



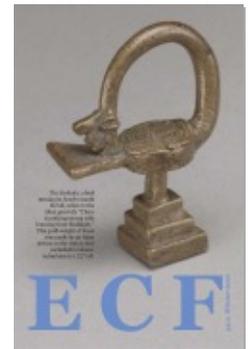
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Paper Minds: Literature and Ecology of Consciousness by
Jonathan Kramnick (review)

Wendy Anne Lee

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(Review)

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Maria—in love with Lawrence—writes movingly about her sister’s new song “When summer’s burning heats arise” (65), not knowing that the song was written while Sally was secretly reconciling with Lawrence herself; not knowing that in three months, she (Maria) would die. Engel also restores to the record a letter Sally penned a few years later of her own distant, painful final encounter with Lawrence at the theatre: she sees him through a spy-glass and realizes that he no longer loves her, for “she has ‘passed’ from his heart and will now be ‘mixed’ with the many who have gone before and were forgotten” (75).

In this love triangle, we see how the touristic theory lends itself so well to the scholar’s self-scrutiny. In witnessing Engel looking at the archive, resurrecting documents and letters heretofore deliberately erased by modest biographers of yore, we also recognize the sadness of these intimate, private moments, which were not meant for public or historical consumption. These are artifacts of the unstaged moments of very hyper-staged people—performers, artists, and celebrities. In caring about these artifacts as well as her role as an archival tourist, Engel gives us a useful model by which scholars can become better guides of history for all of their readers.

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Paper Minds: Literature and Ecology of Consciousness

by Jonathan Kramnick

University of Chicago Press, 2018. 298pp. \$25. ISBN 978-0-226-57315-1.

Review by Wendy Anne Lee, New York University

By the time you are reading these words, *Paper Minds* will already have been reviewed in several publications and you may know the basics: this is a collection of essays that (1) doubles down on literary studies and its method of close reading (see part 1: “On Method and the Disciplines,” which includes an essay co-authored by Anahid Nersessian), (2) applies philosophies of enactive perception to an “ecological” reading of Georgic poetry (see part 2: “Poetry and the Perception of the Environment”), and (3) features what David Chalmers has called the “hard problem” of consciousness, that is to say, the mystery of why phenomenal or subjective experience—the question of *What it is like?*—even happens. For the readers of this journal, then, I will focus on the import of the book’s third and final part, “Fictions of Mind,” to consider its potential relevance to our field.

For starters, apart from localized passages of *Robinson Crusoe* and a handful of pages on *Sentimental Journey*, little eighteenth-century fiction

appears in *Paper Minds*. And while the meta-conversations about formalism, disciplinarity, and aesthetics will attract other reviewers, my remit is to find the pay-off for the study of early fiction. It arrives at the very end of Kramnick's book, surprisingly in a reading of Marilynne Robinson's remarkable and much acclaimed 1980 novel, *Housekeeping*. Preceded by an analysis of a panpsychism advanced by Margaret Cavendish's *The Blazing World* (1666), Kramnick's reading of *Housekeeping* intensifies and refines earlier, looser claims linking consciousness, materialism, and writing. Like other theorists of narrative—in particular, those (including Ann Banfield, D.A. Miller, Blakey Vermeule, and Frances Ferguson) who elaborate the special powers of free indirect style—Kramnick roots much of his textual analysis in point of view, fiction's means of “putting you in the position to be the subject of [another] creature's perception” (144) and thereby to experience, paraphrasing Robinson, “the feeling of reality on another nervous system” (151). Notably, then, his analysis moves past grammatical position (“Ruth's first person at once expands in a watery thinness and mutes as it is no longer just hers”) to take in the virtuosic ways that focalized narrative can slip into a cosmic impersonality, shifting from “a view from one perspective” to “a view from no perspective” such that “phenomenal experience seems at once to lace over every object and belong almost to no one” (155). I can see how Kramnick's account of Robinson's ability to “tamp down singular features of personality while at the same time ... open up a vantage onto the strange, aqueous world in which the novel is set” might spur other insights about, say, Bunyan, Inchbald, Rousseau, and Wollstonecraft (152).

Embedded in Kramnick's valedictory nod to fictional language is the claim that *Housekeeping* features “a simultaneous attention to experience and disregard for the singularity of any character in whom such experience might reside” (152). The articulation here of a narrative project to attend closely to consciousness and, at the same time, to deindividualize its phenomenology conveys a charge of ethical excitement that surpasses milder claims for the discernment of a quantum universe or an “injunction to attend to the forms experience takes” or the particularities of haptic experience (145). Indeed, the book's most vivid passage of literary interpretation expresses an ontological commitment that diverges (for this reader, happily) from its earlier account of literature's “ready-to-hand” “affordances.” In an account of *Housekeeping*'s “conspiracy of the senses with the world,” Kramnick attaches in the end to “a dissolving or dissolution, as if the indifference between one's own sentience and the sentience of everything else meant a kind of final and permanent unknitting of the person” (155).

All this is to point out that it is through his engagement with Robinson's fiction and ideas about fiction that Kramnick arrives at his most sharpened formulations. For all of the disciplinary modesty and genteel pluralism of the preceding chapters, the lede gets buried at the end:

“The work of literary form is just to worry, tweak, and pose the relation between the physical and the phenomenal” so that it is even possible to posit “the idea that perception is the very wonder of the physical, not its transcendence” (151). Narrative prose fiction or all literature, in other words, exists to recast the enigmatic relation between the material world and the experience of consciousness of being in that world—an uneven terrain of objects that changes as I move, that I perceive imperfectly through my species-specific organs of sense, that I navigate sometimes with success and often with failure. Glossing Robinson’s essay on fiction, “Freedom of Thought” (published in her 2012 collection *When I Was a Child I Read Books*), Kramnick writes, “Science should remember that the physical (whether conceived at the scale of particles or of neurons) includes sentience, and fiction should recognize the felt property of mind in physical matter” (151). In the designation of these tasks for science and for fiction—one to remember and the other to recognize—we hear an appeal that belies the accommodating spirit of “ontological pluralism,” which characterizes the earlier essays. Robinson in “Freedom of Thought” lays out “two questions I can’t really answer about fiction”: “(1) where it comes from, and (2) why we need it” (7). Insofar as *Paper Minds* tells a story about the novel’s co-emergence with paradigms of mind and matter, it picks up and tries to answer those questions.

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Migration and Modernities: The State of Being Stateless, 1750–1850, ed. JoEllen DeLucia and Juliet Shields

Edinburgh University Press, 2019. 224pp. £75. ISBN 978-1474440349.

Review by Omar F. Miranda, University of San Francisco

Accounts of literal and metaphorical, forced or voluntary, displacement have been at the heart of the human story since ancient times. Consider *The Epic of Gilgamesh*, *Ramayana*, *The Odyssey*, *The Aeneid*, Sappho’s lyrics, and Sophocles’s plays as some indicators of the predominance of exilic narratives across the globe and ages. As John Simpson argues in the introduction to *The Oxford Book of Exile*, “Each of us is an exile ... We are exiles from our mother’s womb, from our childhood, from private happiness, from peace ... The feeling of looking back for the last time, of setting our face to a new and possibly hostile world is one we all know” ([Oxford University Press, 1995], vii). But something about this universal truth changed during the eighteenth century and the age of revolution, in particular. The introduction of the free market system, the industrialization of urban