

Introduction

The Post-Identity Condition

Asian American Studies traces its origins to radical social movements that emerged in the United States in the late 1960s and 1970s. Invented by scholar-activist Yuji Ichioka at the University of California, Berkeley in 1968, “Asian America” provided a sense of political and cultural identity for Asians in the United States by appealing to shared histories and experiences of racialization.¹ Although Asian America has undergone tremendous growth since its inception and currently includes a wide spectrum of academic, cultural, political, community, and economic formations, its relevance, coherence, and political efficacy have been extensively questioned. These challenges have undoubtedly been prompted by demographic considerations, especially in light of changes in immigration policy. As long-established Chinese, Japanese, and Filipino American communities experienced renewed growth in the wake of the 1965 Immigration Act, the emergence of newer communities, from Southeast Asian refugees to well-educated professionals from South Asia, greatly expanded the diversity of Asian America.

During the 1980s and 1990s, the fledging field of Asian American Studies repeatedly contended with this ever-increasing internal diversity. Considerable efforts have been directed toward reconfiguring Asian America into a more pluralistic rubric that can be inclusive of, and responsive to, undernoticed groups and constituencies. These efforts, along with those of feminist and queer scholars, have interrogated the constituting assumptions of the field. But as Susan Koshy incisively points out, a continuing

investment in the referential capacity of Asian America has had the effect of deferring its decisive emergence to an unspecified future in which “everyone has been included [and] the representational truth of the rubric will be made manifest” (“Fiction” 480). What remains to be theorized is how this referential logic gets attached to and, as I will argue below, derives from an identitarian category that was founded as much on political commitment as demographic realities. While demographic shifts continue to shape debates about Asian American culture and politics, the focus of this book is the theoretical logic of this category, a topic that necessitates a return to the fiercely contested notion of identity.

A rich and multifaceted concept that permeates practically all aspects of contemporary life, identity is used in so many discourses that it often becomes slippery and vague. As the students in an Asian American literature class I taught several years ago observed, identity can refer to the predetermined categories through which we make sense of our social status (gender and race, for example) as well as the unique traits and characteristics that define every individual (as in “my own identity”). Linda Martín Alcoff clarifies this distinction by defining “identity” as “how we are socially located in public, what is on our identification papers, how we must identify ourselves on Census and application forms and the everyday interpolations of social interaction” (92). By contrast, “subjectivity” denotes “who *we* understand ourselves to be, how we experience being ourselves, and the range of reflective and other activities that can be included under the rubric of our ‘agency’” (93; emphasis in original).²

Although this study does not follow Alcoff’s precise delineation, it adopts a similar framework by treating identity as a means to conceptualize the relationship between an individual and the historical, cultural, and social conditions that situate his or her life circumstances. The construction and circulation of identities is inseparable from the distribution of economic and social resources, from questions of power and domination that are sedimented in the very labels and categories that we use. For this reason, Asian American Studies has been engaged from its inception with identity politics, a concern rooted in its activist origins. Although identity politics has become synonymous for many with the struggles of minority and marginalized groups for recognition and equality, it is necessary at the outset to understand it in a more general sense, as a pervasive dimension of modern social thought and practice that anchors the political to the formation and

promotion of, and/or opposition to, identitarian categories and structures. Alcoff contends that identity politics involves “choosing one’s identity as a member of one or more groups as a political point of departure,” as the starting point for establishing communities and collectivities (147). Identity politics is inescapable for societies in which categories of race, ethnicity, gender, and so on determine the privileges of some and the domination of others.

In contemporary North America, identity politics has been widely criticized for imposing reductive scripts on individuals and for being mired in counterproductive, and often oppressive, debates over authenticity. As many critics have charged, rigid understandings of identity are often essentialist, marked, Diana Fuss writes, by an insistent “belief in the real, true essence of things, the invariable and fixed properties that define the ‘whatness’ of a given identity” (xi). Kandice Chuh extends this line of critique when she argues that

identity is a teleological narrative as used in a politics of identity, one that posits a common origin and looks toward a common destiny. It is in that sense assimilative, as difference must be elided to foreground resemblance. Another way to understand that elision is to recognize it as constituting the amnesia necessary to sustain a sense of stable identity. (*Imagine* 33)

Given its anti-racist commitments, Asian American Studies has productively deployed the critique of essentialism in order to expose the pernicious logic of long-standing stereotypes and other racializing discourses.³ What is important for the present discussion, however, is how Asian American identity, which was intended to be an oppositional alternative to such stereotypes, has itself been accused of having essentialist tendencies even by those who are otherwise sympathetic to its political commitments. The conundrum of identity politics has arguably been the most intensely debated topic in the field.

This book is indebted to, and builds on, this extensive body of scholarship and criticism in order to consider how the critique of identity politics has reconfigured the parameters of Asian American Studies. Less an argument for or against identity and identity politics, its aim is to explore the consequences of the “post-identity” turn. My investigation proceeds by tracing the persistence of a theoretical figure that I call the “idealized critical subject,” which operates throughout Asian American literary culture

and cultural criticism as a means of providing coherence to oppositional knowledge projects and political practices. I reframe this figure in relation to the aesthetic in order to specify its cognitive structure, which comes to the forefront as it is textualized into literary narrative. The chapters that follow develop these points in relation to texts from different moments in Asian American literary history, which emerges in this study as an ongoing engagement with the fraught relationship between identity politics and literary representation.

The Post-Identity Turn

For over two decades, debates about identity in Asian American cultural criticism have been generally informed by what Rey Chow, in a slightly different context, calls the “difference revolution,” the “permanent unsettling of the stability of referential meaning, what had been presumed to be anchored in the perfect fit between the signifier and the signified” (*Protestant Ethnic* 128). In light of this revolution, “difference rather than sameness now becomes the key to a radicalized way of thinking about identity . . . so that (the experience of) dislocation per se, as it were, often becomes valorized and idealized—as what is different, mobile, contingent, indeterminable, and so on” (134). These efforts have thoroughly affected Asian American Studies’ understanding of itself as an intellectual and political project. In their introduction to *Asian American Studies: A Reader*, Jean Yu-wen Shen Wu and Min Song write,

The first general claim we can make about Asian American Studies . . . is that it has difficulty defining what its object of study is. Even if we try to split up the notion of Asian American into smaller subgroups, the problem persists. . . . The question remains, however: do these differences invalidate a field of study whose object is admittedly imaginary and constructed? Another way to put this question is: does Asian American Studies foreground, in its difficulty defining an object of study, the imaginary and constructed nature of most, if not all, identities? (xiv)

To a certain extent, these questions are meant to be rhetorical: the answer to the first, as the context makes clear, is no, and as for the second, its quasi-universal claim about “most, if not all, identities” does not directly address

the specific predicament of Asian American Studies, which has never denied the constructed nature of its founding terms. But Wu and Song's characterization of the field is undoubtedly correct, for not only has it become impossible to speak of Asian America as a coherent entity, but the very critique of identity politics has been widely embraced as valuable and necessary.

These developments have reinforced a narrative in which the essentialist foundations of Asian American Studies unravel under the pressure of subsequent critiques. As Daryl J. Maeda points out, this understanding oversimplifies the history of Asian American culture and activism. Examining debates about literature that unfolded in conjunction with the Asian American movement, he draws our attention to a 1975 conference of writers organized by the Combined Asian American Resources Project that was criticized by the San Francisco-based organization Wei Min She for focusing myopically on "self-expression" to promote 'good vibes' about being Asian American" and being "hungup on identity" (qtd. in Maeda 151).⁴ As this anecdote shows, the idea of Asian American literature was controversial from the start precisely because its foundational understanding of identity was being contested by different groups struggling to define what was still an incipient formation.

As Asian American literary studies became institutionalized in the years that followed, debates over canon formation functioned as an extension of, and occasionally proxy for, broader questions about identity politics. In the 1980s, scholars mobilized Asian American literature in order to articulate a set of shared historical experiences that could be reflected by this body of texts. In her groundbreaking 1982 study, Elaine H. Kim focuses on "published creative writings in English by Americans of Chinese, Japanese, Korean, and Filipino descent" but immediately problematizes this framework as incomplete (*Asian American Literature* xi). Kim recognizes that Asian America bears a homological similarity to racialized terms such as "Oriental" but insists on its value for coordinating community building and struggles for social change. This emphasis on anti-racism enables her to avoid essentialist claims about Asian American culture while remaining invested in Asian American literature as such. Sau-ling Wong develops this approach in her 1993 definition of Asian American literature as "an emergent and evolving textual coalition, whose interests it is the business of a professional coalition of Asian American critics to promote" (*Reading* 9). Conceiving

Asian American literature in parallel with a pan-ethnic coalition in the process of being consolidated in society at large, Wong emphasizes the ability of critics to “play a role in building their community” because “the very process of creating a coalition feeds back into history, to further realize what has hitherto been tentative and unstable” (9).

In retrospect, Wong’s account turned out to be one of the last major attempts to align literary criticism with Asian American identity (understood as a nonessentialist formation based on a pan-ethnic concept of Asian America as a politically motivated coalition). The theoretical orientation of the field underwent a significant shift in the 1990s by embarking on what we might call a post-identity turn. First published in 1991, Lisa Lowe’s influential essay “Heterogeneity, Hybridity, and Multiplicity: Asian American Differences” makes a compelling case for replacing “notions of ‘identity’ with multiplicity and shifting the emphasis from cultural ‘essence’ to material hybridity” (75). Embracing Stuart Hall’s conception of identity as position rather than essence, she emphasizes the need to rethink “racialized ethnic identity in terms of differences of national origin, class, gender, and sexuality rather than presuming similarities and making the erasure of particularity the basis of identity” (83). Lowe focuses on the formation of coalitions with non-Asian American groups rather than the coalitional nature of Asian America itself. Asian American “identity” functions as a position from which to build “crucial alliances—with other groups of color, class-based struggles, feminist coalitions, and sexuality-based efforts—in the ongoing work of transforming hegemony” (83).

Kandice Chuh’s *Imagine Otherwise* goes further by attacking the referential assumptions that underscore identity politics. Chuh argues that attempts to “adjust,” “pluralize,” or “expand” the meaning of Asian America “cannot but end in a dead end, where one either is or is not found to be a ‘real’ Asian American, whether a particular representation is or is not found to be ‘authentic’” (21). In order to retain its analytical and critical capabilities, she calls for Asian American Studies to reinvent itself into a “subjectless discourse” (9) consisting of “collaborative antagonisms” (28) that keep “contingency, irresolution, and nonequivalence in the foreground” (8). Delineating the limitations of referentiality, she reframes Asian America as a critical position as opposed to an empirical identity, as a means of catalyzing an ongoing process of social critique:

“Asian American” is/names racism and resistance, citizenship and its denial, subjectivity and subjection—at once the becoming and undoing—and, as such, is a designation for the (im)possibility of justice, where “justice” refers to a state as yet unexperienced and unrepresentable . . . an endless project of searching out the knowledge and material apparatuses that extinguish some (Other) life ways and that hoard economic and social opportunities only for some. (8)

The striking openness of Chuh’s and Lowe’s projects attests to the critical energy that has been generated by the post-identity turn. But as Colleen Lye observes, such accounts have had the effect of conserving Asian America as a discursive vehicle for political and intellectual contestation so that what begin as ardent critiques of Asian American identity ultimately legitimize and expand the field (“Racial Form”).⁵ This irony stems in part from Asian American Studies’ status as an academic formation whose legitimacy depends heavily on its activist roots. Viet Thanh Nguyen argues that the field is characterized by a pervasive idealism that privileges radical resistance as its normative standard, thereby neglecting the fact that “as Asian America has witnessed the growth of its power in the past thirty years due to a rising population and increased political organization, it has also witnessed the growth of a demographically diverse population that is also ideologically diverse due to its wide range of origins and points of entry into American society” (9). Instead of engaging with this diversity, critics have resorted to a rigid dichotomy between authentic resistance on the one hand and accommodation and complicity on the other, a division that ignores the diverse strategies through which Asian Americans negotiate their racialization. Unlike attempts to deny the referential capacity of Asian America, Nguyen challenges Asian American Studies to contend with the material consequences of its own founding terms. As Iyko Day adds, “there are real-life referents of the term ‘Asian American,’ which include its hard-won role as a state-recognized minority category for civil rights monitoring and its more negative existence in U.S. society as an undifferentiated ‘foreign’ population subject to racial hostilities” (73).

How, then, can we understand Asian America as simultaneously material and discursive, and attend to its referential limits while remaining cognizant of what Day calls its “real-life referents”? How can we grasp the ways in which Asian American identity functions simultaneously, albeit

uneasily, as a demographic category as well as a critical position? How does this predicament illuminate the epistemological stakes of Asian American Studies vis-à-vis its vexed relationship with identity politics? These questions are fundamental to this book's discussion of post-identity, a term that I have thus far been using to describe the field in the wake of the critique of identity politics starting in the 1990s. The rest of this book, however, moves away from using post-identity as a periodizing concept because, as I discussed earlier, such a usage tends to solidify an inaccurate historical narrative about the unfolding of Asian American Studies. Instead, what needs to be grasped are the ways in which articulations of Asian American identity have long had to contend with its discursive instability. By the same token, we need to account for how fragments and echoes of identitarian thinking persist in anti-identity discourses. The articulation and unraveling of identity, in other words, is a dialectical process that unfolds unevenly throughout Asian American history, culture, and politics. Accordingly, I use post-identity to denote a theoretical/discursive process that operates in a range of texts concerned with the historical, social, material, and symbolic dimensions of what David Palumbo-Liu calls the Asian/American racial frontier.⁶

In conceptualizing post-identity, I find it useful to draw an analogy with Jean-François Lyotard's well-known definition of post-modernism. The post-modern, he argues, does not chronologically follow the modern. Rather, it is a dissenting mode of representation that is always present in, and even precedes, the modern. Instead of conceiving the post-modern in temporal terms, he describes it as an alternative to the modern belief in the possibility of representation; by refusing this investment, post-modernism marks the rupture of the modern from within. In a similar manner, we can conceive identities as providing a form—a grammar as it were—for making sense of and representing the relationship between the subject and the social. Post-identity marks the breakdown of this grammar and unfolds as an inherent and integral dimension of identitarian thinking. Understanding post-identity in this manner allows us to account for why, despite frequent declarations about the constructedness and/or incoherence of identities, aspects of identitarian thinking continue to persist as affective investments, means of knowledge production, and modes of ethico-political engagement and imagination. A limited focus on the failure of signification and repre-

sentation, regardless of whether the point is to celebrate difference or to decry such critiques as paralyzing, can only provide an incomplete account of identity's complex operations.

The Idealized Critical Subject of Asian American Studies

In order to undertake a sustained examination of identity's conflicted forms, this study pivots around a discursive figure that I call the idealized critical subject, which operates across a range of literary and critical texts concerned with identity. In the following discussion, I treat the idealized critical subject as a composite figure that embodies a set of claims about identity, subjectivity, and oppositional social/political movements. It justifies these movements' claim to offer a thorough critique of modernity from the perspective of those who have been marginalized and victimized. The idealized critical subject is characterized precisely by its ability to integrate the production of critical knowledge with an effective political praxis.

To explore the contours of this subject and the labor it performs, I turn here to an exemplary theoretical text in which what we might call identitarian thinking is explicitly linked to revolutionary praxis. In *History and Class Consciousness*, one of the founding texts in Western Marxism, Georg Lukács asserts that in bourgeois thought, the structural exploitation of the proletariat is rendered natural and unchangeable. This erasure of social relations results in the bourgeoisie's inability to grasp the underlying reasons for its economic and social hegemony, a fatally disempowering condition that he famously calls reification. The antidote to reification lies in the emergence of an alternative mode of class consciousness on the part of the proletariat. The worker, he argues, is affected in every respect by a system that "cuts him off from his labour-power, forcing him to sell it on the market as a commodity, belonging to him" (165–166). These daily experiences produce a very different relationship to capitalist society for, unlike the bourgeoisie, workers are able to "see society from the centre, as a coherent whole" and the result of this insight is knowledge of the "concrete totality [of social relations] of the historical world" (145). Most crucially, this knowledge is a form of praxis that contributes to the "total, structural transformation" of capitalist societies (175).

Lukács is concerned with the status of the proletariat as a collective formation to which he attributes the ability to grasp the fundamental nature of social relations under capitalism in their totality. This knowledge is available to the proletariat by virtue of their structural role within the capitalist mode of production as well as their daily experience of that positionality. Their oppressed status guarantees that this knowledge is objectively valid, applicable across all sectors of society. Lukács aligns the discovery of this knowledge with revolutionary praxis, the process through which the proletariat becomes transformed into a collective agent, the protagonist as it were of a narrative of revolutionary emancipation.⁷ Insofar as Lukács remains deeply invested in the subject as the basis for knowledge and action, his account of class consciousness has been the target of extensive criticism due to its humanist assumptions.⁸ Before turning to some of these problems, I want to first show how his account of the proletariat as an epistemological-political agent offers an illuminating prototype for recent articulations of the Asian American subject.

This claim may seem counterintuitive in light of the fact that scholars have sought to redefine Asian American Studies as a critical project that, in Jodi Kim's words, is neither "a celebration of Asian American assimilation or resistance nor a foray into what has been pejoratively perceived as the strident and unsophisticated identity politics of the 'minority' subject," but rather an "*unsettling hermeneutic* that provides a crucial diagnosis of what could be called the identity politics . . . of the U.S. nation" (10; emphasis in original). Yet it is precisely in the course of privileging critique and its ability to reveal the objective conditions of hegemony that an Asian American subject emerges who is defined by its oppositional relationship to U.S. society rather than cultural, ethnic, or racial identity. This critical subject appears at a crucial moment in Lowe's *Immigrant Acts* in the form of the Asian immigrant, understood as a dissenting subject who plays a potentially transformative role in U.S. national culture:

The Asian immigrant—at odds with the cultural, racial, and linguistic forms of the nation—emerges in a site that defers and displaces the temporality of assimilation. This distance from national culture constitutes Asian American culture as an alternative formation that produces cultural expressions materially and aesthetically at odds with the resolution of the citizen in the nation . . . an alternative site where the palimpsest of lost memories is reinvented, histories are fractured and retraced, and the unlike varieties of silence emerge into articulation. (6)

The cultural forms produced by and through this figure powerfully reveal the history and structures of racialization, the very history that forms the ground from which the Asian immigrant emerges dialectically as an embodied “[agent] of political change, cultural expression, and social transformation” (9). In a manner that recalls the main arguments of *History and Class Consciousness*, the critical Asian American subject is distinguished by its ability to reveal suppressed or neglected histories and experiences of domination, knowledge that in turn becomes the basis for political contestation.

This understanding of Asian American subjectivity departs substantively from approaches that emphasize cultural/ethnic/racial identity, but in doing so, it repeats certain difficulties that can also be seen in Lukács’s account of class consciousness. Insofar as the proletariat/critical Asian American subject are theoretically derived from an analysis of capitalism and racism respectively (in Asian American Studies, these two aspects are in any case often intertwined), they cannot be considered synonymous with actually existing demographic referents. Just as Lukács’s proletariat is not necessarily reflective of actual workers, the Asian American critical subject does not, to recall Nguyen’s point about political idealism, represent Asian Americans as a demographic group. To be clear, I do not mean to dismiss it as a political fantasy, false consciousness, or something to be grudgingly accepted in the name of strategic essentialism.⁹ Instead, I take its idealized character as an important insight into the intellectual and political foundations of Asian American Studies. The idealized critical subject is enormously useful, even indispensable, for conceiving and articulating a politically committed knowledge project because it functions as a flexible trope, a position that gets occupied by a range of subjects including fictional characters, writers, artists, activists, students, critics, and intellectuals. Although I present the idealized critical subject in this introduction as a more or less coherent figure in order to highlight its theoretical logic, the chapters that follow take a more nuanced approach that elucidates the gaps and discontinuities that inevitably arise in its literary manifestations.

For his part, Lukács is well aware that class consciousness is an abstraction that does not reflect the thoughts, feelings, and attitudes of real workers. It lacks, in other words, a stable empirical referent. To explain this apparent shortcoming, he introduces his much-debated notion of “imputed” consciousness:

By relating consciousness to the whole of society it becomes possible to infer the thoughts and feelings which men would have in a particular situation if they were *able* to assess both it and the interests arising from it in their impact on immediate action and on the whole structure of society. . . . Now class consciousness consists in fact of the appropriate and rational reactions “imputed” [*zugerechnet*] to a particular typical position in the process of production. This consciousness is, therefore, neither the sum nor the average of what is thought or felt by the single individuals who make up the class. And yet the historically significant actions of the class as a whole are determined in the last resort by this consciousness and not the thought of the individual. (51; emphasis in original)

In this famous passage, Lukács reveals his theoretical procedure when he claims that class consciousness is an “inference” that can be derived from his understanding of the “whole of society.” It consists of the “rational” reactions that can be attributed to those who occupy a certain class position and, in this sense, is both individual and collective. What enables him to make an argument for the existence of class consciousness, in other words, is a model of social relations that foregrounds class-based interactions and conflicts. Moving from the macro to the micro, as it were, class consciousness is far more compelling when seen as a logical necessity rather than empirical reality.

Imputed consciousness remains a fiercely debated aspect of Lukács’s work. As Martin Jay observes, Lukács found it necessary to “theorize ahead of the empirical consciousness of the proletariat” and imagine a de-reified world in which “the gap between empirical and imputed class consciousness would narrow and finally vanish” so that “objective possibility would become subjective actuality” (112). Lukács justifies these presuppositions by invoking a teleological historicism that culminates in the emergence of the proletariat as a class in itself.¹⁰ As we will see, the idealized critical subject is temporally bound, although it often exists in tension with the teleological temporalities used to conceive its existence. If we set aside the charges that Lukács was mired in bourgeois thinking (that is, his idealism indicates his own failure to overcome reification) or that he was trying to justify an authoritarian party apparatus, *History and Class Consciousness* is most instructive when it reveals how theorizing the relationship between knowledge and subjectivity takes place through an idealized critical subject. What this text illuminates is the predicament of speaking from *within* an oppressed

group in order to articulate the conditions of possibility for its emergence as an agent of social transformation.¹¹

In taking up this challenge, albeit not without shortcomings, Lukács foreshadows other twentieth-century emancipatory movements that claim access to objective and truthful social knowledge as the basis for their political projects.¹² Writing about anti-colonial liberationist thought, Caroline S. Hau observes, “Political struggles, therefore, implicitly commit themselves to the idea of the epistemic reliability of intellectual praxis, to the possibility of obtaining *accurate* and *reliable* accounts of the world (or of a particular society) that can help to demystify existing institutions and their systems of oppression” (134; emphasis in original). The idealized critical subject plays an indispensable role by authorizing such knowledge claims, rooting them in structural and everyday conditions of oppression. But just as Lukács’s text unwittingly demonstrates the limitations of its own project, articulations of the idealized critical subject are often incomplete, even in works that vehemently embrace identity politics. The textual vicissitudes of the idealized critical subject constitute an archive of post-identity as the rupture of identitarian thought from within, at the very scenes of its articulation.

The Aesthetics of Identity (Or, Why Read Realism?)

Insofar as this study is primarily concerned with articulations of identity and subjectivity in literary texts, it develops an account of the idealized critical subject as an aesthetic figure whose conditions of articulation are intricately related to the representational protocols and procedures of fiction. My use of the aesthetic is not meant to function as a casual synonym for the literary in the sense that one speaks of the aesthetics of race, for example, in a given text. Instead, the aesthetic denotes a mode of cognition that exceeds the parameters of rational knowledge and/or political agency. The aesthetic illuminates the internal logic of the idealized critical subject as well as the conditions under which it is manifested in literature.

Aesthetics, writes Marc Redfield, “forms part . . . of modern philosophy’s effort to ground itself in the subject and its perceptions” by positing a counterpoint to the Enlightenment’s emphasis on reason as the guide for ethical and moral behavior (*Politics* 10–11). In *The Critique of Judgment*,

Kant defines aesthetic judgment (what he calls the faculty of taste) as the ability to freely endow universally apprehensible meaning to sensory perceptions without recourse to preexisting rules. At stake in this classic formulation is a subject for whom the ability to exercise taste indicates the possibility of freedom and autonomy. This subject is, furthermore, a prototype for society at large: Kant famously describes taste as a “*sensus communis aestheticus*” (172, n.1, §40; emphasis in original) as “the faculty of judging of that which makes *universally communicable*, without the mediation of a concept, our feeling in a given representation” (173, §40; emphasis in original).¹³ The supposedly universal character of taste is undermined, however, by the assertion that taste is also the result of education and refinement, a claim that sets its development in a social context as well as a temporal progression that authorizes the division of humanity according to levels of taste so that its universality is not an empirical descriptor, but a normative telos. This last point underscores the importance of aesthetic education as well as its seemingly inextricable implication in class-, race-, and gender-based prejudices.¹⁴

In Kant’s view, taste can only be common—apprehensible by and available to all—if its object is not subject to the contingent particulars of empirical sensation and experience.¹⁵ For this reason, the proper object of aesthetic judgment is form, which belongs to the realm of imagination rather than sensation, a point that becomes especially important as he turns to art (Redfield, *Phantom* 13). There, form uneasily denotes the boundaries of the artwork and marks the cut that separates art from the world at large. It becomes, Redfield notes, “a figure for difference and for the (necessary, but uncertain) phenomenalization of difference. The frame must in some fashion be perceived if the object is to be judged aesthetically; yet as a principle of articulation, the (im)pure cut of the frame slips away from perception and toward the realm of inscription” (*Politics* 17).¹⁶ In this sense, form provides an index to the subject’s ability to perceive the distinction between art and real life, a task, as we will see, that becomes even more complex when the artworks in question make a strong claim to socio-historical accuracy.

Despite these uncertainties, for Kant and the tradition he inaugurates, the ability to cognitively interact with form defines the free subject. Taking this highly contested claim as a starting point, this study pursues a reading practice that is attentive to form’s vicissitudes as a means of tracking the unstable status of the idealized critical subject. If this subject is defined by

its ability to engage critically with realities of oppression, articulations of this subject must continually account for its cognitive relationship to the external world; a consideration of form reveals with more precision exactly how this engagement takes place. Form thus reveals the operations of the subject as well as how it is rooted in social particulars. By stressing the cognitive implications of form, we can draw a distinction between reading practices that are attentive to matters of form and formalism as an ideological stance on literary value that eschews the importance of history and/or politics. The former, explains Fredric Jameson, is a “hermeneutic concept” that “emphasizes the operation of interpretation itself, as it moves in time from outer to inner form as from one moment to another in a dialectical process. Thus the critic is recalled to his own procedures, as a form unfolding in time but also reflecting his own concrete social and historical situation” (*Marxism and Form* 401).

Fiction, with its concern for the details of everyday life and the ways through which we make sense of the world, is “a privileged microcosm” in which to pursue this kind of inquiry (*Marxism and Form* xi). Accordingly, this book focuses on prose texts that render explicit the problem of mimetic representation. I read texts that, although stylistically varied, foreground the claim that they are portraying social, historical, and personal circumstances that are continuous with real times, places, and conditions. In other words, this study is concerned with realism, but instead of just focusing on the stylistic traditions and protocols of realist fiction, I use the term in a more flexible manner that reflects Jameson’s definition of realism as a “cognitive as well as aesthetic” concept that “presupposes a form of aesthetic experience which yet lays claim to a binding relationship to the real itself, that is to say, to those realms of knowledge and praxis which had traditionally been differentiated from the realm of the aesthetic, with its disinterested judgements and its constitution as sheer appearance” (“Reflections” 198).

If Kant and his followers sought to construct a philosophical system that maintains distinctions among knowledge, praxis, and aesthetics, realism suggests the possibility of overcoming those divisions, a promise that motivated Lukács to embrace it as part of his ongoing attempt to overcome the limitations of modern thought. Yet in ways that Lukács did not entirely recognize (I will come back to this point shortly), considerations of realism are inevitably bound up with the question of mediation. Jameson writes:

How do we pass . . . from one level of social life to another, from the psychological to the social, indeed, from the social to the economic? What is the relationship of ideology, not to mention the work of art itself, to the more fundamental social and historical reality of groups in conflict, and how must the latter be understood if we are able to see cultural objects as social acts, at once disguised and transparent? (*Marxism and Form* xiv–xv)

Mediation operates in the “disguised and transparent” ways in which “cultural objects” including literature claim to establish a “binding relationship to the real itself”; trying to figure out exactly how this does (or does not) happen requires a consideration of the literary text as a socially embedded object.

Taking up this question, this book pivots from Lukács to the writings of Theodor Adorno. My turn to Adorno resurrects his (in)famous postwar “debate” with Lukács, which pitted the former’s defense of the modernist avant-garde against the latter’s insistence on realism. In his essay “Extorted Reconciliation: On Georg Lukács’ *Realism in Our Time*” (1958), Adorno argues that Lukács erroneously conflates art and reality, thereby erasing the distinction between aesthetic representation and knowledge while ignoring the role of mediation.¹⁷ Lukács, he writes, “follows[s] the tradition of classical philosophy [and] rightly conceives art as a form of knowledge. . . . [I]n doing so he becomes trapped in the same mere immediacy that he short-sightedly accuses avant-garde production of: the immediacy of the established fact” (227). Art, Adorno insists, offers an alternative to “established fact” due to its embattled relationship with society:

Art exists within reality, has its function in it, and is also inherently mediated with reality in many ways. But nevertheless, as art, by its very concept it stands in an antithetical relationship to the status quo. Philosophy reflected this in the term “aesthetic semblance.” . . . [T]he difference between empirical existence and art concerns the intrinsic structure of the latter. . . . [V]is à vis what merely exists, art itself—where it does not betray its own nature by merely duplicating it—has to become essence, essence and image. Only thereby is the aesthetic constituted; only thereby and not by gazing at mere immediacy, does art become knowledge. (224)

Art must thoroughly inhabit this marginal role in order to critically reveal the underlying conditions—reification, the rise of instrumental reason, the elevation of rationality, and so on—that contribute to its marginalization in the first place.