A WORLD WITHOUT NORMS: HISTORICIZING CRITIQUE AND POSTCRITIQUE

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# A World Without Norms: Historicizing Critique and Postcritique

**_Abstract**

Postcritical methodologies are reluctant to historicize themselves because historicization is itself one of the suspicious/symptomatic critical modes that they seek to replace. Nevertheless, a proper historicization of the transition from critique to postcritique could lend more legitimacy to postcritique, and would also help us determine if its methodological tools are adequate to our contemporary moment. This essay uses Michel Foucault's description of the move from a disciplinary to a governmental regime of power to historicize the transition from critique to postcritique. Focusing in particular on the function and power of norms under disciplinarity and governmentality, I argue that our commitment to critique should be determined by the relative normativity of contemporary society.

In May 2019, I attended and spoke at a conference — "Reading in the Age of Trump: The Politics and Possibility of Literary Studies Now" — hosted by Johannes Gutenberg University in Mainz, Germany. As the organizers explain, the conference aimed to "historicize the past two decades in literary criticism in order to examine its present politics and future possibility."[1] Over the course of three days, the conference participants identified many of the twenty-first century's literary-critical commitments — autonomy, sociology, ecology, form — but by far the most discussed was postcritique, a methodological turn away from symptomatic reading and a "hermeneutics of suspicion" that reimagines interpretation as "a coproduction between actors that brings new things to light rather than an endless rumination on a text's hidden meanings or representational failures."[2] Displaying little patience for this postcritical turn, conference participants were in near unanimous agreement that the notion of critique one finds in Rita Felski's *The Limits of Critique*, or in Stephen Best and Sharon Marcus's "Surface Reading" essay, is a reductive caricature. What scholar today actually "ruminates on a text's hidden meaning or representational failures"? And when it comes to our contemporary "Age of Trump," many argued that we need critique now more than ever.

I absolutely agree that much scholarship in a postcritical vein grossly mischaracterizes critical reading practices to make postcritique appear more significant than it actually is. In the spirit of the conference's desire to *historicize* today's critical reading practices, however, I also think postcritique should be taken seriously. There are specific historical/material reasons that postcritical reading practices (e.g., surface, distant,

reparative, and machine reading), accompanied by a scholarly interest in new objects of analysis (e.g., affect, things, animacy, embodiment, and networks), have grown more dominant in the first two decades of the twenty-first century. Although you wouldn't know it from reading Felski, who admits that her work offers "neither a philosophical meditation [on] nor a historical explanation [of]" critique and its limits,[3] these methodological shifts aren't just faddish trends pursued willy-nilly by fashionable academic whim.[4] Rather, they are deliberate intellectual responses to material changes in the socio-political landscape of our time. Bruno Latour recognizes this a bit more than Felski does. Although he too directs a good deal of snark toward the heroic affect of fashionable critics, Latour also observes that "things have changed a lot"[5] since the twentieth century when critique was a more powerful intellectual tool. In particular, although he doesn't fully explain why or how it happened, Latour worries that critique has grown politically impotent now that right-wing conspiracy theorists deploy it as effectively as university intellectuals.[6] Best and Marcus offer even more historicizing context, noting that major political events of the early twenty-first century — torture at Abu Ghraib, the racial disparities revealed by Hurricane Katrina, and the botched, pretextual Iraq war — were unfolding so transparently that critique no longer provided the best tools for analysis and understanding.[7]

As these gestures toward historicization suggest, the contemporary turn away from critique can be read as a symptom of the contemporary itself. But because postcritical work tends to view historicization as an instance of symptomatization — that is, as a suspicious, critical move *par excellence* — it doesn't do a particularly good job explaining and justifying its own reason for being. Rather than justifying the move from critique to postcritique by pointing to specific historical events like Abu Ghraib, Hurricane Katrina, or 9/11 that were perhaps immune to critique in very particular ways, I'd argue instead that a changing relationship to norms, both individual and social, provides a better historical context for explaining the emergence of postcritical thought.[8] Critique remains a powerful tool in a world governed by norms, but it's much less useful in a post-normative world where norms have little purchase. Thus, one way to decide if we should be critical or postcritical involves determining whether we are living in a normative or post-normative world, (keeping in mind that this isn't a mutually exclusive choice).

Foucault's work, particularly his writings and lectures from the late 1970s onward, is quite helpful for thinking about the relative normativity of contemporary society and, in turn, for historicizing the move from critique to postcritique. As is well known, the functioning of norms is foundational to Foucault's thinking about the deployment of biopower in a disciplinary society. Famously, Foucault identifies a shift from laws to norms as a defining feature of the transition from sovereign power (a negative, juridico-discursive form of power guaranteed by the sovereign's "right to *take* life or *let* live") to disciplinary biopower (a regulative, institutional form of power "bent on generating forces, making them grow, and ordering them").[9] Arguing that "[a] normalizing society is the historical outcome of a technology of power centered on life," Foucault explains that disciplinary biopower privileges "the action of the norm at the expense of the juridical system of the law." The law doesn't disappear, but as "the judicial institution is increasingly incorporated into a continuum of apparatuses [...] whose functions are for the most part regulatory," it does "operate more and more as a norm."[10]

According to Foucault, however, normative disciplinary power was no longer his contemporary moment's dominant form of power. Instead, in a series of lectures from the late 1970s,[11] he contends that governmentality, which he describes elsewhere as "the conduct of conducts,"[12] represents a new modality of power that takes "pre-eminence over all other types of power — sovereignty, discipline, and so on."[13] In turn, Foucault suggests that norms function quite differently in a governmental regime than they do in a disciplinary one. To explain the difference, Foucault first establishes that "[d]isciplinary normalization consists [...] in positing a model, an optimal model that is constructed in terms of a certain result, and the operation of disciplinary normalization consists in trying to get people, movements, and actions to conform to this model, the normal being precisely that which can conform to this norm, and the abnormal that which is incapable of conforming to the norm." In an effort to emphasize the primacy of the norm in this scenario, Foucault suggests that we use the regretfully "barbaric word" "normation," not "normalization."[14] Next, to explore whether norms function the same way under governmentality, Foucault imagines a hypothetical smallpox epidemic, which the state manages according to a "calculus of probabilities" that statistically quantifies infection risk for different segments of the population and vaccinates accordingly. In other words, the state mathematically determines the "normal" infection

rate for the population and then mobilizes to align the infection rate for at-risk populations with the normal rate. Rather than starting with the norm — the healthy body — and then working to turn abnormal/unhealthy bodies into normal/healthy ones, governmentality "takes all who are sick and all who are not as a whole," using that whole to establish the "normal" rate of infection, morbidity, and mortality.[15] Under a governmental regime, the state no longer disciplines subjects to a norm of health. Instead, it works to secure a normal rate of infection across the totality of the population. Thus, Foucault concludes, governmentality is "a system that is […] exactly the opposite of the one we have seen with the disciplines." In this new, governmental mode, "The normal comes first and the norm is deduced from it." This process, according to Foucault, deserves the name "normalization" since the normal, not the norm, is primary.[16]

Norms deduced from the normal resist critique. If governmentality derives the normal from the statistical measurement of reality, then unless the math is wrong, the normal is always right. The normal names the statistical average of the world as it is. That's why Foucault also describes the normal as "natural."[17] Although he puts that word in quotation marks, letting us know that he knows that the normal isn't natural in any timelessly universal way, it's also clear that a population governed by the normal lacks much ground for critique. Nothing is imposed on them. They aren't being lied to. Their norms can't be contested. Simply put, there is no better way to be when every way to be counts as natural, when every being is included in the normal. Foucault aptly describes this as the "self-cancellation of phenomena by the phenomena themselves."[18]

But how accurately do these ideas describe society today? Has normativity been reduced to a normalcy that simply includes everything in it, or do norms continue to shape processes of subjectivation and socialization? Has the ground of critique dissolved along with normativity, or do we still have the capacity to articulate the good, the better, and the right? The answers to such questions aren't clear cut. Indeed, just moments before suggesting that governmentality takes "pre-eminence over all other types of power," Foucault muddies the waters by insisting that "[w]e should not see things as the replacement of a society of sovereignty by a society of discipline, and then of a society of discipline by a society, say, of government."[19] Thus, Foucault offers us two very different historicizations of contemporary power. The first is a developmental model, with sovereign power acceding to disciplinary power which in turn accedes to governmental control. The second approach implies a simultaneous model in which

multiple modes of power remain operative at the same time, perhaps even within the same sphere of influence.[20] This ambiguity in Foucault's thinking about the contemporary relationship among sovereign, disciplinary, and governmental power creates a corollary ambiguity in our understanding of contemporary normativity, which in turn complicates any attempt to determine the relative utility of critical and postcritical methods. In other words, if we occupy a moment of governmental dominance, then norms and critique are weak. Conversely, if multiple modes of social control are functioning all at once, then norms and critique are sometimes potent, sometimes not.

This ambiguity also explains why, for example, two scholars such as Wendy Brown and Eva Cherniavsky, both of whom follow Foucault in understanding neoliberalism as "a governing rationality extending a specific formulation of economic values, practices, and metrics to every dimension of human life,"[21] can disagree so dramatically about the relevance of norms for contemporary political analysis. In her examination of contemporary neoliberalism, Brown acknowledges the impotence of norms in a contemporary moment defined by neoliberalism's normal/natural logic of cost effectiveness, market efficiency, and best practices. And yet, even though the world might seem post-normative, Brown doesn't abandon norms entirely. For her, neoliberal governance "downplays to the point of disavowing […] normative conflicts over the good," "eliminates from discussion politically, ethically, or other-wise normatively inflected dimensions of policy," and "buries contestable norms and structural striations (such as class), as well as the norms and exclusions circulated by its procedures and decisions," but it's not fully non-normative.[22]

For Cherniavsky, however, Brown is wrong to continue treating neoliberalism as "a normative enterprise."[23] Hewing more closely to Foucault's distinction between the norm and the normal, Cherniavsky argues that neoliberal values "have no normative social referent." "[N]eoliberalism […] dissolves the very concept of the norm, of the disciplinary measure to which *the ensemble* of social agents and institutions adheres. Implementing control without discipline, neoliberalism cedes to a disincorporated 'us' the task of deciding *in what domain* […] we tally up the cost and benefits, reap the fruits of our 'good choices,' or the burden of our bad ones. The capacity to *construct the environment* in which we reckon our gains and losses is now the mark of social agency."[24] Cherniavsky's post-normative take on neoliberalism grants it no normative grounding whatsoever. We don't just decide what counts as good and bad, a gain or a

loss, we also decide the parameters by which we decide. The goalposts aren't just mobile, they're virtual. For Brown, normative political culture is erased but recoverable, but for Cherniavsky, it has disappeared and isn't coming back.

This debate about the role of norms in our contemporary moment matters a great deal for anyone interested in figuring out, as Lenin once asked, "What is to be done?" It seems to me that we have at least two different options. First, we could fight more aggressively, and deliberately, for the reinstatement of norms. For example, we might reinforce already-existing normative institutions, implement stricter normative expectations on normatively weak environments like the internet, or the Trump administration, and/or develop more severe forms of accountability for norm violators. The very public critiques of speech and behavior that have emerged from recent social justice movements, for instance, are a good example of normatively motivated political tactics. Given her attachment to a normative vision of neoliberal governance, one might expect Brown to endorse something similar, but in the conclusion to *Undoing the Demos*, she forthrightly acknowledges the failures of normative critique in our current conjuncture: "The neoliberal economization of the political […] divests the terms of liberal democratic justice of their capacity to contest or to limit the reach of market values and distributions into every quarter of life." The "platform of critique" is unavailable to us, she suggests.[25] And at the end of an even more recent essay that reads contemporary forms of authoritarianism as an unsurprising outgrowth of neoliberal governmentality, Brown dishearteningly concludes that:

> the aggrieved, reactive creature fashioned by neoliberal reason and its effects […] cannot be appealed to by reason, facts, or sustained argument because it does not want to know, and it is unmotivated by consistency or depth in its values or by belief in truth […]. It cannot be wooed by a viable alternative future, where it sees no place for itself, no prospect for restoring its lost supremacy […]. Having nothing to lose, its nihilism does not simply negate but is festive and even apocalyptic, willing to take Britain over a cliff, deny climate change, support manifestly undemocratic powers, or put an unstable know-nothing in the most powerful position on earth, because it has nothing else. It probably cannot be reached or transformed yet also has no endgame.[26]

For Brown, the authoritarian turn in neoliberal governmentality produces plenty of despair and little hope for critique.[27]

A second possibility, if a return to normativity and critique is too much to hope for, might explore other political possibilities, besides authoritarianism, that post-norma-

tivity makes available. To be sure, as Brown correctly worries, post-normativity undermines liberal democracy's ostensible commitment to a shared, inclusive vision of equality, freedom, and justice, and might even lead to authoritarianism. However, just because post-normativity isn't uniquely (i.e. normatively) committed to equality, freedom, and justice, doesn't mean that it can't produce those outcomes. Cherniavsky, for example, pursues the political possibilities of post-normativity through the concept of "neocitizenship." Observing the erosion of "the terrain on which we have historically understood the 'citizen' to operate," she suggests that normative political culture has been replaced with "serial culture," which, "unlike normative culture […] does not differentiate among identities (between the normal and the pathological, for example), so much as cultivate a process of differentiation that produces an ever broader spectrum of identities" disaggregated from the collective, normative project of liberal democracy.[28] But how exactly might politics proceed under these serial conditions? How can we articulate notions of equality, freedom, or justice without normative consensus?

These challenging questions lack a single, satisfactory answer, but one possible take on post-normative politics comes from Foucault himself. In a lecture titled "What is Critique?," Foucault argues that western modernity's pervasive "critical attitude" — "a certain way of thinking, speaking and acting, a certain relationship to what exists, to what one knows, to what one does, a relationship to society, to culture and also a relationship to others" — gradually emerges as a response to the changing experience of being governed. Thus, Foucault defines critique as "the art of not being governed quite so much."[29] Notably, Foucault's definition of critique offers no ideal form of governance. There isn't a normative standard against which one might evaluate its current modality. There isn't a better way to govern, or a right way to govern. Instead, there are only different ways to govern, which emerge at different historical moments out of the reciprocal interaction between power and knowledge. Consequently, critique as Foucault understands it does not make normative arguments about "what is true or false, founded or unfounded, real or illusory, scientific or ideological, legitimate or abusive."[30] Instead, in the spirit of Immanuel Kant's critical project, critique for Foucault discerns the conditions of possibility that limit but also make knowledge possible in a given historical context. Unsurprisingly, the best tools for such a project, Foucault suggests, are the ones he's been deploying his entire career: archaeology and genealogy, two methodologies which, no matter how intractable and deeply rooted our current

conjuncture, allow us to imagine its possible "disappearance" and replacement.[31] This "critical ontology of ourselves," Foucault suggests elsewhere, "has to be conceived as an attitude, an ethos, a philosophical life in which the critique of what we are is at one and the same time the historical analysis of the limits that are imposed on us and an experiment with the possibility of going beyond them."[32]

Of course, it's easy to experiment with the possibility of going beyond the limits that sovereign laws or disciplinary norms impose upon us. They are impositions, normative interventions, and genealogical analyses that diagnose their conditions of possibility and make resistance discernible and executable. That's why, to the extent that sovereign and disciplinary regimes of power continue to operate, there will always be a place for oppositional, normative critique. But what do such experiments look like under a regime of neoliberal governmentality in which there are, to be sure, still limits, but limits that aren't necessarily impositions because they're normal and natural? What do we do when this descriptive, genealogical mode of critique mirrors the serial culture of neoliberal governmentality itself? How do we cultivate the "art of not being governed quite so much" when the normalcy of governance is equivalent to the natural world? Are there post-normative ways of being that might reconfigure the natural normalcy of post-normative governance, or are we just trapped in perpetual immanence?[33]

By way of conclusion, I offer one possible answer to these questions in the form of Paul Beatty's 2015 novel *The Sellout*, a "critical ontology of ourselves" deeply invested in "not being governed quite so much," and, to my mind, evidence that a world without norms can potentially produce non-authoritarian outcomes.[34] Throughout the novel, Beatty conjures a world that violates every possible norm — equality, freedom, justice — that western liberalism holds inviolable. The eponymous "sellout," a black man nicknamed Bonbon, doesn't just listen to the wrong music, play the wrong sports, eat the wrong food, laugh at the wrong jokes, and pursue the wrong politics. He betrays his race, his nation, and its liberal democracy by enslaving an elderly black neighbor, Hominy, and segregating the public transportation and local schools in Dickens, a fictional, largely black and Mexican community, in Los Angeles, California. Bonbon doesn't just transgress his community's racial norms; he breaks his nation's racial laws. Thus, at the novel's conclusion, Bonbon awaits the Supreme Court's verdict on charges that he has violated the First, Thirteenth, and Fourteenth Amendments of the U.S. Constitution.

The charges are serious — selling out liberal democracy could prove criminal — but *The Sellout* is also quite funny. Bonbon's enslavement of Hominy isn't cruel and vicious. Rather, Hominy masochistically asks Bonbon if he can be his slave. He enjoys it. And the schools are only "segregated" because Bonbon has erected fake signs on a vacant lot announcing that a new, whites-only "Wheaton Academy Charter Magnet School of the Arts, Science, Humanities, Business, Fashion, and Everything Else" will soon be built across the street from Dickens' grossly underfunded Chaff Middle School, which, like so many public schools today, is already *de facto* segregated anyway.[35] Playing on "the colored person's desire for the domineering white presence, which the Wheaton Academy represented," and exemplifying what Cherniavsky describes as "the capacity to *construct the environment* in which we reckon our gains and losses," Bonbon's efforts at school segregation immediately raise test scores, employment, housing prices, and graduation rates in Dickens.[36] Thus, the "legal quandary" the Supreme Court must decide: "whether a violation of civil rights law that results in the very same achievement these heretofore mentioned statutes were meant to promote, yet have failed to achieve, is in fact a breach of said civil rights."[37] If slavery and segregation make life in Dickens more equal, free, and just — not to mention more fun, enjoyable, and community oriented — then are they still wrong? Are they still normative?

This is funny, but Beatty isn't joking. He isn't pro-slavery and pro-segregation, but he's also not anti-slavery and anti-segregation either. That's because Beatty isn't particularly interested in what slavery and segregation mean, whether they're right or wrong, or their legal and/or normative function in contemporary society. Instead, he's interested in the new worlds one might build out of them once they've been detached from the laws and norms that typically ground their significance in the world. Slavery and segregation might not mean anything in particular for Beatty, but instead of wallowing in the post-normative nihilism that Brown ascribes to "the aggrieved, reactive creature fashioned by neoliberal reason and its effects," Beatty, and his protagonist Bonbon, exploit post-normativity to build an entirely different world — a world that achieves equality, freedom, and justice by abandoning liberal democracy's normative commitment to equality, freedom, and justice.

Many critics have chosen to read this as satire. "Swiftian satire of the highest order," the book's back cover reads. *The Sellout* can only function as satire, however, if it shares its readers' liberal racial norms, which it doesn't. As the Cambridge introduction

to satire explains in its opening definition of the genre: "What distinguishes satire from other kinds of writing […] is the moral purpose of the satirist — the desire to 'mend the world.'"[38] But Beatty doesn't offer a satirical version of the world in the hopes of correcting and improving it. He isn't critiquing a nation's hypocrisy or demanding that liberal democracy honor its legal and normative commitments. He has no normative sense of what a "better" world might look like. Instead, he's imagining the possibilities, and liabilities, afforded by a world that abandons those normative commitments — because from Beatty's perspective, that's the post-normative world in which African-Americans already live.

Consequently, whenever anyone describes his work as satire, Beatty just laughs uncomfortably and claims not to know what the word means. When Marc Maron asks him about his understanding of satire, for example, Beatty responds, "I don't know, man. It's just these words that people hide behind. Because you get to say, 'Oh something's satirical,' and you don't have to […] what does that mean? You know, it's like, what are we satirizing? Am I being satirized? It's a good deflecting word."[39] And when Jeffrey Brown of *PBS NewsHour* asks Beatty if "this kind of big satire [is] hard to pull off?" Beatty asserts, "Uh, yeah, I don't try to be satirical. I just try to get what's in my head on the page."[40] Or, in response to an audience inquiry after a reading at a Washington D.C. bookstore, Beatty explains that "somebody was talking about the book, and, you know, everyone's saying, 'Satire.' And my friend's friend said, 'No, it's not satire, it's reportage. This shit's all true,' you know what I mean?"[41]

If this is the post-normative world we already live in — a world in which racial inequality and injustice, segregation and slavery are all perfectly normal and natural — then why pretend that the liberal democratic laws and norms developed to counteract those violent inequities can actually do their job? Or, as Beatty explains in response to Jeffrey Brown's question, "What do we get wrong?": "We get it all wrong," Beatty says. "There's no right. And I think that's part of it, is that, like, we think that there's this weird, you know, utopian endgame to life, you know. Not just racial politics. And for me it's a weird way to try to live life."[42] Rather than satirically reinforcing a normative vision of justice that can govern better, Beatty uses his post-normative vision to speculatively craft alternative social relations and develop new modes of being dedicated to the "art of not being governed quite so much" — not just in *The Sellout*, but in *White Boy Shuffle* (1996), *Tuff* (2000), and *Slumberland* (2008) as well. Beatty's work

demonstrates how the "affirmation of nothing" can still be affirming[43] — how, in lieu of post-normative despair, we might instead affirm the obsolescence of laws and norms that never really delivered on their promise in the first place.

Reading *The Sellout* as critique in the Foucauldian sense — that is, as a "historical analysis of the limits that are imposed on us" (liberal democracy) and as "an experiment with the possibility of going beyond them" (an Afro-pessimism that refuses to exclude exclusion) — demonstrates that critique need not always function normatively. There are forms of critique that can produce a vision of justice even as they deny the normative grounding of justice itself. Felski misses this point when she insists that Foucauldian critique, despite its disinterest in "forcefully extract[ing] a deep but disavowed truth," nevertheless remains deeply suspicious, an apt example of the "hermeneutics of suspicion" that her work challenges.[44] But to believe that things are the way they are for a reason, and even to believe that things can be otherwise, doesn't require suspicion or a commitment to *normative* critique. Instead, all it requires is curiosity and a willingness to recognize that something new (although not necessarily something better) lies on the other side of thought's normative limits.

## _Endnotes

1   Conference website. "Reading in the Age of Trump: The Politics and Possibility of Literary Criticism Now," Obama Institute, accessed June 19, 2019, <http://www.obama-institute.com/reading-in-the-age-of-trump/>.

2   Rita Felski, *The Limits of Critique* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015), 174.

3   Felski, *The Limits of Critique*, 2.

4   Felski's emphasis on "the attitude, ethos, or affective stance of critics" (Felski, *The Limits of Critique*, 55), along with her curious suggestion that scholars are drawn to critique because it provides them an "intellectual kick" (Felski, *The Limits of Critique*, 108), leaves her analysis strikingly dehistoricized.

5   Bruno Latour, "Why Has Critique Run Out of Steam?," in *Critical Inquiry* 30 (2004), 225–248, here: 228.

6   Latour, "Why Has Critique Run Out of Steam?," 226–230. Latour's influential essay, which speculates that Tom Ridge, the U.S. Secretary for Homeland Security from 2003 to 2005, might read Foucault's *Discipline and Punish* before bed every night, should be read historically, as a direct response to post-9/11 politics and the Iraq War.

7   Stephen Best and Sharon Marcus, "Surface Reading: An Introduction," in *Representations* 108.1 (2009), 1–21, here: 2.

8   The introduction to Elizabeth Anker and Rita Felski's *Critique and Postcritique* (Durham: Duke UP, 2017) acknowledges that some scholars have contextualized "current debates about method and

interpretation" against "the increasingly pervasive influence of neoliberalism and economic rationality in recent decades" (Anker and Felski, *Critique and Postcritique*, 18). Because those contextualizations tend to view postcritique as a complicit symptom of neoliberalism, however, Anker and Felski don't have much time for them, although they do helpfully suggest that we might view postcritique "not as an unwitting symptom of current exigencies but as an active and purposeful response to them" (Anker and Felski, *Critique and Postcritique*, 19). I think it's possible for both to be true: postcritique can be both an "unwitting symptom of" and a "purposeful response to" our current political-economic rationality.

9    Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*. Vol. 1 (New York: Vintage Books, 1990), 136. Foucault's emphasis.

10   Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, 144.

11   The first set of lectures, *Security, Territory, Population: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1977–78* (New York: Picador, 2004), introduces the concept of governmentality. The second set, *The Birth of Biopolitics: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1978–79* (New York: Picador, 2004), turns its attention to neoliberalism, which Foucault understands as the emergent political rationality of western governmentality in his historical moment.

12   Michel Foucault, "The Subject and Power," in *The Essential Works of Foucault 1954–1984*. Vol. 3: *Power*, ed. James D. Faubion (New York: New Press, 2000), 326–348, here: 341.

13   Foucault, *Security*, 109.

14   Foucault, *Security*, 57.

15   Foucault, *Security*, 62.

16   Foucault, *Security*, 63.

17   Foucault, *Security*, 70.

18   Foucault, *Security*, 66.

19   Foucault, *Security*, 108.

20   See the fifth chapter of Thomas Lemke's *Foucault, Governmentality, and Critique* (Boulder: Paradigm Publishers, 2011) for a cautionary discussion about the dangers of understanding the sovereignty — disciplinarity — governmentality relationship developmentally. And see the fourteenth chapter of Lemke's *Foucault's Analysis of Modern Governmentality: A Critique of Political Reason*. Transl. by Erik Butler (London: Verso, 2019) where Lemke develops a triangulated take on the relationship among sovereignty, disciplinarity, and governmentality.

21   Wendy Brown, *Undoing the Demos: Neoliberalism's Stealth Revolution* (New York: Zone Books, 2017), 30.

22   Brown, *Undoing the Demos*, 129, 130, 131.

23   Eva Cherniavsky, *Neocitizenship: Political Culture after Democracy* (New York: NYU Press, 2017), 155. Cherniavsky's evidence for this claim draws from Brown's earlier work on neoliberalism, prior to the publication of *Undoing the Demos*, a book that maintains, but also significantly expands on, Brown's understanding of neoliberalism's normativity. In particular, *Undoing the Demos* goes to great lengths to describe neoliberalism as a particular form of political rationality. Even though it functions by "disavowing" and "burying" norms, its emergence as a dominant political rationality — that is, as the best political rationality among a field of possible contenders — remains normative. Thus, Brown explains that "political rationality is not itself an instrument of [neoliberal] governing, but rather the condition of possibility and legitimacy of [governing's] instruments, the field of normative reason from which [its] instruments and techniques […] are forged" (Brown, *Undoing the Demos*, 121). Here Brown describes something like a second-order normativity. Neo-

liberalism's mechanisms and techniques are post-normative, but its presence and dominance over contemporary society are normative. At least, that's what Brown maintains. I can't quite tell if Cherniavsky's criticism of Brown appreciates this distinction, but regardless, to the extent that Brown characterizes normativity under neoliberal governance as merely "disavowed" and "buried," the differences between her and Cherniavsky remain significant.

24  Cherniavsky, *Neocitizenship*, 156. Cherniavsky's emphasis.

25  Brown, *Undoing the Demos*, 208.

26  Wendy Brown, "Neoliberalism's Frankenstein: Authoritarian Freedom in Twenty-First Century 'Democracies'," in *Authoritarianism: Three Inquiries in Critical Theory*, eds. Wendy Brown, Peter E. Gordon, and Max Pensky (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2018), 7–44, here: 35–36.

27  A special issue of *South Atlantic Quarterly*, "Neoliberalism's Authoritarian (Re)Turns," 118.2 (2019), provides a thorough consideration of the relationship between neoliberalism and authoritarianism.

28  Cherniavsky, *Neocitizenship*, 3, 37.

29  Michel Foucault, "What is Critique?," in *The Politics of Truth* (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 1997), 41–82, here: 42, 45.

30  Foucault, "What is Critique?," 59.

31  Foucault, "What is Critique?," 65.

32  Michel Foucault, "What is Enlightenment?," in *The Foucault Reader*, ed. Paul Rabinow (New York: Pantheon, 1984), 32–50, here: 50.

33  See Chapter 14 in Lemke's *Foucault's Analysis* for a thorough consideration of these and similar questions. Lemke connects Foucault's ideas about critique to his concept of problematization and carefully differentiates between normatively grounded practical problems, which remain objects of critique conventionally understood, and non-normative, ungrounded theoretical problems which problematize knowledge itself and refuse conventional modes of normative critique. This distinction often goes overlooked in contemporary debates about critique and postcritique.

34  It's important to note that Beatty's "critical ontology of ourselves" is primarily motivated by contemporary racial dynamics, not concerns about neoliberal governmentality, although as David Theo Goldberg's *The Threat of Race: Reflections on Racial Neoliberalism* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2011) makes clear, the two are thoroughly intertwined.

I'd also observe that the critical position that an Afro-pessimist thinker like Jared Sexton identifies for contemporary black scholarship — the challenge of identifying "a politics with no (final) recourse to foundations of any sort, a politics forged from critical resources immanent to the situation, resources from anywhere and anyone, which is to say from nowhere and no one in particular" — bears a striking resemblance to the political conundrum faced by thinkers of leftist governmentality, although for entirely different reasons. Moreover, Foucault's call for a "critique of what we are [that] is at one and the same time the historical analysis of the limits that are imposed on us and an experiment with the possibility of going beyond them" resonates closely with an Afro-pessimist project struggling to locate "a non-transcendent transcendence that builds upon the immanent critique of bad transcendence without falling into the consequent problem of a 'saturated immanence' in which everything is inside." See Jared Sexton, "The *Vel* of Slavery: Tracking the Figure of the Unsovereign," in *Critical Sociology* 42 (2016), 583–597, here: 589, and "On Black Negativity, Or, The Affirmation of Nothing: Jared Sexton Interviewed by Daniel Colucciello Barber," in *Society + Space* (2017), accessed May 23, 2019, <http://societyandspace.org/2017/09/18/on-black-negativity-or-the-affirmation-of-nothing/>.

35     Paul Beatty, *The Sellout* (New York: Picador, 2015), 192.

36     Beatty, *The Sellout*, 208, 216.

37     Beatty, *The Sellout*, 274.

38     Jane Ogborn and Peter Buckroyd, *Satire* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2001), 11.

39     "WTF with Marc Maron Podcast - EPISODE 798 - PAUL BEATTY / JACKIE KASHIAN," 1:28′:15′′, accessed April 25, 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JbXNWxjR2is>.

40     Paul Beatty, Interview with Jeffrey Brown. *PBS NewsHour*. "Novelist Paul Beatty Pokes Fun at How We Talk About Race in America," PBS NewsHour, 4′:28′′, accessed June 12, 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=j4PYhbZvz_g>.

41     "Paul Beatty, 'The Sellout,'" Politics and Prose, 21′:20′′, accessed April 25, 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sK6bj-hhVjU>. We might link Beatty's "reportage" to Foucault's particular take on critique as a "historical analysis of the limits that are imposed on us."

42     Interview with Jeffrey Brown, 2′:00′′. It's worth observing that the "endgame" logic that Wendy Brown mourns in her diagnosis of "the aggrieved, reactive creature fashioned by neoliberal reason" is the same logic that Beatty here rejects.

43     Sexton, "On Black Negativity."

44     Felski, *Limits*, 82–83.