sensory habits to exclusionary ends—including through invocations of aesthetic theories that universalize a specifically historical subject position—but also to how specific literary arrangements of sense might disrupt or reroute such programs. Chuh's *The Difference Aesthetics Makes*, alongside related analyses of European aesthetics by Simon Gikandi, Lewis R. Gordon, David Lloyd, Fred Moten, and Paul C. Taylor, brings the intimate links between colonialism, liberalism, and

philosophical aesthetics vividly into view. Racism itself is revealed here as an aesthetic project through and through, a large-scale effort to hierarchize sensory perception that has been abetted by aesthetic theory even as it is unsettled by Black, brown, and Indigenous art practices.

Similarly, the long tradition of looking to art to resist the blunting of sensation and the deadening of meaning brought on by industrial capitalism—a tradition cast in suspicious shadow by the ideological critiques of the aesthetic from Pierre Bourdieu and cultural studies—has been revived by progressive critics looking to art for values and experiences not tied to the market. Whereas Bourdieu, in *Distinction*, regarded the discourse of aesthetics as an engine for reinforcing unequal social hierarchies—with “good” taste acting as a mechanism of exclusion—Jacques Rancière has influentially recast aesthetics as a matter of the “distribution of the sensible,” a struggle over what and who can be sensed (*Politics*). Like the scholars mentioned above, he treats artworks and the aesthetic regimes in which they function as shaping the sensory and perceptual experiences whereby we render the social world. His egalitarian gambit, made especially clear in his book on education, *The Ignorant Schoolmaster*, is that this world can be rendered differently, without the imbalances integral to capitalism. Something of this rebooted opposition of art and the market motivates the otherwise very different projects of Nicholas Brown (who presents the intention-bound artwork as an antithesis to the use-me-as-you-like commodity), Joseph North (who treats literary criticism as a practice of aesthetic education that fights the neoliberal impoverishment of experience “on the terrain of sensibility” [xi]), and Michael Clune (who splits the difference by setting the experiences of growth found in the literary classroom against large-scale algorithmic efforts to feed consumers more of what they already like). Sianne Ngai, too, though she foregrounds the entanglement of the artwork with the market, has found in aesthetic judgments a way to diagnose the constricted forms of agency endemic to late capitalism.

This quick survey should make at least two things clear: first, that aesthetics can no longer be

presumed in advance to have a particular politics; and, second, that the dismissal of the aesthetic in the 1980s and 1990s on the grounds that it did have a built-in agenda—a “bourgeois” one—unnecessarily constricted the aims and tools of literary studies. For as Chuh argues, the aesthetic ordering of sensory experience constitutes an integral, if relatively nebulous, component of any social or historical moment (this was the point of Raymond Williams’s idea of “structures of feeling” [128]). The critical mission of the humanities—the job of encouraging students to “know themselves,” including as social and socially formed beings—can’t do without it. At the same time, any effort to extend and make available the particular descriptions, disruptions, or deviations of sensory experience achieved by particular artworks demands a repertoire of techniques for helping others follow how a novelist thinks through narrative, or a painter thinks through painting, or how a poet creates constellations of sense and meaning through words.

All of which raises a question: If aesthetic education happens at different sites and on different scales, how do the specialized activities of literary studies relate to broader social habits of sensory perception? Getting clear on that relation demands keeping an eye both on how the institutional conditions of higher education mediate between our critical activities and whatever wider social role they might play, and on the deliberate efforts to reflect on and experiment with aesthetic discernment in the literary classroom. Descriptions of the latter are thin on the ground, despite the widespread sense, voiced more in conversation than in print, that teaching is the most immediately consequential work that English professors do.<sup>3</sup> What, then, are the aims of aesthetic education in literary studies? And what techniques and objects might achieve them?

This section won’t offer definitive answers to those big questions, but taken together the essays display a set of concerns and orientations that not only advance the growing discussion around educational practices but also reveal how that discussion alters the usual tropes of aesthetic theory. For starters, where so much of the philosophical

tradition of aesthetic education has focused on play and imagination—from Schiller’s description of the play drive to Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak’s call to “keep up the work of displacing belief onto the terrain of imagination” (10)—our contributors focus overwhelmingly on perception and possibility. Talk of the imagination can suggest a faculty that simply exists and must be used; talk of perception, as Clune demonstrates in *A Defense of Judgment*, gets closer to the actual work of aesthetic education. There is a whole philosophical and pedagogical literature on perceptual learning, on how with the right information and plenty of guided practice students come to see new qualities, atmospheres, or patterns in what is ostensibly the same object or situation. Clune finds a predecessor to this work in David Hume, who treats critical discernment as “a skill to be cultivated,” an affair of education and communal expertise (Clune 18). What Clune’s approach makes clear is that aesthetic experience is educated experience, and that the particular type of education involved has everything to do with teaching students specialized modes of perceiving literary works. Those works are imaginative, to be sure, and demand imagination; but in practice, the teacher’s work turns on helping students see and feel what is effectively present on the page and in the classroom.

Yet this should not suggest that perceptual education demands that students come to see literary texts in the exact same way. We suspect that most English teachers resist this outcome, despite the great effort expended to attune students to hitherto unnoticed qualities. One of the aims of familiarizing students with the traditions and contexts of literary styles is after all to equip them to notice new meanings, new possibilities not only for understanding a text but for doing something with it. Practices of aesthetic education, from this perspective, are practices of possibility. Track the invocations of possibility in what follows and you’ll notice that what has elsewhere gone under the name of *play*—the loosening of intellectual and cultural habits in aesthetic experience, the relative freedom to envisage new worlds—is now more likely to be termed *possibility*.<sup>4</sup> That shift marks a movement from a more neutral

term (*play* being defined negatively, in terms of the constraints it slips) to one that denotes a situated and always interested attempt to seize a possibility for some end. *Play*, rhetorically, can suggest frivolity; *possibility*, especially as the term has been used by Black studies scholars looking to art practices to cultivate “worlds of otherwise possibility” (Crowley 163), points rather to specific attempts “to read, think, and imagine otherwise” in the face of a pernicious set of entrenched structures (Sharpe 13). As Audre Lorde wrote in 1977, “poetry is not a luxury,” because “there is only poetry to hint at possibility made real” (39). Lorde looked to poetry for its ability to articulate, in shareable language, feelings and experiences that had been kept inarticulate (though nonetheless present), but we can also recognize in her formulations a familiar facet of our encounters with artworks: the way that their imaginative distance from our everyday worlds, coupled with the immediate pleasures they offer, invites freer experimentation with embedded habits of thought and feeling. Readers are more likely to try on “otherwise possibilities” when the experience is framed as “aesthetic.” That affordance comes with a cost: namely, the challenge of carrying what is realized in poetic experience into other contexts. Possibility is fleeting and tied to a situation; as Lorde notes, “it is not easy to sustain belief in its efficacy” (38). Calling teaching a “practice of possibility” is a way of acknowledging this difficulty while still approaching the classroom as a laboratory for generating and testing the possibilities that literary works afford.

A crucial ingredient, then, in aesthetic education is aesthetic objects. That might seem obvious, but given the wide remit granted to aesthetics when it is returned to *aisthesis*, alongside literary study’s long-term uncertainty about its object of study, it is worth making explicit some of the reasons we teach literature, as opposed to sensory experience in general. By “literature” we mean instances of writing that are made through, and demand to be engaged with, an emotionally infused cognition that resists abstraction from the text’s sensory particulars (its arrangements of sense and sensation). Such writing offers immediate advantages to the aesthetic

educator. A novel, unlike a more nebulous or ephemeral historical experience, can be returned to again and again. It is not a perception but a relatively stabilized script for perception, one that students can gather around, discuss, and debate in ways that realize new possibilities for understanding based on the knowledge and experiences that each one brings to the discussion. After all, literary works are only relatively stabilized; as anyone who has spent time around English departments knows, texts are notoriously—wonderfully—open to ever-new readings.

As literature comes to occupy a smaller and smaller place in the contemporary media ecosystem, the necessity of teaching students how to be responsive to what literary texts make possible becomes more and more imperative.<sup>5</sup> Cultivating literary experience is in this way a more specialized endeavor than cultivating aesthetic experience. Aesthetic response, after all, predates university education by a long way. As Frank Sibley noted, children learn to perceive aesthetic qualities from a young age, as soon as adults start pointing at twilight skies or beetle shells and calling them “beautiful,” or just saying “wow.” Something of narrative and poetic response is gleaned early on, too, but for the historically distant or otherwise challenging texts that English professors often teach, students have to be introduced to the practices, institutions, and cultures in which a text was created—as much as they need to have a sense of what we might learn from that text now—in order to recognize what would constitute a meaningful new reading. As Clune has argued at length, and as Elaine Auyoung details in her essay, the ability to see the world through a literary work—to try on its styles of seeing and understanding—requires first becoming practiced in how to use the specialized objects of an artistic practice. Grasping literary possibilities, which are often embedded in a text’s patterns of perception, takes training.

In this way, aesthetic education makes good on that tired truism that students learn “by experience.” As apt as that insight is in general—it’s well known that the interest and attention that accompany being involved in a task better facilitate learning than the cold reception of facts—it’s doubly true for literary

studies in its aim at aesthetic education. For aesthetic objects demand to be experienced. They are, in Susanne K. Langer’s term, semblances of *aisthesis* that invite an embodied and entangled response (45–68; see also Chuh xii). Aesthetic education cultivates experience in the specific sense that it deals with objects designed to be understood through experience, objects that—unlike arguments or reports—couch their insights within the experiential particulars they assemble. Even more, the work of understanding involves educators not just in *experience* but in its cognate term *experiment*, since the goal is to try to collectively inhabit the perceptual possibilities staged by a work, and then to see what those possibilities might mean when realized in particular contexts.

Learning to see, however, isn’t the whole story, since what is seen must then be communicated, tested out under what John McGowan in his essay calls the “pressure” of articulation. Here is where the focus on the classroom gives a newly concrete sense to what has long been recognized as the social nature of aesthetic judgment. Immanuel Kant famously claimed that aesthetic judgment depends on individual response but demands “universal” assent. And though some have interpreted this formulation as a sleight of hand, a way of measuring the many by the tastes of the few, others including Hannah Arendt, Stanley Cavell, and Sianne Ngai have emphasized how Kant’s account presents judgments about art as performative speech acts that address a community and indeed require a community to be made in the first place—a community, we might add, that can disagree. The classroom makes that community tangible. An essential feature of pedagogical experiments in trying on new values and possibilities is that they are carried out in the company of other people. They are collective endeavors, in which observations and judgments are tested and verified through conversation at every stage.

Everyone comes to class with predilections that shape what they notice and how they respond. To observe something new, to unsettle a reflexive response, depends on becoming aware of these stock habits. The social dynamics of the classroom

can help spur such awareness. When students and teachers read together, they are exposed to a variety of perspectives that might illuminate a scene, a sentence, or a single word. The teacher may be more informed and *experienced*—the root sense of “expert”—and the fact that the teacher assigns the texts and dispenses the grades inevitably shapes the conversation. The classroom is far from a power-free zone. But the very nature of literature as a verbal semblance of life means that it is counterproductive, even impossible, to limit in advance what could count as relevant background knowledge or experiential insight. What a text encodes or prompts is as varied as the minds that come to it in class. There’s always more to see. And this holds for the teacher as much as the student. The essays that follow take different positions on the authority that comes with critical expertise, some arguing for the teacher’s role in modeling exemplary readings, others insisting that the task, instead, is to give students the tools to comprehend the social and personal conditions of judgment. Here we want only to note that the tried and tested role of discussion in the literature classroom testifies to an embedded conviction that listening to others’ observations can reveal one’s blind spots and uncover alternative angles of view. Voicing one’s own views can be just as revelatory. A crucial pedagogical task for aesthetic education is thus to create an environment in which students can practice perceiving and articulating their apprehensions alongside one another.

Many benefits have been claimed for these practices of collectively testing out the possibilities of literature. Even a brief survey, sticking only to the participants in this section, yields several alternatives, stretching from the production of knowledge to the cultivation of sensibility and the promotion of human flourishing. We want to keep all these options on the table. After all, literary criticism has many different aspects, and these different objectives span its various sites and modes. Knowledge, for instance, is the coin of the realm in the research university, and it befits a discussion of aesthetic education to have an account of what kinds of knowledge are fostered through engagements with aesthetic objects and how that

knowledge is pulled from the aesthetic encounter. At the same time, the renewed willingness to endorse the role of the arts in the good life—to argue that aesthetic education can “enrich” experience (Clune 5), promote a “fuller, embodied relation to the world” (Chuh 22), foster “deeper modes of life” (North vii), or create “a livable world” (Gordon 19)—flows more directly from undergraduate teaching and the liberal-arts model of education, including extra-academic sites of literary journalism and amateur criticism. (*YouTube* alone hosts hundreds of hours of deep dives into *Netflix* shows, pop songs, and other aesthetic objects: clearly there’s an interest in criticism beyond the academy.)<sup>6</sup>

On the topic of rationales for literary study, then, we have to give Schiller his due. For though his legacy is contested, his basic formula for aesthetic education continues to cover a broad swath of justifications for the humanities. Put simply, Schiller recommended an education in art, specifically in the experience of play associated with imaginative literature, to combat a perceived ill of modernity, in his case the widening gap between the “sensuous” and “rational” sides of humanity. Replace his understanding of “modernity” with others—as linked to capitalism, colonialism, rationalization, or the acceleration of anthropogenic climate change, for example—and you can account for a great deal of the arguments that have been made for the study of literature, all the way up to Spivak’s attempts at “sabotaging Schiller” (2).<sup>7</sup> There is an ongoing conviction that political change requires a renovation of the “terrain of sensibility” (North xi), a conviction made all the more urgent and concrete in efforts both to decolonize *aisthesis* and to cultivate a more connected, more committed responsiveness to a rapidly warming planet. This is a legacy of the philosophical tradition of aesthetic education worth extending. But with this caveat: that whatever consequences literary study will have, whatever changes it might effect, they will come through the particular institutions and practices of aesthetic education.

The essays that follow offer investigations into the history, objects, techniques, and political possibilities of aesthetic education. We begin with an essay by Jonah Siegel that addresses head-on the long-standing criticism, levied by Bourdieu and Terry Eagleton among others, that modern aesthetics is an instrument for imposing the sensibility of an elite class onto everyone else. Siegel disrupts this entrenched suspicion by revealing the surprisingly complicated role of education in Marx's thought about the bourgeoisie's relationship to the proletariat, and then using that framework to view afresh the political valences of aesthetic education as described by Schiller and Matthew Arnold. Erica Fretwell's "disability history of aesthetic education" then provides a different perspective on the history of aesthetic education, one that tracks how literacy programs of nineteenth-century primary schools borrowed embodied reading techniques from schools for the blind. Drawing a line from Schiller to the enduring Montessori method, Fretwell re-grounds our understanding of aesthesis as a hands-on program of "sensitivity training."

North's essay offers a framework for understanding how such broader efforts at aesthetic training relate to the professionalized practices of criticism in universities. North asks, Through what mediations does literary criticism, narrowly construed, affect broader cultural patterns of *aisthesis*? That question threatens to reintroduce the charge of elitism (English professors telling members of the public what's good for them), but North avoids that trap by appealing to the "commons" as a way of reframing the relationship between a specialized critical institution and more widely distributed critical practices. English professors don't possess a special expertise, he argues, so much as defend a set of common capabilities.

How does an education in sensing and feeling proceed? The next set of essays explores the range of materials and methods that are used to facilitate literary learning. Auyoung draws on education research to discover the specific mechanisms through which experience facilitates noticing. Recent studies reveal the importance of perceptual contrasts when learning to discern the more diverse

and distinctive features of a sensory field. These findings suggest the kinds of classroom practices that will prepare students to perceive a text as a finely differentiated landscape. Heffernan and Buurma trace a long history of English teachers who reconnect everyday experience to literary form by providing students with biographical and contextual resources for reconstructing "the sensory lives of authors." This pedagogical work serves to prepare a qualitative attention that "expands possibilities for textual meaning." In reflecting on the crucial role of aesthetic judgment in editorial work, Merve Emre asserts the importance of a classroom staple—the critical edition—in the process of aesthetic education. As Emre argues, all aspects of literary critical work, even the supposedly anti-aesthetic work of philology, aim at instruction in feeling.

In the next group of essays, contributors put these pedagogical methods and insights to work, revealing the concrete aims and benefits of an aesthetic education, both in and beyond the classroom. Daphne A. Brooks and Nan Z. Da demonstrate how particular aesthetic objects from a variety of artistic practices have enabled them both to foster and to receive an education in looking, listening, and feeling. Brooks narrates her own education in a "free-style" reading practice that moves among textual and sonic compositions—from the Ramones and Tina Turner to Dostoevsky and Toni Morrison—to tap the disruptive potentials of aesthetic performances. In so doing, she reveals how English departments continue to discipline the senses through "chronic exclusionary practices" that are as inhospitable to multisensorial engagement as they are to Black and brown students. Da presents her own aesthetic education at the hands of the critical writing of art historians in reading the work of the contemporary Chinese novelist Can Xue. Da then reveals how, when viewed through analytical tools from art history, Can Xue's work elaborates a model of using sensuous aesthetic clues to navigate representations of complex moral crimes in the context of extreme economic and political precarity.

Thomas Sorensen's classroom experiments in "reading for atmosphere" are designed to unsettle



students' habits of perception so that they are newly open to the affective climate of a novel like Marilynne Robinson's *Housekeeping*. As Sorensen suggests, this attunement can deepen our responsiveness to the subtle yet urgent atmospheres of climate change. Kristen Case shows how teaching Henry James's late fiction under the attenuated temporal horizons of just-in-time capitalism requires students to adopt modes of temporal experience radically different from those afforded by daily life. This Jamesian education in temporal reimagination gives substance to the claim that we read literature to cultivate alternative possibilities. Mark Wollaeger's essay focuses on what follows after such alternatives are made palpable: How do you criticize and judge the values afforded in different aesthetic experiences? Reflecting on his first-year literature course for nonmajors, Wollaeger demonstrates how a literary education offers students an occasion to think through the nature of their own preferences in art and life. For McGowan, the democratic potential of the humanities classroom emerges through this process of reflecting on the "terrain of judgment" in conversation with others. He draws on Arendt's reading of Kant to reaffirm the sociality of aesthetic judgment and its importance in community formation.

The section concludes with responses by Clune and Chuh that underscore the live stakes and material consequences of these discussions, even as they offer different perspectives on the contemporary politics of literary study. Clune outlines the forces pitted against aesthetic education within and without the neoliberal university, from the demand for definite knowledge to what he has called "market egalitarianism" (49). Chuh then draws out the contemporary urgency of aesthetic education at all levels of schooling by discussing recent attempts to whitewash US history through curricular contestation, book bans, and attacks on critical race theory (or a caricature of it).

The contributors in this section represent a diverse range of positions within the profession, from a precariously employed recent PhD to an emeritus professor, teaching in public and private institutions across Canada, the United States, and

the United Kingdom. We believe this range of voices and perspectives to be essential for debate around a topic that touches the entire discipline. For though we hope to focus attention on a shared set of issues, we don't want to lay out a single program for literary education, or to decide in advance what such a program could achieve. Once again, there are no guarantees in aesthetic education. But as the following essays make clear, there are plenty of possibilities.

---

## NOTES

1. For two important and usefully divergent twenty-first-century engagements with the Schillerian tradition, see Spivak; Schoolman.
2. See the essays by Adams; Fawaz; and LeMenager, as well as Michaels's reminder about the role of higher education, especially elite research universities, in reproducing social inequalities.
3. For an elaboration of the former, of how the politics of literary study are mediated through its institutional situation, see Guillory, *Cultural Capital*, ch. 1, and *Professing Criticism*, pt. 1.
4. For a recent example of what can still be done with the concept of play, see Thraikill.
5. See Guillory, *Professing Criticism* 101–02, 354–55, for a discussion of how this changed media system affects the social condition of literary studies.
6. For further discussions of the role of the arts in human flourishing, see Love and English; Tay and Pawelski; and Moi.
7. Reitter and Wellmon argue that the modern humanities are premised on the (impossible) task of healing a fundamental rift imposed by modernity: thus the constant crisis talk, as well as the specific sallies against the modern world.

## WORKS CITED

- Adams, Rachel. "What Can a Literary Critic Do? Thoughts on a Universal Design for Criticism." *American Literary History*, vol. 34, no. 1, 2022, pp. 9–19.
- Arendt, Hannah. *Lectures on Kant's Political Philosophy*. U of Chicago P, 1982.
- Bourdieu, Pierre. *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*. Translated by Richard Nice, Harvard UP, 2002.
- Brown, Nicholas. *Autonomy: The Social Ontology of Art under Capitalism*. Duke UP, 2019.
- Buurma, Rachel Sagner, and Laura Heffernan. *The Teaching Archive: A New History for Literary Study*. U of Chicago P, 2021.
- Cavell, Stanley. *Must We Mean What We Say? A Book of Essays*. Cambridge UP, 1976.

- Chuh, Kandice. *The Difference Aesthetics Makes: On the Humanities "After Man."* Duke UP, 2019.
- Clune, Michael. *A Defense of Judgment.* U of Chicago P, 2021.
- Crawley, Ashon T. *Black Pentecostal Breath: The Aesthetics of Possibility.* Fordham UP, 2016.
- Fawaz, Ramzi. "Literary Theory on Acid." *American Literary History*, vol. 34, no. 1, 2022, pp. 126–41.
- Gikandi, Simon. *Slavery and the Culture of Taste.* Princeton UP, 2011.
- Gordon, Lewis R. "Black Aesthetics, Black Value." *Public Culture*, vol. 30, no. 1, Jan. 2018, pp. 19–34.
- Guillory, John. *Cultural Capital: The Problem of Literary Canon Formation.* U of Chicago P, 1993.
- . *Professing Criticism: Essays on the Organization of Literary Study.* U of Chicago P, 2022.
- Kant, Immanuel. *Critique of Judgment.* Translated by Werner S. Pluhar, Hackett, 1987.
- Langer, Susanne K. *Feeling and Form.* Macmillan, 1953.
- Lee, Maurice S. "Feeling Fallible, Being Wrong." *American Literary History*, vol. 34, no. 1, 2022, pp. 199–211.
- LeMenager, Stephanie. "The Functions of American Literary Criticism in the Present Moment: A Literary Historical Memoir." *American Literary History*, vol. 34, no. 1, 2022, pp. 212–23.
- Lloyd, David. *Under Representation: The Racial Regime of Aesthetics.* Fordham UP, 2019.
- Lorde, Audre. "Poetry Is Not a Luxury." *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches*, Ten Speed Press, 2007, pp. 36–39.
- Love, Heather, and James F. English, editors. *Literary Studies and Human Flourishing.* Oxford UP, 2023.
- Marx, Karl. "Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844." *The Marx-Engels Reader*, edited by Robert C. Tucker, W. W. Norton, 1972, pp. 66–125.
- Michaels, Walter Benn. "Commentary." *American Literary History*, vol. 34, no. 1, 2022, pp. 408–25.
- Moi, Toril. *Revolution of the Ordinary: Literary Studies after Wittgenstein, Austin, and Cavell.* U of Chicago P, 2017.
- Moten, Fred. *Stolen Life.* Duke UP, 2018.
- Ngai, Sianne. *Our Aesthetic Categories: Zany, Cute, Interesting.* Harvard UP, 2012.
- North, Joseph. *Literary Criticism: A Concise Political History.* Harvard UP, 2017.
- Rancière, Jacques. *The Ignorant Schoolmaster: Five Lessons in Intellectual Emancipation.* Translated by Kristen Ross, Stanford UP, 1991.
- . *The Politics of Aesthetics: The Distribution of the Sensible.* Translated by Gabriel Rockhill, Bloomsbury, 2013.
- Reitter, Paul, and Chad Wellmon. *Permanent Crisis: The Humanities in a Disenchanted Age.* U of Chicago P, 2021.
- Schiller, Friedrich. *On the Aesthetic Education of Man, in a Series of Letters.* Edited and translated by Elizabeth M. Wilkinson and L. A. Willoughby, Clarendon Press, 1967.
- Schoolman, Morton. *A Democratic Enlightenment: The Reconciliation Image, Aesthetic Education, Possible Politics.* Duke UP, 2020.
- Sharpe, Christina. *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being.* Duke UP, 2016.
- Sibley, Frank. "Aesthetic Concepts." *Approach to Aesthetics: Collected Papers on Philosophical Aesthetics*, Clarendon Press, 2001, pp. 1–24.
- Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty. *An Aesthetic Education in the Era of Globalization.* Harvard UP, 2012.
- Tay, Louis, and James O. Pawelski, editors. *The Oxford Handbook of the Positive Humanities.* Oxford UP, 2021.
- Taylor, Paul C. *Black Is Beautiful: A Philosophy of Black Aesthetics.* Wiley-Blackwell, 2016.
- Thraillkill, Jane F. *Philosophical Siblings: Varieties of Playful Experience in Alice, William, and Henry James.* U of Pennsylvania P, 2021.
- Tompkins, Kyla Wazana. "The Shush." *PMLA*, vol. 136, no. 3, May 2021, pp. 417–23.
- Williams, Raymond. *Marxism and Literature.* Oxford UP, 1977.