

1 JOHANNA HARTMANN, CHRISTINE MARKS,
2 AND HUBERT ZAPF, eds. *Zones of Focused*
3 *Ambiguity in Siri Hustvedt's Works: Interdis-*
4 *ciplinary Essays* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2016),
5 425 pp.

10 The growing general and academic interest
in the contemporary American writer Siri
Hustvedt has, not surprisingly, resulted in
the first collection of interdisciplinary essays
dedicated entirely to her work. The volume
contains a number of essays by international
scholars from various fields of knowledge,
15 “approach[ing] Hustvedt’s work from a range
of perspectives in order to engage with an
oeuvre that is hallmarked by a wide variety
of styles, themes, forms of narration, and aes-
thetic features” (3). The current collection
takes the phrase “zones of focused ambiguity”
for its title from Hustvedt’s 2012 essay “Border-
lands: First, Second, and Third Person
Adventures in Crossing Disciplines,” in which
she promotes the necessity of interdisciplin-
ary approach. The present volume sets out to
20 advocate interdisciplinarity as well, covering
the range from literature, philosophy, and psy-
choanalysis to medicine, memory, and percep-
tion studies.

25 The first of five sections, “Literary Creation
and Communication,” opens with an essay
“Why One Story and Not Another?” by Siri
Hustvedt herself, where she, exploring “[t]he
mind-body question” (11), speculates on the
nature of imagination, memory, and liter-
ary creativity. “Where do ideas come from?”
30 “Why [...] do some novels feel [...] like lies
and others feel true?” (11). Hustvedt tries to
find answers to these questions, focusing on
the “resonance [...] that lives between reader
and text” (24). According to the author, it is
our imagination that helps us to “leap out of
ourselves and, for a while, at least, become
someone else” (24). Gabriele Rippl further
elaborates on these “boundaries of the self”
(36) in the essay entitled “The Rich Zones
of Genre Borderlands: Siri Hustvedt’s Art
of Mingling.” Based on Hustvedt’s three
40 most recent “hybrid” (33) novels, the article
reveals how the writer’s “blurring of genre
boundaries” (27), on the one hand, “allows
for reinvigoration and further development of
genres” (32) and, on the other hand, is a way
to “[transgress] conventional homogeneous
and one-voiced ways of fictional world-mak-
ing” (36-37). Diana Tappen-Scheuermann’s
44 contribution “Reality Bites: Fractured Nar-

45 rative and Author-Reader Interaction in Siri
Hustvedt’s Work” picks up the discussion
of hybridity, zooming in on the boundar-
ies between fact and fiction. She compares
Hustvedt’s *The Shaking Woman* with David
Shields’s “‘reality-based’ literature” (40) and
singles out the differences between autobi-
ography and memoir, fiction and non-fiction,
considering Hustvedt’s writing to mirror “the
attempt to constitute the self through litera-
ture on different levels of autobiographical
writing” (49). Caroline Rosenthal’s lucid es-
say explores “the shifting boundaries” (52)
between reality and fiction even deeper in her
analysis of the representations of New York
City in *The Blindfold* and *What I Loved*. She
looks at “the imprint of urban space on peo-
ple’s minds and bodies” (52) and engages with
the “cultural practice” (55) of *flânerie*, defined
as “the process of walking and observing”
(55). Scrutinizing the city as “a cultural icon”
(51) and “a means of knowledge production”
(57), Rosenthal shows that in *The Blindfold*,
New York is represented as “a postmodern
labyrinth of signs which confuses rather than
clarifies the protagonist’s search for mean-
ing and wholeness” (57), whereas in *What I*
Loved, it is depicted as “a stimulating, vibrant
urban realm,” “a more private [and] homely
space” (57). Alfred Hornung closes the first
section with his article on the life writing and
neuroscience interaction, where he examines
three media landscapes—the Big Think, Ber-
lin Congress (October 2011), and Brainwave
Series at the Rubin’s Museum of Art in New
York—focusing on what António Damásio
called “the autobiographical self,” in Hus-
tvedt’s *The Shaking Woman*. Looking at the
public discourse of this text, Hornung stress-
es Hustvedt’s “belief in writing as a form of
creative synesthesia” (71) and perceives *The*
Shaking Woman as a “combination of both
narrative and non-narrative knowledge” (78).

Part II, “Psychoanalysis and Philosophy,”
opens with a very personal essay “The No
Truth about Siri” by French psychoanalyst
Lucien Mélése who shares his life story and
his experience reading Siri Hustvedt’s texts,
which he compares to “fragments of a dream”
(84). In his discussion of the author’s influ-
ence on his own work, especially Hustvedt’s
The Shaking Woman and *The Sorrows of an*
American which he calls “parallel” books (89),
Mélése admits that “[p]sychiatric-psychoana-
lytic literature is far from achieving [the] ef-
fect” (85) Hustvedt does in her descriptions of

1 trauma and migraine. In her contribution entitled
2 “Siri’s Timequakes,” Françoise Davoine,
3 another French psychoanalyst, advances the
topic of trauma by embedding it in the dis-
course of Freud’s, Lacan’s, and Sullivan’s psy-
choanalytical theories. Sharing some personal
5 experiences, Davoine pronounces *The Sorrows of an American* to be “a major book for the psychoanalytical healing of trauma and psychosis” (99). Jason Tougaw’s article “The Self is a Moving Target: The Neuroscience of Siri Hustvedt’s Artists” outlines “new frames [that Hustvedt creates] for her ideas about relationships between mind, body, self, and art” (128) within the neuroscientific scholarship of Jaan Panksepp and António Damásio. Seeing a number of similarities with Oscar Wilde’s *The Picture of Dorian Grey*, Tougaw interprets Hustvedt’s “villain-artists” (127) as “exploiting others through portraiture—almost a kind of soul stealing [...]” (115). Klaus Lösch and Heike Paul’s well-informed contribution “Dimensions of Tacit Knowledge and the Art(s) of Explication in Siri Hustvedt’s Work” then underscores the relevance of “the various aspects of the tacit” (135) in *The Shaking Woman*, *The Sorrows of an American*, and *The Blazing World*, directing special attention to “the relation of tacit knowledge and implicit gender bias” (146). These novels, according to the authors, “[point] to the tacit aspects of human experience,” reveal the interrelatedness of the tacit knowledge and the unconscious, and enclose the gender bias into the discourse of “a tacit cultural imaginary” (149). The last article of the section, “Wounding Words” by Mark C. Taylor, communicates Søren Kierkegaard’s and Siri Hustvedt’s life stories, drawing parallels between “the most literary philosopher in the history of western philosophy” and “the most philosophical novelist now writing” (153) and immersing into the questions of authorship, pseudonyms, and Freudian psychoanalysis.

Section III on “Medicine and Narrative” brings together six essays concerned with the representation of illness in Hustvedt’s work. The first contribution is by the Director of the Program in Narrative Medicine at Columbia University, Rita Charon, who shares her personal experience of having Hustvedt as a visiting professor. Using an extended metaphor of “surgeries” (186) in relation to Hustvedt’s seminars and writings, Charon confesses that “Siri’s operation opened something up in [the] clinical-readers” (187), more precisely: it

“opened up gates for scholars and practitioners in disparate disciplines, often constitutionally suspicious of one another, to wander together through mysterious and consequential forms of human experience” (189). Shifting to the discourse of literary studies, Carmen Birkle, in her detailed analysis of Hustvedt’s five novels, zooms in “on the representation of doctor-patient relationships, which shed light on Hustvedt’s critical perspective toward medical practice and reveal the (often) failed communication between both sides, the powers at work in these relationships, and, ultimately, Hustvedt’s passionate desire to understand what is happening in these inter-human encounters” (194). Birkle shows that “doctor-patient encounters are not only omnipresent but also structurally relevant to the movements of the plot that are ultimately linked to characters’ identity formation and the recognition of the self-other entanglement, that is, the intersubjectivity [...]” (212). In a similar vein, Britta Bein’s contribution “Mysterious Illness and the Acceptance of Ambiguity” discusses two novels, *The Blindfold* and *The Summer Without Men*, which illustrate how narrative “helps a patient make meaning of illness” (225) and serves as a means of coping with “existential crises that can be seen as expressions of a de-unified world in which the grand narratives, such as that of biomedicine, no longer hold universal truth” (234). Petra Gelhaus’s medico-philosophical essay “In Search of a Diagnosis: Siri Hustvedt’s *The Shaking Woman*” takes a closer look at the writer’s nonfictional autobiographical report about her seizures and personality “splits” (242) in relation to “the mind-body problem and the disease-illness problem” (237). The section ends with Susanne Rohr’s analysis of Hustvedt’s most recent novel, *The Blazing World*, where Rohr among other themes engages with the topic of autism, which, in her view, “seems to represent American’s cultural condition” (250) and “is more or less omnipresent in the contemporary arts” (257). The scholar argues that Ethan’s, protagonist Harriet Burden’s son, “slowed down” (249) entries are “moment[s] of *mise en abyme*” (258), which “exhibit the characteristics typically ascribed to autistic persons” (257) due to his “different pattern of the mind” (256) and “above all the need to continually look for and establish rules and routines” (257).

Part IV of the volume, “Vision, Perception, and Power,” opens with Carla Schulz-

Hoffmann's contribution which explores Siri Hustvedt's theory of literary visuality based on two novels—*The Blindfold* and *What I Loved*—and her essay collection *Mysteries of the Rectangle*. Schulz-Hoffmann highlights the writer's "commitment to the emotionality of perception" (267) and the dialogical character of the visual arts. The article that follows, "I look and sometimes I see: The Art of Perception in Siri Hustvedt's Novels" by Astrid Böger, continues the discussion of Hustvedt's engagement with visual arts, focusing on the relation of perception and perspective as well as perception and body. Tracing the evolution of the author's treatment of the perception of art, as represented in her earlier versus more recent novels, Böger locates a shift in the representation of art from "a dangerous force field [...] threatening its protagonist's sense of self" to a "more complex arena in which her protagonists meet and mix" and "a genuinely transformative power" that "enable[s] its creators and viewers to transgress numerous boundaries toward more fully realized selfhood" (292). Birgit Däwes's thought-provoking contribution "'Openings that can't be closed': Patterns of Surveillance Culture in Siri Hustvedt's Novels" proceeds to analyze Hustvedt's literary visuality focusing on "the connections between observation and power" (295). Based on examples from *The Blindfold*, *The Enchantment of Lily Dahl*, *The Sorrows of an American*, and *The Blazing World*, the essay demonstrates how Hustvedt's works "provide fresh perspectives on the foundations of surveillance studies" (298) and "remind us that [knowledge] is not inherent in the structures of seeing" (307). Last but not least in section four is the contribution by Anna Thiemann, who is concerned with the questions of female authorship and authority in Hustvedt's fiction while drawing portraits of the (post-)feminist artist. Thiemann provides an overview of the past and current perspectives on female authorship from "the madwoman in the attic" (312) to "masquerading women" (314) and then scrutinizes the artist characters of Hustvedt's *What I Loved*, *Summer Without Men*, and *The Blazing World*—the novels that "take issue with particular kinds of feminism, especially those that reduce women (artists) to victims of patriarchal oppression or believe in the redeeming power of subversive masquerade and poststructuralist theories of identity" (324).

The last five essays of the collection constitute the fifth part, entitled "Trauma, Memory, and the Ambiguities of Self." Jean-Michel Rabaté's article "History and Trauma in Siri Hustvedt's *The Sorrows of an American*" sketches a brief "dialogical framework from which trauma studies have grown" (331) and takes a closer look at the interactions of trauma with perception and memory in Hustvedt's novel as well as in a couple of her essays. Katharina Donn's contribution is also concerned with *The Sorrows of an American*, a novel that, according to her, "represents a fascinating twist on the genre of trauma fiction" and "develops a literary epistemology which originates in the pathology of trauma itself" (341). The essay shows how "trauma becomes a crisis of understanding itself" (343) and how it "distorts the ways in which we know and perceive the world" (346). At the same time, it argues that Hustvedt's text "[t]hrough the multi-dimensional patterns of several conceptual metaphors, [...] establishes the possibility of cognition beyond the rational" (354). Katja Sarkowsky in "'The wounded psyche is not a broken leg': Illness, Injury, and Writing the Self in Siri Hustvedt's Work" speculates in line with the authors from the third section on the concepts of illness and wellness. The scholar argues that Hustvedt distinguishes between "bodily disease[s]," such as cancer, and "neurological disorders," such as shaking (370), but that both are significant for the construction and understanding of a self. Approaching Hustvedt's writings from a memory studies perspective, Christopher Schliephake underscores the role of body memory as "an implicit form of memory" (379) in *The Shaking Woman* and *The Sorrows of an American*, scrutinizing the author's shaking, as represented in *The Shaking Woman*, as "the interaction between self, cognition, body, and world [...] repeatedly problematized as one of intersubjectivity and self-reflective processing of information" (380). The final article by Heike Schwarz applies various theories on multiple personality disorder (MPD) to Hustvedt's most recent novel, *The Blazing World*. Schwarz elaborates on the concept of "self" and shows how Hustvedt's text "even mimics MPD by using the narrative technique of polyphony, and how her recurrent intertextual references emphasize a multidimensional sense of self" (391).

A conversation between Susanne Becker and Siri Hustvedt that completes the volume

1 evolves around *The Blazing World* as well.
 2 Addressing the novel's significant moments,
 3 Becker and Hustvedt discuss the narrative's
 5 main principle, namely, what Kierkegaard
 called "indirect discourse," or "deceiv[ing]
 [the] reader into the truth" (410). Other top-
 10 ics of the interview are Hustvedt's "Gorgon-
 Genius" (412) protagonist Harriet Burden, the
 seventeenth-century philosopher and writer
 Margaret Cavendish providing the book's title,
 the biased and money-oriented art world
 rejecting women artists, and the role of masks
 and monsters in the novel.

15 Overall, this is a fascinating and vastly en-
 lightening collection of interdisciplinary es-
 says on an internationally renowned author
 whose popularity and reputation is increasing
 steadily. The volume's contributions reflect
 this growing interest of academia in Hus-
 tvedt's fictional as well as nonfictional work
 by offering a plethora of insightful hypotheses
 and analyses characterized by the heteroge-

neity of intersecting approaches to the texts.
 For example, some of the essays in the section
 "Psychoanalysis and Philosophy" also tackle
 extensively the subject of trauma, and, in turn,
 there is some overlapping of issues within the
 sections "Trauma, Memory, and the Ambigui-
 ties of Self" and "Medicine and Narrative."
 Nevertheless, having accepted the almost un-
 resolvable challenge of dividing the collection
 into various sections, the editors did a good
 job "while traveling in the borderlands"¹ of
 disciplines and categorizations, "the hard and
 fast borders" between which, Siri Hustvedt
 admits, she "ha[s] actively worked to blur."²
 Furthermore, the present volume, undoubt-
 edly, enhances our understanding and appre-
 ciation of "the zones of focused ambiguity"
 in Hustvedt's miscellaneous oeuvre, embrac-
 ing ambiguity as "a rich not an impoverished
 concept."³

Diana Wagner (Marburg)

¹ Siri Hustvedt, "Borderlands: First, Sec-
 ond, and Third Person Adventures in Cross-
 ing Disciplines." *American Lives*. Ed. Alfred
 Hornung. (Heidelberg: Winter, 2013), 111-35;
 132. Print.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.