Understanding Critics:
Evaluation from the Perspective of Book Reviewers

by

Phillipa Kah-Yee Chong

A thesis submitted in conformity with the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy
Department of Sociology
University of Toronto

© Copyright by Phillipa Chong 2014
Understanding Critics: 
Evaluation from the Perspective of Book Reviewers 

Phillipa K. Chong 
Doctor of Philosophy 
Department of Sociology 
University of Toronto 
2014 

Abstract 

In this dissertation, I examine how book critics establish the literary value of new books through their reviews. And I do so with an analytic focus on the fact that, contra ideals regarding objectivity and dispassionate review processes, critics are real people embedded in real social, cultural, and epistemic contexts which shape how they understand their role as evaluators and ultimately how they review. 

The dissertation is comprised of three interrelated studies prepared and presented as stand-alone articles. Data come from quantitative and qualitative content analysis of 265 book reviews and interviews with 30 book critics who have published reviews in major American newspapers such as The New York Times, The LA Times, and The Washington Post. And although the terms “novelist”, “books”, and “fiction” proliferate the text, this dissertation does not belong squarely to the sociology of literature. It is in more natural dialogue with cultural sociological work on legitimation, economic sociology, and sociological interest in inequality/stratification.
In this first study, I consider how critics, writing for American audiences, impute broader understandings of ethnic and racial difference to their evaluation of books by foreign and racial minority writers. In the second study, I identify four epistemic strategies by which critics hope to turn transform their immediate subjective responses to books into reasoned and inter-subjectively valid appraisals of new books, which they inscribe in their reviews. In the third and final study, I focus on how book critics are structurally embedded in the American literary field with many reviewers themselves being working writers reviewing their peers. And I detail the myriad of professional, interpersonal, and moral tensions that arise from this arrangement, which has direct consequences for what critics put in their reviews.
Acknowledgments

Thanks to my committee:

Shyon Baumann for his support and especially his early encouragement, which gave me the confidence to pursue cultural sociology although I had never taken a culture class and was 4 years into graduate school. So far, so good!

Vanina Leschziner for coming to Toronto precisely when she did and for the quality of her mind and skillful mentorship, which I very begrudgingly relinquish for the betterment of future generations.

Michèle Lamont for “Lipset”-ing me . . . twice! Two acts of generosity and confidence that have already changed the course of my life and expanded my sense of what is possible.

And thanks to Adam whom has been with me since SOC101.
Table of Contents

CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION

EVALUATION AS KNOWLEDGE-MAKING: THE CASE OF LITERARY VALUE 1

THE RESEARCH: READING DIFFERENCE, CRITICAL DISTANCE, & PUSHES AND PULLS IN EVALUATION WORK 3


CHONG, P. “PUSHES AND PULLS IN EVALUATION WORK: CONFLICTING EMOTIONS AND INTERESTS WHEN WRITING A BAD REVIEW” IN ANTAL B, HUTTER M AND STARK D (EDS) VALORIZING DISSONANCE: CULTURAL PERSPECTIVES ON NEWNESS. OXFORD, UK: OXFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS. 4

CONTRIBUTIONS TO UNDERSTANDING CRITICS, VALUE, AND INEQUALITY 4

REFERENCES 7

CHAPTER 2 READING DIFFERENCE: HOW RACE AND ETHNICITY FUNCTION AS TOOLS OF APPRAISAL 10

LITERARY CRITICISM IN CONTEXT 11

ON HOW TO APPRECIATE FICTION 13

DATA AND METHODS 15

SAMPLE 15

ANALYTIC STRATEGY 15

ATTENTION TO RACE AND ETHNICITY IN LITERARY REVIEWS 17

FINDINGS: ESTABLISHING AUTHENTICITY, ETHNIC GENRES, AND NOMINAL MENTIONS 19

ESTABLISHING AUTHENTICITY 19

CLASSIFYING NOVEL AND NOVELIST INTO ETHNIC GENRES 24

IDENTIFYING INTERNATIONAL WRITERS IN INTERPRETIVELY NOMINAL WAYS 27

SUMMARY AND DISCUSSION OF REVIEWING TRENDS 29

RACE, ETHNICITY, AND OVERALL LITERARY EVALUATION 30

EVALUATION 30

LITERARY CRITERIA 31

SUMMARY AND DISCUSSION OF EVALUATION TRENDS 33

CONCLUSION AND DISCUSSION 33

REFERENCES 36

CHAPTER 3 LEGITIMATE JUDGMENT IN ART, THE SCIENTIFIC WORLD REVERSED?

MAINTAINING CRITICAL DISTANCE IN EVALUATION 42

EPISTEMIC RULES FOR JUDGMENTS OF 'TASTE' AND 'TRUTH' 43

DATA AND METHODS 46

STRATEGIES FOR MAINTAINING CRITICAL DISTANCE 47

RECOGNIZING CONFLICTS OF INTEREST: TO RECUSE OR NOT TO RECUSE 48

PRESERVING THE PURITY OF ONE'S OPINION: PEERS AND OTHER CONTAMINATING INFLUENCES 50

EVIDENCE-BASED REVIEWING 52

REFLEXIVE READING: READING LIKE A SCIENTIST 54

WHEN CRITICAL DISTANCE FAILS 56

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION 58

REFERENCES 61
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>CHAPTER 4 THE PUSHES AND PULLS OF EVALUATION WORK: CONFLICTING EMOTIONS AND INTERESTS WHEN WRITING A BAD REVIEW</th>
<th>65</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>UNDERSTANDING EVALUATION FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF EVALUATORS</td>
<td>67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DATA AND METHODS</td>
<td>68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RECIPE FOR A GOOD REVIEW(ER): ONE PART WRITER, ONE PART CRITIC</td>
<td>69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>THE INCENTIVE STRUCTURE OF REVIEWS: PUSHES AND PULLS</td>
<td>72</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>THE UPSIDE OF DISAPPOINTMENT: AN OPPORTUNITY FOR DISTINCTION</td>
<td>72</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RISK IN REVIEWING: CONSEQUENCES OF WRITING A BAD REVIEW</td>
<td>74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A Writer in Critic's Clothing: Violating the Principle of Disinterestedness</td>
<td>75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Retributive reviewing or the favor returned</td>
<td>76</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coming Face-to-Face with Collateral Damage</td>
<td>76</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PLAYING IT SAFE BY PLAYING NICE IN REVIEWS</td>
<td>77</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pitfalls of Playing Nice in Reviews</td>
<td>80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WE WANTED CRITICS, WE GOT PEOPLE</td>
<td>80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>REFERENCES</td>
<td>83</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>CHAPTER 5 DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION</th>
<th>86</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>TAKING STOCK AND MOVING FORWARD</td>
<td>87</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>READING DIFFERENCE &amp; THE MANY WAYS OF VALUING A &quot;GOOD&quot; BOOK</td>
<td>87</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CRITICAL DISTANCE &amp; THE RULES FOR PRODUCING LEGITIMATE KNOWLEDGE</td>
<td>88</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PUSHES AND PULLS IN EVALUATION WORK – THE HUMAN ELEMENT</td>
<td>99</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TAKING A BIRD’S EYE VIEW: TOWARDS A FORMAL MODEL OF EVALUATION?</td>
<td>90</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TENSIONS BETWEEN CRITICAL DISTANCE AND THE USE OF AUTHORIAL CHARACTERISTICS</td>
<td>91</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TENSIONS BETWEEN CRITICAL DISTANCE AND INTERPERSONAL/PROFESSIONAL RISK</td>
<td>91</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>REFERENCES</td>
<td>94</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

| COPYRIGHT ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS | 103 |
List of Tables

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Number of Reviews Mentioning Race/Ethnicity by Authors’ Ethnic Origins</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Critics’ Overall Evaluation in Reviews With/Without Ethno-Racial Identifiers</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Literary Criteria Evaluated in Reviews With/Without Ethno-Racial Identifiers</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Critical Assessment of Literary Criteria in With/Without Ethno-Racial Identifiers</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
List of Figures

FIGURE 1. PHASES OF EVALUATION: SUBJECTIVE, INTER-SUBJECTIVE, AND PUBLIC 92
List of Appendices

**APPENDIX A. IDENTIFYING STRENGTHS, WEAKNESSES, AND OVERALL EVALUATION IN REVIEWS**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Strengths and Weaknesses Identified in the Reviews</td>
<td>96</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gauging Overall Critical Assessment in the Reviews</td>
<td>96</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unambiguous Positive and Negative Reviews</td>
<td>97</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Mixed” Reviews</td>
<td>97</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>References</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**APPENDIX B. HOW CRITICS DISCUSS RACE/ETHNICITY IN REVIEWS BY AUTHORS’ ETHNIC ORIGINS**

<p>| | |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>101</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**APPENDIX C. OVERALL EVALUATION OF NOVELS BY TYPE OF ETHNO-RACIAL IDENTIFICATION IN REVIEWS**

<p>| | |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>102</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Chapter 1
Introduction

Evaluation as Knowledge-Making: The case of literary value

It is widely accepted amongst most sociologists and historians of knowledge that the knowledge we produce about the world reflects not only the world as it is, but also the cultural, political, and institutional embeddedness of the knower. This presupposition has been demonstrated in studies on the valuation of artistic works (Bourdieu, 1983; 1984; Velthius, 2007); the “factness” of medical and scientific knowledge (Fleck, 1979; Latour, 1987; Shapin, 2009; 2010); and our understanding of the natural world (Daston & Galison, 2007; Fourcade, 2011). In this dissertation, I examine treat evaluation as a particular type of knowledge-making.

A rich literature has emerged regarding the perceived worth of artistic work and the circumstances of the knower (i.e., the reader, the viewer, the audience) – especially regarding the concept of taste. The Latin proverb ‘De gustibus non est disputandum’ translates as ‘There’s no arguing for taste’. And there is no arguing for taste because of the folk understanding that it is utterly subjective, idiosyncratic, and thus inarguable, since it is irrational. Yet many scholars reveal that individuals’ tastes are not entirely irrational or idiosyncratic but patterned by social factors including, for instance, when one was born (Mannheim, 1952; Lieberson, 2000); one’s race and ethnicity (DiMaggio & Ostrower, 1990; Frith, 1987); one’s gender (Christenson and Peterson, 1988; Griswold, McDonnell, and Wright, 2005; Radway, 1991) and one’s social class (Bourdieu, 1984; Peterson & Kern, 1996). But my chief concern here is not with individual preference or taste, but taste and evaluation as the professional domain of book reviewers.

I focus on book critics as an occupational group tasked with reviewing new fiction for general audiences. I explore how these critics create knowledge about the literary value or aesthetic worth of new books through their reviews. And I attend to the various interests, norms, and constraints that shape their evaluations (Knorr-Cetina, 1999; Lamont, 2009).

Book critics are important agents of valuation in the literary field. The contemporary fiction market is an example of a mediated market (Hirsch, 1972; Zuckerman, 1999). Mediated markets have third parties (i.e., critics) responsible for offering professional recommendations about new
products (i.e., books) that buyers consult to inform their consumer choices. Like analysts in the financial market (Zuckerman, 1999), literary critics assess and evaluate which products (i.e., books rather than stocks) are most worthy of consumers’ time and money.

Put differently, the average reader relies on critics to “mediate” between them and the large pool of newly published fiction by (i) signaling which titles are worth bringing to readers’ attention; (ii) interpreting the meaning and significance of the works; and then (iii) offering a professionally informed opinion on whether specific titles are actually worth reading (Hirsch, 1972; Zuckerman, 1999). Beyond simply informing a large anonymous audience about newly published fiction, literary critics actively shape the way books are understood by the wider reading public (van Rees, 1983). Critics thus create knowledge about the meaning, significance, and value of new fiction through their reviews.

At the heart of this project is an attempt to understand how book critics establish literary value and how they construct their reviews (i.e., create knowledge about the value of fiction), but with an analytic sensitivity to the fact that critics are real people embedded in real social, cultural, and epistemic contexts which shape how they understand their role as critics and ultimately how they review. Studying how evaluators come to assess aesthetic value is an advantageous because: (i) aesthetic quality is largely accepted as a matter of personal taste; yet (ii) the job of the critic is to translate their own subjective opinions into inter-subjectively defensible claims about a work’s value. The paradoxical nature of this task makes a rich case for understanding how these experts appraise and justify worth: not only of the individual novels or novelists they review, but also their own competency as judges.

I explore these issues through a series of interrelated papers prepared for publication. These papers draw on data of two varieties: A discourse and content analysis of 265 fiction book reviews drawn from The New Yorker magazine and The New York Times newspaper; and in-depth interviews data from conversations with 30 book critics who have published reviews in major American newspapers such as The New York Times, The Washington Post, and LA Times. I use the book reviews to examine the criteria and logics critics utilized to construct and justify the value of a book. While the interview data provided phenomenological insights into how critics understood their roles and responsibilities as critics, how they went about the task of
reviewing, and the many considerations that shaped their review practices which are otherwise not observable in the final print versions.

The Research: Reading Difference, Critical Distance, & Pushes and Pulls in Evaluation Work

The dissertation is comprised of three interrelated papers that have been prepared to function as stand-alone publishable pieces. Below I present these papers in order of their publication and briefly summarize the key empirical findings.


In this first piece (Chapter 2), I consider how critics, writing for American audiences, impute broader understandings of ethnic and racial difference to their evaluation of books by foreign and racial minority writers. I find that reviewers use racial and ethnic identifiers to: (1) establish the authenticity of the novels, (2) classify works into ethnic genres, and (3) nominally identify international literary talent. This latter practice referring to when critics categorize an author as being of a particular ethnic, racial, or foreign national background, but does not make any attempt to interpretively link this background to the content of the books. I also present data on what influence racial and ethnic identification has for critics’ overall assessment of the books under review. This project draws attention to how critics writing in the United States are embedded in imagined communities (Anderson, 1978) including understandings about insiders and outsiders, especially regarding ethnic-racial difference.


The second piece (Chapter 3) features how critics are embedded evaluative cultures, which have their own customary rules for evaluation; that is, taken-for-granted norms, which constrain how evaluators behave and inform the contents of their judgments (Lamont, 2009, 2012). I identify four epistemic process through which critics demonstrate their critical distance; and hence the legitimacy and value of their aesthetic judgments. I define as an epistemic virtue characterized by critical autonomy and the achievement of an optimal balance of distance and engagement. The customary rules associated with this epistemological style include (1) recognizing conflicts
of interest, (2) preserving critical autonomy, (3) reflexive reading, and (4) evidence-based reviewing.


An adapted version of this final piece (Chapter 4) will appear as a book chapter in a special edited volume on evaluation in 2014. This work focuses on how book critics, as evaluators, are structurally and culturally embedded in the literary field with consequences for their evaluative practice. By structural embeddedness, I am referring to how agents are organized in the field. Specifically, I discuss how many reviewers are actually writers who temporarily “switch roles” (Aspers, 2008) and take on freelance review assignments. By cultural embeddedness, I refer to the shared beliefs and understandings within the field, which guides critics’ behaviours. And I illustrate how critics weigh the perceived consequences of their reviews – not only for the book, but also for their own careers and relations in the field as writer-cum-reviewers – and how this has direct implications for what they put in their reviews.

Contributions to Understanding Critics, Value, and Inequality

Although the terms “novelist”, “books”, and “fiction” proliferate the text, this dissertation does not belong squarely to the sociology of literature. It contributes to with cultural sociological work on legitimation, economic sociology, and sociological understandings of inequality/stratification.

Legitimation can be understood as a sub-process of (e)valuation and refers to the process by which a social object is recognized as worthy (Lamont, 2012; Zuckerman, 1999). Critics are key agents of cultural consecration and their discourse has been shown to be a vital component for attaining artistic legitimacy (Baumann 2001, 2007; Bourdieu 1993, 1996; Shrum, 1996; van Rees, 1983, 1987). In Chapter 2, I contribute to this work by demonstrating how strategies for legitimating novels and novelists are racialized. And in Chapter 3, I venture away from thinking
about the artistic legitimacy of books to examine how reviewers demonstrate the legitimacy of their aesthetic judgments through the epistemic strategies of critical distance.

This work also engages with economic sociology given that the question of how social actors assign value to goods runs throughout all of the papers; although mine is a special case of how critics attribute symbolic value to singular goods (Karpik, 2010). Chapter 4 directly engages with the question of how critics’ attributions of value are shaped by the “indissoluble connection of the actor with his or her social surrounding” (Beckert, 2003: 769) in terms of how critics weigh the personal and professional consequences of writing critical reviews about fellow novelists. And I establish the importance of non-economic considerations, like emotions and morals, in evaluative decision-making (see also, Chapter 3).

Finally, scholars interested in stratification will be interested in this work because it advances our understanding of evaluation, which is an important part of reproducing inequality since it is through evaluative processes that select standards of excellence are defined and reproduced (Bourdieu, 1984; Lamont and Huutoniemi, 2012). My contribution focuses on how evaluators work, which is also an important part of the story since how institutionalized actors assess the worth(iness), artistic and otherwise, of social entities has far-reaching consequences for the distribution of material (e.g., promotions, funding, etc.) and symbolic (e.g., status or prestige) rewards (Espeland & Sauder, 2009; Lamont & Molnar, 2002).

Although my dissertation focuses on evaluation in the artistic world of literary fiction, studying how value is assessed in this field could potentially help us understand evaluative dynamics in other fields. For instance, the first paper (Chapter 2) in this dissertation was inspired by my earlier graduate training in immigrant integration and labor market inequalities: I had originally planned to write a dissertation on the devaluation of racialized workers and foreign credentials in the labor market. But over time I became more interested in the cultural logics and processes that belied the systematic devaluation of social groups both in the standard labor market and beyond. So I turned to consider how similar dynamics might be occurring in the artistic market where the “quality” of work and workers is seemingly more indeterminate and requires more explicit justifications. Thus, my project shifted to consider how fiction writing (as a type of work) by foreign and racialized authors (as a type of worker) was valued differently compared to their native-born and white counterparts. And while the dissertation stops short of systemic
comparison of evaluation processes in the literary field and beyond, it does represent the beginnings of such a broader research agenda that takes seriously evaluation as part of the cultural machinery of stratification.
References


Shapin S (2010) Never pure: historical studies of science as if it was produced by people with bodies, situated in time, space, culture, and society, and struggling for credibility and authority. JHU Press.


Chapter 2
Reading Difference: How race and ethnicity function as tools of appraisal

How do we know whether a novel is good or bad? Book reviews are an important guide since they lay out the strengths and weaknesses of a text as determined by book critics. And we value critics’ opinions as culturally sanctioned connoisseurs (Baumann, 2007a; Janssen, 2006; van Rees, 1989). Yet cultural sociologists maintain that literary value is not an inherent quality waiting to be unearthed by a cultivated consumer. There are no objective indicators of literary value; therefore, what reviewers identify as “good”, as “literature” and—perhaps most importantly—‘good literature” is not natural, but normative (van Rees, 1989).

In the absence of objective measures for literary value, research shows that critics rely on other “tools” (Swidler, 1986) to guide their aesthetic judgments such as critical-literary theories (Corse and Griffin, 1997; Corse and Westervelt, 2002; van Rees, 1987) and the opinions of their fellow critics (de Nooy, 1999; Janssen, 1997; Rosengren, 1987; van Rees, 1987). The present study examines how literary critics use authors’ race or ethnicity as an additional tool for critical appraisal.

Racial and ethnic categories figure prominently in the United States as principles for organizing social life (Lamont and Molnar, 2002; Massey, 2007). While these categories are socially constructed, they have objective consequences for access to important resources—including housing, political resources, and opportunities in the labor market (Hsueh and Tienda, 1996; Lamont and Molnar, 2002; Massey, 2007; Massey et al., 1993; Massey and Mullen, 1984; Omi and Winant, 1994). Race and ethnicity have also been shown to have consequences for the cultural market (Banks, 2010; DiMaggio and Ostrower, 1990; Dowd, 2003; Dowd and Blyler, 2002; Roy, 2004); though exactly how the race and ethnicity of cultural producers influence the critical reception of their work is not well understood.¹ I examine this topic empirically using literary fiction as a case study, which is well suited for exploring racial and ethnic categories

¹ One notable exception is Paul Lopes’ (2002) The Rise of the Jazz Art World, which documents the historical rise of the jazz art world from the 1930s through to the post-war period in America. In this book, Lopes addresses racial tensions in the critical evaluation of jazz; for example, accusations of “Jim Crow” practice referring to critics giving preference to Black jazz musicians over White jazz musicians.
because of close ties between literature and how we imagine different communities (Anderson, 1978; Berkers, 2009; Corse, 1995, 1997; Griswold, 1992). So, when a writer is identified as an “African-American writer” or some other hyphenated “ethnic-author”, what implications does this have for the perceived value of the work they produce?

In what follows, I outline the unique role book reviewers play in constructing literary value and review prevailing literary theories about how to “correctly” appreciate fiction. Next, I present empirical data drawn from analysis of 265 book reviews published in The New York Times Book Review and The New Yorker magazine to demonstrate (i) how critics discursively integrate authors’ race and ethnicity into reviews; and (ii) what significance these ethno-racial identifiers have for the overall evaluation of the novels. I argue that the critics in my study engage in an interpretive strategy I term reading difference whereby an author’s ethno-racial position is used as a criterion for evaluating the author’s creative work.

**Literary criticism in context**

Literary critics are key agents in the social construction of literary value. Critics function as “surrogate consumers” imbued with the cultural authority not only to judge a book’s value, but also to decide what factors are relevant for arriving at this judgment (Ekelund and Borjesson, 2002; Hirsch, 1972; Janssen, 2006; van Rees, 1983). Beyond simply informing a large anonymous audience about newly published fiction, critics’ literary discourse actively shapes the way books are understood by the wider reading public (Hirsch, 1972; Janssen, 2006; Kramer, 1970; van Rees, 1983). Van Rees (1987) signaled this creative function when enumerating the threefold task of literary reviewers as describing, interpreting, and evaluating novels.

There are three branches of literary criticism: essayistic, academic, and journalistic (Van Rees, 1983). Literary essays are typically published in specialized monthly or quarterly literary reviews. Academic criticism is reserved for scholarly publications. While these two branches focus on “high-culture” rather than “popular” works, journalistic reviewers write about contemporary and newly-published fiction in daily or weekly newspapers and magazines. Newspaper and magazine critics decide what few titles among the leagues of newly-published works will receive any critical attention with far reaching consequences for an author’s success. Ekelund and Borjesson (2002), for example, found that simply being reviewed in the New York Times Book Review (NYTBR) was a good predictor of whether writers went on to publish another
novel, thus lending credence to the trade wisdom:”[I]t is better to get a negative review in the NYTBR than to get none at all”(Ekelund and Borjesson, 2002: 354). And it is often from this initial pool of newspaper and magazine reviews that literary essayists and academics subsequently select novels and novelists as subjects for their own literary discourse (van Rees, 1983). Attracting the attention of newspaper and magazine critics is thus a necessary, if insufficient, step on the road to being consecrated as a high-culture novelist (Bourdieu, 1993; Janssen, 1998; van Rees, 1983).²

Macro- and micro-institutional factors come to bear on which novels are selected for review in newspapers and magazines. American critics are more likely to review work by domestic over foreign writers because of America’s central position as a cultural producer within the global literary system³ (Heilbron, 1999; Janssen, 2009). And among the foreign-titles that are reviewed, American critics are also more likely to review writers from nations with strong “geo-linguistic” ties to the United States (i.e., countries that are geographically proximate and whose national languages are similar) (Berkers et al., 2011; Heilbron, 1999). On a more microinstitutional level, it is reasonable to expect that publications have their own organizational norms and rules for deciding which novels are more or less appropriate for inclusion. For instance, Janssen (1997, 1998) observes that reviewers make note of the size and status of a novel’s publisher and the opinions of fellow-critics to steer their selection practices.

That book reviewers make note of what other critics think to guide their own review selections underscores the social nature of literary criticism as a practice (Bourdieu, 1993; Janssen, 1997). In the absence of objective indicators of what makes one novel “good” and another “bad”, book critics have been shown to incrementally attune their literary judgments to approximate the opinions of their peers in what has been described as a process of “social orchestration” (Bourdieu, 1977; de Nooy, 1999; Janssen, 1997; van Rees, 1987).

² This important influence of contemporary critical opinion on future appraisals has also been established in studies of “‘retrospective consecration’” in film (Allen and Lincoln, 2004) and music (Schmutz, 2005)

³ Based on interviews with magazine and newspaper Book Review editors, it is common practice for editors to select which books to review and then assign titles to specific book reviewers. So it may be more accurate to say that American critics are more likely to attend to domestic talent because the newspaper and magazine review editors do.
Book reviewers also attend to prevailing interpretive strategies to guide their literary judgments. Cultural texts are multivocal and open to multiple interpretations (Griswold, 1987). Interpretive strategies are “framing devices” that shape how readers come to appreciate the meaning and value of the text (Corse and Griffin, 1997:196). In the case of literature, interpretive strategies include literary theories, like formalism, that espouse normative ideas about how “properly” to decipher the meaning and value of a book (Corse and Griffin, 1997; Corse and Westervelt, 2002; Patterson, 1995). Corse and Griffin (1997) demonstrate the importance of interpretive strategies when explaining how the rise of Black feminist theory was integral to transforming Zora Neale Hurston’s *Their Eyes Were Watching God* from a poorly received piece of “Negro-folklore” to its current framing as a story about a woman’s struggle for selfhood—and subsequently a central text in America’s literary canon.

Given the importance of literary theories for understanding a novel’s worth I now briefly review some of the dominant literary theories influencing contemporary literary criticism and how they relate to appreciating work by “ethnic-writers”.

**On how to appreciate fiction**

Two important literary theories emerging over the past century are formalism and historicism. Formalism is closely associated with The New Criticism that rose to prominence in America during the 1930s and was predicated on the principle of aestheticism, or “art for art’s sake,” meaning that only formal properties of a novel ought to be considered when adjudicating its worth (Abrams, 1993). Prose is an example of a formal literary property broadly concerned with elements like word choice, grammar, literary devices, and writing on a sentence-by-sentence level. Others are voice and tone referring to the ethos conveyed in writing (Abrams, 1993). New Critics would focus on how a writer crafted such formal properties around a theme in a novel precluding any consideration of the novelist’s biography or social context.

The formalist approach fell out of favor during the 1960s with the increasing recognition that what constituted “good fiction”, especially as reflected by the American literary canon, was not based on purely aesthetic principles but the product of political choices and intimately tied with power (Adams, 1988; Corse, 1995; Corse and Griffin, 1997; Corse and Westervelt, 2002). Rejecting the way formalism treated books as ahistorical and completely separate from the author, the historicist approach came to the fore in the 1980s emphasizing that a novel’s specific
social and political context was integral for assessing its meaning and value (Abrams, 1993; Patterson, 1995).

Today, formalist criteria still operate in critical-literary discourse (though few literary critics would argue that a novel’s value is fixed or trans-historical). But it has also become acceptable for critics to draw upon socio-political considerations—like the particular social location of the author—when engaging with a text. We thus require a sociological understanding of how literary critics actually incorporate these considerations into their reviews to further our understanding of the social construction of value.

Race and ethnicity are particularly germane socio-political considerations given that concerns about the inclusion/exclusion of literature by racial and ethnic minorities were integral to the literary “canon wars” that raged within academic departments in the post-war period; and racial and ethnic categories continue to function as central organizing principles in American social life outside of literary field (Massey, 2007).

There is some work that examines how literary criticism intersects with race and ethnicity. Perhaps most famous is Griswold’s study (1987), which looked at how literary critics from three separate nations had different readings of the same set of books by Barbadian-writer George Lamming. Briefly, UK reviewers emphasized a stylistic reading, West Indian reviewers emphasized themes of personal and civic identity, and American reviewers focused on race relations in the books. Griswold takes this as evidence that the novels (and other cultural objects) do not have a stable set of meanings. Instead, how literary critics interpreted the novels was informed by the broader “social presuppositions” of their national context: for example, America’s national preoccupation with race may have influenced American critics’ race-relation readings of Lamming’s work. More recently, Berkers (2009) has found that authors are more likely to be classified by ethno-racial background in literary anthologies when racial and ethnic boundaries are strong in a society. These studies do not, however, engage directly with the question of how reviewers use the race or ethnicity of a writer to construct the value of her fiction. Book reviews are thus particularly suited for analysis because they outline a critic’s interpretation and evaluation of a novel and provide the opportunity to investigate how ethno-racial categories are made meaningful towards these ends.
Data and methods

Sample

The sample consists of fiction reviews published in The New York Times Book Review and The New Yorker Magazine in 2007.\(^4\) The New York Times Book Review is a weekly supplement to the daily newspaper and is readily identified as one of the most influential review outlets in the literary field (Alexander, 2003; Ekelund and Borjesson, 2002). The New Yorker is a weekly general interest magazine that regularly reviews fiction and features original prose by new and established literary talents. Both publications cater to demographically similar audiences; that is, well-educated and largely professional readerships.\(^5\) Both are also general interest publications reaching a broad audience outside of the literary community. Therefore, how critics discuss the race and ethnicity of authors in these publications is likely to reflect understandings of racial and ethnic difference not limited to the literary field.

I analyze fiction reviews because the research question concerns how writers’ race and ethnicity inform aesthetic judgments. Different fields possess unique logics for assessing value and it is less likely that writers’ race or ethnicity would be used to assess non-fiction titles based on factual knowledge, such as books about astronomy or animals (Gans, 1979; Guetzkow et al., 2004; Lamont, 2009). After excluding non-fiction titles, children’s books, anthologies, and reviews comparing more than one author, the final sample consisted of 265 reviews of books written by both foreign and American novelists.

Analytic Strategy

My analytic strategy was twofold. First, I identified how frequently critics mentioned writers’ ethno-racial background in the reviews. Whenever critics located the writer as part of a racial, ethnic, national, or regional group, I counted this as an instance of ethno-racial “marking” or as a “marked” review (Waugh, 1982). Borrowed from linguistics, “marking” refers to the way social

\(^4\) In April 2007, the NYTBR had one edition where they reviewed works that had been translated into English. Reviews from this special edition accounted for only 8 of the 265 reviews.

\(^5\) This is based on readership profiles released as part of media kits and available from the publications websites. For NYT, see http://www.nytimes.whsites.net/mediakit/pdfs/newspaper/MRI_NYTreaderprofile.pdf. For The New Yorker, see http://www.condenastmediakit.com/nyr/circulation.cfm.
asymmetries are reflected in language (Waugh, 1982). For example, the dominant categories of “man” or “white”, achieve a taken-for-granted status and thus go unmarked; whereas, their implied subordinates, such as “woman” or “nonwhite” are marked as special cases, different, or “Other” (Brubaker et al., 2006). Second, I used textual analysis to assess how critics used these markers to inform their literary discourse: when a reviewer described a novelist as an “African-American author”, a “Danish novelist” or “a writer born in Mississippi”, I aimed to make explicit the often implicit links made between these categorizations and the critics’ broader construction of the text. 

Following Brubaker (2009; see also Brubaker et al., 2004), I treat racial, ethnic, national, and regional identifications as equivalent to the extent that they are categories and classifications people use to organize the social world. This is not to say that these categories are indistinguishable (see Calhoun, 1993; Cornell and Hartmann, 2004; Omi and Winant, 1994; Winant, 2000); however, the critics in my sample use racial, ethnic, national, and regional identifiers in similar ways, which the forthcoming analysis makes clear. Thus, I use “ethnoracial” or “race and ethnicity” as an inelegant shorthand for “racial, ethnic, national, or “regional” categories.

After several rounds of systematic reading, I discerned that critics used these ethno-racial identifiers to achieve three rhetorical ends: (i) to establish the authenticity of the novel, (ii) to classify the novel and novelist into ethnic genres, and (iii) to nominally identify international literary talent which are explained later in the paper.

The second stage of analysis involved comparing critics’ overall evaluation of the novels across the two groups of reviews. I coded for critics’ overall assessment of the novels (e.g. positive or mixed/negative) as well as the formal literary criteria reviewers commented upon (e.g. plot, prose, characterization, voice/tone and theme). I also coded for whether critics discussed formal features as strengths or weaknesses of the novel. This provided data on whether the presence of

---

6 If critics used racial, ethnic, national, or regional categories to refer to something other than the writer (e.g., the anticipated readership for a book), then I did not count this as a marked review because my analytical focus is restricted to how the ethno-racial background of writers is mobilized for literary evaluation.
racial/ethnic identifiers increased or decreased the chance of a positive review and based on what criteria (see Appendix A for details on methodology).

Attention to race and ethnicity in literary reviews

The first task of literary criticism is to select which titles to review. Table 1 summarizes the ethnic origins of writers reviewed in *The New York Times Book Review* and *The New Yorker* in 2007. The table also provides data on whether critics made mention of a writer’s race or ethnicity in their reviews.

Looking first at the amount of critical attention given to Western relative to non-Western origin writers, it is clear that these US publications pay more attention to Western-fiction: 226 of the 265 reviews or just over four out of every five reviews in the sample were written about a Western-origin novelist. This is especially true for American writers who accounted for 60% of Western-origin authors and just over half (51%) of the entire sample. These findings corroborate research on the dynamics of the global literary market predicting that American critics will privilege homegrown literary talent and then fiction from countries with strong geo-linguistic ties to the United States (Berkers et al., 2011).

Regarding critical attention to authors’ race or ethnicity, I find that 81 of the 265 cases or roughly a third of the reviews contained any racial or ethnic identifiers. Among Western-origin writers, 27% or just under one out of every three reviews mentioned the race or ethnicity of the writer. Among the non-Western origin writers, 49% or approximately one out of every two reviews mentioned the writer’s ethnic or racial background. That critics mark writers from various ethnic-origin groups indicates that the qualitative findings are not driven by critics’ singular treatment of a specific group of writers (e.g., discussing the race and ethnicity of African-origin writers only).

---

7 I conducted an online search of authors’ personal web pages, publishing house web pages, and other Internet sources to determine authors’ ethnic origins. Following Berkers et al. (forthcoming), I rely on authors’ nation of birth as an indicator of their ethnic origin group and further distinguish between writers of western-ethnic origins and non-western ethnic origin groups. Berkers, Janssen and Verboord distinguish the latter as including regions that are not historically rooted in Judeo-Christian traditions and typically have a majority language outside of the Indo-European linguistic family (e.g., Africa, East Asia, Middle-East, etc.).
Table 1. Number of Reviews Mentioning Race/Ethnicity by Authors' Ethnic Origins (N=265).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Author Ethnic Origins</th>
<th>Does Critic Mention Writer's Race/Ethnicity in Review?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Western</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>American</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Canadian</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>British</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>European</td>
<td>24**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Australian</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Subtotal</td>
<td>62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-Western</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Latin American</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Middle Eastern</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>African</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>South Asian</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>East Asian</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Caribbean (Greater Antilles)</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Subtotal</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TOTAL</td>
<td>81</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*p<.05  (two-tailed t-test).

**p<.01  (two-tailed t-test).

Qualitative analysis of the reviews reveals that when critics did identify the race or ethnicity of a writer, it was discussed in one of three distinct ways, which I explain in detail further below:

(i) to establish the authenticity of the novels (N = 37);

(ii) to classify works into ethnic genres (N = 12);

(iii) to identify international talent in interpretively nominal ways (N = 36)

The sum of categories exceeds \( N = 81 \) because where a review exhibited the use of race/ethnicity for two purposes (i.e., authenticity and ethnic genre classification) this review was counted twice.

8 For an examination of how these frames are distributed across ethnic origin groups, see Appendix B.
Establishing authenticity is defined by critics’ suggestion that a novel’s contents were truthful or accurate because they were based on the novelist’s own ethno-racial insider knowledge. Ethnic genres are defined by critics’ grouping together novels based on the shared ethno-racial backgrounds of the novelists. Nominal identifications are defined by critics identifying authors’ race or ethnicity in passing but without using it as an interpretive tool – hence, marking in a purely “nominal” way. The first two modes of ethno-racial marking emphasize authors’ racial and ethnic positions as salient for appreciating the novels, whereas the nominal category reminds us that this is not the only way critics use ethno-racial identifiers in reviews. The relationship between these different frames is clarified through examples discussed in the next section.

Findings: establishing authenticity, ethnic genres, and nominal mentions

Establishing authenticity

« The first way critics used authors’ race and ethnicity was to suggest that the novel was authentic. Authenticity is a highly valued if ambiguous feature of artistic works. Often associated with sincerity, accuracy, truthfulness, and genuineness (Johnston and Baumann, 2007, 2009), authenticity is defined in relation to some idealized sets of expectations about the “real” essence of things (Grazian, 2003; Taylor, 1997:21). For example, Grazian’s (2003) study of the Chicago blues scene revealed that audiences’ evaluation of authentic blues music was informed as much by musicians’ performance of their “blackness” as their technical skill. This demonstrates how authenticity is not an intrinsic quality but “fabricated” (Peterson, 1997) or “manufactured” (Grazian, 2003) through specific framing processes. One such framing process involves drawing connections between a cultural artifact (e.g., cuisine or music) and characteristics of identifiable cultural producers (e.g., chefs or musicians) (Grazian, 2003; Johnston and Baumann, 2007, 2009; Peterson, 1997; Taylor, 1997). I find that literary critics used similar framing techniques when discussing books.

A novel’s authenticity relates to the perceived truthfulness or genuineness of the story being told (Griswold, 1987). One of the ways critics established the authenticity of the novels was to draw parallels between the ethno-racial features of the writers and the ethno-racial features of the story (i.e. the foreign setting of the story or the race/ethnicity of the protagonist). Drawing such parallels suggested that authors were relying on their knowledge as ethno-racial insiders to
inform the books. In other words, the novels were framed as expressions of their unique ethnoracial subject positions (Taylor, 1997); thus they are authentic because they are based on firsthand experiences rather than pure imagination.

In a review of Michael Thomas’ *Man Gone Down* (Glover, 2007), the critic draws parallels between the author and the protagonist of the novel. *Man Gone Down* is described as telling the story of, “[a] Boston-bred black man living in Brooklyn and struggling to write while supporting his blue-blooded white wife and their three children”(Glover, 2007 :1). Michael Thomas, the author, is then described as:

A Boston-bred African-American writer who lives in Brooklyn with his wife and their three children, Thomas seems to have fully embraced the “write what you know” ethos. And what he knows is how the odds are stacked in America. He knows the unlikelihood of successful black fatherhood. He knows that things are set up to keep the Other poor and the poor in their place. More than anything else, he knows how little but also – fortunately – how much it can take to bring a man down. (Glover, 2007:8)

The parallels drawn between the protagonist and the novelist are explicit: both are Boston-bred, African-American writers living in Brooklyn with their wife and three children. These similarities suggest that *Man Gone Down* is at least partly autobiographical. What is revealing is that the invocation of insider-knowledge, here rephrased as the “write what you know ethos”, privileges Thomas’ personal experience not as a father, not as a husband, not even as a writer, but as an African-American man in the United States and the obstacles he is assumed to have experienced as a member of this racial group. This suggests that part of the value of the novel is that readers will be treated to an authentic depiction of what it is like to be an “Other” in a highly racialized society.9

---

9 The apparent appeal of the “Other” in book reviews is akin to trends in world music as identified by Taylor (1997), whereby the authenticity of world music is often associated with specific positions (especially racialized, ethnicized, or subaltern identities), a romanticization of the traditional, and the purity of primal origins.
Similar parallels are drawn when reviewing Ha Jin’s A Free Life (Kim, 2007). In the following excerpt, a critic for The New York Times Book Review emphasizes how the decisions and trajectory of Ha Jin’s own immigrant experience parallels the decisions and trajectory of his characters, the Wus:

Much as Jin himself did, the Wus came from China to study, not to stay, but they realized after the Tiananmen Square massacre (as Jin did too, he’s said in interviews) that they couldn’t go home again and be themselves, since both their selves and their native land had changed. “A Free Life” is the story of their family’s naturalization. . . and like most novels of what professors call “The American Immigrant Experience,” it’s chiefly a tale of trial and error. (Kim, 2007:14)

Identified as one of many narratives about the “American Immigrant Experience”,10 the parallels drawn between the author and his characters again suggests that the writer is relying on his insider-knowledge as a Chinese migrant to the United States to inform the content of his book. And thus, his novel can be appreciated as an authoritative or authentic depiction of the trials and errors incumbent to the naturalization experience more generally since it is based on Jin’s own immigrant story.

Suggestions of the autobiographical nature of the novel persist even though Ha Jin has publicly denied that his work is autobiographical. A critic for the New Yorker dismisses the authors’ claim by using Jin’s dedication in A Free Life as further forensic evidence of the parallels between the author’s life and that of his characters:

[The author] declared, “I plan to write at least two books about the American immigrant experience, but not my own story.” However, his dedication to “A Free Life” reads, “To Lisha and Wen, who lived this book”; Lisha and Wen are the names of Ha Jin’s wife.

---

10 This is also an example of genre-classification: “The American Immigrant Experience” does not refer to a specific ethnic or national group but is still consistent with the trend of rooting the value of a novel in its expressing the very particular social position of someone who has the experience of being an immigrant in the United States.
and son. Nan Wu, the hero of “A Free Life,” also has a wife and son. . . (Updike, 2007:100)

The efforts made to reveal Ha Jin’s novel as a thinly veiled literary depiction of his real-lived immigrant experience – taken with the emphasis on Michael Thomas’ novel as an authentic depiction of being an “Other” in America – suggest that the value of these novels is partly their edifying rather than aesthetic quality.

Sometimes critics stressed not authentic depictions of individual experiences, but authentic depictions of foreign settings by emphasizing authors’ first-hand knowledge or experience with these exotic locales. This was the case in a New Yorker review of the crime-novel Sacred Games, set in Bombay (Mishra, 2007). The critic provides an extended socio-political sketch of Bombay, and then praises the author, Vikram Chandra, for his unique ability to portray this complex setting. Chandra’s authentic portrayal is partially attributed to the fact that Chandra grew up in Bombay as a child:

But then Bombay itself has transformed rapidly in the past decade and a half – a period during which the city’s official name was changed to Mumbai – as India’s religious and political conflicts have finally caught up with the city’s traditionally business-minded and cosmopolitan communities. In December 1992, during the nationwide riots that followed the demolition of a sixteenth-century mosque in Ayodhya by Hindu nationalists, hundreds of people in Bombay, mostly Muslims, were killed; retaliatory bomb attacks, allegedly masterminded by a Muslim don living in Dubai, killed nearly three hundred people, creating religious tensions among the hitherto secular fraternity of criminals. Though Bombay has prospered greatly from the liberalization of India’s state-controlled economy in the nineteen-nineties, it has also become home to feral forms of capitalism. In recent years, a series of scandals and scams have exposed an intricate network of greed, envy, and lust that binds politicians, tycoons, and civil servants to Mafia dons, Bollywood stars, and slumlords.
Such material – with its prodigies of arcane socioeconomic detail and suggestions of disorder – might appear overwhelming to a novelist. But Chandra – who grew up in Bombay and who now teaches creative writing at Berkeley, mines it confidently. (Mishra, 2007:100)

In providing such a detailed portrait of Bombay’s incumbent political, religious, and economic transitions, the critic suggests that the value of Sacred Games is not simply the cop-criminal narrative but the fact that readers will be treated to an authentic rendering of what it is like to be in this exotic city (Griswold, 1992).11 And readers can be confident in the authority of this depiction because, unlike other writers for whom such a setting would be “overwhelming,” Vikram Chandra has first-hand experience and insider-knowledge of the changing city having grown up there as a child. The idea that Chandra can write authoritatively about recent Hindu-Muslim tensions and economic corruption in Mumbai simply because he lived there as a child is based on essentialist ideas that ethno-racial minorities possess genuine ties and comprehensive knowledge about their foreign cultures12 (Borjas, 1992; Esser, 2004; Kibria, 2000; Warikoo, 2007).

The above examples demonstrate how critics use authors’ race or ethnicity as a tool for constructing the authenticity of a novel. Marking authors’ race and ethnicity in this way can be seen as conferring a level of authority on the novel and novelist – but it is authority of a very narrow kind. Specifically, critics draw upon ideas about writers’ authority as “ethno-racial insiders”, which is problematic for at least two reasons. First, the assumption that authors possess authoritative or authentic ethnic knowledge based on such broad identity categories is rooted in primordial thinking about race and ethnicity (Kibria, 2000). Second, the suggestion that

11 The lengthy sketch of Mumbai also elevates the critics’ own cultural capital by demonstrating his cosmopolitan knowledge of the foreign city. The critic is therefore also in a more authoritative position to assess whether Chandra has done an adequate job of representing the vicissitudes of this complex setting.

12 Race and ethnicity scholars note that there is the common assumption in the US that ethno-racial minorities retain enduring and authentic ties to their foreign culture—including an intimate knowledge of ethnic language, customs, and history independent of their generational status or how long they have lived in the US. Kibria (2000) refers to this as the assumption of “ethnic authenticity” spared most white-Americans whose ethnic ties are largely seen as more mutable, symbolic, or a matter of personal preference (see Gans, 1979; Lieberson and Waters, 1993, 1986).
any of these novels, while rooted in the biographical details of the writer, can be appreciated as authoritative *group* representations (e.g., the African-American or the Immigrant experience) is based on a token logic whereby the writer is seen as representing his or her entire group (Kanter, 1977). Thus, even though authenticity is used to valorize a novel, the basis of such authenticity reifies essentialist ideas of ethno-racial social difference (Grazian, 2003; Taylor, 1997). This emphasis on positioning writers as representatives of their ethno-racial group is also a central dynamic of ethnic-genre classifications.

**Classifying novel and novelist into ethnic genres**

The second way reviewers marked authors’ race or ethnicity was to classify novels into ethnic genres. Genres refer to the socially constructed categories used to group works together based on “perceived similarities” (DiMaggio, 1987:441; Lena and Peterson, 2008). When the “perceived similarity” included authors’ race or ethnicity, I identified this as an instance of ethnic-genre classification.

I begin by offering an example of a *non-ethnic* genre as a point of contrast, which will make the distinction between this and an *ethnic* genre clearer. In the following example, a critic for the *New York Times* puts Jim Crace’s *The Pesthouse* in the subgenre of books that imagine what it must be like in Hell:

> It must be human nature to want to imagine hell, and to want to describe it to those with less vivid imaginations. From van Eyck to Dante, from Jonathan Edwards to Jean-Paul Sartre, artists have been only too happy to tell us exactly how hot the flames will be, and how exquisite our tortures. But it’s mostly in the past century that a new circle of hell has emerged, in narratives ranging from “Mad Max” to “The Twilight Zone” to Cormac McCarthy’s novel “The Road”—and now, “The Pesthouse”. (Prose, 2007:8)

Here, the critic has grouped together a number of books based on their thematic similarity of imagining Hell. The critic then goes on to identify individual novels and novelists (including Dante, Jean Paul Sartre, and Cormac McCarthy) alongside the writer under review who are seen
as fitting this genre. And finally, the reviewer suggests that these novelists’ literary preoccupation with imagining Hell must be part of human nature.

Consider now an example of an *ethnic* genre. In a review of Helon Habila’s *Measuring Time*, the critic locates the novel within the genre of West African fiction, which shares an emotional tone of “existential despair”:

> The defining emotion of the West African novel seems to be existential despair. From Chinua Achebe’s stories of corruption and social collapse to Ken Saro-Wiwa’s Nigerian child soldier Sozaboy, a vein of pervasive hopelessness runs through the writing of a region that has witnessed the slide of postindependence dreams into civil war and chaos. . . “Measuring Time,” Habila’s accomplished second novel, overlays this tradition of despair with a self-consciously mythic plot. . . (Kunzru, 2007:21)

As with the non-ethnic genre example, the critic has grouped together a number of novels based on some perceived similarity: an emotional tone of existential despair. And once again, the critic has identified individual novels and novelists that fit into this subgenre. What distinguishes this as an example of *ethnic* genre classification are the two following points: First, the authors identified are co-ethnic writers; that is, writers who share Helon Habila’s West African background. Second, unlike the previous example where the literary similarities between writers were attributed to human nature more generally, here the writers’ similarities are seen as symptomatic of their shared West African heritage.13

A similar attribution is made when discussing Laura Restrepo’s novel, *Delirium*, which is identified as part of the larger ethnic genre of Latin American literature. Restrepo is described as “invoking the spirits of Juan Rulfo, Jose’ Donoso, Manuel Puig and many others: all those

13 The critic’s description of post-independence existential despair can also be seen as an extension of the “things fall apart” theme identified by Griswold (1992) as a convention of the Nigerian “village novel” subgenre. Griswold explains that the narrative arc of these novels often involves a romanticized depiction of village life disturbed by some external intervention after which “things fall apart”. In Chinua Achebe’s novel of the same name, idyllic village life is disrupted by colonialism. In the critic’s description of *Measuring Time*, idealistic hopes for post-independence life are disrupted by civil war.
orchestra conductors of collective memory” (Raffety, 2007:9). Once again, the critic groups together several co-ethnic writers who evince some literary similarity – in this case, a shared interest in memory. And beyond simply locating Restrepo within this Latin American genre, the critic suggests that Restrepo’s preoccupation with the themes of madness and memory is attributable to her membership in this group:

Laura Restrepo writes about Colombia, her native land. . . The restoration of the forgotten, the ignored, the barely known past has in fact been the great project of Latin American literature, the proof of its writers’ ambivalent love for their suffering countries. The fiction of Latin America is full, as this book is, of painful recollections, whispered confidences, a multitude of voices testifying (sometimes, it seems, under duress) to the things they’ve seen and never told. (Raffety, 2007:9)

Similar to the example of West African fiction, Restrepo’s thematic explorations of collective memory are identified as responding to the imperative of the “great project of Latin American literature” more generally. This contrasts with the alternative interpretation that Restrepo’s decision to write about memory was simply one of many creative choices she made as an individual writer.

Reviewers’ discussion of the “despair” characterizing West African fiction and the “restoration of the forgotten” in Latin American fiction are intimately tied with socio-political and historical circumstances of these regions. In this way, ethnic-genre books can be understood as cultural artifacts of these regions and appreciated as a way of “knowing” these different societies through its fiction. Griswold (1992) makes this point when describing the Nigerian “village novel” genre as a tool for Western audiences to imagine a foreign and distant community albeit in an overly romanticized and distorted way.

Sometimes critics pointed out how writers did not fit into their normative ideas about what writing from particular ethnic genres was like. For example, in a review of Vladimir Sorokin’s English-translation of *Ice*, the critic notes: “In his frigid antihumanism, Sorokin parts company with Russian satirists like Gogol, Bulgakov, Yuri Olesha and, more recently, Viktor Pelevin “(Kalfus, 2007:25). Similarly, when reviewing Danish novelist, Christian Jungersen’s *The
Exception, the critic comments that he “cannot think of anything quite like [this novel]” and that Jungersen “stakes out a path all his own” when compared to “Scandinavian writing in the postwar years... much of it... minimalist, and not in a good way” (Frank, 2007:86). Even though the novels and novelists are discussed in terms of how they do not conform to the critics’ idea of Russian satire or Scandinavian minimalism, it is significant that the writers are still held accountable to and contextualized against what their co-ethnic counterparts have been producing.

In summary, critics sometimes marked authors’ race or ethnicity to classify them into ethnic genres. The significance of this analytic category is that when classified in this way, the novels – whether it be in terms of what the authors are writing about (i.e., themes) or how they are writing (i.e., style) – are interpreted as artifacts of their particular ethno-racial heritages. This is another instance where critics frame authors’ race and ethnicity as integral to understanding the meaning and value of the novels which contrasts greatly with nominal identifications where race and ethnicity is mentioned but has no interpretive significance.

**Identifying international writers in interpretively nominal ways**

The third way critics marked authors’ race and ethnicity was in a nominal way. I use the term “nominal” to indicate that when critics mentioned authors’ race or ethnicity, they did so in passing and in interpretively inert ways: that is, these identifiers were not used to interpret the novels in any way. This point is made clearer by looking at specific examples.

In the following excerpts, critics clearly identify writers as Irish, Canadian, and American, respectively, but in neither the quotes nor the larger review did critics suggest that these ethnoracial backgrounds inform how authors wrote or what they wrote about:

> Long drawn to silence, the Irish novelist Patrick McCabe is generally content to let the spaces between his words speak louder than the words themselves. (Cowles, 2007:19)

***

> Although this is the award-winning Canadian poet [Karen Connelly] and travel writer’s first novel, her writing is muscular
and taut, bringing inmates and warders fully alive. (Adams, 2007:6)

***

Alexander Theroux, the younger of Paul Theroux’s two older brothers, is one of America’s premier frotteurs, to use a French term the impeccable James Salter applies to someone who “rubs words in his hand”. (Bowman, 2007:12)

Because authors’ race and ethnicity were not seen as directly influencing their creative choices, the authors’ race and ethnicity were also not made relevant to interpreting the value or significance of their novels. Analysis reveals, however, that nominal identifications often were accompanied by reference to the authors’ literary accomplishments.

Returning to the excerpts above as examples, in the same review of Patrick McCabe, the critic later notes that his previous novel, The Butcher Boy was turned into a film and was a finalist for the prestigious Booker Prize. Canadian writer, Karen Connelly is noted to be an “award-winning” poet. And Alexander Theroux is located as part of the literary dynasty of Theroux brothers, and is identified as “America’s premier frotteur”. Sometimes critics explicitly identified writers as among the top literary talents on an international stage: for example, Cees Nooteboom is described as “a cerebral, experimental writer renowned in his native Netherlands (indeed throughout Europe) and consistently on the shortlist of Nobel Prize candidates”(Barbash, 2007:20); Jim Crace as a “much admired British writer”(Oates, 2007:84); and William Trevor is given the rare honor of being described as an “Irish Chekhov”(Boyd, 2007:10).

Even though such nominal identifications may not communicate anything about how to understand the novel, identifying writers in these ways can help motivate the review by signaling to readers that the review is written about someone of literary interest or importance.14 The review of William Trevor is not about just any other novel or novelist but a non-domestic talent who is also made equivalent to Chekhov.

14 Preliminary data from interviews with book critics suggests that some reviewers believe including such information about the writer can help pique the interests of readers and draw them into the review.
That critics pair interpretively nominal identifiers with mentions of literary accomplishment counters the idea that ethno-racial labels in reviews are necessarily an epithet one transcends with greater literary achievement. In other words, to be identified as an “ethnic-writer” does not necessarily preclude one’s recognition as a high-quality literary fiction writer. It is worth noting, however, that nominal identification is almost exclusively the privilege of Western-origin writers: 34 out of 36 (or 94% of) the nominally identified writers were Western writers (see Appendix B). This means that it was highly unlikely that critics would bring up a writer’s non-Western origins without using it as a way to interpret and evaluate the significance of their books.  

Summary and discussion of reviewing trends

In the preceding sections, I have sought to empirically demonstrate how literary critics discursively incorporate authors’ race and ethnicity into their book reviews. Specifically, I have shown that critics use racial and ethnic identifiers to (i) establish the authenticity of their books; (ii) classify novels and novelists into ethnic genres; and (iii) identify writers in an interpretively nominal way.

When critics mentioned authors’ race or ethnicity to construct their novels as authentic, they emphasized authors’ position as “ethno-racial insiders” possessing unique insights and experiences they then transferred onto the pages of their books. When critics classified authors into ethnic genres they often suggested that the perceived literary similarities uniting writers were in some way emblematic or artifacts of their shared ethno-racial background. And the finding of nominal marking is a contrastive category because in these cases critics identify a writer’s race or ethnicity not to suggest anything about how to appreciate the novel but as a way of identifying interesting or important authors to motivate the reviews.

Based on these findings I argue that these critics are engaged in an interpretive strategy of reading difference. Again, interpretive strategies refer to “framing devices” that focus readers’

15 What is driving this empirical finding is unclear and not resolvable based on the small number of nominally identified reviews (N = 36) in the study. Future research could examine whether the disproportionate application of nominal identifications to Western-origin writers persists in a larger sample that would yield fruitful insights on geopolitical boundaries in literature.
attention and appreciation of texts (Corse and Griffin, 1997:196). When critics discuss authors’ race and ethnicity in reviews, they often use it as a criterion for constructing the value of the work for its relation to specific ethno-racial experiences or expression of ethno-racial literary sensibilities. The emphasis on how novels correspond to or are embedded in some actual social location echoes the stance of historicist literary criticism that treats socio-political context as meaningful for literary interpretation; though such an interpretive strategy does not preclude consideration of the formal literary merits of the novels or novelists, as the practice of nominal marking reveals. The next question, then, concerns what implications this interpretive strategy has for critics’ overall evaluation of the literary works.

Race, ethnicity, and overall literary evaluation

I now turn to examine how “reading difference” relates to critics’ final verdicts about the books under review. First, I consider whether the presence of ethno-racial identifiers increases or decreases the odds of receiving a favorable or unfavorable review. Second, I consider how reviews that mention an author’s race or ethnicity may differ in terms of the formal literary criteria used to evaluate the text.

Evaluation

High-brow cultural forms like literature usually resist simple good-bad evaluations because they are treated as complex and multifaceted (Baumann, 2007b). Book reviewers generally did not simply pronounce the success or failure of a novel, but led the reader through a novel’s strengths and weaknesses to justify their overall literary judgment.

I compare the overall evaluation found in book reviews that do or do not mention authors’ race or ethnicity in Table 2. The evaluation indicator compares favorable with mixed or unfavorable reviews. When a review is favorable, this means that the critic had mostly positive things to say about the novel: there may be a few criticisms, but overall the reviewer seems to recommend the novel. The unfavorable and mixed category refers to reviews which may include a few positive comments but overall the critic does not seem to recommend the novel to readers.
Table 2. Critics’ Overall Evaluation in Reviews With/Without Ethno-Racial Identifiers (N=265).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Evaluation</th>
<th>Does Critic Mention Race or Ethnicity in Review?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Favorable</strong></td>
<td>43 (53%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Mixed or_Unfavorable</strong></td>
<td>38 (47%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td>81 (100%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* p<.05  (two-tailed t-test).
**p<.01  (two-tailed t-test).

I find that in 53% of the cases where critics identified the race or ethnicity of the novelist, they also gave the novel a favorable review. Similarly, 43% of unmarked cases also received a favorable review. Therefore, when critics marked the race or ethnicity of writers in their reviews, it made no significant difference in how they assessed the overall quality of the novels. But what about the literary criteria used to arrive at this broader evaluation?

**Literary criteria**

Critics often made evaluative statements about plot, prose, characters, voice/tone, and the themes explored in the novel. I compare how frequently reviewers discuss specific literary criteria in reviews that mark author race or ethnicity and those that do not yielding some interesting patterns summarized in Table 3.

Reviewers were equally likely to discuss the merits of plot and characterization regardless of whether or not they mentioned the race or ethnicity of the writer. This is unsurprising since a coherent plot and plausible characters are minimal requirements for any successful narrative regardless of genre, audience, or what we know about the author. Critics were significantly more likely, however, to remark upon voice/tone and prose in reviews where they also marked the writer’s race or ethnicity.

---

16 Additional analysis in Appendix C shows that even though authenticity is by definition a positive trait, this did not mean that every time a reviewer framed the novel as authentic that it received a favorable review. And while a book may be framed as representative of or deviating from a particular genre-type, writing in either direction was not equated with an overall positive evaluation of the book.
Table 3. Literary Criteria Evaluated in Reviews With/Without Ethno-Racial Identifiers (N=265).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Literary Criterion</th>
<th>Does Critic Mention Race or Ethnicity in Review?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Plot</td>
<td>52 (64%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Characterization</td>
<td>50 (62%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Theme</td>
<td>34 (42%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Voice/Tone</td>
<td>53 (65%)**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prose</td>
<td>47 (58%)*</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* p<.05  (two-tailed t-test).
**p<.01  (two-tailed t-test).

Again, prose refers to the technicalities of writing including how writers construct their sentences, the rhythm of their writing, and their particular word choices. Voice and tone generally refer to the “authorial presence” in the novel and the attitude towards a subject conveyed through the writing, which can be ironic, serious, arrogant, sentimental, etc. (Abrams, 1993). Theme, in contrast, refers to what overall message or idea is contained in the novel and is significantly less likely to be remarked upon in reviews that also mentioned the race/ethnicity of the writer.

Table 4. Critical Assessment of Literary Criteria in With/Without Ethno-Racial Identifiers (N=265).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Literary Criterion</th>
<th>Does Critic Mention Race or Ethnicity in Review?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Strength¹</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Plot</td>
<td>34 (52%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Characterization</td>
<td>22 (42%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Theme</td>
<td>32 (58%)*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Voice/Tone</td>
<td>32 (56%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prose</td>
<td>35 (63%)*</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

¹ Numbers exceed totals reported in Table 4 because when a critic commented upon both strengths and weaknesses of the characterization in a novel, for example, each comment was counted as "1" in the strength and weakness categories.

* p<.05  (two-tailed t-test).
**p<.01  (two-tailed t-test).

Table 4 compares critics’ evaluation of specific literary criterion (i.e. as a strength or weakness of the book) in reviews that mention authors’ race or ethnicity and those that do not. The data show no significant differences across the two groups of reviews: While critics were more likely to single out theme and prose as strengths of the books they were reviewing, this was equally true regardless of whether the review mentioned the author’s ethno-racial background.
Therefore, even though reviewers pay more critical attention to some literary features when they identify writers as ethnic-authors, the criteria themselves are not judged differently.

**Summary and discussion of evaluation trends**

While the presentation of racial and ethnic identifiers does not significantly increase or decrease the chance of a favorable review in my sample, I find that critics do appear to be attending to slightly different criteria across the two groups of reviews. In reviews where critics make no mention of a writer’s race or ethnicity, reviewers are more likely to comment upon the content or perceived theme of the novel. When critics identify the race or ethnicity of the writer, they are more likely to pay critical attention to voice/tone and prose of the novel.

Both voice/tone and prose are intimately tied with the persona of the author as the “voice behind the fictitious voices” (Abrams, 1993:156). This is consistent with the qualitative data demonstrating that when critics use authors’ race or ethnicity, it is to frame the novels as rooted in unique social positions as represented by the author: these literary criteria emphasize the author’s presence in the text in terms of not what is written, but how.

**Conclusion and discussion**

This study has illuminated how critics use authors’ race and ethnicity as tools for appraising the value of contemporary literary fiction using an interpretive strategy I term *reading difference*. This involves engaging with a cultural text, in this case novels, in ways that emphasize how it relates to the actual racial, ethnic, national, or regional position of their creators both in terms of the content explored and the way it is formally crafted.

The significance of race and ethnicity for classifying and interpreting fiction has been discussed elsewhere (Berkers, 2009; Griswold, 1987). But what the present analysis adds is an awareness of how classifying writers within racial, ethnic, or a national category is *constitutive* of the value assigned to their work through the strategy of reading difference. I find that when critics identify writers in ethnic or racial terms, they do so to position authors as ethno-racial “insiders” emphasizing a book’s authenticity; to frame the novels as artifacts of particular ethno-racial cultures through the concept of ethnic genres; or to pique readers’ interest in the author and in
reading the review. Content analysis further reveals that critics focus on different stylistic issues when reviewing these ethno-racially classified writers.

Whether this approach to fiction is “better” or more “correct” than any other is not a concern of this paper. This line of debate has been going on within literary circles for over a hundred years (Adams, 1988; Patterson, 1995). The contribution of this analysis has been to demonstrate how the perceived racial and ethnic background of cultural producers is a critical component of the assessment and evaluation of cultural products that has not been empirically demonstrated before.

Of course, the impact of racial and ethnic categories for literary valuation is not limited to the moment of book reviewing but permeates different stages of the production process – including when publishers decide how to market specific titles and when media outlets decide which books to review (Berkers et al., 2011); and these are in turn influenced by the prevailing market logics of the literary publishing field (Berkers, 2009; Dowd, 2003). One limitation of the analysis data is the inability to isolate how these different factors come to bear on how race and ethnicity is discussed in the final print reviews. An area for future study, then, is to provide a more holistic account of how racial and ethnic discourse in reviews may be influenced by other production factors and marketing classifications (Dowd, 2003).

The contributions of the analysis also point to other avenues for future research. First, I have demonstrated that the use of racial and ethnic identifiers by newspaper and magazine critics may not greatly influence the odds of receiving a favorable or unfavorable review; but what about in other branches of literary criticism? Newspaper and magazine critics are the first line of gatekeepers, but attracting the positive attention of literary essayists and academics is necessary for a novel to be valorized as a high-culture and high-quality piece of fiction (van Rees, 1983). Future research could investigate the extent to which novels and writers framed as authentic or as ethnic-genre authors are consecrated in these other forms of literary criticism. Second, because many of the marked reviews discuss foreign or otherwise minority social positions, this suggests that the fiction of groups whose voices or experiences are constructed as “Other” are more likely to be appreciated through the lens of reading difference though no firm conclusions could be drawn from the data here. Investigating whether the cultural works of Other-ed groups are
evaluated differently from the works of majority producers is another worthy question for future research.

It would also be most illuminating to examine to what extent the ways I have identified literary critics’ use of authors’ race and ethnicity as tools for critical appraisal can be extended to critics in other cultural fields. For example, does the critical significance of race or ethnicity function in the same way for painting and dance as it does for fiction? Arriving at such knowledge would greatly push our understanding of the social mechanisms undergirding valuation processes and points to the more general research agenda of building a better theory of cultural valuation.
References


Chapter 3
Legitimate judgment in art, the scientific world reversed?
Maintaining critical distance in evaluation

[1]n judgments of taste and in judgments of truth, we approach inter-subjectivity from different directions, but that is where, in both cases, we tend to wind up. (Shapin, 2012: 7)

Objectivity is often thought the foundation for fair and legitimate judgment in science. Many studies, such as analyses of peer review, have problematized this ideal by pointing to how emotions, interpersonal dynamics, idiosyncratic preference, and other forms of subjectivity come to play roles in evaluative processes (Cole et al., 1978; Langfeldt, 2004; Travis and Collins, 1991).

In the present analysis, I contribute to our understanding of subjectivity as a mode of knowledge making rather than as a mere impediment to objective evaluation. I use the world of artistic judgment as my case study: specifically, how book reviewers evaluate the quality of new fiction. This is a good case because of the generally accepted subjectivity of taste. The Latin proverb ‘De gustibus non est disputandum’ translates as ‘There’s no arguing for taste’. And there is no arguing for taste because it is understood to be subjective, idiosyncratic, and thus inarguable, since it is irrational (Shapin, 2012). This suggests interesting questions for those interested in objectivity and subjectivity in producing judgments: If aesthetic taste is subjective, what distinguishes legitimate and illegitimate aesthetic judgment? What are the customary rules for deploying one’s taste?

The link between subjectivity and legitimacy in evaluation has been discussed by others. Bourdieu (1983, 1989, 1993, 1996) addresses the topic of how artistic and academic value is produced in Homo Academicus and his writing on the field of cultural production. He argues that agents, such as scholars and art critics, are engaged in constant competition with one another to have their own definitions of excellence accepted as ‘commonsense’ in the field. Lamont (2009) goes beyond the idea that evaluative criteria simply reflect competitive dynamics in a field to assess the range of meanings that evaluators attach to evaluative criteria when assessing scientific excellence in the context of peer review panels. Work elsewhere has established how formal evaluative criteria effectively function to transform personal taste into a more general
form (Shrum, 1996). But here I contribute insights into the socio-cognitive processes behind the deployment of these discourses – that is, how critics’ perception of literary quality is formed by broader norms concerning legitimate evaluation.

In this study, I am also interested in the social grounds of evaluation and the legitimation of particular evaluative criteria; however, I venture away from thinking about how value is produced to consider how the legitimacy of individual judgments are established. By value, I do not mean the perceived ‘accuracy’ or ‘truth’ of an evaluative judgment. The focus here is on process: How do social actors come to think of their aesthetic appraisals as good ones, and thus valuable, given the subjectivity of taste? This is an important process to understand because the means by which actors generate what they consider legitimate judgments will likely shape the final value that is produced.

To examine these questions, I interviewed 30 book critics who have written fiction reviews for major newspapers, including The New York Times, The Guardian, and The Washington Post. I asked critics to reflect upon their review process, including the practical steps they took to arrive at an assessment of its aesthetic quality. Book reviewers were the first to acknowledge the subjectivity of their literary judgments, yet they were also invested in practices and customary norms that collectively ‘objectivize’ literary judgments, transforming them into reasoned and valid evaluations, while simultaneously acknowledging the subjectivity of taste.

In what follows, I provide a review and comparison of epistemic norms for legitimate evaluation in scientific and artistic fields. Following that I provide a detailed look at the four strategies of critical distance: (1) recognizing conflicts of interest, (2) preserving critical autonomy, (3) evidence-based reviewing, and (4) reflexive reading. To explore why book critics should be so concerned with objectivizing their opinions given the accepted relativism of taste, I examine a negative case wherein a reviewer describes his failure to maintain critical distance. I conclude by considering how the rules and concrete procedures critics describe for producing legitimate judgment in art are similar or different from the case of science.

**Epistemic Rules for Judgments of 'taste' and 'truth'**

Evaluation is an important part of knowledge production since it is through evaluative processes that standards of excellence are defined and reproduced (Bourdieu, 1984; Lamont and
Huutoniemi, 2012). Just as definitions of value vary across contexts, so do the norms for what constitutes legitimate evaluation (Huutoniemi, 2012). Knorr-Cetina (1999) emphasizes the importance of context in her concept of *epistemic cultures*: the practical, symbolic, and material settings that structure what types of knowledge are produced and valued. We can similarly think of *evaluative cultures*, which vary by their methods of comparison (i.e. ranking or rating), their evaluative criteria, their customary rules, and other facets that constrain how evaluators behave and inform the contents of their judgments (Lamont, 2009, 2012).

*Customary rules* refer to the taken-for-granted norms governing what is considered appropriate behavior for social actors engaged in evaluation (Lamont, 2009). These rules range from substantive issues (i.e. what criteria are ‘irrelevant’) to epistemic issues (i.e. bracketing self-interest) and even norms for interacting with others (i.e. deferring to others’ expertise in peer-evaluation settings). Fairness in evaluation is the ‘collective outcome’ of following these rules (Lamont and Huutoniemi, 2012). In addition, procedural fairness increases the perceived legitimacy of the resulting judgment (Clay-Warner et al., 2005; Hegtvedt and Johnson, 2009).

The customary rules for fair and legitimate judgment in science are tied to norms of objectivity (Merton, 1973). Objectivity is associated with reason and rationality, while subjectivity is typically positioned opposite, as its ‘photographic negative’ (Daston and Galison, 2007: 379) or objectivity’s ‘doppelgänger’ (Shapin, 2012). Gieryn (1983) relays how science has been historically defined as ‘objective knowledge free from emotion, private interest, bias or prejudice’ in direct opposition to the ‘subjective and emotional’ character of religion and other fields (p. 785). The exact rules and procedures for achieving objectivity, however, evolve along with the ideal of objectivity itself.

In their history of objectivity as an epistemic virtue, Daston and Galison (2007) note that in the 19th century, norms of mechanical objectivity prevailed such that researchers endeavored to remove all traces of individual intuition and interpretation, for example, through photography to ‘quiet the observer so nature could be heard’ (p. 785). By the 20th century, however, scientists’

---

17 For example, the virtues of being impersonal and detached are also emphasized in the ideal of objectivity in American journalism, where objective reporting is impartial and ‘cool, rather than emotional’ in tone (Schudson, 1989, 2001: 150).
interpretations were reconceived as productive rather than distorting. Researchers’ interpretations and intuitions were seen as productive for knowledge making, though scientists were expected to sort between productive intuitions and ones that were misleading and better off discarded. This skill was honed through years of professional training, which is why Daston and Galison (2007) refer to this epistemic style as ‘trained judgment’.

Why draw upon the world of scientific judgment to understand the role of subjectivity in evaluating art? At first glance, it appears that the two are worlds apart. While customary rules for scientific judgment attempt (albeit unsuccessfully) to excise subjectivity from evaluation, subjectivity in artistic judgment is not seen as something to be bracketed, but as a tool for producing knowledge in the field. And it is generally assumed that differences of artistic opinion cannot be resolved through rational or empirically grounded argument because aesthetic judgment is a matter of taste, which is personal, emotional, and idiosyncratic (Karpik, 2010). The epistemic culture of the artistic world appears to be like that of the scientific world reversed.

I argue that the differences between judgments about fact and fiction are likely overdrawn. Studies of scientific peer review provide many examples of how various forms of subjectivity manifest in the process of adjudicating scientific knowledge, including preconceived views of what constitutes ‘good science’ (Daston and Galison, 2007; Mahoney, 1977; Travis and Collins, 1991), debate about what legitimates criteria and methods for evaluation (Dirk, 1999; Guetzkow et al., 2004; Langfeldt, 2001; Laudel, 2006; Roy, 1985), and interactional dynamics among evaluators (Lamont, 2009; Lamont and Huutoniemi, 2012; Langfeldt, 2004; Olbrecht and Bornmann, 2010). These studies document how actors have been unsuccessful at eradicating subjectivity from knowledge-making processes. Furthermore, these works suggest that emotions, morals, interactional dynamics, and other ‘extra-cognitive’ considerations are intrinsic to the evaluation process, and thus they cannot be seen as extraneous contaminants (Lamont, 2009; Mansilla et al., 2010).

The goal of the present analysis is to move beyond binary thinking about objectivity in aesthetic and scientific judgments. I achieve this by examining the concrete steps critics take when adjudicating matters of artistic quality, finding that some customary rules for producing legitimate judgment in art and science bear significant similarities.
Data and Methods

The study is based on in-depth interviews with 30 fiction critics who reviewed for prominent American newspapers. I use the terms ‘critics’ and ‘reviewers’ interchangeably to refer to those people who write reviews for a general newspaper audience. Participants were selected using the following procedure. I began by generating a list of the names of people who had published a fiction review in one of three newspapers in 2007. Respondents were then randomly selected from list of names and invited to participate in the study.

I do not specify which papers I used to generate the original list of names to preserve the anonymity of my respondents, but the publications were selected based on a combination of criteria including their having (1) among the largest national circulation numbers, (2) comparable targeted audiences, and (3) a reputation for paying attention to books. For example, USA Today and the Wall Street Journal are among the more widely circulated papers but do not have stand-alone book sections. And while I used only three publications to generate my initial population of reviewers, all of my informants have reviewed for multiple publications, among them The New York Times, Los Angeles Times, The Washington Post, Chicago Tribune, The New Yorker, The Guardian, The Times (UK), and other news outlets.

There were 14 women and 16 men in the sample. The majority were ‘occasional’ reviewers, meaning that in addition to writing reviews, they make their living through freelance journalism, teaching English or Creative Writing at the college level, writing books, or more likely a combination of all the above. Only four of my respondents had full-time staff positions with a newspaper as book critics or book section editors at the time of the interview. Discussions with industry informants (publicists and book section editors) suggest that this is a typical sample. Newspapers have greatly diminished the space allotted for book reviewing, with many stand-

---

18 There are three branches of criticism: essayistic, academic, and journalistic (Van Rees, 1983). Essayistic and academic branches of criticism typically involve close analysis of high-culture literature written for a specialized readership (i.e. quarterly literary reviews or academic journals). Journalistic reviewing, in contrast, covers a range of newly published books for the general readership of a newspaper or magazine. Contrasting newspapers reviews to critical essays and academic criticism, we see the range of works reviewed, the pool of critics, and the intended audience becomes increasingly specialized (Van Rees, 1983). Journalistic critics write for the broad readerships of general newspapers, so it is inappropriate for them to go into deep literary analysis or use specialized literary jargon in this branch of criticism.
alone book sections being folded into general ‘Entertainment’ sections due to the changing economics of print publishing. With less space for book reviews, there are fewer review assignments and a lower demand for full-time book critics on staff. The editor for a major east coast newspaper book section estimates that there are probably only 12 full-time critics left in America, and other informants estimate that it cannot be ‘more than a handful’.

Interviews were conducted over the telephone and typically lasted 60–90 minutes, during which time I asked critics to tell me their thoughts about what made for good fiction and how they went about the task of book reviewing. Despite widespread interest in evaluation, little work has investigated evaluation as a phenomenological practice (Boltanski and Thévenot, 2006; Bourdieu, 1977; Chong, 2011; Lamont, 2009; Shapin, 1996, 2012). The interviews provided critics with the opportunity to explore ideas and assumptions about their practice upon which they had not explicitly reflected, since reviewing is a very informally organized professional activity (Pool, 2007). Furthermore, customary rules for evaluation are not often formally articulated but become apparent when criticizing or praising the practices of others (Lamont, 2009). This makes a phenomenological look at evaluation all the more important for understanding the concrete steps actors take when producing what they consider to be legitimate judgments of quality or worth.

**Strategies for maintaining critical distance**

In *Science in Action*, Latour (1987) follows the production of scientific ‘facts’ (i.e. black-boxing processes). These include the rallying of ‘allies’, the use of instruments, and trials of strength that test the relation between instruments and the scientists who interpret their data. Scientists are meant to report on whatever facts and data their instruments reveal. But if a critic (or ‘dissenter’) can show that a researcher’s interpretation has been distorted by some kind of subjectivity, then the scientist is revealed as a ‘subjective individual’ rather than an ‘objective representative’ of the empirical world (p. 78). And the scientific claim in question becomes less a ‘fact’.

However, critics do aspire to *objectively* represent the content and quality of the novels in question, though not in the sense of being ‘right’ in any universal way. Book critics recognize that their reviews reflect their individual assessment of a book and that other readers and reviewers are likely to differ in their opinions. Critics aspire to some form of generality in their artistic judgments: their reviews should reflect their judgment as connoisseurs, not simply reflect
their preferences as private consumers. So how do critics accomplish this balance between the particularities of taste and the generality of the judgments conveyed in their reviews?

Book reviewers engage in specific practices to accomplish what I term critical distance, which is an epistemic virtue characterized by critical autonomy and the achievement of an optimal balance of distance and engagement. The customary rules associated with this epistemological style include (1) recognizing conflicts of interest, (2) preserving critical autonomy, (3) reflexive reading, and (4) evidence-based reviewing. I detail the contents of each critical distance strategy, demonstrating how they effectively transform evaluators’ individual tastes into reasoned and legitimate representations of a book’s quality.

Recognizing conflicts of interest: to recuse or not to recuse

« The first decision that a book reviewer must make is whether or not to accept a review assignment. Because it is common practice to invite novelists to review the work of other novelists, this can introduce conflicts of interest into reviewing. One critic explains that he avoids putting himself in situations where he reviews a book by someone he knows because ‘you are tempted to skew somehow, you know’? And if you review ‘someone who is a friend, you might artificially inflate your review. Or, somebody who is not a friend, you might artificially depress your review’. Recusing oneself in situations where a preexisting relation precludes one from writing an unprejudiced review is crucial to the perceived fairness of the review process.

Preexisting relations can be personal or professional, though sometimes the two overlap:

    It’s hard not to have met someone as a writer if you’re in the literary game over time.

    But there’s a difference between having met someone and knowing them, or spending a week at their house on the coast in the summer, or something.

The tightness of literary communities means that the simple fact of personal acquaintance is an impractical criterion for recusing oneself. Instead, it is a question of what degree of familiarity is
sufficiently compromising. The above critic draws the line at summering at someone’s home. Another critic was offered this folk wisdom:

   Somebody once told me, ‘You can review a book by people you know who are acquaintances, but if you know the names of their children, you shouldn’t review them’.

Critics are very conscious of how habits and bonds of friendship might compromise their ability to be critical as readers and reviewers, so they do their best to avoid such situations by not reviewing work by writers with whom they are too friendly.

Critics are also aware of how even indirect professional ties could bias a review. One reviewer explains:

   I know friends that have gotten nasty reviews, for example, from a reviewer who was turned down by their editor, or turned down by their agent.

   [T]hey have never met the writer. It’s not like they’re old high school buddies. There is no real personal connection, except they have a little axe to grind … their ego is a little bruised, and …they’re picking up the book saying, ‘What’s so good about this? Why did the agent take this book and not mine? Why did the editor take this book and not mine? Why did this person get this prize and not me?’

The critic describes how bruised egos and a sense of competition between the writer of the book and the writer of the review can bias a critic’s judgment. In this case, the reviewer might be tempted to be unduly ‘nasty’, at which point the review ceases to be a representation of the book’s quality and becomes a reflection of the reviewer’s own career frustrations. Interestingly, critics were less likely to be concerned with the opposite possibility – of reviewers and writers who shared publishers or agents being tempted to positively skew their reviews because of their shared professional association. Critics were more concerned about undue criticism than undue praise. Pool (2007) observes this asymmetry when reflecting on legal cases brought against reviewers that concerned undeserved slander rather than undeserved acclaim.

Even before turning the first page of a book, reviewers stress how important it is to screen for personal and professional conflicts of interest that might preclude them from fairly assessing of a
novel. When critics describe this first task of deciding to take a review assignment, more than considerations of time or money, critics frame this as an ethical decision.

Of course, avoiding conflicts of interest is not solely a matter of personal moral conviction. Reviews are not anonymous: they are published with the reviewers’ names printed in the articles’ bylines. And many critics can bring to mind examples where the reviewer ‘had no business’ writing about another author because of some known relationship: ‘I’ve seen many times people reviewing other people who I know damn well are friends of theirs, and I think, no fucking way should they … review this book!’ Such instances undermine not only the validity of the review but also the reputation and credibility of the reviewer when readers sense that a review is being used to advance a personal agenda (‘That person had an axe to grind’).

In summary, critics recognized that social ties – both personal and professional, positive and negative – can hinder their ability to be sufficiently critical. And this would compromise the integrity of their reviews since their judgments would be based on a preexisting relationship rather than a reasoned assessment of the book at hand.

Preserving the purity of one’s opinion: peers and other contaminating influences

Beyond the prejudicing influences of friendship and professional acquaintance, critics were wary of how the opinions of other reviewers could influence their own judgment. It is not uncommon for reviews of the same book to be published around the same time since newspapers report on the same pool of newly published fiction. This creates a situation where reviewers can read what other critics have said about the same book they are reviewing.

Some critics are tempted to read others’ reviews to make sure they ‘got it [the book] right’. This insecurity relates to the radical uncertainty of artistic quality (Karpik, 2010). But respondents were clear that they would only consult others’ reviews after they had submitted their own – never beforehand:

I try not to read other people’s reviews of until I’m done with my own piece … most of us [critics] like to think that we are not easily influenced. And I’ve come to learn that is not true.
[I’ll read others’ reviews] sometimes afterwards, but never before or during; it’s just way too confusing. It’s – I mean, you think that you are good enough and pure enough, but you just aren’t. Their phrases, their opinions and their tones, it just stains you instantly.

Critics felt strongly about preserving the autonomy of their opinions, here described in terms of ‘purity’ and avoiding the potential ‘stain’ of peer opinions (Douglas, 2002 [1966]). This may be related to the fact that reading (and reviewing) is often thought of as a solitary relation between a reader and a book (Nell, 1988). And critics felt that they must protect this personal relation from ‘contaminating’ exterior influences.

Concern about the ‘purity’ of critics’ judgments extends to contempt for the outside influence of commercial interests (Bourdieu, 1993). When I asked one reviewer about whether he consults other critics’ reviews, he replied:

Reviewer: Oh, no, never. Never, never, never … not only don’t I look at reviews of books I’m reviewing, I don’t even look at the publicity material that comes with the book. I just throw it out as soon as I open the envelope, the book. I never look at that material, no.

Interviewer: Can I ask you why?

Reviewer: I don’t want my reading clouded by anything that doesn’t have to do with the book itself. I don’t want my opinion biased … that to me is so extraneous and that’s wrong.

Here again, the critic foregrounds the book and its reader as the only relevant beings for assessing a book’s quality. The publicity material that accompanies the novel is not ‘the book itself’, it is ‘extraneous’ to the reader–book relation, and thus, it is ‘wrong’ to consider in this evaluative context.

What critics are describing here and above are efforts to preserve the legitimacy of their judgment by reducing the epistemic context to reader–book relation. And anything outside of
critics’ personal experience of reading a novel was seen as extraneous, irrelevant, and thus corrupting. By limiting their evaluative criteria to the logic of artistic appreciation (e.g. the reading experience), critics are less vulnerable to attack for considering irrelevant information (e.g. their judgments are seen as legitimate). Thus far I have shown how critics made efforts to remove external sources of bias, including conflicts of interests related to friendships or grudges as well as preserving the autonomy of their literary judgments by avoiding outside influences. I now consider how critics manage internal sources of bias in reviewing.

Evidence-based reviewing

When reflecting upon the review process, many critics felt that the most difficult task was not the evaluation itself but conveying to readers why they reached a particular conclusion. When I asked how critics knew whether they liked a book, they could offer only vague responses: ‘I just know if I like it or if I don’t’. ‘Well, to some degree, it’s instinctive’. ‘I don’t think it’s anything more complicated than a gut reaction.’ The apparent unintelligibility of this evaluative moment is not unique to fiction; it has also been observed in other cultural forms including curatorial work (Acord, 2010) and fine cuisine (Leschziner, 2010). What these studies have in common is that the first ‘indicator’ of artistic quality is embodied: an emotional response.

The challenge becomes translating these personal emotional reactions into a reasoned review. As one reviewer explains: ‘When a book is good, a book is good. And I’ll identify it usually in a very sort of visceral, maybe even primitive emotional manner. It just has to hit me that way’. This critic describes her ability to decipher the value of a book in embodied terms (i.e. ‘visceral’ and ‘primitive’ reactions), but goes on to say ‘[I]t’s my job to articulate emotion in a rational

---

19 This is a variant of what reviewers and ‘how-to’ reviewing manuals (see Drewry, 1966; Hooper, 2010) describe as the critic’s duty to review a book ‘on its own terms’; you should judge the book in front of you and not what you wish the book was about or draw on any other exogenous considerations.

20 In their work on justification, Boltanski and Thévenot (2006) conceptualize multiple modes of justification (or ‘worlds of worth’) with independent logics. For example, the inspired world privileges emotions, creativity, and artistic sensibilities, whereas the world of fame/renown values celebrity, reputation, and public recognition. The authors suggest that ‘the more an argument stays consistent with a single logic then the less open it is to attack or critique’ (p. 219). Book critics who avoid publicity materials (i.e. an object from the world of renown) can be seen as preserving the ‘purity’ of their opinions by limiting their considerations to artistic appreciation (e.g. the inspired world), making their reviews less susceptible to criticism.
format.’ Critics have to move from knowledge that is embodied or instinctive to knowledge built on rational arguments.

Many critics report feeling ‘engaged’ or ‘absorbed’ by successful fiction:

A novel succeeds if it engages me so deeply that I find myself reading without awareness of anything else that’s happening. *I’m completely engaged in that creative world ...*

When you are in the hands of a really good writer, you believe there is something *fundamentally real* about the world they’re creating. The problem with a writer who isn’t as good is that, within pages, *you are seeing what you are reading as a construct.*

While critics disagreed on which specific titles best exemplified high-quality literature, they converged around the standard that good fiction allows the reader to be swept away into an author’s fictional landscape. And in the case of poor-quality fiction, bad writing is highly visible and can, because of its apparent artificiality, obstruct the reader’s attempt to become engaged in the story (‘you are reading a construct’). Thus, a novel’s quality is evidenced by the *affective* experience of reading.

Critics also made reference to emotions as indicators of a book’s quality when recalling why they gave particular books positive or negative reviews. But these emotional indicators were framed as properties of the novels themselves. Take, for example, one reviewer who recalls a recent novel he reviewed favorably and describes as:

*Very sympathetic. Very moving. Very funny. It was a great example of technical skill, [the writer’s] ability to construct stories in these different voices.*

The critic describes the merits of this novel in emotional terms (i.e. ‘sympathetic’, ‘moving’, and ‘funny’). And he takes these emotional qualities as objective evidence of the author’s ‘technical skill’. The idea that readers’ emotional responses are conjured by the force of author’s talent exemplifies what Bourdieu (1996) called the ‘charismatic ideology of “creation”’ (pp. 167–169; see also Becker, 1982). Such an enchanted conception of the artist obscures the role that critics
(and art dealers, publishers, and other consecrating institutions) play in actively producing the value of cultural goods (Becker, 1982; Bourdieu, 1996).

Sometimes critics addressed their emotional experiences more directly. This was often the case when critics addressed why they gave books bad reviews:

I guess the last book I hated was an historical novel […] You just never knew anything – and after 528 pages! So that was a terrible book and aroused my wrath.

[The book] was extremely annoying to me, and in fact provoked a lot of hostility in me, but I had to really think about why … everything was a hot concept.

These critics explicitly refer to their personal emotional responses to the novels (i.e. ‘hate’ and ‘hostility’). As with the previous example, however, even these internal reactions are understood as the impersonal effects of the books themselves. The critics are external to critics because they are reactions to the technical failings of the object the critics are evaluating. Critics’ emotional responses become properties of the texts as an effect of the writing – and evidence of the novel’s quality.

**Reflexive reading: reading like a scientist**

Given their emphasis on the embodied nature and private intimacy of the reading experience, how did critics manage to move beyond their idiosyncrasies as readers and offer a general assessment? I found that critics turn their subjective experience of books into an object of scrutiny. This involves taking a reflexive reading approach, as a reviewer describes in the following:

My process was to read this book and to constantly stop and look at the page and think, ‘Was that really good?’ I mean, I just thought I read something that was really good, but … I had to try to interrogate the reading experience.

Here, the reviewer describes a hypothesis that the book is really good. But he then describes distancing himself from his immediate reaction to ‘interrogate’ it from a different perspective. These two perspectives suggest a double-reading strategy. There is what one respondent described as the ‘civilian’ reading, which is reading for the sheer pleasure and enjoyment of
experiencing a story. And then there is the ‘critical’ reading, which interrogates a book and ‘tests’ the critic’s hypothesis through analyses of language, structure, and plot to answer the question: ‘Was that really good?’ What is significant about reflexive reading is the a priori presumption that critics can separate their critical and personal sensibilities and that they can somehow ‘check’ the influences of one with the other. The same critic goes on to explain how he vets his initial impressions of the book through tests of formal critical vocabulary and devices: for example, taking a closer look at the book’s ‘perky tone’ and the ‘intelligence of the writing and the structure’.

Another critic describes a similar reflexivity when describing a time he reviewed a book negatively because the author’s voice was ‘irritating’:

[It’s] one of those things where you look at it and you go, ‘Hmm, I’m having a negative reaction to this. Is it my personal idiosyncrasy or is it that this book is not very good?’

The critic describes a moment of critical pause during which he suspends his immediate reading experience, and he investigates where his negative reactions are coming from: the civilian part (i.e. his ‘personal idiosyncrasy’) or the critical part that is simply evaluating a ‘not very good’ writer. By posing the question, the critic assumes that he is able to distinguish where his subjective preference ends and where the intrinsic qualities of the book begins. In effect, these critics engage in ‘trials of strength’ (Latour, 1987) that test to what extent critics are speaking on behalf of the book or their own behalves as private consumers.

It is not so important whether or not critics are actually able to isolate their personal preferences from their professional opinions but that they believe these are ontologically separate realities: the ‘personal idiosyncrasy’ of the reviewer and the actual quality of the book.

A common tool for successfully separating the two was through the use of direct quotations from the novels within the reviews. One critic explains it this way:

I usually like to use quotations because I like to let the book speak for itself … You don’t want it to be just a long string of quotations. You also don’t want to put
a quotation in that, though it seems to fit your sort of thesis, the quotation isn’t representative in a way.

You know, every book has at least one bad sentence in it.

Many critics expressed a similar concern with how to accurately and fairly represent a novel; using quotations allows the book to ‘speak for itself’ unmediated by the reviewer. The emphasis on foregrounding the book as an independent entity again reinforces the idea that critics were trying to objectively represent the content and quality of books in their reviews.

So far I have outlined the customary rules for producing fair evaluation in book reviewing. These include specific discursive and practical strategies that critics believe enable them to avoid external sources of bias (i.e. peer influence and conflicts of interest) as well as bracket internal sources of bias (i.e. through reflexive reading and evidence-based reviewing) and thus arrive at a more valid evaluation. But given the accepted relativism of taste, what is the value added of attaining this critical distance? The value placed on critical distance as an epistemic practice is best illustrated by considering a negative case where a critic failed to maintain critical distance.

**When critical distance fails**

In the following example a reviewer describes a time when he gave a book a positive review for the wrong reasons and conveys critics’ investment in critical distance:

I once reviewed a book [title and author removed] which is about an obsessive love affair, or a kind of failed love affair, but about a romantic obsession let’s say. I read it, frankly, too closely on the heels of having gone through a similar experience myself, which meant that I didn’t have enough critical distance. I didn’t realize it at the time, but … I identified too closely with the character and with the situation, which meant that I misread the book.

I liked the book a lot [and] I have no qualms about having given that book a positive review, but I gave it a positive review for the wrong – I saw the wrong stuff in the book.
The critic describes an instance where he failed to maintain critical distance, resulting in a ‘misreading’ of the book. He is referring here to a failure of judgment. The reviewer This same critic reflects in hindsight that while an affinity between reviewer and book is okay, the reviewer should be able to ‘step back and really assess the book without it becoming a piece of autobiography’. Good fiction is supposed to make one believe that there is something fundamentally real about the story whether or not it conforms to an individual’s specific experience. So while critics do not dispute the subjectivity of reading, they do believe that there are ‘right’ and ‘wrong’ ways to review a novel.

The difference between right and wrong concerns how critics manage their individual preferences as readers. What critics describe as part of their review process are the ways taste can be ‘reasoned’ and ‘rationalized’. By doing so, critics’ opinions move away from purely subjective responses toward a more inter-subjective appraisal of the work. It is this approach toward inter-subjectively intelligible judgments that best approximates an ideal of ‘objectivity’ in arts reviewing (Shapin, 2012). While art and science appear epistemologically opposed, with the objectivity of truth at one end and the subjectivity of taste on the other, in practice, inter-subjectivity is where ‘we tend to wind up’. It is this inter-subjective quality – enabled by critical distance – that is foundational for the perceived legitimacy of artistic (and other) forms of evaluation.

Critical distance is also an effective strategy for drawing boundaries around the critics’ cultural authority by distinguishing their opinions from those of the average reader (Abbott, 1988). The value of critics’ opinions is not evidenced by the valence of their aesthetic judgments alone. Determining artistic (literary) quality is an uncertain affair adjudicated by the application of personal taste. Critics rely on the relative ‘neutrality’ of their recommendations – resulting from an objectivizing review process – to legitimate their professional judgments. In other words, it is not the particular valence but the perceived validity of critics’ artistic judgments that distinguishes their opinions from that of the average reader. This is an especially important style of boundary making (Gieryn, 1983) because, unlike the world of peer review in science, the actual content of the expert knowledge that supposedly sets book reviewers apart from the average reader is less clear. Thus, critical distance enabled critics to acknowledge the subjectivity of taste while simultaneously attesting to the legitimacy of their professional artistic judgments.
Discussion and conclusion

At first, the epistemic logic of aesthetics appears like the scientific world reversed – whereas objectivity and rationality are prized in the case of scientific objects of knowledge, emotions, personal preference, and taste are fundamental ways of relating to artistic objects. However, by focusing on the concrete steps critics take to judge quality, we can identify points of convergence in how the evaluation of fact and fiction is established.

Subjectivity is never completely absent from evaluative processes: whether as an epistemic virtue in artistic appreciation or vice in the case of scientific judgment. But the two converge on a disciplined approach to incorporating subjectivity – including emotions, preferences, and intuitions – into their judgments. For book reviewers, this entailed reflexive reading, which enabled them to separate idiosyncratic responses from reasoned judgments about a book itself (reporting only on the latter). This echoes the disciplined use of subjectivity seen in the trained judgment discussed by Daston and Galison (2007), in which subjective intuitions can be useful, but only if wielded in a cautious and informed way by a trained expert.

Another point of convergence is evaluators’ concern with removing extraneous and potentially corrupting factors from an evaluative situation. For book critics, these factors included friendships or conflicts of interest that would positively or negatively bias their reviews. Critics are expected to avoid taking on reviews in such cases. In the world of scientific review, there are similar concerns about how personal and professional relations might bias the evaluative process. Scholars invited to review journal articles are similarly expected to recuse themselves if there are any relations that would preclude them from impartially adjudicating a work. And nepotism is an ongoing concern (Sandström and Hällsten, 2007; Wennerås and Wold, 1997). There is a shared concern about the biasing influence of personal relations in judgments of artistic and scientific values, though the two worlds may vary in what they consider sufficiently corrupting social ties.  

21 Lamont (2009) explains that disclosure of personal/professional relations is a customary rule of peer evaluation, but because social networks are shaped by one’s expertise in academia, it is difficult to avoid situations where one is evaluating the work of a close colleague or a colleague’s student. Lamont goes on to explain: ‘Nevertheless, discussions proceed as though panelists were free of these influences’ (p. 128), facilitated by the use of impersonal and universal evaluative language.
Emotions also matter. Fiction is seen as intrinsically emotional and so reviewers of fiction use their emotions as instruments for detecting a novel’s quality: the better the book, the greater the emotional engagement. The place of emotions in science includes the emotional motivations and rewards for scientific work (Collins, 1998; Hermanowicz, 1998, 2003) and the importance of emotions like trust and commitment as a context for facilitating scientific work (Golden, 1994; Lamont, 2009; Mansilla et al., 2010; Parker and Hackett, 2012). But more could be done to develop how emotions act as a compass for directing scientific judgment, including how work is valued and how scientists decide on different courses of action (Barbalet, 2011; Polanyi, 1974).

Book reviewers were also wary about letting the opinions of others shape their assessments and describe insulating themselves from the judgments of other critics. In contrast, consulting colleagues in scientific work is not a source of distortion but can sometimes be a means to intellectual rigor. And the value of critical distance strategies likely depends on the context of reviewing.

Evaluations may take the form of single-author reviews or can take a more collaborative form such as panel deliberations. But neither form is exclusive to evaluation in art or science. In this article, I study single-author reviews written by literary critics, but the sciences may also use single-author reviews for journal articles and academic books. Collaborative evaluation includes panel deliberations used to make funding decisions in the sciences or for selecting the winner of prizes in literature. In these contexts, to ignore the opinions of other members of the panel would be nonsensical if not detrimental. One fruitful avenue for future study would be to compare how rules for critical distance translate from individual to collaborative forms of evaluation characterized by their own customary rules for fair evaluation. When an evaluator enters a collaborative evaluation scenario, how are the rules for critical distance amended? Do norms

---

22 In scientific peer review (Guetezkw et al., 2004; Lamont, 2009), evaluators report emotional responses (i.e. ‘excitement’) as a means of identifying formal qualities of scientific work (i.e. ‘originality’). And originality is a property of the work under evaluation, not the evaluator. This echoes book reviewers’ efforts to project their emotional reactions as readers to the book itself.

23 Though even in science, there are important exceptions. In systematic reviews in medicine, for example, it is increasingly seen as necessary to have multiple people independently coding the data, with some method for resolving differences afterward.
surrounding group dynamics (e.g. maintaining collegiality or deferring to others’ expertise) take priority? How do evaluators maintain critical distance from processes such as ‘group think’?

The argument of this article does not hinge on whether critics’ statements accurately reflect their actions. What is significant is that the gestures they describe would enhance the perceived validity of their judgments. But that leaves open the question of how closely critics’ descriptions of their review process approximate their actual practices. Surely, some critics would seize the opportunity to help out a writer-friend or eviscerate a professional rival. And there are those reviewers who consult what other critics are saying so they can either toe the line or be noticeably contrarian.

While subjectivity of taste is an accepted condition of the art world, legitimate artistic judgment is not wholly subjective. It requires evaluators to ‘add dollops of objectivity’ to the process (Shapin, 2012: 7), to push their judgment toward inter-subjectivity, and to aspire to some degree of generality. This is accomplished through critical distance practices that aim to remove corrupting influences and regulate the place of subjectivity in knowledge making about artistic quality. In this, we see significant affinities between the customary rules and procedures for rendering legitimate judgments in art and science so often considered worlds apart.
References


Chapter 4
The Pushes and Pulls of Evaluation Work: Conflicting Emotions and Interests when Writing a bad Review

Violence. Revenge. And a long-standing rivalry. This sounds like the stuff of Medieval or heroic literature, but actually describes a dinner party at which Norman Mailer, the famed American novelist, journalist, and essayist, punched writer and critic Gore Vidal in the mouth. The reason? Retaliation over a bad book review.

Examining evaluative practice – that is, how actors practically go about assessing and assigning value – has proven useful for understanding unequal distributional outcomes across multiple arenas of social life: in the world of knowledge-making, what research topics are deemed worthy of investigating, and hence funding? (Lamont, 2009; Lamont & Huutoniemi, 2012); in the labour market: which candidate most deserves the job? (Rivera, 2012); and in the cultural field, what is legitimate art and whom a legitimate artist? (Baumann, 2007; Schmutz and Faupel, 2010; Shrum, 1996). How we define and recognize worth has implications for how we reward social and symbolic resources in society.

Yet, as the opening vignette suggests, evaluative practices do not only carry consequences for the object of evaluation, but also the evaluators themselves. While the violence of the Mailer-Vidal feud may be an extreme example, it clearly makes the point that evaluation – in this case, book reviewing – is done by real people, embedded in real networks, with real social, professional, and on rare occasion even physical consequences. And I argue that how actors perceive the consequences of their judgments (to themselves, to others, and the objects they review) can help us understand why they evaluate the way they do.

There has been some discussion about the consequences of evaluation, usually in terms of benefits, for those who engage in evaluation as part of their professional work. Bourdieu (1993) underscores how book critics can benefit from using reviews as a tool for legitimating their own tastes and cultural authority in the literary field. Lamont (2009) examines the case of peer review panelists working at scientific funding agencies and finds that panelists derive a sense of pleasure and validation of their self-concept as experts when engaged in evaluation work. I take for granted that power, pleasure, self-concepts and competition all come to bear on evaluative
practices; however, the question that remains unanswered is: How do evaluators manage these various considerations – some of which easily co-exist whilst others inevitably conflict? And what implications does this have for the final evaluations they produce?

I address these questions through a case study of book critics as a type of evaluator. It is fitting because of the context in which reviewing occurs: the contemporary fiction market has switch-role structure (Aspers, 2008) meaning that market actors are not fixed to a single position (e.g., a novelist) but can switch into different roles (i.e., from producers of fiction to reviewers of fiction and back again). Indeed, most critics whose by-lines appear in major American newspapers are themselves working writers (like Mailer and Vidal). A widespread assumption in the literary field is that authors who “switch roles” in this way make for excellent critics because they possess a unique insight into the creative works of others. Yet critics recognize the precariousness of this situation because, as one writer-cum-reviewer (now, writer-reviewer for brevity) explains, every time you write a review you run the risk of “putting your reputation and also your relationship with other writers on the line” – especially if it is a negative review.

The switch-role structure coupled with the tight networks characterizing the publishing world heightens critics’ awareness of potential personal and professional consequences of their reviews for their work as writers and as critics. Hence, critics are a good case for exploring how evaluators manage the sometimes contradictory interests and values associated with the writer and reviewer roles. It is the consequence of this tension for the content of critics’ reviews that is the focus of this chapter.

The analysis is based on interviews with 30 book critics who have written fiction reviews for major newspapers, including The New York Times, The Guardian, and The Washington Post, during which I asked critics to reflect upon their review process, including how they decided what to put in their reviews. In what follows, I explain how the perceived consequences of critics’ reviews directly shape the contents of their criticism. While none of the reviewers I interviewed admit to being blatantly dishonest about a book’s quality, many did report experiencing a series of emotional and professional tensions, related to role-switching, that alternatively pushed and pulled them towards being more ruthless or forgiving in the their reviews.
Understanding Evaluation From the Perspective of Evaluators

Scholars elsewhere have considered the link between personal and professional consequences of evaluation work and evaluative practices and have arrived at more cynical or optimistic conclusions. In his theory of symbolic fields, for instance, Bourdieu (1993, 1996) focuses on the *strategic self-serving* consequences of evaluation. He emphasizes how critics, as gatekeepers and agents of consecration in the cultural field, use reviewing as a vehicle for maximizing their own self-interests. Critics can achieve this, for instance, by representing their personal taste as “good” taste or using reviews as a venue for displaying their cultural capital; though critics can be more or less conscious about these processes. Reviews, then, reflect not only critics’ evaluations of aesthetic quality, but also the larger project of advancing their own position in the field and competing with others occupying similar positions – namely, other critics.

Lamont (2009), in contrast, argues that we need to move beyond considerations of self-interest to examine the “neglected” aspects of evaluation, including how evaluators understand their role and the emotional consequences of their work. Using the world of scientific peer review as her case study, Lamont finds that peer review represents more than just an opportunity for panelists to advance their research agendas or reproduce their positions in the academic field. Panelists are driven by the desire to contribute to collective problem solving and resultant feelings of pleasure and validating their self-concepts as fair judges and experts whose opinions matter. This analysis demonstrates the value of considering actors’ subjective experiences for a fuller portrait of evaluative practices.

What this chapter contributes is an account of how evaluators experience switching roles. Many, if not all, of the panelists populating Lamont’s (2009) analysis, for example, are esteemed academics asked to take time (or switch) from their regular professorship duties to serve as evaluators on peer review panels. But there is no indication that these participants experienced difficulty or dissonance when making the switch; on the contrary, Lamont finds continuities across her respondents’ self-concepts as academics and their work as panelists.

But not all role-switching is so seamless. In the case of book reviewers, there are many moral, emotional, and professional tensions that arise from switching back and forth from the reviewer
role and back again. And as I show in the following sections, such frictions are crucial for understanding how reviewers understand their role as critics and what they put in their reviews.

**Data and Methods**

The study is based on in-depth interviews with 30 fiction critics who reviewed for prominent American newspapers. I use the terms ‘critics’ and ‘reviewers’ interchangeably to refer to those people who write reviews for a general newspaper audience. Participants were selected using the following procedure. I began by generating a list of the names of people who had published in 2007 a fiction review in one of three newspapers. Respondents were then randomly selected from list of names and invited to participate in the study.

I do not specify which papers I used to generate the original list of names to preserve the anonymity of my respondents, but the publications were selected based on a combination of criteria including their having: i) among the largest national circulation numbers, ii) comparable targeted audiences, iii) a reputation for paying attention to books. For example, *USA Today* and the *Wall Street Journal* are amongst the more widely circulated papers but do not have stand-alone book sections. And while I used only three publications to generate my initial population of reviewers, all of my informants have reviewed for multiple publications, among them *The New York Times, Los Angeles Times, The Washington Post, Chicago Tribune, The New Yorker, The Guardian, The Times* (UK), and other news outlets.

In everyday parlance, we speak of critics writing reviews; however, there are multiple forms of literary criticism. Van Rees (1983) offers a three-branch model of criticism consisting of: i) academic critics who offer close analysis of predominantly high-culture forms of literature and whose discourse is geared towards fellow academics; ii) literary essayists who publish longer-form reviews in specialized magazines or quarterly literary reviews; and iii) journalistic reviewers who report on the range of newly-published fiction for the general audiences of newspapers. As one moves across these forms of criticism – from academic critics, to literary essayists, and finally newspaper reviewers – the pool of critics, the range of books discussed, and the intended audience becomes more general (van Rees, 1983). I focus on the world of literary journalism because it is at this level that the role switching occurs most frequently. And I use the terms reviewer and critic interchangeably from here on in.
There were 14 women and 16 men in the sample. The majority were ‘occasional’ reviewers, meaning that in addition to writing reviews they make their living through freelance journalism, teaching English or Creative Writing at the college level, writing books – or more likely a combination of all the above. Only four of my respondents had full-time staff positions with a newspaper as book critics or book section editors at the time of the interview. Discussions with industry informants (publicists and book section editors) suggest that this is a typical sample. Newspapers have greatly diminished the space allotted for book reviewing, with many stand-alone book sections being folded into general ‘Entertainment’ sections due to the changing economics of print publishing. With less space for book reviews, there are fewer review assignments and a lower demand for full-time book critics on staff. The editor for a major east coast newspaper book section estimates there are probably only twelve full-time critics left in America; other informants estimate it cannot be ‘more than a handful’.

Interviews were conducted over the telephone and typically lasted 60 to 90 minutes, during which time I asked critics to describe how they went about the task of book reviewing. Despite widespread interest in evaluation, little work has investigated evaluation as a phenomenological practice – that is, the concrete steps and considerations actors make when assessing quality or worth (Boltanksi and Thevenot, 2006; Lamont, 2009; Shapin, 2012). The interviews provided critics with the opportunity to reflect upon their evaluative practice including those practices and considerations not observable in the final published reviews themselves.

In what follows, I introduce book reviewers and their role in producing literary value. Next, I outline some of the tensions that arise from being both a writer and a reviewer, which drive some critics to be more severe or to “play nice” in their reviews.

**Recipe for a Good Review(er):** One part writer, One part critic

Publishing can be visualized as a production chain wherein each link facilitates the process of getting new books into the hands of the reading public. Thompson (2010) notes that the publishing chain is at once a supply chain and a value chain; each subsequent link is supposed to add some ‘value’ to the final product. The first link in the chain begins with an author who produces a manuscript. This manuscript may attract the attention of a literary agent (second link) who works with the author to develop the work and sell it to a publishing house (a third link),
and so on and so forth. Book critics are an important link in the chain as they act as “surrogate” consumers signaling to the general reader which, of the hundreds of new fiction titles released each week, are actually worth reading (Chong, 2011; Hirsch, 1972; Zuckerman, 1999).

There is a growing trend towards outsourcing book coverage to freelance writers. The increased reliance on freelancers is partially a response to the declining fortunes of the American newspaper industry where circulation numbers are trending downwards: in 2009 approximately 30.4 million Americans purchased daily newspapers; this number down from 41.1 million in 1940.

For book review editors, always on the lookout for contributors, it is common practice to invite English professors and novelists to write reviews of new fiction. This is an efficient recruitment strategy since there is no formal accreditation to become a reviewer, and editors can be reasonably sure that novelists and literary scholars have sufficient knowledge of fiction and facility with the written word to produce usable reviews (Chong, *manuscript in progress*); that is, well-written articles informing readers what a book is about, offer some analysis of how well the book is done, and are in themselves an entertaining read.

When it comes to fiction, review editors are especially interested in recruiting people who review as part of a broader writing career because of the assumption that the skills and insights they have accrued through their work as novelists will enhance their work as reviewers. A long-time book section editor, himself a published author, and one of the few remaining full-time staff book critics in America explains his preference for using novelists to review other novelists:

> I think there is more *a sense of process* . . . more of a sense of what a writer might have been going for, whether they succeeded or not, so I think there's a little bit of a more *interior vision* of how a book works.

Review editors and critics alike shared this belief that having gone through the creative process of writing a book equipped writers with a unique way of looking at a novel, to get into the head of the writer, which made them especially desirable reviewers.
Alongside this artistic sensitivity, one reviewer explains that her reviews benefit from her work as a novelist because it enables her to perceive and convey the mechanical successes or failings of a book to the general reader:

I generally can see better than just any sort of average reader: the mechanics of [writing] . . . I can appreciate when it’s done very well . . . and I can see what's happening when it's not working well.

Definitely, you know obviously, my own work as a writer has made that possible.

Here the reviewer explains that beyond simply deciding that a book is not working, she can pinpoint what ingredients are missing by virtue of her own work as a writer. This is an advantageous ability in a reviewer since critics are expected to go beyond simply conveying like or dislike of a book; they should be able to point to specific features of the book as evidence to support their judgment.

The benefits of the writer-reviewer flow not only from the writer to the reviewer role, but also the other way around. Reviewing offers working writers the opportunity to promote their own creative work as writers in a variety of ways. Many writers first became interested in reviewing after receiving the advice that writing reviews was a good way to help them get their own work published and/or reviewed. One critic explains, “It’s not like a quid quo pro thing” but more like “going to someone’s party and they remember you” meaning that writers hope that when review editors are thinking about new titles to review or searching for writers for new projects the publishing reviews keeps their names (and their work) at the forefront of editors’ minds. For others, reviewing is a way to keep one’s name “in the public eye” since it can be “three of four years between books”; and to attract new readers to their work.

Writers’ effort to promote themselves while evaluating the work of their peers is largely unproblematic when they are writing positive reviews. Writing a good review is a situation where everyone wins since the perceived interests of all parties are served: the novel and novelist under review get positive publicity; the reviewer gets a venue to demonstrate his/her literary acumen (perhaps even curryng favor with the author reviewed); and readers get to learn about a new great book. When faced with writing a negative review, however, tensions and conflicting priorities among individuals’ interests and responsibilities as writers and reviewers become
manifest. In the next sections I delineate the contours of these conflicts beginning with the positive and then negative consequences critics grappled with when deciding how to write a negative review.

The Incentive Structure of Reviews: Pushes and Pulls

Once critics have arrived at some judgment about a book’s quality and resolved to write a positive or negative review, the next set of decisions regard how to convey this judgment when writing up the review. Critics perceived both incentives and deterrents for, on the one hand, being ruthless in their reviews, and “playing nice” on the other. These factors alternatively push and pull critics toward one impulse or another throughout their reviewing history.

Critics did not report writing positively about books that clearly warranted a negative review. But the range of considerations that came to bear on how generous they would be when, say, writing a bad review extended well beyond their simple disappointment with a book’s storyline or protagonist. Below I reveal the various risks and benefits, or consequences, critics perceived would come from their judgments and how this ultimately shaped the content of their final reviews.

The Upside of Disappointment: An opportunity for distinction

There are nice ways to put derogatory comments” one reviewer told me; however, there were also benefits to being unforgiving in one’s criticism. One of the upsides for writer-reviewers penning a bad review was that it was easy to capture the attention of readers. For instance, recommending that a writer should give up writing and take up pottery, as one of my respondents did, captures readers’ attention in a way that a more straightforward laundry list of a book’s plotting faults does not. In short, bad reviews often make for good reading and in so much as reviewers try to write articles that engage and entertain their readers, negative reviews are rich with possibility.

Even critics who deliberately chose never to be too nasty in their reviews enjoyed reading reviews written by critics who were intensely critical. One critic tells me, “I don’t like to do a hatchet job [but] I like to read them”: a hatchet job being a review that is not simply critical of a
book but perceived as attacking. Another reviewer explains that she enjoys reading one critic’s work because, “He’s not afraid to be a bitch . . . He’s not afraid to ‘go there’”.

Some reviewers are famous for “going there”. A controversial figure, *New York Times* reviewer Michiko Kakutani is known for her very polemical reviewing style: she is equally passionate in her praise and criticism of novelists. But she is perhaps most famous for her takedowns of writers having once been described by the equally controversial Norman Mailer as a “one-woman kamikaze”. One critic explains that while she does not always agree with Kakutani, her willingness to be so damning in her reviews does “keep the conversation lively” when many other reviewers are playing it safe:

> Often people *in my position* who were assigned a book, didn’t really love it, didn’t really hate it and are trying to do right by the readers and the writer. They don’t make for the most exciting reading.

Michiko Kakutani *makes for exciting reading*.

The reviewer gestures at the tendency of people *in her position* (i.e., writers who switch to the reviewer role) to “do right by the readers and the writer”. And by “doing right” she is referring to writing about disappointing books in such a way that it does not offend anyone. This strategy will be discussed later on when turning to consider reviewers who choose to ‘play nice’ when writing negative reviews. But the significance here is that this style of reviewing may not offend anyone, but neither does it excite anyone.

Another benefit or potential upside of writing a disappointed review was when one’s negative opinion contradicted the critical consensus (de Nooy, 1999). For some, being a singular voice of dissent was an attractive way of distinguishing oneself from the crowd. Of course, the same effect can be achieved by being the one reviewer who positively reviews a book that other critics deem a failure; however, critics often described such instances as embarrassing rather than beneficial. One reviewer recalls feeling “a little embarrassed” after writing a glowing review about a book that most other people hated – a review he says that other critics still tease him about.
In contrast, a critic with a reputation for writing very negative reviews recounts a time when he wrote a devastating review of a book that was so negative that he and his editor decided not to publish it. The book went on to win the prestigious *Man Booker Prize for Fiction*. Yet this critic did not experience relief that his clashing judgment had not been revealed, but instead expressed regret at a missed opportunity: “I really wish it had come out because I ended up being one of the few – or maybe the only dissenting voice”.

What is the benefit or significance of being the “only dissenting voice”? In addition to the publicizing effects, this critic explains that it is part of his responsibility to readers:

This is self-aggrandizing, but there’s like an “Emperor’s New Clothes” kind of feeling, like you’re going to be the little boy that points out that this is actually not so good.

Even if you’re not the only one . . . we live in this ridiculously hyperbolic culture where everything is fantastic . . . [it’s important to] put things in perspective.

The “Emperor’s New Clothes” reference elicits the image of a person courageous enough to point out what other people know, but are too frightened to say for fear of appearing foolish. And the critic equates his criticism with the bravery and public good provided by the young boy in the fairy tale. He suggests that his negative reviews act as a corrective or counterbalance (“put[ing] things in perspective”) to the “nimbus of excessive praise” he sees created by newspaper reviewers who may be working too quickly or are inclined to “go with the flow” rather than point out when a book is simply not very good.

**Risk in Reviewing: Consequences of Writing a Bad Review**

Given the benefits describe above, one might assume that critics would be more enthusiastic when they came across a disappointing book. Yet pursuing such gains did not come without risk to critics, which invoked considerable conflict about how to best proceed. One reviewer described the experience of writing a negative review of another writer’s work as “a whole hornets’ nest of conflicting emotions”. In this section I illuminate the sources and contours of these conflicting emotions.
A Writer in Critic’s Clothing: Violating the Principle of Disinterestedness

Alongside the potential benefits of writing a very negative review, critics risked being perceived as “writers in critics’ clothing”: novelists who disingenuously adopt the role of the critic so they have a venue for advancing their own interests as novelists. These reviewers are seen as prioritizing the benefit of an attention-grabbing negative review over serious consideration of the literary work at hand. When I asked critics how they drew the boundary between a vehemently critical or “mean” review, it is when the writer of the review is trying to “score points off a failure by making himself [sic] look more clever or witty, or sharp, or talented in their own writing of the review”. The idea of “scoring points” to better one’s own interests suggests a violation of the principle of disinterestedness (Bourdieu, 1993).

Briefly, disinterestedness refers to the symbolic value of disavowing economic and material profits. Bourdieu (1977; 1983) argues that it is by demonstrating one’s disinterest in profit that individuals accrue prestige and authority in the cultural field; hence, he describes the cultural field as the “economic world reversed”. For artists, the principle of disinterestedness requires that they make “art for art’s sake”. For critics, this means that for their criticism to be deemed legitimate, it should be guided purely by aesthetic considerations. Composing a review with an eye towards one’s career trajectory, then, violates this core value in the field.

Few critics openly admitted to taking shots at writers or turning phrases for the sake of “scoring points” off of other novelists. And those who do explain that this is something they did in the past when they were “younger” or less “mature”. However, reviewers were quick to identify and condemn other writers whom they perceived as giving into the temptation of self-promotion at the cost of fair criticism. Sometimes this offense was seen as a matter of house style. The London Review of Books was singled out as a repeat offender on this count: “[I]t’s presumably about books but it always turns out to be about the writer of the review”. One writer reports that “it generally tends to be sort of mid-rate writers” who “use reviews as an opportunity to make a name for themselves, to make a big splash, to do something bold”. Another critic suggests that these types of writers are simply trying to crowd out their competition.
So one consequence or risk of writing mean reviews as a mode of self-distinction is being recognized as such, which can hurt one’s status and legitimacy as a critic and a writer in the literary community by being grouped in this unflattering and disparaging category of writers.

**Retributive reviewing or the favor returned**

Another consequence of the switch-role structure in book reviewing is that the reviewer today could become the reviewee tomorrow. And if a critic writes a very ungenerous review about a book, then one runs the risk that the favour will eventually be returned.

There is an expectation amongst critics that they should recuse themselves if there is some conflict of interests that prevents them from giving a fair and unprejudiced review. And many respondents would agree that reviewing a novel by someone who has previously reviewed their own work was a sufficiently corrupting factor. Yet, while review editors may do their best to weed out biasing relations, not all such conflicts are reported or easily identifiable.

Acts of “retributive” reviewing can occur. One critic described as the “classic” scenario when authors go onto Amazon.com and other online review forums and bash their critics’ books. One reviewer tells me about a writer who had “posted anonymous horrible reviews on Amazon on my book” as payback for a negative review she had published about his earlier book. Other retributive consequences of writing a very critical review could include being blacklisted by the literary agent or publishing house associated with a book that one might want to work with in future.

**Coming Face-to-Face with Collateral Damage**

When critics write a very negative review, even if it is in service of quality control or just an honest evaluation, they run the very real risk of being confronted by the collateral damage of their reviews. Collateral damage, a concept used often in the context of war, refers to people or things that are damaged incidental to some primary target. Applied to the case of book reviewing, the intended target is a novel and the collateral damage includes the novelist – the human – behind the book.
One reviewer recounts a time where she was confronted by the aftermath of a negative review she had written: “A few years later at a party, the guy’s wife led this broken figure up to me and said, ”You know, you've ruined his life?” Another reviewer tells me about a friend who “wrote a negative review of another writer’s book, and that writer came up to him at a party and spit at him” and “yelled at him in front of everybody”. It is also worth noting that Mailer’s physical assault on Vidal, which opened the chapter, was only made possible by the fact that one man was literally in arm’s length of the other. The significance is that reviewers often come to face-to-face with the people they have reviewed because of the tight social networks and geographic concentration of the publishing world.

Many critics had very unpleasant stories to share about times when they came face-to-face with the consequences, the hurt and anger, caused by a very negative review. And for some, this and all of the other risks described above were enough to make them think twice about whether or not it is worth the risk to write them or just “play nice” to avoid such unpleasant experiences.

**Playing it Safe by Playing Nice in Reviews**

Just as there are benefits to being unforgiving with one’s criticisms, as the above discussion suggests, there were benefits to following the opposite impulse – that is, “playing nice” with one’s criticism. Playing nice as a critical practice includes an array of written and rhetorical strategies. It can mean softening negative language in one’s review. One critic, for example, expresses his strong feelings against a book he had reviewed negatively. He concludes that the book was “a mess and all over the place!” The intensity of his criticism and the language in the final printed review of the same book by this reviewer is noticeably muted wherein he suggests rather benignly that the reader may feel a little “lost” at some points of the book. Another means of playing nice is to fill one’s review with *descriptive* details of the book’s plot to crowd out any explicit *evaluative* statements about the book’s overall quality.

Several critics admit that when they are faced with writing a negative review, they will hedge by emphasizing how the book might appeal to other readers. One critic explains:
If I ever have to say something bad about a book . . . I kind of try to be - to play nice about it and say, you know, I just didn't like it, but maybe someone else might like it?

So “playing nice” is accomplished in multiple ways but its overall intended effect is to downplay critics’ own negative feelings towards a book thereby skewing the overall valence of a review in a more positive direction. Again, critics would emphasize that they are not being dishonest about the absolute quality of a book – writing a positive review of a very bad book – but perhaps obscuring the intensity of their own criticism.

For some reviewers, playing nice is a defensive strategy critics employ in hopes of avoiding some of the potential or experienced fallout of being too cavalier with one’s criticism. For example, the author mentioned above who had been targeted by a scorned novelist on Amazon.com reflects that, although she believed that author “behaved very badly”, the incident “did make me hesitate before I’d be quite so up front in a really negative opinion”. Her hesitation extended to a review she was currently writing about a book she considered a “failure”. But informed by the Amazon incident, the extent of her negative appraisal was “just not going to come out in the review”. So here we see the explicit impulse to mute one’s criticism as a defensive strategy to avoid potential backlash from other writers.

For others, “playing nice” was not only about precautionary measures, but also professional service and responsibility. Part of the critic’s job is to tell readers about books they might like or to guide them to new books they might like to read (Drewry, 1966). And as one critic put it: “Why are you telling people about nine books they shouldn’t be reading?” By acknowledging the variability of reader’s tastes in how they write a review (i.e., emphasizing how a book will appeal to others), critics felt they were not simply avoiding potential backlash from angry authors but fulfilling their roles as book critics and serving the needs of their readers.

Critics were also interested in serving the perceived needs of the literary community. Respondents were acutely aware of what they perceived to be the declining cultural significance of reading culture. Struggling publishing houses, the retrenchment of review pages, and the allure of alternative entertainment media like film and television were cited towards this conclusion. It is within this cultural climate that critics understood their reviews’ significance.
One critic reflects, “[P]eople are not reading novels nearly as much as they were 20 or 30 years ago” which “puts you in a very different position [as a reviewer] . . . than it would if [fiction] had this more prominent place”. That is, she recognizes that effectively telling the reading public about books they should not read seems like a wasted opportunity or an unnecessary blow to an already ailing industry.

Against this backdrop, the same critic reflects upon a time she wrote a very negative review for the LA Times. She later learned:

[The author’s] publisher lost confidence, not only in that particular book but maybe in future books In other words, to write that negative of a review had real repercussions.

I never felt terribly that I was wrong in my critical assessment of the book . . . but it did raise for me some kind of deeper issues of responsibility as a critic.

There are two points worth making about this critic’s comments. First, the reviewer is confident in critical assessment about the book: she did not like it. But she treats the issue of aesthetic judgment (“I never felt terribly . . . wrong”) separately from concerns about the consequences of her review (“deeper issues of responsibility”). Second, the consequences she references regard the author’s career, and taken with her previous comments about the decline of the novel, the book industry in general. Against such an ailing backdrop, perhaps the right or responsible thing to do would have been to be gentler with her criticism. It is questionable whether a single review can generally make or break a writer’s career (let alone the entire literary enterprise), but this critic’s comments is representative of some of the emotional conflicts and sense of stewardship some reviewers expressed towards books and their fellow writers in general.

Critics describe playing nice in reviews as a response to the switch-role structure of the reviewing field. Some chose to soften their criticism as a defensive strategy; that is, in the hopes of avoiding the personal and professional backlash that could come from penning a very negative review about another writer in the field. Others emphasize playing nice as an act of writer-ly sympathy and even stewardship for an ailing book industry. Given the risks of being overly critical described in the previous section and the moral and humanist inflections of playing nice,
one might presume that this would be an innocuous critical strategy to take. Yet, there were still risks with even this seemingly benevolent evaluative practice.

**Pitfalls of Playing Nice in Reviews**

One of the risks of being too vitriolic in one’s criticism could leave one vulnerable to charges of violating the principle of disinterestedness by doing something splashy rather than giving due consideration to the book under review. On the other end of the spectrum, being too kind or forgiving of a lukewarm book could also provoke suspicions of being kind for the wrong reasons, including: “working for the publisher”, social network considerations, or perhaps worst of all, because one has bad judgment or does not have any useful critical analysis to offer.

A long-time editor independently observed that “the act of having written a book can kill you as a critic” because writers know how long it takes to publish a book and how disheartening it can be to receive a bad review. As a result, he is sure to “keep an eye on” writer-reviewers who tend to be “a little softer as critics”. The fact that this editor describes softened criticism as something he has to “keep an eye on” suggests that “playing nice” is a practice generalizable beyond my sample of interviewees. While this same editor admits his preference for recruiting novelists to review fiction because of the interior vision they bring to reviewing, he states that his interest is in “acute” and “enthusiastic” criticism, not being “a kind of cheerleader for writers”. The cheerleading allusion connotes unbridled enthusiasm and unthinking support, which contradicts the measured and incisive criticism expected of book reviewers.

Similarly, another reviewer explains that critics are conditioned to think that if they write very positive reviews, they risk looking “like a shill or we look stupid or we look like we don’t have any critical judgment.” And he closes by signaling the benefits of going the other direction of nice: “To write a negative review, of course, you have critical judgment because you are being critical!”

**We wanted critics, we got people**

The above is a play on a phrase, by Swiss writer Max Frisch, which often comes up in discussions of immigrant guest worker programs. While governments wanted cheap and temporary workers, what they got were people: people with their own values and aspirations; people who made friends and embedded in local communities. Book review editors seek out
individuals who are knowledgeable about fiction and good with words to review for their papers. And fiction writers regularly fit that bill. But as the preceding analysis illustrates, authors do not only bring their literary acumen to reviewing, but also their literary ambitions, social ties, and personal set of ethics to the task.

To review briefly: None of the critics admit to being dishonest about a book’s lackluster quality. But critics do reflect on the perceived consequences of their reviews for their identities as writers-who-reviewer; and this directly informs what to put in their reviews.

While most critics would say that they do not look forward to reading or writing about a bad book, such literary disappointment provided an opportunity to distinguish themselves as critics. Bad reviews make for entertaining reading, which benefitted reviewers interested in attracting new readers to their own creative work. Negative reviewing also allowed some reviewers to demonstrate their independent and judicious tastes. Writing a very negative review carried the incentive of generating a lot of attention and publicity for the reviewer; though the attention is not always positive. One risk of making such a “splash” in their reviews is that they may be perceived as violating the principle of disinterestedness and lose legitimacy amongst their peers. There were also various anecdotes about reviewers being confronted with the fall out of such reviews from scorned authors.

In the opposite direction, some reviewers hope to avoid such backlash by “playing nice” or skewing positively in their reviews. ‘Playing nice’ is a beneficial move for writers whom hope to avoid making enemies or to demonstrate their solidarity or stewardship toward other writers; however, nice critics can be perceived as lacking the courage or critical integrity (i.e., disinterest) to be honest in their criticism, or lacking any critical acumen. So critics’ evaluations are not only driven by competition, but also concerns with reputation and maintaining positive relations with others in the field.

There is an array of professional, interpersonal, and moral consequences that critics take into consideration when constructing their reviews, which are tied to the fact that many reviewers are working authors who have switched roles. An empirical contribution of this chapter is that it shows how writer-reviewers experience not only a drive towards individualistic self-interests, contra Bourdieu (1993, 1996), but also a sense of solidarity with fellow writers; stewardship as well as competition; empathy alongside self-preservation. While recognizing their discomfort,
critics did not see these tensions as problems to be resolved. They were accepted as part of the complex constellation of factors that infuse evaluation work (Lamont, 2009). And these factors become evident when we think of evaluators beyond their functional niche and attend to them as real people.

The tight social networks of the publishing field and the fact that respondents were writers who switched roles likely heightened evaluators’ concern about the consequences of their reviews. These individuals are, in effect, “critics for a day”. But what they do with that day – how they convey their judgments in their reviews – can carry long-term consequences. One limitation of my interview data is that critics may be engaged in self-presentation work and not be completely forthcoming about when they choose to skew one way or the other. Respondents were far more comfortable positioning themselves as people who ‘play nice’; and they discuss the perks and pitfalls of writing a mean and showy review as something they saw other less mature reviewers do. One avenue for future research, then, would be to empirically demonstrate how the characteristics of evaluators, such as seniority, shape the overall valence and contents of their reviews.

The majority of occasional reviewers I interviewed also hypothesized that full-time critics, people who are just critics and not also working authors – could afford to be more negative because they may not be confronted with same set of potential personal and professional risks as working novelists. And what about reviewers in other fields who do not switch roles? While it is routine (if not preferred) to have novelists review the works of other writers, it is unusual to see a director to review other movies, or chefs to review new restaurants. Another interesting question that follows from this discussion is whether full time reviewers – or other types of evaluators – experience the same range of tensions and subsequently produce more or less positive evaluations than people who switch-roles.

The point of this chapter is not to say that evaluation in a switch-role structure produce less ‘objective’ or legitimate outcomes. Instead, it is to underscore that how evaluators are embedded, for instance in switch-roles or single fixed positions, can have unintended consequences for how evaluators understand their role, the consequences of their work, and subsequently the contents of their final judgments.
References


Chapter 5
Discussion and Conclusion

This dissertation examines how book reviewers go about evaluating the quality of newly published fiction. I use book critics as a case of market intermediaries or “mediators”: third parties responsible for offering professional recommendations about market offerings, whose opinions audiences consult to inform their consumer choices (Hirsch, 1972; Zuckerman, 1999). In the literary market, book reviewers use book reviews to “mediate” between readers and the large pool of newly published fiction by signalling whether specific titles are actually worth reading (van Rees, 1983).

Of course, market mediators, such as book reviewers, are not simply messengers. They do not just report on the underlying value of a product; otherwise they would not be interesting to sociologists (Sauder, Lynn, and Podolny, 2012). Mediators are active agents in constructing the value and worth of social objects. Therefore, this dissertation contributes to our understanding of how we establish worth by providing new insights into the different processes by which mediators (i.e, book critics) shape the meaning and value of the cultural objects they assess.

How market intermediaries are implicated in the creation of value is currently a central concern question for research at the intersection of the sociology of culture and economic sociology. Many cultural sociologists focus on the role that critics play in how specific cultural objects gain value or become legitimated in the art market (Baumann, 2001, 2007; Bourdieu, 1993; Corse and Griffin, 1997; Griswold, 1987). This dissertation offers new insights about not only how critics contribute to the valuation of cultural objects (Chapter 2), but also how critical judgments themselves come to be seen as legitimate (Chapter 3).

Many economic sociologists are similarly oriented towards questions of valuation in an array of markets including the art market (Velthius, 2007), wine market (Zhao and Zhou, 2011), and the securities market (Zuckerman, 1999) amongst others. The research presented here also contributes to this vein of work by drawing attention to how the social organization of markets constrains how social actors – in this case, market mediators – assign value to goods (Chapter 3 and 4).
This dissertation focuses on the evaluative practices of critics in the literary field where symbolic rewards (e.g., status, reputation, etc) are primarily involved. But one can easily imagine how the racializing evaluative criteria (Chapter 2), the performative value of critical distance (Chapter 3), and the constraining effect of one’s place in the market structure (Chapter 4) in other domains where both symbolic and material rewards are at stake. And so insomuch as this dissertation clarifies our understanding of how we define value or assess worth, it contributes to our understanding of inequality since evaluation occurs across diverse settings and can significantly influence the allocation of resources in society.

Taking Stock and Moving Forward

A brief note on explanation versus description: Descriptions are often thought to of as answering the question “What is happening?” whereas explanation asks, “Why this is happening?” Kaplan (1998 [1964]) reflects that, "[e]xplanation is often contrasted with description, as telling us, not merely what happens, but why” (329). Yet he and other scholars recognize that this distinction between description and explanation is sometimes overdrawn; for instance, sometimes descriptions can be explanatory when they are answering how question that give us not only the what of a case but also the why.

Many of the contributions of this dissertation come regard the how of evaluation. These are valuable because they allow me to provide mechanism-based explanations of evaluative practice (Gross, 2009). And identifying social mechanisms in my specific case provides a basis for future research(ers) to see if similar mechanisms hold across cases enabling us to build better theories.

Below I provide a summary of the key empirical findings and significance of each chapter in terms of its contribution to explanation. And I close with comments on what we learn about evaluation when reflecting on the dissertation as a whole.

1.1 Reading Difference & The Many Ways of Valuing a “Good” Book

In Chapter 2, I explore the different ways critics interpret and evaluate the work of writers identified or “marked” as ethnic, racial, or national outsiders; that is, I consider how aesthetic

---

24 Most notably the pragmatist school such as Latour (2005) and Gross (2009)
valuations and ethno-racial boundaries intersect. And I argue that broader social understandings of ethno-racial difference in American society are inflected in how critics’ frame the literary value of “ethnic”-authors.

I empirically substantiate this claim through content and discourse analysis of 265 fiction reviews revealing that critics engage in “reading difference” practices wherein critics use the ethno-racial background of writers as a criterion of valuing their work; for instance, by emphasizing the book’s authenticity, locating it in an ethnic genre, or simply mentioning an author’s foreign or “exotic” features as a way of piquing the interests of people reading the review. Interviews I conducted with book reviewers after this article came out subsequently confirmed my interpretation of this latter practice (i.e., nominal marking).

By documenting how select racial and ethnic backgrounds are made salient in reviewing, we see how broader ideas of social difference are mobilized and discursively reproduced in critics’ reviews. The explanatory power of the “reading difference” concept, then, is to draw attention to how racial and ethnic differences operates as a schema for evaluation. This study thus contributes to our understanding of evaluation processes (i.e., how worth is established) as well as the cultural dimensions of racialization (i.e., how racial and ethnic boundaries are maintained and deployed).

1.2 Critical Distance & The Rules for Producing Legitimate Knowledge

Summary: Taking evaluation as a type of knowledge-making, in Chapter 3, I consider affinities in the customary rules and procedures for producing legitimate knowledge across two fields – art and science. I choose these two fields because, intuitively, they appear to be on opposite ends of an epistemic spectrum: with art and subjectivity (i.e., taste) at one end; and science and objectivity (i.e., fact) on the other. While customary rules for scientific judgment attempt (albeit unsuccessfully) to excise subjectivity from evaluation, subjectivity in artistic judgment is not seen as something to be bracketed, but as a tool for producing knowledge in the field. And I argue that the differences between the rules governing legitimate judgment (or evaluation) of facts and fiction are overdrawn as both aspire to inter-subjectivity.

The empirical analysis draws upon in-depth interviews with literary critics, as judges of artistic value, during which they reflected on their evaluative practices. I find that critics are acutely
aware of how their subjective biases and preferences enter the review process; however, they invest in epistemic strategies to achieve ‘critical distance’ and transform their immediate and idiosyncratic reactions to books into legitimate and inter-subjectively valid aesthetic judgments. These practices include: being wary of conflicts of interest that might skew their judgment; ignoring external influences such as peer opinions; supporting judgments with “evidence” from the book; and reflexive reading. I close by considering similarities in the customary rules and procedures for producing legitimate judgments in art and science.

Significance: While we have seen good work produced about the nature of evaluation and how evaluations are produced, we do not understand very well how evaluations are legitimated, especially in the realm of aesthetics, where evaluations cannot fall back on objective measures. This study explains how book reviewers legitimize their judgments and describes the epistemic strategies by which they go about this legitimacy-work. The explanatory power of “critical distance” as a concept is in its identification as a norm to which critics aspire (and orient their review practices towards) because of its perceived equivalence with legitimate judgment. This is significant also because it reveals how scientific norms of objectivity are being translated into other fields – even the artistic world.

1.3 Pushes and Pulls in Evaluation Work – The Human Element

Summary: In Chapter 4, I shift the focus from thinking about book reviewing and evaluation as something that happens between a book and its reader/critic to a social practice that occurs between writers. I attend to the ways book critics are embedded in the literary field and what consequences this has for the content of their reviews. Many reviewers are themselves working writers who temporarily “switch roles” (Aspers, 2008) and take on occasional assignments as reviewers. This creates a situation where many novelists are reviewing their fellow novelists. And I explore the emotional, moral, and professional tension and conflicts that arise from the writer-reviewer role, which I demonstrate has direct consequences for how critics review.

Drawing upon in-depth interview data, I lay out the various risks and benefits that critics must weigh when confronted with the task of writing a negative review. Some people choose to play nice while others hold no punches in their criticism. The benefits of being gentle with one’s criticism include avoiding various forms of retribution on the part of the scorned author; though one also risks losing credibility as a reviewer. The benefits of being brutal in one’s review is that
it easily makes for exciting reading and can draw a lot of attention to the reviewer as a writer and thinker; however the risks of such a move include making enemies. Either way, I demonstrate how critics’ decisions about how to convey their literary evaluations are tied to the way they are structurally embedded in the field as writers who temporarily switch into the reviewer role.

**Significance:** In describing the various social and normative factors that affect the nature of critics’ reviews, this piece demonstrates how the social organization of a field shapes valuation processes. Specifically, I argue that the switch-role structure of the literary field helps explain why critics might choose to skew their evaluations one way or another because of the heightened perception of risk that results from writers reviewing other writers. A take-away point from this chapter is that beyond the simple fact of being a market intermediary, how evaluators are structurally embedded in a market (i.e., switch role) is important for understanding valuation processes.

**Taking a Bird’s Eye View: Towards A Formal Model of Evaluation?**

The dissertation is structured as three separate articles. But when taken as a whole tensions and contradictions across the empirical pieces become evident. There are two sources of tension with the critical distance paper (Chapter 3) sitting at the centre.

The *Critical Distance* chapter emphasizes critics’ efforts to guarantee the legitimacy of their evaluations by preserving the integrity of the reader-book relation. Yet in the other chapters, critics can be seen introduce considerations that are external to this relation. In *Reading Difference* (Chapter 2) we see critics drawing upon cultural ideas of ethnic, racial, and national difference in their reviews. And in Chapter 4 we see critics’ weighting of interpersonal and professional consequences of their reviews.

What sense can we make from these apparent tensions? It is my contention that these tensions do not point to damming contradictions in the project, but fruitful areas for future research including the need for a more fine-grained conceptualization of evaluation as a multi-stage
process. I elaborate on these points by considering the implications of the tensions between chapters below.

1.4 Tensions between Critical Distance and the use of Authorial Characteristics

It is worth pointing out that critics draw a distinction between author characteristics deemed *germane* to the reading experience and those that are *gossip*. Author characteristics that are seen as *germane* include anything that may help explain why someone might have chosen to write on a topic or their particular approach to a theme or topic explored in the novel. Germane characteristics might include where an author grew up, where an author went to school, travel histories, or an author’s racial/ethnic background (see: Chapter 2). *Gossip* includes any information that does not have a direct bearing on the creative material of the book itself. This might include to whom an author is married, details pertaining to the size of the advance a novelist got for a book, or what an author might do as part of their regular day job.

The distinction between the germane and gossip is itself a socially constructed boundary. An interesting task for future research would to explain the contours of this boundary. What is germane? How do critics decide? What does it mean when an identity/feature is deemed germane? Are characteristics that are seen as “Other” or exotic more likely to be judged as relevant? And how does this change over time? Longitudinal and more detailed analysis of this sort would be very useful avenues future research. But for the purpose of this dissertation, it suffices to underscore that insomuch as particular feature of an author is seen as informing the artistic work, it is not deemed as external to the reader-book relation and therefore, introducing author characteristics would not be seen as in competition with critical distance as a professional value/practice.

1.5 Tensions between Critical Distance and Interpersonal/Professional Risk

A more explicit contradiction is observable between the insularity of the reader-book relation emphasized in *Critical Distance* (Chapter 2) and critics’ preoccupation with personal and professional relations in the *Pushes and Pulls* piece (Chapter 3). I contend that this tension that
exists between the two chapters captures a movement between two discrete moments in the evaluative process; each with its own discrete body of customary rules for evaluation.

In *Critical Distance* the question critics are grappling with transforming their subjective and idiosyncratic reactions to a book (i.e., “Do I like this book?”) into an inter-subjectively defensible and useful evaluation/recommendation (i.e., “Is this a good book?”). In the *Pushes and Pulls* chapter, a different set of concerns come into play because we have entered an analytically distinct phase of the evaluation process. Having established their professional judgment about a book’s quality (i.e., “This book is bad”) the critics are concerned with how they are going to render their judgment in the form of the review (i.e., “How am I going to put this out there?”).

**Figure 1. Phases of Evaluation: subjective, inter-subjective, and public**

One can imagine these phases of evaluation as concentric circles (see Figure 1) with the inner circle being the most idiosyncratic, subjective, and personal reaction to a book (or other object). And each subsequent ring represents a movement “outwards” towards more formalized and public records or forms of evaluation. In the context of this dissertation, movement to the second ring would happen when critics transform their personal reactions into a more general claim about a book’s quality through critical distance strategies, and the most outward ring would be
when critics are considering the final published review. It could also be deliberative context such as a literary prize jury.

The point is that each phase or stage has its own realm of consideration and rules governing what is legitimate behavior and judgments are transformed as they travel through these phases; put differently, going through these phases affects the final shape of the evaluation. What is significant about this model is that clarifies our understanding of evaluative practice and process: how critics judge literary quality and how they convey that judgment are two analytically distinct tasks with different sets of rules and effects on the final evaluative product (the review).

Some phases are more analytically distinct than temporally distinct: for instance, critics sometimes know that they are going to have to write a review so they may never really read a book entirely from a “personal” perspective of “liking”. But noticing these fine grained differences is an original and fruitful way of organizing the work on evaluation, which to date encompasses an ever-growing number of case studies but lacks cumulative theory building (Lamont, 2012). This model has the benefit of specifying steps in an evaluation process that can be translated across cases; and therefore represents an important step forwards in understanding evaluation as a general social process.
References


Appendix A. Identifying Strengths, Weaknesses, and Overall Evaluation in Reviews

Strengths and Weaknesses Identified in the Reviews

I identified what critics deem strengths or weaknesses of a novel by attending to the explicit evaluative statements critics made about the book. For example, if a critic stated that a novel’s protagonist was a middle-aged woman, I did not identify characterization as a strength or weakness since this largely a descriptive comment. If a critic went on to say that this middle-aged character was deeply moving, lively and complex, or conversely, unsympathetic and lacking depth, then I interpreted such comments to mean that the critic considered characterization as a strength or weakness within the novel. Table 4 thus reports not the frequency with which critics mentioned character or plot in their reviews, but when they provided some kind of critical assessment of character or plot.

Restricting attention to explicit evaluative statements was important for two reasons. First, the balance of these positive and negative evaluations served as a basis from which to deduce the overall critical assessment of the reviews (discussed below). Second, while some research suggests that critics rely on purely descriptive comments to subtly connote their negative sentiments about a book, I could not impute such meaning onto all instances of description in reviews. Therefore, I relied only on the explicit evaluative statements made by reviewers.

Gauging Overall Critical Assessment in the Reviews

The evaluation measure I use in the analysis compares favorable, mixed and unfavorable reviews. I arrived at the overall assessment of the novels based on a balance of positive and negative statements made by the reviewers.

Where it becomes more difficult is when critics offer both praise and criticism within a single review. Many of the reviews in my sample were “mixed” in this sense, but what determined whether such reviews were classified as positive or among the mixed/negative category was if the critic ultimately decided that the merits of the novel survived its admitted weaknesses. Examples of each case are offered below.
Unambiguous Positive and Negative Reviews

In a minority of cases, the overall critical evaluation of the novel was quite clear because critics have exclusively positive or negative things to say about a book. One example comes from an unambiguously positive review of a Rudolph Delson novel wherein the critic explains that by the book’s end he was “wallowing in a state of pleasure” and even “felt an odd elation” having read the novel (Beller, 2007: 51). This critic even admits that even he is suspicious of such an entirely positive response to the book but assures the reader that after “looking through [the book] again I found one tiny comic gem after another, one pitch-perfect rendering of the modern moment after another” (Beller, 2007:51). Another example of an exclusively positive review comes from a review of Sándor Márai’s The Rebels recently translated into English. The critic explains that the novel “displays much of the genius visible in [Márai’s] later works” (italics added) while being “funnier and more extravagantly imaginative” (Phillips, 2007:80). And later comments that “Márai’s wit is displayed on every page, and he can shift smoothly from vicious irony to heartbreak” (83).

Some critics are equally unequivocal and forceful about their dislike of a book. One example comes from a review of Natsuo Kirino’s Grotesque wherein the critic describes the dialogue as “veering startlingly into B-movie melodrama” and admonishes the author for “dismember[ing] the detective novel . . . hacking off suspense, glamour, mystery and horror to leave a disconcerting stump of a book” (Harrison, 2007:15). In these examples, the critics are explicit and clear about their praise or distaste for a novel making their overall critical assessments of the book easy to ascertain. Where it becomes more difficult is when critics offer both praise and criticism within the same review.

“Mixed” Reviews

Many of the reviews in the sample were “mixed” in the sense that critics pointed out both strengths and weaknesses of the books under review. The qualitative threshold used to discern between favorable or mixed/unfavorable reviews was whether or not critics, in balancing the merits and failures of a novel, suggest that the book is still successful or worth reading.

For example, in a review of Amy Bloom’s Away, even though the critic praises Bloom for “fill[ing] a vast canvas with brilliantly sketched characters”, she notes that the protagonist is
“less well imagined” resulting in “a few missteps” in the story (Thomas, 2007:11). So here we see both strengths and weaknesses in characterization being pointed out by the reviewer; ultimately she forgives such weaknesses concluding that “[s]uch clumsy moments are far outnumbered by the elegant and surprising moves of Bloom’s plot” (Thomas, 2007:11).

Another example of a mixed yet positive review was written about Martin Amis where the “old-fashioned psychological realism” and Amis ability to “calculate degrees of anguish” are counted as virtues of the book (Acocella, 2007:83). At the same time, however, the reviewer criticizes Amis for his “linguistic fanciness” and sections of dialogue with “archness that sounds like bad Nabokov” (Acocella, 2007:85). The critic’s final verdict, however, is that the novel is still of value even with such shortcomings: “I find these traits of [Amis] annoying, but they are part of something larger, which I cherish. His sheer courage as a writer” (85). So again, whilst being very clear about the weaknesses in Amis’ novel, the critic ultimately seems to forgive the novel these faults and positions the book as worth reading. I thus classified this as a positive review.

When a critic suggests that the weaknesses of a novel outweigh its strengths or does not otherwise give some indication that the novel is worth reading, I counted such reviews in the mixed/negative category. An example is a mixed review of Douglas Coupland’s The Gum Thief. As in the above cases, the critic offers both positive and negative points of the book. The review recounts one of the novel’s more successful moments when the superficial veneer of a few characters is revealed to be masking deep grief and describes the emotion it evokes from the reader: “For an instant, the knowing laughs we’ve been having [at these characters’ expense] die in our throats . . . the layered narratives strike a profound note” (Theroux, 2007:7). But in other sections of the review the critic says that Coupland’s narrative structure “push[es] the book toward dizziness and involution” (Theroux, 2007: 7) and the critic ultimately decides that while there are high-notes in Coupland’s novel such moments are outweighed by weaknesses. In the closing paragraph, the critic concludes that “the pleasure ‘The Gum Thief’ offers are pretty conventional ones . . . The parts all snap together neatly and satisfyingly, but the diagram son the box seemed to promise more” (7). Thus, this review would be classified in the negative/mixed category.

So in these cases when critics judged the merits of the books as surviving its admitted weaknesses, these reviews were counted as favorable. When the balance of strengths and
weaknesses did not tip towards critics recommending the novel, then these reviews were counted in the mixed/negative category.
References
Appendix B. How Critics Discuss Race/Ethnicity in Reviews by Authors' Ethnic Origins

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Writer Background</th>
<th>Authenticity</th>
<th>Ethnic Genre</th>
<th>Nominal</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Western</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>American</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Canadian</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>British</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>European</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Australian</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Subtotal</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Non-Western</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Latin American</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Middle Eastern</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>African</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>South Asian</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>East Asian</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Caribbean (Greater Antilles)</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Subtotal</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>TOTAL</strong></td>
<td>37</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*p<.05  (two-tailed t-test).

**p<.01  (two-tailed t-test).

25 Ethnic origins refers to the authors' nation of birth determined by online search of authors' personal web pages, publishing house web pages, and other internet sources
Appendix C. Overall Evaluation of Novels by Type of Ethno-Racial Identification in Reviews

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Favorable</th>
<th>Mixed / Unfavorable</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Authenticity</td>
<td>19 (51%)</td>
<td>18 (49%)</td>
<td>37 (100%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ethnic Genre</td>
<td>5 (42%)</td>
<td>7 (58%)</td>
<td>12 (100%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nominal</td>
<td>21 (58%)</td>
<td>15 (42%)</td>
<td>36 (100%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*p<.05 (two-tailed t-test).

**p<.01 (two-tailed t-test).
Copyright Acknowledgements

This dissertation draws upon work I have published elsewhere. Thank you to Poetics and Social Studies of Science for permission to reprint the following articles:
