Dissenting Commodities

Negotiations of (Un)popularity in Publications Critical of Post-9/11 U.S.-America

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I. (Un)popularity and Marketability

This essay discusses three generically diverse pieces of writing that are critical of U.S.-American foreign policy and society since 9/11: Jane Mayer's *The Dark Side* (2008), Jonathan Franzen's *Freedom* (2010), and Juliana Spahr's *thisconnectionofeveryonewithlungs* (2005). These texts—journalistic, novelistic, and poetic—are dissenting, critical, and counter-hegemonic depictions of the direction that the USA has taken since 9/11. They have been written, marketed, and successfully sold to well-established sectors of the reading public. While there is a significant body of scholarly work that focuses on how such examples of post-9/11 writing offer discourses counter to those perpetuated by top policymakers and mainstream media outlets, little attention has been paid to the commodified nature of such writerly dissent. In my analyses of these texts, I explore the tensions and ambivalences regarding issues of unpopularity and popularity that affect writers who strive for political impact while they participate in a market logic that inevitably dampens the blow.

I thus conceive of popularity and unpopularity in terms of marketability. Raymond Williams writes in *Keywords* that the word ‘popular’ began as ‘a legal and political term’, referring to what was generated by the people, but finds that ‘[t]he transition to the predominant modern meaning of ‘widely favoured’ or ‘well-liked’ is interesting in that it contains a strong element of setting out to gain favour’ (236-37). That which sets out to be popular is strategically designed to fall within the parameters of what is known to be favorable. Popular cultural artifacts, news outlets, and political messages generally enter the realm of the familiar and acceptable, abide by established tastes and sensibilities, and match desires and expectations prevalent within the public sphere. They are, simply put, produced with their markets in mind.

The unpopular is that which does not set out to gain favor. It does not purposefully appeal to a market, even though it will likely find one, however small. Within a neoliberal age that accommodates virtually any form of
cultural expression (even the extreme levels of offense pursued by the band Anal Cunt mentioned in this volume’s introduction), the unpopular is more of an aspiration—a fantasy of unadulterated and autonomous expression that does not pander to anyone or anything—than a fully realizable phenomenon. Pursuits of the unpopular are nonetheless attempts to break out of established paradigms, and, even if in failure, they perform politics. Jacques Rancière’s concept of the ‘distribution of the sensible’ is helpful in this context (cf. *Aesthetics* 12–19). Changes made to this distribution of what can be known, sensed, and imagined at any given place and time are, for Rancière, the essence of politics. I posit that pursuits of the unpopular have more potential to disrupt this distribution than the purposefully popular, as the latter is tailored to fall largely within its bounds.

Rancière’s theoretical framework offers a productive perspective for thinking about issues pertaining to unpopularity and popularity as they find expression within, and amongst discourses surrounding, politically and socially critical writing about U.S.-America’s post-9/11 era. My contention is that such writing engages in politics in the manner that Rancière conceptualizes, by adding to the ways we sense and perceive the post-9/11 political and social horizon. Naturally, this happens in ways that are in accordance with the segmentation of the literary market and the media landscape at large. The impulse to engage in political and social critique is thus channeled through specific market structures that position the meaning and reception of these texts, determine who their audiences will be, etc. This process is one that generates complex negotiations regarding issues of popularity and unpopularity—what I have respectively framed as the pursuit of market-friendliness and the refusal to make such a blatant appeal.

After elaborating upon Rancière’s concept and relating it to notions of the unpopular and popular (section II), I proceed with the three case studies (section III). While I discuss the content of these three texts, I also consider paratextual information (III.1), authorial comments (III.2), and the selection of genre (III.3), respectively, to understand the positioning of these texts as products. These dissenting commodities engage in the politics of aesthetics while they are also framed within the limitations that the logic of the market places on this endeavor.

II. Political Dissent and the Distribution of the Sensible

The premise that sensory perception is contingent upon social, political, and historical regimes offers a powerful framework with which to consider
(un)popularity. Rancière establishes the phrase ‘distribution of the sensible’ to refer to a system of boundaries that define what is generally sensed within a community. For Rancière, politics ‘consists in interrupting the distribution of the sensible by supplementing it with those who have no part in the perceptual coordinates of the community, thereby modifying the very aesthetico-political field of possibility’ (Rockhill 3). Politics is the integration of that which has previously been excluded from view, the subjectivization of those not formerly acknowledged as speaking, acting subjects.

According to such a framework, something can become popular if it falls within the realm of what is recognizable to the senses. The unpopular, on the other hand, confounds the senses; it arises from outside the frame of what is knowable, visible, or audible—from an uncanny, non-normative place excluded from dominant frames. The unpopular thus performs politics by first disrupting and consequently reconfiguring the distribution of the sensible. According to this extension of Rancière’s framework onto notions of (un)popularity, politics is the introduction of the unpopular into the field of the sensible. It involves bestowing something or someone with the chance to be sensed—with legitimate and ontological presence—as well as with the ability to influence the distribution to which it/he/she belongs. The unpopular is both political and aesthetic because it alters the purview of perception; it rearranges the coordinates of what is knowable, visible, and imaginable.

As any form of cultural expression, non-fictional and fictional literature can exert pressure on the distribution of the sensible. Rancière often stresses the difference between speech and noise in discussions of the literary: speech is voiced by those participating in the distribution of the sensible, while the latter is the din of the excluded. Political activity ‘makes audible as speaking beings those who were previously heard only as noisy animals’ (Aesthetics 4). For Rancière, most literature as we know it today has emerged from an aesthetic revolution epitomized by the realism of Balzac and Flaubert. In producing works that paid indiscriminate, impartial, democratic attention to the minute details, objects, and artifacts of banal, everyday life, these writers tore down hierarchies that ‘governed [...] the appropriateness of expression’ (Literature 10). They shifted to the ‘social and political promotion of ordinary human beings’ (Literature 11). Instead of portraying the actions of heroes, Rancière states that:

The sentences of Balzac and Flaubert may well have been mute stones. [...] They don’t have voices like princes, generals or orators. But they only
speak all the better as a result. They bear on their bodies the testimony of their history. And this testimony is more reliable than any speech offered by human mouth. It is the truth of things as opposed to the chatter and lies of orators. (Literature 14)

Sentences like mute stones, I suggest, are sentences that communicate without appealing to an audience. They are not crafted with the same kind of rhetorical and political intentions as the sentences of ‘princes, generals or orators’ and thus embrace the tenets of the unpopular as I have defined it. This literary aesthetic was revolutionary, according to Rancière, because it pulled the ‘testimony’ and ‘the truth of things’ from the realm of ‘noisy animals’ into the field of speech.

I would add here that what were once revolutionary narrative tactics during the time of Balzac and Flaubert have lost their singularity within the logic of postmodernism. In an essay on philosophical honesty in postmodern literature, Timothy Bewes stresses how sentences can no longer appear like mute stones—autonomous and true—because ‘(1) a sphere outside the administered realm of the market seems unimaginable at the moment’ and ‘(2) because of the theoretical and philosophical objections to the concept of aesthetic autonomy which arise in postmodernism’ (428). Within a neoliberal market designed to absorb all human action (cf. Harvey 3), and with intertextuality and pastiche overriding the notion of ‘aesthetic autonomy’, attempts at literary ‘testimony’ and ‘truth’ are inevitably compromised by a cultural and economic sphere from which an escape ‘seems unimaginable’. The unpopular is always already swallowed up by the market’s highly obliging distribution of the sensible.

The distribution of the sensible could perhaps also be construed as the distribution of the marketable. It seems that the more expandable and accommodating this market distribution becomes, the less it can be perturbed or produce significant counterweights to the speech of official policymakers—the ‘princes, generals [and] orators’. As Jodi Dean writes, the USA witnesses a significant discrepancy between ‘the circulation of content and official policy. Both are politics, just politics of different sorts, at different levels’ (20). Referring specifically to the post-9/11 era, she notes how the Bush administration, for example, acknowledged what was a significant deluge of dissent within various media channels and in the form of mass protests on the streets as preemptive war on Iraq drew near. Yet, this was acknowledgement of a right to express disagreement—of the fact that people are entitled to their opinions, just as the administration had a right to its own. The communication of dissent did not exert pressure on the
powers that were. A democratic openness of expression that continuously revises the limits of the sensible proves to be compatible with a disjoint in the mechanisms of democracy: ‘dense, intensive global communications networks actually relieve top-level actors (corporate, institutional, and governmental) from the obligation to answer [...]’ (Dean 20).

These dynamics, I would venture, generate a desire amongst those unsatisfied with the status quo for unvarnished, true communication and a form of politics different from the actual ‘normative political sphere’ that ‘appears as a shrunken, broken, or distant place of activity among elites’ (Berlant 227). Ironic as it may be, in October 2003, Bush himself expressed the wish to ‘go over the heads of the filter and speak directly to the people’ (qtd. in Berlant 223). Lauren Berlant discusses this comment in her book Cruel Optimism, suggesting that the filter, which sorts out noise to make communication possible, creates clear speech and strategic messaging, as opposed to affective noise. Bush’s comment reveals a desire for ‘true soul-to-soul continuity between politicians and their public’ (Berlant 226). Such continuity would be democracy in an ideal state and communication in its purest form.

This political fantasy of getting to the side of noise is what unpopular artistic and aesthetic endeavors entertain. Pursuits of the unpopular, while they cannot presuppose radical rupture within the postmodern paradigm, nevertheless strive to bring untapped ideas and affects to light and make them available for reflection. The texts presented in the next section perform this kind of politics. They portray certain facts, stories, and sentiments, drawing them into the purview of the sensible. I would suggest that they stem from a desire for unfiltered politically and socially critical expression. This desire, however, takes a transformational journey: it is translated into words on paper, picked up by the appropriate publishing houses, and packaged and publicized to meet the demands of the market in which it ultimately circulates.

III. Commodified Critique: Three Case Studies

III.1 The Dark Side

In his description of writers like Balzac and Flaubert, Rancière emphasizes how fiction, when democratically chronicling the minutiae of unremarkable objects and lives, enters the same realm as testimony. It reports and lays bare material to the reader’s eyes. The testimony that results from
investigative journalism, I would argue, attempts a similar type of politics. With what became a bestseller within the American market, Jane Mayer chronicles the way black sites such as Abu Graib, Guantanamo, and the case for invading Iraq, among other things, were made possible. The Dark Side suggests that Bush, Cheney, and close advisors obtained what many found to be dubious legal opinions to sanction, for example, forced confessions, extrajudicial detention, and the expansion of executive power. White House insiders—not even political opponents but in-house lawyers, top military and intelligence officials, allies and the British Intelligence Service—were, as Mayer’s research attests, marginalized and penalized for challenging decisions and expressing dissent. Much of this dissent remained hidden, as these matters were protected by claims of national security. The administration essentially controlled and protected a specific ‘distribution of the sensible’ and resisted attempts to rearrange its coordinates.

While it is interesting to consider the ‘distribution of the sensible’ and the controlling of what could become popular inside the post-9/11 White House, this is not my main intention in discussing this text. Rather, I mean to highlight the politics of Mayer’s journalism itself, which gives voice to many politicians, aides, intelligence workers, lawyers, military personnel and military psychologists—not to mention detained terror suspects and victims of torture—who had been silenced. Her collection of details, interviews, and researched facts about the course of events are laid out chronologically. The book’s politics is about giving things presence, offering them, making them available for recognition and acknowledgement. It pulls information into the purview of the sensible—or, in Ranciere’s words on literature, it ‘intervenes [...] in the carving up of space and time, the visible and invisible, speech and noise’ (Literature 4).

With a title like The Dark Side, the book also loudly announces itself as a work that reveals concealed truths, the Other of the government’s official narrative. Its purposefully flaunted appeal is the access it gives the reader to unvarnished reality. As the review blurbs covering my edition claim, this account, which became a finalist for the National Book Award, is ‘deeply troubling’, ‘shocking’, ‘unsettling’; it is lauded as an ‘essential’ book ‘that should be read by every concerned American’ (this is the Anchor Books edition, 2009 [2008]). The Washington Post writes that ‘to dismiss these [findings] as wild, anti-American ravings will not do. They are facts, which Mayer substantiates in persuasive detail’; Bloomberg News says that the narrative takes the reader through ‘the processes by which practices and methods we associate with tyrannies become official U.S. policy’. What these reviewers consistently claim is that Mayer’s work
brings new facts to light, and that it is vital that they reach the public. The book did, indeed, reach many readers, as its bestseller status proves. It surely informed a significant number of U.S.-Americans about post-9/11 political realities largely excluded from the mainstream media’s coverage. When reviewers write that such a journalistic account is important and essential, the question is to what ends does such importance and essentiality aim?

One blurb is particularly striking in a different way than the others, and it moves me toward a tentative answer. A reviewer for *Slate* is quoted as stating: ‘Stunning.... If you’re a fan of *24*, you’ll enjoy *The Dark Side*’. In other words, viewers of the fictional television series *24* about Counter Terrorism Unit agent Jack Bauer will also enjoy the heart-racing tale of American tyranny Mayer reports. What the selection of this blurb for the front matter (i.e. the pages proceeding the actual text) of this edition indicates is that *The Dark Side* is marketed as a consumer experience and form of entertainment. While I do not wish to insinuate that a TV series like *24* is not critical in its own right, its critique operates metaphorically while Mayer’s work of investigative journalism speaks directly of the facts and gives voice to flesh-and-blood witnesses. The paratextual reference to *24* implicitly relegates *The Dark Side* to the same market segment occupied by viewers of fictional television.

The selection of this blurb is symptomatic of an effort to gain favor—a positioning of the book within a large and established consumer market. In his work on the forms and functions of paratexts, Gérard Genette writes that every paratext is

> a privileged place of a pragmatics and a strategy, of an influence on the public, an influence that—whether well or poorly understood and achieved—is at the service of a better reception for the text and a more pertinent reading of it (more pertinent, of course, in the eyes of the author and his allies). (2)

The paratextual strategy of this blurb’s selection is to mobilize a consumer segment. It sets the stage for a page-turning experience rather than for collective outrage to which policymakers would have to answer. The importance and essentiality of the narrative that Mayer presents is thus packaged as a politically dissenting, shockingly true document that is destined for likeability amongst a certain milieu, rather than the grounds for the policy changes Mayer implicitly begs for throughout the account she provides. There is a push for popularity written all over this book’s packaging, while
its message is meant to function in an unpopular manner in the sense of perturbing the status quo. This packaging and presentation of disturbing information as ‘likeable’ is strange, though it is easy to overlook the strangeness of such a scenario at first glance, because it has arguably become a naturalized phenomenon within the current cultural logic. The ‘like’ function on Facebook comes to mind as an analogy: awkward moments arise when users post troubling information that friends, wishing to acknowledge the importance of such content, end up ‘liking’ for lack of an alternative response mechanism. In a similar sense, The Dark Side circulates as a product within the book market and, as such, participates in a logic in which favorability-as-marketability is its driving force. Its outrage-inducing content stands in tension with its commodification.

III.2 Freedom

Jonathan Franzen’s novel Freedom supplements perception about American politics, culture, and society with the breadth of politically charged themes and plotlines pertaining to the post-9/11 era that it covers. It is a family saga that begins just after 9/11 and traces the interrelated fates of various protagonists. One of them is the family son, Joey Berglund, who has just begun his college career when the 9/11 terrorist attacks occur. Imbued with a sense of entitlement, Joey resents the attacks for their interference in his college experience:

Joey Berglund had received numberless assurances that his life was destined to be a lucky one. [...] The world had given unto him, and he was fine with the taking. [...] College looked like it would be an extension of the world as he had always known it, only better. He was so convinced of this—took it so much for granted—that on the morning of September 11 he actually left his roommate, Jonathan, to monitor the burning World Trade Center and Pentagon while he hurried off to his Econ 201 lecture. Not until he reached the big auditorium and found it all but empty did he understand that a really serious glitch had occurred. [...] The deep chagrin he’d then experienced [...] became the seed of his intensely personal resentment of the terrorist attacks. [...]. In the days after 9/11, everything suddenly seemed extremely stupid to Joey: It was stupid that a ‘Vigil of Concern’ was held for no conceivable practical reason, it was stupid that people kept watching the same disaster footage over and over, it was stupid that the Chi Phi boys hung a banner
of ‘support’ from their house, it was stupid that the football game against Penn State was canceled, it was stupid that so many kids left Grounds to be with their families [...]. (232–33)

The novel performs politics in the way Rancière describes it not simply because Joey’s perspective obviously counters post-9/11 discourses of trauma, redemption, and heroism that bolstered the hegemony’s tightly controlled distribution of the sensible. Rather, in portraying a character like Joey, the novel performs politics in the detailed, democratic attention it pays to the psyche of a young adult who is unremarkable, unadmirable, and has absorbed neoliberal individualism to such a degree that he ‘personally’ resents national, collective tragedy. This is not a story of actors or heroes but that of mundane living and, according to Rancière, ‘what literature pits against the [...] privileging of action over life, is writing seen as a machine for making life talk’ (Literature 14). Franzen’s novel is a reporting on life that integrates the unpopular into its fabric, thereby presenting it as an artifact available to perception.

As Franzen states in an essay on novel-writing entitled Why Bother?, his aims as a writer are not explicitly political nor does he expect the aesthetics of his work to have much societal impact:

I can’t pretend the mainstream will listen to the news I have to bring. I can’t pretend I’m subverting anything. [...] I can’t stomach any notion that serious [literature] is good for us. It’s hard to consider literature a medicine, in any case, when reading it serves mainly to deepen your depressing estrangement from the mainstream. [...] Expecting [literature] to bear the weight of our whole disturbed society—to help solve our contemporary problems—seems to me a peculiarly American delusion. To write sentences of such authenticity that refuge can be taken in them: Isn’t it enough? Isn’t it a lot? (73–74)

Here, Franzen expresses a conviction in small, sentence-sized forms of poetic truth, along with a professed disdain for the mainstream. As a writer, he aims to offer refuge as opposed to calls for action. Novel writing is, for him, not about political agendas and there is nothing particularly heroic about the effort. The ‘bother’ is about refuge, retreat, reflection, and a sense of connection between readers and sentences on the page.

When Oprah Winfrey, the highest-rated talk show host in U.S.-American television history, announced that Franzen’s novel The Corrections, which was published before Freedom, had been chosen for her book club, Franzen
publicly expressed concern about what his instant popularity would mean. He worried that his association with Winfrey’s pop-iconic status would alienate his writer friends and the types of readers he most wanted to reach. His reaction, not surprisingly, caused a wave of controversy and motivated Winfrey to rescind the selection (cf. Kachka). The controversy was nonetheless effective in putting Franzen on the map.

Franzen, especially by the time he wrote and published *Freedom*, had become a brand name with a marketing machinery behind him poised and ready to push his products and more or less ensure their commercial success. His post-9/11 realism reaches a widespread public, because it is presented as a high-demand commodity. The ‘Oprah incident’ suggests that Franzen is not fully comfortable with the phenomenon he has become. He wishes to satisfy the desires of those who value the unpopular and feel a ‘depressing estrangement from the mainstream’. This, not hype and attention, is the source of his pride as a writer. There is certainly something snobbish and judgmental about this desire to be unpopular. It presupposes that mainstream audiences lack the subtlety or acumen to take refuge in sentences according to Franzen’s design, that the realm of the popular glosses over and fails to grasp the text’s poetic truth.

Yet, perhaps Franzen’s discomfort is more accurately about the politics of aesthetics. When a book is hyped in the way *Freedom* is, it becomes difficult if not impossible to discern if its success, in terms of sales, truly depends on its content or marketing and publicity. Its popularity is anything but spontaneous or surprising and its circulation among readers is by no means autonomous. What is more, the reading process becomes prefigured, or pre-mediated, by the hype. This is a potential conflict of interest for the politics of Franzen’s novelistic aesthetics. When they are lauded as coming from the greatest American novelist of our time, Franzen’s sentences are loaded with platitudes and an imposed weightiness that they are not meant to possess. In depicting Joey’s reaction to 9/11, for instance, Franzen is arguably not voicing political opinion through his character, but rather attempting to transcribe the noise of life into discernable speech. The novel’s politics, as in this particular scene, lies in its embrace of an unremarkable, unlikeable, selfish college student. Joey’s personal resentment towards the 9/11 attacks as well as the outpouring of emotion and campus activity they unleash is a depiction of an unpopular, post-9/11 structure of feeling.

Like the un-heroic and un-admirable Joey, Franzen’s own aesthetic is meant to be un-heroic in itself, not met by an applauding Oprah-show studio audience or interpreted as the definitive social portrait of our times. Its aim is to expand the distribution of the sensible into the flat, banal,
embarrassingly human stuff of U.S.-American experience since 9/11. This is the politics and the aesthetic that the novel's popularity might overshadow and the potential source of Franzen's controversial reaction to the mainstream favorability that the phenomenon of Winfrey's book club selection guarantees.

III.3  thisconnectionofeveryonewithlungs

The degrees of (un)popularity of a published text depend on its genre. Mayer's non-fictional 'current events' book and Franzen's literary novel represent two of the most readily bought and sold genres on the market. By choosing to write poetry, a writer also inherently accepts the limited extent of her own (un)popularity. Even the most renowned poets would not garner the kind of media hype or sales figures that a popular novelist would. Juliana Spahr published a series of personal and political poems written from her home in Hawaii between 2001 and 2003, which she entitled thisconnectionofeveryonewithlungs; it begins with a poem about 9/11, followed by others concerned with its political aftermath. The spirit and structure of Spahr's lyrics are in the tradition of Walt Whitman. Formally and thematically, they cultivate notions of connectedness. The ethos of these poems is clearly to expand the distribution of the sensible into an all-encompassing whole.

Spahr's words aim to refigure notions of selfhood that banish individuality and selfishness to create an ethical mode of being that fosters awareness of the contingency between the cells, the body, personal space, the state, nation and international spheres, through to the limitless expanses of outer-space. In the 11 March 2003 entry she writes:

Bush keeps saying he will go it alone if he has to.
Huge protests continue, protests without alone and against alone.
It is the word alone, beloveds, the word alone.
When I speak of alone I speak of how there is no alone as Pakistan claims it is moving in on bin Laden, as Iran's nuclear plant is nearing completion, as Oscar organizers announce that the show will go on in the event of war.

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It is an uneventful day as we sit here waiting for news.
The television promises updates on the situation with Iraq on the half hour.
Our apartment is small and is buried between two other apartments,
one above and one below.

Beloveds, my desire is to hunker down and lie low, lie with yous in beds and bowers, lie with yous in resistance to the alone, lie with yous night after night.

But the military industrial complex enters our bed at night. We sleep with levels of complicity so intense and various that our dreams are of smothering and of drowning and of the military outside our door and we find it hard to get up in the morning. (61–63)

In *Frames of War*, Judith Butler responds to U.S. foreign policy since 9/11 by asking that we reconsider subjectivity in a way that ‘implies living socially, that is, the fact that one’s life is always in some sense in the hands of the other. It implies exposure both to those we know and to those we do not know’ (14). Spahr engages in a similar reframing by resisting ‘the alone’—resisting a sense of enclosure to accept complicity, resisting a narrow distribution of the sensible to cultivate a globally scaled form of awareness. She advocates a sensibility through which the discrete boundaries of bodies and things dissolve and frames collapse.

This wish for an all-inclusive distribution of the sensible is a wish for the end of politics in the way Rancière defines it: with no noise waiting to be turned into discernible speech, with nothing excluded awaiting entry into the purview of perception, the post-political, democratic vision Spahr cultivates is utopian. She figures a space in which everything is awarded ontological presence, legitimacy, and equal footing—in which terrorism, weapons of mass destruction, and preemptive war would be rendered useless. But, as Spahr acknowledges, the ‘military industrial complex’ persists and waits ‘outside our door’.

Ultimately, Spahr’s poetry cultivates a vision that self-consciously admits to its own limitations. Rancière describes writing that tries to prefigure the future and write new life into being as inherently thwarted by the fact that it can only draw from the world available at the time of its composition. Instead of envisioning new forms of life out of nothing, writing is ‘a powerful machine for self-interpretation and for the re-poetization of life, capable of converting all the rubbish of ordinary life into poetic bodies and signs of history’ (*Literature* 29). The notion of a ‘new body that sings the hymn of the new world is destined to remain a utopia, at once necessary and unrealizable, by means of which the regime of literary writing projects itself beyond itself’ (*Literature* 29). Instead of forging the new, the writer can only really convert what is unpopular and excluded into the distribution of the sensible. Boundaries are not collapsed but shifted.
Spahr pursues what is ‘necessary but unrealizable’, not merely in terms of what her poetry can achieve but also, I would argue, by choosing to be a poet herself. Successful and recognized as she is, she devotes her energies to a relatively unpopular mode of cultural production. Her efforts go into words that will shift thought and experience within an intimate circle. As she writes of her apartment, framed by others on all sides, social experience is ultimately one of compartmentalization, not fusion. The military-industrial complex waiting outside her door blocks the extension of social engagement that she is able to cultivate domestically and creatively. She engages in a small form of politics in the sense that the message of her poetry is limited by the market of readers for which contemporary poetry is packaged and marketed. The impetus for writing is thus not revolutionary but a modest contribution to latent and untapped realms of perception, to honing and preparing the senses for new configurations of reality not yet fully imaginable. Spahr produces an inherently unpopular type of text yet still bothers to bring it into existence, and thus she upholds the conviction that even the smallest contributions to the distribution of the sensible are worth our while.

IV. Conclusion: Framing Counter-discourse

I have covered a range of different genres of text. Yet, from Mayer’s laying out of facts to Franzen’s depiction of mundane subjects to Spahr’s verses about complicity and connectedness, all these texts perform politics, or at least attempt to add to the way we sense and perceive the social and political contexts they address. This kind of politics is about illuminating parts that have no part (to paraphrase Rancière). It is about giving the unpopular the option to become popular and to ‘introduce lines of fracture’ (Rancière, Aesthetics 39) into arrangements of perception. A discourse counter to those disseminated by top policymakers and the mainstream media takes shape, is circulated and documented, via such publications.

Instead of simply focusing on how the case studies presented here function in counter-discursive manners, however, my aim has been to understand the fate of counter-discursive publications within the logic of the publishing market. Mayer’s investigative journalism is packaged as a thrilling experience as much as it comprises a document of potentially serious political consequence. Franzen’s literary fiction seeks to honestly portray American society and tap into a truthfulness of experience that pandering to a market arguably taints; yet, his novels are hyped more than those of almost any other contemporary U.S.-American novelist today. Spahr’s
poetry funnels dissenting expression into an intimate sphere, making her global vision knowingly utopian and inevitably limited. All of these cases have exposed a tension between the degrees of popularity (the purposeful setting out to gain favor and market viability) and unpopularity (expression free of targeted appeal) that such texts symbolize. I have thus explored how these publications embody tensions surrounding (un)popularity. This essay is meant as an impulse for further inquiries in such a direction—into reading critical texts not simply for their messages but also for how such messages are framed for the market, and what this does to the channeling and fate of dissent.

Works Cited