

Amodern 6: Reading the Illegible

AMODERN 6: READING THE ILLEGIBLE

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Editing this special issue of *Amodern* was done, one could say, under the influence, in a reader-to-reader relationship with Craig Dworkin's 2003 monographic study of "a tradition of poetic illegibility."^[1] Having read for over a decade now under the influence of his poetry and critical work, I borrowed the title from Dworkin's book. What is more, in keeping with his impetus as projected there and extended in his most recent collection of essays, *No Medium*, I called for contributions that could think through the inter-relatedness of two things in an ambitious manner: the pressure put on the poetic imagination (for better and worse) by limit-cases of il/legibility; and technical and conceptual innovations in reading practices that have somehow shifted the horizontal divide-lines between the legible and illegible via a relationship to academic research.^[2]

The relational preposition “via” was purposefully indeterminate: academic knowledge is not necessarily the starting point or aim of this issue’s contributors, but at minimum it plays an informal role in informing these projects. It was and is important to me, as it seems to have been for several of the authors gathered here, that being ambitious in the sense described above invites a speculative criticality that need not be methodologically or stylistically conventional let alone conventionally academic. Rather, the work in this issue ranges from the scholarly to the para-scholarly and thinks across the arts. As a collaboratively produced network of invested thinking this issue is dedicated to the literary- and art-historical, socio-ethical, mediatized and speculative dynamics of reading as a common cultural practice, wherever it be put to work in the world as a mode of conscious praxis. Meta-aware but not merely for its own sake, in the articles that follow reading is done in the spirit that Marcel Proust invokes via the closing chapter of *Le Temps retrouvé*: “The work of the writer is only a sort of optical instrument which he offers to the reader so that he may discern in the book what he would probably not have seen in himself.”^[3]

Reading

Implicitly and less often explicitly, a concern for the desubjectification of readers charges much of what follows, with all the complications that conceptualizing both subjectivity and readership as such entail. What we have left to Proust’s narrator is his insistent privileging of books as *the* (only) textual object. At the risk of sounding too analytical, speaking transversally across the central terms of media theory and sociology as a way of studying communicability (both sayability and readability) seems like a fertile approach for mapping the previously unimaginable extent of the mediatization of contemporary life. It also pays attention to the key roles that languages (plural) play in that process, both on and below the surface of our everyday.^[4] Stig Hjarvard and colleagues have been at pains to stress a difference that bears repeating here: a media-centered approach is not necessarily a media-centric one.^[5] The latter admits a focus that the former can only *focus on* myopically rather than *think from*.^[6]

Just as Dworkin’s “reading” knowingly doubles as a lesson in listening, I foresaw this issue as a chance to explore the relationship between theories of mediatization and literary studies, given that the complexity of inter-media reading experiences that we

all now live with demand newly adequate complexes of attentional modes and forms. Devising syntheses of such complexions in contextually specific ways in turn demands a reflexive yet holistic movement towards the object of analysis – some kind of dancing with, as Friedrich Nietzsche might have put it while wearing his philologist’s hat.[7] What follows are nine examples of reading with an array of inter-media cultural objects that do not obviously prescribe the complex attention here paid to them. Better put, these are nine examples of reading with and against the power of authoriality exercised by nine quite different clusters of cultural expression, from jazz music to glitch art.

By way of a shorthand, I am going to call these variable complexes “attentional approaches” to underline the drive implied by the first term, so as to emphasize the projection of their project. When we read in amongst the pervasive media-scapes of our everyday it can be easy to forget that the tools, formats, and interfaces we use to compose, save, and share textual material – in short, our textual communications media – are interactive and inter-acting. The premise-*cum*-rationale of Dworkin’s *No Medium* pins this down as the constitutive problematic of studying the mediality of media:

No single medium can be apprehended in isolation. Moreover, these chapters collectively argue that media (always necessarily multiple) only become legible in social contexts because they are not things, but rather activities: commercial, communicative, and, always, interpretive.[8]

During a recent interview for *Amodern*, Jerome McGann further cautions against clumsy differentiations between supposedly old and supposedly new media forms and environments:

When we think about e-publishing it’s important to remember that printed works are themselves critical and analytic machines. They organize data, arguments, expositions, displays. We’re so accustomed to using them that we commonly take them as purely vehicular and transparent in relation to their “content.” But they’re not, they’re deeply interpretive, and they’re also remarkably flexible in the ways they can lead us to think and argue.[9]

Accordingly, one might say that the attentional approaches we synthesize today have to respond to new degrees of instability in the form, content, and context of what we

approach. If those qualities are not new to our communications media in general then we need to historicize their transformations. If, then, the form, content, and context of what and how we write and what and how we read are now hyper-extended and hyper-situated, it seems fair to suggest that our attentional approaches be recalibrated in response to the peculiar instabilities of new media objects and environments. Not least because, in a foundational sense, reading and writing are mutually dependent cultural practices.

From the scalability of digital data (Lev Manovich's "variable media," for instance), to the power relations vested by controlling those vectors of scaling (McKenzie Wark's "vectorialism," for instance), to the very idea of authorship in an era of data management (Kenneth Goldsmith's *Uncreative Writing*, for instance), our literacies are being strained.^[10] Given the modifiable experiences that are permitted by what Lori Emerson calls our "reading writing interfaces," the views (plural) we might have on any one object of analysis are now parallaxic: the same text can appear differently in different situations simultaneously. As Emerson says, "twenty-first-century readingwriting ups the ante," in a way that modifies by intensifying the contextual specificity of reading experiences.^[11] Add that to a fact as old as reading, that every reader puts their historical and ideological subjectivity to work in every attentional approach they make, muddled in a mix of emphases and blindnesses, and we have an active field that can not be accounted for by most paradigms of readership. Standard models from various camps typically assume some combination of fixed and variable factors. For example, the fixed model of an ideal reader paired with a variable or mutable text; or, subjective readers engaging with a text cast in ink. Our newly intensified problem is that both parties are now unstable in many, even most, reading contexts.

From glossing the vocabulary above it will come as no surprise to you that the "polyglot" field of the sociology of literature,^[12] plus its precedents and inheritors, are a big influence on my editorial bent.^[13] But I am yet to find a theory of reading that adequately accounts for all of the moving parts in the jigsaw or even just their fit. Bibliophiles, from professional book fans like Alberto Manguel to bibliologists like Paul Saenger, disagree with critical theorists, from the splintered lineages of Pierre Macherey to Paul de Man and Hélène Cixous to Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, who will not settle for reader-response theories, from Stanley Fish's "interpretive communities" to Wolfgang Iser's "literary anthropology."^[14]

Whatever the grounds of their disagreements, disagree they do. Putting aside their many nuances, collectively such differences show up the classic problem of

theorizing lived realities: the problematic tension between the specific and the general that every model must resolve for itself, while also accounting for whatever resolution it backs to affirm its own validity as a model. Unstable readers of unstable texts resist the kind of generality that is a minimum for robust theorization, for thinking the specific in general terms that can at least adequately account for both sides of the equation, a problem made all the more acute by increasingly “liquid” readingwriting contexts.[15] This problem precedes the other differences between models like those mentioned above – between, for instance, those that centralize the readers’ work on the text, be it “recuperative” or “reparative”;[\[16\]](#) those that centralize the text’s work on readers, as affect or prescription; those that centralize indifference or resistance, one way or other; and those that are slippery, be it because they are anti-/de-/re-/constructive.

Il/legibility

The contributors to this issue have all been willing to invert the hierarchy of responsibility we normally assume when we dismiss things in the world as “illegible.” Keeping in mind the problematic of *reading model reading* outlined above, each contribution somehow performs and analyses in a way that is speculative and may or may not be considered “model” as yet or at all. By not worrying about this problem, their work deftly shows that the limits of legibility at any one time in human history are adduced from the horizons of our abilities and willingness to read, not from any fault, block or lack on the part of worldly stuff. What, then, is “the illegible” if not faulty, blocked, lacking or plain absent? And why try to read the illegible?

Reading il/legibility poses as an oxymoron. Given the mutual exclusivity of said intention (to read) and its object (the unreadable), any attempt to read the illegible should combust at an impasse before it can be said to have begun. Literarily speaking, this contradiction can be re-tensioned as a paradox whereby the parent concept of “legibility” presupposes that said intention (to read) is necessary even if its object (the unreadable) seems impossible or inaccessible qua that intention; and that paradox can become productive if we pressurize the constituent concepts even slightly. Reading, as a present or future tense verb, describes an intention to act, to approach and to attend to something, but makes no (past tense) claim about what it does (*did*) or does not manage to achieve, nor does it presuppose how we should value or judge what it does and does not manage.[\[17\]](#) Reading is always *trying to read* – it describes an approach not a conquest. Somewhat ironically, the identity of the

illegible as that which is “not clear enough to be read” or is “indecipherable” is less clear than those definitions suggest.[18] Illegibility is itself a paradox. To be present, it has to register in some way(s) as the opposite of its conceptual identity – it has to work against its own negational value to work at all.

The *not-to-be-read* are things that we could possibly read if we had access, things that may be readable in themselves but are blocked by some manner of injunction. For example, censorship or other redacting gestures, or because they are not considered attractive and do not solicit (read “merit”) attention, or because the attention that they do solicit somehow invites what Julie Goldman calls “post-reading” in much the way that Roland Barthes was charmed by material he considered “*illisible*.”[19] The strictly *unreadable* are things that cannot be read. For example, things now lost or too damaged, or things locked by encryption or the limits of paleography. Just as the former category is blocked by a super-imposed (exterior) injunction, the latter category is blocked in contextually-specific circumstances and is not quite the same thing as the *not-yet-read*, which can be thought prospectively as something we might be able to read with ideas like Bruce Andrews’ version of “Unreadability – that which requires new readers and teaches new readings.”[20]

It is from the shade of that last category, of the *not-yet-read*, that the speculative ambitions I mentioned earlier of the articles in this issue project outwards; and they do so by enacting the inversion of responsibility also mentioned earlier. If, from their respective places, these authors found that the texts and issues they wished to approach somehow refused their attention they have realized self-critically the need to try to read differently rather than abandon the task. Individually and collectively, these articles also serve as a mirror on reading practices as such. Encouraged by the range of contributions, which stand as indicative examples not comprehensive prescriptions, the very idea of constantly renovating our critical literacies will I hope be read as call to work – one charged by the symbiosis of this issue’s central paradox and my shameless editorial stance. If this issue proffers any kind of modest, everyday meta-ethical incitement, it is this: Learn to read differently![21]

Contributions

The inaugural issue of *Amodern* explored the future(s) of the scholarly journal. There, Benjamin Robertson in particular discusses the shift from the linear sequence of content bound by codex publications to the multi-directional reading options enabled

by matrix-structured web platforms, like *Amodern*, as a change in grammatology. For exactly that reason, I am going to briefly introduce each contribution to this issue according to a sequence of thematic links that run back-and-forth through the billed order, pointing to just one way of navigating the many possible lines through this mini-network or matrix.

Johanna Drucker narrates how Ilia Zdanevich (known as Iliazd) brought together the earliest known anthology of experimental sound and visual poetry between 1947-49, *Poésie de Mots Inconnus*. Beginning with the look and feel of the book itself, an object now so scarce and museumified that it is all too infrequently re-read, she re-tells the history of his editorship. Iliazd's determination was directly fermented by the blustering claims to novelty of Isidore Isou, founder and propagandist of the Lettrist movement, and Drucker critically considers Iliazd's motivations and their outcome in terms of the historiographic lessons they offer to the way we remember, think and write about collaborations between visual and literary artists. In the same milieu of mid-twentieth-century Paris but with a different register and mode of history writing in mind, André Hodier proposed the "music essay" as a model for *composing* jazz criticism. John Mowitt develops a detailed philosophical account of both the status of each concept in Hodier's odd formulation plus what is at stake in their relation. Building on a career-long concern for the issue, Mowitt unfolds the problems for genre (generic) identity that essayistic reflexivity poses to any art and its criticisms by prompting us "to rethink completely what might constitute the subject of the essay." In turn, with and beyond Hodier's work, Mowitt takes up the significance of improvisational playing and essaying to the way we think critically about the concept of subjectivation.

Garrett Stewart makes a studied reading of photographic projects by Éric Rondepierre, works that go to extreme technical lengths to explore what Rondepierre himself calls "the blind spots of cinema." The Paris-based contemporary artist extracts frames, brackets, even background furniture, from the fleeting stills that normally get spun into supposedly moving images as film. Stewart takes these conceptual experiments, which cut across media, as exemplar of the "transmedium vector" that characterizes what he calls Conceptualism 2.0 - "an interpretive proposal, not an established program" - and its "platformatic gestures." Turning his attention, too, to legacies of conceptualist art practice, Luke Skrebowski pairs together a sophisticated unpacking of the contemporary concept of contemporaneity with a philosophical appraisal of so-called Conceptual Writing's post-conceptualism. In what Rosalind Krauss so famously called art's "expanded field," opened by the

constructive failings of strongly Conceptual art of the 1960-70s, Skrebowski takes the chance to clarify the art/non-art status claims of various writing-art mongrel practices. The institutional critique performed by Ben Lerner's auto-fictional novel *10:04* (2014) is taken as a vanguard example of what post-conceptual writing might be *if* established as a critical category.

Diana Hamilton focuses on the opening works of two novelistic trilogies by William Burroughs, *The Soft Machine* (1961) and *Cities of the Red Night* (1981), as well Robert Rauschenberg's turn to the combine method and John Ashbery's use of quotation and disjunction, to develop an argument about style as movement: "as the actual process of seemingly 'procedural' literature—or the means by which writing proceeds—rather than a static description or definition of a given text." For Hamilton, a stylistics fit for studying forms of procedural writing like Burroughs' cut-ups must involve reading the compositional moves that combine components in the work rather than just any sum effect of those components' qualities as a gathered whole. What one could then call, in Hamilton's sense, a *style* of reading, one rooted in cognitive science, has been performatively tested by Kate Briggs. Her contribution *stories* the story of reading Henry James' 1903 short story, "The Story in It," for a collaborative experiment with experimental psychologist Dr. Sam Hutton. The pair used eye tracking apparatus to record the scanpath of Briggs' gaze as it stuttered through a one-take reading of James' romance and so re-composed a new version of that text's word order. Just as James creates mirrors between the events and feelings of Maude Blessingbourne, her obsession with reading, and those of us who get to read about her life, Briggs uses structural repetitions in her account to register the bi-directional influences of her gaze on James' word order and James' story on her mind.

Drawing on theoretical differences between Gilles Deleuze & Felix Guattari's concept of the *order-words* and Alexander Galloway's interest in "the command and organization of the text/code relation," Matthew Applegate analyses how the transition from art-typing to text-based digital art brought about an expansion of the ways that an aesthetic of failure can produce and redistribute virtual space. His article examines the claims to novelty of text-driven glitch art: "the aestheticization of corrupted code or data." He does so by paying systematic theoretical attention to the nuances of transformation and translation that turn code into visualizations, be that as an image, text or whatever else. In his contribution, Michael Cronin thinks outwards from the quickening race within the translation services industry for instant and accurate machine translation. He couples the increasing scarcity of

translators brought on by this clamor for automation with an increasing scarcity of attention brought about by the mediatization of our contemporary “attentionscape,” and he does so to advocate a fuller and more fully public discussion about ecologies of translation. “In other words, you can only pay meaningful attention to what you can understand and translation in a multilingual world is central to the task of language mediation.”

The politics of misunderstanding and inattention find expression in a sharper example at the start of Stephen Voyce’s article. Erasure as an act of censorship that overwrites expressions of censure are condensed in Mohamedou Ould Slahi’s *Guantánamo Diary* (2015) in a way that, Voyce argues, is symptomatic of how redaction can be a powerfully negative signal of power relations. Reading redactions for what they are, in a specific instance, rather than *just* for what they cover up, would be one important part of what Voyce and Dee Morris have been mapping as “a *counter-forensic* poetics of militant research, one that reverse-engineers those technologies of surveillance and warfare increasingly absorbed into the fabric of everyday life.” Rosi Braidotti’s long and similarly grounded commitment to drawing the central concerns of feminism into the so-called Information Age by imminently critiquing the terms and forms of scholarship in the humanities continues to be hugely influential. In her new and extensive discussion with Heather Davis published in conjunction with this issue’s main articles, the pair together explore the consequences of posthumanist philosophies for scholarship and their attendant challenges to real-world ethics and models of subjectivity. What, they ask, are the shared responsibilities of readers and writers as activists in the age of the anthropocene?

Acknowledgments

I am hugely grateful to the *Amodern* team for being given the chance to bring this mini-network together, especially to Darren Wershler for the invitation and early encouragement. Trite though it sounds, this issue would not have been possible without the diligence and open-mindedness of Managing Editor, Michael Nardone, nor the trust and hard work of all the contributors. The “Amoderns” interview series is a parallel editorial project, and I am delighted that Rosi Braidotti and Heather Davis are speaking so insightfully alongside us, even if I can take no credit for instigating their conversation. Throughout these pages you can see glimpses of work by Kristen Mueller, a Berlin-based artist whose experiments with the extra-linguistic

marks of reading are well worth following via her website or various publications. With admiration and in friendship, this issue is dedicated to Craig Dworkin and Simon Morris on the eve of Information As Material's 15th birthday.

1. Craig Dworkin, *Reading the Illegible* (Evanston: Northwestern University

Press, 2003), xxii. Image type unknown
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- 2.

Craig Dworkin, *No Medium* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2013). Image type unknown
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- 3.

Marcel Proust, *Le Temps retrouvé* (1927), transl. Scott Hudson (University of Adelaide, 2014). Accessed 12/05/2016:

<https://ebooks.adelaide.edu.au/p/proust/marcel/p96t/chapter3.html>. Image type unknown
https://s.w.org/images/core/emoji/2

- 4.

For a fuller discussion of this topic, see Nick Thurston, "The Mediatization of Contemporary Writing," in Annette Gilbert (ed.), *Publishing As An Artistic*

Practice (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2016), 94-5. Image type unknown
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- 5.

Andreas Hepp, Stig Hjarvard & Knut Lundby, "Mediatization: Theorizing the Interplay between Media, Culture and Society," in *Media, Culture & Society*, vol.37:2 (2015): pp.314-24. Accessed 12/05/2016:

<http://mcs.sagepub.com/content/early/2015/02/16/0163443715573835.full>.

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- 6.

Hepp et al. "Mediatization," 317: "Being 'media-centric' is a one-sided approach to understanding the interplay between media, communications, culture and society, whereas being 'media-centered' involves a holistic

understanding of the various intersecting social forces at work at the same time as we allow ourselves to have a particular perspective and emphasis on the role



of the media in these processes.” Image type unknown
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7. On dancing and philology see, for example, Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy* (2nd edition Preface, 1886) and *The Gay Science* (Appendix, 1882),



transl. various. Image type unknown
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- 8.



Dworkin, *No Medium*, 28. Image type unknown
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9. Jerome McGann & Scott Pound, “Towards Philology in a New Key,” in *Amodern: The Future of the Scholarly Journal* 1:1 (2013). Accessed 12/05/2016:



<http://amodern.net/article/interview-with-jerome-mcgann/>. Image type unknown
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10. Lev Manovich, “Variable Media,” lecture delivered 03/11/05, V2 Institute (Rotterdam); McKenzie Wark, *A Hacker Manifesto* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004); Kenneth Goldsmith, *Uncreative Writing: Managing Language in the Digital Age* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011).



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11. Lori Emerson, *Reading Writing Interfaces: From the Digital to the Bookbound*



(Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2014), 171. Image type unknown
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12. James F. English, “Everywhere and Nowhere: The Sociology of Literature After the Sociology of Literature,” in *New Literary History* vol.41:2 (2010), v.



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13. See, for example: Richard Hoggart, *The Uses of Literacy: Aspects of Working Class Life* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1957) and Janet Wolff, "Cultural Studies and the Sociology of Culture," in *In_Visible Cultures* vol.1:1 (1998). Accessed 12/05/16: https://www.rochester.edu/in_visible_culture/issue1/toc/toc.html.



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14. See, for example: Alberto Manguel, *A History of Reading* (London: Penguin Books, 1997); Paul Saenger, *the Space Between Words: The Origins of Silent Reading* (Stanford University Press, 2000); Pierre Macherey (1966), *A Theory of Literary Production*, trans. Geoffrey Wall (London: Routledge, 1978); Paul de Man, *Resistance to Theory* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986); Hélène Cixious (1979), *Reading With Clarice Lispector*, trans. Verena A. Conley (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1990); Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003); Stanley Fish, *Is There a Text in This Class* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University press, 1980); Wolfgang Iser, *The Fictive to the Imaginary: Charting Literary Anthropology*



(Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1993). Image type unknown
<https://s.w.org/images/core/emoji/2.2.1/svg/21a9.svg>

15. See, for example: Paul Stephens, *The Poetics of Information Overload: From Gertrude Stein to Conceptual Writing* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2015) and Zygmunt Bauman, *Liquid Modernity* (Cambridge: Polity,



2000). Image type unknown
<https://s.w.org/images/core/emoji/2.2.1/svg/21a9.svg>

16. Eve Sedgwick, "Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading, Or, You're So Paranoid, You Probably Think This Essay Is About You," in *Touching Feeling*



(Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003), 123-151. Image type unknown
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- 17.

The confusion of tenses in written English between “to read” and “to have



read” does not help. Image type unknown
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18. *Oxford English Dictionary* Online. Accessed 12/05/16: <http://www.oed.com>.



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19. Judith Goldman, “Rethinking Non-Retinal Literature: Citation, “Radical Mimesis,” and Phenomenologies of Reading Conceptual Writing,” in *Postmodern Culture* vol.22:1 (2011). Accessed 12/05/16: <https://muse.jhu.edu/article/481023>. Roland Barthes, *S/Z* (1970) and *The*



Pleasure of the Text (1973), trans. various. Image type unknown
<https://s.w.org/images/core/emoji/2.2.1/svg/21a9.svg>

20. Bruce Andrews, “Text and Context” (1977), repr. in Bruce Andrews & Charles Bernstein (eds.), *The L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E Book* (Carbondale: Southern



Illinois University Press, 1984): 31. Image type unknown
<https://s.w.org/images/core/emoji/2.2.1/svg/21a9.svg>

21. That phrase, “Learn To Read Differently,” was the title of a survey exhibition of projects by Information As Material in 2013 at the Northern Gallery of Contemporary Art (Sunderland, UK). See also Nick Thurston, “Publishing As



Praxis,” in *Plastic Words* (London: Publication Studio, 2015): 28-37. Image type unknown
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Image: [Kristen Mueller](#), “III: The Work's Space and It's Demand,” from *Partially Removing the Remove of Literature*, 2014.