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Hip to Post45

Michael Szalay, *Hip Figures: A Literary History of the Democratic Party*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2012. 324 pp. \$24.95.

“ [W] ”

here are we now?” About five years have passed since Amy Hungerford asked this question in her assessment of the “revisionary work” that

was undertaken by literary historians at the dawn of the twenty-first century.¹ Juxtaposing Wendy Steiner’s contribution to *The Cambridge History of American Literature* (“Postmodern Fictions, 1970–1990”) with new scholarship by Rachel Adams, Mark McGurl, Deborah Nelson, and others, Hungerford aimed to demonstrate that “the period formerly known as contemporary” was being redefined and revitalized in exciting new ways by a growing number of scholars, particularly those associated with Post45 (410). Back then, Post45 named but a small “collective” of literary historians, “mainly just finishing first books or in the middle of second books” (416). Now, however, it designates something bigger and broader, a formidable institution dedicated to the study of American culture during the second half of the twentieth century and beyond. This institution comprises an ongoing sequence of academic conferences (including a large

1. Amy Hungerford, “On the Period Formerly Known as Contemporary,” *American Literary History* 20.1–2 (2008) 412. Subsequent references will appear in the text.

gathering that took place at the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame in 2011), a Web-based journal of peer-reviewed scholarship and book reviews (*Post45*), and a monograph series published by Stanford University Press (*Post•45*). Its increasing influence is palpable, evident in the ordinary language of academic sociality. When people ask, "What do you work on?" they know what you mean when you say "post-'45."

Michael Szalay's *Hip Figures: A Literary History of the Democratic Party* (2012) is one of five books in the Stanford series, which is edited by Florence Dore and Szalay himself. As such, it not only constitutes an exemplary case of *Post45* scholarship but also provides an occasion to reiterate Hungerford's question: Where are we *now*? What is the current state of scholarly work on the period formerly known as contemporary? *Hip Figures* showcases what Hungerford called "the solid dominance of historicism" in her 2008 survey of the field, while reminding us that, to use her words, "close reading remains at the heart of . . . critical practice" for this generation of scholars (416). Throughout his study, Szalay deploys the technique of close reading in order to demonstrate, as he puts it in the very last phrase of the book, "how and why culture mattered to political life" (281), or more specifically how the novels of Robert Penn Warren, Ralph Ellison, Norman Mailer, William Styron, John Updike, E. L. Doctorow, and Joan Didion "invoked hip on behalf of the Democratic Party" (3). His readings are dense, learned, theoretically informed, and often quite surprising; in all cases, they give us a sense of how these novelists worked as "political strategists of their time" (3). But the overarching method of the book, its combination of formal analysis and historical contextualization, is very familiar. And this method has sustained a variety of high-profile attacks in recent years from scholars, such as Rita Felski and Eric Hayot, who seek what Felski calls "transhistorical methodologies."² By assessing *Hip Figures* in what follows, therefore, I mean to consider how a resolutely historicist monograph stands up against a certain exhaustion with historicism that is increasingly evident in literary studies. My ultimate goal is not

2. Rita Felski, "Context Stinks!" *New Literary History* 42.4 (2011) 577.

to deplore the “solid dominance” of this method, which in Szalay’s hands produces a compelling argument along with a series of illuminating accounts of seminal novels, but to claim that there is, perhaps somewhat ironically, a good historical justification for scholars of this period to develop alternatives. Indeed, I want to suggest that as Post45 “continue[s] to expand [its] vision of this newly vital field,” it could remain a home for “groundbreaking work on U.S. culture after the Second World War,” while also serving as a sort of laboratory for experimenting with new methods of interpretation.³

The “central contention” of *Hip Figures* “is that, over the last fifty or so years, a range of predominantly white fantasies about hip have animated the secret imagination of postwar liberalism and, more concretely, organized the Democratic Party’s efforts to redress ‘the brutal legacy of slavery and Jim Crow’” (2). These fantasies, as Szalay understands them, “first emerged in novels” (3), hence the reason that each of his chapters offers an extended close reading of at least one influential novel from the era. But what exactly is hip? The *OED* tells us that it means “wise to” or “up-to-date” or “smart” or “stylish.”⁴ The term is closely related to “cool,” so *Hip Figures* can be placed alongside the work of Alan Liu and Thomas Frank, two thinkers who have helped to define, respectively, the “laws” and the “conquest” of cool after 1945.⁵ The specific version of “literary hip” (3) that Szalay analyzes, however, is conceptualized (with the help of Susan Willis, Eric Lott, and Wolfgang Fritz Haug) as both a “fetish” (4) and “a complex variant of the peculiarly American tradition of blackface minstrelsy” (8). As such, it mediates relationships among “multicolored bodies possessed of different economic interests,” ultimately, as he sees it, to serve the aims of the Democrats (4). After the Dixiecrat revolt of 1948, this party began to transform. The

3. The first quotation appears on the *Post45* journal website, the second in Stanford University Press’s description of the book series Post45.

4. “hep, adj,” *OED* Online, June 2013, Oxford UP, 2 July 2013.

5. Alan Liu, *The Laws of Cool: Knowledge Work and the Culture of Information* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 2004); and Thomas Frank, *The Conquest of Cool: Business Culture, Counterculture, and the Rise of Hip Consumerism* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1997). Szalay cites both Liu and Frank at various points throughout *Hip Figures*.

rise of “professional and managerial elites” started to eclipse the power of “old guard southerners still committed to white supremacy and segregation,” even as African Americans assumed increasing electoral importance (5). Within this context, Szalay argues, novelists deployed hip—a trope he takes to “transport whites into the imagined bodies of African Americans” (4)—toward the goal of uniting the black and white “voting constituencies of postwar liberalism” (3), or of “produc[ing] a vision of naturalized, easy authority capable of consolidating a rapidly changing Democratic Party” (7).

Unfolding across six chapters, this argument is lighted throughout by Norman Mailer and Ralph Ellison, both of whom produced texts, including Mailer’s infamous “White Negro” essay, that Szalay considers “something like the code key” for his own analyses (11). The first chapter examines Robert Penn Warren’s *All the King’s Men* (1946) in the context of “the South’s transition from tenant farming to large-scale agriculture,” reading the novel “as an account of why affluent southern liberals, who were pledged to the Democratic Party but still implicated in the former production regime, would ultimately fail to form a workable coalition with working-class blacks” (12). Then, in an intriguing move, Szalay “[f]ollow[s] Warren North after the Second World War” in order to reassess the politics of the New Criticism, apprehending the New Critics’ firm “commitment to poetic autonomy as a commitment to obscuring” the role of the professional-managerial class in “laundering black labor” (12). He means to demonstrate that as the Southern Agrarians morphed into New Critics, they “adumbrated a formal program that guaranteed that [black] labor could never be read out of a poem, could never be grasped as anything other than a poetic effect” (68). This claim sets the stage for the next three chapters, which take as their premise the notion that hip (specifically in the musical style of bebop) gave white professionals the “capacity to sublimate demanding physical labor, and the social relations that organized that labor, into something more easily exchangeable” (13).

With this assumption in mind, chapters 2, 3, and 4 constellate Chandler Brossard’s *Who Walk in Darkness* (1952), Ralph Ellison’s

Three Days Before the Shooting . . . (2010), Richard Condon's *The Manchurian Candidate* (1959), and John Updike's *Rabbit, Run* (1960). What these very different novels have in common, Szalay contends, is that they all seek "to demonstrate hip's importance to the sale of commodities," especially the Democratic Party itself as a commodity or brand (13). His readings elegantly combine formal analysis with historical contextualization, ultimately to suggest that these novelists are not unlike both politicians and advertising executives insofar as they engaged hip to make "a fetish of racial difference" while generating a "conglomerating image designed to pass over and go beyond difference" (13). Hip, in other words, "transported whites from their own bodies and into the images of other bodies," so that "selling hip to white consumers involved selling them the fantasy that consumption could turn them black—but only for as long as they wished to be" (13). This claim, which is informed by the theoretical work of Lott, Willis, and especially Haug, is variously inflected throughout these three chapters, and it achieves particular clarity in the segment devoted to *Rabbit, Run*. Haug's account of commodity aesthetics and capitalist advertising defines commodities as "second skins," or phantasms that float "unencumbered like a multicolored spirit . . . into every household."⁶ Szalay builds on this definition to describe the hip figures—"figures of skins and skins produced through figures" (4)—in novels such as Updike's.

Rabbit, Run tells the story of Harry "Rabbit" Angstrom, a twenty-six-year-old white man who lives in a Pennsylvania suburb with his wife. He has a job selling a kitchen gadget called a "MagiPeeler," which removes the peels of fruits and vegetables, not to expose the more easily edible part of the plant beneath, but to enable the consumption of the vitamin-rich skins. Near the beginning of the novel, Rabbit is fed up with his job and his wife and his life in the 'burbs, so he decides impulsively to drive south. "Floundering in a world of commodities," as Szalay understands him, "Rabbit wants a black 'second skin' that is

6. Wolfgang Fritz Haug, *Critique of Commodity Aesthetics: Appearance, Sexuality, and Advertising in Capitalist Society* (Cambridge, MA: Polity, 1986) 50.

somehow resistant to those commodities. He finds this skin, however, only as a function of his commitment to consumption" (137). Indeed, from Szalay's perspective, even though Rabbit stops selling the MagiPeeler when he embarks on his road trip, he nevertheless remains a consumer of skin, which is to say that "he makes a fetish of skin itself, of recycling and exchanging skins," to such a degree that he "discards everything but these surfaces" (137). This dynamic becomes visible when Rabbit—who is, as Szalay reads him, "search[ing] for a new body on the road" (138) as he drives through a "commercial haze" (140)—becomes suddenly attracted to black skin, or to a certain hip figure. He sees "a young but tall colored boy" whose "limber lazy body slump[s] inside baggy Amoco coveralls," and he "has a weird impulse" to hug him.⁷ Szalay accounts for this impulse as follows:

We're uncertain if he wishes to hug the boy because his "colored" skin promises an antidote to the product phantasmagoria through which Rabbit has been driving or because the boy is, like Rabbit thinks himself, trapped beneath a branded second surface. Ultimately, Updike suggests that these alternatives amount to much the same thing, insofar as the black skin that Rabbit imagines would save him from his own is itself a branded product: Rabbit's desire for blackness is a desire for a commodity that promises escape from commodities.

(140)

The point here is not merely that skin, whether black or white, is subject to commodification, but that Updike constructed scenes like this one as a means of "solv[ing] in symbolic fashion a problem then facing the Democratic Party" (142). Because Rabbit "doesn't simply run away" (142) but flees a wife who "has everyone on her side from Eisenhower down" (Updike 139), Szalay can argue, playing on the pun, that he "'runs' as a Democrat" in the spring of 1959, a few months prior to Kennedy's election, leaving a state, Pennsylvania, that voted for JFK by a narrow 2.4 percent margin. Viewed in this historical context, "Rabbit's trip south creates the interracial coalition"—consisting

7. John Updike, *Rabbit, Run* (1960; New York: Random, 2012) 34.

of “white voters in suburbs like Rabbit’s” and “African American voters from states south of the Mason-Dixon line”—that would help to elect the president in 1960 (142–43). In sum, then, Rabbit’s desire to hug the “tall colored boy” allegorizes the desire of the Democratic Party to consolidate a constituency of voters across both racial and geographical lines.

Szalay’s reading of Updike simultaneously exemplifies his method and paves the way for his next chapter, on Ralph Ellison. That chapter manages to make some sense of the strange and complicated scene (initially published in “Cadillac Flambé” [1973]) in *Three Days Before the Shooting* . . . that has black musician Lee Willie Minifees torching his car on the lawn of a senator who claims that the Cadillac brand has been tarnished by its popularity with black consumers. As in his reading of Updike, Szalay concentrates on the way that Ellison deploys the trope of skin: Minifees “replac[es] the use value of his car with a shimmering membrane”—a slick of gasoline that “produces a spectacular image”—and “the fire that results from the membrane destroys the car but saves the brand” (163). Following this chapter, Szalay takes up the question of how white novelists (Styron, Mailer, Updike, and Doctorow) use hip figures “to militate on behalf of an interracial alliance between white and black workers,” even as they “reassure their readers that white professionals and managers have it in their power to become owners and capitalists, in ways that black workers do not” (14). Finally, he concludes his study with a critical account of Joan Didion that tracks the death of the hip figure. Didion, he argues, “conflates purging the Democrats of African American taint with doing the same to her own literary voice.” Yet because “[s]he performs this racial cleansing” while defending “the interests of what she calls ‘the American business class,’” he argues, she “anticipates the neoliberal project of the Democratic Leadership Council (DLC) (formed one year after the novel’s publication) and the presidency of Bill Clinton” (14).

I hope that this précis conveys how much there is to admire in *Hip Figures*. Szalay’s readings are imaginative, thorough, historically sensitive, and rendered in prose that is forceful and lucid. His argument is extremely ambitious, no less than a

twinned effort to revise our understanding of the postwar American novel and to rethink the role of the Democratic Party within American literary culture. Because his claims, both large and small, are clearly delineated, scholars will not only learn from but also debate them for a long time. His local interventions, such as his account of Updike's treatment of skin, adjust the critical stories that we have told about individual authors and their political ambitions, even as his broader assertions raise productive questions. Were these novelists really "the most important political strategists of their time" (3)? What are the larger consequences of defining a novelist as a "strategist" writing "on behalf of" a given political party, as opposed to an artist grappling with the relation between the aesthetic and the political? Can you find yourself persuaded by Szalay's readings, in other words, without thinking that novels like *Rabbit, Run* amount to a kind of propaganda produced by a party hack? Such questions inflect in new ways a topic that, as Szalay puts it, "still haunts the assimilation of New Left thinking within literature departments: how to understand embodied experience in the novel as constituting and describing a 'politics' that is linked to—even in its indifference toward or disavowal of—more traditional understandings of that word" (33–34).

This is really a question about interpretation. How does a critic identify and assess the politics of a given literary object? Szalay's answer resides in his method—a certain mode of literary historicism that can be traced back to Fredric Jameson's *The Political Unconscious* (1981). As Jameson explained, the task of the politically minded critic is to study the "*ideologeme*, that is, the smallest intelligible unit of the essentially antagonistic collective discourses of social classes."⁸ Making this "unit" visible, he argued, involves "a process of transcoding" (40) or "rewriting a given text in terms of a particular interpretive master code" (10). Thus interpretation itself "is here construed as an essentially allegorical act" (10) whereby "a text is systematically *rewritten*" in order to disclose the ideologeme (58). Although Szalay never mentions

8. Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell UP, 1981) 76. Subsequent references will appear in the text.

The Political Unconscious, he has certainly heeded the imperative “slogan” of Jameson’s book: “Always historicize!” (9). And while *Hip Figures* is by no means reducible to a relentless hunt for the ideologeme of American literature during a given historical moment, its argument unfolds through an allegorizing procedure whose aim is to reveal the social and political content of the literary texts in its archive. The chapter on Warren is explicit about this: “[W]e might read *King’s Men*,” Szalay writes, “as an allegory for the ambitions of a previously southern group of agrarian intellectuals who, having taken their place in the mid-forties in northern organizations, needed a story about the national relevance of otherwise parochial southern values and commitments” (68). His use of this method—historicizing by means of allegorizing—eventuates in a series of provocative and, in many cases, counterintuitive claims that scholars can and should debate. My interest in closing this essay, however, is the current status of the method itself.

One year after Hungerford affirmed the “solid dominance of historicism” among the critics associated with Post45, Stephen Best and Sharon Marcus published an essay decrying the lasting influence of the book that urged critics always to historicize. In “Surface Reading,” the introduction to a now widely read special issue of *Representations*, Best and Marcus take aim at *The Political Unconscious* and the interpretive method (what they call “symptomatic reading”) that it galvanized. The problem with this method, as they see it, is that it assumes that the meaning of the text is “hidden, repressed, deep, and in need of detection and disclosure by an interpreter.”⁹ They are not exactly criticizing the imperative to historicize, but rather the notion that “the critic,” relying on the allegorical procedure defined by Jameson, “restores to the surface the history that the text represses” (3). Against this procedure, which is a species of critique, they urge critics to focus on “what is evident, perceptible, apprehensible in texts; what is neither hidden nor hiding” (9). This claim on behalf of “surface reading” is part of a much broader effort, span-

9. Stephen Best and Sharon Marcus, “Surface Reading: An Introduction.” Spec. issue of *Representations* 108.1 (2009) 1. Subsequent references will appear in the text.

ning the literary humanities, to reimagine the practice of literary interpretation—including the type of historicist reading exemplified by Szalay and singled out by Hungerford. Just as Felski (quoting Bruno Latour quoting Rem Koolhaas) asserts that historical context “stinks!,” so too Eric Hayot deplores “the near-total dominance of the concept of periodization in literary studies, a dominance that amounts to a collective failure of imagination and will on the part of the literary profession.”¹⁰ On this score, Hayot would seem to agree with Bruce Robbins, who argues that “[t]he period, like the nation, should perhaps be seen as a sort of pseudo-anthropocentric norm that has been adopted for a long time out of laziness.”¹¹

So where are we now? On the one hand, a book like *Hip Figures* indicates the firm commitment to historicism that characterizes so much scholarship on American literature after 1945. On the other hand, the challenges to historicism are mounting alongside a growing restlessness with the methodological status quo. Many of us, it seems, are casting about for a method, and interpretation itself appears to be enjoying or enduring a renewed crisis.¹² Historicism still dominates, but perhaps less solidly. Within this intellectual atmosphere, I want to propose, scholars of post-1945 literature have an important part to play. We should actively and explicitly “ask basic questions about how to read,” to quote the description of the book series, and the historicists among us should welcome the challenges of thinkers like Felski and Hayot. There are several good reasons for this, not least that our period—unlike, say, the long eighteenth century—is just emerging as a unit of literary-historical analysis, which means that it is still very much in flux. Because the prefix “post” in Post45 designates only a starting point, for instance, its ending could be 1989 or 2001 or 2008 or never, and the totally mundane task of adjudicating among these various possibilities might actually precipitate a broader conversation about the concept of

10. Eric Hayot, “Against Periodization; or, On Institutional Time,” *New Literary History* 42.4 (2011) 740.

11. Bruce Robbins, “Afterword,” *PMLA* 122.5 (2007) 1650.

12. For the history of the crisis facing interpretation, see John Guillory, “The Sokal Affair and the History of Criticism,” *Critical Inquiry* 28.2 (2002): 470–508.

periodization itself, the limits of and alternatives to historicism, and the strengths and weaknesses of emergent methods of literary criticism. We are in a good position, moreover, to develop such methods because the “texts,” broadly conceived, that many of us study (for example, films, plastic art, works in digital media) exert powerful pressure on the very idea of textuality and other fundamental concepts of literary analysis.

This brings me, finally, to the role that Post45 might play as a home for what the journal calls “cutting-edge work in the field.” While “Post45” names several related things—a conference, a book series, and a journal—it is above all and most generally “a collective of scholars working on American literature and culture since 1945.”¹³ So it is neither a discipline (like English or history) nor a professional organization with dues-paying members (like the MLA or the MSA) but a society of thinkers with overlapping interests and expertise. I hope that this society will expand in the coming years, not just to include more literary critics who might help us to refine our methods and objects of analysis, but also to attract scholars from other disciplines, especially those that are closely aligned with literary studies, such as history, art history, sociology, anthropology, and psychology. Post45 might thus become a site where different approaches to apprehending the cultural objects of the recent past can make contact with one another. Surely this mingling of disciplines would produce some friction and conflict—since each individual discipline, as Jacques Rancière writes, has a unique “way of defining an idea of the thinkable”—but is that so bad?¹⁴

We have all learned to value interdisciplinary scholarship, which has proliferated dramatically since 1960, and especially since 1980, when Clifford Geertz pointed to “the enormous amount of genre mixing in intellectual life.”¹⁵ Of course, we have also seen its limits and problems, as when it deteriorates into what anthropologist Marshall Sahlins dubs “competitive xeno-

13. This quotation appears on the *Post45* journal website.

14. Jacques Rancière, “Thinking between Disciplines: An Aesthetics of Knowledge,” trans. Jon Roffe, *Parrhesia* 1 (2006) 6.

15. Clifford Geertz, *Local Knowledge: Further Essays in Interpretive Anthropology* (New York: Basic Books, 1983) 19.

philia," or "trumping one's disciplinary mates by importing prestigious ideas from unrelated disciplines."¹⁶ Nevertheless, given Post45's focus on the period that saw the rise of interdisciplinarity as a major event in American intellectual culture, it would seem poised to foster a more self-aware and productive version of exchange across and between disciplinary boundaries.¹⁷ A book like *Hip Figures* enacts such an exchange, productively in my view, between the discipline of English and the multidisciplinary field of U.S. political history. This is finally why I want to see it as a prompt to begin a new conversation regarding how we make knowledge about the period formerly known as contemporary.

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16. Marshall Sahlins, "The Conflicts of the Faculty," *Critical Inquiry* 35.4 (2009) 1015, 1014.

17. On the rise of interdisciplinarity, see James Chandler, "Introduction: Doctrines, Disciplines, Discourses, Departments," *Critical Inquiry* 35.4 (2009): 729–46; and Louis Menand, *The Marketplace of Ideas: Reform and Resistance in the American University* (New York: Norton, 2010) ch. 3.