Glimpses of the World: The Vignette in 21st-Century American Fiction

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ABSTRACT

Glimpses of the World: The Vignette in 21st-Century American Fiction

A dissertation presented to the Faculty of the
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By Daniella Gáti

"Glimpses of the World: The Vignette in 21st-Century American Fiction" examines the relationship between contemporary digital and print fictions that center their critique in the short form of the vignette. Delineating a media archeology of short textual and visual forms in and around the book and in print culture, the project theorizes brief media as sites through which socially dominant ideologies may be contested and alternative—feminist and antiracist—epistemologies may be articulated.

The historical print ephemera, social media fictions, short story cycles, and novels analyzed in this dissertation enable an understanding of our social world primarily through brief descriptive passages depicting the lived experiences of marginalized groups. These texts do not make grand pronouncements about the causes, structures, and cures of social ills; rather, they show human bodies as entangled in the material experiences and affects produced by these larger structures. Thus, the representational tactic of the vignette privileges immediate situatedness and allows writers to articulate experiences of marginalization as part of a common, shared experience or as different facets of a system of oppression whose entirety elides our grasp. Instead of focusing on potentially totalizing explanatory structures for racist, capitalist, imperialist and patriarchal domination, vignette aesthetics enables heterogenous strategies to describe and intervene in disparate forms of precarity and oppression. Ultimately, through its

examination of the forms and platforms of resistance strategies rooted in brevity, "Glimpses of the World" offers a theory of contemporary short forms of political expression that takes into account literature's imbrication in present and historical media, and which situates literary texts as objects articulated by digital technologies, internet culture, historical media practices, and historical book design.

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INTRODUCTION: THE WORLD OF FICTION IN FRAGMENTS

In her 2013 story "Vignettes," the Canadian writer Monique Proulx shows us two short scenes from a relationship: one from the early stages, where Mona and Thomas are deeply in love, and one from the end, where Mona demands solitude and change. Although the story is concerned with intimate relationships, the last lines seem to articulate a more general condition, characteristic of life in the 21st century—the fragmentation of experience into mere moments:

> Thomas la voit encore, partout. Vignettes colorées, saisissantes,
> plus réelles parce qu'imaginées.
> Ce n'est pas l'absence de l'autre qui fait si mal. C'est sa
> présence, qui n'en finit pas de durer.
>
> Thomas sees her yet, everywhere. Vignettes—colorful, gripping, more real for being imaginary.
> It's not the absence of the other that hurts so much. It's their presence, which never ceases to linger. (Proulx 51, my translation)

The story of the relationship has fallen apart into "colorful, gripping" moments that may not even be more than "imaginary"—and yet these moments are the best, perhaps the only, way to describe and come to terms with what has happened. In fact, Proulx's entire story is told exclusively in vignettes: "Vignettes," then, enacts formally the disaggregation of narrative structure that Thomas experiences with respect to his relationship to Mona, a relationship whose reasons for coming to be and for falling apart cannot be comprehended through narrative attempts to explain.

This dissertation asks about the representational strategies of 21st-century fiction, fiction written in and about an age where our lives appear ever more fragmented and virtual, and where the world seems perhaps more difficult to comprehend than ever. How can writers depict and

describe our social conditions if those conditions are veiled by the rapid flickering of news media items, advertising images, and presidential tweets? Indeed, how can fiction make claims for its continued social and political relevance in an era where the proliferation of minute bits of news, opinions, claims and counter-claims has fragmented our notion of the world into many "alternative worlds" and produced what has sometimes been called the post-truth regime?

This dissertation argues that contemporary social critique fiction responds to this representational impasse through a new realism that combines social media short forms and the book history's oldest short form, the vignette. This new realism, which I call situational realism, insists on the political importance of depicting the conditions of life under late capitalism while recognizing the difficulty intrinsic to any attempt to represent the world. Indeed, the books in my study—Jennifer Egan's *A Visit from the Goon Squad,* Elizabeth Strout's *Olive Kitteridge,* Brando Skyhorse's *The Madonnas of Echo Park,* Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Americanah,* Viet Thanh Nguyen's *The Sympathizer,* Paul Beatty's *The Sellout* and Atticus Lish's *Preparation for the Next Life*—eschew narrativizing social problems with the knowledge that such attempts to explain often end up reducing those problems to oppressive master narratives, which explain away more than they illuminate the oppressions of those whose lives are at stake. The vignette becomes the main formal vehicle for navigating the political imperative to continue the work of representation while recognizing the latter's limits and risks. The vignette is suitable for such work because it allows novelists to negotiate, within their own print fictions, the forms and functions of social media—the increasingly all-encompassing text of contemporary life—in a media historical perspective. The vignette, a brief descriptive passage that arrests plot and enables a short glimpse into the conditions of character's lives, thus becomes the hinge point of a new situational epistemology in which representation does not amount to claims of mastery, and

in which the situatedness of the glance—its immediate site and context—are just as much part of representation as the depicted world itself.

Vignettified World

Many critics have observed that around the turn of the millennium, the processes that characterized economy and society under the "late capitalism" of the 20th century had intensified even to the point of producing a society that, though existing in continuity with, was now fundamentally different from its post-45 antecedent. On the one hand, the intellectual purchase on contemporary life of influential critiques of late capitalism, such as Herbert Marcuse's in the 1950s, Guy Debord's in the late 1960s, or Fredric Jameson's in the 1980s, seems to have sharpened in the first decades of the new millennium, since, as Jeffrey Nealon has argued, the processes these critics had described for their respective periods had only intensified in the early 2000s (Nealon ix). Society has continued to demand and produce the "one-dimensionality," spectacular superficiality, and "flattening" of affect decried by these critics (Marcuse 11; Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle* 12; Jameson 10). On the other hand, these processes have gained a powerful accomplice in cybertechnology. This field, in its infancy in the second half of the 20th century, really came into its own starting in the late 1970s, with personal computers becoming relatively accessible household items in the late 1980s.[1] Where the spectacularity of late capitalist society had functioned as a mask to cover up the material processes of exploitation, dispossession, and racial violence, computer technologies now provided a new, virtual world

[1] Many scholars have written about the anti-authoritarian, utopian promise that computer technology and specifically the internet held in the second half of the 1980s. A thorough examination of that promise can be found in Jen Schradie's recent book, *The Revolution that Wasn't: How Digital Activism Favors Conservatives* (2019).

which promised to offer a world separate from, and untouched by, those exploitative processes. The surfaces of advertising and the movies, depicted so poignantly by Richard Wright as the seductions designed to sedate the materially dispossessed into forgetting their dispossession, were now complemented by the computer screen. This screen, the ultimate surface behind which lies ostensibly an entire immaterial world, suggests the complete flattening of social experience. The labor, exclusions, marginalizations and violence that the capitalist system relies upon for its continued functioning can now be veiled perhaps more perfectly than ever. Not only does the internet enable an existence in a seemingly disembodied, virtual sphere, with no connection to the physical world, it also renders the flow of capital instantaneous, able to move across the continents in seconds, as if by magic. The global networks of financial transactions make the economy itself seem disembodied, disconnected from the materials and bodies that are still needed for production and service. Computer technology, then, makes the task of representation even more difficult: where the social critique novels of earlier times could to some measure rely on relatively unified sites of experience, such as the factory or the mine, many of the processes of social interaction, consumption and production today are virtual. They seem disembodied even if only for a more perfectly covered up material basis; for this reason, the social phenomena of life in the 21st century seem even less available for representation than previously.

If the processes of production and consumption are increasingly decentralized, vernacular communication media too are ever more fragmentary. Next to newspapers and magazines, which themselves have gone through shifts towards truncated electronic forms with clickable content and links, social media has become a primary site of online communication whether in personal relationships or in interactions with advertising and news media. Here, a news story rarely exceeds the length of a single post, and news items are frequently punctuated with a barrage of

opinions from a large set of individuals. Information about the world spreads in small segments and travels in many different directions. Narrative unity is fundamentally threatened by this networked structure. Indeed, if we are to learn anything about the world from perusing the internet, the only image we are likely to be able to form is one of many fragmentary, brief snippets that never coalesce to a full or unified image. In effect, we are seeing the world in vignettes.

The Exhaustion of Postmodernism

To say that our vision of the world is "vignettified" in this manner is not, however, to assert that the sociocultural experience of living in this world feels "experimental." Rather, inhabiting this world and navigating its winding communication circuits has become vernacular lived experience, an experience in which it is ordinary and not radical for virtual worlds and physical environments to collide and coexist. The seeming disembodiment of communication may present the illusion of life divorced from the body and its emplacements, but the material conditions of society continue to produce effects and affects that govern people's lives. Our experience of both connection and matter as fragmentary, appearing to us in the form of vignettes, does not, then, feel experimental: rather, brevity, disconnection, and flickering aesthetics reflect a shift in how the everyday is organized, but the everyday remains quotidian and ordinary—just the stuff of our lives.

It is for this reason perhaps that writers of the 21st century have started to feel increasingly dissatisfied with the movement of literary postmodernism and its successors in the literary landscape. Postmodernism, so suitable initially to capture fragmentation in the 20th century,

seemed to many in the beginning of the 21st to have lost its political relevance. For all its skepticism of grand narratives and debunking of the illusion of wholeness, postmodernism seemed to have exhausted its critical potential during the 1990s when fragmentation seemed to have become a *fait accompli,* no longer in need of further demonstration. Following David Foster Wallace's well-known indictment of postmodern irony in *E Unibus Pluram* (1993), writers in the new millennium seem to insist with renewed vehemence on depicting the material conditions, affective predicaments and relationships in which people live. Novels like Jonathan Franzen's *The Corrections* or Louise Erdrich's *LaRose* do not seek to dismantle each phenomenon into countless simulacra, but rather attempt to chronicle complex social phenomena such as the dismantling of the traditional family unit through the careful depiction of individual character fates and psychologies.

Accordingly, scholars have turned their attention to new forms of realism in the 21st century. Many have drawn up helpful, if provisional, taxonomies to make sense of the many different approaches to new realist writing. Robert Rebein describes a line of novelistic inquiry in the 1980s and 1990s that could be called dirty realism and which traces its origins to the minimalists such as Raymond Carver (Rebein 37–40). Mary Holland argues that what she calls "poststructural realism" combines a postmodern experimental linguistic program with a realist and humanist conceptual interest in questions of family, history, and the individual psyche (Holland 7). Ramón Saldívar has outlined his notion of speculative realism, in which writers merge magical realist elements with metafiction and science fiction motifs (Saldívar 585).

Not all contemporary realisms are well captured by these frameworks, however, because contemporary literature does not, as Rachel Greenwald Smith argues, fall easily into the mutually exclusive categories of linguistic experimentation and realist depiction, even when such

tension continues to be present (Smith 183). In other words, innovation is not limited to experimentation, and the rejection of experimentation does not deterministically return novelists to earlier modes of realist writing. Indeed, this dissertation is concerned with fiction works that do not lend themselves to any side of this binary, and which refuse this binary as a meaningful way to approach fictional representation in the first place. In terms of language, the works analyzed here do not seek to provide radical new forms of expression or deconstruct language. Simultaneously, they also do not embrace any naïve notion of linear narrative, where story becomes the primary vehicle to explaining complex social phenomena. Rather than attempting to negotiate between supposedly postmodern experimentation and supposedly realist depiction, these novels and cycles embrace a representational program that rejects this binary as false. The French naturalist writer Émile Zola once reportedly remarked that all writing is realist, and that any formal change simply reflects the changes of society, the object of representation, itself. His observation applies well to the works analyzed here, which remain committed to the politically motivated depiction of the social world while recognizing that that world has changed and therefore demands new representational strategies. Thus, representation in these texts continues to serve the goals of a social agenda insofar as it demands direct and unapologetic engagement with people's lived realities. But representation necessarily takes new forms—not because of formal innovation for innovation's sake, but rather because of the recognition that in the current constellation of the world, experience itself has become fragmentary. There is no clear or unified world available for representation.

What are the forms of such a realism? This dissertation argues that this new realism borrows formal elements from social media on the one hand and the short visual forms of book history, especially the vignette, on the other. The resulting plot structure, in which action tends to

be subordinated to brief descriptive moments, emphasizes the characters' situatedness in particular social, economic and often racialized locales rather than the development of a plot around a conflict or the characters' psychological relationships. The resulting epistemological claim, then, hinges fundamentally on the ethical mandate to engage directly with the immediate environment on the one hand, and on the impossibility of solidifying such brief glimpses into coherent or unitary narratives. While such plot-driven or unitary accounts may have been effective before, they do not now, any longer, do justice to the political need to confront ongoing social issues because overhasty explanations risk explaining away the realities of *how* people are impacted by structures such as race, poverty, and migration. The epistemology and ethics of this representational program thus rests on both the importance of directing our attention to lived experience on the ground as well as on the difficulty, indeed impossibility, of doing anything else. Because of its focus on such brief and momentary situations, then, I call this form of contemporary realism situational realism.

What exactly is a situation? In the books of this study, it is essentially a moment in life taken in at one glance, as if by a present observer. Situation thus also inextricably applies situatedness—the location of the glimpse in a particular space, which imposes limits on what and how far the glimpse may see. The fiction works examined here thus allow insight into characters' conditions in only highly constricted moments, and the fact that they do so renders the position of the reader's gaze as much subject to destabilization and inquiry as it does the idiosyncratic positions of the characters themselves. Thus, these works do not only show, through the characters, how people are mired in conditions that do not easily lend themselves to narrative explanations, but also enact, through the reader's own positionality, the limits to any epistemological project to comprehend.

The situation as a concept has a longer philosophical tradition of which at least three different strands inform its meaning in this study. These three strands of thought are that of the Situationists, themselves drawing from the philosophy of Jean-Paul Sartre, in the early 20th century; the branch of sociolinguistics spearheaded by Erving Goffman in the early 1950s; and 1980s materialist feminisms, represented by figures like Donna Haraway. As developed by the Situationists and articulated most famously perhaps by Guy Debord, the situation is the concrete experience of material conditions that are normally concealed by the spectacle (Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle* 26). Importantly, the situation does not penetrate below the surface and render manifest the underlying structures, but merely makes those structures felt in ways that the spectacle is designed to preempt. For this reason, "being in situation" is a momentary way of being that disrupts the usual, less recipient way of life (Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle* 34). "Being in situation," then, is a truer and freer mode of existence for the Situationists because it resists the illusory and alienated mode of life propagated by the spectacle.

In fact, the key Situationist concepts of psychogeography and *détournement* both rely on the situation's ability to break the pattern of experience enforced by capitalism. Psychogeography refers to the understanding that the city as actually lived is radically different from the space that appears on a map—and which, in the case of Paris, was a space designed to regulate the work lives of its inhabitants (Debord, "Introduction to a Critique of Urban Geography" 8). The *détournement*, which means the hijacking or diverting of capitalist objects and practices, can be applied to this urban environment in order to grant access to the situation. A walk through the city dictated only by chance or intuition refuses the patterns of movement demanded by a capitalist workday and the spectacle of consumption. Thus, the walker who allows their path to be *détourné*—"de-turned," led astray, misguided—has effectively put

themselves "in situation" by allowing themselves to experience the city freely, without the constraints of being driven by a purpose. The situation here is in a sense the abandon of the individual observing gaze to the sensations of the life of the urban environment.

If "being in situation" grants the individual merely the sensory experience of the world and no deeper insight into the precise mechanisms of capitalist power, Goffman's notion of the situation emphasizes our inability to go beyond the surface in our attempts to gather information on our surroundings. For Goffman, however, the surface is a valuable site with important meanings rather than the screen for capitalism's projection of illusions. Goffman articulates a theory of interpersonal communication where the situation stands for the encounter between people who may or may not have met before and who may or may not have come together for a particular purpose (9–10). What people attempt to do in Goffman's situation is to gather clues about the personalities present, their potential objectives, the conditions of the environment, and so on. These clues reside solely on the surface and can be gleaned from the exterior appearance of the other participants, from the things they say or do, as well as from the material characteristics of the place itself. That is, the situation is the outcome of a mutual defining activity in which the participants both project and receive information to and from the surface. Ultimately, then, in Goffman's account the surface presents not primarily as the site of capitalist deception, but rather as the locus of productive and mutual information sharing, which informs meaningful, if not always successful, attempts to arrive at temporarily defined notions of what the relationships between the participants are. The surface, or, to put it in less evaluating terms, the immediate environment, then, is paramount to Goffman's notion of the situation: it presents a wealth of sensory information that allows for the experience, though not the understanding, of the people and objects present. Far from the tool of the spectacle, which for Debord reduces

everything to the one-dimensional plane of illusion, the surface for Goffman is the primary site of experience within a situation.

If the situation in both of these understandings is the scene of a more direct, sensual experience of the world unmediated by the dominant narrative of capitalist production, then the materialist feminist notion adds a last important anti-hegemonic feature to the situation: its resistance to linear narratives of progress. Donna Haraway articulates a feminist relation to science in which the disembodied, perspectiveless and therefore supposedly objective viewpoint of the scientist is displaced, while maintaining a "commitment to faithful accounts of a 'real' world" (Haraway 579). Displacing the fiction of a neutral view from nowhere, Haraway argues, an ethical relation to scientific study is one that dispenses with the narrative of mastery by embracing the scientist's situatedness—that is, their unique position determined by intersections of material and social axes of power (582). Here, the situation is an abstract concept rather than an immediate sensory experience, but it still encompasses an attention to the specific and particular configurations of space in which an observer is located. Thus, an individual's situatedness becomes the cornerstone of a humble, more ethical relation to the attempt to understand the world. The situation, then, embodies a representational paradigm that does not attempt to master what it seeks to depict. Specifically, by constantly emphasizing the limits on sight, as well as its particular location in social and physical space, a situational form of representation negotiates its own perspective in relation to what it sees and depicts. As a result, such a mode stops short of fitting the complexity of the world into the mold of narratives of progress, causation, or explanation. Instead, a situational approach is preoccupied with the immediately available and the limits that constrain its apprehension to short, glimpsed moments.

Situational realism draws from these understandings of the situation, and the vignette is its primary representational form. Indeed, situation and vignette are the conceptual and representational sides of the same coin. The works of fiction examined in this study eschew explanatory narratives and place attention instead on vignettes of vivid, sensorily depicted situations that never coalesce into stable narrative order. In this way, the conditions of economic oppression, racial violence, and xenophobic chauvinism are made available for critical scrutiny without the risk of being reduced to simplified and ultimately violent explanations, and without leaving the observer's own situatedness unexamined. The vignette is therefore the essential representational form of that strand of 21st-century political fiction that is the object of this study: situational realism.

Why the Vignette?

What makes the vignette, an ephemeral and marginal form, so important to the critical work of situational realism? This dissertation argues that it is the ability of this form to provide a boundary site between the textual and the visual, the central and the marginal, as well as among historical forms of representation and contemporary communications media, that enables it to animate a 21st-century mode of realist writing. While Chapter One describes this form, its origins, and its development in detail, it is important to highlight here that the vignette was originally a visual form that acted as a structuring device in the book during the infancy of printing in Europe. It developed from the floral ornaments that bordered text in medieval manuscripts at least as far back as the 14th century, and which may have their origins in the floral script and ornament patterns of the Middle East. This dissertation refers to such vine patterns in

European manuscript borders consistently as vines or border vines; I argue that the vignette, which means "little vine" in French, emerges only once printing is introduced to Europe and border vines are segmented into shorter chunks for the printing block, producing little vines. Through the next 300 years, the vignette goes through many different formal variations with an important constant being brevity and the function of ornamenting and structuring the book.

It is not until the 19th century that the vignette also becomes a textual, and eventually literary, genre. Even then, it is not clearly distinguishable from other short genres such as the anecdote or especially the sketch, or even from decorative writing on artifacts of everyday use such as diaries, calendars, or advertisements. Indeed, although short forms of writing enjoy enormous popularity in the 19th century—one need only to think of the short story or the village sketch—the vignette remains a marginal genre. Its marginality is tied to its ambiguous status as a medium: textual as well as visual, a literary object or an object of use, decoration as well as punctuation. This ambiguity is an essential feature of the vignette: throughout its history and into its contemporary use, the vignette always mediates across uncertain borders between forms, uses, and aesthetic practices. This boundary-crossing affordance also means that the vignette is finally more adequately described as a form or device rather than as a genre: although it at times in its history courted generic standardization, it is ultimately too fluid and shape-shifting to fit the mold of a genre. Rather than stable generic feature, the vignette instead has characteristic formal affordances: its brevity, its ambiguity, and its ability to mediate across textual-visual, geographic, and other borders.

One such mediation important for contemporary fiction writers is that between traditions from book history and contemporary electronic writing practices. On the one hand, the vignette as a visual form is distinctively bookish: different from visual genres like the miniature, the

vignette was almost never produced as an autonomous work for existence outside of books or other textual artifacts. On the other hand, however, it is also a form that lends itself to the description of the contemporary electronic environment. Social media posts, news headlines, and clickable links partake of what might be called a vignette aesthetics; they are short, fragmentary, and often connected to other text segments. The vignette, then, highlights a continuity rather than a disjuncture between material forms of written recording, such as the print book or the manuscript, and electronic forms of communication. For this reason, the vignette enables writers of fiction working today to incorporate social media forms into their writing in distinctly literary, bookish ways. The vignettes in the novels and short story cycles that this dissertation analyzes are therefore not simply electronic or book historical forms that have been pasted into the fabric of the book without significant alteration, as might be supposed about the blog posts in *Americanah*, for example. Rather, vignettes provide the formal organizing structure of specific passages and in particular of the descriptive programs of these books. Ultimately, the vignettistic organization of these texts disturbs the overarching plot structure of the books as a whole, but not in straightforward, immediately visually salient ways. The print books in this study are not electronically enhanced, and appear visually in ways that align with what we normally expect a print book to look like.

The vignette also has important social justice implications: one could claim, somewhat programmatically, that the vignette is a feminist form. Its emphasis on situations and situatedness at the expense of a supposedly objective outside perspective, its resistance to narrativizing, and its resolute smallness disable grand narratives or illusions of mastery, throwing the viewer/reader back to reflect upon their own positions and perspectives. Haraway's feminist epistemology, where the scientist attempts to reckon with her own embeddedness in the world that she studies,

is embodied perfectly in the representational work of the vignette. Simultaneously, as Naomi Schor elaborates in *Reading in Detail*, attention to the minute, the marginal and the seemingly insignificant has often been "gendered and doubly gendered as feminine" because of its refusal of the more masculinist mainstream of overarching narrative and logical explanations (Schor 4–5). Indeed, as Chapter One of this dissertation observes, the few prolific writers of vignettes in the 20th century were predominantly women, and often women of color: Katherine Mansfield is the primary modernist vignette writer, while Sandra Cisneros and Esmeralda Santiago are the writers of two vignette cycles, an extremely rare form.

Perhaps it is also an indication of the form's "femininity" that, owing perhaps to its lack of stable generic characteristics as well as to its frequent crossings between various media, the vignette has not garnered much scholarly attention. Apart from Schor's theory of the detail discussed above, scholars have attended to notions such as "episodic poetics" (Garrett 19), theories of short fiction (May xvii–xviii), and alternative short forms like the sketch (Nagel 3). The vignette has rarely constituted the object of scholarly analysis—it has no comprehensive history or theory—and in those inquiries that place it center stage, its meaning is often taken for granted, predetermined by the particular discipline (examples come variously from art history, print history, theater, advertising, photography, literature, and so on). This dissertation sets the ground for an account that does justice to the multimedia and multidisciplinary boundary-crossings of the vignette by contextualizing it in a media archeological and book historical dimension that exists in a relation of remediation, even intermediation, with contemporary, electronic vignette-like forms.

For a form so thoroughly bound up with mobility across media as well as regions, perhaps it is unsurprising that the vignette is often used to articulate questions about place and migration.

Suitable for interrogating different forms of boundary-crossing, the vignette becomes an important tool for writers negotiating migrations in the 21st century. *The Madonnas of Echo Park, Americanah, The Sympathizer, The Sellout* and *Preparation for the Next Life* all examine the pathways of migration and the conditions of life of migrants in the United States, and *Olive Kitteridge* and *A Visit from the Goon Squad* are both invested in questions about highly specific places. The vignette provides useful ways of depicting rather than narrativizing these various plights and predicaments. It allows writers to avoid reductive and potentially chauvinist explanatory narratives and at the same time insist on the political importance of devoting attention to the conditions of life of these populations, who are often depicted as marginal but whose experience really characterizes the majority of the United States population in one way or another.

Electronic Literature and Print Novels in the Networked Age

If fragmentation, interconnectedness and travel are primary features of the contemporary world, then it might seem that a realism for the 21st century should take a purely digital form. Electronic literature, after all, often mimics the global pathways of connection and the multidirectional flows of communication. Indeed, some authors explicitly thematize such electronic communication formats: print novels like Mark Z. Danielewski's *House of Leaves* or Jonathan Safran Foer's *Tree of Code* make use of computer code and the linked forms of the internet to speak cogently to the experience of living in a fragmented, virtual world. The works of fiction examined in this study, however, do not assume or mimic electronic forms. With the exception of *Americanah,* none of them integrate digital communication forms into their fabric,

and in some of them—*Preparation for the Next Life, The Sellout*—communications technologies like the internet seem to exist only on the margins of everyday experience (*The Sympathizer*, meanwhile, is set in an age that predates such technologies). How then do these books engage with the communicational practices of social media?

Key to this seeming paradox is the insight that electronic literature as well as the print novels borrowing forms from the electronic world have often enacted an experimental, postmodern aesthetics. Indeed, influential scholars like N. Katherine Hayles have frequently described literary engagements with computer technology as experimental (Hayles 7). As a consequence, electronic literature has come to appear as an extension of literary postmodernism. Certainly, in the 1980s and 1990s, when computers were just in the process of becoming staple goods in American households, literary works that were written and read on computers must have seemed boundary-breaking. But as electronic forms of communication, labor, and play became more vernacular, digital textuality no longer seems so experimental or new; it, too, has become a part of the fabric of everyday life. The texts in this study are concerned with describing that vernacularity. They reflect the awareness that everyday digital textual practices are not necessarily experienced as a departure from the ordinary, or as a test of its limits. Indeed, in these books, digitality remains just one mode of contemporary experience, with physical and material modes retaining at least equal importance.

Situational realism, then, embodies a less explicit, because less topical, concern with digital media than do experimental or electronic literatures. Instead, such works of fiction use the vignette to emphasize the continuities between representational practices in the book and on the web. The vignette, as argued above, also enables a more sensory experience of what it is like to inhabit a digitally fragmented world, as opposed to more experimental forms that make that

experience an intellectual or metaphysical question. Where hypertext fictions might invite the reader to contemplate the forms and directions of interaction and interconnectedness that characterize our increasingly global world, situational realist texts expose the reader to the vivid, often highly visual, experience of briefly glimpsed moments in other people's lives. If that sentence reminds of the experience of scrolling through one's Twitter or Facebook feed, then it should be apparent how vignettes embody the representational dynamics of social media, rather than depict them.

Brian McHale has famously contrasted the epistemological concerns of modernist writing with the ontological ones of postmodernism, arguing that questions of how we know as opposed to questions about forms of existence—epistemology as opposed to ontology—can usefully distinguish between these literary periods (McHale 27). If experimental print and electronic literature can be described as dealing with questions of ontology, then situational realist works affirm a commitment to questions of phenomenology. They ask: how do we experience the world, given that we seek to know it but cannot ever truly do so? With the knowledge of the impossibility of the representational project, our commitment to seek to understand the world becomes an ethical and political stance, an insistence on the sociological inquiry of what the conditions of the world are like. To do right by those who continue to experience exploitation, racial violence, and xenophobic discrimination, fiction must continue to examine the lived realities of the 21st century even as those realities migrate into increasingly digital realms and take increasingly fragmented forms. Situational realism, then, interrogates the digital condition of contemporary life not so much through themes and topics but by representing it as a sensory and embodied experience in continuity with, rather than apart from, material forms of social life.

Chapter Structure

Chapter One theorizes the vignette, tracing its genealogy from the winding vines on the borders of medieval manuscripts to visual and textual short forms in the printed book such as 18th-century miniature prints and the popular village sketches of 19th-century fiction.[2] The chapter argues that the vignette was a constant companion to the textual program of the book, adding a sensual, visual component to the text. The specific forms of this visual representation varied according to the needs, technologies and media of the particular context. The chapter concludes with an examination of the contemporary legacies of textual and visual vignettes across media like the television serial, chat fiction, or the social media post.

Chapter Two examines the online life of vignette-like forms, arguing that a digital vignette aesthetics organizes communication on the internet. Interrogating the use of short forms across text, image and video, the chapter delineates the forms and functions of social media genres. It argues that these genres provide a model for the representational and political work of contemporary fiction. The chapter then describes electronic literature that experiments with social media, and concludes with the analysis of Twitter fiction by professional writers David Mitchell, Jennifer Egan and Teju Cole.

Chapters Three and Four examine contemporary American short story cycles and novels that respond to the pressures of social media communication. Chapter Three argues that the short story cycles *A Visit from the Goon Squad* by Jennifer Egan, *Olive Kitteridge* by Elizabeth Strout and *The Madonnas of Echo Park* by Brando Skyhorse present a stepping stone between the

[2] This dissertation features screenshots and other images prominently. In order to provide access to people with visual impairments, all images have been supplied with alt texts, which allow reading machines to parse the contents of the image.

digital vignettes of social media and the situational realist novels of Chapter Four. These books are formally short story cycles, but they function as novels-with-a-difference, fragmenting the unity of the book-length text and breaking up its representational project into short segments. Through short stories that are linked together by recurring characters or setting, short story cycles disrupt the unified structure of plot development; more importantly, however, the individual short stories are themselves fragmented by contemporary forms of the textual vignette. In this way, description in Egan's, Strout's and Skyhorse's works focuses on immediate and temporary moments that enable the temporally and spatially delimited experience of the conditions of characters' lives. The situational realist short story cycle, then, takes representation apart into its most minute forms, inspired by the digital vignettes of social media and the vignettes of book history. In this project, the short story cycles of the chapter present a situational realist model for fictional works, including novels, as such.

Finally, Chapter Four examines how such a vignette aesthetics takes shape in contemporary "well-made novels" (Munro, quoted in Slopen n.p.), novels that resemble, or seem at a first glance to resemble, conventional realist novels. In spite of their apparent reliance on more familiar plot structures, *Americanah* by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, *The Sympathizer* by Viet Thanh Nguyen, *The Sellout* by Paul Beatty and *Preparation for the Next Life* by Atticus Lish use their own versions of the vignette to disrupt the centrality of plot development and fragment the reader's access to character psychology. In each their own ways, these novels share the situational realist representational project by foregrounding how plot and psychology are dramatically displaced in favor of ephemeral moments of vivid sensory insight into characters' lifeworlds.

The world may ultimately elude our attempts to represent it, and the processes that determine human lives may be too complex to narrate. But situational realism insists on the continued importance of grappling with the lived realities of people's experience in, and with, the world. The ongoing processes of marginalization and violence demand attention, even if they escape our ability to depict and comprehend them—even if all we can see at any given point are glimpses of the world. In situational realist novels, the vignette is what enables such glimpses. And, as Thomas in Proulx's story recognizes, vignettes may be brief and fragmentary, and they can even be "imaginary," pure fiction; but they are also "colorful, gripping," and somehow "more real."

CHAPTER 1: ON THE MARGINS OF BOOK HISTORY: A MEDIA ARCHEOLOGY OF THE VIGNETTE

What is the vignette? Why is this term paramount for a consideration of 21st-century realism? Through its tortuous history, this small visual-textual form crosses media and interrogates boundaries, providing changing contributions to the question of how books can represent reality. Indeed, in all of its changing forms, the vignette epitomizes brief, momentary vision whose boundaries are porous and uncertain, and in so doing problematizes the act of representation—its limits and possibilities. By historicizing the vignette and tracing how it has accompanied literary endeavors in the West since the emergence of the codex, this chapter will draw out the main characteristics by which the vignette can catalyze these questions, even as these characteristics take different forms across time. Thus, the chapter provides the historical groundwork for the aesthetics, and ethics, of representation that the vignette offers to a contemporary fiction embedded in an increasingly fragmented media ecology, and to the analysis of a larger, itself highly fragmented, 21st-century culture.

The chapter proceeds inductively, starting from the minimal assumption that there is a visual object that can be called "vignette," and that it will have some features that distinguish it and that can be derived historically. No initial assumption is made on *what* the vignette is now or was across its history; however, the historical consideration does propose three criteria that can help to identify and analyze this form, based on the general tendencies of how scholars have used the term. Although there has been no single work that has provided its history or theory, whether in literature or in the arts, the vignette is frequently evoked with an air of assurance about its meaning, and this in spite of a confusing array of diverging and often internally inconsistent uses. Thus, although it is usually impossible to be sure that a person means by "vignette" the

same thing as any other given scholar,[3] there are implicit commonalities. It is on the basis of these commonalities that I have drawn the rather minimalist criteria to identify which objects merit my attention.

First, whatever contemporaries themselves considered and called a vignette or some synonym, such as miniature, fleuron, and so on, was a candidate for a place in the present history. This means that for establishing the origins of the vignette, etymology was a primary method for delimiting my inquiry. This criterion allowed the identification and analysis of the historically changing functions associated with the vignette because, as will be seen, roughly the same form could take on a wild diversity of functions, and such functions were often—inconsistently—differentiated through synonymic or near-synonymic designations (vine, flourish, fleuron, printers' flower, etc.). Etymologically related terminology, drawn from the semantic field of vines, stems, leaves and flowers, was thus relevant for my study.

Second, any visual object in a book needed to be of small size (at least to the exclusion of the full-page size) to merit analysis. This requirement was set by the sense that, notwithstanding their diverging uses of the term, scholars do generally concur in the understanding that vignettes are small relative to other book illustrations and sometimes even to letters. Although this feature might be the only stably held judgment of the form's characteristics, in practice there is no consensus on how small a visual device needs to be in order to be a candidate for a vignette. Thus, the vignettes in this study range from punctuation-size, letter-size, enlarged initial size to around a third of a page.

[3] Some of the discrepancies are explained by scholars' segregation into areas of specialization, so that medievalists might use the term in rather different ways than would students of the eighteenth century or scholars of photography. This calls for some caution in the treatment of other academic works and necessitates that the primary materials in question be assessed on their own terms alongside their evaluation by previous scholars.

Third, this history was initially begun with the notion that vignettes have no borders. This feature would usefully serve to differentiate vignettes from other types of illustration, especially in the eighteenth century, when illustration was the rule rather than the exception. However, the criterion of borderlessness soon had to be modified in the face of overwhelming evidence that eighteenth-century vignettistes did not consider it a defining, or any, feature of vignettes at all, while contemporaries of other periods were likely to be silent about this question. Thus, since the first criterion, contemporary designation, clashed with the third, it became incumbent to revise the latter. Borderlessness could not be upheld as an invariable feature of vignettes, but it was observed that vignettes nonetheless do have a special relationship with the borders of the text, even though this relationship changes across time. What could be considered a vignette, then, always involved some explicit role in structuring a text's frame. Vignettes have, over the course of history, mediated the borders of media (text and image, or inscription and page), text structure (chapters, section headings, and section closings), and content (demarcations between speakers or emphatic utterances).

In sum, the visual devices considered in this study as the historically changing forms of the vignette all share the following characteristics: they were designated by contemporaries as vignettes or as some floral synonym; they were all smaller than half a page; and they all maintained a special relationship with the text's borders, and with the text's structure more broadly. At its inception, the vignette was a small, framing element that incorporated floral motifs, but as we will see, the specifics of its framing function, as well as the vignette's permissible motifs, changed considerably over time.

Thus, although it is my contention that the vignette's minuteness as well as its structuring function characterize this form throughout its history and ultimately constitute its usefulness for

the contemporary writers of my study, a number of questions regarding the time-varying specifics need to be addressed. In what ways and with what implications does the vignette frame the text at various points in its history? How, and to what effect, is a framing device pulled into the text itself? How does the vignette migrate from an illustrative practice to a purely textual one, and what are the ramifications of such a migration on the resulting textual form? These questions form the backbone of the present genealogy and their answers ultimately allow for a precise vocabulary for investigating a situationally oriented new realism in the 21st century.

The history of the vignette sketched by this chapter is the story of how the vine tendrils of the medieval manuscript, so integral to the structure of the manuscript text, are seized on by the invention of movable type printing for their structuring properties; how the dual function of structure and decoration produces the blooming illustration culture of the eighteenth century; how the Romantic period reinterprets this functional dualism as a challenge to the boundaries of the medium of text itself; and how, finally, the twentieth century sees the emergence of the literary genre of the vignette as a brief and descriptive prose, though often poetic, form. It is this vision that will become useful for writers in the 21st century to fuel a renewed, hopeful and yet critical realism.

Vine Precursors: Border Illustrations, Initials and Flowers in the Medieval Manuscript

Without fail, definitions of the word vignette point to its etymology in the French *vigne*, vine, with the diminutive *-ette* causing *vignette* to simply mean "little vine." This suggests a provenance for the vignette in the vine tendrils that were characteristic of illuminated medieval manuscripts, that is from the period between the invention of the codex (the bound book format familiar today) sometime in the 2nd century and the (European) invention of movable type

printing by Johannes Gutenberg in 1450 (Mandl 181). However, there exists very little evidence of manuscript illustrators' own terms for their illuminations, making it difficult to argue that these illuminated vines were the first vignettes. Indeed, to my knowledge, nobody has hitherto made that claim. On the other hand, scholars of medieval manuscripts do, as will become evident, use the term "vine" nearly ubiquitously to describe floral manuscript borders, and the etymology of "vignette" does equate the vignette with vines so unequivocally that it makes sense to consider the vine borders of manuscripts as laying the foundations for what would eventually become its own formal element. This assumption is corroborated by evidence from the early printed book; therefore it is useful to overview the functions and uses of vines in medieval manuscript illumination.

It is unclear when vine tendrils first appear on the borders of manuscripts. David Bland, in his *History of Book Illustration*, first mentions them in connection with German manuscripts from the 10th and 12th centuries, although he seems to suggest that these vines were "distinctly Teutonic" adaptions of an already existing form (56). It is certain that manuscript borders had featured interlacing designs of various kinds ever since the transition from the scroll to the codex, that is, ever since borders as such were a possibility (the scroll was a continuous sheet of parchment, and therefore did not have pages). Indeed, Arabic texts had featured flower patterns much before similar patterns showed up in European manuscripts (Arabic script itself was more decorative and vegetal than Latin). Early European examples of manuscript borders tended to be geometric and come from the north; floral patterns seem to first appear within monastic practice on the continent, and only somewhat later, after the turmoil following the collapse of the Western Roman Empire had started to settle (Bland 33).

There is a longstanding disagreement among scholars over whether vegetal forms in European manuscript illumination were borrowed from Arabic decoration patterns. In his *Essai sur la Calligraphie* published in 1841, draftsman and engraver Eustache-Hyacinthe Langlois disputes the opinion of the Dijonnais bibliographer Gabriel Peignot, who had claimed in 1832 that arabesques were "bien postérieures aux *Vignettes*" (Langlois 3–4 emphasis original), that is, that crawling vine patterns had existed in the European manuscript well before Moorish influence. Langlois disagrees, leaning instead on a seemingly preexisting contrary view of which I have found no evidence; in this view, espoused again in the 20th century by scholars of printing Francis Meynell and Stanley Morison, floral flourishes came unequivocally "from the East" (3). Even if arabesques may not have introduced vegetal patterns in the European manuscript tout court, it seems plausible that they would have helped disseminate them: after all, as Jonathan J.G. Alexander argues, the widespread influence of Byzantine patterns around the 13th century contributed to the general predominance of floral ornamentation patterns over the earlier geometric ones (98). Byzantine art, itself highly influenced by Arabic script and ornament, left a lasting impact especially on the southern regions of Europe such as Greece or Italy—precisely those regions where Bland finds tendentially more floral than geometric illustration patterns (33).

There is also another possibility for the provenance of vines, although no scholar has to my knowledge suggested this possibility. The hedera, also known as the single ivy leaf or Aldine leaf, is a leaf-shaped decorative element that usually shows a single leaf on a vine stem (❦). As M. B. Parkes observes in his review of the history of punctuation in the West, the hedera was used prominently as a punctuation mark in the 7th and 8th centuries, and then in early printed books, although its use as decoration may have gained the upper hand in some 12th century manuscripts (61). In fact, despite its widespread medieval use, Parkes notes that the hedera could

possibly be the oldest punctuation mark of all, reaching as it does all the way back to the second century BCE (61). If this is so, then the producers of early Christian manuscripts, mostly scribes and illuminators at monasteries, might well have found inspiration in this manner of punctuation, given the Christian clergy's high esteem of Latin art and culture. Since Parkes also demonstrates that early Christian punctuation practices differed significantly from their models in Roman rhetoric, it would be reasonable to assume that the ivy leaf would be modified in its use, growing into an entire vine, while retaining the structuring function that is the essence of punctuation.

Whether border vines ultimately originate from the hedera or from arabesque floral patterns or even from a combination, they encapsulate the structuring features of both. Punctuation is the visual, non-linguistic marking of the text to highlight its syntactical or document structure, or to mark tonal emphases; Arabic floral patterns are also intricately related to the word, coming as they do from the visual, decorative properties of Arabic script. Consequently, though we may not be able to conclusively establish the precise origin of vine tendrils, these hypotheses do already suggest three central properties that accompany the vignette throughout its later development. First, its function consistently fluctuates between two major components, the structural mark-up of the text and its decoration. Second, the vignette systematically negotiates textual borders, whether between the text and the page around it, or between text and image. Third, whatever the vine's precise origin, the vignette is a form fundamentally shaped by cross-regional, cross-cultural, and cross-media movement. Its history will be marked by constant boundary-crossings: from illumination to print, from the book medium to all kinds of print artifacts, and finally from image to text in the 19th century, but also across national borders, channels and oceans. These three features, best encapsulated perhaps by its small size and mobility, accompany the vignette's conceptual implications for the entirety of its history.

Whatever their precise origin, by the late 14th century, vines had become almost ubiquitous in manuscript borders. Kathleen Scott's work on manuscript borders in the period of c. 1395-1499 allows for some conclusions on the functions and locations of vines. Scott defines a vine as "an element of decoration that acts like a vine in supporting branches, leaves and flowers… [and] used to initiate border sprays, to form roundels, and bar frames, etc." (125). Vines, then, have two important functions: to provide support for a structure (bar frames) and to give the impetus for smaller decorative elements (border sprays, roundels). Figure 1 illustrates two examples of vines providing a supporting structure for already existing bar frames: in the Book of Hours on the left (Huntington HM 47544, second half of 15th century, probably Italy), the vines complete the borders of the text on all side, including where the bar frames are missing (on top) and on the left side, where the small amount of space available allows only for a few flowers. In the Book of Hours on the right (Huntington HM 1087, Use of Sarum, between 1440-60, Flanders), the border constituted by vines and spraywork only surrounds the text partially. Here, the vines actually create a different structure for the text than does the text itself.

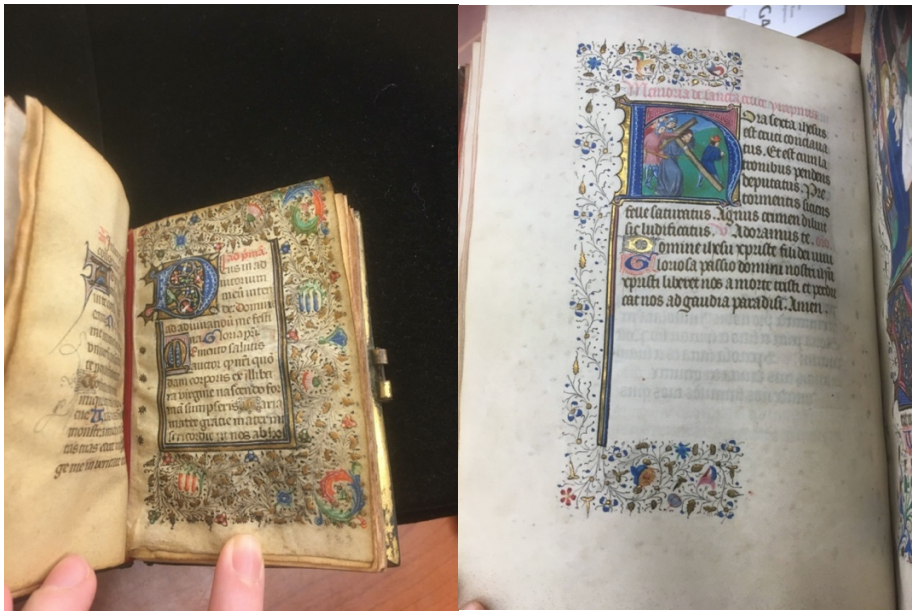


Figure 1: Vine supporting structures in two Books of Hours (left: Huntington 47544; right: Huntington 1087)

We see in the above, then, clear examples of borders that are formed by vines "to suggest the structure of the text" (Scott 7), even in cases where this structure actually modifies that implied by the text itself. Indeed, that text and vines were conceived as two different parts of the book that co-constructed its structure and meaning, rather than the vines being mere ornaments for the text, is also suggested by the frequency with which manuscripts featured vines sprouting "from the corner or tail of an initial," a design that Scott dates to "possibly c. 1220" in England (10). Below, Figure 2 illustrates an example of spraywork sprouting from several initials in the Book of Hours, use of Sarum, presented above:

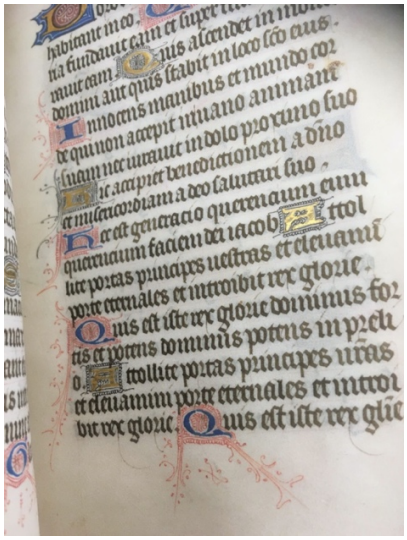


Figure 2: Spraywork from initials

Here, the text grows little floral tails that do not exactly provide a frame or border for the body of the text. Rather, these flourishes seem to emphasize the letter or word from which they grow: they highlight semantic or tonal emphases, drawing attention to some words over others. Thus, these interventions are meaningful in constructing the message of the text: they act like punctuation, but they also occasion a visual pleasure, even play, involved in their contemplation.

Conceptually, then, we see that vines fulfill two functions: they organize the text tonally as well as in terms of its structure, and they give occasion for visual embellishment and play. Furthermore, they also put in question the boundary between image and text: when vines sprout from the enlarged initials of a text, then the resulting border cannot really be conceived as a structure separate from the text, since it literally grows out of it. In this sense, border vines are not an external principle superimposed upon the text, but rather an internal aspect whose form is nonetheless visual, not textual. The mediation of what the borders of the text are becomes, necessarily, a mediation between image and word.

More specifically, Margaret M. Smith notes that the "decorative border" in medieval manuscripts was often used to suggest text beginnings; these could be chapter or section beginnings (36). The implication is that what "beginnings" are is in fact highly flexible, since the insertion of vines at a specific point in the text can construct that particular point as some kind of beginning. "Beginnings" are thus not unequivocally predetermined by the textual structure itself prior to its visual demarcation. In fact, J.J.G. Alexander claims that initials and decorative frames may also have given "opportunities for illuminators to evade or even challenge the authority of the preexisting cycle and the constraints of the text" (118). For example, the partial vine border above seems to suggest, counter to the text's apparent program, that there *should* be more textual content there. That is, the vine border functions almost as a rebuke, framing and thus highlighting textual absences that the text does not address. Clearly then, already at this early stage in the book's history, we see manifest a productive tension between image and word, set in motion by the vines' ambiguous position as growing from, but growing apart from, text.

During the period that Scott studies, these borders underwent a development where they became increasingly discontinuous, consisting more of unconnected individual floral designs.

While manuscripts from the beginning of the 15th century tended to feature thoroughgoing vines that formed continuous borders (even if these did not always surround the text on all sides), towards the end of the century there emerged discrete decorative elements that broke up the continuity of the vine frames (9). It will be my argument that the invention of movable type will seize precisely on this phenomenon. For now, however, let it be noted that although Scott's convincing argument is predicated on the idea of change, the manuscripts that she uses to illustrate her thesis show a remarkable consistency: vines are almost always present to the point where they can be called obligatory. This consistency leads Bland to postulate that "the ivy-leaf" border became the norm for the 14th and 15th centuries, a period during which this border "hardly developed at all" (65).[4] However, while the leaves may tend to be that of the ivy, the vines themselves show a dizzying array of types: a vine can take almost any shape or initiate almost any kind of decorative device or pattern (see Figure 3).

Figure 3: Left: Spraywork, Book of Hours, Flemish, 15th c. Brandeis Special Collections. Middle: Vine bar frame, Book of Hours (ca. 1405, Houghton Library MS Richardson 45). Right: Spraywork (top, bottom); flourished penwork (middle). Roger Dymmok, Contra Lollardorum, 1395. MS17, Trinity Hall

[4] This mandatory presence of vines could also be taken as evidence of their conceptual relation to punctuation, which is also increasingly regarded as necessary by contemporaries whenever there is a grammatical, conceptual or rhetorical pause (while punctuation itself was typically applied much more haphazardly this period). Bland's note about the dominance of the ivy-leaf might thus suggest its punctuational significance.

Indeed, patterning and ornamentation became gradually more important: J. J. G. Alexander documents how initials, which had tended to be plainer in the 12th century, were becoming more elaborate in the 13th and 14th centuries, which saw the development of a particular "type of flourished penwork, often called 'fleuronnée'" (49). An example of such decoration—a pattern of flower-inspired but primarily geometric pen-drawn shapes—is visible in the book on the right of Figure 3, on the middle bar. This term should be noted, as it will come to play an important role later. Patterns for borders and initials were also starting to be documented in entire books devoted to the subject, instituting their own genre, the pattern book—*Skizzenbuch* or *Musterbuch* in German (J. J. G. Alexander 124). In fact, Alexander associates the increasing importance of pattern to the heightened influence of Byzantium at this time (98). Indeed, the need to catalog these patterns suggests that they were new enough or foreign enough to require an effort to organize them. Thus, the absorption of these patterns into manuscripts across the European continent is perhaps most rightly regarded as a cross-cultural intervention, triangulated between continental illumination practices, Byzantian ornamentation, and Middle Eastern flower design. The counter-programmatic ability of vines to intervene in the textual meaning of the manuscript arguably owes to its travel across different, unfamiliar cultural contexts.

In summary, then, vines in manuscripts have a number of important features. They function as structuring devices, working with but at times also against the text, and possessing agency on their own terms in the creation of the meaning of a given text. Thus, vines are rightly regarded as actants in Bruno Latour's sense, that is, as "any entity that modifies another entity" (237) and which can therefore be read as possessing agency without necessarily having autonomous intent. This structuring function bears a family relation to punctuation: both provide a "pragmatics" of

the written medium (Parkes 2). This means that, like punctuation, border vines add contextual—tonal or positional—cues to the text that words do not carry by themselves. Pragmatics is the area of linguistics that studies how language accrues meanings that exceed bare denotation, by way of situational factors such as voice, tone, body, setting, and so on. To add a pragmatic meaning to a text in the linguistic sense, then, means to reach outside of the text for external, situational factors, such as the tone or voice of the speaker, or the topic or setting of the conversation, in order to determine the meanings of the text. The fact that manuscript border vines are fundamentally involved in connecting text with extratextual situations is highly important for this study, because it rather straightforwardly offers an opportunity for writers to situate their works in the external, material world. Far from merely suggesting or interrogating the text's structure, then, the vine's family relation to punctuation also implies its ability to introduce a pragmatic dimension to a text.

It is possible to take the argument about border vines' resemblance to punctuation much farther. If vines straddle decoration and punctuation, the system of punctuation that we are familiar with today was itself far from being firmly established or even nearly systematic at this time. Not even the most basic form of punctuation, the period, was used in any consistent way, often even within the work of a single scribe. Indeed, vine borders were more uniformly used in manuscripts than any nearly coherent system of punctuation; the same can be said of initials, whether rubricated (ruled or colored) or historiated (supplied with small figures or scenes; such initials were also called inhabited initials, blooming letters, or *lettres grises*). Border vines were thus not alone, but rather part of a system performing punctuation functions for texts. And although this system was used in highly creative and context-dependent ways, it was also nearly ubiquitous, in stark contrast to punctuation itself.

As a second important function, vines offered a place for playful ornamentation. In this sense too they resembled punctuation in that, as Isidore of Seville claimed of punctuation in the 6th century, they endowed the text with affect (Parkes 35). Punctuation, according to Isidore, allows the speaker (or the reader, since in Isidore's time texts would be punctuated solely by their readers) to determine areas of emphasis, pause, exclamation or uncertainty. Highlighting the beginnings and other general limits of the text, as vines did, may have added some emotion as well, but it is in particular the ornamental rather than the structuring aspects of border vines that brought added affective dimensions to a text. Intricate interweaving patterns could instill a sense of awe or simply pleasure, whereas excessive elaboration could add an element of humor. It is well known that the marginalia of monastic texts, which were highly fanciful, often even pornographic, were meant to provide distraction, and through distraction, added bursts of energy, for the serious study of religious texts. The often playful, often simply beautiful flowers, leaves and other ornaments sprouting in abundance from vine stems similarly added a wide emotional range to the manuscript texts.

Vines in manuscripts thus set up the basic properties that would later characterize the vignette. The products of cultural exchange, these floral patterns mediated between textual and visual meaning-making registers, structured and organized texts, interrogated borders, and provided playful, often counter-programmatic affective charges to manuscript texts. Their functions in creating meaning for the manuscript was so essential that by the 14th and 15th centuries, they came to be seen as basically indispensable. Yet, if their functionality already established the basic tenets of the later vignette, the vines of the 15th century also underwent a development that further favored the emergence of their smaller offshoot. Indeed, even as vine borders retained their importance throughout the century, they slowly began to lose their

continuity and gradually disintegrated into smaller, discrete designs. Just in the time when printing was introduced, continuous vine stems were in the process of becoming rarer: although the function of a border was still regarded as largely indispensable, the form of the vine became vulnerable to dissection. The stage was therefore set for the transformation of the vine to the little vine—that is, for the birth of the *vignette*.

Early Printed Books: Mechanization and the Emergence of the Vignette

Often the claim is made that the early printed book was designed so as to imitate the manuscript. Smith, however, argues that it is a mistake to insist too strongly on manuscript imitation, and that the *incunabulum*, the printed book before 1501, is best viewed as a continuation of earlier book production practices with a difference (Smith 23). Those practices that made sense logically or practically were continued, while the technological affordances of print ensured that some production practices were altered, improved or discarded altogether. For example, Smith argues that the titlepage of the printed book, which develops over a period of time, "owes hardly anything to the manuscript tradition of beginning and ending books" (36). For the purposes of this chapter, some of the continuities from the age of manuscripts are highly meaningful: the structuring function of vine borders and the process of disaggregation of vines into their component elements in the late manuscript are fundamental for the emergence of the first vignettes. At the same time, the vignette depends in the same measure on technological change—specifically on printing—that offers new possibilities for the design of the book.

Indeed, printing introduced two distinct options for book illustration: larger images, such as illustrations or entire borders, could be printed as one using a single woodcut, or, illustration could be integrated into the printing process of the text, as decorative "letters." The difference

between these options is due to the differences in technology between printing text and printing images. With each page of text, the printer needed an entire array of individually produced types—individual printing surfaces cast in iron for single letters—arranged in the correct order in a so-called matrix; during printing, it is this matrix that is pressed onto the page. On the other hand, printing an image required only a single printing surface, a single woodblock into which the image was carved as one unit. Thus, this technological difference introduced a conceptual distinction within illustration itself between that which is purely image—printed as a woodcut—and that which, though visual, resides in the domain of text and is printed within a matrix via a type. The vignette's in-between position fundamentally depends on this latter notion of the typographical ornament: it is a form of decoration that, just like letters and punctuation, is typecast, and which, again like the letters of a text, is arranged in the printer's matrix along with the text during printing.

While the earliest printed books were "finished" by hand, meaning that illustrators would add and color illustrations by hand (Smith 35), gradually, towards the end of the 15th century, printing started taking care of book illustration as well (Bland 116). My own survey of a vast range of early printed books held at the Huntington Library in San Marino, CA, suggests that the advantages of printing—which consist primarily of the ability to produce many copies of the same text or ornament quickly—first extended to woodcut ornaments. One of the earliest mechanized book illustrations typical in the Huntington's incunabula collection is the type of illustration that Bland calls "stock woodcut borders," which he considers a feature of titlepages, but which I have seen appear in various places among the Huntington's incunabula (Bland 150–54). In some cases, the entire page, including the letters, was cut from a single block but more

often, as in the 1522 French Book of Hours depicted below (Huntington 108699) the borders were cut as three or four separate blocks and printed around the text:

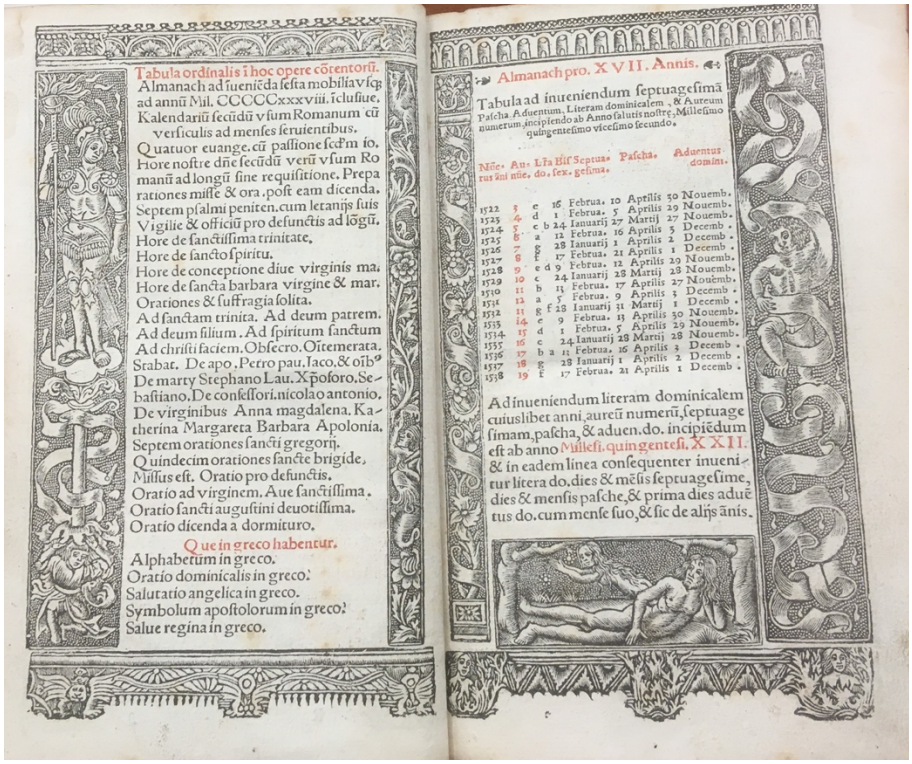


Figure 4: Woodcut block borders in a Book of Hours (1522, French, Huntington 108699)

These mechanized illustrations are not yet vignettes, but it is from them that vignettes may have gradually evolved. As Paul Beaujon speculates, "[p]robably during the sixteenth century several motives of arabesque woodcut borders were actually cut out of the blocks to be used as separate flower vignettes; surely many such models were eventually cut by typefounders" (253). This process, which produced the first typographic ornaments, would have been aided by the development that, as Scott delineates, was already taking place in manuscript illumination in the 15th century, namely the gradual dissection of border vines into their component parts. These two processes are congruent temporally: an early example of typecast ornamentation, cited by Bland, was an *Aesop* produced in Verona in 1479, and it used typographic flowers "for borders and also

singly throughout the text" (116). "Typographic ornaments seem to have been first used the previous year [i.e. 1478]," Bland continues, "in the *Ars Moriendi* also from Verona. In this book, a whole page is thus decorated" (116, note 1). However, my research suggests that extending typographic ornaments to the whole page was rare; these new devices were not used abundantly even across whole books until later.

In sum, then, the incunabula and 16th-century books decorated typographically evidence that printers did not only continue earlier border ornament practices but were also happy to experiment with the new possibilities afforded by typographic ornaments. Indeed, the reproduction techniques of printing made the decorative elements newly autonomous and mobile; and with time, since this mobility allowed for increased communication and exchange across printers, typographical ornaments began standardizing into several different types of increasingly formulaic and recognizable devices.

It is the argument of this study that it is among these typographical ornaments that we can locate the first vignettes. The disintegration of continuous vines in the borders of manuscripts enabled the production of typographic, individually cast floral decorative devices, which could now be used autonomously, as well as be moved flexibly to new positions around the page. The typecasting of preexisting ornaments constitutes the origin of a whole range of floral devices designated by the collective term "printers' flowers," or "fleurons," of which the asterisk is a familiar example (Meynell and Morison 2). Indeed, it might be remembered that the *fleuronné* was a particular floral decorative element in manuscript borders: therefore, the typecast fleuron is a direct conceptual offshoot of its manuscript antecedent. Indeed, this is Meynell and Morison's hypothesis. They credit Aldus Manutius the elder, a printer who set up shop in Venice in 1494, with cutting manuscript border patterns up into their component parts and producing "piccoli

ferri" (or "petits-fers," little irons), that is type, to print with: this is how "fleurons and corner pieces were born" (13).[5] Parkes notes that the hedera, the ivy-leaf, was also cast in iron type at this time (61). Thus, while these devices will eventually be both differentiated from one another and standardized, the term printer's flower is adequate to designate all these various typecast floral forms.

My argument is that the process that produced fleurons out of the *fleuronné* is also responsible for producing the vignette out of the *vigne*. As the manuscript's decorative devices were being divided up to be able to fit the mold (literally) of the typefount, the vine itself was dissected into little vines: vignettes. Another way to put this is to say that the vignette is the response produced by mechanization to the manuscript's earlier handmade structuring frames; thus, the vignette is, already at its inception, a form fundamentally constituted by mechanization. This responsiveness to mechanization and technology in general recurs throughout the vignette's history, informing its formal and contextual mobility, and it will be important in the 21st century as well. It took some time for the new technology to take hold, but by the middle of the 16th century, vines had been more or less fully displaced with typeset small leaves or flowers, or forms that approximated them. Figure 5 shows such a mid-century typographical vignette in a poetic romance entitled *Philippi Galtheri poete Alexandreidos libri decem nunc primùm in Gallia Gallicisque characteribus editi* printed in Lyon in 1558 (Huntington 122098) using types cut by the admired Robert Granjon:

[5] The two propositions by Bland and Meynell and Morison about the first use of typecast decoration are not temporally consistent: if the earliest typographical ornament was indeed, as Bland claims, from 1478, then Aldus, who only started his press in 1494, could not have invented typecast decorations. It is difficult to decide the matter conclusively, but my research suggests that Aldus was certainly important in popularizing these forms, which were not in frequent use until around the middle of the 16th century.

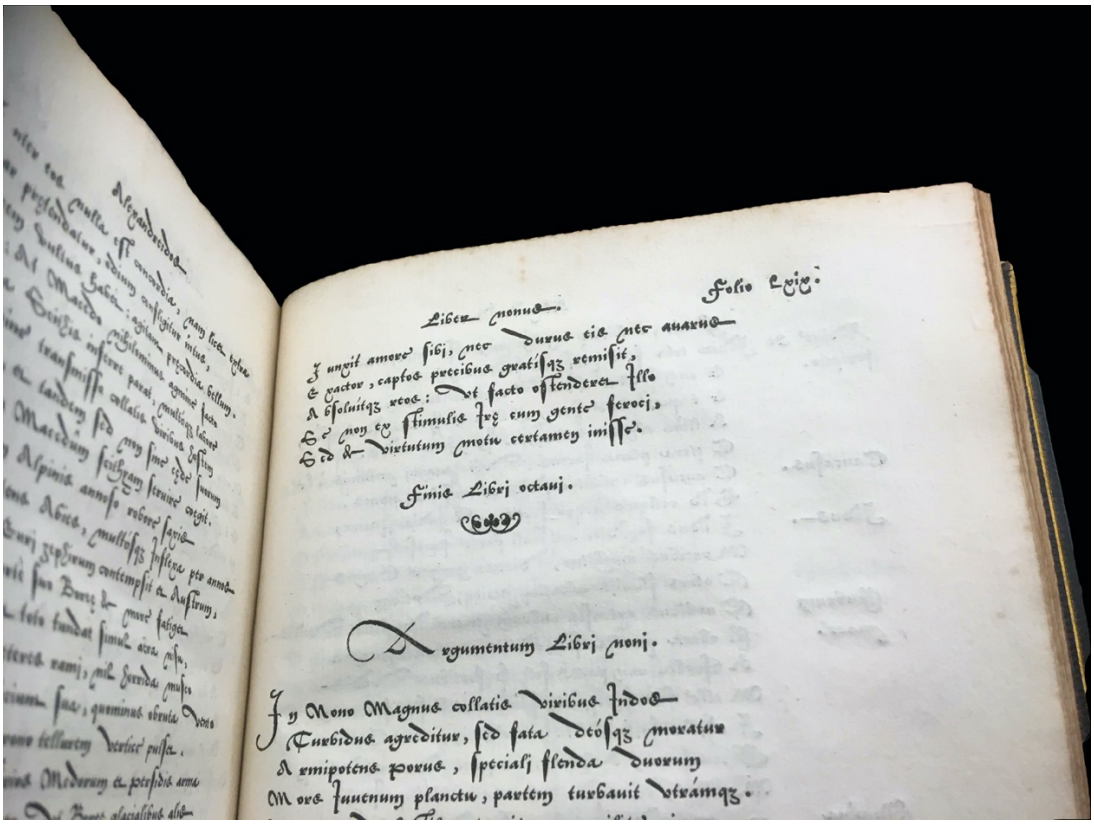


Figure 5: A Granjon vignette tailpiece in *Philippi Galtheri poete Alexandreidos* (1558, Lyon, Huntington 122098)

Meynell and Morison's account of the emergence, from border vines, leaves and flowers, of discretely printable "letters in the language of decoration" (2) supports the thesis that vignettes were created through the dissection of larger ornaments into smaller, printable chunks—even if they do not explicitly mention the vignette as part of this process. Their term of preference is fleuron, which privileges the flowery dimension of these ornaments, while vignette more thoroughly accounts for the relationship with the previously existing form of the border vine. Yet, Meynell and Morison immediately extend the semantic field of typographical devices: thus, they claim that the 16th century abounded in "printers' flowers, fleurons, vignettes de fontes, roslein, as they are variously known" (1). This enumeration suggests a tenuous equation of all these terms ("as they are variously known"), all of which are diminutives (*-on, -ette, -lein*) of

preexisting floral terms in French and German respectively (*fleur, vigne,* and *Rose* for flower, vine, and rose). It was noted at the beginning of this chapter that there are some terms that become near-synonymous with the vignette. Clearly, these various floral nouns designate very similar, difficult to distinguish print devices, for which printer's flowers or fleurons are sometimes used as the most general term. The vignette cannot, therefore, be considered in isolation from the development of fleurons in the course of later history.

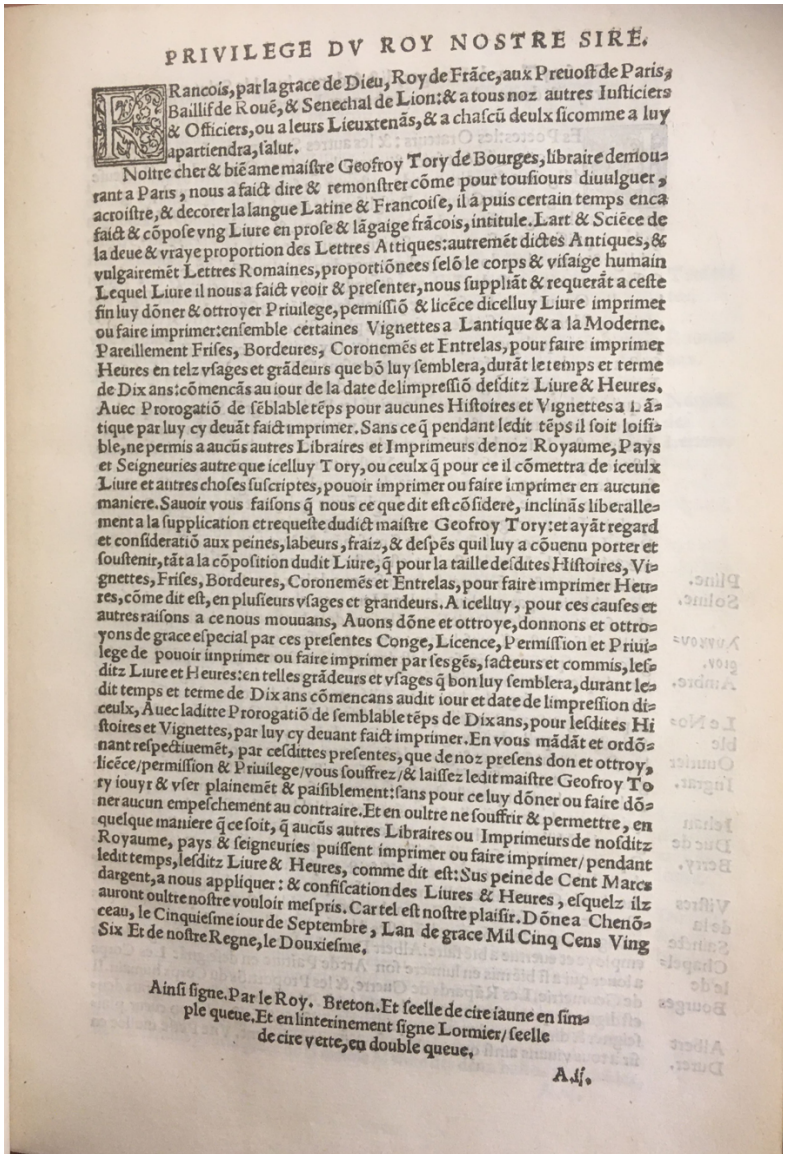
Moreover, even if there was, at the time of the first typecasting of floral ornaments, some slight differentiation between vines and their leaves and flowers, between vignettes and fleurons, then this differentiation would have been porous, uncertain, and potentially irrelevant. Especially since vines seldom appeared as decorative devices in their own right no matter how delicate an interlacing may be, but would almost invariably grow at least one leaf or flower, it makes little sense to attempt to enforce a strict separation between stems and the leaves or flowers that grow on them. Indeed, one might even say that it is a reflection of both historical and contemporary flora-centrism to focus on the fleuron, the flower, rather than on other parts of the plant—a categorical mistake similar to the one made when we focus solely on the text of books rather than their entire visual and material constitution.

Meynell and Morison's use of "vignettes de fontes," a rare term I have otherwise only encountered in 18th-century French typefounding discourse, emphasizes the vignette's origin in typecasting: the French *fonte* for typefount is where our term for font comes from. "Vignettes de fontes," then, evokes the typefount. At the same time, though, the qualifier "de fontes" also implies that vignettes produced by type may just have been a subset of all vignettes. It is remarkable that none of Meynell and Morison's other terms has this qualifier, especially given that such a distinction could be justified for the fleuron, for example, which had preexisted

printing in the *fleuronné*. Is it to be concluded that vignettes were the only print ornaments that were produced not merely by typefounts but also by other means? That other means would be the woodcut, discussed above. If this assumption is upheld, then it can be inferred that the vignette still retains in the period a connection to the border vine from which it derives, since borders are the only decorative elements that cannot be shrunk down to the size of font. In this case, vignettes do distinguish themselves from the other ornaments in that they may, as yet, still be cut in wood or typecast. Uniquely, then, the vignette continues to unite the function of punctuation (structuring) with decorative, affective meaning-making (illustration). That is, contrary to the "strong" version of the claim that vignettes are the products of letter-printing, vignettes signify the blurry boundaries between letter-type and image printing. Thus, while other ornamental devices essentially became part of the alphabet of printing, that is, of the domain of the text, and illustrations proper occupy the domain of the woodcut, the vignette continues to challenge the boundaries between these by simultaneously inhabiting both text and illustration.

Primary evidence upholds this conceptual indistinction so central to the vignette's representational significance. This evidence comes from an illustrious source: Geofroy Tory, successful printer and bookseller (*libraire*), printer to the French king starting in 1531 (Johnson 250), was an authority on all things books, having himself worked as an illustrator, designed his own alphabet, and written an influential treatise on printing, typography and book design, entitled *Champ Fleury* and published in 1526 in his own press ("a Lenseigne du Pot Casse") in Paris (Huntington 82586). This book provides the earliest occurrence of the word "vignette" that I have been able to find. In the *privilège,* the bookseller's copyright, printed at the beginning of the book, the king grants Tory permission to "imprimer ou faire imprimer," that is to print or to have printed, "certaines Vignettes a Lantique & a la Moderne. Pareillement Frises, Bordeurs,

Coronemẽs et Entrelas"—"vignettes in the old and the modern style[; s]imilarly, friezes, borders, crown flourishes and entrelacs" (interlacing patterns; my translation). Essentially, Tory here provides a list of existing print ornaments (later in the *privilège*, he also mentions "Histoires," which almost certainly refers to historiated initials):



PRIVILEGE DV ROY NOSTRE SIRE.

FRancois, par la grace de Dieu, Roy de Frãce, aux Preuost de Paris, Baillif de Rouẽ, & Senechal de Lion: & a tous noz autres Iusticiers & Officiers, ou a leurs Lieuxtenãs, & a chascũ deulx sicomme a luy apartiendra, salut.

Nostre cher & biẽ ame maistre Geofroy Tory de Bourges, libraire demourant a Paris, nous a faict dire & remonstrer cõme pour tousiours diuulguer, acroistre, & decorer la langue Latine & Francoise, il a puis certain temps encça faict & cõpose vng Liure en prose & lãgaige frãcois, intitule. Lart & Sciẽce de la deue & vraye proportion des Lettres Attiques: autremẽt dictes Antiques, & vulgairemẽt Lettres Romaines, proportiõnees selõ le corps & visaige humain Lequel Liure il nous a faict veoir & presenter, nous suppliãt & requerãt a ceste fin luy dõner & ottroyer Priuilege, permissiõ & licẽce dicelluy Liure imprimer ou faire imprimer: ensemble certaines Vignettes a Lantique & a la Moderne. Pareillement Frises, Bordeures, Coronemẽs et Entrelas, pour faire imprimer Heures en telz vsages et grãdeurs que bõ luy semblera, durãt le temps et terme de Dix ans: cõmencãs au iour de la date de limpressiõ desditz Liure & Heures. Auec Prorogatiõ de semblable tẽps pour aucunes Histoires et Vignettes a L ãtique par luy cy deuãt faict imprimer. Sans ce q̃ pendant ledit tẽps il soit loisible, ne permis a aucũs autres Libraires et Imprimeurs de noz Royaume, Pays et Seigneuries autre que icelluy Tory, ou ceulx q̃ pour ce il cõmettra de iceulx Liure et autres choses suscriptes, pouoir imprimer ou faire imprimer en aucune maniere. Sauoir vous faisons q̃ nous ce que dit est cõsidere, inclinãs liberallement a la supplication et requeste dudict maistre Geofroy Tory: et ayãt regard et consideratiõ aux peines, labeurs, fraiz, & despẽs quil luy a cõuenu porter et soustenir, tãt a la cõposition dudit Liure, q̃ pour la taille desdites Histoires, Vignettes, Frises, Bordeures, Coronemẽs et Entrelas, pour faire imprimer Heures, cõme dit est, en plusieurs vsages et grandeurs. A icelluy, pour ces causes et autres raisons a ce nous mouuans, Auons dõne et ottroye, donnons et ottroyons de grace especial par ces presentes Conge, Licence, Permission et Priuilege de pouoir imprimer ou faire imprimer par ses gẽs, facteurs et commis, lesditz Liure et Heures: en telles grãdeurs et vsages q̃ bon luy semblera, durant ledit temps et terme de Dix ans cõmencans audit iour et date de limpression diceulx, Auec laditte Prorogatiõ de semblable tẽps de Dix ans, pour lesdites Histoires et Vignettes, par luy cy deuant faict imprimer. En vous mãdãt et ordõnant respectiuemẽt, par cesdittes presentes, que de noz presens don et ottroy, licẽce/permission & Priuilege/vous souffrez/& laissez ledit maistre Geofroy Tory iouyr & vser plainemẽt & paisiblement: sans pour ce luy dõner ou faire dõner aucun empeschement au contraire. Et en oultre ne souffrir & permettre, en quelque maniere q̃ ce soit, q̃ aucũs autres Libraires ou Imprimeurs de nosditz Royaume, pays & seigneuries puissent imprimer ou faire imprimer/ pendant ledit temps, lesditz Liure & Heures, comme dit est: Sus peine de Cent Marcs dargent, a nous appliquer: & confiscation des Liures & Heures, esquelz ilz auront oultre nostre vouloir mespris. Car tel est nostre plaisir. Dõne a Chenõceau, le Cinquiesme iour de Septembre, L an de grace Mil Cinq Cens Ving Six Et de nostre Regne, le Douxiesme.

Ainsi signe. Par le Roy. Breton. Et seelle de cire iaune en simple queue. Et en linterinement signe Lormier/ seelle de cire verte, en double queue.

A.si.

Figure 6: Discussion of vignettes in *Champ Fleury* (1526, Paris, Huntington 82586)

Here we have the evidence that printing truly took charge of previously existing decorative forms, and in so doing, created the vignette, but the available methods for printing cannot be so

straightforwardly deduced. On the one hand, the *Champ Fleury privilège* and the printed images themselves suggest the woodcut as having produced this book's prints; on the other, the text leaves open the possibility of typecasting of ornaments for other books. Thus, further down in the *privilège*, "la taille," woodcut, is mentioned as the method of production of the commissioned ornaments: this suggests that the vignettes of *Champ Fleury* would not have been made using typecasting technologies. Indeed, a closer look at the illustrations of *Champ Fleury* suggests that most, if not all, were produced using single woodcuts:

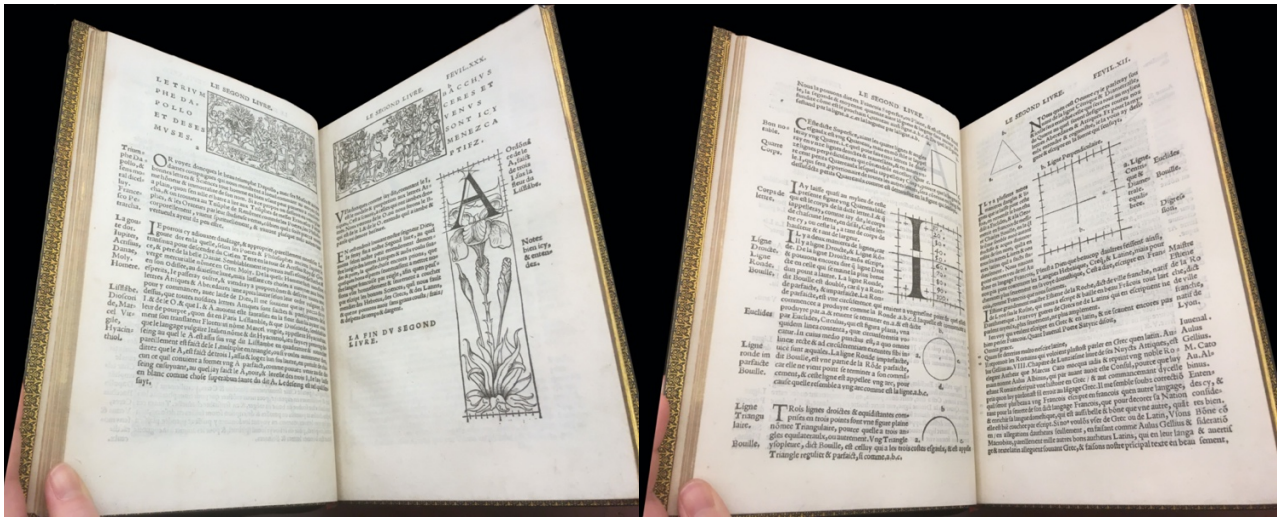
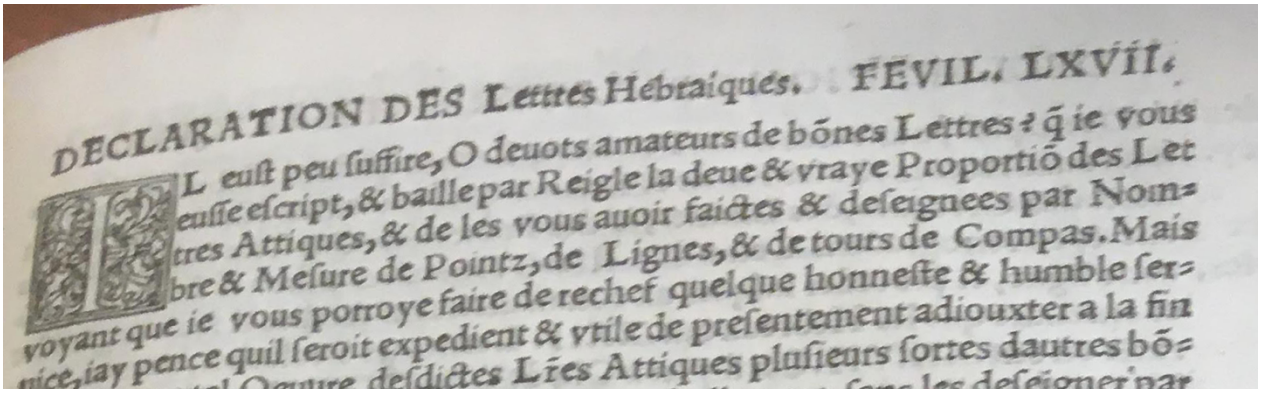


Figure 7: Woodcut illustrations in *Champ Fleury*

These images were clearly printed from cuts in single woodblocks: their size vastly exceeds that of the letters, which means that they could not easily have been printed with the matrix of the letterpress. Indeed, the plates used for printing a later edition of *Champ Fleury* in 1549 in V. Gaultherot's print shop, also in Paris (Huntington 122096), produced images of the same size as the 1526 edition, in a book of much smaller dimensions: this suggests that the same blocks were either preserved for reuse or copied for Gaultherot's print. That is, the *Champ Fleury* illustrations were not typographical.

Or were they? The historiated initials (*histoires*) the *privilège* mentions, such as the floriated "I" in the figure below (Figure 8), form a possible exception to the woodcuts used for the larger illustrations. Though still larger than the letters, such initials can have been printed within the matrix of the letterpress, similarly to the enlarged but undecorated letters that mark section headings in the figures above. These floriated initials are also *Champ Fleury*'s most direct nudge to the preexisting manuscript tradition of initials with vines and leaves growing from them: it is therefore possible that the text treats the terms "histoire" and "vignette" as (near) conceptual equivalents, both pointing to the framing vines that grew from initials in the medieval manuscript.


DECLARATION DES Lettres Hebraiques. FEVIL. LXVII.

IL euſt peu ſuffire, O deuots amateurs de bõnes Lettres ? q̃ ie vous euſſe eſcript, & baille par Reigle la deue & vraye Proportiõ des Lettres Attiques, & de les vous auoir faictes & deſeignees par Nombre & Meſure de Pointz, de Lignes, & de tours de Compas. Mais voyant que ie vous porroye faire de rechef quelque honneſte & humble ſer= nice, iay pence quil ſeroit expedient & vtile de preſentement adiouxter a la fin

Figure 8: Vine initial in *Champ Fleury*

Furthermore, the vignette's conceptual indistinction between text and illustration increases when *Champ Fleury* is taken as just one instance of a larger domain of print practices of book illustration. Even if all of *Champ Fleury*'s illustrations were cut out of wood, this does not mean that other books could not have used typographical techniques of image printing. The *privilège* terms "vignette," "histoire," and so on, may therefore be referring to woodcut illustrations *in this particular book,* but not necessarily in others. Indeed, the use of "taille," woodcut, as technique of printing does not expressly foreclose typographical production, because typecasting too

requires that the shape of the letter first be cut in wood, which is then used as the mold in which to cast the letter. Thus, the *privilège* text could also be referring to the first part of the typecasting process; at the very least, it leaves that possibility open, if not for *Champ Fleury*, then at least in the abstract. Finally, the text's distinction between vignettes "a Lantique & a la Moderne" could also suggest the possibility of both woodcut (older style) and typecast (newer style) vignettes. Tory makes a similar distinction in a Book of Hours published a year earlier (1525), where the *privilège* notes that he had had printed "certaines histoires et vignettes a lantique, et pareillement unes autres a la moderne" (qtd Johnson 238). That is, Tory seems consistent in distinguishing between old ("a lantique") and new ("a la moderne") types of vignettes (and historiated initials). The distinction here is not between hand illumination and mechanical printing, because the text is clear on the fact that both types of designs were meant to be printed ("pour icelles fair imprimer"). Might Tory therefore be differentiating these designs based on whether they were cut in wood or cast in type? As seen above, the *Champ Fleury* does not seem to have typecast ornaments (apart from its historiated initials, possibly) and I have not been able to gain access to Tory's 1525 Book of Hours, so evidence is lacking to assess this claim. The indistinction remains: the vignette cannot be clearly pinned down to either woodcut illustrations or typographical ones and the possibility that it encompasses both remains open.

Perhaps, then, the difference between the "antique" and the "modern" vignette is a stylistic one—one between print ornaments gesturing to the vines of manuscript borders and ornaments that have emancipated themselves from this necessity. Helpful to remember, at the time of the publication of *Champ Fleury* and the Book of Hours in the 1520s, typographical ornaments were fairly new in Europe, having been invented around the turn of the century,[6] while woodcut

[6] See note 4 above on the dating of the invention of typecast ornaments.

decoration had been around for much longer than that. Furthermore, the introduction of typecasting brought about the standardization of fonts and letterpress decorations, and thus coincided with the emergence of an ever more homogenous new style emanating from the center of book printing and arts, Northern Italy. This stylistic difference seems salient enough for Tory's *privilège* texts to want to draw out, especially since Tory, who had spent some time in Italy, undertook some effort to establish the Italian Renaissance style of book printing in France (*Champ Fleury* is arguably a work written with this purpose). Thus, Tory's distinction in 1525 between vignettes of a modern and an "antique" style would suggest that vignettes as a concept would have had a presence in booksellers' and bookbuyers' consciousness for some time, enough for large stylistic differences to develop over time. If this is the case, then the "modern" style evidences that the vignette is already on the way toward becoming a miniature ornament whose connection to its vine tendril origins (its "antique" form) no longer needs to be made fully explicit.

In sum, although, or because, Tory's printing work does not offer clear examples of both typecast and woodcut vignettes, it is sufficiently ambiguous to uphold the vignette's boundary-straddling position between these different—image or text-based—techniques.

Tory's *privilèges* locate the origins of the term *vignette* in the French context, which implies that the etymological connection between vines and vignettes ought to be regarded as meaningful. Yet, this need not necessarily mean that vignettes were first made in France, especially since French was spoken widely across Europe as a language of education and culture. While the term is therefore certainly French, this says nothing about whether the concept—with or without a name to it—was in existence elsewhere in Europe.[7] Linguistically, this question is

[7] It is difficult and often unhelpful to think in national frameworks for the topic of this chapter, since book production and trade was highly interconnected across Europe, and readers, writers, buyers and sellers of books

hard to test for English, because England had no copyright at this time and little discourse on the art of printing itself, so that traces of terms like vignette, fleuron, or even printers' flower are hard to find. Yet, Peter W.M. Blayney asserts the existence of the "word variously spelled as 'vynyet,' vinyate,' and the like" in the 16th century, and argues that it could "apply generally to any kind of ornamental cut" (Blayney 455). However, for Blayney, its English use "usually implie[d] an identifying device or trademark." He takes as his evidence a 1563 lawsuit, where the printer's trademark device was referred to most often as "either 'vynyet or marke' or 'marke or vynyet,'" which for Blayney suggests "clearly" that 'vynyet' and 'marke' (trademark) "were synonymous."

The Huntington library holds two almost contemporary sources that attest to the presence of the decorative device used similarly across the channel, no matter by what term it may have been present in the English conceptual vocabulary around book ornamentation. In the books below, dated 1570 and 1568, respectively, and coming from France and England, vignette borders fulfill very similar functions and seem to have been produced in technologically similar ways:

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formed much more of a homogenous group by virtue of their participation in reading, writing, buying and selling books than they did as a result of their national or ethnic background. Printing technologies, fonts and printers themselves circulated from one country to the other, defying categorization on a national basis. (For example, the great English printer with the fortuitous name for his profession, Wynkyn de Worde, was not of English but of Dutch origin.) The Eastern region of Europe tends to receive relatively scant attention from scholars, which, one suspects, is only partially justified. The advances of the Ottoman Empire in the 16th century certainly cut off part of this region from the Christian-oriented central and Western parts of Europe, although it must not be forgotten that the latter regions were themselves seriously divided by the religious conflicts sparked by the Reformation. Whatever the reasons may be, there was but little primary and secondary material from the Eastern parts of Europe available to me, which is reflected in the West-centrism of the present study. This tendency is not intended to reflect any assumptions on relative significance of influences, however.

Figure 9: Typographical bands in an Aesop's *Fables* (1570, Lyon, Huntington 110787)

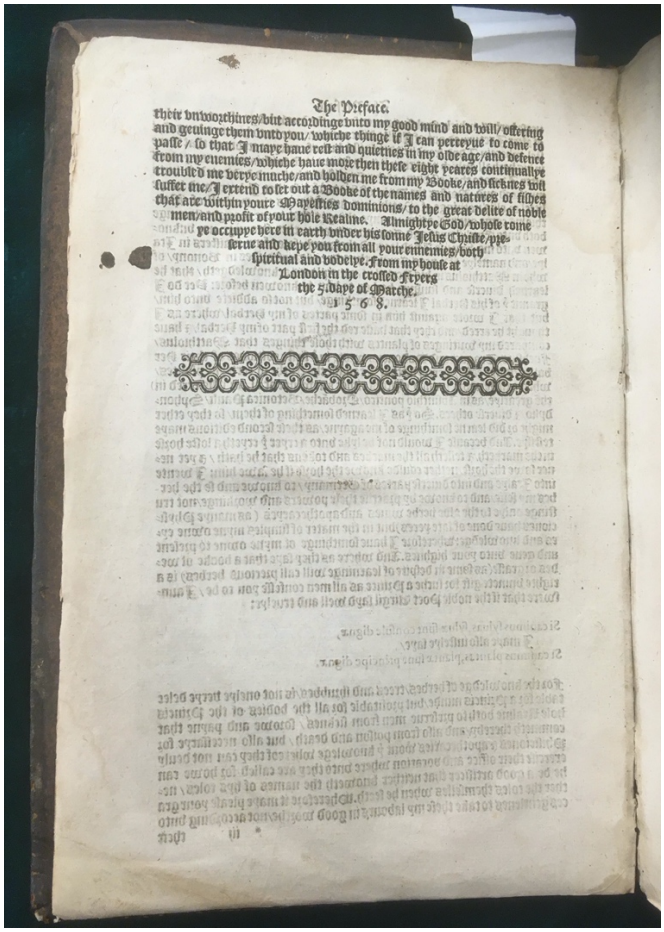


Figure 10: Typographical tailpiece (1568, Collen, England, Huntington 61542)

In these examples—on top, a 1570 Aesop's *Fables* from Lyon (Huntington 110787), below, *A New Herball* by William Turner printed in 1568 in Collen, England (Huntington 61542)—the vignettes embody the in-between position between woodcut border and typographical ornament uniquely associated with them. In both of these books, it is not fully clear whether the vine borders were carved in single woodcuts, or whether they were assembled from smaller typographical units; and even if, as I think probable, the latter is true, then these typographical units still exceed the size of individual letters. That is, the vignettes resist easy integration into the order of text as well as into that of image. Yet the stylistic difference to which Tory's texts perhaps speak—between the thinner, more economical type of the Lyon Aesop and the heavier, more manuscript-like *Herball*—is salient. Thus, as vignettes continue to occupy an in-between space between type and image, they are also simultaneously vehicles of the gradual and uneven standardization of particular printing practices and styles.

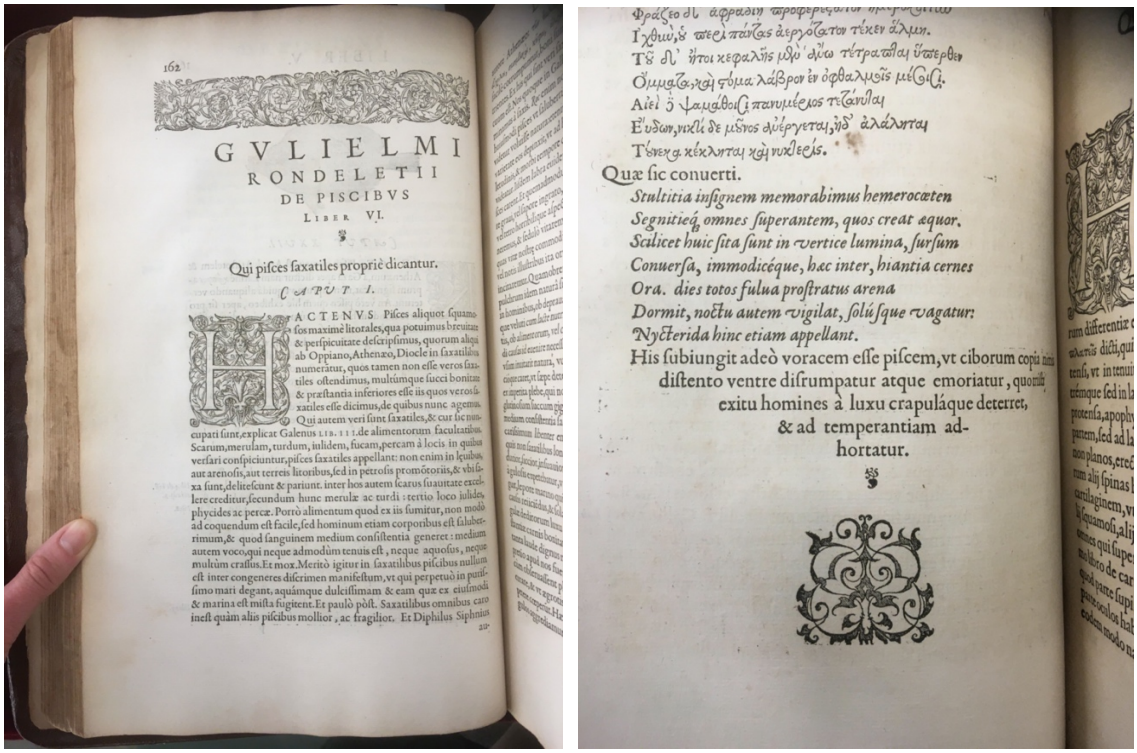
While vignettes were gaining currency, an interesting parallel development in the book is that the function of a supporting structure continued to play an important role even as borders were slowly fading out of use. Borders, as well as the continuity of manuscript script, had provided stabilizing structures that now threatened with disintegration. Script itself was becoming increasingly discontinuous because of the discreteness of letters produced by printing types. One way to reintroduce a formal continuousness was through the heightened emphasis on the serif. Serifs had not been invented with printing; they had existed in manuscripts at least as far back as the 12th century in order to ensure that scribes and readers would not slip from one line to the other (Parkes 41). However, they came into their own in the 16th century, where connecting lines between letters could no longer be achieved by printing mechanisms: the best that could be done

was to have the letters reach out for each other in a gesture of connection, the serif. It is reasonable to suppose that the reliance on serif fonts aided the process of the disappearance of borders, since they provided a similar thoroughgoing "stem" to what border vines had supplied previously. If this is the case, then the increased use of the serif would also have increased the prevalence of vignettes de fonte vis-à-vis their woodcut (and therefore larger, more suitable for structuring) counterparts.

Indeed, the 16th century brought with it an immense wave of standardization across letters and punctuation, claims Parkes (51), and the 16th-century books I have examined evidence that this process extended to typecast decorative elements as well. Parkes exemplifies the homogenization process: by 1525, new fonts were rarely ever designed (though new types had to be cut constantly to replace types lost to wear); instead, they were purchased from large printers like Claude Garamond and Robert Granjon (Parkes 51). This practice would have meant that across Europe, the typographical appearance of books would have started to converge. Indeed, the most influential developers of English printing, William Caxton and Wynkyn de Worde, both bought their type from France. Thus, gradually the stylistic differences discussed above between the two cotemporaneous English and French books would have started to give way to a more uniform, pan-European appearance. Yet, as the examples above witness, this process was uneven and not nearly complete towards the second half of the century.

Where were vignettes usually placed in early printed books, and what were their functions? The examples above suggest some typical positions and effects. Vine initials often appear at the beginnings of chapters or headings, but never at the end. Larger undecorated initials often signal section or even paragraph beginnings (see the *Champ Fleury* for examples of both). Floral borders, whether woodcut or typographical, often surround entire pages, or three sides, early in

the century (see the woodcut block borders of the 1522 French Book of Hours above); later, they appear above a chapter heading, after a chapter or section ending, or simply at the top of the page (as in the 1570 Aesop from Lyon). Single typographical ornaments are relatively rare in the 16th century: when they do occur, however, they can mark titles (including chapter titles) or section and chapter endings; both of these positions are typically associated with the single ivy leaf. A scientific treatise by Guillaume Rondelet of Montpelier, printed at Lyon in 1554-55 by Mathieu Bonhomme (Huntington 496820) exemplifies this use of the ivy leaf in a chapter beginning (Figure 11, left) and ending (Figure 11, right); though at the chapter's end, the hedera is here accompanied by another typographical tailpiece:



GVLIELMI RONDELETII DE PISCIBVS LIBER VI.

Qui pisces saxatiles propriè dicantur.

CAPVT I.

Quæ sic conuerti.

Stultitia insignem memorabimus hemerocæten
Segnitieq, omnes superantem, quos creat æquor.
Scilicet huic sita sunt in vertice lumina, sursum
Conuersa, immodicéque, hæc inter, hiantia cernes
Ora. dies totos fulua prostratus arena
Dormit, noctu autem vigilat, solúsque vagatur:
Nycterida hinc etiam appellant.

His subiungit adeò voracem esse piscem, vt ciborum copia intra distento ventre disrumpatur atque emoriatur, quomodo exitu homines à luxu crapuláque deterret, & ad temperantiam adhortatur.

Figure 11: Hedera as headpiece and tailpiece (1554-55, French, Huntington 496820)

Finally, a fully new design practice that emerges in the 16th century is that of the gradually narrowing text body at the end of a chapter (also shown in Figure 11 above), which may or may

not be accompanied by a print ornament. The *Herball* above provides another example, but the *Champ Fleury* uses this practice frequently as well. When vignettes as chapter-closing print devices, so-called tailpieces, become more common towards the 17th century, their shape will be fundamentally informed by the upside-down triangle layout of the text in these books.

Thus, the early vignette is the product of the emergence of printing practices applied to text as well as to image. The mechanization of illustration practices as well as of writing led to the solidification and standardization of an entire class of print devices that occupied an in-between space between image and letter, and which drew from their vine origins a structuring and punctuating function that distinguished them from illustration proper. These print devices—fleurons, vignettes, and ivy leaves—fulfilled a representational function different from that of the image: rather than depict the world, they worked to structure the representational form of the text itself by breaking it up into smaller sections. Among them, the vignette held a uniquely suspended position between image and punctation, or illustration and text, since the vignette alone could be produced not merely through the typographical means of the letterpress, but also using the woodcut technique typical of the visual illustration. Thus, the vignettes of the early printed book could modify, sometimes even challenge, the meanings of the main text through means that were both visual as well as structural—residing within the text itself.

The Emergence of Visual Culture: Etching, Book Illustration, and the Vignette as Miniature Illustration

After a 16th century that saw the explosion of book printing, the introduction of the typographic and structuring vignette, and a total reshaping of book production, trade, and reception, the 17th century brought changes that set the stage for the 18th-century vignette, an

incarnation which many bibliographers and "bibliophiles" consider the peak achievement of the form. Owing to changes in image printing techniques, as well as to the shifting roles of visual illustration in general, the vignette's in-between status between text and illustration allowed it, during the course of the 17th century, to emancipate itself from typography and become a miniature illustration on its own right. Yet, floral print devices continued to fulfill important structuring functions in the book, even as their typographical production became gradually less common, displaced by engraving and etching techniques.

The 17th century marked the rise of visual culture: figural illustrations gained importance in literary as well as in scientific publications, and visual artifacts became valuable objects of circulation, whether as standalone prints, pamphlets and brochures, or trade paraphernalia such as posters and business cards. The century thus saw a rapidly rising demand for illustrated books, partially owing to the growing dominance of genres that demand illustration, such as primers, scientific treatises, and children's books. This development was therefore accompanied by an increasingly specialized book decoration industry, in which the makers of prints would typically belong to one of two ever more separate professions: draughtsmen, responsible for the designs and drawings, and engravers, who furnished the plates to be printed. The printing itself was usually carried out by printers, a third group, from whom publishers were also increasingly separate. Book selling was usually done by the latter, although often in unbound form: many buyers would themselves send their acquisitions to book binders to be bound in a style matching their private libraries (Bland 169–81).

An important technological shift accompanied book illustration's increasing standardization and specialization. Increasingly in this period, rather than producing woodcuts as was typical of the previous century, engravers would engrave copper plates, or produce plates by the new

technique known as etching. (The term "engraver," however, can be used to refer to person using either of these two techniques.) Differently from woodcut and letterpress, engraving and etching are both so-called *intaglio* printing techniques, meaning that the design is carved into the surface of the plate rather than standing out (in relief) from it. Thus, differently from relief techniques like woodcut, in intaglio printing, the ink is pressed *into* the design during inking and the background also receives ink, which can but does not have to be washed off before printing. During printing, then, the entire plate is pressed into the paper, with not only the designs but potentially also the background receiving a gentle shade of color.[8] This principle is fundamentally different from that of relief printing, applicable for woodcut prints and typography, where the design is the actual surface that will be inked, standing off (in "relief") against a receded background. Most importantly, the intaglio process invariably produces a so-called platemark framing the final print: because the plate as a whole is pressed into the page during printing, this creates an indentation at the edges of the plate, which are also the borders of the inked image. Therefore, with intaglio, it is nearly impossible to create an image that will not be framed by the platemark, even if the ink has been removed from the background.[9]

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[8] The Metropolitan Museum, New York, provides a visual overview of the intaglio printing process of an engraved image. See https://www.metmuseum.org/about-the-met/curatorial-departments/drawings-and-prints/materials-and-techniques/printmaking/engraving#:~:text=Engraving%20is%20an%20intaglio%20printmaking,made%20of%20copper%20or%20zinc. ("Engraving" n.p.)

[9] The technique of etching is a subcategory of intaglio techniques such as engraving, and it owes its existence to the difficulty of carving designs into copper plates. During engraving, the craftsman would carve thin lines into the hard copper using a special tool called the burin, which was a difficult and arduous task. During etching, however, the copper plate was first covered with a soft acid-resistant resin paste, known as the ground: it was into this soft surface that the design was drawn—with ease, as if with pencil on paper. Then the entire plate was submerged in an acid, which bit the underlying copper where the design had been drawn, but which was prevented from doing so wherever the ground had been left intact. Thus, after the plate was retrieved from the acid and the ground washed away, the copper surface was left with the design not carved, but bitten into it by the acid, allowing for the same kind of intaglio printing as used with engravings. Etched prints therefore resemble engravings in that they also allow for a colored background; but etchings yield much softer lines, since the acid bites more unevenly than the burin engraves.

With the rise of engraving and etching, and the increasing importance of book illustration and image printing in general, the 17th century saw a vast expansion in the types of illustrations and ornaments used within, and increasingly also autonomously from, the book. Indeed, among the many ever more specialized professions devoted to printed visuals, craftsmen started to emerge who devoted much, if not all, of their work to specific genres of prints. Jacques Callot (1592-1635) exemplifies this trend. An engraver, Callot specialized in what can variously be called emblems, miniatures, or vignettes: very small prints that depict allegorical figures or symbols, though not typically structuring devices and never typographical ornaments. Callot's distinguishing feature was how small his illustrations were: indeed, contemporaries supposed him to have been working under a double magnifying glass (Daniel xvi), and his prints elicited enough admiration that they found a market as prints circulating separately from any text. Yet, these prints were still tied to the notion of the book: they were usually conceived as a series of prints unified by a topic, such as *Lux Claustri* ("The Light of the Cloister"), *Les Misères et les malheurs de la Guerre* ("The Miseries and Sorrows of War"), or *Capitano de Baroni* ("Captain of the Barons").

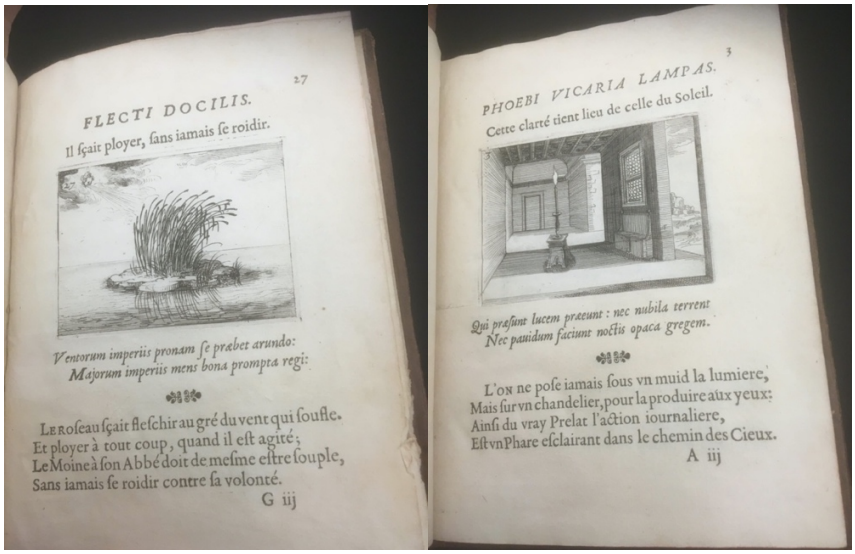


Figure 12: Emblems from *Lux Claustri* (1646, Paris, Huntington 377985)

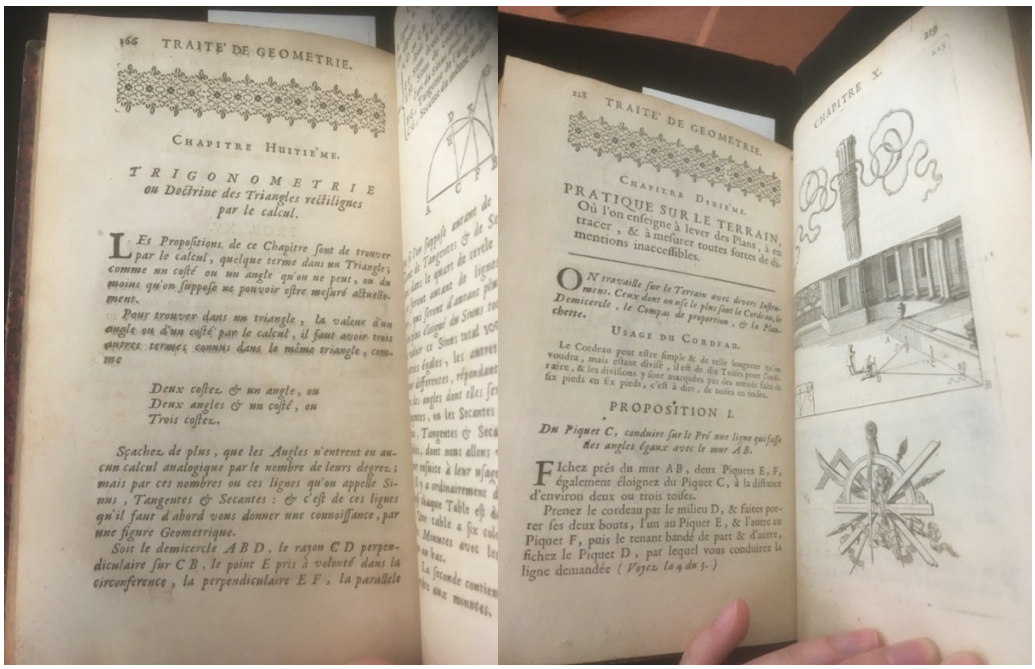
Callot's work thus exemplifies the process by which book illustration emancipated itself from the text of the book, at the same time as it illustrates how prints participated emphatically in the material culture of books, occupying a similar position in public discourse.

Arguably, it is its alignment with the book that makes Callot's work illustration rather than "pure" visual art: we might draw from this distinction to say that his minute prints are therefore adequately called vignettes rather than miniatures, because they participate in the discourse and the material culture surrounding books rather than that of art. Thus, in comparison with a somewhat younger contemporary with a similarly prolific print career, Rembrandt van Rijn (1606-1669), who is regarded as a defining figure of the period's visual art, Callot epitomizes the process by which the visual becomes a more important dimension of the book and of the book trade. Rembrandt, on the other hand, is rarely considered among the important contributors to the print culture surrounding books and other printed texts.

In his book on the printer Abraham Bosse (1604-1676), Carl Goldstein discusses how the technological changes in printing created new forms of public life, and how printers shifted their professional activities in response to, but also contributing to, the changing social sphere. Bosse, whose printing activities encompassed the full range of visual material from books, pamphlets, theses, playbills, broadsides, actor images, and even fans, demonstrates the scope to which print culture participated in the everyday life of an increasingly important public sphere. In fact, Goldstein argues that the activity of perusing the wares of a book shop or print shop became comparable to that of shopping "fashionable gloves, fans, and lace;" indeed, the commercialization of book distribution enabled what Goldstein calls "genteel browsing" to emerge as a new "form of sociability" (126).

Bosse exemplified this trend and contributed to it in multiple ways. Not only did his printshop produce all kinds of products for genteel consumption, many of which were autonomous visual artifacts outside of books, but he also contributed to increasing visualization of the book itself, in the form of "frontispieces…, title pages, historiated initials, cul-de-lampes and illustrations placed throughout texts ranging from bibles and other religious tracts to novels, scientific studies, and technical and theoretical studies, his own and others" (126). Bosse both participated in and thematized the labor and commercial activities of the print shop; his work therefore demonstrates the increasingly important position that visual material occupied in public discourse around science, politics, leisure, and consumption.

This confluence of scientific and ornamental visual discourses is evident in the work of Sébastien Leclerc (or Le Clerc, 1637-1714). Leclerc was a designer and engraver who, like Bosse, contributed illustrations to scientific works and himself authored treatises on geometry, perspective, and art. For example, although he produced print ornaments for books, such as the title vignette for a 1676 *Metamorphose d'Ovide* printed for the Imprimerie Royale at Paris (Huntington 378514), he was also prolific as a creator of scientific visual material, as demonstrated by his perhaps most influential work, the *Pratique de la Geometrie* (1669), which he wrote as well as illustrated. A treatise on geometry and design, the *Pratique* shows the book's visual registers operating simultaneously as markers of structure, decoration, and illustrative material. Thus, in a 1719 reprint from Paris (Huntington 701666), Leclerc's illustrations of measuring and drawing geometric planes and of the tools used for these endeavors are accompanied by typographical bands designating chapter headings:



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CHAPITRE HUITIE'ME.

TRIGONOMETRIE
ou Doctrine des Triangles rectilignes
par le calcul.

LEs Propositions de ce Chapitre sont de trouver par le calcul, quelque terme dans un Triangle, comme un costé ou un angle qu'on ne peut, ou du moins qu'on suppose ne pouvoir estre mesuré actuellement.

Pour trouver dans un triangle, la valeur d'un angle ou d'un costé par le calcul, il faut avoir trois autres termes connus dans le même triangle, comme

Deux costez & un angle, ou
Deux angles & un costé, ou
Trois costez.

Sçachez de plus, que les Angles n'entrent en aucun calcul analogique par le nombre de leurs degrez: mais par ces nombres ou ces lignes qu'on appelle Sinus, Tangentes & Secantes: & c'est de ces lignes qu'il faut d'abord vous donner une connoissance, par une figure Geometrique.

Soit le demicercle A B D, le rayon C D perpendiculaire sur C B, le point E pris à volonté dans la circonference, la perpendiculaire E F, la parallele

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CHAPITRE DIXIE'ME.

PRATIQUE SUR LE TERRAIN,
Où l'on enseigne à lever des Plans, à en tracer, & à mesurer toutes sortes de dimentions inaccessibles.

ON travaille sur le Terrain avec divers Instrumens. Ceux dont on use le plus sont le Cordeau, le Demicercle, le Compas de proportion, & la Planchette.

USAGE DU CORDEAU.

Le Cordeau peut estre simple & de telle longueur qu'on voudra, mais estant divisé, il est de dix Toises pour l'ordinaire, & les divisions y sont marquées par des nœuds faits de six pieds en six pieds, c'est à dire, de toises en toises.

PROPOSITION I.

Du Piquet C, conduire sur le Pré une ligne qui fasse des angles égaux avec le mur A B.

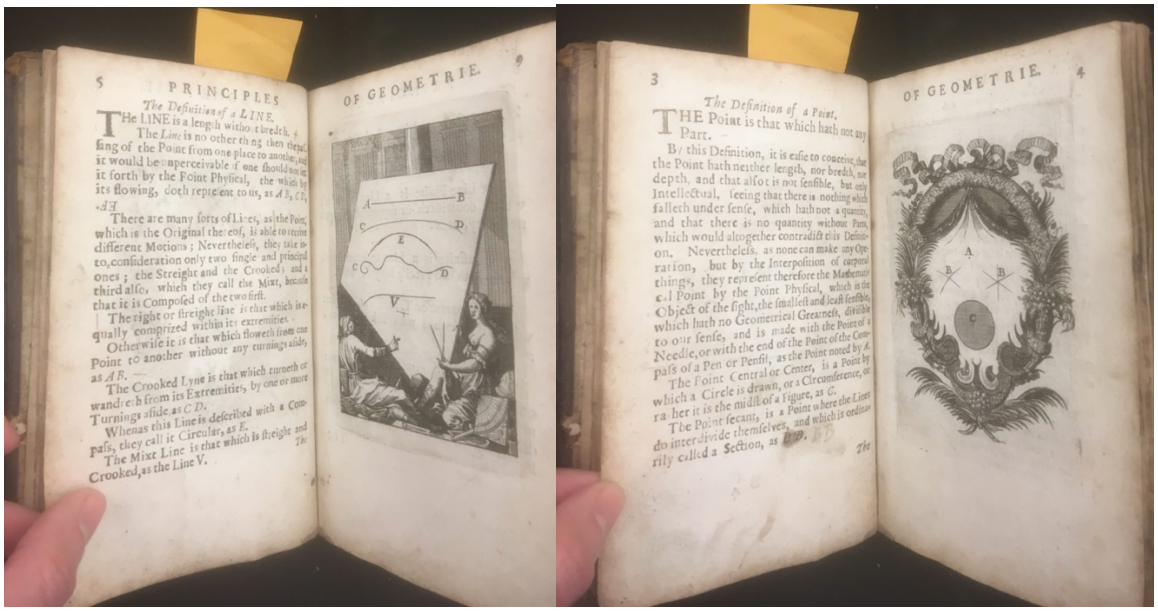
FIchez prés du mur A B, deux Piquets E, F, également éloignez du Piquet C, à la distance d'environ deux ou trois toises.

Prenez le cordeau par le milieu D, & faites porter ses deux bouts, l'un au Piquet E, & l'autre au Piquet F, puis le tenant bandé de part & d'autre, fichez le Piquet D, par lequel vous conduirez la ligne demandée (Voyez la 4 du 3.)

CHAPITRE X.

Figure 13: *Traité de Géometrie* with typographical bands and engraved illustrations (1719 reprint, Paris, Huntington 701666)

An earlier edition of the *Pratique*—a translation published in London in 1672 by Robert Frick (Huntington 442004)—combines ornament and illustrative depiction even more explicitly:



5 PRINCIPLES OF GEOMETRIE. 9

The Definition of a LINE.

THe LINE is a length without breadth. The *Line* is no other thing then the flowing of the Point from one place to another, and it would be unperceivable if one should not set it forth by the Point Physical, the which by its flowing, doth represent to us, as *A B*, *C D*, *E F*.

There are many sorts of Lines, as the Point, which is the Original thereof, is able to receive different Motions; Nevertheles, they take into consideration only two single and principal ones; the Streight and the Crooked; and a third also, which they call the Mixt, because that it is Composed of the two first.

The right or streight line is that which is equally comprized within its extremities.

Otherwise it is that which flowetb from one Point to another without any turnings aside, as *A B*.

The Crooked Lyne is that which turneth or wandereth from its Extremities, by one or more Turnings aside, as *C D*.

Whenas this Line is described with a Compass, they call it Circular, as *E*.

The Mixt Line is that which is streight and Crooked, as the Line V.

3 OF GEOMETRIE. 4

The Definition of a Point.

THE Point is that which hath not any Part.

By this Definition, it is easie to conceive that the Point hath neither length, nor breadth, nor depth, and that also it is not sensible, but only Intellectual, seeing that there is nothing which falleth under sense, which hath not a quantity, and that there is no quantity without Parts, which would altogether contradict this Definition. Nevertheles, as none can make any Operation, but by the Interposition of corporeal things, they represent therefore the Mathematical Point by the Point Physical, which is the Object of the sight, the smallest and least sensible, which hath no Geometrical Greatness, divisible to our sense, and is made with the Point of a Needle, or with the end of the Point of the Compass of a Pen or Pensil, as the Point noted by *A*.

The Point Central or Center, is a Point by which a Circle is drawn, or a Circumference, or rather it is the middle of a Figure, as *C*.

The Point secant, is a Point where the Lines do interdivide themselves, and which is ordinarily called a Section, as *B*.

The

Figure 14: Combining ornament and diagram in Frick's *Principles of Geometrie* (1672, London, Huntington 442004)

Here, the illustrations bring together the depiction of geometric planes and propositions with artistically appealing, ornamental devices such as allegorical figures or floral frames. Leclerc may not have designed these illustrations himself: the frontispiece, not depicted here, was signed "*Rob. Frick excudit,*" meaning that Frick had "executed" the engraving, which may or may not imply that he also designed it. Yet, in this way, the distribution of Leclerc's *Pratique* shows how visual explanatory structures (what today we might call data visualization) converged with book ornamentation practices. In fact, these different editions depict two kinds of ornamentation—the typographical and the engraved—contributing both aesthetically and rhetorically to the geometrical message of the treatise text.

Thus, in spite of the importance of engraving for the development of print vignettes like those of Callot and Leclerc, these works also demonstrate that 17th-century print culture was not merely comprised of engraved small illustrations: throughout the period, ornamentation using typographical devices continued, and even grew. Both Callot's and Leclerc's works were amply decorated using these devices *next to* their engraved images: in this case, one might speak of textually subordinated vignettes ornamenting main texts that are themselves, sometimes, vignettes. Thus, the key distinction is that while engraved illustrations had risen to prominence as an autonomous form essential to books, pamphlets, broadsides, and print culture at large, and sometimes circulating as the main texts of the print object they were in, typographical ornaments remained within the domain of a text's constitutive elements—a small part of the text, like the alphabet. Thus, while in the 17th century engravers were increasingly signing their works with their names, the ever more fanciful typographical vignettes were, like the characters of the alphabet, most often anonymous, their types and founders unknown but to a few specialists in the field. While the print art within and circulating autonomously outside books was increasingly

sought after on its own terms as the work of cherished artists, fonts and typographical vignettes rarely became objects of high value for book and print collectors.

As a consequence, when some typefounders began cataloging their letter and ornament work in the mid-eighteenth century, the specific meaning of "vignette" in their catalogs—that of floral typographical ornaments—would have been less salient to the wider print culture audience. Instead, as the engravings of Callot, Leclerc, and others suggest, the vignette had at this time found increasing resonance as a term referring to small book illustrations that could, but need not necessarily, have floral components, and which would usually carry some emblematic or symbolic function, as well as continue to structure books at least in terms of chapters and other major headings.

All of this is to say that, whether as desired print artifact or overlooked decorative "letter," the vignette was entering the increasingly specialized realm of print draughtsmen—the world of book commerce. That is, in an age where figural illustrations were rapidly gaining predominance, the specialists of book design were devoting a considerable amount of their time to designing (and engraving or founding) vignettes of two increasingly separate types: the artistic engraving and the typographical "letter." By the dawn of the 18th century, then, the vignette had undergone a transformation from a small, printed—woodcut or typecast—floral design that had been regarded as an indispensable *structural* feature of the book to a primarily *decorative* device, produced by woodcut, engraving and type alike, and belonging to the increasingly specialized branch of decoration and book design. The structuring, mediating and punctuating functions of the vignette were starting to receive less attention at this time; but, as we will see, the vignette's negotiation of a text's borders will continue to characterize it, if in a less manifest form.

On the Margins and at the Center: Autonomous Visual Meaning-Making in the Eighteenth Century

"The eighteenth century in France," writes Bland, "has often been called the age of the vignette" (200). The statement refers, among others, to a pronouncement made by the Goncourt brothers, famous literati of the 19th century, who had distinguished the 17th and 18th centuries from one another based on the former's preference for the frontispiece (the full-page illustration facing the titlepage) and the latter's for the vignette. Indeed, in scholarship and lay discourse, the vignette is often singularly associated with this particular period of book design. I argue, however, that the term indexes the more general developments of book design in which ornamentation became not only a standard expectation for books, but also a main driver of the book trade as such. Indeed, I link the general explosion of book production and consumption, as well as the emerging vogue of book illustration, with a connotative expansion of the vignette's semantic field. Where previously the vignette had just begun to anticipate itself from designating, fairly narrowly, a small floral print device (whether woodcut, engraved, or typecast) whose function was decorative but primarily structural, with the explosion in inventive forms of book decoration, the vignette's meaning partook in this expansion of possibilities. Thus, the vignette—theoretically just one of many small decorative and structuring devices—comes to stand in for the larger trend in which the visual dimension of books achieved new levels of importance in how literary meaning was conceived.

If the previous century had seen a bifurcation of vignettes into book-internal small decorations (printed or typecast) and autonomous small prints, the 18th century saw a proliferation of different forms of illustration and decoration even within the book. Frontispieces and decorated titlepages were the most important illustrations between the book's covers but

outside of the text proper, while small floral devices of different kinds were amply used to mark chapter or section headings, the border of the page, or endings, and scenes from the story were ever more often illustrated with full-page prints. In his survey of prints for books, Anthony Griffiths divides text-internal prints into four categories, distinguishing the *estampe*, the full-page plate, from the small floral decorations, which he divides into vignette, *cul-de-lampe*, and fleuron (1). Among these, Griffiths draws quite rigid distinctions, based primarily on position. Fleurons go on the title page, *culs-de-lampe* at the end of (a section of) the text, while vignettes would be placed "at the head of the beginning of the text" (1). In this account, the designations depend entirely on position: vignettes, fleurons, and culs-de-lampes are all the same kinds of "small decorative design[s]" with floral patterns, distinguished only by whether they are title ornaments (fleurons), headpieces (vignettes), or tailpieces (culs-de-lampe). Only for the vignette does Griffiths specify a form: its usual shape, he claims, was that of "a rectangular plate" (1).

My research suggests that this categorization was not very salient to 18th-century discourse—in other words, that the associations between terms and positions was primarily connotative rather than denotative. The near-synonymy of vignettes and fleurons seen in previous periods continued at this time; in fact, often "vignette" and "fleuron" were used interchangeably or randomly to designate the entire field of small floral designs within books as such. Thus, the 1776 *Almanach des artistes,* which was a yearly collection of noteworthy printmakers and visual artists, subsumes all of small prints under the vignette, which it simply defines as "le genre pygmé," the tiny genre (qtd Griffiths 101). Indeed, "vignette" and "gravure en petit" (small engraving) were often treated synonymously in contemporary discussions of printmaking. Furthermore, when these devices were typecast, vignette was the unambiguous term of preference no matter what the design's location. Cul-de-lampe seems to have been an alternative

name used for vignettes and fleurons when these appeared at the end of a text. That is, when vignettes or fleurons were used as tailpieces, sometimes they were referred to as culs-de-lampe, but only sometimes. Thus, the trifurcation of the small floral design in the 18th century indexes not so much the emergence of clear-cut definitions and distinctions, but rather a semantic, positional, and structural expansion of the forms and functions of the small print device, as well as the book industry's increasing discourse about, and demand for, these types of meaning-making strategies within the book.

The proliferation of discourse around the vignette and its semantic cognates is a marker of the 18th century's veritable explosion in print culture in all of its aspects within and outside the book. Print commerce encompassed a massive volume of textual artifacts such as advertising texts, book subscriptions, announcements of forthcoming books (known as prospectus), and letters, as well as visual commodities, including full-page prints, picture-books, almanacs, posters, flyers, and collectible miniature prints—all of which partook in active circulation among booksellers and buyers, printers, engravers and draughtsmen. Within the book, too, illustration became almost a requirement by the first decades of the century (Bland 199), and the demand for books with prints continued to rise drastically through the 1760s.

While much of this illustration was concerned with titlepages and frontispieces, later in the century it became more common for books to be illustrated with diegetic scenes and other increasingly elaborate ornaments scattered throughout the text. For this reason, the processes of specialization within the book trade that had begun in the previous century reached new heights. Not only were draughtsmen and engravers separate professions, with draughtsmen responsible for the design and engravers for the execution, but even among them, artists began to specialize in particular areas of expertise, and these areas implied different levels of respect. Among

engravers, vignettistes ranked last, as Griffiths demonstrates (58), a fact that is significant because it shows that contemporaries considered the different types of decorative engravings separately. Thus it was possible for the *Almanach des artistes* to create two different categories for *vignettistes* and for engravers who "gravent *aussi* la vignette" (qtd Griffiths 58, my emphasis), that is engravers who work on vignettes as well as on other plates.[10]

The demand for the work of these artists was enormous, a fact to which book advertisements attest. Often, because of the massive amounts of design and engraving they required, the costs of book projects were so prohibitive that the projects were serialized and subscriptions would be set up and advertised in advance. This allowed the projects to be cancelled even before they got underway in the event that not enough people had signed up to buy the books. Because these prospective advertisements (the prospectus) typically emphasized the elaborate ways in which the book project was planned to be decorated, it should be concluded that the decoration was a major selling point. It is impossible to overstate the extent to which such projects came to dominate the market; in fact, although many subscriptions were dropped, this was usually not because of lack of demand, but rather because engravers were so swamped with work that they simply could not deliver on time.

Because of commercial and discursive preoccupation with the print designs of texts, the literary historian Janine Barchas argues that scholarship has been remiss to read the canonical works of the time (works by Defoe, Swift, Richardson, Burney, Smollett and Fielding) in isolation from the print illustration culture in which they were indivisibly enmeshed (7). Considering only the text of an important novel, as literary critics today tend to do, would have

[10] Specialization could also be thematic, and connoisseurs of the book market would be aware of which printers, illustrators and publishers were associated with which market. For example, Griffiths notes, it was well known that the combination of the publisher Hubert Martin Cazin, the designer Antoine Borel and the engraver François Rolland Elluin specialized in the production of pornographic publications (52).

made little sense to readers of novels at the time. For example, one of the most successful French authors of the time, Claude Joseph Dorat, who wrote sentimental and romantic stories in verse, and who owed achieved a large part, though not all, of his literary fame through the lavish prints with which his works were illustrated, is effectively unknown to literary scholars today. His obscurity suggests that scholarship is not fully accounting for 18th-century literary discourse and the circuits through which books and texts more generally produced meaning and value for their contemporary readers and buyers.

The publication in 1762 of La Fontaine's *Contes* by the Fermiers-Généraux provides another example of how literature, commercial artifacts, and visual culture inhabited the same discursive space and produced social meaning jointly. This project, on which nearly all major French draughtsmen and engravers were employed, constituted the center of public attention already during its production, and once published, it set a new standard for illustrated books. The *Contes,* which had previously been banned in France for immorality (Griffiths 17), was commissioned by the wealthy and highly influential Fermiers-Généraux, an aristocratic organization who depended on their income, from contracting farmlands, on the crown (21). The *Contes* was not intended for commercial circulation but only as a limited set of private luxury items, presumably as gifts to the court. Thus, no expense was spared in its production. Although it was not the first book of literature to be illustrated, it included a previously unimaginable density of illustrations: "four *vignettes* and eighty plates by [Charles] Eisen, and fifty-three *culs-de-lampes* by [Pierre-Philippe] Choffard" (Griffiths 17, emphasis original), and employed an entire "series of engravers" (18). Although it was not commercially circulated, it stirred general awe and admiration in the public, who encountered it through ecstatic reviews in the newspapers (Griffiths cites a review in *Mercure* dating to January 1763) and through private circulation. At

the center of public adulation were the *Contes* prints and not the text's literary value—unsurprisingly, since, notwithstanding the ban, the text of the tales themselves was actually well known.

The *Contes'* impact can be measured in three ways. First, it created the expectation that books would necessarily be decorated with prints. Griffiths exemplifies this trend with Dorat, who, in spite of his already large popularity in the years before the publication of the *Contes*, began commissioning illustrations systematically starting in 1763. Second, the *Contes* provided a precedent for the octavo format as the standard for illustrated literary books (Griffiths 29). Finally, the *Contes* also introduced into book illustration printmaking the technique of "finishing" etched illustrations. Since in etching the design is incised into the plate using the bite of an acid, the final lines in the print can be quite blurry. Finishing meant that after a plate had been etched, harder lines were added directly in the copper by the engraver using the burin, the traditional engraver's tool. The hard lines of the burin were used to achieve crisper but also more consistently shaded effects. Taken together, the *Contes* set these three properties as requirements for successful illustrated books.

One incident that took place during the *Contes*' production speaks volumes about how literary culture constituted itself around the illustration, and not just the texts, of particular books. Griffiths observes that during the production of the 1762 edition, a large number of plates were produced in several versions: some such versions were distinguished according to whether they were "couvert" or "découvert," covered or uncovered (22). The covered plates, which ultimately made it into the final publication, insert some piece of clothing that is missing on the uncovered versions: what the uncovered versions reveal are body parts that were considered inappropriate for display, in some cases straightforward obscene. Griffiths is uncertain about how to read this

incident: he wonders if it was "something of a private joke or speculation" (22). But if the text of the *Contes* was itself the object of disapproval and suppression from public view, and nonetheless made it into public discourse, then how could the visual depictions of the same "immoral" material fail to partake in public circulation? I suppose rather that the titillation of the nearly, but not quite available—the book that is published, but only privately, the lascivious illustrations that exist, but not in the final print—was part of what made the 1762 *Contes* such a universal success. Although the Fermiers themselves may have intended text and illustrations alike merely for the royal eye, the commercial culture encompassing engravers, draughtsmen, printers and book readers and collectors were forming a literary culture in which books' texts and their illustrations could circulate widely and impactfully, potentially independently of one another but all contributing to the esteem of the particular book. The case of the covered and uncovered plates, as well as of the production and reception of the *Contes* in general, illustrates how the meanings generated by a particular text were partially determined outside of it, in the larger context of commercial culture in which texts and images circulated together.

It is possible to observe the same relationship between literary and visual culture outside of France as well. Barchas's work on the frontispiece supplies an instructive example of the significance of illustration to the meaning of the text from the English context. The frontispiece, "a subgenre of the long-standing tradition of the author portrait, emerge[d] as a feature of the English book in the seventeenth century" (21). However, as novels began to feature fictional author-narrators, the frontispiece author portrait could be reconfigured to depict as the "author" a fictional and therefore inexistent narrator. This was the case with all the different editions of *Gulliver's Travels*, many of which featured radically different "portraits" of Lemuel Gulliver. These different portraits effectively framed the book's fictional author as a different personality

depending on the print edition of the novel: now reliable, now more likely to be a liar and a fraud. Coupled with the already fraught relationship between Swift's person and his fictional writer-narrator, the insinuation of a possibly deceptive, but at the very least shapeshifting "author" contributed to the controversy that Swift's novel caused. It is thus in combination with its illustrative strategies that *Gulliver's Travels* launched the attack on gullibility with which literary history credits Swift's novel.

The case of the Gulliver frontispiece demonstrates that, as society became more visually oriented, there started to emerge in England as well an explicit interest in the ways that the graphic components—frontispieces, vignettes and other visual artifacts of printing—could contribute to the representational strategies of books. Indeed, because *Gulliver* first appeared in 1726, these developments in England and France were arguably parallel, rather than constituting a unidirectional relationship in which France led and England followed. Yet, France, which was generally considered to be the heart of all matters of culture and fine taste at this time, did exert influence on the pictorial practices in the English book.

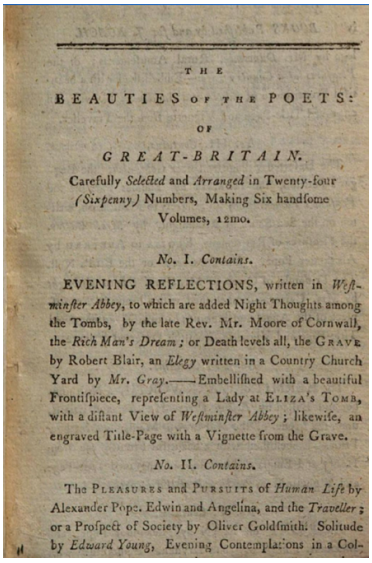
One of the early proponents of French illustration, the engraver and designer Hubert-François Gravelot, who went on to illustrate such important works as Rousseau's *Julie, ou la Nouvelle Héloïse* (1761) and a French edition of *Tom Jones* (1750), spent the years 1732-1745 in London, where he had an immense impact on engraving generally, and book illustration specifically. He was so highly regarded that Samuel Richardson, having commissioned Hogarth with the illustrations for *Pamela* but being appalled by the latter's ironic, more *Shamela*-minded drawings, broke off his pre-existent contract and hired Gravelot to do the job, which the latter completed in 1742. Gravelot also trained pupils, one of whom, Charles Grignion, went on to produce the engravings for the 1753 edition of Gray's Poems (Bland 219), which is possibly the

one to which Walpole refers in the letter where the *Oxford English Dictionary* locates the first English-language use of the term vignette. Gravelot himself also made vignettes, at least in a 1767 French edition of the *Decameron* (Griffiths 102). Gravelot remained influential for English book decoration even after he returned to Paris, especially because he maintained ties with England through a correspondence with the famous actor David Garrick, and he also continued to take commissions from London.

Gravelot was probably singularly influential for the London scene, but it is very likely that he was not alone in providing French influences across the channel. Whatever the case, by the time of Richardson's *Pamela*, it became more and more of a requirement for novels to be illustrated with in-text plates of scenes and characters, and decorative elements too began exceeding the frontispiece author portrait or the titlepage. England thus fully partook in the literary-visual culture in which a book's meaning was jointly determined through its textual and illustrative components.

I have claimed that the vignette indexed this confluence of literary and material culture, but in the examples discussed above, the print material was not primarily constituted by vignettes. Out of the illustrations of the *Contes,* the frontispieces in *Gulliver*, and the ornaments of Dorat's works, vignettes were only some of the illustrative designs that constituted the visuals, and these vignettes could take a number of forms. Many were small floral headpieces or tailpieces, or even floral bands situated at the top or the bottom of the page; others were small diegetic illustrations of scenes; and many illustrations were not vignettes at all (this includes frontispieces and full-page plates, for example). But the vignette increasingly became the term of preference for how ornamentation became an important, even required, element in the overall representational strategies of books.

For example, in prospectuses for forthcoming books, which was common practice in England starting in the 1740s, the phrase "frontispiece and vignette" or "titlepage and vignette" became a nearly ubiquitous feature (D. Alexander 117). Figure 15 shows an example of such a prospectus page for a forthcoming series on *The Beauties of Modern Poets,* which appeared in the publication *Tully's Rambles; or, an Irishman's tour through London and Westminster*. Notably, too, the vignette engravings of E.F. Burney, the nephew of the accomplished author Frances Burney, were also used as selling points for publications arguably important in their own right, for example for the *Biographical and Imperial Magazine* in 1789 on the pages of *The Morning Chronicle*. Indeed, as the critic David Alexander points out, what the *Chronicle* calls Burney's "elegant Frontiſpiece and Vignette" were as sought after as the fiction works of his successful aunt (131). Indeed, as Alexander's title makes clear, these vignettes, which signified the entirety of books' visual domain, were marketed as "alone worth treble the price." That this advertising slogan tapped into truly existing demand is indicated by the high return on marketing forthcoming publications based on their vignettes.



THE

BEAUTIES OF THE POETS:

OF

GREAT-BRITAIN.

Carefully *Selected* and *Arranged* in Twenty-four *(Sixpenny)* Numbers, Making Six handſome Volumes, 12mo.

No. I. *Contains.*

EVENING REFLECTIONS, written in *Weſtminſter Abbey*, to which are added Night Thoughts among the Tombs, by the late Rev. Mr. Moore of Cornwall, the *Rich Man's Dream*; or Death levels all, the GRAVE by Robert Blair, an *Elegy* written in a Country Church Yard by *Mr. Gray*.——Embelliſhed with a beautiful Frontiſpiece, repreſenting a Lady at ELIZA's TOMB, with a diſtant View of *Weſtminſter Abbey*; likewiſe, an engraved Title-Page with a Vignette from the Grave.

No. II. *Contains.*

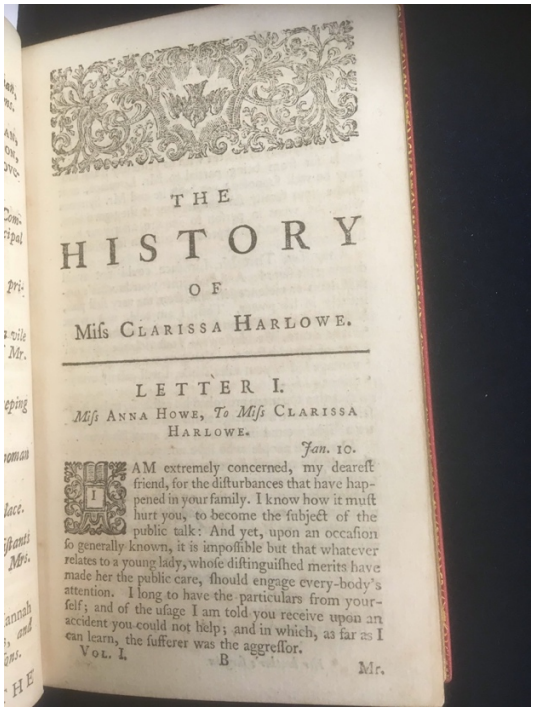
The PLEASURES and PURSUITS of *Human Life* by Alexander Pope. Edwin and Angelina, and the *Traveller*; or a Proſpect of Society by Oliver Goldſmith. Solitude by *Edward Young*, Evening Contemplations in a Col-

Figure 15. Prospectus advertisement for the first three issues of *The Beauties of Modern Poets* from Tully's *Rambles,* printed by J. Roach, 1795

The discursive prominence of the vignette in the 18th century is signaled by the fact that the *Oxford English Dictionary* locates the first occurrence of the term vignette in the English language at this time. This occurrence takes place in a letter, written by Horace Walpole in 1751, concerning a recently published edition of Thomas Gray's *Elegies*, which had been illustrated with vignettes. However, while the *OED* does not know of earlier uses of the term, a quick search on Google's Ngram does yield a number of earlier occurrences, and, as discussed above, English books had been decorated, indeed structured, with floral print devices for centuries already, even if the terminology around such devices had not been clear (Blayney's discussion of the terms "vynyet and marke" has been considered above). At this time, however, "vignette" became the standard term for small engraved or woodcut designs, whether these were floral or figural. The French terms fleuron and cul-de-lampe were seldom, in fact almost never, used in the English context. Vignettes thus had a high degree of semantic flexibility: they could be headpieces or tailpieces, woodcut or engraved (although they were typically engraved), and they could occur within the text, at chapter headings and endings, or on the title page. Typographical vignettes were also quite common, although the term seems less frequently to include them within its reference: the vogue was for engraving, and—as has been discussed for the typefounders of the 16th century—typecast ornaments were considered part of the standard domain of the alphabet and therefore of less artistic interest. Thus, the vignette simultaneously signified a visual object at the center of public attention for books as it also constituted an omnipresent and yet hardly salient feature of books, like the letter itself.

Vignettes of the engraved variety contributed quite specifically and vividly to the meanings of literary texts. For example, they constructed what Barchas calls the "emotional realism" (137)

of *Pamela* and *Clarissa*. One instance of this is how the use of "pictorial images of flower-filled urns, angels, and cupids… in the head- and tailpieces to each volume" of the third edition of *Clarissa* subtly, perhaps subconsciously, frames our interpretation of the text by engirdling it in "pathetic monuments to a ravaged Eden" (149). What Barchas's eloquent formulation makes clear is how the seemingly purely ornamental devices actually fundamentally contributed to the creation of an underlying tone in which the events of the plot can transpire. That the novel is itself about the spoiling of innocence through the machinations of a libertine is thus something readers can already intuit emotionally—hence the emotional realism—from the floral bands and initials almost as soon as they open the book:



THE

HISTORY

OF

Miſs CLARISSA HARLOWE.

LETTER I.

Miſs ANNA HOWE, *To Miſs* CLARISSA HARLOWE.

Jan. 10.

I AM extremely concerned, my dearest friend, for the disturbances that have happened in your family. I know how it must hurt you, to become the subject of the public talk: And yet, upon an occasion so generally known, it is impossible but that whatever relates to a young lady, whose distinguished merits have made her the public care, should engage every-body's attention. I long to have the particulars from yourself; and of the usage I am told you receive upon an accident you could not help; and in which, as far as I can learn, the sufferer was the aggressor.

VOL. I. B Mr.

Figure 16: Headpieces in *Clarissa* (1748, London, Huntington 76995)

Clarissa also provides an example of the meaningful use of typographical vignettes. At first sight, a reader might suppose the typographical marks inserted between, sometimes within, the

characters' letters, to serve a structuring function, indicating temporal breaks in letter writing (see Figure 18). This use of typecast vignettes would draw straightforwardly from the book historical tradition of using these marks as signs of structural breaks between sections in plot or logical argument. But Richardson, who was himself the printer of his own books, made highly conscious choices about *which* mark should be used by which character. For example, Clarissa, a symbol of purity, is consistent in her use of these devices (see Figure 17). "Clarissa's own letters," Barchas observes, "are exempt from graphic sway… her letters remain free of a visual indicator betraying external influences. The static nature of Clarissa's mark evidences graphically her purity and spiritual autonomy" (Barchas 139).

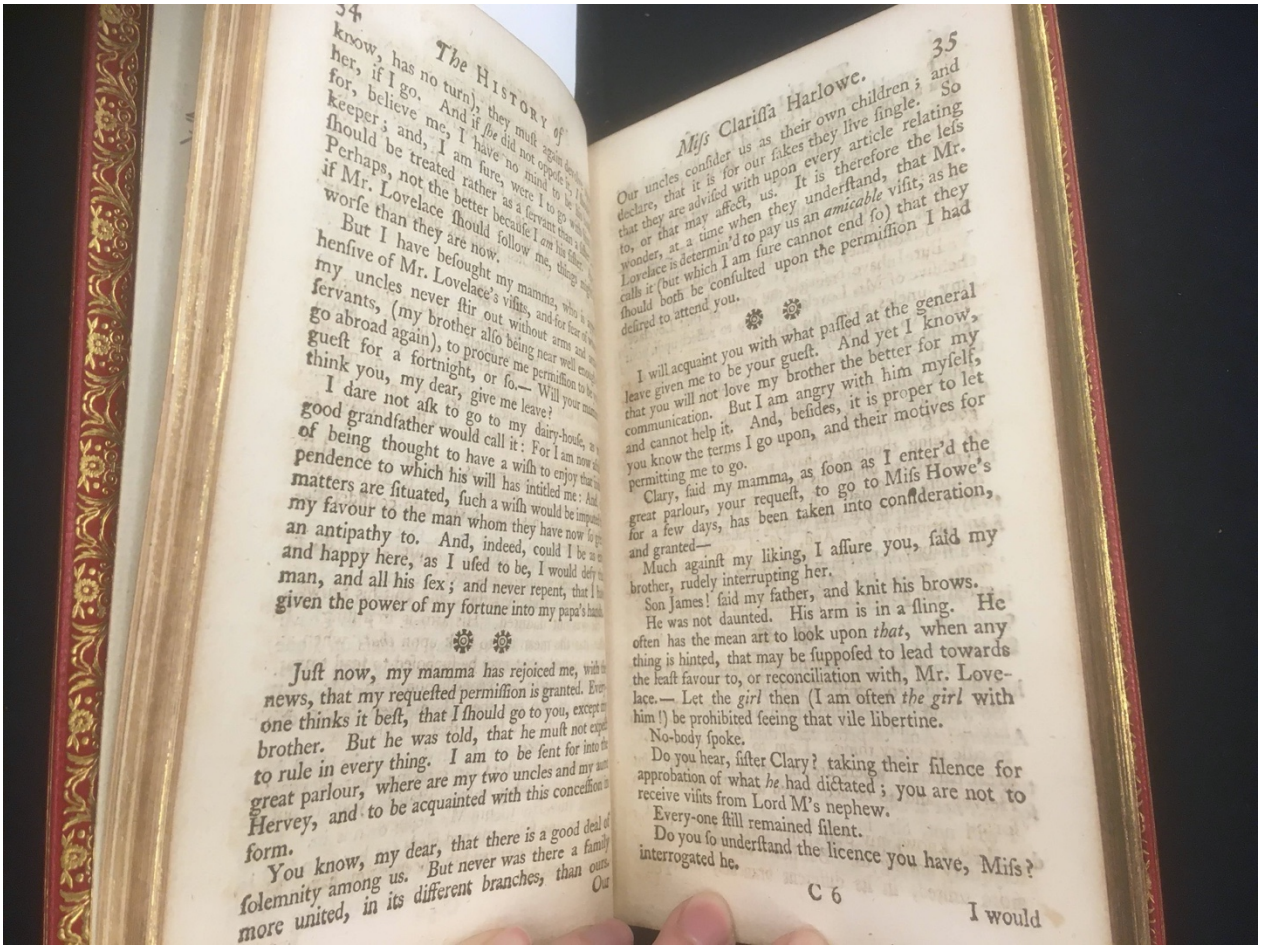


Figure 17: Clarissa's typographical mark

Not so the typographical vignettes of Clarissa's seducer, the villainous libertine Lovelace. While Lovelace initially appears to use a single signature mark, his typographical practice quickly loses consistency as he borrows devices from other characters, at times haphazardly, at times with purpose. Most interestingly perhaps, as his project to seduce Clarissa advances, he takes over Clarissa's print device more and more frequently. His appropriation of her symbol suggests visually his attempt to claim her physically: his project to control her body and mind thus extends even to her typographical practices.

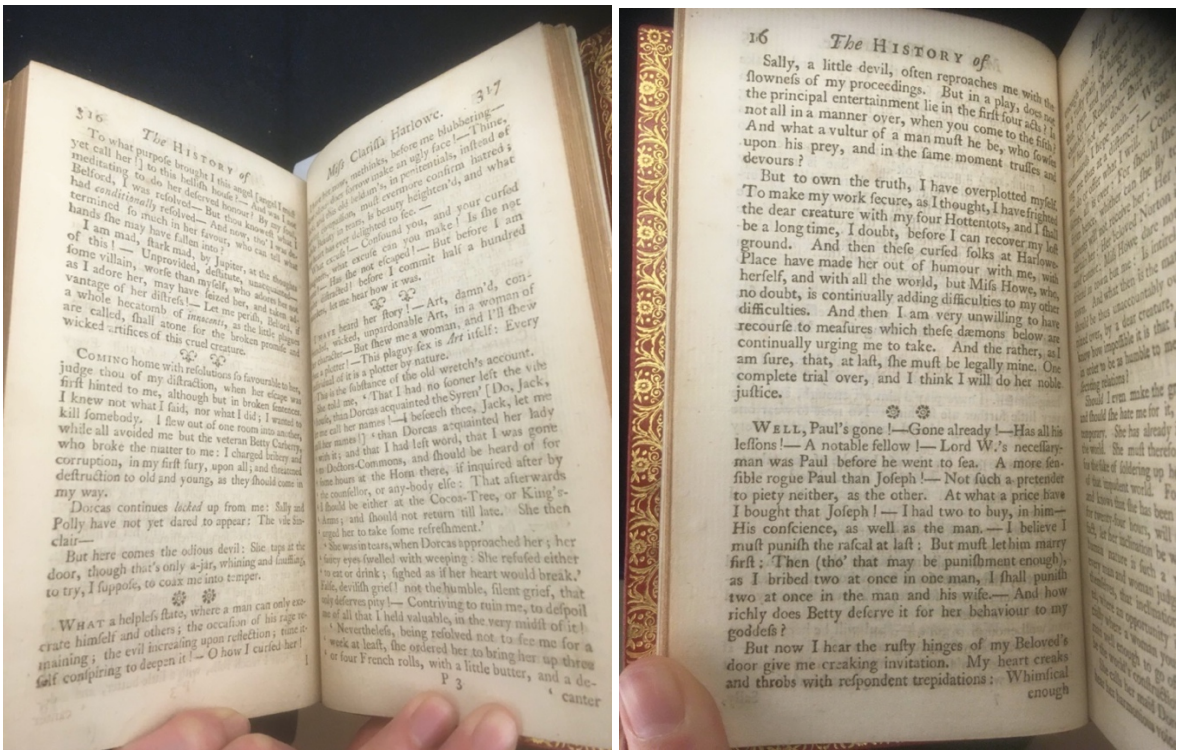


Figure 18. Lovelace appropriating Clarissa's print symbol in his letters

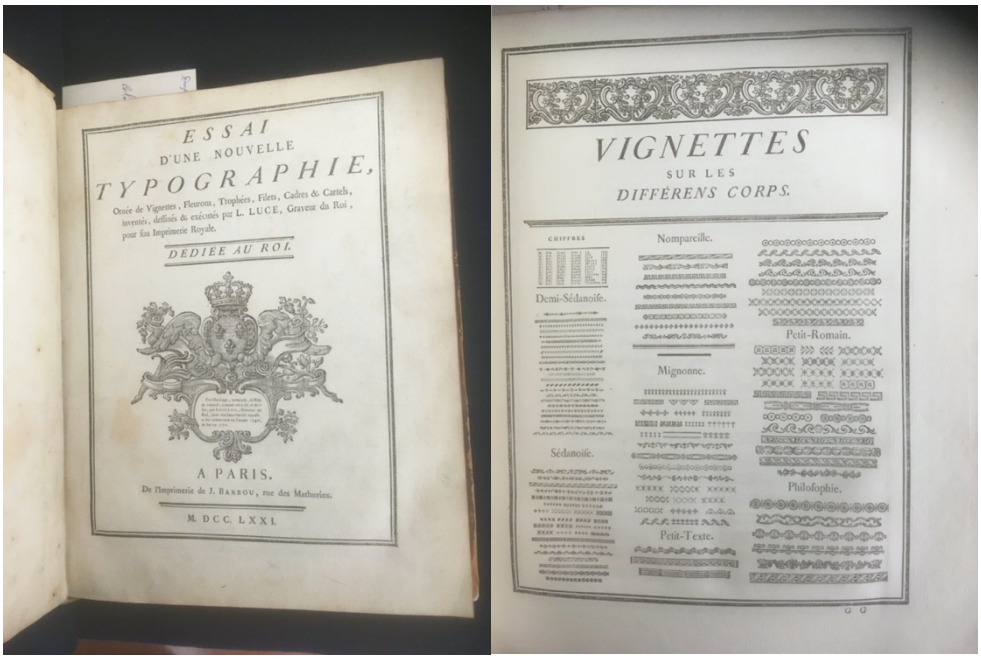
Notably, too, Lovelace's repeated thefts and forgeries of other characters' letters also exists on a continuum with his approximation of their use of typography: in the section of the novel where he tries to meddle in the relationship between Clarissa and Anna Howe, he proceeds in his

project of obfuscation by stealing Anna's letters, impersonating her style in forged letters to Clarissa, and appropriating Anna's typographical device—in the forged letters as well as in his own ones. Thus, Lovelace is not merely crafty, a cunning impersonator of writing style and typographical style alike, but also an incorrigibly inconsistent character as such: his impulsive, scattered, creative and sometimes crafty use of typographical characters thus stands in for his own impulsive, scattered, creative and sometimes crafty character. In this way, Richardson forges a typographically constructed emotional realism where typecast vignettes, rather than *telling* readers about the progression of the seduction plot or about the psychological traits of his characters, allow readers to grasp these at a more subconscious, emotional level.

Furthermore, these typographical interventions reside on a clearly distinct diegetic level than the more textual narratorial devices: while the printed words of Richardson's novel do not visually approximate the words that the characters write, by hand, in their letters, the typographical marks do convey their messages visually. That is, while the conceit that we are reading the actual letters handwritten by characters is upheld without the attempt to mimic the letters' graphological idiosyncrasies (with the notable exception of Clarissa's famous deranged letters), the print devices signal, though perhaps subliminally, an authorial intervention to index mimesis. For this reason, the typographical devices signal Richardson's interest in experimenting with, and so interrogating, the practices of meaning-construction that are typically taken for granted, but which actually work in often concealed ways to provide an underlying framing against which the plot and characters are read and interpreted.

What *Clarissa* makes clear in addition to the importance of visuals to books' strategies for producing meaning is that while the most visible and most highly prized types of print ornament of the 18th century were engraved, typographical devices were, though less salient to public

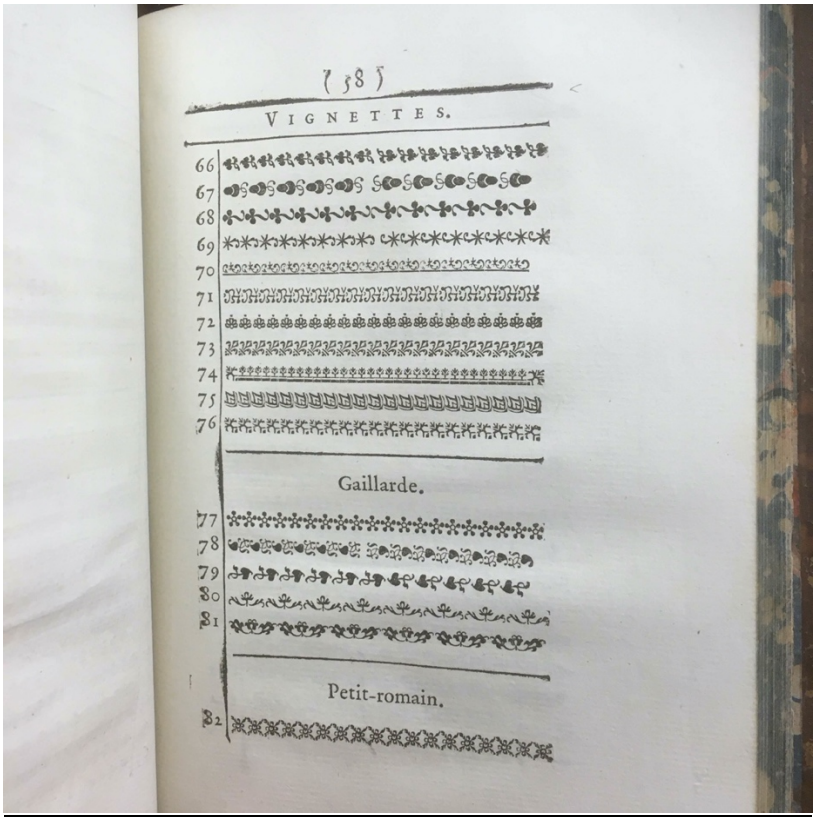
discourse, similarly important in constituting visual layers of meaning. In fact, typographical decoration, although overshadowed somewhat by the craze for engraved ornamentation, also partook of the explosion in decorative book design. "Never before had the printer commanded such a wealth of fleurons and borders" Bland observes (200): in fact, at this time, typefounders began producing catalogs of their font families, each with their accompanying sets of vignettes, which could be typographical floral characters the size of letters, or even lines and bands. These typographical ornaments were usually referred to as vignettes (though sometimes also as fleurons); thus, to specialists of founding, "vignette" has a single, obvious meaning, unlike its connotations for the wider public, where it could be small engraved ornament, trademark device, or miniature illustration alike. In fact, attaching vignettes "sur les corps," that is, to particular font families (the way asterisks and such might look different today depending on whether they belong to the Times or the Garamond font families) became such standard practice that the *Encyclopedie* project of D'Alembert and others (1770-1780s) discussed vignettes as essential components of typefounding. Figure 19 (below) shows the vignettes renowned typographer Louis-René Luce designed for the Imprimerie Royale (showcased here as part of his own essay on typography from 1771) while the figures following depict the vignette pages of two such catalogs. The first comes from the 1773 annual catalog of the printer Delacologne (Lyon, Huntington 421843) and the second is from the foundry of Claude Lamesle from 1742 (Paris, Huntington 276333):



ESSAI
D'UNE NOUVELLE
TYPOGRAPHIE,
Ornée de Vignettes, Fleurons, Trophées, Filets, Cadres & Cartels, inventés, dessinés & exécutés par L. LUCE, Graveur du Roi, pour son Imprimerie Royale.
DÉDIÉE AU ROI.
A PARIS.
De l'Imprimerie de J. BARBOU, rue des Mathurins.
M. DCC. LXXI.

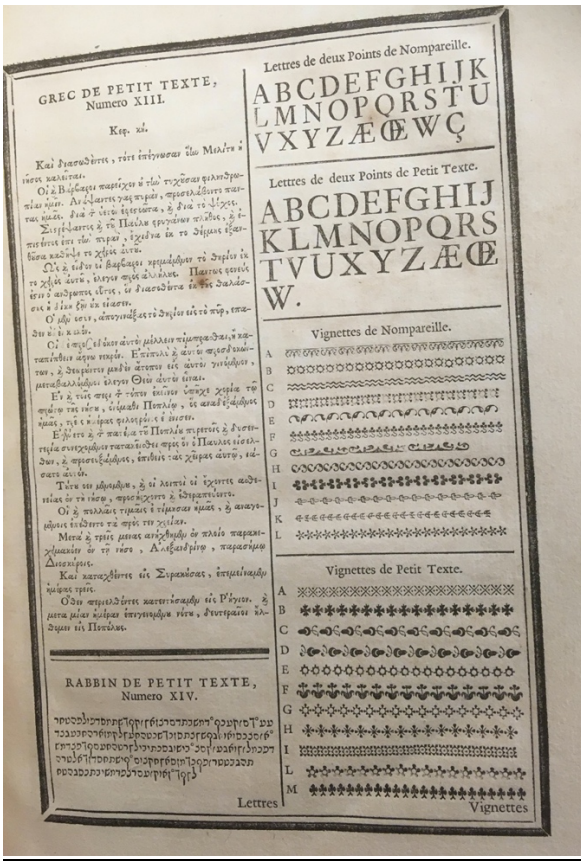
VIGNETTES
SUR LES
DIFFÉRENS CORPS.
CHIFFRES
Demi-Sédanoise.
Nomparcille.
Petit-Romain.
Mignonne.
Sédanoise.
Philosophie.
Petit-Texte.

Figure 19: Luce's *Essai d'une Nouvelle Typographie*, featuring his own vignette designs (1771, Paris, Huntington 373646)



(38)
VIGNETTES.
66
67
68
69
70
71
72
73
74
75
76
Gaillarde.
77
78
79
80
81
Petit-romain.
82

Figure 20: A page showing vignettes from the catalog of the Delacolonge print shop (1773, Lyon, Huntington 421843)



GREC DE PETIT TEXTE,
Numero XIII.

RABBIN DE PETIT TEXTE,
Numero XIV.

Lettres de deux Points de Nompareille.

ABCDEFGHIJK
LMNOPQRSTU
VXYZÆŒWÇ

Lettres de deux Points de Petit Texte.

ABCDEFGHIJ
KLMNOPQRS
TVUXYZÆŒ
W.

Vignettes de Nompareille.

Vignettes de Petit Texte.

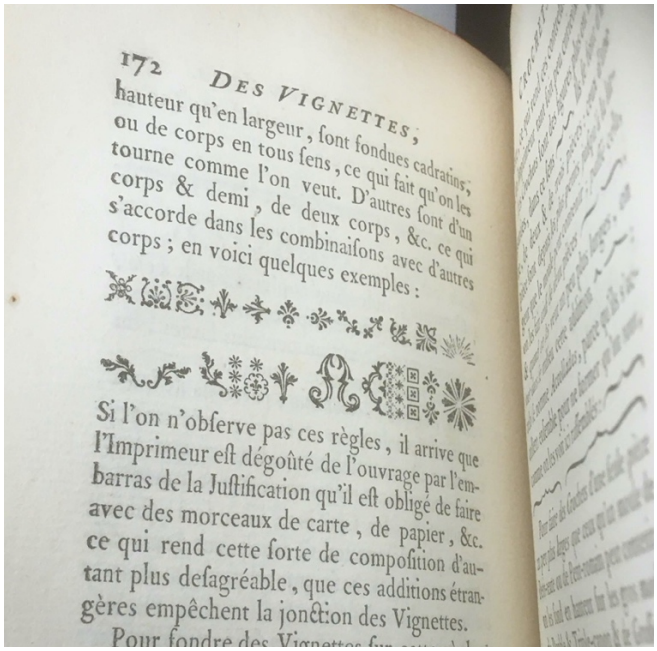
Lettres

Vignettes

Figure 21: Vignettes from the Fonderie Lamesle (1742, Paris, Huntington 276333)

An important printer, letter founder and writer, Pierre Simon Fournier, shaped the typographical vignette more than any other. Fournier, who had contributed to the famous Fermiers-Généraux edition of La Fontaine's *Contes* by casting a new type for it, produced and cataloged an immense variety of vignettes in type. "By 1742 he had cut an enormous number of fleurons, vignettes, and borders in the new taste [rococo]" (Meynell and Morison 23). In so doing, Fournier sought to emancipate decoration from the engraver, pushing the latter to resort more to illustrations proper. As part of these efforts, in 1764 he wrote a treatise on typography entitled *Manuel Typographique*, in which he argues vocally in favor of what he sees as a newer trend to pay attention to typographical vignettes in books: "Les petits ornement mobiles, qu'on nomme vignettes, font une partie de l'art qui a été négligée par nos anciens graveurs… Ce n'est

qu'une trentaine d'années que l'Imprimerie s'est enrichie dans cette partie" (25–26).[11] Fournier is probably referring to himself in code here, since he worked for the Imprimerie Royale, the Royal Press, and "selected motives from eighteenth-century engraved vignettes for cast ornaments" (Beaujon 253); yet, although Fournier was instrumental in augmenting the use and dissemination of typecast vignettes, he was not alone in this endeavor. Beaujon credits the above-mentioned typefounder Luce with likewise being a vocal advocate (253), and we have seen that designing and promoting a typefoundry's house style of font-dependent vignettes became widespread throughout the 18th century. Thus, typographical vignettes continued to play an important role in the conceptual notion of the vignettes: they were "petits ornements mobiles," Fournier stresses, that is, they were both small and mobile, thus retaining their essential ability to be employed in a structuring or decorating role across the text of the given book.


172 DES VIGNETTES,
hauteur qu'en largeur, ſont fondues cadrations;
ou de corps en tous ſens, ce qui fait qu'on les
tourne comme l'on veut. D'autres ſont d'un
corps & demi, de deux corps, &c. ce qui
s'accorde dans les combinaiſons avec d'autres
corps; en voici quelques exemples:

Si l'on n'obſerve pas ces règles, il arrive que
l'Imprimeur eſt dégoûté de l'ouvrage par l'em-
barras de la Juſtification qu'il eſt obligé de faire
avec des morceaux de carte, de papier, &c.
ce qui rend cette ſorte de compoſition d'au-
tant plus deſagréable, que ces additions étran-
gères empêchent la jonction des Vignettes.
Pour fondre des Vignettes

Figure 22: Some of Fournier's vignettes in *Manuel Typographique* (1764, Paris, Huntington 79284)

[11] "The small and mobile ornaments that we call vignettes constitute an aspect of the arts that has been neglected by our old engravers… It isn't until the past thirty years that printing [or the Royal Press] has availed itself of these kinds of decorations" (my translation).

As the preceding discussion makes clear, vignettes were far from the only types of illustrations to participate in the 18th century's increasing passion for book ornament, and although the different types of illustrations had assumed increasingly well-defined roles, distinctions were not always clear, especially among small illustrations. Yet, the examples of *Gulliver* and *Clarissa* in particular also demonstrate that the dominant scholarly narrative of the age of the vignette as being primarily about a passion for ornamentation (Bland 200) misses the important meaning-making dimension that vignettes and other forms of illustration increasingly contributed to literary and other texts at this time. When scholars of book history like Michael Twyman describe the 18th-century vignette as a "primarily artistic," as opposed to narrative, descriptive or informative, visual device (164–65), the aesthetic decisions that went into book design appear as if they had been autonomous from the texts themselves, and vice versa. In this reading, characteristic of literary as well as book history, the vignette's only function was the production of aesthetic refinement. Thus, Bland writes of master vignettiste Pierre-Philippe Choffard, whom we have encountered as the engraver of many culs-de-lampe in the Fermiers-Généraux *Contes,* that Choffard's vignettes "carried the elaboration of borders and foliage to extreme lengths;" for Bland, it is this degree of elaboration that explains why "the prevalence of the vignette in the second half of the eighteenth century is due" to Choffard "more than to any other" (Bland 210). But considering ornamentation as an a priori separate domain from representational strategies disallows us from recognizing how texts and their visual environment mutually informed each other's meaning. Books never were purely textual artifacts, and text has never existed in a vacuum, separable from its material context; this is one of the key insights that the fiction writers in 21st-century digital environments discussed later in this dissertation take

from the media history of the book. As examples like the *Contes, Clarissa,* and *Gulliver* demonstrate, this insight was much more readily available to authors and the reading public in the 18th century.

The Space of the Page: Bewick, Romantic Vignettes, and the Emergence of the Literary Vignette in the Nineteenth Century

If in the 18th century the vignette assumes a radically expanded field of meanings, among which small size, ornamental aesthetics, and placement at section beginnings and endings tend to be the unifying characteristics, Thomas Bewick's modest intervention introduces a major turning point in the history of the vignette at the beginning of the 19th century that both specifies what the vignette is and does, and fundamentally renegotiates how the vignette can produce its own meanings within the larger frame of the book. With Bewick, the function, form, technique and conceptual implications of the vignette all change, inducing a radical shift not only in book illustration but in the history of representation as such. While Bewick radically reinterprets how non-illustrative visuals can contribute to the meaning of a book's text, his vignettes eventually become free-standing pictorial genres of their own—a development that finally translates into a literary genre in the second half of the century.

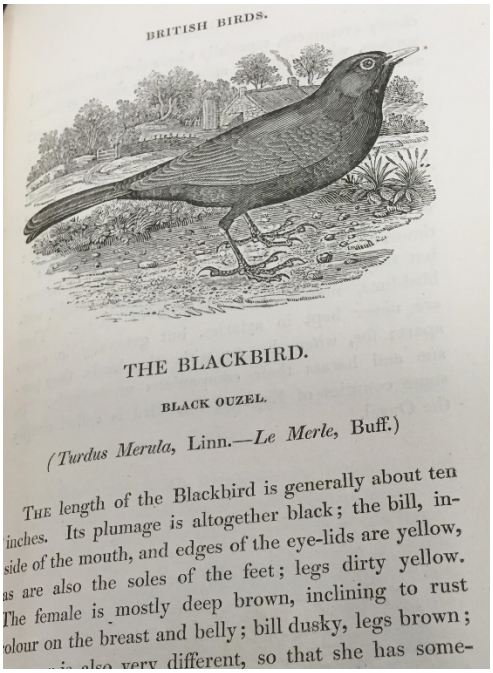
Thomas Bewick (1753-1828) was a relatively obscure engraver active for the most part of his life in Newcastle-upon-Tyne. His truly groundbreaking work, *The History of British Birds,* which he authored as well as illustrated, was completed around the turn of the century: Volume 1, on land birds, was published in 1797, and the second volume on water birds followed in 1805. *British Birds* became so influential that it stands as an inaugural moment of 19th-century book illustration: with it, the vignette moved "from an essentially decorative device, as seen in French

rococo books, to a pictorial and illustrative one" and became the "abiding feature of 19th-century book illustration" (Mandl 164).

Bewick's first technical innovation concerned the borders of the image. As early as in his 1779 edition of Gay's *Fables*, he had experimented with lowering parts of the printing block so as to "make the background recede" (Bland 223); we might remember that in intaglio printing techniques such as engraving, the entire block is pressed into the paper—a process that invariably produces the so-called printmark on the edges of the print. In Bewick's experiment, on the other hand, the lowered areas of the block's edges received less ink and would therefore print more faintly, producing a fade-out effect. Although Bewick's later works go much further in deconstructing the division between image and page, already these early works can be called "'vignetted' in the true Bewick style" (Bland 223). Indeed, it is because of Bewick that "vignetting" will later become the designation of various, especially photographic, processes by which the edges of the image are made to fade. Furthermore, faded borders will become a defining feature of the Romantic vignette.

Bewick's challenge to the border of the image reached its highpoint in *British Birds*, where he abandoned the dominant technique of the 18th century, copper engraving, and began producing a new type of woodcut where the wood is cut against, not with the grain—a technique that is sometimes called wood engraving. Woodcut and wood engraving have an important attribute: they are printed in relief and not in intaglio like engravings and etchings, which means that the designs stand out (in relief) from the rest of the block, and thus only the designs are inked and pressed into the paper during printing. Thus, the platemark, inevitable consequence of intaglio printing, can be avoided. Indeed, while Bewick was constrained by copper engraving in the *Fables* to mere attempts to fade out the borders, wood engraving allowed him to produce

images that were fully liberated from borders. The birds in *British Birds* thus sit on the page without a frame:



BRITISH BIRDS.

THE BLACKBIRD.

BLACK OUZEL.

(*Turdus Merula*, Linn.—*Le Merle*, Buff.)

THE length of the Blackbird is generally about ten inches. Its plumage is altogether black; the bill, inside of the mouth, and edges of the eye-lids are yellow, as are also the soles of the feet; legs dirty yellow. The female is mostly deep brown, inclining to rust colour on the breast and belly; bill dusky, legs brown; is also very different, so that she has some-

Figure 23. A Bewick bird at the head of the Blackbird chapter of *British Birds* (1805, Newcastle, Huntington 112286)

Printing in relief, has another, particularly bookish advantage: since letter fonts also require relief printing, the illustration can be printed at the same time and in the same press as the text. This had not been the case with the great illustrations of the 18th century, where copper engraving predominated. For this reason, illustrating a book had always been very difficult: the book page would have to go through the intaglio press after the text had been printed in a relief letterpress, a process so complicated that, as Griffiths explains, "no-one today is sure how this was achieved" (5). Especially for vignettes, which did not occupy full pages on their own, this process required meticulous planning and high precision in inserting the ornaments in the right places. By contrast, wood engraving allowed the block to be inserted next to the typefounts, allowing text

and images to be printed together in one go. Unsurprisingly, then, Bewick's invention ushered in a new wave of woodcut book illustration.

Bewick also modified and expanded the range of shapes that the vignette could assume. We might recall Griffiths's description of the 18th-century vignette as "a rectangular plate" (1), which, though perhaps not a binding condition, did often characterize the vignette. Bewick kept the horizontal orientation, but relaxed the strict rectangle, producing horizontal ovals or even irregular shapes. The majority of the vignettes in *British Birds* are more or less regular ovals (Figure 24). Indeed, as Bland remarks, the "horizontal oval is a shape Bewick made peculiarly his own and it fits particularly well into the printed page" (223). The vignette's versatility in shape and adaptability to the specific demands of page layout became defining features of all later vignettes.

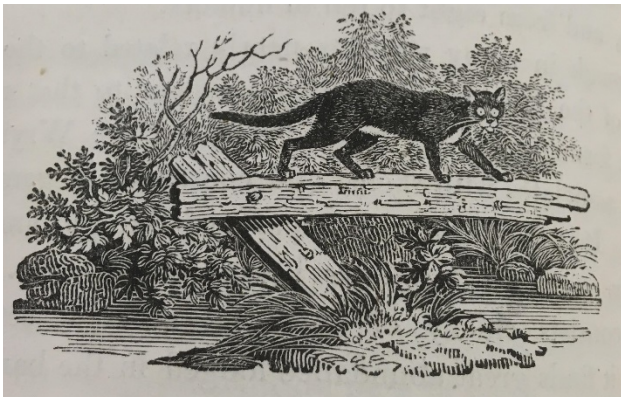


Figure 24. A Bewick vignette in horizontal oval shape (not to scale), a shape that also often characterizes Bewick's birds

Conceptually, too, it is almost impossible to overstate the importance of *British Birds*. An 1805 issue of the *British Critic* considered the variety of the vignettes "ingenious" (Anonymous 293), a sentiment echoed in the famous opening scene of Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* (1847):

> I returned to my book—Bewick's History of British Birds [*sic*]: the letter-press thereof I cared little for, generally speaking; and yet there were certain introductory passages that, child as I was, I could not pass quite as blank. […] The words in these

> introductory pages connected themselves with the succeeding vignettes, and gave significance to the rock standing up alone in a sea of billow and spray; to the broken boat stranded on a desolate coast; to the cold and ghastly moon glancing through bars at a wreck just sinking. (8)

Although Jane admits some interest for the text, it is especially the vignettes that arouse her fascination: "the rock standing up alone in a sea of billow and spray," "the broken boat," "the cold and ghastly moon." None of these illustrations are of birds; indeed, reading *Jane Eyre* alongside *British Birds* makes it clear that the "ingenious" vignettes are not the birds but the tail-piece scenes from country life that have no relation to the text. Indeed, it was the "tailpieces or Vignettes," as Bewick called them (Bewick and Bewick 122), that caused such a stir in the book and art world. These tiny images at the end of chapters sometimes depict single objects or animals (a vase, a pitcher, a cat), sometimes small landscapes (a mill, a seaside with a ship, a brook) and sometimes tiny scenes (a boy sitting in a tree, a runaway cart, a peasant being chased by a demon).

Figure 25: Some vignettes from *British Birds* (1805, Newcastle, Huntington 112286)

It was the ability of these vignettes to produce a sudden and intense opening to an entire, unexpected world that held contemporaries spellbound. Jane gives us a good description of this fascination as she goes on to enumerate some of the vignettes that cause the strongest reactions in her:

> I cannot tell what sentiment haunted the quite solitary churchyard…

> The two ships becalmed on a torpid sea, I believed to be marine phantoms.
> The fiend pinning down the thief's pack behind him, I passed over quickly: it was an object of terror.
> So was the black, horned thing seated aloof on a rock, surveying a distant crowd surrounding a gallows.
> Each picture told a story; mysterious often to my undeveloped understanding and imperfect feelings, yet ever profoundly interesting: as interesting as the tales Bessie sometimes narrated on winter evenings […] from old fairy tales and older ballads; or (as at a later period I discovered) from the pages of Pamela, and Henry, Earl of Moreland.
> With Bewick on my knee, I was then happy: happy at least in my way. (8–9)

Although the introductory pages do connect "themselves with the succeeding vignettes" and give "significance" to them, they still do not account for the fascination Jane feels from looking at the vignettes. She is captivated, rather, because "[e]ach picture told a story" apart from the text; or, as Bewick joked, the vignettes were "tale-pieces" rather than mere illustrations of the text. Furthermore, for Jane, the narrative fascination of these still-life tales ranks them among the well-known stories of the oral and the written tradition. In fact, Jane constructs a literary history that consists not simply of the greats like Samuel Richardson's *Pamela*, but just as well of folk tales and Bewick's vignettes.

The ability of these vignettes to concentrate narrative drama into a mere snapshot is perhaps Bewick's most influential contribution. We have seen that Bewick's vignettes did retain some of the vignette's historical characteristics, such as their small size, ornamental nature, lack of relation to the text, and their position at the margins of a text. Their narrativity, however, introduced a new dimension that vignettes had never before had: a kind of mystery, or sudden concentration of dramatic intensity. Bewick's vignettes are a kind of narrative still-life, where plot does not exist and yet there is a curiously compelling intimation of story.

The mystery and intensity of Bewick's vignettes explains why he is often considered an early Romantic (Bland 227; Rosen and Zerner 84). For Bland, the later Romantic vignettistes are comparable to Bewick only if they possess their own "sudden intensities of vision" (278).

Charles Rosen and Henri Zerner go as far as to say that the Romantic vignette "was invented" by Bewick (84); they add that this invention was the "only completely new formal invention" in book illustration (93). Bewick's vignettes abolished the distinction between illustration and ornament (88); more radically yet, with their incomplete and unrelated narratives, they created an entirely new language for illustration, and a new vision for depicting the world. These vignettes were both "global metaphor of the world" and "fragment" (81). George Mandl concurs: the vignette "relates an image of the world without defined boundaries in vision to something that sits well on the page of a book" (164–65).

The absence of a border has very powerful conceptual implications for the question of representation. Without a border, the pictorial space threatens to intrude upon the space of the text: the boundary between image and text becomes uncertain. Bewick's vignettes often experiment with this liminal space. For example, in the vignette below which depicts two cows grazing (Figure 26, left), there are birds flying outside of the drawn landscape, with only the white page as a background. Where does this white sky end, and the empty space of the page begin?

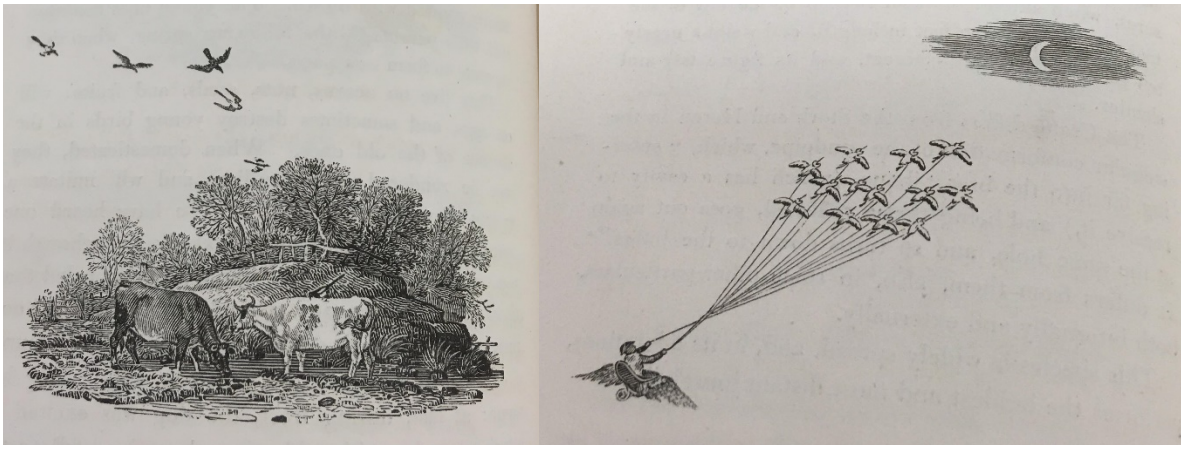


Figure 26. Vignettes (not to scale): with cow and birds (left); boy flying a kite (right)

In another vignette, a boy is flying many small kites under a dark sky with the moon (Figure 26, right). Here, there are no lines or shading between the figure of the boy and the figure of a bit of sky with moon: the two are separated only by the white of the blank page. What exactly is the status of this white space: is it part of the vignette, signifying the sky, or is it simply the blank page? Is this not one vignette, but two?

These conceptual questions, centering as they do on the issue of how to use the space of the page to capture reality, place the vignette, for the first time in its history, front and center in conversations about the representational abilities of books. Jane Eyre's inclusion of Bewick's vignettes in the historical canon of literature is well-deserved: these vignettes examine the function of literature because they test how the page can represent reality. This experimentation with the possibilities of representation becomes a defining feature of the vignette from now on and will also inform the literary genre of the vignette once the latter is born.

Importantly for the book, however, Bewick's vignettes do not only challenge but also embody the function of the text. Unlike illustrations proper, vignettes do not simply show visually the characters and scenes that the text describes. Instead, just like the text, vignettes open up potentially boundless worlds from the small and confined space of the page. At the same time, they continue to carry out the structuring function inherited from their more ornamental, framing past. Thus, they refuse the notion of the window on the world, positing the boundaries on sight as not inexistent, but as indeterminate: the world is boundless, and there is no way of knowing where our limited vision ends. As a result, the vignette constitutes that type of book illustration which most closely resembles the work of the text itself. It is in this sense that Rosen and Zerner can claim that the vignette constitutes the "only completely new formal invention" in book decoration (93): it manages to accomplish an entirely new function.

With Bewick, the vignette becomes "the basic form of Romantic book illustration" (Rosen and Zerner 74), though it now has but few constraints on its shape, content or position. It can be rectangular, oval or anything else in shape; it usually does not, but it may have borders; it can be placed anywhere; and it can depict anything. Next to its unpredictability, the vignette's only stable remaining characteristics are its small size and its negotiation of the text's borders.[12] It is suggestive of the vignette's ubiquity in the 19th century that the bibliophile Henri Bouchot, the author of a two-volume work on *Livres à vignettes* (1891), devoted one of the two volumes to the 19th century, and one to all the preceding ones. The vignette came to dominate illustration in the new century entirely, but revised its vision of the world so radically that it seems justified to say, as Mandl does, that the vignette "may even be the most significant contribution the book has made to the graphic idioms of picture-making" (165).

The vignette's popularity allowed it to influence other types of illustration as well. Its lack of borders started appearing in the illustrations of children's books, as exemplified by the work of Kate Greenaway (Bland 270). Even the copper engravers of full-page illustrations experimented with softer outlines by "trimming off the platemarks" (249). Similarly, well-known painters like Géricault and Delacroix started producing series of small, vignetted images that were exhibited on their own—although this development cannot be entirely attributed to the changes wrought by Bewick's vignettes, since we have seen their precursors in the work of engravers like Jacques Callot and Sébastien Leclerc. Indeed, next to the artistic vignettes of accomplished painters, the vernacular commercial tradition that had really set off in the 17th century fully came into its own during this time. Vignettes outside of books, in various forms of ephemeral commercial artifacts,

[12] A fascinating example of vignettes radically reimagining the text's borders occurs in an 1830 edition of Charles Nodier's *Histoire du roi de Bohème*, illustrated by the well-known French vignettiste Tony Johannot (Rosen and Zerner 79). Here the vignettes go so far as to disrupt the text by invading the space that is traditionally allotted to letters.

proliferated. 19th-century vignettes appeared everywhere: in chapbooks, travelogues, calendars, pocket diaries, and so on (Jung 23), as well as on various commercial artifacts, such as business cards, poster frames, and stickers, labels or decals on products. A type of free-standing vignette was produced later in the century in the vignetted photograph portrait. However, there is an important distinction between free-standing vignetted paintings on the one hand and vignettes as parts of book illustration or commercial artifacts: the first was its own art form, whereas the second was part of the design layouts of larger artifacts, including books, posters, and product label. The artistic vision of painters and photographers transcended the book and was ultimately damaging to its unity. Not so with the vignette, whose essence was to exist on the pages of a book, or as part of a larger textual-visual ensemble.[13]

Despite its Romantic representational vision, the vignette already gestured towards the questions of realism that will preoccupy writers and artists in the second half of the century. In his characterizations of vignettes, Bouchot notes two trends: what he calls historicizing or allegorical illustrations and depictions of scenes from contemporary life. For Bouchot, the true vignette is the latter, the "vignette contemporaine" (24), which incorporates an element of the life and humor of the masses, as opposed to the loftiness of the allegorical. Such vignettes manifest a "réalisme encore mal définé et embryonnaire" (36).[14] For Bouchot, this realism is already concerned with class and poverty, which for him explains why the revolutionary artists of 1830 turn to it (27). If it was Bewick's Romantic, experimental approach to representation that later vignettes predominantly internalized, his scenes of everyday events from rural life also had a large influence on the representational concerns of the century's vignettes. To the questions

[13] It would be worthwhile, however, to speculate further on the influences of the vignette on the medium of painting, and not only on the faded borders of some images on the canvas, but also on the floral frames that are frequently used for paintings in this period.
[14] "An embryonic and not yet well-defined realism" (my translation).

about the possibilities and limits of representation on the page that were central to the vignette since Bewick, the question of *what* was to be depicted soon added a specifically realist element: the vignette's experimentation served the better depiction of the material realities of contemporary life. This dual representational project will prove of central importance to the 21st-century uses of the vignette analyzed in later chapters of this study.

Of course, the 19th century also witnessed the invention of the mimetic medium par excellence, the photograph, which did not fail to have a major impact on discourses of realistic representation. Photography enabled the artist to capture a slice of the immediate environment more accurately than painting or printmaking, but it was confined to the immediate surroundings and the present moment. Allegorical, fictional, or historical scenes could not be depicted by the photograph unless they were enacted. Thus, initially, illustrations proper (depicting characters and scenes) were not threatened by photography. In fact, though the print reproduction of the photographed image, the so-called *photogravure*, was developed in the first quarter of the century in France, it did not take hold in book illustration until the 1880s (Bland 272). However, once it became technically possible to illustrate scenes in unprecedented detail using photogravure, this procedure virtually took over illustrations proper, in particular when illustrations pertained to locales rather than people. Indeed, for vignettes in travel writing, where "views" of famous sites and buildings proliferated, photographs provided illustrations that were at once more accurate and easier to produce. Obviously, scientific texts in the vein of *British Birds* also benefited greatly from the photograph, which allowed much higher precision in depicting the desired objects. So while fiction may have been more impervious to photographic illustrations initially, for all of the non-fictional genres in which the vignette had been used, the photograph became a more efficient solution.

At the same time, however, photo-artists remained invested in some of the characteristics of vignettes for their photographs, in particular in the vignetted border. Photogravure required etching to reproduce the photographed image, which meant that the picture had to be printed using the intaglio press, reintroducing the platemark. Already the 1850s, well before larger scale photographic book illustration, marked a period of lively experimentation in "vignetting techniques," methods to fade the borders of the reproduced image. A plethora of such methods were developed, even leading to arguments about whose method was first or best, as documented by J. Werge in an 1865 article of *The Photographic News* entitled "How to Take Vignette Negatives in and out of the Camera—Old and New Processes" (Crookes and Simpson n.p.). Vignetted borders soon became the norm for the highly fashionable genre of the portrait photograph (Figure 27). In fact, the term "vignetting" continues to be in use today in analog as well as digital photo-editing, including commonly used software such as Adobe Photoshop.

Figure 27. Vignetted photo-portrait of a young Civil War soldier (1870s, The J. Paul Getty Museum 84.XD.879.316)

The wide range of popular publications that were decorated with vignettes made it possible for the vignette to become an important factor in literary culture more broadly defined—in fact, in textual culture and commercial culture at large. When Jane Eyre places the vignette in literary history, she reconfigures literature as including the entire spectrum of textual culture, a culture which in the 19th century spanned magazines, chapbooks, calendars, pocket diaries, and literary annuals, among others. I discussed earlier in this chapter how the decoration of these popular genres became a highly lucrative business towards the end of the 18th century, a business in which vignette illustrations played a key role. Many print publications, it will be remembered, were advertised with special attention to their decoration, and many magazines would brandish the names of famous vignettistes such as Stothard, Burney, or Heath as brand names on their title pages. The 19th century witnessed an expansion of the textual genres in which vignettes, whether produced by photogravure or older printmaking techniques, became indispensable. Sandro Jung argues that illustrated textual genres that served both practical and decorative purposes were regarded as fashion items: almanacs, memoranda and pocket diaries with titles like "*Lady's Fashionable Repository*, *Le Souvenir*, *Daily Remembrancer*, and the *Gentleman's Pocket Book*" were marketed as suitable gifts for specific target audiences (27). Not only did such pocket books fulfill a decorative function, with ornamental vignettes that could often be cut out for separate collection (36), they also served an educational purpose in supplying quotes and vignette illustrations from canonical works of literature (30). That is, these pocket books were seen not as distinct from, but as on a continuum with the literary works that made up the canon. Indeed, Jung notes that from 1806, the highly successful *Pocket Atlas*, a series of pocket books published by Thomas Baker, was illustrated "in vignette format" by the same Stothard (30) who was also a

key vignette illustrator of novels. In fact, Jung argues that Baker saw himself as intervening in the formation of a *contemporary* canon by commissioning Stothard to illustrate the *Pocket Atlas* not with scenes from traditional works but from those of his contemporary, Sir Walter Scott (29–30).

Similarly fashionable genres include the calendar and the literary annual, of which *The Keepsake* is the most well-known and longest-running example (Ledbetter 35), or travel publications such as what might be called, for lack of a better term, "views." In the former, vignettes were used to mark time, separating the days, months or years visually. The latter used vignettes to depict place: "views," such as William Marshall's 1825 *Select Views of Great Britain*, were collections of images of famous buildings or sites that were popular travel destinations and the knowledge of which was considered important cultural capital. Views usually consisted of vignetted engravings with brief captions and often no accompanying text (Jung 36). In addition to participating in the dissemination of the literary and cultural canon, these texts display an instability in terms of what counts as text and what as paratext. Even with captions or explanatory notes, the central meaning-making "text" in views and pocket diaries is not the text, but the vignettes, which sets the stage for the vignette's transformation into a literary form.

Indeed, the vignette was already undergoing a vast expansion in terms of the range of settings in which it could be employed. Print artifacts such as music sheets, poster frames, business cards, stamps and product labels frequently included, or consisted of, vignettes. Stunning examples of such artifacts remediating the vignette's earlier functions to frame and depict in detail include maps whose borders consist of vignette advertisements for companies, such as an 1862 map of Boston (Huntington priJLC 005406, 1862), a map of Baltimore with its borders depicting

vignettes of landmark buildings (Huntington priJLC UNCAT, ca. 1850), or posters with inventive frames, such as an undated Seneca Falls, NY, fire department advertising print (Huntington priJLC UNCAT, ca. 1870) framed by small prints depicting the accoutrements of firefighting (a hose, a helmet, a ladder).

Figure 28: From top to bottom: View print of Baltimore with vignette landmarks (Huntington priJLC UNCAT, ca. 1850); Map of Boston with advertisement vignettes (Huntington priJLC 005406, 1862); Seneca Falls fire station advertising print with hose and ladder frame (Huntington priJLC UNCAT, ca. 1870)

Yet the vignette also started making an appearance as a small decorative and informative device in a similar structural position on labels, business cards, and receipts as previously in books and magazines. For example, the California-based Lehmann Printing and Lithography Company produced vignettes specifically for delivery to the canning factories of local fruit producers to apply to their cans. These vignettes were collected in a sample book specifically designed for this purpose—a kind of catalog of vignettes from which fruit sellers could choose their preferred fruit vignette (Huntington priJLC UNCAT, 1938).

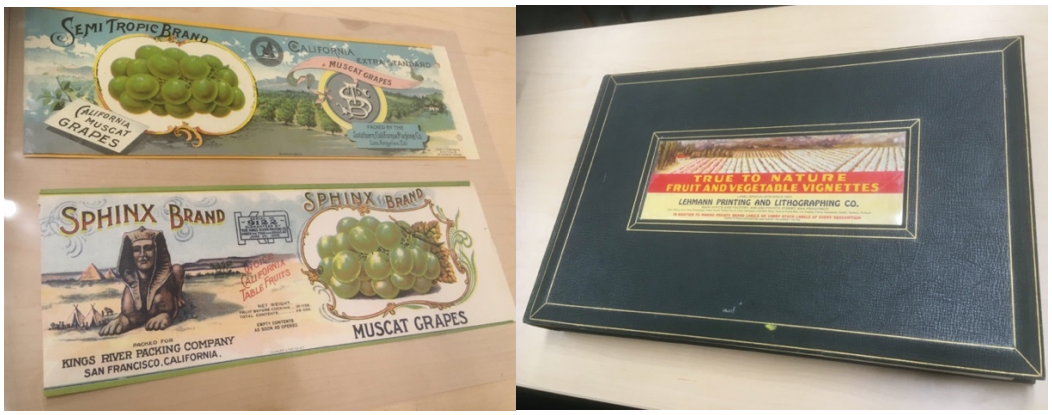


Figure 29: Sample book*: True to Nature Fruit and Vegetable Vignettes* (Huntington, priJLC UNCAT, 1938)

At the same time, firms and companies also started developing logos and trademarks for use on their stationery, promotional material, billheads, and correspondence, which drew heavily on the printer's mark tradition (see Figure 30).

Figure 30: Vignettes as stamps and logos on various stationary items (billheads, business cards and business envelopes), including a typographical logo arrangement (top left). From top left to bottom right, the objects are: Billhead: *Bought of Nevada Flouring Mill Co*. (Huntington priJBC_BIN3, 1865); Billhead: *M. L. & D. Marsh, Manufacturers and Dealers in Lumber* (Huntington priJBC_BIN3, 1896); Business card: *Lewis W. Femerick, Sail Maker* (Huntington priJRC UNCAT, ca.1860); Business envelope*: Wm. M. Cooper & Co. Oak Coopers* (Huntington priJRC UNCAT, ca.1860); Billhead: Gladding, McBean & Co. Sewer, Water & Chimney Pipe (Huntington priJBC_BIN3, 1890); Billhead: *Sierra Madre Vintage Co*. (Huntington priJBC_BIN3, 1893)

These artifacts made the vignette at once more vernacular, its representational strategy more familiar, while also disseminating it into a vastly larger domain of use.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, then, the second half of the century witnessed an upsurge in literary interest in snapshot visual depiction: the literary vignette was born. I contend that the idea to transplant the work of the vignette into text comes from heavily illustrated popular genres like the pocket diary, the chapbook, the annual, and perhaps especially the view, with a possible contribution by the vignette's complex role as decorator and main "text" of product labels and business cards. Here, as we have seen, the relative role of text and image was often uncertain: the image could well assume the central position with the text being relegated to the role of paratextual commentary. These explanatory texts, which could range from one-line captions to longer introductory passages, might constitute the first attempts to capture textually the work that the vignettes were doing visually (Jung 31). In a kind of role reversal, while vignettes had grown out of the need to structure and illustrate a text, now texts were starting to be used as illustrations for a work constituted of vignettes. Of course, captions were not invented at this time, but it is descriptive works like the views that first placed captions in the former structural position of the print vignette, as paratext. Furthermore, captions had a tendency to grow into descriptive works a few pages in length, resulting in the skeletal structure of the literary vignette. For example, while the *Polite Repository,* a pocket diary published by William Peacock, confined itself to legends consisting of "short, one-line descriptions" of the pictured images, Marshall's later *Ladies Pocket Engagement Atlas* also included a "five-page 'Description of the Views'" (36). Brief description without plot: this is the essence of the literary vignette, starting to take shape in commodities like views and pocket diaries.

Furthermore, Jung observes that, next to their visual material, pocket diaries started containing written "descriptive sketches" around the 1830s (34). These may have catalyzed the composition of book-length works composed entirely of sketches, which, as Maggie Dunn and Ann Morris argue, started appearing in England in the 1820s; they call this genre the "village sketch composite" and cite Mary Russell Mitford's 1824 *Our Village* as its first example (22). In the village sketch composite, which may be the first fully literary use of the textual vignette, the short sketch served a primarily descriptive purpose: although it sometimes contained a short plot, its main goal was to describe a smaller part of a particular setting, with the book as a whole offering a "composite" image of the entire place. Dunn and Morris argue that the village sketch composite was a popular genre in the United States that included, among many others, Sarah Josepha Hale's *Sketches of American Character* (1829), Kate Chopin's *Bayou Folk* (1894), or Hamlin Garland's 1891 *Main-Travelled Roads* (22–23). Thus, in these works, a literary form emerged that sought first and foremost to depict, in a short format, the places, events, and conditions of everyday ordinary life.

Dunn and Morris also identify a similar, less unified tradition, which "has had no name" (23): a tradition exemplified by works such as Louisa May Alcott's *Aunt Jo's Scrap-Bag* (1872) or Maley Bainbridge Crist's *Patchwork* (1898). These works are collections of short descriptions, sometimes stories, that do not coalesce into a congruent unity; they are best interpreted perhaps as collections of textual ornaments, that is, as textual analogies of pocket diaries, almanacs, and other print commodities. I have also found a number of similar, hard-to-categorize works. Many are collections of short texts that are more descriptive than they are plot-driven. Works like *The Keepsake* (1831), which was discussed briefly above and to which Mary Shelley also contributed, Nora Hopper Chesson's *Ballads in Prose* (1894), Richard La

Gallienne's *Prose Fancies* (1893), or William Theodore Peters's *Posies out of Rings* (1896) are too different to be considered as constituting a unified genre but they all share a commitment to brief forms and ornament. Most are prose, but *Posies* is not; most are purely descriptive, but *Ballads* and *The Keepsake* are not; most contain only textual ornaments, but *The Keepsake* is also illustrated pictorially. Most of these texts allude to their generic ambiguity in their titles, which designate them as hodge-podge objects: scrapbooks, patchworks, posies, fancies, or keepsakes. Such fanciful little objects call to mind not only collectible gift items such as pocket books and annuals, but also the minute ornaments with which they were adorned. That is, if the sketch approximated textually the images of the view, the fanciful verse and prose scraps of these heterogenous works were the textual analogies of the collectible commodities decorated with print vignettes.

Indeed, although posies, fancies and ballads in prose were not quite literary vignettes yet, some literary works at the end of the century made explicit their attempt to convert visual vignettes into a literary form. Two examples from two sides of the Atlantic are Brander Matthews's *Vignettes of Manhattan*, published in 1894, and Hubert Crackanthorpe's *Vignette: Miniature Journal of Whim and Sentiment,* published in 1896. Matthews dedicates "this little volume of vignettes" to Theodore Roosevelt and declares of the stories in it that "They are not stories really, I am afraid not sketches even, nor studies; they are, I think, just what I have called them: vignettes. And there are a dozen of them, one for every month in the year, an urban calendar of times and seasons" (Matthews n.p.). Matthews thus makes his debt to the decorative vignettes of the calendar explicit. At the same time, in making New York the object of descriptive attention, Matthews also draws from the vignette depictions of famous sites in views, calendars and pocket diaries. Although the texts do rely on an underlying plot, they center on

single situations—a funeral, an exhibition, a Thanksgiving dinner—, giving the reader insight into only one moment in time. These situations add up to a cumulative collage of "views" on New York City, resembling pictorial views as well as village sketch composites. In restricting its stories to single situations, *Vignettes of Manhattan* thus acts as a forerunner to vignettistic short story cycles like Sherwood Anderson's *Winesburg, Ohio*.

It is important, too, that Matthews's work continues the paratextual instability noted above: it is illustrated with photogravure images, usually vignetted, with short captions. The text seems to grow out from these captions, raising the question of which medium constitutes the backbone of the book's descriptive project. Does the text provide us with descriptions of the city with support from illustrations, or do we have pictorial views of New York to which text has been added to provide explanations?

Vignette: Miniature Journal of Whim and Sentiment is an even more playful work, and it is also much more clearly vignettistic in form than any of the works previously examined. It somewhat resembles a travelogue, with the first-person narrator describing brief situations or encounters that take place in various places across Europe over a span of linearly progressing time. These short textual descriptions are without exception brief and plotless. Furthermore, they often have caption-like titles that indicate time and place ("Spring in Béarn," "On Chelsea Embankment," "Old Marseille at Midday"). Thus, the texts function just like print vignettes in traditional views or travelogues: they provide the reader with a descriptive view, and the title tells us what we are looking at, just like a caption would. The linear progression of time, as well as the "whim and sentiment" of the title echo the fanciful ornamentation of calendars and pocket diaries directly. These vignettes can therefore be considered the earliest unambiguous example of literary vignettes.

It would be an exaggeration to say that literary vignettes ever constituted an expansive canon of works, but this survey shows nonetheless that a literary tradition of the vignette, though often generically ambiguous, did exist and thrive at the end of the 19th century. The *Oxford English Dictionary* bears out this hypothesis, listing as the earliest literary use of the term an entry from 1880, and providing a few examples all the way up into the 1980s. The examples the *OED* provides are, like my examples, consistent with the definition that the vignette is a "brief verbal description of a person, place, etc.; a short descriptive or evocative episode in a play, etc." Unlike the works of Crackanthorpe and Matthews, however, all the *OED*'s examples are either episodes within plays or episodic observations in journals or the like. It therefore seems fair to say that the vignette became, though perhaps not a genre of its own, but a form that was well-known and practiced by writers across genres. When modernist writers turn to the vignette form, they do have a tradition to look back to for their own inquiry of representation at the intersection of image and text.

The Twentieth Century: Tradition and the Modernist Vignette

The print vignette, and book illustration in general, became increasingly rare in the 20th century, so much so that for a book to be illustrated meant that it staked a claim for itself as high art, whether avant-garde or canonical. Partly, the expansion of the reading public and increasing competition from mass-produced newspapers made it less viable for contemporary work to be published with illustrations, making illustration a highly specialized affair. In addition, the vignette was also caught in an in-between situation—between popular ephemera and literary refinement on the one hand, and between Romantic experimentation and realist mimesis on the other—that made it less desirable as an ornament of books: the signal such ornamentation would

send to the reading public was no longer clear. This functional instability—whether the vignette indexed canonical literariness or "cheap" prints for commercial consumption—ultimately meant that book illustration was increasingly done by other means. In the more mimetic genres, photographic illustration displaced the vignette proper by restoring the window on the world notion of representation. Meanwhile, in literary book illustration, the counter-impulse to realistic depiction manifested in what Bland calls painterliness (290). Opposing vernacularity with an emphasis on artistic creativity, well-known painters like Degas and Rodin came to redefine book illustration as a new platform for their paintings (334). Such illustrations, however, all but abolish the difference between painting and illustration. This trend continues into the 20th century, when book illustrations by great modernists like Picasso and Matisse can barely be distinguished from their work as painters. If the photograph takes care of the vignette's representational function, painterly illustrations take over the vignette's ornamental dimension. Between painting and photography, there remains little room for the traditional vignette.

Indeed, when literary works were illustrated at this time, they usually employed either photographic means or artistic license to distinguish themselves from the "low" forms of illustration employed by the popular media. The Woolfs' Hogarth Press provides a fine example of publishing that paid attention to the appearance of its publications. The press's experimentation with structural arrangements, illustrations and titlepages, often drawing upon the 18th century, claimed a place in the canon for the published texts. For example, the resemblance of the titlepage of Virginia Woolf's *Flush* to 18th-century titlepages works to suggest the continuity of this modernist novel with the canon of great fictional (auto)biographies, such as *Gulliver*'s *Travels* (Figure 31, left). The titlepage illustration of Woolf's novel also makes clear, however, that it is not primarily the vignette tradition that inspired the illustrations of the Hogarth

Press. Thus, while the image of Flush the dog has no borders and its arrangement seems to be invoking Bewick's birds, it is also a rather straightforward portrait of the subject of the biography, a function very different from that of the vignette. Similarly, when Katherine Mansfield's *The Garden Party* was illustrated by Marie Laurençin, the illustrations were by no means vignettes: rather, they were commissioned artwork drawings for a 1939 special edition by the Verona Press, intended to add another artistic dimension to the book rather than open up their own worlds of meaning (Figure 31, right). Though the pictures have faded borders, they do not challenge representational illustration in the manner of the vignette. These examples demonstrate that book illustration had all but dispensed of the vignette; indeed, illustration in general tended to be confined to experimentation or special fine editions in order to distinguish the literary elite from the commercial culture with which the vignette had become too intimately associated. Under this paradigm, vignettes were rare outside of cheaper editions, popular journals, or ephemeral print artifacts (Bland 576, 353, 375).

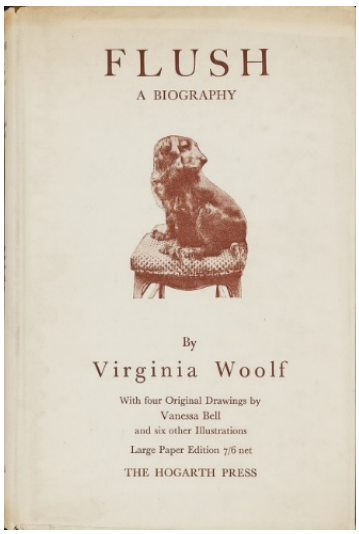


Figure 31. The title page of *Flush* (left); a Laurençin illustration for *The Garden Party* (right)

In literature, on the other hand, modernism brings in a renewed interest in the brief, the momentary, and the fractured, resulting in writers turning towards a range of short forms across prose, drama and poetry. The increasingly "fragmentary ways of seeing" (Bowler 3) sparked a modernist interest in the intensities of the single moment and in the subjective experience of arrested and discontinuous time. One need only to think of imagism in the poetry of Ezra Pound or H.D., intense moments of the present in the novels of Virginia Woolf, Ford Madox Ford or John Dos Passos, or the single central situations in the modernist short stories of writers like James Joyce, Jean Toomer, or William Faulkner. Indeed, the literature of the early 20th century is frequently understood "as a series of responses to impressionism's challenge to subjectivity – to the experience of perception, the experience of time, and the intelligibility of the self" (Saunders 14).

Yet, the modernist use of the vignette to negotiate splintered experience remains understudied. In some of their writing, Katherine Mansfield and Ernest Hemingway resorted to vignettes explicitly, but, as Matthew Garrett's work on episodic poetics demonstrates, many more writers cited the vignette indirectly, writing in episodic forms that partially resembled or incorporated vignettes (19). It would go beyond the scope of the present study to chart all of these various forms. Mansfield and Hemingway, however, carried on the vignette tradition directly by writing self-contained short fiction that often already suggested its status as vignette in its title.

Mansfield was the more prolific writer of vignettes, although much of this work, coming mostly from the years 1907-1908, remains underexamined, even unpublished, due to its generic fluidity. Many of those Mansfield vignettes that did appear in print were published in *The Native Companion*, and many, though not all, are readily identifiable by titles like "Vignette: Summer in

Winter," "Vignette: Sunset Tuesday," "Vignette: Westminster Cathedral," or simply, "Vignettes." However, scholars disagree as to what these texts actually are. Elke D'hoker refers collectively to this group of eponymous vignettes as "Vignettes" in quotation marks, but interprets them as prose poems (150–51). Simultaneously, though, she also notes that critics have often regarded them more straightforwardly as poems, and she lists as example the critic Vincent O'Sullivan, who chose to include them in his collection of Mansfield's poetry (150). Melissa Reimer, too, treats the vignette term as a descriptor of texts with a certain, impressionistic, *quality* rather than a form, and she uses this quality to describe Mansfield's short fiction as such. On the other hand, Reimer discusses evidence that Mansfield herself thought of these pieces as vignettes (i.e. in distinction from her other short work): in her correspondence with *The Native Companion* editor E.J. Brady, Mansfield refers to "In the Botanical Gardens" as "the 'Botanical Garden' vignette" (qtd Reimer 41). In fact, even D'hoker, who pays careful attention to the titular designations of Mansfield's vignettes, groups "In the Botanical Gardens" together with the "Vignettes" (though as prose poems), regardless of the absence of the term in its title. Thus, both Mansfield and critics recognize the structural, rather than merely titular, commonalities among these short pieces—commonalities which set them apart from Mansfield's short fiction in general. In fact, the titles Mansfield gave to these texts suggest that she considered them as participants of a longer tradition of vignette writing, like the work of Matthews and Crackanthorpe: in their titles, regardless of whether the term "vignette" appears or not, Mansfield's vignettes invariably designate a particular time, place, or both (Vignette: Sunset Tuesday," "Vignette: Westminster Cathedral," "In the Botanical Gardens"). Thus, like the 19th-century literary vignettes analyzed above, Mansfield's vignettes cite the caption tradition of the

print vignette, where the image of a particular landscape would be accompanied only with a short descriptive phrase.

Mansfield's vignettes exemplify a modernist interest in the vivid sensory and intellectual experience that comes to replace a more holistic understanding of self and world in the demise of coherent and unified explanatory narratives and belief systems. "In the Botanical Gardens" provides an illustrative example of this aesthetic. In this vignette, the unnamed narrator strolls through a botanical garden in which he or she encounters, perhaps only in fantasy, a sudden unkempt area of wild bush. It is this encounter that unleashes a powerful flash of associations and experiences, and around which the representational drive of the vignette revolves. The narrator's experience is at once terrifying and powerful, and it cannot be assimilated into an orderly narrative:

> I turn from the smooth swept paths, and climb up a steep track, where the knotted tree roots have seared a rude pattern in the yellow clay. And, suddenly, it disappears—all the pretty, carefully-tended surface of gravel and sward and blossom, and there is bush, silent and splendid. On the green moss, on the brown earth, a wide splashing of yellow sunlight. And, everywhere that strange, indefinable scent. As I breathe it, it seems to absorb, to become part of me—and I am old with the age of centuries, strong with the strength of savagery. (19)

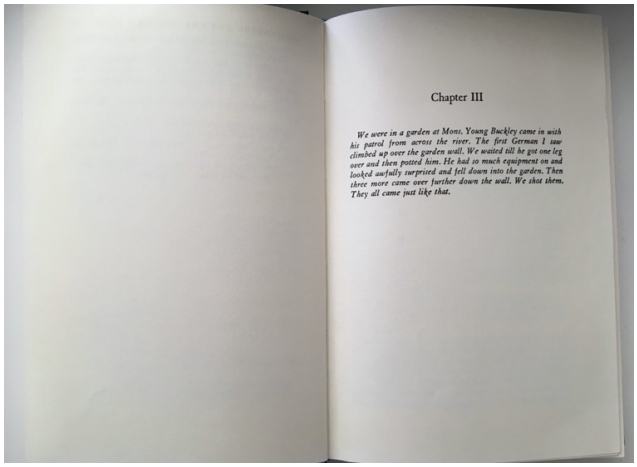
Here the narrator progresses from one part of the garden to another, which introduces a plot-dimension and frees the reader from the single, static view. However, that view is still restricted to only a few glances and action is constantly overwhelmed by the description of the garden in the present tense. Thus, although at one and a half pages it is longer than some of the "Vignettes," and although it offers to readers more than just a single glance, "In the Botanical Gardens" still focuses on a single situation experienced as one extended moment. In its intense depiction of that one moment, the vignette explores that experience of the self where the sensorium is overwhelmed with signification it can neither explain nor mold into a story. Thus,

while "In a Botanical Gardens," like *Vignettes of Manhattan*, does not abandon story entirely, the focus is, like in Crackanthorpe's *Vignette*, on the place and its effects on the narrator, whether illusory or real.

This balancing act, which displaces plot in favor of a static view while still extending the reader's perspective past the single glance, makes Mansfield's vignettes somewhat elusive. Their central concern remains that of the traditional vignette—restricted vision—but Mansfield experiments with what those precise restrictions should be. Since this experimentation characterizes much of Mansfield's short fiction in general, it is understandable why scholars do not always differentiate between the vignettes and the stories. I maintain nonetheless that there is a crucial difference between a story like "Bliss," for example, whose plot is essential for the story's meaning, and a vignette organized around and consisting solely of one or two glimpses. The former arranges slices of life into narrative; the latter may introduce a narrative dimension into the slice, but remains focused on the single moment. Thus, within the latter, more vignettistic form, experience cannot be understood or demarcated through a plot structure: it remains an unintegrated, individual experience whose most salient feature is its attention to the immediate circumstances.

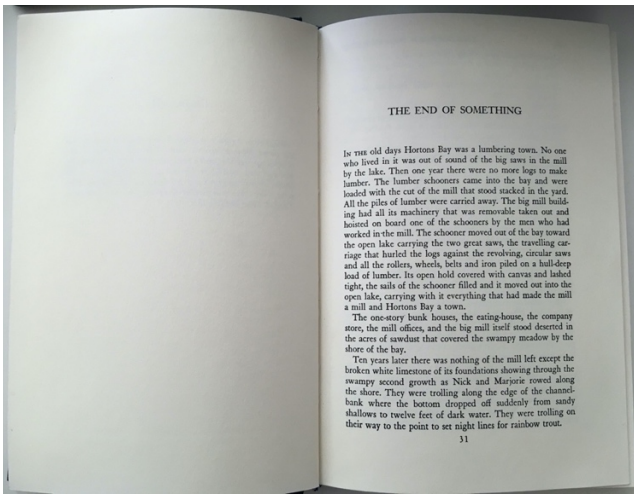
Hemingway's vignettes are similar to Mansfield's: they are unambiguously identifiable and they differ markedly from his short stories. Although there is little evidence that Hemingway ever published other vignettes than the ones that eventually made it into *In Our Time*, the history of these vignettes is instructive. In 1923, Hemingway published six vignettes in *The Little Review* under the title of "Six Vignettes." A year later, he published these and twelve more in *in our time*, where the individual vignettes had no separate titles. Finally, in 1925, Hemingway completed *In Our Time,* in which he included a total of sixteen short stories, before each of

which (with the exception of the first story), and after the last, he placed a vignette. The end result is that a total of sixteen vignettes appear, italicized, on what look like chapter titlepages following a blank verso, under headings like “Chapter I,” “Chapter II,” etc. All of these vignettes are short enough to fit on a page, and none of them has a title, unless we interpret “Chapter I,” “Chapter II,” and so on as their titles. Turning the page, the reader encounters again a blank verso and then, on the recto, the next short story, always with a title (“A Very Short Story,” “Cross-Country Snow,” “Big Two-Hearted River,” etc.). Figure 32 demonstrates this sequence on pages 28-31 of the 1988 Macmillan edition of *In Our Time,* where the short story “The End of Something” is preceded by a blank recto, and that by a vignette under the heading “Chapter III.”



Chapter III

We were in a garden at Mons. Young Buckley came in with his patrol from across the river. The first German I saw climbed up over the garden wall. We waited till he got one leg over and then potted him. He had so much equipment on and looked awfully surprised and fell down into the garden. Then three more came over further down the wall. We shot them. They all came just like that.



THE END OF SOMETHING

In the old days Hortons Bay was a lumbering town. No one who lived in it was out of sound of the big saws in the mill by the lake. Then one year there were no more logs to make lumber. The lumber schooners came into the bay and were loaded with the cut of the mill that stood stacked in the yard. All the piles of lumber were carried away. The big mill building had all its machinery that was removable taken out and hoisted on board one of the schooners by the men who had worked in the mill. The schooner moved out of the bay toward the open lake carrying the two great saws, the travelling carriage that hurled the logs against the revolving, circular saws and all the rollers, wheels, belts and iron piled on a hull-deep load of lumber. Its open hold covered with canvas and lashed tight, the sails of the schooner filled and it moved out into the open lake, carrying with it everything that had made the mill a mill and Hortons Bay a town.

The one-story bunk houses, the eating-house, the company store, the mill offices, and the big mill itself stood deserted in the acres of sawdust that covered the swampy meadow by the shore of the bay.

Ten years later there was nothing of the mill left except the broken white limestone of its foundations showing through the swampy second growth as Nick and Marjorie rowed along the shore. They were trolling along the edge of the channel-bank where the bottom dropped off suddenly from sandy shallows to twelve feet of dark water. They were trolling on their way to the point to set night lines for rainbow trout.

31

Figure 32: The arrangement of the textual vignettes of *In Our Time* (New York: Macmillan, 1988)

What this sequence at the beginning of "The End of Something" demonstrates is that Hemingway made a clear visual, spatial, and titular distinction between the vignettes and the short stories of *In Our Time*. In fact, italic type also sets the vignettes apart from the stories. These short snapshot descriptions, then, serve a different function within the book than do the stories, and this difference is apparent as soon as the reader opens the book.

Thus, Hemingway treated the vignettes differently from the short stories: although they were clearly important textual objects, they did not achieve the level of autonomy that the short stories did, evidenced by the fact that they, like Fournier's vignettes, could be moved around flexibly across larger textual works, and also implied by their lack of a title. In these aspects, Hemingway's vignettes resemble 19th-century print vignettes, for example Bewick's, which tended to have neither title or caption. Thus, the only way to refer to any individual vignette was by a brief phrase about its contents, which is often replicated by scholars' reference to particular Hemingway vignettes via their settings (for an example, see Gradoli 187).

In *In Our Time,* Hemingway also picks up on another of the vignette's traditional features, namely its use as a headpiece. The vignettes in *In Our Time* replicate the placement and function of headpieces in the 18th and 19th centuries: below the title but before the actual text. Before "The End of Something," for example, the titlepage (shown in Figure 32) contains only the following text:

Chapter III

> *We were in a garden at Mons. Young Buckley came in with his patrol from across the river. The first German I saw climbed up over the garden wall. We waited till he got one leg over then potted him. He had so much equipment on and looked awfully surprised and fell down into the garden. Then three more came over further down the wall. We shot them. They all came just like that.* (29, emphasis original)

This is the complete vignette, which occupies the page alone. The vignette provides a visual description that fills the space of the page under the title, performing the traditional role of the headpiece. If Bewick's vignettes had been "tale-pieces," that is narrative tailpieces, then Hemingway's vignettes are narrative headpieces: they reverse Bewick's visual narratives into texts that work primarily visually. Hemingway thus directly "imports" the Romantic vignette's experimentation with the relation of visual and textual depiction by switching out the headpiece ornament with a headpiece descriptive text. Furthermore, because the vignettes are separated out from the short story that follows them by the turn of a page, simultaneously as they are also connected through the use of chapter designations, *In Our Time* builds a separate representational function for its vignettes, which nonetheless works as a part of the larger book. These vignettes thus remediate the representational contributions to the book of print vignettes of the 18th and 19th centuries.

In terms of their content, too, Hemingway's vignettes cite the tradition of print and literary vignettes of the previous century. The vignette in Chapter III starts by picking up on the caption tradition by introducing the place, "in a garden at Mons." The vignette is confined to a single image—a single glance that hovers across the scene from the arriving Buckley to the row of Germans climbing the wall. There is no background information: all we see is the setting in which we can discern objects and people. We see a similar structure at work in the vignette that precedes "The Revolutionist:"

Chapter VIII

> *At two o'clock in the morning two Hungarians got into a cigar store at Fifteenth Street and Grand Avenue. Drevitts and Boyle drove up from the Fifteenth Street police station in a Ford. The Hungarians were backing their wagon out of an alley. Boyle shot one off the seat of the wagon and one out of the wagon box. Drevitts got frightened when he found they were both dead. Hell Jimmy, he said, you oughn't to have done it. There's liable to be a hell of a lot of trouble.*

> *--They're crooks, ain't they? said Boyle. They're wops, ain't they? Who the hell is going to make any trouble?*
> *--That's all right maybe this time, said Drevitts, but how did you know they were wops when you bumped them?*
> *Wops, said Boyle, I can tell wops a mile off.* (79)

Again, the vignette starts by introducing the place, and here also the time. None of the characters are introduced: they are simply presented to the reader. Much like the Germans in Chapter III, the Hungarians are not named: we merely see them in the moment before and after their death. Though there occurs a brief exchange between Drevitts and Boyle, the vignette nonetheless remains confined to a very short time, and our gaze is not permitted to wonder away from the single street corner.

Hemingway is, of course, famous for his minimalist style, but these vignettes ratchet up his characteristic minimalism one notch further than even the short stories in the same volume. *In Our Time* is organized very tightly around the sense that life has been emptied of meaning in the wake of the devastation of World War I, but the short stories are not nearly as bleak as the vignettes. Partially this is owing to the short stories' more everyday topics (skiing, fishing, and hiking) while the vignettes usually portray acts of war and violence; importantly, however, the vignettes also seem bleaker because they are bare of almost every traditional aspect of stories. They have no plot, no character psychology, and their confinement to a single setting produces the claustrophobic feeling that the depicted violence is inescapable. In a sense, then, *in our time*, the version of *In Our Time* without the short stories, is like a 19th-century travel book or "view" for post-World War I times: it shows views of famous sites which have all been demolished, their surrounding landscape torn up by bombs. Hemingway's vignettes thus depict more brutally and more directly than the short stories the reality of "our time," a time in which every tenet of civilization—buildings, relationships, lives—has been reduced to smoldering ashes.

For Hemingway and Mansfield, then, the vignette becomes a useful tool for exploring characteristic preoccupations of modernist writing: the fragmentation of the self and experience, and the demolition of certainties in the outside world as well as within the individual. Indeed, these writers draw from the print tradition of the vignette to advance a modernist literary project that relativizes knowledge and questions our mechanisms for seeing and knowing. Lived experience remains an important object for representation, but it has become elusive: it cannot be grasped in its entirety, only in small moments; and where those moments begin and end cannot be established with any degree of certainty. The vignette becomes for Mansfield and Hemingway a primary vehicle for a new epistemology of experience, one in which the project of knowing the world appears ever more hopeless and yet, at the same time, perhaps more urgent than ever.

That this work contained the seed of an intersectional feminist epistemology is suggested by the use of the vignette later in the century by Latina writers Sandra Cisneros and Esmeralda Santiago. Throughout the modernist and indeed postmodernist periods, the vignette remained a marginal form, in spite of its suitability for exploring questions of fragmentation and liminality. It goes beyond the scope of this study to examine to what extent the vignette was part of a larger representational program within the novel—arguably, episodic works like Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own* or John Dos Passos's *Manhattan Transfer* could exhibit vignettistic characteristics—but direct citations of the form, like Mansfield's and Hemingway's, were rare. Therefore, when Cisneros and Santiago wrote *The House on Mango Street* (1984) and *When I Was Puerto Rican (*1993) as vignette cycles, they were inserting themselves into a tradition that was at once prominent—following upon a vibrant book history and use by two influential modernists—and marginal. This interplay between prominence and marginalization is precisely what lies at the heart of the use of the vignette in these two novels.

Picking up on the feminized narratives of the 19th-century village sketch composite, as well as on the work of two geographically transplanted modernists (Hemingway and Mansfield), Cisneros and Santiago build a specifically feminist and migrant form of representation through the vignette. Relying on a form that has both traveled across time and media and which had, by the time of their writing, become marginalized out of the mainstream, Cisneros and Santiago use the vignette to situate their works explicitly as interventions from the margins—and as vernacular ones to boot. Their stories are not concerned with claims about literary experimentation; rather, they centralize the lived experience of people—especially Mexican and Puerto Rican women in the US—who are otherwise written out of mainstream accounts of society and history.

The House on Mango Street achieves this representational ethic primarily by relying on a series of vignettes to give readers snapshots into the life of a Mexican American family. Because it prioritizes these moments of experience, without attempting to integrate them into larger, more familiar narratives like the Bildungsroman or the immigrant novel, *Mango Street* can be called a true vignette cycle: each chapter consists only of a few pages and focuses on a single situation or image, although there is some plot development across the vignettes. One such situation is depicted in "A House of My Own," where the entire vignette is the narrator-protagonist's articulation of what home she would like to inhabit:

> Not a flat. Not an apartment in the back. Not a man's house. Not a daddy's. A house all my own. With my porch and my pillow, my pretty purple petunias. My books and my stories. My two shoes waiting beside the bed. Nobody to shake a stick at. Nobody's garbage to pick up after.
>
> Only a house quiet as snow, a space for myself to go, clean as paper before the poem. (108)

Though the other vignettes are generally longer, "A House of My Own" exemplifies well the structure of the vignettes in *The House on Mango Street*: the reader is allowed a glimpse into the

living conditions and the dreams of the protagonist and her family. Each vignette gives us one restricted image, and this image remains unconnected by plot, though not by topic, to the other vignettes. Echoing Woolf's *A Room of One's Own,* "A House of My Own" gestures, by its mere brevity, toward how Woolf's dream remains unattainable for Chicana women in the 20th-century United States. As a whole, then, *Mango Street* approaches literary culture from the margins: using a vernacular but marginalized form, it inscribes the experiences of Mexican American women into the larger narrative of US society without recourse to the narrative structures that had elided, and continue to elide, the voices and perspectives of this population.

When I Was Puerto Rican employs a similar strategy: with a form that is closer to a short story cycle that exhibits an underlying, if vague, sense of narrative progression, Santiago's cycle critiques the all too linear progress narratives more typical of masculinist immigrant literature and the Bildungsroman. With its slice-of-life approach, *When I Was Puerto Rican* builds a representational paradigm in which plot is constructed primarily so as to be dismantled: its short stories display a heightened attention to description and less to plot, thus displacing the short *story* genre itself with a more vignettistic equivalent. Thus, *When I Was Puerto Rican* not only responds to the fracture of identity caused by the immigrant experience, but it does so by destabilizing coherent narrative into isolated situations, through a turn towards the vignette. In this, Santiago's book resembles those Mansfield short stories that, like "Bliss," approach but do not quite assume the vignette form: plot loses importance next to specific situations, but is not dismantled entirely. In effect, *When I Was Puerto Rican* builds up the expectation of a linear and coherent narrative only to displace it with a more grounded, local, and situational perspective.

Given the similarity of their respective projects, it is unsurprising that Cisneros's and Santiago's books both describe the immigrant experience from a young girl's point of view.

Naomi Schor has argued that detail is traditionally associated with the feminine (16–17), and this association can be explained by the detail's resistance to grand narratives, which have tended to be determined by those in power. Indeed, scholars have argued that the novel, with its traditional linear form, has often been an effective tool for nation-building projects that rest on monolithic views of who counts as a subject (see Said 81–82). For a text to stake its claims with the detail amounts to opting out of exclusionary grand narratives. Fragmenting their novels into vignettes allows writers of the immigrant experience to break up the monolithic notion of the nation that seeks to erase them. Vignettes, more so than sketches or anecdotes, are suitable for this task also because they have always problematized borders—a focus that serves migration narratives well. In these two books, then, the vignette's main task is to resist coherent, overarching narrative.

The 20th century was also the period during which such overarching narratives came under increasing scrutiny, even attack, as socioeconomic and cultural developments introduced ever larger degrees of fragmentation and episodicity into the ways in which society was organized and lived. Thinkers like Guy Debord or Fredric Jameson register a sense of disintegration (Debord 43), lamenting the bombardment of the individual by a multitude of discontinuous stimuli, and mourning the loss of a sense of historical continuity (Jameson 14–15). In Theodor Adorno's well-known account of life as fundamentally damaged, Adorno himself turns to short forms, which he calls aphorisms, in which to articulate his critique: "If today the subject is vanishing, aphorisms take upon themselves the duty 'to consider the evanescent itself as essential'"(16).

Perhaps ironically, then, the vignette, whose form arguably lends itself to describing these processes of fragmentation and their attendant consequences, underwent a semantic fragmentation whereby many specialized, niche denotations were developed and the general term lost specificity. In psychology, "vignette" designates a survey methodology in which participants

are presented with a situation only the outlines of which are provided: participants' assessments of the situation are then used to infer underlying ethical convictions (Heise; Rossi and Berk). Here, anti-narrativity is emphasized: the situation under investigation is conceived as static. A similar emphasis on stasis is present in computer programming, where vignettes refer to verbal descriptions of what a particular function or set of functions does (see for example the documentation on vignettes in the R language: *Vignettes: Long-Form Documentation · R Packages*). On the other hand, other uses of the term focus less on stasis and more on minuteness. Thus, some European highway systems, for example in Austria and Switzerland, use small stickers called vignettes that have to be pasted on the car's front window as proof of payment of highway tolls (Figure 33, left). This system cites 18th-century book printing, in which small illustrations had to be printed separately on the already text-printed page, so that vignettes were effectively pasted in; it also draws from the commercial decals and logo vignettes that were used on stationery and product labels in the 19th century. Indeed, in the German language, the primary meaning of "vignette" is sticker—a stark difference to English, where the literary meaning of short episode or anecdote is predominant. In a similar citation of 18th-century ornamentation, in home decoration, vignettes refer to small arrangements that are meant to provide a decorative highlight to a room; these tend to resemble the forms of vignette headpieces and tailpieces in 18th-century books (Figure 33, right).

Figure 33. A highway vignette used in Switzerland (left); A vignette decoration arrangement (right)

Finally, we have already seen that the vignette's traditional lack of a border is reflected by the photo-editing term "vignetting," which continues to be in use in software like Adobe Photoshop and others. Thus, in the 20th century, the vignette underwent a semantic expansion similar to, but even more extended than, its 19th-century counterpart. With its entry into so many radically different spheres of human activity, the vignette lost clear conceptual outlines within the artistic domain. What it lost in terms of artistic denotation, however, it gained in association to popular culture, vernacular and commercial goods, and ordinary life. By the beginning of the 21st century, the vignette had become a cultural form that was simultaneously everywhere, and which yet had very little conscious presence in the discourse around the textual and visual forms by which we seek to represent the world.

The Twenty-First Century: Flash Fiction, the Internet and Vines

It is characteristic of the present moment that the vignette has developed so many niche meanings that its origins and traditional characteristics are no longer obvious. Indeed, while the various meanings outlined above do share, if only latent and implicit, commonalities, they are still different enough to seem virtually incompatible. Small wonder, then, that many of the classical features of the vignette have been lost to popular and even to academic consciousness. Hence also the reigning ambiguity in literary studies about what exactly the vignette is: scholars' interchangeable use of terms such as vignette, sketch, episode, aphorism, etc. suggests that it is no longer obvious what the difference between such short forms might be. For the contemporary writers examined in the rest of this dissertation, however, some of the vignette's traditional characteristics will play a major role in enabling the depictions of slices of reality.

But this turn to the vignette that the rest of this study examines does not take place in a cultural vacuum: rather, the 21st century sees a major shift towards short forms of communication and expression in general. Short media, from television to social media and literature, gain a perhaps unprecedented significance. The universe of online short media is the topic of the next chapter, while here the developments more immediately related to the vignette across a broader spectrum of media will be discussed. Film is, of course, the novel's closest of kin, and arguably the major narrative form in Western society since the 20th century. Feature-length films correspond the closest to novels, but these are not the televisual genres that captivated audiences in the early days of the medium, nor predominantly today. In its beginnings, television was technically incapable of showing more than short sections of film at a time: famous films like the Lumière brothers' *Train Arriving at La Ciotat* (1895) are remarkably like motion-picture versions of vignettes. Even in the early days of the television as household item, channels rarely operated for more than brief intervals at a time, giving rise to the necessity of televisual narratives to be delivered in instalments. Thus, when these technical limitations were overcome, the television series was already an established form. Although many series do build narrative continuity across individual episodes, some genres center, like the vignette, on discrete situations across which no narrative teleology is established. The most prominent example is the situational comedy, whose name already signals its interest in static situations rather than narrative development. Sitcoms like *Friends,* for example, preserve the slice-of-life approach that we have seen in vignettes from Bewick to Santiago. This genre is carried over into the 21st century, with shows like *Insecure, Portlandia* or *Easy* functioning much like *Vignettes of Manhattan* or *The House on Mango Street*—as collages depicting particular environments.

The rise of the Internet both enables and requires the proliferation of fast, bite-sized information. Social media platforms like Twitter, Instagram and Facebook force their users to communicate in short posts or photos with mere hashtags; and even political communication has shifted ever more towards brief messages, in no small part owing to Donald Trump's preference for Twitter as his podium. Such limitations on size have also resulted in a veritable explosion in extremely brief animated media such as GIFs and Vines. GIFs are short, moving images that have gained wide currency across all social media platforms in recent years. As for Vines, Jo Devereux explains that "Vines are six-second looping videos that anyone can produce and upload to the Internet via the website Vine: they are prodigiously popular" (9). The Vine website shut down in January 2017 to the immense grief of fans, resulting in innumerable Twitter accounts devoted to tracking down beloved Vines (Gordon n.p.). Vines allowed for highly compressed stories in the filmic medium; in their wake, GIFs continue to carry this function, which is complemented since January 2020 by Vine's successor site Byte (Rosenblatt n.p.). As Devereux points out, it is hardly a coincidence that Vines basically adopt the name of vignettes: both forms are facilitators of what Devereux calls "faster seeing," necessitated by the "impulse to transmit art to ever-increasing numbers of viewers" (9). The Vine logo makes the grapevine reference, familiar from medieval manuscript borders, explicit:

Figure 34. The Vine logo

Yet, the allusion to the grapevine also nods toward the vernacular, popular dimension of Vines as well as vignettes: grapevine, or gossip, has traditionally spread over publications with wide popular appeal but little cultural acknowledgement. Byte's name in turn picks up on the

computer-technological dimension (bytes referring to computers' memories) as well as on the bite-size formula of the medium.

Literature, too, responds to the imperative for "faster seeing" in genres both short and long. This response, however, has not received much critical attention: either because its short manifestations, many of which belong to online media or fan fiction, are often not regarded as serious enough, or because novels continue to be read with an assumption of conventional realist story development. Fan fiction, usually online, has produced a myriad of short fictional forms, some of which are known as "ficlets" or "drabbles." Some more venerable literary venues have sprung up to accommodate such interests, such as the journal *100 Word Story*, devoted to publishing stories of 100 words or less. Even in the domain of more traditional fiction, backed by MFA writing programs and the publishing industry, previously unheard-of short forms now proliferate, for example short short stories, microfiction and flash fiction, whose generic boundaries are by no means clear. These new forms probe the ways in which restricted situations and brief glimpses might provide valuable strategies of reading and expression in the new century.

Thus, the vignette's representational structures come to play an ever more central role in the media environment of the 21st century, even as the term "vignette" is typically decoupled from these developments. Yet, politically incisive social commentary on social media and perhaps especially on Twitter is fundamentally informed by the representational politics that the vignette enables. The next chapter shows how the short digital media of the 21st century draw from the vignette tradition in their own formal solutions and affordances. Indeed, the chapter demonstrates that among the key features of the vignette in its various forms in history, its brevity, its ability to introduce multidirectional communication content, as well as its mediation across the borders of

media are the three that become vital for articulating counterhegemonic political thought and representation on social media. In turn, it is by drawing inspiration from and reinvigorating these core vignette characteristics as remediated on social media that the contemporary writers examined in Chapter 3 and 4 introduce a hopeful, powerful but minimalist vision of the world—mere glimpses, with uncertain borders. Thus, the chapters that follow first describe the proliferation of what might be called a "digital vignette aesthetics" in social media, before turning to the different ways in which the vignette crystallizes a new representational epistemology and ethic in contemporary fiction.

CHAPTER 2: DIGITAL VIGNETTE AESTHETICS AND POLITICAL REALISM IN THE TWITTERVERSE

The vignette, as the previous chapter has demonstrated, was never solely a literary form, though it has always been intricately bound up with the book. The 21st century, however, has seen a fundamental transformation in how literature, and written communication as such, is presented to readers and therefore in what it means to read. Information now circulates routinely in rapid, bite-sized bits: personal communication takes place over SMS, Facebook Messenger or other texting apps, while business communication is increasingly diverted from phone conversations to brief emails and business messaging apps such as Slack. Amid the myriad of competing short forms, what is the communicational role of the (digital) vignette?

This chapter takes up this question by arguing, first, that written communication in the digital domain is fundamentally "vignettified," that is, it is structured by a vignettistic architecture in which linear plots and sequences are displaced in favor of short, multidirectional messages participating in polyvocal conversations. Second, I argue that this altered, multimodal textual structure carries a powerful political potential: by opening up the site of authorship to multiple interventions, displacing plots in favor of dialogue, and limiting the epistemological claims possible in a single message, texts structured by digital vignette architecture can democratize the act of reading by making it a participatory, conversational, co-authoring and engaged act. At the same time, such acts of reading and writing reside in a close relationship with vernacular, quotidian life, partaking in the same textual structures that are otherwise used to access the news, perform labor, or socialize. This formal similarity means that insofar as short digital texts represent the contemporary world, they do so through a realist framework that invites readers/participants to experience brief but heightened moments from other people's lives and

circumstances. This chapter demonstrates how digital fictions draw from this affordance of short forms to articulate a renewed realism for the 21st century—a representational paradigm in turn underlying many longer 21st-century print fictions, as later chapters argue.

By vignettification I mean the process by which human communication is increasingly structured around small chunks of communicative content, independently of whether this content is textual or visual. The term does not simply suggest that content existing in some prior, longer form has now been subdivided into short segments. Rather, it recognizes that digital communication entails a fundamental restructuring of text itself—around a structure constituted by small segments, similar to medieval marginalia or the early printed book's vignette. The process of vignettification is a sociological one, to be sure, but it exerts significant pressure on artistic modes of communication, including specifically the literary scene. As many commentators, including N. Katherine Hayles and Janez Strehovec, have observed, the simultaneous processes of information overflow and information fragmentation have a significant impact on human cognition, resulting in a new predominant mindset that Hayles calls "hyper-attention" as opposed to the kind of "deep attention" traditionally associated with humanistic modes of analysis (Hayles, *Electronic Literature* 117). This new mindset means that literary scholars can no longer assume reading activity to be characterized by the same attitudes as were predominant when the attention devoted to the pages of a book was not challenged every five minutes by incoming text messages, emails, push notifications, or Instagram posts. It is probable that reading habits, too, have shifted as a result. According to Mariusz Pisarski,

> today's readers are also players, viewers and users surrounded by self-broadcasting and instant-messaging devices. They spend their time in augmented and virtual worlds delivered by home entertainment, and literature is just a fraction of the available spectrum. (41)

Pisarski concludes that this new environment places new requirements upon literature. In his view, "literature need[s] strategies attuned to those used by the social media and game industry behemoths…[i]n order to survive." From a less fatalistic viewpoint, we might say that literature's social relevance might be buttressed by "closely observ[ing] those niche artistic and literary communities who try to relate to the habits of a contemporary audience and reflect it at the level of form and expression" (41).

This chapter provides an in-depth description of this new, digital environment characterized by fast-paced snippets of information, arguing that it is usefully understood as a vignette architecture enabling new forms of realist writing. The chapter maps, in the exploratory and non-totalizing way described by Fredric Jameson as cognitive mapping (*Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* 51), the sphere of social media along with its communicative forms and practices; and it interrogates the place of the vignette as a possible digital form as well as a literary response to the digital environment. The chapter begins with a brief consideration of electronic literature as it has been studied in literary scholarship, arguing that that scholarship has not yet provided an appropriate approach for reckoning with the social media-based forms that fiction increasingly takes in the second decade of the 21st century. Then, the chapter offers a sociotechnological account of what could be called the "Twitterverse," the digital environment in which short communicative forms reign supreme, asking what its predominant forms and their structural affordances are and demonstrating the realist political potential opened up by those affordances. Finally, the chapter turns to Twitter works by accomplished authors Teju Cole, Jennifer Egan and David Mitchell as situated within an immense web of less established writers, and demonstrates how these writers are drawing from the new possibilities created by short digital media to articulate new, realist social critique fictions that effectively intervene in

pressing problems of 21st-century social world, problems such as racism, economic exploitation, and the gendered project of techno-utopian domination. As later chapters will show, this new field of writing, which I call Twitter fiction, undergirds a larger project of reinventing realist social critique fiction for the 21st century.

Postmodern Ancestors: Electronic Literature

In the last two or three decades, electronic literature has exploded into prominence among a growing number of literary scholars, including established academics such as Katherine Hayles, Tara McPherson or Marjorie Perloff. However, electronic literature, which can be broadly defined as literature that uses electronic media for its presentation, has tended to be analyzed in ways that do not give adequate attention to social media-based literature as its own genre system within the larger field. In this section I argue that descriptions of electronic literature have so often focused on its early forms and so insistently read these as partaking in a metafictional, poststructuralist project that it has become difficult to read later, more realist or vernacular forms as making interventions into what it means to read and engage with a text politically in the digital world.

Electronic literature (or "e-lit") is a form of literature that uses electronic media of presentation, and which emerged in the 1980s especially in response to the electronic possibilities enabled by the computer. Notably, however, electronic literature is not limited to the medium of the computer; accordingly, a scholarly collective consisting of Bell and others has proposed the alternative term "digital fiction" to designate this narrower field. For Bell et al., "digital fiction… is fiction written for and read on a computer screen that pursues its verbal, discursive and/or conceptual complexity through the digital medium, and would lose something

of its aesthetic and semiotic function if it were removed from that medium" (Bell et al. n.p.). In spite of its narrower reach, this definition is useful for the wider field of electronic literature as well because it highlights the medium-specificity of literature outside of the printed book. Thus, as Hayles points out, when electronic literature includes "sound, animation, motion, video, kinesthetic involvement, and software functionality, among others" (*Writing Machines* 20), these features become paramount to the affordances and effects of the text and to the ways in which it can be received.[15]

Indeed, many early and paradigmatic examples of e-lit rely on precisely these diverse medium-specific affordances to interrogate reading and writing practices beyond the page. An early genre experimenting with nonlinear models of reading is that of hypertext fiction, for example Michael Joyce's *afternoon: a story* (1987), in which readers have to navigate their way through different possibilities of plot outcomes by clicking on different options offered by the text on a computer screen. A similarly experimental genre, generative literature, where an algorithm takes a particular textual input and transforms it into literary output (Balpe n.p.), interrogates the intentionality of composition and the figure of the author. In the cases of both of these forms, the promise of electronic literature in the late 1980s and early 1990s was that newly popularized computer-mediated technologies could transform the ways in which texts were produced and read. Other technologies, too, for example video and projection, allowed authors to push the boundaries of traditional acts of literary writing and reading. For instance, the exhibition of the generative poem "Poemedia" by Erin Costello and Aaron Angelo, which "consisted of one

[15] It lies beyond the scope of the present work to provide an exhaustive list of the forms and genres of electronic literature, or to present a more thorough account of its history. Hayles offers a good categorization of the diverse types of electronic literature (Hayles, *Electronic Literature* 3–30), while Wardrip-Fruin provides a helpful history of these forms, embedded in a theory of what "digital literature" is (Wardrip-Fruin 29). Hayles's own brief history is a good overview as well (Hayles, *Writing Machines* 26).

hundred fifty 8.5'' x 11'' sheets of card stock suspended one to eight feet above the ground with live and/or recorded video projected onto the sheets" (Grigar et al. n.p.) raised questions about what it means for an author to read a poem at an event. Scholar and e-lit writer Lori Emerson accordingly describes "Poemedia" as more accurately a "site-specific installation and performance," and notes that its generative constitution "poses many challenges to the conventional notion of a poetry reading" (Grigar et al. n.p.). Thus, whether using computer or other electronic media, early e-lit forms of fiction and poetry were fundamentally concerned with the question of what it might mean to decouple reading and writing from the static dimensions of the page.[16]

Thus, these early forms set a standard for how to read electronic literature, inviting an interpretive framework in which e-lit is always primarily metafiction commenting on and expanding the forms of literary production and reception. For electronic literature to be considered part of "real" literature—an extension of, rather than a deviation from, literary history—it needed to be anchored within the category of the literary, which the *Electronic Literature Organization* attempted to do by defining e-lit as works that necessarily contain "important literary aspects" (Hayles, *Electronic Literature* 3). Hayles takes those aspects to mean that e-lit "interrogate[s] the histories, contexts, and productions of literature" (*Electronic Literature* 3). That is, electronic literature had come to seem metafictional per definition—incapable of integrating realist concerns with social space, race relations, or questions of economic production and exploitation. Such a definition does not readily accommodate other e-

[16] Ironically, though, those early texts like *afternoon: a story,* which relied on computer platforms that were new at the time, have since become virtually inaccessible as their platforms were replaced with newer versions and the hardware they ran on became commercially unavailable. The computer-enabled transformations of reading, then, have ultimately made any kind of reading of these early works impossible.

lit forms, like the later emerging field of social media-based literature, that probe more realist questions.

But the metafictional interpretive framework also struggles to integrate even many forms of earlier electronic literature when those do not demonstrate a primary concern with the questions of literary production; yet, such forms abound, though they have tended to be categorized only ambiguously as part of the emerging e-lit canon. Rita Raley discusses SMS artworks displayed as installations in public space, where passers-by can text their own messages to a provided number, to be displayed on electronic billboards in the city (Raley 10); these works explore questions related to public space, public discourse and billboard advertising. Patrick Jagoda elaborates on what he calls alternative reality games, where characters and plotlines are developed on some internet space such as a blog, Facebook, or Twitter, but where specific plot events are also enacted in real life (Jagoda 189), works which ask questions about the interrelations between our virtual and physical selves. Finally, so-called geolocative narrative installations dramatize the question of who gets to inscribe social place. For example, in *Yellow Arrow*, the visual and sound artists Christopher Allen, Brian House and Jesse Shapins attached stickers of yellow arrows with scannable codes to buildings and objects across New York, which allowed participants to record their own stories or listen to stories recorded by others. A work like *Yellow Arrow,* then, examines the processes by which stories and histories become attached to, or detached from, particular places.

Many of these works would not make the cut of the *ELO*'s definition of e-lit since they do not primarily interrogate language, text, or writing.[17] Indeed, the website of artist Brian House explains that the function of *Yellow Arrow* was "to radically redefine our conception of *place*," not of text, reader or author (House, my emphasis). Yet to exclude a work like *Yellow Arrow* from the domain of literature would seem misguided, given that the piece was centrally concerned with narrative: at its most basic, the objective of *Yellow Arrow* was to make the participants connect places with *stories*. Although Hayles's attempt to provide a heuristic by which to determine which works belong to electronic literature is helpful and necessary, it is ultimately too limiting, and it explains why the works that she analyzes, for example Michael Joyce's *an afternoon: a story*, Talan Memmott's *Lexia to Perplexia* (2000), or M.D. Coverley's *Califia* (2000) (Hayles, *Electronic Literature* 7) are all highly ambitious, pathbreaking experimental works that test the conditions, possibilities and pitfalls of linguistic expression.

In fact, Hayles's approach to read e-lit in metafictional terms is not isolated but can be considered something of a critical consensus. Emerson understands the main impetus of the installation "Poemedia" to be the rearticulation of "what constitutes an e-literature 'reading'" (Grigar et al. n.p.). Strehovec provides a cogent formulation of the same focus on experimentation within the domain of language and aesthetics: electronic literature, he claims, "revolutionizes mostly the language itself, redefines narrative, establishes a laboratory for the experiencing of the letter and the word under new media conditions (for example, the practice of

[17] Not coincidentally, perhaps, such works also often straddle the boundaries between literature and the visual arts. Many are created by visual artists rather than writers and some, for example the works of scholars and game designers Noah Wardrip-Fruin and Ian Bogost, have been exhibited as art installations in museums. In fact, many commentators would agree that words, or even word-resembling, "protosemantic" sounds, are not necessary requirements for a work of electronic literature (Hayles, *Electronic Literature* 4). Therefore, as Emerson reflects, "If electronic literature is emergent, generative, interactive, kinetic, tactile; if the textual elements of electronic literature are only one part of, a digital version of, a verbi-voco-visual complex, then what constitutes an e-literature 'reading'?" (Grigar et al. n.p.).

epoetry generators), and challenges reading by focusing on arrangements of words in a mode of illegibility" (Strehovec 7). In other words, independently of what the works themselves might thematize, reading, decoding, linguistic play and breakdown remain central to their artistic concerns, according to this strand of thought.

Consequently, critics have systematically aligned electronic literature with earlier experimental literary modes, and specifically with modernist and postmodernist experimentation. For example, Marjorie Perloff associates computer-generated poetry with the concerns of the L.A.N.G.U.A.G.E. group (Perloff 85), Mark Marino and Rob Wittig with Oulipo (Marino and Wittig n.p.), and Strehovec with Dada and the Situationists (Strehovec 7). To read electronic literature, then, has been predominantly to read it experimentally, as a continuation, elaboration or expansion of earlier modes of avantgarde literary experimentation.

This dominant mode of reading, interpreting and even identifying electronic literature thus understands the literary through a fundamentally poststructuralist lens: the literary is that which interrogates language, both in its representational limitations and in its power to construct worlds. One could even say that scholars have drawn too straight a line between postmodernist literature and electronic literature, although it needs to be recognized that forms of experimentation do not come exclusively from the postmodernist tradition, and modernism too has often been treated as e-lit's direct precursor. Jessica Pressman and Pisarski, for example, speak of e-lit in terms of a "digital modernism" (Pressman 26; Pisarski 41), while Ellen McCracken proposes the term "avant-garde digital literature" (McCracken 105). Nonetheless, the digital reconceptualization of reading and writing, hailed by scholars as the dominant feature of electronic literature, echoes postmodernism most closely.

Electronic literature has therefore often been associated with the language of revolution that echoes the revolutionary promise of modernism and especially postmodernist fiction and poststructuralist thought. Julia Flanders highlights this scholarly focus on radical experimentation in her account of the emergence of electronic literature:

> "The 'revolution' envisioned by the early theorists of hypertext and electronic modes of authorship suggested a radical restructuring of textuality, authorship, and readership and a significant democratization of the institutions of publication, with potentially dramatic political consequences" (Flanders par. 3).

In other words, scholars tended to regard the experiments of electronic literature as an extension of the "revolutionary" efforts of postmodernist art and poststructuralist theory to deconstruct earlier notions of author, reader and text. This observation tends to hold true even for scholars who draw more firm distinctions between the types of experimentation in modernism and postmodernism on the one hand, and experimental e-lit and its more vernacular forms on the other. Pisarski, for example, recognizes that "even the digital modernism of experimental e-literature [is] in fact turning into something that" is "short in form, high-paced and fast-served" (41). But rather than freeing this emergent, vernacular literature from older periodizing terms, he reinscribes it into the experimental paradigm by asserting that "one might call [it] "digital postmodernism" (41).

However, aligning electronic literature with postmodernist art is more restrictive than it is helpful for at least two reasons. First, as scholars of the contemporary have been pointing out for some time, the radical preoccupation with language characteristic of postmodernism has the serious political disadvantage that it privileges the abstract, philosophical domain over the lived and embodied experiences of the material world, making not only political action but political analysis itself difficult, if not impossible. One of the reasons that contemporary novelists are increasingly turning away from postmodernist styles and genres (see, for example, López and

Potter) is precisely the awareness that the deconstruction of language has exhausted its radicality, leaving behind a political and analytical paralysis; the same is arguably true for newer forms of e-lit, such as social media-based literature. As Flanders puts it, "in more recent years the language of revolution has not retained its critical bite or its pervasiveness" (Flanders par. 3). It is not advantageous for theorists of the contemporary to attempt to fit our understanding of electronic literature within this increasingly weary mold.

Second, as I have argued in the introduction of this dissertation, the sociocultural experience of the vignettified world, that is, the media environment consisting of snippet-based communication, is not necessarily experimental, if experimental means extraordinary or radically new. While during the early years of widespread private computer and internet use, radicality and techno-utopia may have constituted the ruling "structures of feeling" (Williams 132), in a world where such communication is increasingly commonplace, the vignettified environment arguably feels more mundane than radical. Living in it no longer constitutes a profound challenge to the foundations of language and identity: instead, this environment has become the stuff of our everyday lives—lives that, furthermore, continue to be mired in attachments not only virtual but also physical. The language of experimentation, revolution and radicality do not well describe such affects. For authors interested in questions of social and material conditions, the task is therefore to capture the experience of digitalized lives that are not primarily perceived as radical—of lives in which a rich sense of place, of situatedness within the environment, matters. Such interests—realist, rather than postmodern—lie at the core of many e-lit works, such as some discussed above, but especially of social media-based literatures.

In fact, as Dorothy Kim argues in a different context, a scholarly environment that privileges "big data analytics" and "distant reading" runs the risk of overlooking the "granularity of ever

more minute details" (Kim 234), a granularity that characterizes the digital short forms of contemporary media. It is thus neither accurate nor expedient to attempt to align electronic literature primarily with a postmodernist, avantgarde, and experimental agenda, even if we concede some space to radical or experimental dimensions. In making the experimental the sole domain of electronic literature, we miss analytically the material and materialist explorations of this new direction in literature, and we relinquish the transformative political dimensions as well.

What is needed instead is a focus on what Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett has described as the "electronic vernacular," the forms and practices of "electronic communication in everyday life today—that is, messages typed on a keyboard, visible on a screen, and transmitted through a global network of computers and linked by telecommunication lines" (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 22). We need a more "granular," sociologically driven account of the digital short form communications media environment—the sphere that I call the Twitterverse—and of the literary practices that it enables. This electronic vernacular, which informs the communicative practices of social media sites, provides a ground for new, realist forms of digital literary activity. We therefore need a more systematic consideration of the possibilities, limitations and practices of short communicative forms such as the social media post, the tweet, the meme, or, even more minute, the hashtag. In the next section, therefore, I present such an examination of the Twitterverse and its myriad minute forms, along with the social practices associated with them, before examining Twitter literature in the last section.

Forms of Everyday Life on the Twitterverse

The Twitterverse is a large multimodal text that records the everyday interactions, impressions, opinions, and preoccupations of millions of people. Although scholars have used "Twitterverse" to refer to the virtual space of Twitter specifically (Bode et al. 153; Pickens 14), I expand the meaning of the term to the entirety of the sphere of social media communication, including platforms such as Twitter, Vine,[18] YouTube, Instagram and Facebook, among others. The Twitterverse can therefore be defined as the whole domain of what Georgeta Cislaru calls "short instant online written interaction (SIOWI)" (Cislaru 456), but with the explicit inclusion of non-textual or not merely textual forms as well, since even primarily textual platforms such as Twitter now routinely integrate images, GIFs, sound and links. The Twitterverse, then, is simultaneously a textual and multimodal medium encompassing many different short forms of social communication.

In this section I argue that the Twitterverse offers affordances and descriptive structures that are well suited for the epistemological project of getting to know the world through representation and for political ends. A text or web of texts that cannot be assimilated to the organizational logic of the book, the Twitterverse provides a model for new realist descriptive work insofar as it reflects people's everyday behavior, behavior both virtual (such as conversations taking place entirely online) and material (such as photographic or video footage of events taking place in the real world). As media theorists Lisa Gitelman and Geoffrey Pingree have pointed out, "[h]abits of communication mediate among people, pragmatically and conceptually" because they "reflect, challenge, reinforce, or mystify authority" and "help

[18] Kendra Calhoun distinguishes between the platform Vine and the genre of the six-second video it popularized by capitalizing only the former. I depart from this practice in order to maintain the difference between ornamental, vegetal vines of book illustration and the online video genre.

imagine community" (Gitelman and Pingree xv). In the Twittersphere, then, new practices of reading and writing restructure our notions of subjectivity, community, and world, and reorient the possibilities of political action.

I argue that three features of this web of texts—brevity, multidirectionality, and multimodality—are the primary vehicles that enable a new representational and political paradigm. Importantly, these features are not fully new and unprecedented characteristics of social media; rather, they draw centrally from the functional logic of the vignette within the book. The vignette, a brief textual-visual form that was traditionally used to complicate the linearity of the book, is the formal hingepoint of this digital textual environment and the fundamental enabler of a new realist representational model. Indeed, I contend that the most important agent of the political in social media is what I call its "vignettistic" architecture: the way in which its small, seemingly unrelated and inconsequential messages are connected by a network of linkages as if by an invisible vine. The vignette and the organizing logic it enables will therefore be the primary forms that 21st-century print fictions draw from social media texts. This section looks at the three main features of the Twitterverse and demonstrates in each case how these contribute to a larger realist representational and political potentiality.

Brevity: Focusing on a Single Situation

Alan Kirby has argued that the short message service (SMS) had already become the dominant medium of communication by 2009 (Kirby 69); one may dispute this claim, but short textual and visual media certainly constitute a large and growing part of human communication, including even areas that are typically non-textual, such as dating or spending time with friends. Brevity is a central characteristic of the media in any of these environments, whether they be

online (such as social media) or just digital (such as the text message).[19] Tweets are limited to 280 characters, Vines to six seconds, an Instagram post to a single image and brief comments. Facebook posts can be longer, but often they too focus on a single image, observation, or comment. In the digital sphere, then, information is always segmented into minute chunks that may or may not cohere into larger segments of text.

Cislaru argues that the brevity of Twitterverse media means that they are "constrained in volume, speed, connectedness, etc." (457). While these modalities of constraint each have their particular effect, in terms of the Twitterverse as a system, the dominant mode of constraint is arguably that of space. Like the print vignettes of the early book, the individual tweet or social media post is always infinitesimal compared with the sum of all the posts within that particular medium. A single post, even a single thread, therefore possesses a quality of superfluity, even ephemerality: an individual tweet feels, like border vines in the printed book, marginal in relation to the "main text." Importantly, though, while early printed books do possess such main texts, in relation to which typographical ornaments are paratextual, social media as "a text" does not have a center to which anything could arguably constitute a margin or a periphery. The quality of marginality is therefore merely an affective one, and what it captures in more structural terms is how superfluous any individual contribution comes to seem when it jostles in the same space with so many other posts. Like a drop in the ocean, a single tweet is infinitesimal; brevity therefore assures that in the Twitterverse, no single voice or narrative can dominate.

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[19] Brevity here refers not to the infinitesimal bits of information underlying software and hardware architectures. Rather, my interest is in brief segments in human-readable text rather than in computer code—in textons rather than scriptons, to borrow from Espen Aarseth's distinction between human and machine text (Aarseth 62). For more computer-oriented approaches, the reader is referred to Mark C. Marino's forthcoming book *Critical Code Studies*, danah boyd's article "Social Network Sites as Networked Publics" (boyd); or the collaborative project *10 PRINT CHR$(205.5+RND(1)); : GOTO 10* (Montfort et al.).

Brevity therefore already makes apparent, and indeed enables, a central political affordance of the Twittersphere: its resistance to grand narratives, and a concomitant epistemological humbleness. Social media's vignettistic structure plays a central role in this. Medieval marginalia, border vines and print vignettes were subordinated to the expressive program of the book or manuscript as a whole, assumed to be relatively unified; thus, the structure from which such ornaments could deviate, and which at times they even challenged, was the unifying and dominant narrative encoded in the text. By contrast, the ensemble of a multitude of minute posts has no such grand narrative; the relation between individual posts does not congeal into a larger order. Instead, every individual post has just as much claim to importance as any other—at least in theory, disregarding the impacts of corporate sponsorship. The Twitterverse, then, appears as a level playing field, a communicative free-for-all. Although this appearance is illusory to the extent that business-sponsored ads and each social media platform's internal algorithms distort the respective visibilities of individual posts, favoring certain posts and posters at the expense of others, the sheer volume of posts prevents even these voices from fully dominating the space. The brevity of the unit of communication operates then primarily as a constraint on the individual unit relative to the size of the whole domain. At the same time, each unit functions, vignette-like, as a disruption to any attempt to rise above the din of posts. This vignettistic architecture of the space, then, yields an epistemological modesty where any particular statement

about the world is constrained in how much it can claim by way of content and how much space it can claim for itself to be heard.[20]

To put this in a perspective that aligns more clearly with this dissertation's concern with realism and representation, brevity produces situatedness: to give a minute post attention is to accept it as the single, delineated situation that is relevant in that particular moment. Posts therefore produce short, momentary situations that arise and dissipate, situations that, furthermore, do not enable a far-reaching view but focus instead on what is immediately available. In this sense, communication on the Twitterverse resembles spoken language: although conversations are recorded, they are in a sense only heard by those who are immediately present and listening—those who have opted to "be in situation," to borrow a phrase from the Situationists. From a representational point of view, then, brevity constrains a social media post's representational purview to the immediate situation, and disables larger narratives of explanation.

Twitter conferences, in which conference talks and their Q&A's are delivered entirely on Twitter, clearly exemplify the medium's ability to situate its readers in a delimited social space whose epistemological purchase is curtailed. I tested the extent to which these and other affordances of the Twittersphere would emerge automatically, with no added effort, in a Twitter talk I gave in July 2019 at the MLA's *Humanities Commons* Twitter conference "Making

[20] Of course, this is not to claim that no social media users have larger audiences than others. Celebrity status, posting frequency, search engine optimizations (SEO) and corporate sponsorship are just a few of many reasons for how certain voices systematically garner more widespread reception than others, as perhaps nothing demonstrates more clearly than Donald Trump's use of Twitter. Yet it is entirely possible for even an active Twitter user to engage with the medium without encountering the messages communicated by the former President that very day; not even Trump can exert such control over a medium in which brief posts always resound together, and in conflict, with thousands of other short messages. Brevity necessarily restricts the grandeur of any claim on reality.

Connections," organized by Anne Donlon and Caitlin Duffy.[21] My talk's opening tweet enacts this situating function:

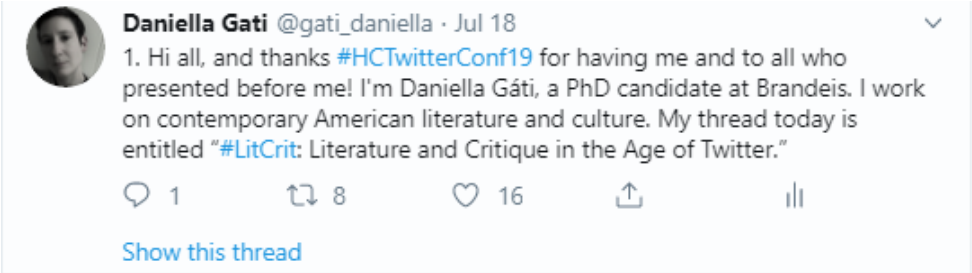

Figure 35: Introductory tweet from a Twitter conference talk

This tweet, the first in a thread that constitutes the talk, resembles a familiar opening from a presentation, except for two important features: it is much shorter, and it includes the hashtag of the conference, #HCTwitterConf19 (Gáti tweet 1). The tweet immediately sets up the context: the situation is the conference marked by #HCTwitterConf19, and the speaker introduces their talk as a thread belonging to this particular conversation. A Twitter user knowingly searching for the #HCTwitterConf19 hashtag can easily navigate directly to the thread introduced by this tweet, and so occupy a position as participant. Like a radio stream, Twitter talks have listeners who "tune in" by keeping an eye on their Twitter feed with a focus on the particular hashtag; an intimacy similar to radio is established when presenter and listeners occupy the "same" space of the talk synchronously (i.e., if the listeners are reading the thread as it is being tweeted out, rather than after the fact). And like radio, the talk was inaudible to anyone who was not specifically

[21] The talk was concerned precisely with the new forms of literature and literary criticism enabled by the Twitterverse (its full title was "#LitCrit: Literature and Critique in the Age of Twitter"), and the decision to minimize precisely these new affordances was a conscious effort to see to what extent they would nonetheless seep in by virtue of the medium alone. Thus, the talk enacted an experiment in these affordances *formally*, just as the talk thematized them on the level of content. Therefore, the talk's deviation in structure, style, and language from the academic norm, such as this dissertation chapter, is particularly informative of the affordances of the Twitter medium. Information about the conference, as well as the schedule and all the talks, can be accessed at https://conference.hcommons.org/.

paying attention, because the odds that a Twitter user would stumble across it by chance are near zero. Therefore, the amount of attention that either the talk or the conference as a whole can claim is always severely limited. Indeed, arguably it is easier to learn about such an event elsewhere on the internet than it is on Twitter itself. Thus, while for the participants of such a thread the established situation is both immediate and intimate, in relation to the entirety of the Twitter sphere, its epistemological purchase is strongly restricted.

Brevity, though, has other politically significant consequences too. As a linguistic constraint, brevity catalyzes creativity in language on a resolutely vernacular level rather than with the experimental intents of postmodernism. On the one hand, brevity often triggers inventive language use, with acronyms, abbreviations and other playful departures from the norms of written language. An often considered example among ethnographers is lolspeak, the linguistic register that relies on abbreviations, emoji, and simplified language for quicker typing (Shifman, "The Cultural Logic of Photo-Based Meme Genres" 351; de Seta 11). "Whatever else it is," Benjamin Peters writes, "the digital revolution is a revolution in language. Peripheral keys have been reclaimed for everyday use— for example, the '@' for email, the '/' of URLs, and the '#' (once a 'pound' sign on rotary telephones and now the 'hashtag' of Twitter); our language morphs with new corporate capitalizations and spelling combinations such as Facebook, Flickr, WordPress, YouTube or (micro)blogs, crowdsourcing, mashups, webinars, wikis, as well as under the linguistic pressures of texting" (Peters 7). Although Peters uses the language of revolution, he also emphasizes that the changes taking place are on the level of "everyday use;" the change comes from many people using language in their everyday, rather than from the experimental genius of a single author. If social media is good at establishing immediate

situations that cannot claim explanatory power over larger swaths of the world, then these situations are also rendered intimate by inventive, yet vernacular, language use.

On the other hand, the constraint of linguistic brevity also encourages visual or multimodal content, which bolsters the sensory nature of the situations set up by social media posts. Twitter's character restriction (formerly 140, now 280 characters) means that often, images or links are better suited to expressing the desired message than the two or three sentences enabled by 280 characters. Such communicational tasks are therefore often accomplished through visual means: like print vignettes in the book, an emoji might index a feeling or a visual icon might, analogously to border vines, point to content in different places to which the reader's attention is directed. In Twitter talks, for example, hyperlinks are always predominantly snapshots of the page to where the link points:

Figure 36: The use of a hyperlink and an image

In the above tweet, for example, the reference to Nishikawa's blog post on *Post45* does not take the form of a full URL; instead, a snapshot of the blog post functions as a small visual pointer to

the external content. In this way, brevity encourages multimodality of content, as well as links that allow further elaboration of particular strands of thought elsewhere.

The ultimate social media form that encapsulates brevity's ability to anchor the reader in a visual, immediate and intimate situation is Vine. Tweets, memes and Vines are all very short forms, but Vines, because they are a fundamentally storytelling form, provide perhaps the best example of how brevity works to engage the viewer in a single, immediate, and sensorially perceived situation. While Vines have been relatively understudied and the platform itself is now defunct,[22] Vine inaugurated the genre of the short-form video that was later copied by the likes of Instagram, Snapchat, Twitter, and more recently, TikTok (Calhoun 28). Once the genre became mainstream, however, the Vine platform itself somehow became superfluous. Unlike Twitter or Facebook, then, Vine maintained a somewhat marginal status in spite of its popularity and the creativity of its users.

As noted at the end of the previous chapter, Vine was an app for shooting and posting six-seconds long videos, a function that led some commentators to call it the "Instagram for video" (Langer n.p.). Vine was created in 2012, acquired by Twitter in 2013 and then shut down in 2017 when Twitter integrated video shooting and uploading into its own interface (Calhoun 33, 28).[23]

Vines are digital versions of vignettes to the extent that they embody the focus on a single, visually perceived situation. The name and the logo, in which the letters V and I were connected by a vine, explicitly reference grapevines and thus possibly the "little vines" from which

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[22] Kendra Calhoun's thesis on Vine racial comedy, *"What, a Black man can't have a TV?:" Vine Racial Comedy as a Sociopolitical Discourse Genre* (2016), is the only monograph study known to me to date.

[23] Due to Vine's popularity, its shutdown caused many to anticipate the launching of a successor. After a torturous eight years filled with rumors, new name suggestions, and delays, Vine-cofounder Dom Hoffman launched the app Byte in January 2020, accompanied by the website byte.co, which replicates the functionalities of Vine (Rosenblatt n.p.). By this time, however, much of the online short video production had migrated to other platforms, especially TikTok, Instagram, and Twitter.

vignettes were developed. The reason for this reference, however, is unclear. There has been some popular speculation that Vine might be "short for Vignette [*sic*], which is defined as 'a short impressionistic scene'" (Langer n.p.), but it is difficult to locate any statement by Vine's founders of such an intention. In any case, the six-second length restriction made Vines resemble moving photos, allowing for a very brief, "impressionistic" glimpse into any particular "scene." The affordances of the medium thus resemble the slice-of-life approach of (Romantic) vignettes, with their gesture toward a narrative possibility that remains undeveloped and subordinated to the description of a situation.

It is difficult to analyze Vines with the platform gone; although Vine was initially maintained as a searchable archive, this is no longer the case. Individual Vines can only be found if one already knows what to look for. For this reason, I borrow an example from Calhoun, who was following the Vine comedian King Bach during the latter's activities on Vine (after Vine was discontinued, King Bach continued his short-form video comedy on YouTube).

In "Getting Out of Situations Using the Race Card," King Bach sets up a situation where he and another African American man are accosted by white police officers while carrying a TV outdoors:[24]

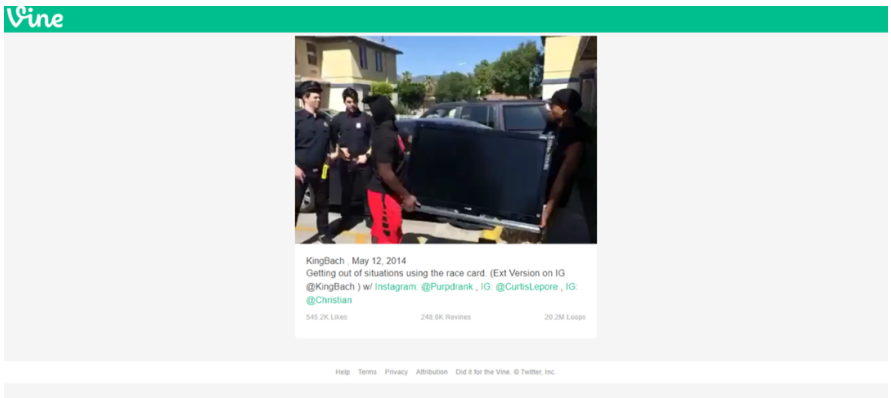

Figure 37: King Bach's "Getting out of Situations Using the Race Card"

[24] The full Vine can be accessed at https://vine.co/v/Mg201XVlqYw, as well as on my website.

When asked by the officers what they are doing, King Bach responds indignantly, "What, a Black man can't have a TV?" (King Bach n.p.). Embarrassed, the officers let them go, and the Vine ends with King Bach and his companion pulling robbers' masks on, claiming, obviously fallaciously, that "it's cold out."

The Vine follows a simple structure: an initial situation is set up, which encourages the reader to adopt the same horizon of expectations as the police officers, namely that the two Black men are stealing a TV. This stereotypical expectation is first refuted by King Bach's indignant exclamation, and then quickly confirmed as the men pull down their robbers' masks. In the final half second of the video, the white officers stand around embarrassedly, uncertain of what to do and too intimidated to follow the apparent robbers.

This Vine is exemplary of the extreme condensation of narrative under the constraints of brevity. Characterization falls away, leaving only stereotypical types in a clearly defined situation. The situation is particular, and focuses on a single action, but it captures, through a brief glimpse, a more general condition. In "Getting Out of Situations Using the Race Card," that general condition is white embarrassment about race, which ends up confirming the very stereotypes it attempts to reject.

Vines, then, respond to the constraints of space with a highly condensed plot that in its stark reduction often becomes humorous or absurd. According to Calhoun, "sometimes a new suite of affordances fits [social need and desire] in much the same way as an old medium did, and the genre then simply adjusts, meeting the same recurrent exigence in a somewhat new, possibly better way...But sometimes...the new suite of affordances potentiates an exigence that had not yet been met, had not yet perhaps even crystallized" (Calhoun 30). Vines arguably met such a not

yet fully crystallized exigence, but their "new suite of affordances" were not completely new: Vines' slice-of-life approach and single situation representation draws directly from the vignette, especially Bewick's version. Thus, Vines provide an example of how this earlier form can be used to respond to a 21st-century exigence—that of a textually oversaturated digital age—even when this structural relationship is not fully clear to the writers of the new form.

Jo Devereux makes the vignette-Vine remediation spectrum explicit by arguing that Vines cater to 21st-century needs using means adapted directly from Thomas Bewick's late 18th-century vignettes. For Devereux, Vines remediate the function of "faster seeing" introduced by Bewick with his Romantic vignettes (see the previous chapter): Bewick's vignettes gestured toward the possibility of a story that they ultimately did not provide, but in so doing they opened up the possibility of alternative worlds. Devereux argues that this type of "faster seeing" enabled by Vines and vignettes is not nostalgic: it does not attempt to capture some long-lost aura of the real (Devereux 10). Instead, Vines adapt to the exigencies of a faster world so that they can engage meaningfully with the conditions of that world. Because "[t]hey are anticlimactic and antiteleological," they possess a narrative impulse but without the need for a clear direction (teleology) or resolution (climax). Like Bewick's vignettes, then, Vines provide concise openings to a particular, sensually apprehended situation but without inserting that situation into a full narrative.

However, Vines differ from vignettes in that they are still deeply narrative: indeed, Vines balance a narrative impulse with the confines of a delimited situation. As users started experimenting with the platform, genre characteristics quickly emerged that favored story over description. Calhoun therefore concludes that Vines "were not slice-of-life" works (33) because they usually focused on crafting a very tight, condensed "storyline" (36). Faster seeing does not

necessarily, then, eliminate story: like with flash fiction, the needs of brevity might in fact tend to favor basic plot structures to the detriment of setting or character development. On the other hand, as we have seen, stories in Vines are usually, if not always, contained in a single situation. This is true for King Bach's racial comedy Vines as well as many other popular Vine genres, for example #relatable Vines, "which were comedic enactments of everyday experiences that most viewers could relate to, such as nervously trying to talk to a romantic interest" (Calhoun 33). The point of Vines is precisely for the viewer to be able to place themselves in the situations depicted: how would they handle attempts to use the "race card," or navigate a standoffish love interest? Through their brevity, Vines make this intense affective connection possible. Ultimately, then, although Vines rely on a central narrative impulse, they are a paradigmatic example of how brevity enables social media texts to provide sensory engagement with an immediate, single and brief situation. The established affective connection can then be mobilized for political participation.

Multidirectionality: Texts Grow in Every Direction

Multidirectionality is a central feature of social media texts that enables these texts to resist being subsumed into teleological narratives of causation and explanation. By multidirectionality, I mean that any social media utterance has the potential to spawn several lines of thought, lines that may pursue radically different conversations and have very little to do with one another. Instead of a logical sequence, the relation between these linked posts resembles what Deleuze and Guattari call the rhizome (5–7), a decentered network of connections sprouting in every direction. Multidirectionality thus defuses a central authorial intention and a linear logic of development. It is therefore a key feature for how the meaning of a set of social media texts

evades centralized control, and can even express a position jointly articulated by several social media users.

Multidirectionality has two key components, which are always necessary to create it: these are nonlinearity and interactivity. Nonlinearity means "interdiscursive richness, due to the inclusion of links, images, hashtags, etc., as well as the sharing of 'retweets;'" while interactivity is achieved through "a dialogic form, … evolving from a monological construction into a polylogical network" (Cislaru 457). To say that the narrative logic of a tweet is not linear is also immediately to say that it points in many directions, is connected to many other tweets, and that many others than the author are responding to it. Thus, the multidirectionality of Twitterverse media comprises not merely the many directions enabled by user interaction, but also already the nonlinearity of the single post itself.

Multidirectionality arises out of social media posts' brevity and multimodal content. Brevity necessitates links: because of character restrictions, references to news stories or other external narratives are typically made via hyperlinks rather than through, say, summary: in this way, linear narrative structure is replaced by multidirectional pointers. This was the exact case with the Nishikawa citation in "#LitCrit," which allows readers to pursue directions other than the main one of the talk. That is, the multidirectional constitution of information exchange creates a fundamental obstacle for linear storytelling. Further nonlinearity is introduced by the presence of visual components, since even static images disturb the stable directionality of message decoding. When looped elements—GIFs or videos—are added, they contribute further circularity to the activity of decoding the social media message.

In fact, multidirectionality is so inherent in Twitterverse texts that it persists even when individual users attempt to articulate lengthier, more complex trains of thought on the

Twitterverse, for example in Twitter conferences. Such attempts tend take the shape of a series of interconnected short messages, structured into a "thread" of replies or connected by hashtags.[25] Because many of these individual posts will consist of links to outside sources or of images that break narrative linearity, even a seeming monologue by a single individual becomes profoundly constituted by the (repurposed) voices of others, whether those voices are heard in the linked stories or in the images that are recycled for posting. For example, Bradley Philbert ended his talk with the following tweet, which incorporated a GIF animation of several customary ending formulas, including "Thank you," "Gracias," and "Have a nice day" (Philbert tweet 14):

Figure 38: A GIF embodying body language or alternative voices

[25] The term "thread" suggests the conceptual relationship between the interconnection among a series of posts and the overall structure of nonlinear texts—with "text," like "thread," both being terms from weaving.

Philbert's final tweet establishes several linkages—to the conference, the organizers, and *Humanities Commons* itself—and the single voice is displayed in favor of several, including that of the potentially impersonal voice of the GIF. Nonlinearity and dialogicality are introduced together, by virtue of each other, even before other users start interacting with the original post. Once that interaction starts—and it inevitably will—the single, authoritative voice succumbs decisively to a polyvocal, multidirectional and dialogic social media text. Philbert's use of the GIF as a kind of representation of body language and voice gives way at this point to the questions and links of other users.

Twitterverse texts, then, displace the figure of the author, making the meaning of the text subject to a multivocal and multidirectional negotiation. These texts produce meanings coauthored by many users and not easily assimilable to any single explanatory structure. Even when encumbered by conference conventions, social media threads produce a reading experience that is qualitatively different from print reading: not linear but multidirectional, and not univocal but interactive and dialogic. Indeed, Yarimar Bonilla and Jonathan Rosa rely specifically on Bakhtin's influential coinage to posit a fundamental dialogicality underwriting Twitter communication as distinct from other communicative forms, including traditional print forms (Bonilla and Rosa 7). If for Bakhtin it was the novel that could provide the adequate space for a multitude of voices, the truly dialogic text for the 21st century is arguably the Twitterverse.

This ability of social media to produce inclusive, non-authorial texts becomes important for fictional projects that attempt to eschew authoritative accounts of social conditions and political issues. Formally, then, such fictions can draw on the model of the Twitterverse for how to accomplish this—and especially on the form of the hashtag.

The hashtag is perhaps the most important engine of multidirectionality; indeed, I argue that the hashtag is the primary vehicle of all of the Twitterverse's formal characteristics, including brevity and multimodality. A word following a hash (#) sign, the hashtag is "metadata" (Losh 32, 54) that can serve several purposes. It can act as "a technolinguistic unit that breaks linearity" (Cislaru 462); it can sort conversations as pertaining to particular topics; it can signal emotive stance; or it can constitute a "technomorpheme" that modifies the semantics of words (Paveau 151, my translation). All of these functions challenge the directionality of reading, as they ask of the reader to read dialectically (negotiating text and image) and process multiple strands of potential meaning at the same time (emotive stance, participation in particular conversations, etc.). Hashtags therefore contribute to the construction of the reader as an active participant rather than a passive recipient of a linear, intentional message. Such a reader provides a fruitful ground for invitations to engage with and participate in the construction of politicized meanings in the Twitterverse.

Morphologically, the hashtag has the ability to endow a word with new grammatical meaning. Morphemes can change a word's part of speech, as when *-ly* changes the adjective *slow* to the adverb *slowly*, or they can specify grammatical functions like the plural *-s* (*cats* as opposed to *cat*). In the talk title "#LitCrit," the term "literary criticism" becomes what Elizabeth Losh calls "a compound compound object" (Losh 20), a noun phrase that refers to an entire complex thought, something like the subtitle's "criticism in the age of Twitter." Hashtags, therefore, paradoxically enable readers to read texts both slower and faster at the same time: the intake of the word takes less time, but its meaning(s) might be so condensed that they require more mental processing. Reading texts with hashtags, then, prepares the reader for a heightened dialectical

engagement with the text, reading both faster and slower and decoding in several modalities at the same time.

Hashtags also introduce a nonlinear structure into the linearity of syntax by providing jumping points to other conversations, thoughts, or topics. Indeed, hashtags are often used by tweeters to categorize that particular tweet in terms of the conversation(s) in which it participates. #BlackLivesMatter, #nofilter, or #HCTwitterConf19 are examples of such conversation designations. In this dimension, the hashtag functions very much like the hedera, the single ivy leaf (❦), as well as other typographical ornaments discussed in the previous chapter that have served for centuries to signal points of connections across segments of text. Indeed, Losh explains that when first introduced into telephone technology, the hash sign was used analogously to typographical marks in enabling phones to parse that a particular type of input had ended and another had begun (Losh 11). On the internet, hashtags similarly enable users to group posts according to type or topic, which connects tweets by users who may not know one another. Next to punctuating the social media text, then, hashtags form invisible vines that connect tweets based on their content. In incorporating hashtags, tweets and other posts depart from forms like the radio stream, aligning instead with the scribal practices of medieval manuscripts, the typographical ornaments in printed books, and the early technology of the telephone, in connecting temporally or spatially divided acts of creation. Hashtags therefore rely on these earlier communication models to form the lines along which readers may connect and form community.

Furthermore, unlike Twitter threads, formed through a series of replies to an original tweet, hashtags are fundamentally nonlinear: these linkages do not permit the unidirectionality of the main texts of printed books. Like the little vines in the early printed book and the border vines of

the manuscript before it, hashtags create a web of connections that runs counter to the linearity of the book's main text. For example, in the "#LitCrit" talk, where the internal linear order was maintained by posting the tweets in numbered replies to one another, the hashtag #HCTwitterConf19 broke this established order by connecting the presentation with all the other talks, as well as with the organizers' paratextual tweets. Hashtags are thus a major way in which interconnectedness is established among short media in the Twittersphere. Indeed, hashtags are the invisible vines of the social media world.

While forging such connections between readers and writers in the Twittersphere, hashtags also embody a sensory, even bodily, dimension as opposed to verbal language. Because hashtags are typographical marks, they are always already visual. As linguistic signs, they are fundamentally multimodal: like images, video clips or GIFs, hashtags serve to move signification beyond the merely textual domain. Indeed, David Matley has demonstrated that hashtags are often used in the same emotive function that M.B. Parkes calls the "pragmatic function" and ascribes to the hedera (Matley 68; Parkes 2). Pragmatics, it might be remembered, is the branch of linguistics that deals with the influence of context upon meaning. Thus, in Parkes's account, the hedera can serve to provide the emotive or affective context for a particular segment of text, beyond the pure denotative meaning of the words themselves. Analogously, Matley explains, hashtags can perform the pragmatic tasks of "stancetaking" or "metacomment" (68). Not just technolinguistic units or technomorphemes, hashtags are thus also technopragmatic units, imbuing certain utterances with expressions of body language such as voice (e.g. ironic or cheerful), gestures (such as eyerolling or facepalm), or others (motions, sweating, etc.).

For example, after Republican politicians, including Senator Mitt Romney, were reprimanding Congresswoman Rashida Tlaib for her use of an expletive in referring to then President Donald Trump, a Twitter user tweeted:[26]

> Oh but it's only #lockerroomtalk (Anonymous n.p.)

The hashtag #lockerroomtalk inserts this tweet in the national conversation about the legitimacy of Trump's claim that his debasing comments about women are just "locker room talk." Moreover, the hashtag allows the tweeter to offer a "metacomment" on the situation: that it is hypocritical on behalf of Republicans to insist on rhetorical courtesy after having exempted the President from such courtesy. With this short visual-textual unit, the tweeter accomplishes the intricate communicative task of emotional stancetaking.

Matley interprets such use of hashtags as "the social media equivalent of non-verbal expressions" (Matley 68). Beyond their linking and sorting functions, then, hashtags supplement the texts of social media posts with visual elements that alter the affective stance of that text. Thus, all the while that they connect spatially separate conversations, hashtags also enable a direct focus on the materiality of the body as a communicational device. Using hashtags then, writers establish an immediate presence, even intimacy, between sender and recipient. Hashtags' combination of extreme brevity, resistance to unidirectional order, and sensual immediacy thus affords a unique resource for realist fiction interested in capturing, without oversimplifying, the lived experience of the contemporary social world.

[26] Because of the political nature of this tweet, the screenshot has not been shared and the actual text has been modified to keep the tweeter anonymous.

Multimodality: Sensory Perception in the Digital World

Multimodality is the last characteristic of Twitterverse media that render them suitable for engaging readers and communicating immersive political messages. All the social media forms discussed so far (hashtags, Vines and Twitter conference talks) exhibit a plethora of media, including text, image, moving image and sometimes even sound; the text of social media is thus fundamentally multimodal. Indeed, when message content is clickable, playable or otherwise responsive, a ludic dimension is added on top of the textual, sonic and visual ones.

The fundamental effect of the multimodality of social media texts is that a sensory immediacy is established. Like vignettes in the book, Twitterverse media insist on perception premised not merely on reading but also on the senses—seeing images and hearing sounds. (With the growing predominance of touch screens not merely on smart phones but also on tablets and 2-in-1 laptops, tactility, too, is of increasing importance.) If brevity places the reader in a single situation, and multidirectionality disables the insertion of that situation into a linear narrative of development, then multimodality renders that situation a vivid sensorial experience. The phenomenological effect is that readers may gain a sense of immediacy and presence; this feeling enables deeper engagement and often leads to creative participation. Therefore, multimodality completes social media texts' vignette aesthetics, in which representation hinges on a single, sensorially perceived situation where our ability to see and comprehend is constricted to the immediate present.

Memes, the potentially most popular and widely circulating genre on the Twitterverse, are perhaps also its most multimodal genre, and their incorporation of many different media enables a participatory culture founded on the interplay between rules and creative rule-breaking. Since memes can take many different forms, participation in meme culture can happen in many ways.

In each instance, however, the primary effect of multimodality in memes is the potential to spark communal engagement and build new forms of sociality.

Memes are pithy, often humorous, forms of communication in which text or other media are repurposed from earlier use and circulated widely.[27] Since the repurposing and circulation are both rule-governed, memes are highly formulaic, resulting in what literary scholars would call a genre with several subgenres. Bonilla and Rosa argue that memes might best be understood as mediatized tropes (note 26). Gal et al. provide the following concise definition: "The term 'meme,' coined by Richard Dawkins (1976), describes small cultural units of transmission that flow from person to person by copying or imitation" (Gal et al. 1700).[28] Scholars today regard the process of "copying or imitation" as not passive but rather creative and playful, for which reason for most scholars, meme "describes a genre," a cultural norm negotiated through the contributions of many dispersed writers, and "not a unit of cultural transmission" (Wiggins and Bowers 1890).

Memes come in many different types, such as image macros, reactions shots or GIFs, or what Limor Shifman calls "memetic videos" ("An Anatomy of a YouTube Meme" 187).[29] Image macros, "comprising text superimposed on an image" (Heiskanen 3) are probably the most well-

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[27] Scholars sometimes use the term "internet meme" (Shifman, "Meme" 197) to distinguish the internet phenomenon—the phenomenon with which most people would probably associate memes—from other circulating cultural objects. For the present study, "meme" will simply mean the contemporary internet meme, that phenomenon where an original text, image or video is edited, cut up, reenacted or remixed and then circulated online, usually achieving mass appeal and further remixings.

[28] Dawkins's original, broader notion of the meme regarded meme transmission as analogous to gene transmission across generations, but scholars of the contemporary meme have mostly abandoned this early, so-called "memetic" approach, discarding the notion of passive transmission in favor of a more agentive model of willed, meaningful and often playful human participation in communication processes. The connection between this playful approach and the musical remix cultures of mainly African American hip hop and house artists—another foundational scene of contemporary popular culture—has been underexplored and deserves further attention.

[29] Memetic videos are videos or sometimes photos of people performing the same action as in an originally posted video, such as sticking their heads in a freezer or pouring a bucket of ice over themselves in the Ice Bucket Challenge against ALS (Shifman, "An Anatomy of a YouTube Meme" 189; Gal et al. 1711). They will not be discussed further; for an example, see https://dgati.github.io/twitterfiction#freezer.

known type of meme. Below is one example of an image macro from the "One does not simply…" meme, which uses Boromir's line from the film *The Fellowship of the Ring*, "One does not simply walk into Mordor," as a starting point for a humorous observation superimposed on an image of Boromir from the film:[30]

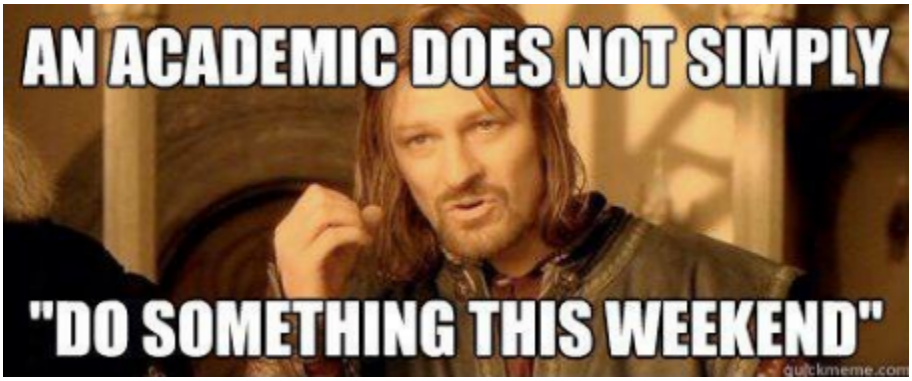

Figure 39: Chaucer Doth Tweet's version of the "One Does Not Simply" meme

The above meme also exemplifies the genre known as "reaction meme" or "reaction shot." Such memes are photos, short videos or GIFs "drawn from popular film and television [that] isolate and repeat moments of action or dialogue (whether a wink or a nod, a gasp or a laugh) which can be used as an individual's response to a previous post or another's claim" (Highfield and Leaver 58). Although the poster of the above meme, the Twitter user Chaucer Doth Tweet, did not use the meme to react to a post, the meme still borrows Boromir's consternated facial expression for a reaction—the implied reaction of any academic to the innocent question of "What did you do this weekend?".

[30] This particular instance of the meme was created by the Twitter user Chaucer Doth Tweet (@LeVostreGC), who specializes in tweeting contemporary song lyrics or observations about medieval studies and social justice in Chaucer-style Early Middle English. Chaucer Doth Tweet posted this meme on October 12, 2019 (Chaucer Doth Tweet n.p.).

In all of these genres, multimodality is fundamental for a meme's meaning-making process: in fact, the first important effect of multimodality is to introduce a dynamic, dialectical reading process that differs from that of just texts. This dialectical pattern can play out in multiple ways. Often, as Cornelia Brantner, Katharina Lobinger and Miriam Stehling argue, an "image-text combination" performs the function of what Roland Barthes calls "anchorage," where the "text fixes the denotative and connotative meanings of the image" (Brantner et al. 15). According to L. Grundlingh, the interpretive process can also run in the other direction, where the image, rather than being anchored by text, "provides either the non-verbal aspect of the context, or the background information needed in order to interpret the meme correctly" (Grundlingh 155). The relationship can also go both ways: visual content can help to set up context, in this way fixing the text, or it can introduce an instability which the text then resolves. But these two processes can also be present together, as Adrian Lou argues in his work on memes as "multimodal similes." For Lou, images set up "frames," the linguistic equivalents of horizons of expectations, with which the texts are usually in jarring contrast (110). Thus, while the images do provide background information that is indispensable for interpreting the message, that information will initially appear incongruent. Neither text nor image anchors the otherwise indeterminate meaning of the other; rather, they create a productive tension with it, which is then resolved dialectically in an exchange between image and text. The multimodality of memes means therefore that meaning-making becomes a more dialectic process, where readers have to toggle back and forth between different modalities of making sense of a message, including between affective and narrative ones.

Such a complex interpretive process has several important effects for politically or socially motivated writers and meme-makers. First, the semantic density of memes has given rise to rules

that delineate memetic genres, which enable meme-makers and meme readers to orient themselves based on norms that become increasingly familiar. Memes therefore enable the delineation of a sense of online home, where objects and practices are known and shared by participants. Second, because memes are fundamentally about remixing and reusing, the established genre conventions are constantly subject to experimentation and modification. Indeed, participation in the meme culture consists of using memetic rules while at the same time playfully subverting them.

What, then, are the effects of multimodality? Its first outcome, the emergence of rules, predicates the creation of communities based around their shared love of particular genres. In memes, the tension between many modes of meaning has produced a high degree of rule-boundness to stabilize memes' semantic fields. Indeed, Shifman, one of the leading scholars of the meme, considers memetic genres analogous to literary genres. She argues that memes "function as 'horizons of expectations' for readers and as 'models of writing' for authors," that is, for meme-makers ("The Cultural Logic of Photo-Based Meme Genres" 342). The "shared pathways for meme production" are "vital for creating a sense of community in a fragmented world" ("The Cultural Logic of Photo-Based Meme Genres" 342). In other words, genre enables community, even when the genre requires reading and writing across several modes and media.

Multimodality also encourages a participatory and creative culture, as meme-genres are also constantly challenged and revised by the meme-making community. Memes, unlike viral media,[31] are indivisibly entangled in what Henry Jenkins calls participatory culture (Jenkins,

[31] Viral or "spreadable media" (Wiggins and Bowers 1897) can take the form of massively circulated videos or fake news articles (Shifman, "An Anatomy of a YouTube Meme" 188; Heiskanen 22) but they are not participatory: they are merely spread and consumed, not repurposed or remixed. Good examples include massively popular music videos such as Psy's "Gangnam Style," which has been watched almost 3.5 billion times since its release on YouTube in 2012.

Convergence Culture 3): memes live on media-crossing imitation, editing, remixing, distributing and sharing (Shifman, "An Anatomy of a YouTube Meme" 188). In fact, Shifman defines memes not as a *particular* instance of an image or text, but rather as the set of images, texts and other media that have made use of a particular original object to the point where it has become recognizable as a meme (Shifman, "Meme" 201). The emergence of memes is then predicated on the process of engagement with this initial object, which could be an earlier meme. In other words, participation allows for a creative, agentive dimension to memes, for which reason the communities coalescing around memes are resistant to rules becoming overly normative or solid. Thus, memes possess a "rebellious graffiti nature" (Bowen n.p.): like graffiti, they clutter and tag the virtual urban landscape with individual signatures, repurposing images, signaling in-group membership, and drawing up social spheres in the Twitterverse. At the same time, like literary genres, memes provide a recognizable form for a community of users to make their own, more or less experimental, interventions, into the formation of the virtual space.

In sum, then, in memes, the complexity of many simultaneous media and the immediacy of sensory perception unite to form communities shaped by common practices and the constant renegotiation of those very practices. Multimodality adds the sense of immediacy and presence to the situation established by brevity and multidirectionality, and is therefore a key component of the ability of Twitterverse media to locate their readers in a delimited but intimate space of engagement with a post.

In different ways, then, the various forms and genres of the Twitterverse contribute to an overall vignette aesthetic in which communication hinges on material and sensory encounters within delimited situations that arise momentarily and dissipate as quickly. Readers come face-to-face with brief moments that can entail surprising intimacy, which often leads to heightened

engagement—indeed, even to active participation and contribution. The Twitterverse is therefore a textual space that promises much potential for politically engaged, collaborative writing and exchange.

The final part of this section considers how this potential is realized in a particularly powerful example of social media activism: Black Twitter. How do the affordances of brevity, multidirectionality, and multimodality enable the political potential of writing on the Twitterverse? Black Twitter, arguably the most important virtual activist movement in America, offers a compelling case study for what kind of interventions the Twitterverse enables and precludes, and why.

Black Twitter: An Example of Twitter Epistemology and Activism

"Black Twitter," a term introduced by André Brock in 2012 (Brock 529), refers to a loosely structured and decentered community, or as Cassius Adair puts it, a "non-monolithic assembly of voices" of anti-racist African American thinkers and grassroots activists on social media sites, especially Twitter (Kim et al. 162). Black Twitter became active in response to the many incidents of gratuitous police and civilian violence against African Americans, in particular after the killing of Trayvon Martin in 2012, and later after the deaths of Eric Garner and Michael Brown in 2014 and Freddie Gray in 2015. It was mobilized with renewed force after the near cooccurrence, in 2020, of countless other acts of police and civilian anti-Black violence, including the murder and brutality enacted upon George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, Ahmaud Arbery, David McAttee, and Tony McDade.[32] A "virtual community of Twitter users engaged in

[32] These lists are not nearly comprehensive accounts of the fatal violence against African Americans: they comprise merely the most high-profile cases. The fact that these cases have come to larger media attention is significantly owing to the work of Black Twitter.

real-time discourses primarily related to Black American culture and politics" (Hill 287), Black Twitter responded to these events by circulating eye witness narratives, photos and videos taken on mobile phones on Twitter and other social media in order to counter the mainstream media coverage of anti-Black violence, or, in many cases, the absence of such coverage. Black Twitter was also responsible for propagating the #BlackLivesMatter and #SayHerName hashtags, thereby making otherwise marginalized voices audible to a broader audience.[33] The success of these actions is attested by the fact that the local acts of anti-Black violence in Sanford, Florida, Ferguson, Missouri, and Baltimore, Maryland, which the local authorities tended to attempt to shield from broader public view, have become nationally and internationally known (Hill 287). In some cases, pressure from Black Twitter ultimately led to the firing or resignation of the perpetrator of violence: this was the case with school resource officer Deputy Ben Fields at the Spring Valley High School in Columbia, South Carolina, who physically assaulted a student after she had refused to leave the classroom. Following activism mounted by Black Twitter, the local community pressured Fields into resigning (Hill 291). Indeed, in the wake of the renewed wave of atrocities perpetrated on the Black community in 2020, the slogans of Black Twitter's social media campaigns, such as "Black Lives Matter," have become audible in protests against anti-Black violence all around the world.

Many scholars consider the hashtag the key to the success of social media activism. As Matthew Haffner asserts, "[t]he use of hashtags on social media has largely been successful in projecting the voices of oppressed groups and starting political movements" (Haffner 2). Bonilla

[33] The 2020 actions, more focused perhaps than ever on combating systemic racism across the entire range of social institutions, also resulted in the creation of the #BlackInTheIvory hashtag, a hashtag that gathers a discussion of racism in academia, where survivors of racist violence perpetrated by the academic community come forth with their testimonies. #BlackInTheIvory, like so much of Black Twitter, thus exemplifies the moral and personal courage of individuals who contribute to social media activism. The hashtag also illustrates the social media form's suitability for the communication of such personal, and often dangerous, stories.

and Rosa explain its efficacy by highlighting the hashtag's realism: like Bewick's vignettes, hashtags are "entry points into larger and more complex worlds. Hashtags offer a window to peep through" (Bonilla and Rosa 7). Because hashtags provide linkages between separate groups of texts or people, selectively direct attention towards certain spaces or discourses, and mediate affective stances effectively, they create linkages from the ground up rather than, as a corporate-designed search algorithm would do, from the top down. This allows hashtags to counter the hegemony of what Safiya Noble has described as "the algorithms of oppression," where internet search behavior systematically yields racist, sexist, homophobic and otherwise oppressive results (Noble 4). Hashtags enable an alternative organization of the virtual world.

Although Black Twitter has made ample use of the hashtag's counterhegemonic potential, the initial reasons that precisely Twitter became the hub of antiracist activism may be more economic ones. Marc Lamont Hill argues that in an age where material counterpublic spaces such as Black bookstores are increasingly crowded out by global capital, Twitter can provide a virtual counterpublic if used appropriately (288). Further, scholars have noted that African Americans outnumber any other ethnic group in terms of number of Twitter users relative to the size of the demographic group (Murthy et al. 35). This fact is likely caused by Twitter's low barriers to entry: Twitter can easily be and is perhaps best accessed on a smartphone and, as Hill explains citing 2015 Pew data, for "communities of color… smartphones are disproportionately the only means of home Internet access" (289). However, Brock asserts that Black Twitter is not representative of the general Black population or even of the population of African American Twitter users: it is a specific community of practice organized around digital activism, cyber protest and popular pedagogy. Murthy et al. conclude that "Twitter may be facilitating ad-hoc urban Black collectives that are able to quickly mobilize" (47).

The discourse conventions of Twitter enabled by the hashtag offer appealing ways to articulate an antiracist agenda. Employing an analytical technique that he calls "critical technoculture discourse analysis," Brock examines Twitter's interface in conjunction with the content of tweets by Black Twitter and notes that the interface itself accommodates discourse drawing on Black cultural practices such as signifyin' and shout-outs (Brock 530). The hashtag as a pointer and as metacomment is highly enabling of such practices. Other Twitter characteristics further aid the project: the 280-character length restriction or the ease of responding to a tweet, which encourage the production of a call-and-response pattern, make Twitter suitable for the digital continuation of traditional Black communal discourses. In other words, brevity and multidirectionality are fundamentally enabling for the formation of a digital Black community. As Murthy et al. argue, "shout-outs and forms of call and response on Twitter can help enhance social presence … and ultimately facilitate certain community networks" (44). On Twitter, then, when digital relationships are established through tweeting, these relationships can emerge as meaningful to their participants and to the wider audience to which they are broadcast (Haffner 16). Black Twitter has forged such a meaningful network in the form of what danah boyd calls a Black countercultural "networked public" (boyd 1) for political debate and activism.

Is the example of Black Twitter generalizable? Certainly, other marginalized groups have resorted to similar organizing strategies, as in the case of the trans rights activism organized around Janet Mock's #GirlsLikeUs hashtag (Bailey pars. 6-13). Moya Bailey argues that especially for groups where visibility is a potential danger, social media activism can be an effective way to achieve a voice and take control over the group's dominant narrative without directly exposing group members to harm (Bailey par. 11). Other scholars, however, have

questioned the efficacy of such political action, arguing that such "slacktivism" may have more to do with the statistical law of large numbers than with genuine political organizing and action, and may therefore not achieve anything beyond the individual's own sense of having made a contribution to political discourse (Morozov 180). Certainly, there is the possibility for elements of both of these aspects in social media activism: Twitter and the Twitterverse are products of corporate design and thus subject to motives that run counter to, and at times straight-out preclude, progressive political intervention. Yet, I argue that the vignettistic logic of the Twitterverse in general and the hashtag in particular does afford a counterhegemonic discursive potential: it relies on the invisible vines established between individuals by virtue of their own participation in discourse. It builds a multimodal, multidirectional and interactive communication space that affirms presence and draws from traditional Black communication practices. Especially for vulnerable communities whose voices are systematically erased out of mainstream media discourse and for whom visibility can be a threat just as much as a necessity, the Twitterverse does present gaps and fissures in the cyberspace hegemony—fissures where little vines can take root and flourish.

Twitter Fiction: Vignette Aesthetics and Literary Realism in the Twitterverse

Next to this bustling mundane sphere of activity, the Twitterverse has also provided a site for the emergence of new, creative forms of literary realism. Analogously to the way that the Twitterverse has been used in this chapter to designate the general, broader online sphere of textual and visual short forms, in the following, "Twitter literature" will be used to refer to the vast variety of literary productions on social media and related technologies of short messages, such as SMS or reading apps. This final section of the chapter argues that such literary

production, straddling the professional and the vernacular, enables new forms of realist interventions into some of the crucial social issues of the contemporary world, issues like racism, gender violence, and technologically driven projects of domination. The three main affordances of social media texts discussed above—brevity, multidirectionality, and multimodality—allow these forms to inhabit a particularly close relationship to the everyday. By participating in mundane activities of non-literary life, social media-based fictions transform the project of knowing the world from a mimetic to a participatory one: realist representation here becomes an invitation for readers to engage in the first-hand experience of the workings of the world, even if just for brief moments that do not coalesce to full-scale knowledge. This invitation, insofar as it charges readers to take up positions in and even act upon the conditions that they experience, opens up a political potential crucial for activists and writers of social critique. Although not all literary writing on the Twitterverse is political, of course, this section argues that these possibilities are key components of social media-based literature. They are also, as later chapters will argue, the main features informing realist political projects in 21st-century print fiction.

In what follows, I first demonstrate how the participatory dynamic of Twitter literature operates in literature authored by "amateur" writers, that is, writers who have not been recognized as "authors" by the literary establishment (through publications, author talks, grants, etc.). My use of the term "amateur" is not intended as a valuation; it is simply used as a shorthand to distinguish this prolific field from social media writing by "professional" authors, whom I will also call published or legacy authors. The last subsection of this chapter surveys the Twitter work of three such authors, David Mitchell, Jennifer Egan, and Teju Cole, and argues that, informed by vernacular literary and non-literary social media texts, these works articulate new realist representational possibilities on socially important topics such as class, technology,

gender, and race. In so doing, these works perform the function of a bridge between social media and print literature, modelling a new realist representational paradigm for social critique in the novel tout court.

Between the World and Twitter: Amateur Creativity in the Twitterverse

Digital short fictions combine epistemological humbleness with an ability to enter the cracks of everyday activities: like the social media after which they are modelled, they inhabit a particularly close relationship to everyday life. Their ability to intervene in the mundane and everyday performs a striking feat of taking part in, and yet standing apart from, the stream of seemingly affectless information that characterizes our textually supersaturated contemporary world. Most of the formal characteristics of the various types of such fiction contribute to, or revolve around, this fundamental tension between the literary, which often arrests the everyday and provides a space for contemplation, and the mundane, which is often popularly referred to as "real life." The various characteristics that mediate this tension in Twitter fictions include their groundedness in quotidian life, their ability to puncture or interrupt the everyday, and their potential for introducing unexpected levels of intimacy and affect. This capacity to simultaneously participate in (and, through participation, represent) and also disrupt the practices of ordinary existence lies at the core of Twitter fiction's political possibilities.

Because of its intimate connection to and participation in mundane textual activities, the vast majority of Twitter literature is popular and resistant to identification as literature.[34] Accordingly, the literary establishment has been slow to embrace these diverse forms of writing, with only a handful of authors trying their hand at composing in social media (notably Jennifer Egan, Teju Cole and David Mitchell discussed below),[35] and just a few institutional venues for showcasing Twitter work, such as Twitter festivals or Twitter competitions.[36] For the most part, incorporating various technologically mediated short forms into literary practices has remained a vernacular affair, even—or especially—in its most popular, widely disseminated incarnations.

There is a vast range of such popular forms, much of which, as Seth Perlow has pointed out, lies beyond the purview of scholarly analysis (Perlow n.p.). Instagram poets like Rupi Kaur, who writes short poems on post-its and uploads photos of them to Instagram, have followers in the millions (Perlow n.p.). Twitter bots like "Sapphobot," which tweets segments of Anne Carson's Sappho translations at unspecified intervals, or Ranjit Bhatnagar's *Pentametron*, a bot that parsed and retweeted tweets written in iambic pentameter, have similarly large followings and can, as did *Pentametron*, even yield book contracts.[37] Story apps such as Yarn, Readit, Episode or yOwl, which offer users lengthy, serialized tales delivered one text message at a time, are another very

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[34] This difficulty is easily demonstrated by attempting to locate fictional works on Twitter without having knowledge of them beforehand. As an illustration, I conducted an exploratory Twitter scrape for the search terms #fiction, #twitterfiction, #microstory, #nanostory and others (along with their respective plural forms and other variable forms) and the scrape yielded very few examples of actual works. Instead, these and similar hashtags are typically used to designate paratextual tweets referring to literary works *outside* of Twitter, while Twitter fictions themselves are usually not marked with hashtags or other such indexical signs. As a result, literary works on Twitter are practically impossible to find.

[35] Some earlier and less well-known Twitter experiments include Rick Moody's story "Some Contemporary Characters" and Matt Stewart's novel *The French Revolution*. While Moody, already an established writer, merely experimented with the Twitter form, Stewart owes his first book contract to having first published his novel tweet by tweet on Twitter (Rudin n.p.).

[36] For example, in 2012 *The Guardian* invited well-known authors like Hari Kunzru and Geoff Dyer to contribute one-tweet stories to the newspaper, and published the result as a collection (Dyer et al. n.p.).

[37] A tweet from the *Pentametron* handle, as well as a link to its select archive, can be accessed at https://dgati.github.io/twitterfiction#pentametron.

popular but rarely analyzed example. In Japan, all these forms were preceded by the "cell phone novel" or *keitai,* a novel read through a series of SMS messages. *Keitai* were wildly popular already by 2010 and spawned separate branches in publishing houses devoted to their distribution, and occasionally even enabling an author to publish their work in print (Osterhout n.p.; Nagano; Abel; Rudin n.p.). *Keitai* tended to be authored by and written for a female teenage readership, a group whose reading and writing practices are still subject to stigma, which may have contributed to their disregard by scholars. In the American context, too, this kind of literary work has received only scant scholarly attention, but the popular media, especially genre fiction communities, have sometimes recognized such online literary forms. For example, the internet fan fiction archive *An Archive of Our Own* was nominated for a Hugo award in science fiction in the Best Related Works category (S. Cole n.p.). There exists, then, a very prolific and creative field of vernacular online literary activity, but its popularity has tended to render it elusive to academic study.

That popularity, however, stems precisely from the close alignment of such forms with the culture and media environment that constitutes the everyday of millions of people. It is this same proximity to the everyday to which Twitter literature owes its unusual purchase on the affects of 21st-century life. The brevity of the medium and its spoken language-resembling temporality make such literature well suited for capturing the experiences of living in the contemporary world, because reading Twitter fiction often feels like itself an act in that world, rather than the type of seclusion from the world often associated with reading.

Kathi Inman Berens offers a helpful example to articulate how short digital fiction can become an event in the reader's ordinary life. Writing about a type of short form fiction that is sometimes referred to as mobile e-lit, Berens explains that the "physical intimacy of the mobile

phone means that mobile e-lit can insinuate itself into one's 'offline' life." She goes on to describe one such instance from her own experience:

> Standing in line at the grocery store last summer, a push notification from *The Carrier*, a graphic novel…, nudged me in my pocket. *The Carrier* remediates serial distribution: the reader waits between installments released to coincide with events transpiring in the novel. When I saw it was a notification from *The Carrier*, I rolled my shopping cart out of line and leaned against a mini-fridge while I read the latest installment. I haven't experienced a locative work interrupting my day like that. (Grigar et al.)

This example highlights how the temporal structure of *The Carrier* enables the work to become an affective event in Berens's day. First, the brevity of each installment in *The Carrier* enables the graphic novel to enter the fissures of the everyday: since the reader knows that the next installment requires only a short read, she is tempted to, and eventually does, interrupt the mundane activity of grocery-shopping in favor of the brief but highly affective experience. Because this moment is so short, the everyday is not so much displaced as rather transformed by it: grocery-shopping has suddenly become shot through with literary affect. Indeed, as the title of the graphic novel hints, the everyday shifts to become "the carrier" of the possibility of story. *The Carrier* thus transforms the larger experience of shopping, or of everyday life more broadly.

In this way, short digital fiction uses small bursts to heighten the affective experience of the everyday, and thus to render that everyday itself the site and object of reading. To use the eloquent formulation of Ben White, founder of the short fiction site Nanoism, such stories "fit in the cracks of your day" (quoted in Rudin n.p.). For Berens, stories so small as to fit in those cracks afford a high degree of "physical intimacy," owing to their minute size, the smallness of their medium of display (the phone), and the medium's status as a highly personal object. Digital short literature, then, can produce a small but powerfully intimate encounter set in the midst of a supermarket, rendering that experience a meaningful part of the literary work itself. Literature arrives in the small and personal object of the phone; it becomes, in effect, a participant in the

everyday. Thus, the function of representation shifts: Twitter literature need not necessarily depict reality because it already offers an event in it. The new realism of this type of fiction resides in its participation in, even enactment of, the everyday: to read it means to be a participant and an observer of the world in which one lives.

Next to the intimacy of the brief message and small personal phone, the temporality of a work like *The Carrier* contributes fundamentally to the immediacy of the participatory experience. Arguably, literature's (perhaps trans-historical) ability to transport its reader to a different space is amplified when the temporality of the text coincides with that of lived experience. There is a powerful physical and affective dimension to the experiencing of the (fictional) events simultaneously with their occurrence: this experience creates an overlap between the reader's world and the diegetic world. That is, although the story may not take place in the contemporary world, it does in some manner still inhabit it: the text, rather than opening out into an escape *from*, becomes an event *in* the real world—it becomes what Rita Raley has called a "text event" (Raley 20). The diegetic world of the story and the external world of the grocery store become linked by their temporal cooccurrence: it is as if they inhabited the same space, their boundaries blurred by the ability of one to intervene in the other.

Not all Twitter literature matches the temporal experience of reading the work with the time of diegesis, but even works that do not do so demand a degree of participation from readers that is unusual in, though not fully absent from, print literature. For example, "chat fiction," in which stories "are told through fictional text message exchanges" (Sommer n.p.), does not typically uphold the conceit that the reader is a character receiving text messages, and the arrival of those messages does not therefore coincide with the events being narrated. In a story app like Yarn, where "[s]tories appear message by message, requiring viewers to tap to see each new message"

(Sommer n.p.), readers are invisible observers to a conversation between people other than themselves, and the time of reading is determined by the reader's tapping, much like turning the pages of a book might be. The difference lies in the brevity of the messages, and the conversational nature of the text: like on Twitter, the reader becomes a listening participant, though not a speaker, in a conversation held between several other people. Rather than inserting themselves into external, real-life activities like the instalments of *The Carrier*, the stories on Yarn rely on the participatory nature of text message conversations, in a sense asking their readers to enact the text message conversation that they are reading, as if they were participants. As observed above, this property is not unprecedented in print literature: in asking readers to enact other people's written conversation, chat fiction resembles the epistolary novel of the 18th century, which blurred the boundaries between the real-life correspondences that were customary at the time and letter exchanges among fictional characters. Chat fiction, then, remediates such epistolary fictions for the 21st century: relying on the temporality of the conversational structures of popular mundane media such as Twitter, chat fictions can achieve powerful effects of intimacy, immediacy and participation that are situated firmly in everyday life.[38]

The genre(s) of digital theatrical performances sometimes called netprov provide a further powerful example of how Twitter fiction inhabits the spaces of ordinary life. The scholars Rob Wittig and Mark C. Marino have, both together and separately, created fictional works that make use of characters' utterances on Twitter or other short media and also fall into the category of

[38] Yarn, like many such story apps, is a subscription-based service. The question of ownership, authorship, copyright and remuneration is relevant across the board for social media or text message-based literature. As Ian Crouch, Mike Rudin and Tore Rye Andersen each point out, for authors of print fiction, Twitter often functions as a promotional tool, as advertising paratext; indeed, even fictional texts on Twitter may serve such writers primarily to promote their forthcoming print publications (Crouch n.p.; Rudin n.p.; Andersen 4). At the same time, however, Rudin observes that enabling access to electronic literature publications for free can be problematic in its own right because it risks reducing the labor of authors to a service the public does not consider valuable enough to be remunerable.

real-time, interruptive literature. In much of their work, they also add a third dimension: role-playing. Each character, embodied by a fake Twitter account for example, is assigned to an "actor" who is responsible for tweeting, sometimes also for composing, the lines of that character. Because of this added performative dimension, Wittig and Marino call this genre "netprov," networked improvisational narrative (Marino and Wittig n.p.). The term is unfortunately rarely used by other writers of such collective Twitter fictions, although it is rather capacious, allowing for much variation in whether lines are improvised or pre-written, whether characters appear in real-life performances or merely in cyberspace, how many characters or actors there are, etc.

Marino's and Wittig's fiction work provides an illustrative example of how netprov can explore, performatively embody, and sometimes critique particular aspects of contemporary life. In Marino's *The Ballad of Workstudy Seth,* that aspect was the semi-social, semi-professional sphere of academic Twitter. In *Workstudy Seth*, the title character, a fictional undergraduate at Marino's university, was charged with managing the real-life Marino's academic Twitter account (Marino n.p.). In reality, Marino continued tweeting from that account, but as Seth. Thus a play of mistaken identities ensued, in which not every follower of Marino's account was aware at all times when "Seth" was tweeting and when Marino returned to assume control over the account. A similar blurring of the real and the fictional took place in *LA Flood*, a netprov performance by the cooperative LAInundación, of which Marino was a member (LAInundación n.p.). *LA Flood* involved several actors assuming responsibility for tweeting out their characters' responses to the real-time, six-day "performance" of a fictional flood of Los Angeles. The actors deliberately attempted to interact with the Twitter handles of real-life institutions, some of whom responded by reassuring their followers that the flood had not reached their particular campuses yet, or tried

to impress upon the Twitter world that no flood had actually been forecasted. *LA Flood* therefore constituted another "text event" taking place in the real world: although Los Angeles was not flooded, of course, the cooperative still managed to provoke responses out of non-actor participants as if it had been, or might be. That is, the danger of the flood was still performed by actors and some non-actor participants alike.

Netprov, then, highlights the many different ways in which theater, multi-voice narrative, and real-time diegesis can be combined to achieve interventions in the spaces, virtual or not, in which people ordinarily lead their lives. *Workstudy Seth* turned the online sphere of academic Twitter, a place where many academics connect, exchange conference announcements or CfPs, or debate ideas, into the stage of a fictional academic drama, whereas *LA Flood*, like Orson Welles's radio drama *War of the Worlds* in 1938, instilled fear in quite a few unwitting audience members, who presumed that Los Angeles might actually be in danger of a full-scale flood. Twitter fiction, then, in all of its different modalities, enables writers to puncture the everyday in particularly physical or intimate ways—to stage textual events that actually intervene in people's quotidian lives—, and to make strange, embolden or transform the ordinary in ways that are often politically potent or meaningful. *LA Flood,* for example, provides a clear illustration of the political character of such interventions: by asking its audience to physically live through the anguish of the potential environmental destruction of the city in which they live, it raised questions about the racialized dynamics in which fictional and real participants differentiate between which neighborhoods and neighborhood residents are worth saving, and which can be abandoned without their ruin being, in Judith Butler's terminology, "grievable" (Butler 18).

The *War of the Worlds* analogy is instructive: in the radio play, like in *LA Flood*, what enabled audiences to blend their perception of reality with fiction was that the medium on which

each play was encountered—radio, Twitter—was otherwise such an important part of non-fictional life, including as news medium. The titillation between non-fiction and fiction so central to Twitter literature depends, then, not merely on the brevity of each single message, but also on the degree to which the medium is imbricated in everyday, non-fictional, even news-oriented use. In other words, the participation of Twitter—and other such media, such as SMS messaging and apps—in the sphere of quotidian discourse like the news enables Twitter fiction to touch upon ordinary life in a particularly close way.

Vernacular literary texts on the Twitterverse, then, explore the affective conditions of life in the digital age through text events that take place in life itself. Such texts depict reality by participating in it; although they consequently blur the boundaries between fiction and the world, they do not do so in a postmodernist gesture of the deconstruction of reality's "truth." Rather, by making literature an event in the world, they make possible a creative and participatory knowledge of the world as it is lived and experienced in the 21st-century. In the next and final subsection of the chapter, I describe the Twitter work of established authors David Mitchell, Jennifer Egan and Teju Cole to delineate how professional writers draw from such amateur literary works as well as from the larger, more political social media environment for their versions of a contemporary realism. My discussion follows not a chronological order but moves instead from the least to the most encompassing adoptions of the media specificities of Twitter.

Published Authors' Twitter Fictions: Class Anxiety in Digital Form in David Mitchell's "The Right Sort"

David Mitchell's Twitter short story "The Right Sort" (2014) keeps Twitter's affordances at a minimum.[39] Even so, Mitchell's Twitter text produces strikingly different effects as social media text than in its printed form as a chapter of Mitchell's 2015 novel *Slade House*. Indeed, I argue that the Twitter story uses the affordances of its digital medium to capture, more affectively than its print counterpart, the anxieties of a precarious lower-class existence. Although, as I argue, the digital story provides a more compelling depiction of class anxiety than the print version, the underlying problem in "The Right Sort" is not a digital one: class inequalities have, of course, existed long before the computer, and they are not, in Mitchell's story, exacerbated by the digital condition. Instead, Mitchell uses the Twitter medium for particularly realist ends: to depict the bodily and affective impacts of precarity, which are material—not virtual or philosophical—conditions. This realism of the digital medium is strikingly at odds with the non-realism of *Slade House,* in which "The Right Sort" functions as part of a larger horror story narrative. Therefore, by using the Twitter story as a prosthesis to one of his novels, Mitchell draws out the Twitter medium's potential for depicting, in realist ways that his novel does not, the affective costs of lower-class precarity on a young child's psyche. Specifically, it is the Twitter medium's intrinsic limits on epistemological claims that captures the existential uncertainty of Mitchell's lower-class characters.

Twitter is often used by legacy authors to advertise their print texts, and at first glance, it might seem that the Twitter "The Right Sort" also serves mainly, or even only, this function for

[39] Each text discussed in this subsection has a small showcase on my website; direct links to these showcases have been provided in every case. For "The Right Sort," the link is https://dgati.github.io/twitterfiction#rightsort, where there is also a link to the full story as assembled by *The Guardian*.

two of Mitchell's novels. First, its publication on Twitter was timed so as to increase Mitchell's media visibility just before the release of his 2014 novel *The Bone Clocks*. Later, the story doubled as promotion for *Slade House* when it was reworked to become that novel's first chapter. However, Mitchell's placement of the short story in the Twitter medium as well as in a novel works to set off these different publication formats against one another. Thus, "The Right Sort" functions to contrast the realist representational model of the digital medium with the horror genre of the print story. That contrast is amplified by the fact that Twitter's medium-specific features are kept at a minimum.

"The Right Sort" consists of almost 300 tweets, published on a schedule during a week in July 2014. It recounts firsthand and in the present tense the story of a teenage narrator, Nathan, and his mother's visit to a lady's mansion. Nathan has taken a Valium pill, stolen from his mother's purse, before the two set out to make their visit; the pill provides the ostensible explanation for Nathan's disjointed, fragmentary thoughts—the tweet structure. The opening tweets exemplify this discontinuous, though not multi-directional, thought process:

Figure 40: The first three tweets of "The Right Sort"

The story begins *in medias res* as the narrator sets the scene: the two have just gotten off the bus and are engaged in a conversation that revolves, implicitly but clearly, around class. We learn that Nathan's mother, divorced from his father, cannot afford to take taxis, but also that she cares about appearing wealthier than she actually is. Nathan's tweets place us directly in the middle of the scene, and also establish the story's important concern with class status. Yet, Nathan's fragmented delivery, though effective in immediately situating the characters and pointing toward the underlying conflicts, also slows down the plot: Nathan appears slow to comprehend what to the reader must appear clear, that the specificity of the situation—the mother's doomed struggle to appear at least middle class—renders the universalizing truism of "lying is wrong" irrelevant. The tweets, then, embody the disconnect between the young child's innocence of his mother's and consequently his own social status, and the reality of precisely that status.

The tweet form functions therefore not so much as an actual series of tweets, but rather as a formal embodiment of Nathan's psyche and class precarity's impacts on it. This young first-person narrator is trying to tell a linear story, but his thoughts are too disconnected for it, tripped up by the discrepancy between "truth" and wished-for appearance (not, as it might be in a postmodern fiction, between "truth" and the words used to signify it). Indeed, Nathan, who is around 13 years old, does not sound like a teenager messaging his friends: his voice resembles that of a conventional, if simple, narrator, except that it has been cut up and slowed down, which suggests that the tweets are to be read as enactments of his psychological state, and not of the tweet format.

The temporality of "The Right Sort" likewise implies that the tweets are not actual social media posts. While the present tense suggests an overlap between diegetic time and readerly time

(i.e., that Nathan writes that they are getting off the bus as they are actually getting off, and that we read this as it happens), this overlap is actually rendered impossible by the story's publication schedule. "The Right Sort" takes place during a single afternoon, while readers following it in real time would have been reading it over several days, imposing pauses that are implausible in the story-world. Furthermore, as we learn from the chapter of *Slade House*, the narrated events take place in 1978, well before Twitter, Internet, or SMS. Instead, "The Right Sort," like many first-person fictions, invites readers to engage in the illusion that they can magically access Nathan's thoughts; the tweets *are* Nathan's embodied thoughts. Indeed, this embodied access to the child's thoughts is an amplified version of the technique, familiar from literary realism, of inhabiting a character's interiority, and in this respect "The Right Sort" deviates from the conversational and therefore exterior perspective of Twitter.

Given that the tweets are not tweets in the world of the story, the tweet structure manifests primarily in the brevity of each single tweet and the pauses between them. The fragmentation imposes an attitude of wavering and uncertainty on Nathan's thoughts, and this is true even, perhaps especially, when sentences are not contained within single tweets:

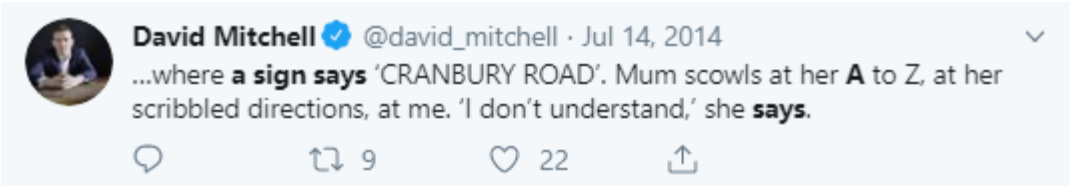

Figure 41: Breaking the brevity constraint in "The Right Sort"

Even as Mitchell is underplaying the specificity of the medium by pushing against the limitations that tweets' brevity imposes on sentence length, the resulting fragmentation still produces an effect that is characteristic of Twitter: a kind of hesitation, and a curtailing of the epistemological purchase of any individual utterance. In fact, although such ellipses violate the character restriction of an individual tweet, they are not uncommon among ordinary Twitter users either; "The Right Sort" therefore highlights, even amplifies, the poetic affordances of the form as it is used in the everyday. The interruption of individual sentences achieves an almost uncanny effect, amplified by the wait between the interrupted tweet and the following one. This effect is especially strong when a tweet trails off with phrases like "you're out," which resonate with multivalent meanings before coming to a resolution in the next tweet. The affective response is, perhaps, akin to the suspense, or even ominous anticipation, associated with cliffhangers in serial forms (Andersen 35). More than that, however, it draws attention to how the Twitter medium introduces a kind of poetry into prose form—familiar from Bewick's vignettes as well as the modernist literary vignettes of Katherine Mansfield. These poetical, affective effects capture the feelings of instability and precarity experienced by this lower-class mother and child as they face the "black iron door" of a "Lady" that, to them, is not just shut, but even invisible.

This feeling of uncertainty is further amplified by the Twitter platform's constant threat to the order and unity of the story. Unlike in a print short story, the publication of "The Right Sort" would have permitted no semblance of order among the tweets for an individual Twitter user.

Instead, each user's feed would have been flooded with tweets from the various other people or businesses that they follow, as well as with ads. However, the tweets shown above do not reflect that disorder. They appear as a collected thread, but only as an artifact of my curatorial intervention: in fact, the bolded letters bear evidence to the search terms I used to locate the tweets. Importantly, I was familiar with these terms because I had already read the full story in *The Guardian*'s ordered collection. Arguably, most readers of "The Right Sort" rely on this collection, and those who were not following it live in July 2014 might have little other choice. But "The Right Sort" does not itself produce a single object to be read: *The Guardian*'s collection is in a sense the retroactive assemblage of such an object. The feelings of uncertainty and precarity experienced by Nathan and his mother as they cannot find the door to the Lady's mansion are therefore echoed, even relived, by readers attempting to find "The Right Sort" tweets—whether retroactively or during the story's publication. While interpretation will always depend on context, "The Right Sort" demonstrates that Twitter fiction is inextricably entangled with the medium in which it is embedded: in the case of this story, the medium itself enacts the feelings of ephemerality, insignificance, and uncertainty that lower-class precarity imposes on Nathan and his mother.

In fact, *The Guardian*'s publication of Mitchell's text necessitated the isolation, collection and ordering of the tweets outside of their native Twitter environment, and the story so assembled is a very different object than the fragmented, scattered series of dispatches that originally appeared on the microblogging platform. The fact that "The Right Sort" lends itself well to being read as a single object while not really being one works to highlight the mechanisms by which readers mentally seek to assemble unified, easily interpretable stories. Even so, Mitchell's Twitter story resists such assembly: its central drive is precisely to enact the

emotions of precarity and to build an epistemological project that represents no certainties or facts about lower-class conditions, but instead enables a bodily or affective experience of them as manifested in the psyche of a young child. This stance captures postmodernism's conclusions about the inaccessibility of a larger "truth" but without giving up on the project of representation: in "The Right Sort," class status *is* available for representation, but not through facts or certainty, but through the affective experience of its bodily, psychological manifestations.

Indeed, in its Twitter form, "The Right Sort" performs the kind of readerly uncertainty and hesitation that the print chapter forecloses. In *Slade House,* the details of "The Right Sort" are fleshed out, producing a frightening horror story in which little is left to the reader's imagination: Lady Briggs and her son really are soul-eating monsters who devour Nathan and imprison his mother. In the Twitter story, however, Nathan's fears do not receive such ambiguity-dispelling explanation. Nathan's thoughts and the form in which we read them are the only sources of fear, uncertainty, and hesitation. Although readers cannot intervene in the plot, they are required to fill in the many blanks left open by the fragmentary structure of the story. Nathan might be hallucinating, or there really is a soul-eating dog-like monster in pursuit of him: we do not know, because the tweets disclose only fragmentary information, whose multivalence therefore remains unresolved. What we do know are the feelings of precarity—of being lost, insignificant, and helpless—caused by a lower-class existence that precludes one, already at Nathan's young age, from being of consequence.

Importantly, too, the Twitter story ends earlier than its novel chapter counterpart, before the horrible conclusion of the chapter. One might consider the earlier ending of the Twitter version a cliffhanger with a projected denouement elsewhere; this would be the promotional reading of Mitchell's text. But such a reading would overlook how "The Right Sort" experiments with the

realist possibilities afforded by the effects of brevity and fragmentation. The affects of Mitchell's story—its uncertainty and sense of disorientation—are not postmodernist: they do not reflect or problematize the fractured relationship between language and reality, the unending feedback loops produced by chains of signification, or the ontological precarity of human beings in the world. Instead, the uncertainty comes out of the Twitter medium's limitations on epistemological claims in the first place, and it reflects the psychological angst and instability that are the systematic outcomes of lower-class precarity. The tweet form of "The Right Sort" enacts these psychological impacts by embodying the affects of Nathan's psyche—that is, by enabling a sensory, bodily and affective knowledge of the world. "The Right Sort" therefore operates with a representational paradigm that does not depict, but rather makes felt, the conditions of the world that demand continued political attention—in this case, the psychological impacts of social status.

Notably, too, the conditions of the world that "The Right Sort" represents through this enacting dynamic are, in true realist fashion, emphatically material ones: class status itself, as well as the body's experience of it, are material conditions that continue to be experienced in the digital era but have constituted embodied experience much before it. Indeed, in sidestepping the actual depiction of social media communication—and in setting the story in 1978, that is, well before the digital age—Mitchell's text uses the digital medium to capture an anxiety that is expressly not digitally produced. In the non-digital version of the story, this anxiety is resolved into the terror intrinsic to a horror story: thus, between these two versions of the story, the digital medium is the one to more compellingly capture the affects of material life.

Which "The Right Sort" is the right one? Although Mitchell's story compels us to ask this question, I suggest that it is ultimately a misleading one. Rather, what the double life of "The

Right Sort" as print chapter and Twitter story offers is a new, digitally inspired model of realist representation that, in striking contrast with its print counterpart, enables the embodied affective experience of what it is like to grow up under the shadow of class-based precarity. "The Right Sort," as an extension of a novel into the Twittersphere, presents a challenge to reading as decoding and representation as depiction, inviting instead a more empathetic, affective reading experience. We cannot read Mitchell's Twitter story with more familiar genre expectations, such as those of horror, because the Twitter medium does not lend itself to such resolutions: it is more dialectical, which means that the ambiguities are not resolved. But the resulting uncertainties are not the postmodern ones that question the relationship of language to signified reality. That connection is not severed; rather, reality itself—the experience of existence as a lower-class child, inheritor of generations of precarity—is like a Valium-induced nightmare, in which the possibility of one's soul being devoured by immortal monsters does not seem unrealistic, and might even feel plausible. Indeed, as commentators of modern capitalism have observed, our subjection to an exploitative economic system has in a sense already turned us into zombies devoured by other zombies (Huehls ix). That is, for the Twitter story, the reality which realism endeavors to depict has shifted to encompass this hallucinatory quality. And this shift, in spite of its preexisting the digital world, is most adequately—effectively and affectively—captured by fiction told in the Twitter medium.[40]

[40] Mitchell also has a later, more theatrical Twitter experiment, entitled "@I_Bombadil." For this text, Mitchell created a separate Twitter handle, @I_Bombadil, ostensibly operated by the character Bombadil from *Slade House*. This handle, however, is locked: thus, until Mitchell approves my access request (which he might never do), I cannot give a reading of this work. Readers are referred to Andersen's treatment (Andersen 14–21).

When the Real in Realism is Posthuman: Jennifer Egan's "Black Box"

If "The Right Sort" is committed to the realist exploration of the psychological effects of class status, Jennifer Egan's "Black Box" (2012) interrogates the role of the body in a technologically dominated world.[41] "Black Box" proposes as its central, mysterious material—its "black box"—the body as it is supersaturated with enhancing technologies that take over functions of writing, recording, and broadcasting. Yet the human body—specifically, the gendered, female body—is not rendered obsolete by its technological extensions. Instead, "Black Box" posits a relationship of duality, indeed antinomy, between body and technology—antinomy in Fredric Jameson's sense of a dialectical relationship of co-occurring and unresolved tensions (Jameson, *The Antinomies of Realism* 6–7).

This human-technology antinomy underlying the thematic core of Egan's story also underwrites its form in a structure that I call formal hybridity. Extending Ian Watt's articulation of formal realism (Watt 32) into the digital domain, I argue that "Black Box" espouses a dual, hybrid form in which literature meets Twitter, realist depiction runs parallel to spy fiction plot, and the human body exists in tension with its technologically supersaturated environment. Egan has said that her motivation was the wish to "take a character from a naturalistic story"—Lulu from *A Visit from the Goon Squad*—"and travel with her into a different genre" (Egan, quoted in Andersen 44). Accordingly, "Black Box" itself is a travelling artifact—between print short story and Twitter text—and this dialectical process of travel dictates a form centered on doubling. Thus, "Black Box" performs the duality of the posthuman condition, whose realist literary depiction cannot exist in separation from the digital technologies that so thoroughly pervade 21st-

[41] Parts of this work are exhibited at https://dgati.github.io/twitterfiction#blackbox. It was published in its entirety in *The New Yorker* and can be read here: https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2012/06/04/black-box-2.

century existence. Negotiating the dichotomies of human and machine, "naturalistic story" and sci-fi spy fiction, then, Egan's story interrogates the antinomies of realist representation in the era of social media.

The mechanisms of doubling are present on many, perhaps every, level of Egan's story. "Black Box," set in the not too far future, is told in the second person in a series of tweets by Lulu, a woman who leaves her ordinary existence to lead a double life as a secret agent on a one-time mission. While Lulu is herself a double of the child Lulu in *A Visit from the Goon Squad*, her narratorial voice, too, is the outcome of two divergent perspectives, human and machine. The tweets that we read are recordings made during her mission by a chip implanted in her brain, which means that Lulu does not type these messages, but merely thinks them: their existence in written form is the work of the chip. What we read when we read the tweets has therefore been written not by a human, exactly, but by a cyborg (Andersen 42). Furthermore, Lulu's name is itself a doubling, and many of her tweets revolve around a schizophrenic concern with detaching herself from her body to inhabit a second observing perspective—hence, perhaps, the narrator's use of the second-person voice.

In its publication history, "Black Box" likewise enacts a doubling: it is, like "The Right Sort," an evanescent Twitter artifact, but its delivery also resembled a conventional short story reading. Released on the New Yorker's fiction account, @NYerFiction, between 8 p.m. and 9 p.m. during ten nights in 2012, Egan's story is scarcely readable today in any other way than in the *New Yorker* article in which it was assembled. The story is difficult to locate online because the tweets were not tweeted in replies to each other and are not linked by hashtags. Thus, a search for "Black Box" yields only paratextual tweets:

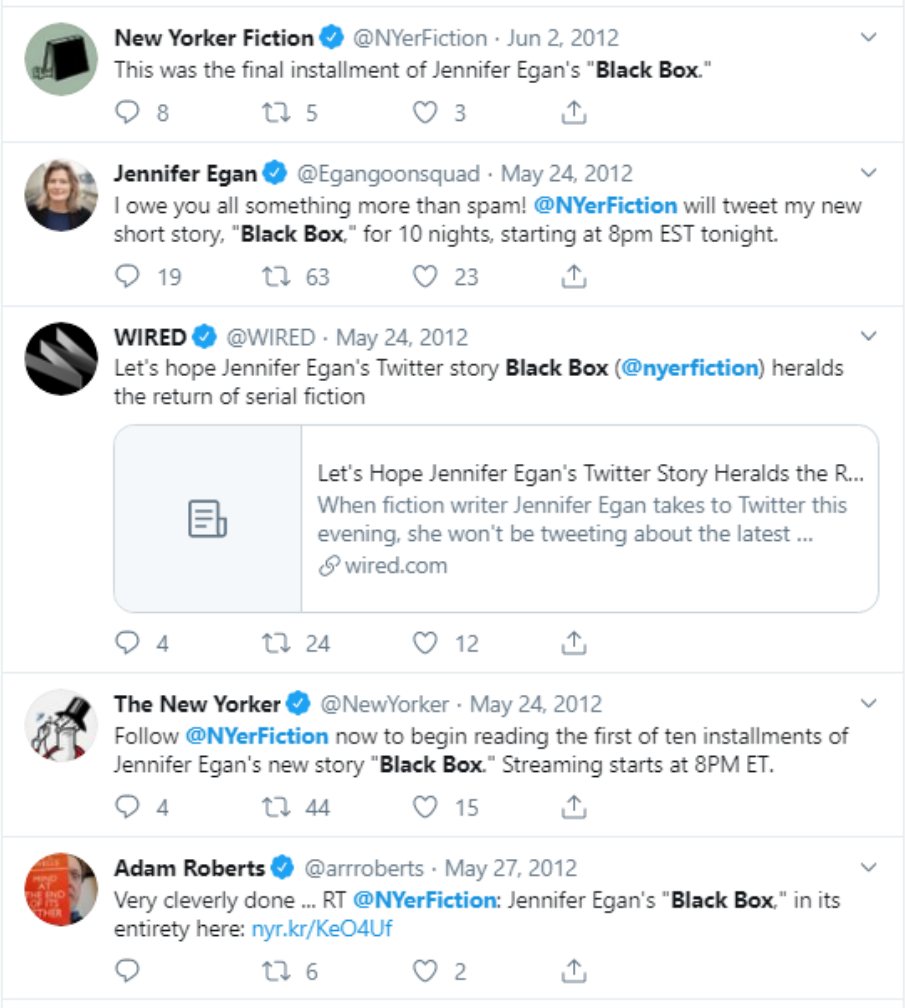

Figure 42: Paratextual tweets surrounding “Black Box”

If one knows their text, individual tweets are easy to retrieve, which allows for verification that they were indeed not published in a thread or linked in any way. For example, knowing that the phrase “Designated Mate” features prominently in the story, I was able to search the @NYerFiction handle for the term “designated,” which yields the results below:

Figure 43: "Black Box" tweets returned out of order by a Twitter search

Indeed, each individual tweet in the search results has only the fiction text in it, absent of hashtags or links. The retweets are few, and there are no replies. It seems, then, that the appearance of any individual tweet to anyone following the publication live would have been something like the clean, isolated tweet below:

Figure 44: A single "Black Box" tweet

In its presentation, then, "Black Box," like "The Right Sort" and other Twitter texts, is evanescent and ephemeral; yet, unlike many social media posts, "Black Box" remains free of the clutter of hashtags, replies, and non-textual components like GIFs or links. "Black Box," then, participates in forms and discourses characteristic of both Twitter and reading events of print fiction. Indeed, though it is difficult to verify this in retrospect, "Black Box" tweets were probably the only tweets to appear on the @NYerFiction handle during the slotted time of 8 p.m.- 9 p.m., giving the impression as if the *New Yorker* had simply yielded the stage to the author to read her work in instalments.[42] There seems to have been an effort, then, to keep Twitter's messiness in check, and to import into the medium qualities associated with more traditional fiction readings: the *New Yorker*'s Twitter account became Egan's podium.

Readers of "Black Box" during its serial delivery seem to have treated it, accordingly, like a story being read by an author at an event: with silence. As seen above, the reactions were scant, and when they did occur, they were rarely of the "audible" type, which would be a reply: most

[42] In fact, Twitter affords another possibility for searching in order to attempt to verify such claims, which is to search a particular handle in a particular time period, available under Advanced Search. Yet the results of such a search are not organized according to any clearly apparent logic: the returned tweets are not recognizably in chronological order, and it is difficult to verify if all tweets that were posted in the given time period are actually returned by the search. Indeed, in my search of the @NYerFiction handle for the time period of the publication of "Black Box," the resulting tweets were neither in order of publication, nor were they the complete set of tweets published during this time.

reactions were either likes or retweets. The one example of a direct response I have been able to ascertain was a retweet with a comment, where the hashtag, #talkingbacktofiction, suggests a more dialogical, if not belligerent, attitude towards fiction reading (Lani n.p.):[43]

Figure 45: A rare reader's response to "Black Box"

This simultaneous presence of Twitter-like ephemerality with the strong authorial presence associated with fiction readings makes "Black Box" appear both humble in its claims to attention and yet insistent on a voice of its own. This antinomy highlights the struggle, enacted across communications media in general and through history at large, between perspectives assumed to be authorial, intellectual and important, and those deemed to be other, embodied, and insignificant. Indeed, the ephemerality of the "Black Box" tweets resembles that of marginalia in medieval manuscripts, woodcut vignettes and telegraph fictions, to name just a few examples of short media from earlier periods of book history—minute forms whose contributions to meaning-making have traditionally been held to be minimal, trivial, or inexistent. "Black Box" intermediates these significations into the 21st-century digital form of Twitter. And by offsetting these historical minute forms against the authority of literary readings, "Black Box" throws light on the continued sidelining of certain discourses, this time in digital media, such as those of BIPOC thinkers and activists. Such discourses are treated as ephemeral, peripheral and inconsequential while other tweets—notably those by the president or other authority figures—

[43] Searching Twitter for this hashtag yields no results, which suggests that #talkingbacktofiction was not a concerted movement, but rather a more spontaneous reaction by this particular reader.

are considered official statements of crucial importance. “Black Box” does not comment on these issues thematically, but through its formal enactment of the duality between ephemerality and authorial communication, it highlights the political questions and tensions surrounding marginalization in the digital domain.

If the presentation of “Black Box,” then, embraces the duality between digital messaging and fiction reading events, the individual tweets themselves embody a formal hybridity consisting of several dualities. On the one hand, the tweets double as instructional observations for spies in training, and as descriptions of Lulu’s specific encounters. The opening tweet, pictured below, exemplifies this function:

Figure 46: Duality of meanings in “Black Box” tweets

This tweet may be read as a warning to future spies against the deceptiveness of appearances, but it can also be taken as a signal that, in terms of plot, Lulu has just laid her eyes on her target, who looks different than she expected. Likewise, a later tweet works simultaneously to inform us where Lulu is (that is, the setting of this particular plot point), while also containing general advice about how to use books as a decoy: “Posing as a beauty means not reading what you would like to read on a rocky shore in the South of France.” We learn from this tweet that Lulu is now somewhere “on a rocky shore in the South of France,” but future spies also receive advice on how to use their ostensible beach reading to deflect attention from their secret agent mission.

In terms of their content, then, Lulu's tweets enact the double function of advancing the plot for the readers, while also being operationalized as educational texts for agents in training.

There are further dualities in how the content of Egan's Twitter story embraces techniques familiar to scholars of literature. In terms of genre, "Black Box" draws from conventions in spy fiction to spur "a strong narrative desire," with readers "read[ing] for plot, drawn by a strong sense of an ending" (Andersen 44). The story's ability to fuel such narrative desire aligns it, according to Tore Rye Andersen, with serial fiction traditions. Indeed, for Andersen "Black Box" represents the attempt of a legacy author to use the Twitter medium to forge a new serial form for the 21st century (Andersen 35). I suggest, however, that to consider "Black Box" a social media serial is to overlook its carefully wrought balance of contrary impulses. The publication schedule could be argued, as Andersen does, to introduce serial fiction elements like cliffhangers, but a closer examination of the individual tweets suggests that the forced wait between tweets also works against such narrative dimensions. The intervals of waiting do, of course, impose narrative suspense, but because of the tweets' double function as part observation, part plot point, the forced wait also produces a different effect: it transforms the quality of the observations. As each tweet stands on its own for a while as an isolated and contextless thought, the wait encourages a contemplation that transforms the observations in the reader's mind to more general, even philosophical meanings: "People rarely look the way you expect them to, even when you've seen pictures." As part of the plot, such tweets function to move us forward in the action. As a standalone observation, however, unlinked by thread or hashtag, they become philosophical-poetic comments. "Black Box," then, embeds a semantic polyphony that is not reducible to the pleasures of serial narrative.

In this reading, the publication schedule, coupled with the tweets' multivalence, becomes a meaningful choice that places emphasis not so much on seriality but on some familiar aspects of contemplative pleasure in reading. The brevity of the tweets, as well as the interval of time elapsed between them, produce meditative, poetic effects resembling genres like the haiku, the Imagist poem or the prose poem—forms that, as the previous chapter has argued, are traditionally associated with literary vignettes. These effects, familiar to scholars of brief literary forms, are explicitly juxtaposed with the humdrum of social media—the clamor for attention of a myriad of notifications from within Twitter and from other apps. Contemplation and pause thus set distraction in stark relief, and vice versa. Scott Rettberg has argued that electronic literature is ideally suited for balancing hyper attention and deep attention (Rettberg par. 16). "Black Box," however, achieves this balance not so much by virtue of its digitality but rather by juxtaposing digital forms and platforms with print reading practices in what might be called a literary media remix.

Furthermore, the publication schedule of "Black Box" also sustains a temporal discrepancy which, though it might at first seem to discredit Egan's project, ultimately drives the story's exploration of formal hybridity. The regular publication schedule imposes a temporality that is fundamentally at odds with the central conceit of the tweets' delivery. If the tweets are dispatches from Lulu's brain as she is engaged in action, why do they arrive to us in regular intervals? Furthermore, if the plot spans only one day, why was the story delivered during ten? These discrepancies forestall the interpretation that the tweets come from Lulu in real time: there is too stark a contrast between "the time of the telling with that of the told" (Andersen 47). In other words, although the Twitter medium would allow for the immediacy of telling, "Black Box" does not take this option. Instead, Egan's story asks readers to read it in more traditional

literary ways, suspending their disbelief in the discrepancy between the time of the tweets' dispatch and their reading.

But towards the end of the story, this adherence to literary models of reading is subverted in turn by the revelation, in the denouement of "Black Box," that our access to the tweets has been enabled by an access to Lulu's body—the medium upon which the text was inscribed by the chip—and that the regularity of the tweets is probably owing to the regular occurrence of the classes that spies in training are taking. This revelation works to cancel out our suspension of disbelief, situating us in the middle of the diegetic universe after all.

Furthermore, the position we as readers suddenly come to occupy as spies in training recasts the entirety of the preceding story in yet another doubling, this time highlighting the importance of embodiment in this highly digital world, through the central importance of Lulu's body. At the end of her mission, when Lulu has obtained the information she set out to gather and has escaped her pursuers from the terrorist organization, she floats, body wounded, on a raft in the Atlantic, awaiting rescue from the secret service. In an image that recalls the shipping and mutilation of dehumanized bodies across the Atlantic, Lulu lies helplessly in wait of rescue, but that rescue, as it turns out, is interested only in her body, not in her life:

> Remember that, should you die, your body will yield a crucial trove of information.
> Remember that, should you die, your Field Instructions will provide a record of your mission and lessons for those who follow.
> Remember that, should you die, you will have triumphed merely by delivering your physical person into our hands.[44]

The secret service needs Lulu's body in order to access the "Field Instructions," which constitute a "crucial trove of information" even "should you [Lulu] die" in the process. Indeed, these "Field

[44] This quote consists of three tweets from the end of "Black Box." Screenshots of these tweets have not been retrieved because the argument focuses on the textual content.

Instructions" are nothing but the tweets that we have been reading, constituting "a record" and "lessons for those who follow"—that is, for us. Lulu's body, then, is the black box containing the key to the mission; the tweets (alias "Field Instructions"), which contain the digital information that is essential to the mission's success, therefore depend crucially upon the human body. In fact, in line with the different dimensions of the extractive management of lives and resources described as racial capitalism, biopolitics, or informational capitalism (Melamed xvi–xvii; Foucault 242–47; Castells 69–74), Lulu's body is an othered—female, sexualized, broken—body that unites the informational value essential to capitalist advantage with the material body upon which sexualized violence may be enacted. These forms of extraction are interlinked: sex with Lulu's Designated Mate—a not fully consensual encounter, given Lulu's status as "citizen agent" with a husband at home—is the key to gaining crucial information. Lulu's body is therefore instrumentalized, capitalized and weaponized; the sole dimension that remains irrelevant is the well-being, or even life, of that body. That concern is Lulu's alone. This is why she cautions, at once literally and metaphorically: "Keep your body in view at all times; if your mind loses track of your body, it may be hard—even impossible—to reunite the two."[45]

The centrality of Lulu's body to "Black Box" drives the story's concern with how digital technologies do not obliterate the embodied—and importantly, gendered, even racialized—dimensions of human experience. Technology does not displace such dimensions, but merely changes them; the central question of "Black Box" is, in realist fashion, *how* human embodied experience changes in a world where embodiment, too, is technologically mediated. The

[45] Although Lulu herself is not Black, the story's emphasis on skin and skin color (for example that of her Black husband, for whom Lulu's longing is omnipresent throughout the story), as well as its linking of the body's informational and monetary value with its status as a "black" box do more than just imply the connections between capitalist extraction and racist violence. Egan's emphasis on gender and sexual exploitation only further this connection.

narrative act of "Black Box," then, may be the work of a chip, but that chip needs to be embedded in the human body for its narration to become readable; indeed, that body needs to be physically recovered for reading to take place. The fact that we are reading "Black Box" means therefore that "we"—the "we" implied to be the secret service—have gained access to Lulu's body, that we are, in essence, reading her body. The "black box" of information in the story, as well as "Black Box" *as* story, are really nothing more than deployments of Lulu's body.

And that body is not merely a material necessity for the story to happen, but also an object *to which* things happen: it is exploited for sex when Lulu needs to gain access to her Designated Mate, and it is bruised and bloodied in combat. Indeed, it is not clear whether this body, once recaptured by the secret service, returns to life or whether Lulu in fact dies at the end of the story. The body's experience, then, as well as its informational content and indeed even life, cannot be divorced from the gendered ways in which it can act and be acted upon. In accordance with Hayles's influential argument, in "Black Box" information is inextricably embedded in the body (Hayles, *How We Became Posthuman* 11–12). The formal hybridity of "Black Box," therefore works to demonstrate that posthuman experience, though technologically modified, is also resolutely embodied. Rather than dissolve into technologically disseminated simulacra and dizzying virtual realities, the human body is a firmly anchored component of the posthuman condition. As Egan's realist inquiry tells us, the latter is not some techno-utopian or dystopian condition in which the body has been superseded, but a quotidian, though dialectical, bodily-technological experience.

Ultimately, then, "Black Box" combines narrative drive, social media distraction, and a fragmentation that lies ambiguously between poetic prose form and tweet medium to produce a polyphonic literary artifact that speaks multidirectionally, to social media communities as well as

to readers of print literature. Egan's text is thus in the last instance not merely a short story serialized on Twitter, but an interrogation into what it means for the human body to exist in a technologically saturated world, as well as for literature to exist in digital space. Indeed, Lulu's prosthetic modification with a chip can be read to stand in for the modification of the short story genre via the technology of Twitter. Just as the human subject is situated somewhere between the physical body and its computer-mediated extensions, "Black Box" asks about the place of literature between print and digital—fiction between Twitter and novel.

Marginalia Without Margins: Digital Postcolonial Subjects in Teju Cole's Twitter Stories

The legacy author whose social media fiction most deeply engages with the specificities of the Twitter medium is Teju Cole. In particular, in his Twitter works "Hafiz" (2014) and *Small Fates* (2011-2013), Cole paves the way for a transmedia artform, a form whose meaning derives equally from its textual content and its visual appearance. I argue that Cole's tweets use their "trans" status as existing between and across media, genres, and conversations to simultaneously participate in and yet critique the discursive regimes of the media that they inhabit—discourses of the news, Twitter, or simply fiction. This quality enables Cole's work to align with Black Twitter in giving a voice to those whose fates are otherwise marginalized and erased out of existence. Thus, "Hafiz" and especially *Small Fates* problematize contemporary modalities that attempt to represent historically sidelined lives and bodies while at the same time also constituting a representation of these lives that is emphatically respectful, inclusive, and careful about its objects of representation. In so doing, Cole's Twitter stories critique the dynamics that continue to treat as marginal the expressions and representations of certain—especially racially othered—lives within the very medium that obliterates the notions of center and margin. Out of

this critique, these stories grow a vignettistic model of realist representation of and for the marginalized.

Cole, a photographer, essayist and author of the novels *Every Day is for the Thief* and *Open City*, has written several experimental Twitter works that exist on a continuum with and yet stand apart from his novelistic and photographic work. Cole's Twitter experiments are arguably part and parcel of his more general project of what Jenkins calls "transmedia storytelling" (Jenkins, "Transmedia Storytelling 101" n.p.), an approach where boundaries between media become obsolete as each medium contributes equally to the overall project. Cole's more visually oriented works in this vein include some of his Instagram photography, or his Twitter-based "Time of the Game," in which he asked his followers to post a photo of the kickoff moment of every game of the 2010 soccer world cup in South Africa, wherever users were experiencing it.[46] It is a witness to the genre-breaking creativity of these works that even Cole's own website finds no obvious category for them. Among the categories pictured below, where should one seek linked multimedia works like Twitter stories?

Figure 47: The header of Teju Cole's website

Accordingly, Cole's two predominantly text-based Twitter experiments, the re-tweeted story "Hafiz" and the series of current event stories usually referred to as *Small Fates,* require some detective work to be accessed. "Hafiz" is easier, because a web search, though not a Twitter

[46] It is possible to see a collection of contributions made during the Argentina-Germany game on July 13, 2014 at https://twitter.com/tejucole/timelines/428635031313985536 (T. Cole, "Time of the Game 07/13/14 | Collection / Twitter" n.p.). My website also features a browsable exhibit: https://dgati.github.io/twitterfiction#timeofthegame.

search, returns the full story assembled in a Twitter "collection"—a form that allows a group of tweets to be gathered into a thread.[47] *Small Fates*, however, is more elusive. The stories "are difficult to retrieve directly from Twitter because Cole has not used a hashtag to identify" them (Mingazova 148). Further, finding any particular story offers no help in finding the others, because the individual tweets were not published in a thread as replies to one another. It is virtually impossible to retrieve this work in its entirety, and scholars can either painfully comb through Cole's Twitter feed, which requires familiarity with the style and tone of *Small Fates*, or rely on tweets that other scholars or news outlets have identified. In *Small Fates*, then, Cole places special emphasis on the "ephemeral nature" of content on Twitter (Mingazova 148), entirely in line with the project's concern with "small," supposedly ephemeral "fates."

Although "Hafiz" and *Small Fates* are very different, they both embody the gathering and repurposing approach of the meme. When publishing "Hafiz," a short story about a homeless person of color's death as observed by a bystander on a subway platform in New York, Cole asked friends and followers to tweet the 33 lines he had written, and then retweeted these individual lines together so as to form a story: an excerpt is pictured below ("'Hafiz' Collection / Twitter" tweets 7-13).

[47] This collection is accessible at https://twitter.com/tejucole/timelines/437242785591078912?lang=en or on my website at https://dgati.github.io/twitterfiction#hafiz.

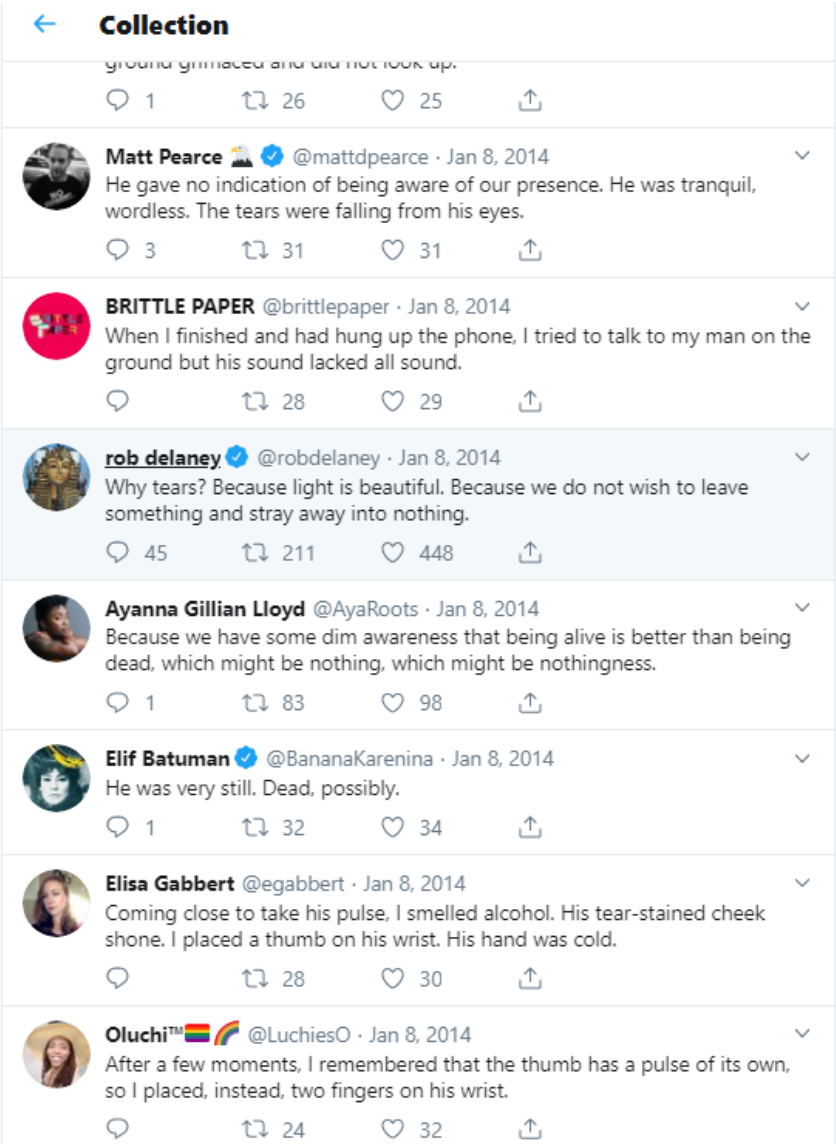

Figure 48: Screenshot of "Hafiz"

Who exactly is the speaker here? Because Twitter conventions ask us to read tweets from a particular handle as coming from the person who owns the handle, the initial impression created by "Hafiz" is that of confusion: the "I" does not coalesce into a single subjectivity but seems to be a communal identity speaking in many voices. Only after certain events establish the consistency of the speaker's actions across tweets (for example, the speaker uses their thumb to feel the pulse of the dying man in Elisa Gabbert's as well as Oluchi's tweets) do we arrive at an

understanding of the narrator's single persona. "Hafiz" thus becomes an exploration about the identity of perspective as it shifts between its singular and communal modalities. The fact that the tweeters are predominantly Global South, immigrant or second-generation American writers, as well as indie publishers and literary magazines located outside the US mainstream, adds further nuance to the question of identity and community. The individual speaker, in shifting back and forth between a coherent, singular identity and the multitude of diverse voices across whom individual coherence is established, becomes a hybrid figure in the postcolonial sense: a person with multiple underlying histories, ethnicities, and cultural formations. Technology—the dispersion enabled by the Twitter medium—produces in this case not a posthuman subject but a postcolonial one.

Furthermore, "Hafiz" places pronounced emphasis on the multiple bodies of this hybrid postcolonial person formation as sites of story/history. The individual tweets lead a double life: they are part of a short, chronological narrative as presented above, but they also exist standing on their own, on their tweeters' handles, scattered across Twitter. The bodies of the story therefore also lead lives independently of "Hafiz." Cole compared this approach to Shelley Jackson's textual installation "Skin," in which volunteers agreed to have one word of Jackson's story tattooed on their body (Vecsey n.p.). Like Jackson's work, "Hafiz" decenters Cole himself, and interrogates the materiality of the medium that carries the words. Jackson's story as a material publication exists only while its carriers are alive, but while they are, those bodies carry the individual words into unpredictable situations and places. Similarly, the individual tweets of Cole's story possess their own trajectories and live in their own environments. Cole's act of collecting them via retweeting is necessary for the story to come together, but it does not control the individual trajectories of the tweets. Indeed, "Hafiz" places emphasis on the Twitterers

whose handles become the bodies on which the story is inscribed, even as it does not attempt to narrativize their experience. Thus, "Hafiz" asks what it means for such people and venues to become the sites of the quotidian and yet epiphanic story of an unknown man of color's death of in contemporary New York City.

Small Fates, too, exemplifies the act of repurposing, because Cole drew from minor news stories from Nigerian newspapers as well as from an earlier news-based literary project, the 1906 *Nouvelles en trois lignes* by French writer and journalist Félix Féneon. Féneon's title, which was rendered by Luc Sante in his 2007 translation as *Novels in Three Lines*, is a pun on the French word *nouvelle*, meaning both news and short story (Mingazova 145). Féneon was working as a correspondent for the newspaper *Le Matin*, writing *faits divers*, which are stories of current events happening to ordinary, unknown people. When collected, these *faits divers* constitute an odd array of very brief self-contained stories that are based on fact but are also fictionalized. These partly fictional, partly true, and often quite absurd short stories are the *Novels in Three Lines*.

Inspired by these "three-line novels," Cole relied on factual stories from Nigerian newspapers and rewrote them in condensed, often humorous or poetic ways. Pictured below are the results for a Twitter search for "Teju Cole" and the Nigerian state of Bayelsa, which I know figures in some of the *Small Fates* tweets. In the screenshot, Cole's first tweet is a reply to another Twitter user, but his second and third tweets are identifiable as *Small Fates*. Laconic and ironic in tone, these tweets capture the fates of average people in Nigeria, whose lives and names would not otherwise register as news-worthy. Moreover, like their subjects, the *Small Fates*

tweets are themselves clouded in obscurity, drowned out by other activity on Cole's Twitter feed as well as by the Twitterverse at large.[48]

Figure 49: Results of a Twitter search for "Bayelsa" and "Teju Cole"

Unlike "Hafiz," *Small Fates* never comes together as a unified whole: this dispersed, resolutely ephemeral form allows the work to participate particularly successfully in Twitter's proximity to everyday life. Indeed, providing a type of alternative news channel for everyday events on Twitter was part of Cole's project. According to Cole himself, "I wanted people who

[48] In fact, in the results of my search, shown in the screenshot below, we can also see other Twitter users (@ZawadiNyongo and @Aliben86) responding to Cole's project with their own versions of small fates (IG: @ZawadiNyongo n.p.; Nebila Abdulmelik n.p.). To my knowledge, this is not an effect that Cole had planned.

were not Nigerian to know something about everyday life in Nigeria," and *Small Fates* was intended to capture "all the texture of everyday life that is basically missing from the news stories that we hear about Africa" (Inskeep n.p.). Humorous, startling, often wistful, stories like the ones below grant a kind of sensual understanding of "the texture of everyday life" perhaps precisely because they are just as unobtrusive as the fates of the people they describe:

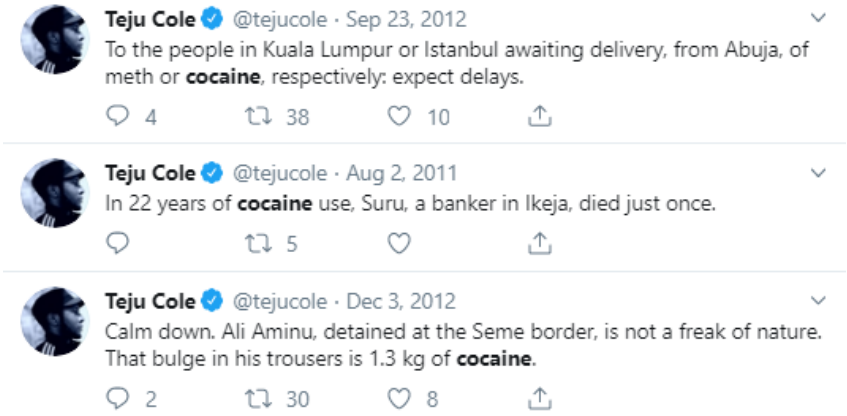

Figure 50: *Small Fates* tweets with cocaine in them

Despite the involvement of cocaine in these fates, the reported stories remain low-profile, resistant to media attention and drowned out by other "news" on the Twittersphere that mainstream discourses deem more worthy of mention, including the trivial activities of celebrities or the empty swagger of the United States president's tweeted performance of virile leadership. While having in common with celebrity tweets their mundaneness, the *Small Fates* tweets are more direct, perhaps more honest, about the limits of their reach, about how little they can encompass narratively, and how minor their impact on the world likely will be. This sets them apart from the self-importance and "loudness" of political or celebrity tweets.

Yet, in spite of their "quiet" tone, the *Small Fates* tweets also possess a striking, arresting quality that, while stemming from their proximity to quotidian life, offset these fates from ordinary Twitter. Accordingly, Cole's readers frequently responded with expressions of how

Small Fates interrupts the flow of Twitter, if only for a short while. For example, in response to the first tweet above, a Twitter reader wrote (David Evans n.p.):

Figure 51: A reader's response to *Small Fates*

This striking ability of Cole's tweets to produce "a quiet pause" and a "shift" in the brain among the humdrum of an otherwise "noisy" and restless medium owes, paradoxically, to their embrace precisely of Twitter's brevity and the potential of epistemological humbleness that brevity enables. That the tweets do not imply an ambition to far-reaching impact—that they insist, almost shockingly, on the single, radically curtailed glance—contributes a striking affective force to the stories they depict. Brevity and the refusal of linear, or any, causal plotmaking are central to achieving this effect. But the tweets' tone also contributes to shifting the affects of Twitter away from the at times combative, at times too definitive voice constituting the discursive mainstream. *Small Fates* stories, though often humorous, are also often poignant, even mournful; and they do not claim far-reaching epistemological or moral purchase. This humility, perhaps, contributes most forcefully to *Small Fates*'s political message.

Indeed, the *Small Fates* tweets' paradoxical participation in and yet resistance to the medium in which they live produces such a powerful effect that reading them on any other medium feels unsatisfying. Divorced from the deluge of information in which they make their momentary, glinting mark, these tweets feel awkward, like fish on land. For example, if I integrate one of the tweets figured above, "Five in Benue, four in Bauchi, three in Bayelsa, and one in Delta, died, from cholera, floods, cultists, and police, respectively" (*Small Fates* n.p.), into

the text of a more conventional medium (the word processor of this dissertation), the tweet text loses a significant portion of its aesthetic effects. Gone is the poignancy of these absurd everyday tragedies; gone too is the commentary about the story's failure to capture the attention of mainstream discourse and news media. In this respect, *Small Fates,* like "Hafiz," embodies perfectly what Bell et al. consider a defining characteristic of digital fiction—that it "would lose something of its aesthetic and semiotic function if it were removed from that medium" (Bell et al. n.p.). Indeed, *Small Fates* is dependent on the Twitter medium for its effect, and in its dependence, it demonstrates Twitter's potential, as well as its limitations, for political commentary and counterhegemonic fictional projects.

Small Fates and "Hafiz," then, draw their primary impact from the ways in which texts exist in virtual space, and specifically on the space of Twitter. "Hafiz" constitutes a comment on how the individual parts of a composed whole gain their own lives, scattering every which way on Twitter and demonstrating the intricate interrelations of individual subjectivity with a multitude of voices, histories, and future life paths. Importantly, the digital medium enables a postcolonial hybrid subjectivity that accounts for, but does not control, Global South bodies, stories, and trajectories both within and outside of the space of the contemporary United States. *Small Fates*, on the other hand, participates in and yet critiques, even disrupts, the ephemerality of news discourse about ordinary Nigerian lives. Strikingly, not only does this series critique the dominant narratives in which certain racialized lives can never take center stage, but it also offers a sensual description of such lives without ever solidifying them into a unified grand narrative. The Twitter medium enables *Small Fates* to provide an efficacious example of simultaneous critique and productive counter-model. Cole's Twitter work, then, intervenes in contemporary American fiction by providing a Transatlantic perspective that fulfils the realist agenda to depict

ordinary black lives while also critiquing the literary and news media institutions in which such lives are marginalized. Twitter's multivocality and the tweets' ephemerality become central for Cole's critique of discursive norms that perpetuate the erasure and marginalization of racialized lives.

Last Words on Twitter Fictions and their Role in Social Critique

In sum, then, Mitchell, Egan and Cole provide new models for realist social critique fiction on Twitter, by drawing, to varying degrees, from the formal affordances of the Twitter medium. Mitchell explores the epistemological uncertainty of tweets as they chop up longer sentences into short chunks, revealing thereby the form's adequacy to capture the psychological anxieties carved into the body by the precarity of lower-class existence. Egan similarly employs brevity and multivalence as central forms to build a posthuman formal hybridity, situating the body—and specifically the sexed and gendered body—at the heart of the posthuman condition in which technologies supposedly render the body obsolete. Finally, Cole explores the Twitter medium's possibilities for centering, without controlling, the disparate bodies and perspectives of multiple marginalized subjectivities, especially those of Global South or otherwise racially or ethnically othered people. Drawing from the remixing ethos of the meme, the multidirectionality of Twitter conversations, and the epistemological humility enabled by tweet brevity, Cole's Twitter work carves out pathways for social critique fiction that both participates in Twitter's aesthetic affordances and yet critiques those very forms and practices.

These writers, then, forge new ways of depicting pressing social problems as these problems themselves assume changing forms in an increasingly digital world. Importantly, though the expansion of (digital) technology transforms the manifestations of social issues, digitality does

not in itself produce them: instead, phenomena such as class, racist marginalization or gendered violence have plagued American society for centuries and have therefore been the topics of different forms of realist representations. In writing digitally about class, race, and technology in its relation to the (gendered) body, Mitchell, Cole, and Egan therefore align themselves with a realist representational project that, seeing the transformation of society brought on by digital technologies, can no longer rely on earlier realist forms. Yet, although such changes necessitate new forms of writing, it would be wrong to consider the formal innovations of "The Right Sort," "Black Box," "Hafiz" and *Small Fates* experimental in the postmodernist sense: these works do not thematize the severing of the connections between signifier and signified, the constructedness of seemingly essential categories, or the play of language. Rather, they use the formal possibilities of social media, itself drawing from the aesthetic possibilities of the vignette, to reflect on social phenomena pertaining to this world. In a realist fashion, these works suggest that the attempt to represent and comprehend the world and its problems is both meaningful and necessary, even if such comprehension is never fully possible.

While Mitchell, Egan and Cole are professional, published writers, their Twitter work exists on a continuum and in conversation with fictional works by amateurs. Many such fictions are much closer to the practices of everyday social media use, and amateur social media fictions also often go further than the Twitter fictions of published writers in decentering authorship, incorporating a polyphony of voices, and destabilizing notions of reading by inviting readers to participate. In this regard, too, such fictions resemble the vernacular poetics characteristic of visual and textual vignettes in the commercial culture of the 17th, 18th, and 19th centuries. Thus, it is the works of amateur Twitter writers and a larger underlying commitment to vernacularity that provide models and inspiration for the Twitter work of professional authors, and both draw for

their political potential from the social media work of activist groups like #BlackLivesMatter and Black Twitter—online social movements that embrace multiple meanings, polyvocal and multidirectional conversations, and collaboratively articulated agendas. These formal linkages to BIPOC social media activism, and the historical genealogy of multimodal vernacular short forms, in turn enable counterhegemonic literary practices. Twitter fiction is not necessarily activism, but in displacing the centrality of a single, authoritative voice and inviting readers to participate in meaning-making, it does open up a field of possibility for communal, even democratized, reading and writing.

The central argument of this chapter has been that social media, by reanimating some of the affordances of book historical short forms like the vignette, constitutes an architecture that enables counterhegemonic textual work. Successful forms of social media activisms make use of this architecture, and—in manifestations both amateur and professional—Twitter fictions in turn respond to the forms of critique offered by activist movements to inform their own, realist and critical, representational program. This chapter has provided an analysis of the various forms, genres, and affordances of social media expression in order to draw out the ways of productive social critique and intervention after which fictional projects can be, and are, modeled; and it concluded with a demonstration of how these affordances are used in Twitter fictions by both amateur and professional writers to achieve powerful political messages.

None of these fictional forms are fixed or final; Twitter fiction as a genre is emergent, fluid, and unstable. But the work of these writers testifies to how short digital media are changing literary writing and enabling new forms of realist political fiction in the Twitterverse. The next two chapters describe how social media texts both fictional and nonfictional as well as book historical short forms such as the vignette come together in contemporary print fictions to

articulate a new form of political fiction for the 21st-century—the form that I will call situational realism.

CHAPTER 3: PUSHING REPRESENTATION TO BREVITY'S LIMIT: VIGNETTES IN SHORT STORY CYCLES

> I have no heartbreaking story of the journey here; the heartbreaking story *is* here, in this small couple of square miles of land called Echo Park.
> *The Madonnas of Echo Park,* 20

> While he mentions no plans to change his day-to-day life, this is a condition he says—most of us say—is temporary. Ask any man why he's here, and you'll get the same answer: *What else can I do?*
> *The Madonnas of Echo Park,* 4

> Olive's private view is that life depends on what she thinks of as "big bursts" and "little bursts." Big bursts are things like marriage or children, intimacies that keep you afloat, but those big bursts hold dangerous, unseen currents. Which is why you need the little bursts as well: a friendly clerk at Bradlee's, let's say, or the waitress at Dunkin' Donuts who knows how you like your coffee. Tricky business, really.
> *Olive Kitteridge,* 68-69

This chapter is about when the heartbreaking story is not a story at all, but a condition—a condition that the Mexican American *trabajadores* of Echo Park hope will be temporary, but which is actually the condition that defines their lives. How can 21st-century writers describe such conditions after postmodern fiction has dispensed with the notion of accurately depicting the world? This chapter examines how contemporary short story cycles draw from book historical vignettes as well as from social media's digital vignette aesthetic to articulate a formal alternative to the novel for a 21st-century political realism. Furthermore, as will be the subject of the next chapter, this aesthetic model then informs a new representational paradigm in the contemporary novel as well. Thus, short story cycles represent an intermediary step between the contemporary vignette aesthetics of social media and short digital fictions on the one hand, and the situational realist novel on the other. This chapter examines what can therefore be called the situational realist short story cycle, in which the print fictional paradigm of the situation is cogently and clearly articulated.

Short story cycles, which often imply an underlying, though not explicitly emplotted, sequence of events, are by virtue of their genre an alternative to the novel's organization of events into a causally meaningful sequence, but as I argue in this chapter, situational realist cycles do not merely challenge the novel's structuring of action into plot. More radically, such texts anchor their depiction of the world not in the unit of the short story, but, even smaller, in the unit of the individual glimpse. Complex phenomena such as structural xenophobia or technological transformation thus become accessible to readers not as processes manifesting in action but rather as static situations that determine the environments in which people live. Elizabeth Strout's *Olive Kitteridge,* Brando Skyhorse's *The Madonnas of Echo Park* and Jennifer Egan's *A Visit from the Goon Squad* articulate a social media-inspired representational model in which the vignette, as a brief form of static description, becomes the hinge point of the representation of the world. Strout's, Skyhorse's and Egan's texts therefore offer the short story cycle form as a possible modification of, even model for, the 21st-century novel—a modification that both accounts for the fragmentation of contemporary society and also affirms a commitment to depicting what it means to inhabit it. This chapter, then, examines how the vignette mediates between fragmentary modes of representation from the history of the book and the multimodal brief forms of social media in these short story cycles to produce the new representational paradigm of situational realism. I conclude the chapter by piecing together the notion of the situation—as constructed through vignettes in these texts—that undergirds the situational realist epistemological project.

As the chapter demonstrates, the vignette in these works is a unit of representation that is brief, fulfils a framing or locating function, and privileges the visual and otherwise sensory dimension of perception. As a short glimpse, the vignette provides vivid but curtailed access to

reality without connecting that snapshot into logical explanatory sequences or causal plots; in this, it resembles social media's multilinear directionality as well as its visual quality. At the same time, the vignette also provides a frame in the sense that it sets a context and curtails the horizons to sight, but without clearly defined or delimited boundaries. This aspect draws directly from the ornamental print vignettes in book history, which embodied such porous boundaries between text and image, headings and chapter text, and word and world. The epistemological effect of representation in vignettes is that events, if they appear at all, are treated as if they were conditions: what we see in a vignette is not how an action might lead to a consequence, but how bodies, movements and objects constitute the situations in which people live. Differently than in television, the situation constructed by vignettes is not a plot point in a logical sequence but rather a moment, sometimes a snapshot from an action, treated as a condition or setting. The precise notion of the situation encapsulated by such highly contextual, physically, socially and locally determined settings will emerge from my readings towards the end of the chapter as a concept drawing on but also deviating from its Situationist, technofeminist, and sociolinguistic precursors discussed in the introduction.

The decision to refer to *Olive Kitteridge, The Madonnas of Echo Park,* and *A Visit from the Goon Squad* as short story cycles is informed by the forms of these texts: although their book covers variously claim the status of "novel" (for *Madonnas* and *Goon Squad*) and "a novel in stories" (in the case of *Olive Kitteridge*), the structure of these books resembles the genre that scholars have designated with terms such as the short story cycle (Mann x), the short story composite (Creighton 16), the short story sequence (Luscher 148), or the composite novel (Dunn

and Morris 1–2).[49] These terms describe novel-length works in which each chapter is a short story that can be read on its own but where the individual stories are connected by characters, setting, or theme—a description that adequately captures the formal layout of *Olive Kitteridge, Madonnas* and *Goon Squad*. Yet, I do not fully eschew from labeling these texts as novels: as their self-styling (in their subtitles) suggests, they constitute not merely innovations in the genre of the short story cycle but also in fictional representation writ large. Indeed, although the situational realist paradigm plays out differently in texts where each chapter can be read as an autonomous short story than in novels where this is not the case, the social media-inspired aesthetic centering on the vignette as its main formal device becomes crucial across the board for the works of fiction in this chapter as well as in the next.

Yet, from a narrative theoretical point of view, it does make a significant difference that Strout's, Egan's and Skyhorse's books are made up of short individual works rather than of the linear plotline that one might more typically encounter in a novel. The shortness of the short story as a genre might well be supposed to be particularly enabling for an aesthetics built around the vignette. Puzzlingly, however, the theoretical considerations of the short story genre have tended not to give adequate consideration to the narratological constitution and structural effects of brevity. Influential debates in short story theory, collected in edited volumes by scholars such as Susan Lohafer and Charles May, are mired in the difficulty of pinpointing what the structural implications, defining properties, and affective effects of shortness are. In May's helpful outline of this debate in his later collection, *The New Short Story Theories,* he points to a lineage of scholars, on the one hand, who subordinate the short story to the novel, arguing that its shortness

[49] A discussion of the respective merits and disadvantages of these near-synonyms is tangential to the focus of this chapter and will therefore not be engaged. Throughout this dissertation, I use the term "short story cycle" from among these various designations.

is not enough of a structural distinction and that the short story therefore "cannot be defined excerpt by comparison to the novel" (May vxi). On the other hand, May also observes that if the shortness of the short story does not sufficiently determine its generic affordances, then surely the novel's "longness" is a likewise indeterminate, and hence too often taken for granted, characteristic (vxi). Thus, the issue of the short story's length has, from the point of view of short story theory, often constituted more of a distraction, even detraction, from other more reliable characteristics around which critics could allow the form to stabilize.

One of these characteristics is the genre's disproportional amount of "weight," to use May's word, on the ending. This line of inquiry, which draws from the idea of "unity of effect" in Edgar Allan Poe's well-known account of the genre (Poe 1532), crystallized into a structuralist theory owing importantly to the work of Russian formalist Boris Éjxenbaum, and emphasized the short story's ending as that point which determined its entire narrative flow. It was later rearticulated as a more cognitively oriented theory emphasizing the directionality of short narrative, especially influentially so in Lohafer's notions of "storyness" and "preclosure." "Storyness" reflects the sense of "narrative wholeness" (Lohafer 3) that readers accrue as they progress through a short story, but before having reached its end. This idea relies intimately on Lohafer's earlier notion of the short story's characteristic "overdetermined, early-signaled closure" (Lohafer 2), which Lohafer later replaced with the idea of "preclosure points," points that signal "the 'end' of a putative story within the one the author actually wrote" (4). That is, in this account, short stories evince structural points that complete a *narrative* structure which becomes recognizable to readers on a subconscious, psychological level. For this approach of short story theory, then, the genre reflects a psychological human need to narrativize experience, and narrative ordering, rather than imagistic or static description, is the essential component of the short story.

The vignette is absent from these discussions both as term and as conceptual property, which absence might help explain why brevity remains so puzzling and indeterminate in accounts of the short story genre. Without considering the descriptive, visual or otherwise sensory and often highly static properties introduced by the vignette, short story theories are left with explanations of brevity that can see it only in terms of plot. Indeed, in the influential accounts of the genre, shortness, if important at all, is seen predominantly as a *narrative* component rather than, as previous chapters of this dissertation have demonstrated as the effect of book historical vignettes, a mechanism to arrest or disturb the forward motion of plot. Neglecting to consider the vignette either as a generic or formal unit participating in the discourse around short narrative loses analytical precision in the question of what the effects of brevity on short fictions are.

This chapter takes a different approach, which might begin to piece together a theoretical distinction between vignettes as short descriptive units and the longer, though still short, short stories in which vignettes are employed to particular effects. Thus, in this account, brevity imparts different effects to short stories than a closure or preclosure theory might postulate: rather than determining everything towards an overly significant ending, the more vignettistic—descriptive and static—version of brevity encountered in these short stories deemphasizes both the ending as well as plot itself. Instead, the focus shifts towards the brief and static moments articulated in the vignettes, which linger in a kind of timeless suspension, rather than being dissolved—and resolved—in cathartic, revelatory, or affectively significant endings. This sense of timelessness produces affective insight into conditions that characterize the lives of the characters across larger timespans, rather than as parts of plot points along a trajectory towards some resolution. Thus, vignettistic description in these short stories works against closure and

provides a more affective, experiential view of life in the late 20th and early 21st century. An understanding of the work of vignettes in these short story cycles, then, allows us not only to develop a new realist epistemology, but also to analyze the structural shortness of short stories from a new, less plot-focused, perspective.

This new perspective, which emphasizes visual and sensual insight into the conditions of life on the ground, does not, however, authorize a new or alternative "total" understanding of social life. All three short story cycles discussed in this chapter build a cumulative image of the life of a particular community, perceived from the perspective of a different character in each short story, and yet, though in different ways, *Madonnas, Goon Squad* and *Olive Kitteridge* all resist the notion that a unified aggregate image should or can be assembled. Indeed, these works thematize the representational failures and ethical risks involved in the attempts to link such images in logically coherent narratives. Instead, they insist on the individual images themselves as the loci of representational attention and the ground from which a political understanding of the world can emerge. *The Madonnas of Echo Park* is about the Mexican and Mexican American inhabitants of Echo Park, a Los Angeles neighborhood that is undergoing rapid gentrification: in its eight short stories, we encounter the first-person narratives of people who are linked by family or friendship ties, but whose stories rarely overlap in any meaningful ways that the characters themselves might recognize. The perspectives of the day laborer Hector, of his daughter Aurora, of the formerly incarcerated gang member Freddy, or of his stepdaughter Angie do not add up to an aggregate understanding of the life paths and fates of these characters; instead, they yield a multitude of perspectives on Echo Park—on the settings and objects of these people's lives. *Madonnas* insists on the view from the ground, privileging the gaze that looks *with* a character on particular settings and situations, and thematizes the alienated or otherwise troubled

relationships of characters who cannot engage in such situated looking. The visual and otherwise sensory dimension becomes paramount: in order to confront these characters' realities, we have to look directly and see intensely rather than attempt to make abstract logical connections.

Olive Kitteridge similarly prioritizes the view from below. Depicting the lives of different characters in the (fictional) coastal town of Crosby, Maine, Strout's book ostensibly provides the figure of the title character as a unifying presence, and the stories of her family members—her husband Henry and her son Christopher—as central anchoring points of the text. But the short stories that present moments from these characters' lives, such as "Pharmacist," which details the story of Henry's infatuation with his employee, or "A Little Burst," in which Christopher is getting married, are presented in ways that suggest the failed epistemological promise of understanding through plot. Foregrounding detail observations, the perspective from below, and events described as though they were static situations anchored in physical space, *Olive Kitteridge* problematizes the urge to use narrative to make sense of people's lives. Instead, the text offers vignettes that present only the briefly glimpsed moment—making the specific event visible as a static condition—as a more immediately available mode of understanding lived experience. People's momentary situations matter more than their stories of development.

A Visit from the Goon Squad is also concerned with the fallacy of the attempt to understand people primarily through narrative. Egan's text, which focuses on the changing familial, friendship and amorous dynamics of a group of young people in New York City and San Francisco as their lives are increasingly dominated by technology, repeatedly features characters who make inferences about others based on stories about them, or who rely on grand narratives about aging, authenticity or the relationship between the sexes in order to make sense of their predicaments. But such interpretations routinely fail, and *Goon Squad* uses vignettes to provide

vivid, sensory glimpses into characters' situations that pointedly demonstrate those failures. The material and social situations of characters thus not only allow meaningful insight into the conditions of their lives, but they also make clear the inadequacy of projects that seek to amalgamate them into larger narratives of sense-making. Thus, while 21st-century neorealist fiction that continues to center on plot remains vulnerable to postmodernist critique, I argue that the short story cycles that concern this chapter have internalized and respond to that critique by emphasizing situations rather than plot.

Of course, *A Visit from the Goon Squad, The Madonnas of Echo Park* and *Olive Kitteridge* are not entirely composed of vignettes, or even of description: ample room remains for plot, and there are also many cases of description that are not vignettes. But the expansive and systematic use of the vignette in these short story cycles works to foreground situations, displace plot, and ultimately line these works up in a new realist epistemological project rooted in situatedness. Where and in what conditions people are situated—that is, the ways in which they are anchored in physical and social spaces and in relations among people and objects—provides a more meaningful access to their lived realities than do explanatory plotlines or life stories.

It is for this reason that in these 21st-century short story cycles, the central short representational form is the vignette rather than the individual short story—the vignette that never encompasses a whole short story but is always a small unit within it. Indeed, while the short story cycle as a genre already embodies a fragmented approach to plot, the vignettes in these cycles break up the plots of even the individual short stories themselves. This formal structure resembles that of social media, where a thread—though itself a short form already—might still constitute a logical sequence of contributions to a teleological argument or opinion, but is itself further broken up by small segments that refuse such narrative logic. Such segments,

often photos or looping GIFs in social media, rely on visuality to break the linearity of the causal chain. In the short story cycles of this chapter, it is vignettes that serve this function: by presenting a visual and intensive focus on the immediate setting, vignettes arrest the forward motion of even an individual short story's plot. Thus, though plot is not fully absent, the vignettes refuse the logical or causal organization of events.

Indeed, at around 20-30 pages, for example, the short stories of these books transcend the single glimpses afforded by the vignettes in them: in this, *Goon Squad, Olive Kitteridge* and *Madonnas* depart from works like Sandra Cisneros's *The House on Mango Street*, where each individual story is itself a single vignette. This larger scale of the short stories allows them to develop some notion of plot, usually coming from the characters' attempts to narrativize their lives. Thus, these three books do initially suggest that plot—events, stories, epiphanies—matter, but, importantly, this suggestion is undermined by the central driving force of the vignettes, which demonstrates the failure of plot-based representation. In what follows, then, I offer an account of how vignettes, inspired by the short descriptive forms of social media as well as brief structuring forms from book history, enable *Olive Kitteridge, A Visit from the Goon Squad* and *The Madonnas of Echo Park* to articulate a situational realist representational program that relies on the minute glimpse to provide readers with access to the conditions of contemporary life in different parts of the United States.

Olive Kitteridge: The Epistemology of the Small

Elizabeth Strout's *Olive Kitteridge* centers on thirteen characters living in the fictional town of Crosby, Maine, whose lives are not so much connected as taking place in proximity, and sometimes in intersection with, each other. The titular character, Olive, a local math teacher who

is in older middle age for most of the book, provides a point of reference for many of the characters, although she does not occur in all of the stories, and is a protagonist in only a few of them. Olive's storyline involves her relationships with her husband, Henry, and her son, Christopher: several short stories depict, in more or less chronological order, Henry's retirement from his work in the pharmacy, Christopher's first marriage, Henry's stroke, paralysis and subsequent death, as well as Olive's solitary life after Henry's passing. The majority of short stories, however, treat other Crosby residents, in whose stories Olive sometimes appears fleetingly, is mentioned, or at times even interacts with the focalizing characters. Olive's perspective is thus an omnipresent possibility, but one in which the text indulges only intermittently. Indeed, I argue that the figure of Olive functions as a constant threat to the attempts to unify *Olive Kitteridge*'s many divergent narratives and perspectives. Her person does not authorize a grand narrative that allows us to better comprehend the stories of other characters or even her own, and whenever readers inhabit her perspective, her thoughts and views destabilize linear explanatory narratives.

This reading departs from the interpretations of previous critics, who have tended to read *Olive Kitteridge* as more unified due to its tightly delineated setting and the charisma of its quirky main character. Yet, *Olive Kitteridge* has not received much scholarly attention in spite of its commercial and institutional success (it was the winner of the 2009 Pulitzer Prize for fiction and was made into an HBO miniseries under the direction of Lisa Cholodenko in 2014). Most critical engagements focus on the miniseries, which intervenes provocatively into debates about women's televisual expression (e.g. Brooks; Letort), and even in journalism, more attention has been devoted to the miniseries than to Strout's novel (see for example Nussbaum). Although the perspectives of these scholars reflect the miniseries' primary focus on questions of gender, aging,

domesticity and depression, scholars have without fail picked up the central role of the coastal Maine setting, as well as on Olive's role in mediating the stories of many of the other characters. In fact, readers of the HBO series have argued that Crosby comes together as a web of interconnected stories thanks to the psychological unifying presence of the work's title character—an argument that might well explain the filmic adaptation of Strout's book. By contrast, I argue that *Olive Kitteridge* only speciously offers Olive's perspective as one that will unify, organize and therefore make sense of the relationships between the characters and their conflicts. Indeed, the central drive of the book is to undermine any such explanatory function that Olive might offer; the illusion is only set up in order to be debunked. Olive's views and observations do not construct plausible causal relationships; rather, they disrupt the possibility of any such logic. Instead, what Olive and *Olive Kitteridge* as a whole offer is a type of groundedness: an awareness of, and a perspective from, the ground upon which the lives of the characters are founded. The person of Olive and the physical features of the Maine environment thus function analogously as wedges in the narrative structure that cause linear teleologies of character development and unifying explanations to break down.

Olive Kitteridge begins in a way that helpfully illustrates this tension between plot, which could arrange events into logical, causal sequences, and the mere presence of the Maine environment. At first glance, the cycle's first short story, "Pharmacy," seems to tell a story—that of Henry's platonic and extramarital love for his assistant in the pharmacy, Denise. Discrete events do take place: Denise arrives at the pharmacy, Henry invites her and her husband over to the Kitteridges for dinner, during which he spills ketchup on his shirt, Denise's husband dies tragically in a hunting accident, Henry starts taking Denise under his wing, and finally she leaves town, sending Henry an occasional postcard. But from its very beginning, "Pharmacy" sets up an

opposition between plot events and Henry's situatedness in the specifics of the environment, and suggests that his life is more meaningfully captured by minute glimpses into the latter. "Pharmacy" opens with a vignette that immediately constructs the details of the environment as a transtemporal condition in which Henry's life is set:

> For many years Henry Kitteridge was a pharmacist in the next town over, driving every morning on snowy roads, or rainy roads, or summertime roads, when the wild raspberries shot their new growth in brambles along the last section of town before he turned off to where the wider road led to the pharmacy. Retired now, he still wakes early and remembers how mornings used to be his favorite, as though the world were his secret, tires rumbling softly beneath him and the light emerging through the early fog, the brief sight of the bay off to his right, then the pines, tall and slender, and almost always he rode with the window partly open because he loved the smell of the pines and the heavy salt air, and in the winter he loved the smell of the cold. (*Olive Kitteridge* 3)

This opening passage introduces some markers of a story's beginning: for example, the distance between the time of telling ("now," when Henry is retired) and what seems like story time ("used to be," when Henry "was a pharmacist") sets up the traditional expectation of narrative discourse, where the telling and the action are temporally distinct. In the narratology of Gerard Genette as formalized by Seymour Chatman, the telling takes place in the present, in the dimension of discourse-time, while the story unfolds in the past, in story time (Genette 33; Chatman 62–84; Scheffel et al. n.p.). However, although such a narrative expectation is set up within the first two sentences, the passage immediately scrambles these temporal distinctions, since the story seems set in the present (Henry "wakes early" and "remembers"). Yet, that present-time setting is itself blurred by the amount of space that the passage spends in the diegetic past: the description of Henry's morning drive makes it seem as if it were an event taking place in the diegetic present. Thus, as readers we spend most of the time of the passage on the road with Henry, in a flashback extended for so long that it can no longer be realistically considered a flashback. In sum, if we are reading for plot, we receive a few highly different

indications to go on, and the account itself remains suspended in the copresence of multiple temporalities. Even as it is introduced, plot is also put off, as if kept for later.

Instead, what the first paragraph of "Pharmacist" does is locate the reader in static state of the sensual experience of place. We see the "snowy roads, or rainy roads," confront the dark purple of the "wild raspberries," bask in "the light emerging through the early fog" and smell "the pines and the heavy salt air," or "the smell of the cold." In other words, readers are made to experience Henry's drive in sight and smell. We are told it is a daily routine, and yet we witness it as if it were a singular occurrence. By contrast, the opening passage allows us no access into the present of Henry's existence: we do not see, hear, or smell what his present early morning is like, although, as we learn later, the discourse present takes place during a single day rather than in an extended routine.

Thus, although we might expect story—indeed, "Pharmacist" might initially seem to invite us to expect it—, our first encounter with *Olive Kitteridge* is one that displaces our sense of time (are we in Henry's past or present? Will the story be set in the past or the present?). Instead, the opening situates us in an atemporal, highly visual (and olfactory) condition that is the determining setting of Henry's life. Like the printed ornamental vignettes in the early book—indeed, like the opening vignettes of *Clarissa*, which already set the stage for the drama of the loss of innocence—, this opening vignette frames the text and at the same time offers an alternative to a plot-based mode of reading. At the very beginning of the short story cycle, "Pharmacy" guides our attention away from the plot events and towards the sensory details of the environment: thus, although plot is introduced, it is immediately deferred.

Furthermore, "Pharmacy" as a unit operates in the manner of its first passage—and this is generally true, albeit to varying degrees, of all the short stories in *Olive Kitteridge* and ultimately

of the full cycle. Although this short story does relate the events of Henry's infatuation with Denise, throughout the text, narrative attention shifts to those descriptions, like Henry's morning drive, that constitute more general, habitual occurrences. Indeed, as the short story's title suggests, the space of the pharmacy becomes the story's primary site, the backdrop to most of its important events and descriptive vignette. For example, Henry's increasing fascination with Denise is captured in vignettes that depict the young woman in moments of work or break from work in the pharmacy:

> Sometimes on her break she would sit on a crate in the back room with the Merck Manual on her lap. Her child-face, made serious by her glasses, would be intent on the page, her knees poked up, her shoulders slumped forward. (13)

Or we see Henry's state of happiness in Denise's presence similarly described in a vignette:

> His smile would linger as he arranged his bottles, typed up labels. Denise's nature attached itself to his as easily as aspirin attached itself to the enzyme COX-2; Henry moved through his day pain free. The sweet hissing of the radiators, the tinkle of the bell when someone came through the door, the creaking of the wooden floors, the ka-*ching* of the register. (13)

Like the morning drive passage, both of these examples offer snapshots of routine, everyday events that seem initially to depict Henry's attention to Denise but which actually speak more powerfully to the characters' situatedness within a rural, isolated setting. Because they portray recurring, habitual events (indicated by the repeated use of habitual "would") as if readers were catching vivid, intense glimpses of singular events, these passages are vignettes: under the pretext of delivering the Henry-Denise story, they offer minute insight into the spaces and objects that inhabit and frame these characters' lives.

In the wake of Denise's husband's death, Henry apprehends her sorrow similarly in vignettes, such as when he "remembers her standing by the fan near the window, her thin hair flying behind her in little undulating waves, while she gazed through her glasses at the

windowsill. Standing there for minutes at a time" (23). Similarly to Monique Proulx's "Vignettes," the story with which this study opens, "Pharmacy" suggests that instead of story, memory relies on vignettes—brief, vivid sensory glimpses—of what happened. Although it is possible to piece together the story of the events that took place, "Pharmacy" suggests that to comprehend these characters' predicaments, it is more helpful to pay attention to the small, sensory details about the objects and environments that shape each character's situation.

Indeed, Strout herself has emphasized that setting plays a major role in her creative process. In response to a question from the audience during a reading in Newton, Massachusetts in October 2018, Strout claimed that for her, the two essential components for a new work were a clear sense of the setting and of the characters, but not of story (Strout, *Newtonville Books* n.p.). This seems to imply that the central *raison d'être* of Strout's texts tends to be to capture the relationships between people and their particular environments, while the recounting of events that befall is secondary. While such authorial statements need not be read as definitive or even adequate accounts of what her texts do, Strout's claim is borne out by the prominent presence of vignettes like the ones in "Pharmacy" discussed above: the Henry-Denise plotline is available to readers but secondary next to descriptive attention to the small details of everyday life.

The short story "A Little Burst" provides another characteristic example of *Olive Kitteridge*'s detail-based representational program. In this story, Olive and Henry's son, Christopher, is getting married to Suzanne, a woman from a wealthy background whom he had met just a few weeks earlier, and about whom, in spite of her better intentions, Olive has some misgivings. The short story, however, does not so much recount the wedding as provide short descriptions of its small and insignificant details. The wedding, arguably a momentous event in a person's life, is thus demoted from its place as the locus of narrative importance; as film critics

Jodi Brooks and Delphine Letort both observe about the *Olive Kitteridge* miniseries, the wedding scene builds up a tension between what Olive calls "big bursts" and "little bursts:"

> Big bursts are things like marriage or children, intimacies that keep you afloat, but those big bursts hold dangerous, unseen currents. Which is why you need the little bursts as well: a friendly clerk at Bradlee's, let's say, or the waitress at Dunkin' Donuts who knows how you like your coffee. (68-69)

"A Little Burst," which concerns precisely the "big burst" of Christopher's wedding, throws this distinction, central to *Olive Kitteridge* as a whole, into stark relief. The short story gives us only little account of the wedding ceremony or bridal procession themselves, focusing instead on small moments that come to embody the larger predicament in which Olive finds herself—her rootedness to the Maine soil and to the house that she and Henry built, her inability to comprehend her son's growing need to escape, and especially her unease with other people's confidence in their knowledge of others. While depicting the ostensible "big burst" of Christopher's wedding, what the chapter actually spends most time on is what might be called the "look from below," focusing not on the life-changing aspects but the little, seemingly insignificant details of the event. Using Olive's terminology, then, we might say that "A Little Burst" stands in for *Olive Kitteridge*'s larger representational project, which privileges the little bursts as the primary vehicle for depiction and produces what can be called an epistemology of the small.

The description of the wedding opens with an Olive who, worn out from the social expectations at the wedding party, retires into her son's bedroom to lie down to rest. As she lies in bed, readers receive indications of how the party is going from the muted, distant perspective of the bed:

> The inside door of her son's bedroom is partly open, and voices and sounds make their way from the front of the house, where the party is also going on: high heels

> clicking down the hallway, a bathroom door pushed aggressively shut. (Honestly, Olive thinks—why not just close a door nicely?) A chair in the living room gets scraped over the floor, and in there with the muted laughter and talk is the odor of coffee, and the thick, sweet smell of baked goods, which is the way the streets near the Nissen bread factory used to smell before it closed down. There are different perfumes as well, including one that all day has smelled to Olive like that bug spray Off! All these smells have managed to move down the hall and drift into the bedroom. (62)

This passage is structured into two distinct bits: first the narrator describes the sensory events as agents or witnesses to action ("voices and sounds make their way from the front of the house," "a bathroom door pushed aggressively shut"), and then we hear Olive's thoughts in response to them ("why not just close a door nicely?" or, arguably, "which is the way the streets near the Nissen bread factory used to smell before it closed down"). Overall, the impression is that of an experience shared with Olive: the reader is similarly cut off from the main events as Olive is. Unlike free indirect discourse, where the boundaries between the narrator's voice and the character's are porous, this passage locates the reader as a separate participant in the scene, inhabiting a perspective similar to, but not overlapping with, Olive's. The passage makes a fairly clear separation between the external, almost factual, description of the sensory experience—the sounds and smells—and Olive's thoughts, which are delivered as a distinct, individual way of receiving and reacting to the remote voices. Yet the reader does share Olive's focus on the small details of the event: the noise of a chair dragged over the floor, doors being shut, the smells of coffee and pastries, and later, "[c]igarette smoke, too" (62). Importantly, sight is the sense that is blocked off by Olive's perspective: in a culture dominated by the primacy of the visual, the displacement of this sense works to suggest an alternative perspective to the socially sanctioned, mainstream one. Olive's horizontal position in the bed also reinforces the notion of the perspective from below, and justifies the focus on, indeed the availability of, small and seemingly unimportant details.

Naomi Schor argues that attention to the detail has been traditionally associated with the domain of the feminine and the domestic (Schor 3–4). Indeed, critics of Cholodenko's filmic adaptation argue that this connection constitutes the driving force of the miniseries, which highlights Olive's situatedness, even entrapment, in a domesticity that her husband and environment insist is a woman's place. Brooks even compares Cholodenko's interpretation to Chantal Akerman's 1975 *Jeanne Dielman: 23 Commerce Quay, 1080 Brussels,* a masterpiece of feminist cinema depicting what Brooks calls "female discontent" with the domestic sphere (Brooks 945). Certainly, Olive's perspective here is a feminized one, located as it is below the height of an adult person, and in a bed no less. But although Olive is clearly at odds with the rest of the company, this passage seems to express less a female discontent with the domestic sphere as rather the ability of the feminized, detail-focused perspective to grasp the "little bursts," the small details of the situation that offer an alternative understanding of the world than that authored by event-centric and plot-based accounts.

Indeed, "A Little Burst" makes clear that the latter are associated with a more masculine, socially sanctioned way of organizing experience when it contrasts Olive's husband Henry's perspective with that of Olive and the reader. This occurs when Henry, who is at ease at the wedding and has been participating actively in its events, comes to look in on Olive to make sure that she is all right. As he sits down on the bed next to his wife, his "big face is shiny with the affability that comes over him in large groups of people" (65), which seems to render him oblivious to the small sensory details of which Olive is so aware. As Henry tries to pacify Olive's complaints that "They're smoking outside there" (66), the narrator gives indication that the "smell of cigarette smoke returns" (66) but the smell does not lead Henry to accept Olive's complaints. In fact, Olive herself, though not a timid woman, seems inhibited by Henry's

presence to use the smell as evidence to her point. It is as if Henry's more socially acceptable focus on the events of the wedding ("Everything went well, I think" [66]) threatens, even temporarily disables, Olive's "look from below."

But the short story suggests that Henry's way of organizing experience around causal event sequences produces misleading interpretations of other people and their situations, while Olive's attention to the details resists misrecognizing others or fitting them into inadequate molds. For example, although Olive attempts to endorse a positive attitude towards Christopher's bride, Suzanne ("all things considered, Dr. Sue will do fine," she thinks [68]), the little details she notices about Suzanne's behavior make it difficult for her to accept Henry's observation that Christopher has "married a nice woman" (66), "good for Christopher" (67). And Olive will turn out to be right, as the text as a whole suggests, since we learn in a later story that Christopher's and Suzanne's marriage ends in divorce only a year later (144). Even before Olive overhears Suzanne's spiteful gossiping about the "hard time" her "new in-laws" gave the child Christopher (70, 69), Olive notices small moments during the wedding ceremony in which Suzanne seems to be projecting images of herself that are meant to be integrated into mainstream narratives about weddings. Specifically, her seemingly generous behavior toward the child of one of the guests, as well as her affirmative "I do" during the ceremony, strike Olive as scripted as parts of a larger, well-known narrative. For Olive, the scene with the little girl, "who was supposed to sprinkle rose petals on the ground right before the ceremony but at the last minute decided she didn't want to, and hung back, sulking" (63-64), exemplifies Suzanne's production of an image of herself as empathetic to children even when they threaten the perfection of the wedding. That Suzanne is "nice about it," "speaking reassuringly to the little girl, cupping her hands gently around the child's head" (64), has a strange, unsettling effect on Olive:

> But the gesture, the smooth cupping of the little girl's head, the way Suzanne's hand in one quick motion caressed the fine hair and thin neck, has stayed with Olive. It was like watching some woman dive from a boat and swim easily up to the dock. A reminder how some people could do things others could not. (64)

Suzanne's gesture appears to Olive as a performance of grace rather than a sign of Suzanne's innately gentle and sympathetic nature: the "things" Suzanne can do well that "others could not" therefore include, for Olive, an elegant self-presentation that dazzles onlookers the way a graceful swimmer or a beautiful bride might. Indeed, when we later hear Suzanne's dismissive comments about Christopher's parents, it becomes clear that a sympathetic outlook and restraint from criticism do not necessarily come naturally to her. In this regard, then, Olive is right to feel ill at ease with her daughter-in-law. Although Strout does not give Olive omniscience, nor does she affirm Olive's interpretations, "A Little Burst" does suggest that the scripted actions that obey the rules of familiar plots, such as that of the graceful and gracious bride, produce misleading interpretations of the characters. While we cannot fully affirm whether Suzanne truly is "good for Christopher" or not, or whether Henry and Olive were good or bad parents (indeed, *Olive Kitteridge* does offer some suggestions that they may have been less than ideal), Suzanne's self-presentation does appear at least dubious, given the small details about her that Olive observes. Strout's text suggests, then, that the little details to which Olive as well as the narrator pays heightened attention enable our comprehension of the world around us more than do the underlying stories.

By contrast, Suzanne relies precisely on the power of narrative to shape our understanding of the world, or at least, so Olive thinks. For Suzanne, story—specifically the story of how she and Christopher met—serves as the primary epistemological vehicle, as both evidence for and guarantor that "she [Suzanne] actually *knew* him" (67, emphasis original). The story, which "Suzanne was telling… all day" (66), becomes a foundation myth, a grand narrative, that imbues

"how Suzanne was looking at Christopher while they were getting married" with a deeper meaning, that of 'I know you—yes, I do, I *do*'" (68). Indeed, in Olive's mind their entire wedding becomes an affirmation not so much of the wish to spend their married life together but rather of the power of the explanatory narrative, as Suzanne's "I do" is meant to indicate her special knowledge, gained by way of narrative. This is Olive's interpretation, of course, but Suzanne's insistence on retelling the story of her initial meeting with Christopher again and again over the course of the day suggests a need to cling on to that story for its reassuring teleology and its confidence in the knowledge of Christopher.

Olive, and *Olive Kitteridge*, are suspicious of such insistence on storytelling to assert knowledge and organize experience. It is for this reason that Olive ends up smearing a Magic Marker over Suzanne's sweater in secret, "just to keep the self-doubt alive. Give herself a little burst" (74). In other words, for Olive, doubt and uncertainty are valuable: the small details that do not align with the way we have explained the world for ourselves counteract the "fear" she feels when seeing someone like Suzanne's self-assurance in "smiling up at Christopher, as though she actually *knew* him" (67). We never learn why the relationship between Christopher and Suzanne does not work out, but we do know that they are divorced a year after their wedding. In other words, *Olive Kitteridge* suggests that although neither Olive nor any other character has any privileged access to truth or knowledge, the small details to which Olive is attentive, and which are presented to the reader in vignettes, allow for a more bodily, more immediate and more reliable understanding of the world, even if that understanding remains always limited.

Staring at Life in *A Visit from the Goon Squad*

Jennifer Egan's *A Visit from the Goon Squad* is similarly concerned with how interpretations based on the premise of narrative causality lead characters to ignore, misrecognize and misread the perhaps most important features of their particular situations. Like *Olive Kitteridge, Goon Squad* provides readers with short, sensory glimpses of some of these features, but unlike in Strout's text, none of the characters models the sensitive attention to detail that descriptive vignettes offer. Further, although Egan's characters' misguided interpretations of their lives are heightened by their struggle with the changes wrought by digital technology, *Goon Squad* does not condemn such technologies. Instead, Egan's text suggests that blaming digital technology for the characters' alienation from one another and themselves is actually a misrecognition of the underlying causes, a misrecognition authored by narrative attempts to construct causality. Indeed, formally, Egan's book enacts a social media-based structure, where representation is multimodal, multidirectional, and always fragmented. In this way, the text affirms the descriptive potential of such forms and urges its readers to distance themselves from the characters' misleading interpretations of the causes of their plights.

Set in the late 1970s to the early 2020s and moving between New York, San Francisco and other locales, *Goon Squad* recounts the stories of a group of characters whose lives and careers mirror, and are shaped by, the decline of rock music and the rise of digital technology. The book's thirteen short stories focalize thirteen different characters and are told from different points of view, but characters do reappear in one another's short stories. The two characters who appear the most frequently are Sasha and Bennie (Solwitz 604). Bennie, a member of the high school punk band the Flaming Dildos and later music producer, struggles with the changes wrought by digitally produced music and is ultimately fired from his job when he breaks down

and serves his executives cow pies as a statement about his view of the music industry. Sasha, a college-educated white woman and Bennie's assistant in some of the short stories, faces difficulties with mental health and issues around kleptomania. If any of the characters' life stories can be assembled into linear plots, it is Sasha's and Bennie's, who are the centers of "reader-interest" (Solwitz 604). As will be argued below, however, the linearity of their stories is presented in mere glimpses that are frequently undercut by images from other narratives, producing a flickering, imagistic narrative structure that resembles the texture of social media. Indeed, chapter 12, a short story presented entirely in PowerPoint format, makes the text's interest in digital forms explicit. The overall digitally inflected structure of the book serves to cast doubt upon the characters' own misleading attempts to organize their life stories into too-linear causal narratives.

This argument differs from what could be called an emerging critical consensus about Egan's book. Often read in continuity with modernist or postmodern experimental fiction (Moling 53; Cowart 243), *Goon Squad* is seen by many critics as a meditation on time and its effects on human lives. "Jennifer Egan stages and restages the doomed battle of youth with time, the "goon" of her title," David Cowart announces in the opening sentence of his article on Egan's novel (Cowart 241). For Sharon Solwitz, the novel's main question is the one articulated by Scotty Hausmann, former lead guitarist of the Flaming Dildos in the late 1970s who has lost his career, wife and home: "I want to know what happened between A and B" (Egan 101; Solwitz 605). For this reason, Solwitz argues that the novel's twelfth chapter, "Great Rock and Roll Pauses," narrated in a PowerPoint format by the child Alison Blake, which is both about pauses and "itself a kind of pause in the narrative," is the central piece that "governs" the novel as a whole: standing as an "intentional gap in time" between points A and B, it compels readers

to ponder the "unanswerable" questions of what happened in between (Solwitz 606). Martin Moling reads *Goon Squad* "[i]n light of a perennial literary tradition exploring human subjection to the ravages of time," from which only *Goon Squad*'s moments of "punk time" can offer reprieve (Moling 53). James Zappen succinctly summarizes this scholarly view: "The title of the novel reflects the observation of several of the characters that "Time's a goon" (127, 332), an acknowledgement that time takes its toll on all of them and that most of them make compromises of one kind or another as their lives run the course "between A and B" (101)" (Zappen 301). The central interest of the novel, then, according to these scholars, is the characters' struggle with the vicissitudes of passing time and the imponderable questions of aging.

By contrast, I take the novel's interest in pauses and moments to build a representational structure intent on capturing the conditions of living in a society ever more in the grip of machinic and digital technology, represented most clearly in the text's depiction of the transformation of the music industry. Egan's book, I contend, is about the historically specific moment in which physical, material experience seems ever more sidelined by digitally mediated modes of being—although, as will be argued in more detail, *Goon Squad* does not condemn this transformation so much as seek for ways to productively use digital-influenced forms for representational purposes. Accordingly, I read the text's title as a reference not to an ahistorical truth, but rather more specifically to the "goon squad" in David Bowie's song "Fashion," whose visit to town has transformative consequences for social life:

> Fashion—turn to the left
> Fashion—turn to the right
> Oooh, fashion!
> We are the goon squad and we're coming to town
> Beep-beep, beep-beep! (Bowie n.p.)

Bowie, whose work plays an important role elsewhere in *Goon Squad,* as several critics have recognized (Moling 58; Strong 479), here articulates a critique of the tyranny of changing trends that dominate social life: when fashion, personified here as a band of clowns ("goon squad") descends upon the city, there is no escaping its tyrannical dictates ("turn to the left" and "turn to right" resembles the orders barked at a military parade or other orchestrations of power). Egan's title picks up on Bowie's image of the descent of the goons of fashion on town—a descent announced through technology, the "beep-beep" of a machine. "A visit from the goon squad," then, refers to the seemingly arbitrary changes in modes of experience in the late 20th and early 21st centuries, and specifically to the unforeseen degree to which technology has become the new "hype" that obliterates both earlier modes of communication (as seen in the novel's "T-ing," a radically shortened form of texting) and instrumental music-making (as Bennie complains, "the problem was *digitization*, which sucked the life out of everything" [23, emphasis original]).

I argue that it is in the context of these changing fashions that Egan's insistence on pauses and momentary experiences becomes meaningful. These moments do not halt time or interrupt the process of aging; instead, they are the new ways in which a technologically constituted world can be apprehended. Indeed, pauses and fragmentation work simultaneously to reproduce the experience of a technologically enhanced life and also to enable a sensory relationship to the world, suggesting that digitization has not obliterated the bodily and material dimensions of life. But such dimensions have become more difficult to access, which is why *Goon Squad* presents them in short vignettes, whose alternation produces a social media aesthetic of flickering images and multidirectional texts. *Goon Squad*'s situational realist program, then, relies precisely on technologically influenced forms to represent the enduring presence of material reality.

Counterintuitively, then, in this reading the PowerPoint chapter is not the central formal constituent of Egan's novel: although it does embody *Goon Squad*'s emphasis on pause as well as its interest in digital forms, the text's twelve other chapters employ a subtler, and I argue more productive, strategy to draw from digital forms a new representational paradigm. These chapters use vignettes that resemble social media's representational structures to depict the glimpsed but impactful conditions of the characters' lives. In so doing, they not only capture the representational possibilities of a social media-infused culture, but also successfully articulate the conditions that govern these characters' lives, and thus provide a ground for a critique of late capitalist society.

The book's first short story, "Found Objects," which focalizes Sasha, succinctly demonstrates *Goon Squad*'s social media-based vignette aesthetics: "Found Objects" recounts at least two distinct plots in alternating short moments that make each plot function as a brief and simultaneous commentary on the other. The short story as whole therefore reads like a social media feed, where images, captions, comments and hashtags together form a rhizomatic and multidirectional narrative or descriptive structure.

"Found Objects," told from a third-person point of view, focalizes Sasha, who goes on an indifferent date, is tempted to steal a woman's purse in the hotel bar's bathroom, and ultimately ends up having sex with her date, from whom she also steals a trinket, a "scrap of binder paper" that says "*I BELIEVE IN YOU*" (17). Intermittently during this account we hear interjected observations by Sasha's therapist, Coz ("'I get it,' Coz, her therapist said" [4]) or even snippets from different therapy sessions. The chapter thus reads like a parallel account of one particular instance of Sasha's struggle with kleptomania, and of her account of that instance to her therapist. Like in *Olive Kitteridge*'s "Pharmacy," where the temporal present of the telling is

uncertain, "Found Objects" obliterates the clear temporal distinctions between these plots, placing them instead into a simultaneous existence similar to how they might be found on a social media platform.

Scholars have tended to analyze this short story in terms of its final scene, in which Sasha is in therapy, examining whether the silence that ensues between her and her therapist, Coz, represents an opening for an altered conception of time:

> There was a pause, during which Sasha was keenly aware of Coz behind her, waiting. She wanted badly to please him, to say something like *It was a turning point; everything feels different now*, or *I called Lizzie and we made up finally*, or *I've picked up the harp again*, or just *I'm changing I'm changing I'm changing: I've changed!* Redemption, transformation—God how she wanted these things. Every day, every minute. Didn't everyone?
>
> "Please," she told Coz. "Don't ask me how I feel."
>
> "All right," he said quietly.
>
> They sat in silence, the longest silence that ever had passed between them. Sasha looked at the windowpane, rinsed continually with rain, smearing lights in the falling dark. She lay with her body tensed, claiming the couch, her spot in this room, her view of the window and the walls, the faint hum that was always there when she listened, and these minutes of Coz's time: another, then another, then one more. (18)

Critics disagree about the meaning of this scene, but they concur in the significance of the pause that it embodies. Zappen argues that *Goon Squad* is made up "silent connections" between particular moments in the novel, where different times and places are connected by an unspoken recurring motif (Zappen 300), and that "Sasha's silent moment with Coz" is precisely such a connection. We are not made aware of it at this point in the novel, but, Zappen argues, "readers need to infer for themselves, perhaps retrospectively," that this moment "is a crucial turning point in [Sasha's] life" (Zappen 302). Cowart disagrees, arguing that "[t]he "story" written by Sasha and her therapist (5, 7, 13) moves toward no meaningful resolution: its aimless unspooling mocks any larger metanarrative as well. Readers may assemble, order, and recapitulate the novel's component parts, but they discover no mythic, valorizing narrative" (Cowart 249). Their differences notwithstanding, these readers of Egan's novel both accord Sasha's therapy session

with crucial importance: for Zappen it is one of the early instances in the novel where "silent connections" are made, whereas for Cowart, it stands in for Egan's project of "modernism at a century's remove" (Cowart 243), where the modernist preoccupation with "the central mystery of time's arrow—or [with] the meaning of life in thrall to time" are not resolved, because postmodernism has obliterated even the remotest possibility of coherence (249).

I agree that this passage is important for the representational program of the book as a whole, but I contend that it is misleading to think of this moment in therapy as a "turning *point*" (Zappen 302, my emphasis): in my interpretation, not only does this moment not change anything fundamental in Sasha's life, but it is also not a "point" in the sense that it would stand apart from any of Sasha's other life experiences. In other words, it cannot be considered a plot "point" along a sequence of other plot events that articulate a forward motion. Rather, Sasha is stuck in a static situation which she can neither improve and which she is likewise unable, or unwilling, to recognize—and this stuckness, as well as Sasha's inability to see it, is precisely what this moment embodies. Sasha's silent moment not only shows her blindness to what it is that she is actually stuck in, but it also cracks open her misleading attempts to cast her struggle as an individual mental-health issue rather than a product of larger social structures. In endowing the silence with interpretative significance, in attempting to "crack" the puzzle of what ails her on the level of an individual with their own personal story, Sasha fails to inhabit her other experiences, including her date and the experience of therapy itself. Her reading, as well as scholarly readings that invest Sasha's silent moment with interpretations of sequential meaning and personal development, thus stand in stark contrast with a short story in which both sequential progression and the individual's story are disabled. Instead, what the parallel and alternating accounts of the date plot and the therapy plot achieve is a sense of Sasha's experience as part of a

larger, impersonal condition in which Sasha has become stuck, which cannot be integrated into a narrative of personal success or failure. It is this condition that is rendered accessible, through brief sensory moments, in the vignettes that displace the narration of plot in this short story.

The silent moment at the end of the chapter is itself such a vignette and thus participates as an equal in the representational work of the vignettes of the story as a whole. Certainly, as Zappen and Cowart both suggest, the pause during therapy allows Sasha to reflect on the events, but it does not seem like Sasha is able to use that space for any such productive thinking. She is too tense and anxious, even distrustful of the notion of progress, and mistakenly aiming to please her therapist, to really devote her attention to herself. In this, her image—that of an anxious and confused woman just as out of sorts in therapy as elsewhere in life—becomes an apt image of her general life condition. As she lies there "with her body tensed," feeling like she has to "claim" her space on the couch, her attention to "these minutes of Coz's time" suggests a concern with, and potential guilt over, wasting her therapist's time, and also her own money—as she exclaims at one point, "Shit, I'm bankrupting myself to pay for you—obviously I get that this isn't a great way to live" (8). Rather than a woman arresting time in order to imagine alternative futures, Sasha here appears as a stressed, financially constrained lower middle-class worker who is barely functional without the assistance of a therapist whom she cannot really afford. Thus, the therapy scene at the end, just like "Found Objects" as a whole, shows Sasha as a woman alienated from her life, not particularly interested in either dating or her job, yet struggling with loneliness and a kleptomania that seems to stand in for her socially conditioned lack of prospects. The final part of the scene with Coz crystallizes these images into one, that of a woman clinging desperately to the analyst's couch, yet receiving little succor from the experience.

At the same time, to focus merely on the silence as a space of reflection is to miss that Coz's imagined presence offers Sasha pause also while the events are taking place. Indeed, reciprocally, Sasha's recalling of those events also functions as pause in the narrative of her session with Coz. With the parallel storylines of the date and the therapy session(s) constantly interrupting each other, Egan chops up the delivery of plot in both cases into single, limited images that function as reflections on the plot they interrupt. The two accounts thus both read as illustrations of one another: Sasha "reads" the story of her date in light of what (she thinks) Coz will say, while Coz's comments in the session are illuminated by Sasha's recalling of the events that took place. Furthermore, the rapid succession of descriptive vignettes makes Sasha's anxiety and stress a sensory experience, allowing readers to engage affectively with the mental tolls of an overburdened working life.

"Found Objects" opens immediately with an illustrative example of this flickering, interruption-riddled structure. The first image of the chapter and of the book as a whole, has Sasha "in the bathroom of the Lassimo Hotel," on her date, "notic[ing] a bag on the floor beside the sink" (3) and beginning to yield to the temptation to take it. This image is directly interrupted by her therapist's voice, first in a parenthesis, and then in a jarring cut to a therapy session:

> But this wish only camouflaged the deeper feeling Sasha always had: that fat, tender wallet, offering itself to her hand—it seemed so dull, so life-as-usual to just leave it there rather than seize the moment, accept the challenge, take the leap, fly the coop, throw caution to the wind, live dangerously ("I get it," Coz, her therapist said), and *take* the fucking thing.
>
> "You mean steal it."
>
> He was trying to get Sasha to use that word, which was harder to avoid in the case of a wallet than with a lot of the things she'd lifted over the past year, when her condition (as Coz referred to it) had begun to accelerate…. (3-4)

This cutting short of the narrative flow resembles the work of typographical vignettes, whose function was also to chop up the text into smaller units (and which were themselves, we might recall, dissected smaller segments of larger border vines). The bits of the two narratives

interlaced into one another perform this work on each other, each acting as a vignette of the other. In the passage above, the account of the therapy session cuts short the story of the date, but that particular session is itself interrupted by a description of Coz that ultimately reaches back to the time when the sessions first began.

The chapter's formal structure, where no scene is permitted to run for long before being interrupted by another that functions as a commentary, resembles social media as well. Especially when we hear Coz's voice in one-liners, for example in "I get it" or "You mean steal it," his comments read like image captions that frequently appear on social media platforms from Instagram, Twitter, to Facebook. One might imagine encountering on Twitter, for example, an image of a woman pocketing a wallet with a commentary like "I'd call that stealing" or even a hashtag like #NopeNotTaking. These comments by Coz also recall reaction GIFs: although, or precisely because, his face is not described, we see a generic lecturing expression, correcting Sasha, "You mean steal it." The chapter thus uses the constant interruptions of the delivery of each story to create a social media-resembling aesthetic of "faster seeing" (Devereux 9), where readers receive a series of short images into particular scenes without having the chance to assemble a fuller or more detailed picture of them.

Thus, Sasha's silent moment serves to highlight her mistaken attempts to order her life experiences into a meaningful narrative teleology. If, as Solwitz points out quoting Egan herself, *Goon Squad* "is all about the pauses" (qtd Solwitz 602), this pause dramatizes the misuse of pause to fit the emptinesses of life into inadequate molds. For Solwitz, pauses embody the "emptiness, the spaces between things in which we strive to connect moments and events, to understand relationships" (606); yet in my reading, the pauses work not so much to amplify "the spaces between things" as rather being the things themselves. Sasha's life is characterized by the

act of clinging in despair to the therapist's couch in search of relief that does not come, just as it is meaningfully captured by the image of her fleeing into the thrill of stealing a purse from the boredom of her date. The emptiness resides not between things, but in life itself under 21st-century capitalism. As *A Visit from the Goon Squad* tells us, under the current dictates of the fashion goons, the life of even a privileged, college-educated white woman is bare, hollow, and barely sustainable without neurosis.

The next short story, "The Gold Cure," which focalizes Bennie, portrays Bennie making not just one, but several important misreadings of the causes of his predicament. In "The Gold Cure," Bennie is past his youth, having already divorced his wife Stephanie (herself the focalizer of another chapter, "A to B"), with whom he has a nine-year-old son, Chris. The short story revolves around Bennie's decision to visit an aging band, the Stop/Go sisters, that he had signed a few years back but whom his label has given up on. Bennie's son, Chris, unexpectedly decides to tag along after gold-sprinkled coffee with his father has rendered him uncharacteristically curious about Bennie's work. With them for this whole trip is Sasha, who is Bennie's assistant at this point in the book, and whom Benny uses intermittently to assess his unhappily lackluster libido. At the rehearsal, Bennie has a near-ecstatic experience which culminates in some kind of nervous or heart attack. After he recovers, the energy of the moment is gone, Chris's enthusiasm has vanished, and Bennie deflatedly drives his son back to his ex-wife's house.

At a first glance, "The Gold Cure" seems to invite the type of reading that focuses on lost youth and the passing of time. Bennie, though not yet fired from his music producer job, is already nostalgically yearning for the music of yore, for "actual musicians playing actual instruments in an actual room" (22), and as such, he seems more in line with the argument that Egan's book is about the struggle with time. Moling reads Bennie's story in this way, arguing

that at the heart of this short story lie the gold flakes that Benny puts in his coffee in the hope that they will restore his sexual prowess. Bennie uses the gold flakes, Moling writes, not simply "to restore his expired sex drive" but '[m]ore generally" as "a cure to stop 'time within time'" (Moling 57).

But his youth and libido are not the only things that Bennie has lost: more poignantly, perhaps, "The Gold Cure" presents Bennie's son Chris as the lost and unattainable object of Bennie's longing. The loss of Bennie's sex drive, which even Bennie admits "[a]t times" was "sort of a relief" that "he didn't even mind" (22), seems to be a substitute standing in for a more substantial loss, especially when compared with the image of Chris as Bennie picks him up from school:

> Driving in, he glimpsed his son crossing the athletic field with his friends. Chris had been skipping a little—actually skipping—tossing a ball in the air, but by the time he slumped into Bennie's yellow Porsche, any inkling of lightness was gone. Why? (23-24)

Indeed, the entirety of Bennie's meager amount of custody time threatens to be just as bleak and deflated as it begins:

> "So, boss," [Bennie] said. "Whatcha feel like doing?"
> "Don't know."
> "Any particular wishes?"
> "Not really."
> Bennie looked helplessly out the window. A couple of months ago, Chris had asked if they could skip their weekly appointment with Dr. Beet and spend the afternoon "doing whatever" instead. They hadn't gone back, a decision Bennie now regretted; "doing whatever" had led to desultory afternoons, often cut short by Chris' announcement that he had homework.
> "How about some coffee?" Bennie suggested.
> A spark of a smile. "Can I get a Frappucino?"
> "Don't tell your mother." (24)

This passage clearly reveals Bennie's "helpless[ness]" in the face of his son, whom he can hardly get to talk with him, as evidenced by Chris's curt replies as well as his refusal to go to therapy with Dr. Beet. We learn that Dr. Beet is a therapist, since his or her interpretations

sprinkle Bennie's narrative just like Coz's are scattered throughout Sasha's ("Betrayal Bonding, Dr. Beet called this" [24], we read as the therapist assesses Bennie's habit to buy his nine-year old son coffee against the admonitions of the kid's mother). In other words, Bennie has resorted to external help in order to try to get his son to relate to him, but Chris's sullen behavior and taciturnity suggest that this relationship is already irredeemably lost.

Ironically, the coffee, which when boosted with gold flakes is supposed to reignite Bennie's sexual desire, results in a "spark" not from him but from his son, who flashes the "spark of a smile" at the prospect. As they sip their coffees, the text makes this effect even more apparent, as Chris, his curiosity aroused by seeing Bennie slip the flakes into his coffee, prevails on his father to allow him to try some:

> Chris sucked on the gold and closed his eyes. "Dad," he said. "It's, like, waking me up from the inside."
> "Interesting," Bennie mused. "That's exactly what it's supposed to do."
> "Is it working?"
> "Sounds like it is."
> "But on you," Chris said.
> Bennie was fairly certain his son had asked him more questions in the past ten minutes than in the prior year and half since he and Stephanie split. Could this be a side effect of the gold: curiosity? (26)

Bennie never overtly contemplates the reasons for why Chris has become so distant or the ways in which he might win his son back—unlike his lackluster libido, which is a constant preoccupation. But as the episode with the gold flakes suggests, Bennie is actually searching for a way to reconnect with his fatherhood rather than with his sense of himself as a young, sexually potent man. Ironically, the demise of his position as father seems to be predicated on the divorce, itself an outcome precisely of Bennie's extramarital sexual affairs. In other words, what Bennie seeks as a cure for his malaise—the desire for promiscuous sex—is at least partially what brought it on in the first place.

It is not the sex drive itself that is destructive: as Theodor Adorno claims, capitalism renders human beings the objects of exchange so that sex becomes a compensatory act to cover over how every person has become replaceable (Adorno 41–42, 167–69). Indeed, sex serves not just as a displacement of people's discomfort over their sense that their relationships have been emptied out of meaning, but it is also a mandated act for men to engage in in order to uphold their masculinity. Bennie draws upon this socially sanctioned narrative to provide spurious explanations for the failures of his life. But as an attention to the child's "skipping," his sullen silence and then the flashed "spark of a smile" suggests, the explanatory narrative of sex misdiagnoses Bennie's ailments by directing attention away from his emptied-out relationship with his son.

We see this in the attention devoted in "The Gold Cure" to the vignettes, those moments when, rather than focusing on what is taking place, we get to see the dynamics between the characters. In the passages above, plot, dialogue and reported thought turn our attention to Bennie's sex life and his longing for the music of a bygone era. Focusing instead on the situation and its features that are available to a surface perusal—the father unable to get his son to speak to him, then the son's sudden loquaciousness upon drinking the gold-infused coffee—allows us to glimpse the physical dynamics between father and son and understand that many of Bennie's explanatory narratives for what is going wrong in his life are precisely that—explanatory narratives, both spurious and misleading. With Adorno, we might say that they are compensatory narratives to make up for the hollowed-out relationships that Bennie cannot and does not want to—does not even know how to want to—try to make meaningful.

To pay attention to the vignettes in Egan's text is to be attentive to the passages in "The Gold Cure" that, like the ones above, give us the kind of information that participants in an

encounter would attempt to glean from one another in Erving Goffman's account of the situation: people's gestures, body language, voice, amount spoken, and so on. So, as the chapter unfolds, critics reading for story might examine the events that take place or read these events, as Moling does, with an attention to the thoughts and conversations of the characters: such a reading would yield an emphasis on Bennie's initial participation in the sisters' music-making and then his realization that they are passé (Moling 57). As Sasha reminds Bennie: "It wasn't two years" when the sisters had "sounded… [*sic*] different," "It was five," which, in the "music business… 'is five *hundred* years'—your words!" (33-34, emphasis original). Reading for vignettes, on the other hand, directs our attention to the two passages of parting at the end of "The Gold Cure." The first takes place when Bennie drops Chris off at his ex-wife's house; the second is the short story's last scene, when Bennie, after having driven Sasha back to her apartment in Manhattan, is suddenly seized by a desire to cling on to her. These two parting scenes bookend the chapter in two vignettes that make apparent Bennie's distance from his own life, which he can do nothing but helplessly stare at.

The sense of helpless disappointment is painfully strong in the vignette in which Bennie drops Chris off:

> He got back in the car but didn't turn the key. He was watching Chris scale the undulating lawn toward his former house. The grass was fluorescently bright. His son seemed to buckle under his enormous backpack. What the hell was in it? Bennie had seen professional photographers carry less. As Chris neared the house he blurred a little, or maybe it was Bennie's eyes watering. He found it excruciating, watching his son's long journey to the front door. He worried Sasha would speak—say something like *He's a great kid*, or *That was fun*—something that would require Bennie to turn and look at her. But Sasha knew better; she knew everything. She sat with Bennie in silence, watching Chris climb the fat, bright grass to the front door, then open it without turning and go inside. (35-36)

This passage offers a simple visual illustration of Bennie's life: in a fake green suburban setting, a father watches from his car as his son, too small to stand upright under the weight of his

schoolbooks, walks into his home. We hear Bennie's thoughts and share in his feelings, but that is not what constitutes the vignette: as we have seen, the characters' thoughts often reflect their impulse to attempt to narrativize, and through narrative, explain away the difficulties of their lives. Instead, the vignette offers a visual, sensory glimpse into the life of Bennie—what the reader as an onlooker would see—and what we see of him here is how alienated he is from both his "former house," as he calls it (34), from his son, and really from the woman sitting next to him in the car as well, whom he cannot even bear to look at.

That Bennie is out of touch with the actual potential of his relationship to Sasha as well is made apparent in the chapter's final vignette. As Bennie drops Sasha off at her apartment, he suddenly grabs her hand, and although he "felt no lust at all," but a "love, a safety and closeness," he erupts in protestations of passion: "I'm crazy for you, Sasha.… Crazy" (38). Sasha resists: "There's no way, Bennie.… We need each other" (38). Then the vignette begins as the two of them slowly draw apart:

> They looked at one another in the failing light. The delicate bones of Sasha's face were lightly freckled—it was a girl's face, but she'd stopped being a girl when he wasn't watching.
>
> Sasha leaned over and kissed Bennie's cheek: a chaste kiss, a kiss between a brother and a sister, mother and son, but Bennie felt the softness of her skin, the warm movement of her breath. Then she was out of the car. She waved to him through the window and said something he didn't catch. Bennie lunged across the empty seat, his face near the glass, staring fixedly as she said it again. Still, he missed it. As he struggled to open the door, Sasha said it once more, mouthing the words extra slowly:
>
> "See. You. Tomorrow." (38)

A focus on dialogue would mistakenly suggest an amorous escapade, and even the omniscient narrator's explanation that what Bennie "felt for Sasha was love, a safety and closeness like he'd had with Stephanie before he'd let her down so many times that she couldn't stop being mad" (38) urges us to read this episode as one of romantic love. But the vignette tells us different. The image of two characters "looking at each other in the failing light" suggests that

although they are staring, they are not really seeing each other—an impression that is supported by Bennie's "lung[ing]" attempts to catch the words Sasha is saying. When those words are finally made apparent, it turns out that they simply refer to the workday: "Tomorrow" will be just another day at the office. It is not the case here that Sasha's deflecting the possibility of an amorous relationship, by insisting on the rhythms of work, causes an unbridgeable distance between these two characters. Rather, it is Bennie's attempt at recoding as an amorous liaison the relationship between himself and Sasha that already contained valuable and meaningful potential on its own terms, which drives a wedge precisely into that relationship. The problem is ultimately with Bennie's inability to see value outside of the socially sanctioned narrative of sexual-amorous relationships with women, in line with the vacuity of sexual relationships that Adorno decries in a society where human beings have become fungible to one another.

Thus, rather than reading Bennie's lunge as an attempt to grope for lost youth, we might instead pay attention to the vignettes that close this chapter to see that "The Gold Cure" offers meaningful glimpses into a life that has been emptied of sustaining human relationships. Work, which originally was Bennie's passion, has provided him with the house and the car and the good life that, like what Lauren Berlant describes as "cruel optimism" (Berlant 1), have failed to provide meaning and in fact even hindered Bennie's "flourishing," and his flight into sex serves merely to cover up, and in fact deepen, these underlying causes. For Sasha, too, the exacting pressures of work produce the boredom from which thieving is supposed to provide some relief, but work demands that the individual be "cured" from their mental afflictions (indeed, Bennie ultimately fires Sasha for having "sticky fingers" (338), as we learn later in the book), so Sasha nearly "bankrupt[s] [her]self" in order to relieve that condition in turn. The vignettes in *Goon Squad*, then, allow us to observe the physical, sensory ways in which the overarching emptiness

and alienation of these individuals manifest themselves. We do not ever see more than glimpses, however: in an increasingly digitized world, glimpses remain the only possibility for representation. But these glimpses afford meaningful ways to make sense of these characters' circumstances—the conditions in which they, too, can do nothing but helplessly stare at their own lives as if from a distance, with a deep sense that everything has gone wrong but forever reaching prematurely for misleading explanatory narratives to cover up the deeper causes of their malaise.

This is not to say that there is no plot in "The Gold Cure" or in *Goon Squad* more generally. To the contrary, as an autonomous short story, "The Gold Cure" is the story of an exceptionally dismal day in Bennie's life. But scenes like the ones described above, for example the one with Bennie sitting in his car and gazing ashamedly at his departing son, encapsulate the general conditions of Bennie's life. They are visual illustrations of that life, and not merely of this particular day. That is, while these vignettes are part of a story, they are so only to frame that story into a more static image of the circumstances of daily life. Like the roads, raspberry brambles and pines of Henry Kitteridge's morning drive, Bennie's life is constituted and well captured by the images of driving in a luxury car to do a job he does not care for, to gaze longingly at his leaving son, to lunge in make-believe passion at his assistant. In the terminology of situational realism, these objects and actions are what constitute these characters' situation.

Maps vs. Vignettes: *The Madonnas of Echo Park*

If in *Goon Squad* the scripted stories and mainstream narratives can work to provide misleading explanations for characters' plights, *The Madonnas of Echo Park* dramatizes the difficulty of severing our attachment to such narratives. Indeed, Brando Skyhorse's text often scrambles

together narrative techniques and descriptive vignettes within the same passages, blurring the boundaries between depictions of characters' situations and the accounts of their plot or psychology. This blurring makes it difficult to locate descriptive vignettes through which to access the direct, though brief, glimpses into the physical state of the world, and readers are often tasked with processing competing story-related and descriptive information. Unlike in *Goon Squad,* where characters always privilege narrative explanations, and *Olive Kitteridge,* where Olive is the only character to model a non-narrative epistemology, the characters in *Madonnas* share with the reader the wavering between story-based and description-based interpretive modes, albeit to different degrees. This section argues therefore that *Madonnas* dramatizes the struggle between these competing epistemological modes by entangling its brief vignettes of sensory description with the recounting of thoughts and events in each short story's homodiegetic narration. Thus, as each narrator-character wrestles with what Echo Park means to them, they also enact the competition between these two epistemological projects. Although *Madonnas* therefore recognizes just how difficult it is to wrest ourselves from the interpretive primacy of narratives, it ultimately insists on the importance of the description of the present conditions, which constitute the everyday and shape the lives of Echo Park's inhabitants.

Madonnas consists of eight stories, each of which is narrated by a different character. The characters, all of whom are Mexicans who were born in or immigrated to the Los Angeles neighborhood of Echo Park, are linked by a complicated web of kinship and association, which the reader can piece together only through difficult work. Unlike in *Olive Kitteridge* or *Goon Squad,* characters rarely reappear in each other's stories, except sometimes as brief mentions. As Hsuan L. Hsu argues, the cycle's last short story, *"La Luz y la Tierra,"* which collects a vast portion of the book's focalizing characters within the space of a Lotus Festival taking place by

Echo Park Lake, is Skyhorse's most incisive demonstration of these characters' disconnectedness from one another, since the focalizer of that chapter, Aurora, "encounters her estranged father, her half-sister, her mother, her grand-uncle, and her estranged grandmother … without recognizing (or being recognized by) any of them" (Hsuan L. Hsu 88). For Hsu, *Madonnas* runs counter to what he calls the "ensemble narrative:" instead of presenting a satisfying connected picture of a unified place, Skyhorse's novel "shows how the characters, most of whom are Mexican American and many of whom are related by blood, become so disconnected that they can continually miss opportunities to recognize and communicate with one another" (88).

I argue that *Madonnas'* use of this failed ensemble structure also thematizes another important disconnection: the difficulty for both readers and characters to look at their neighborhood and their own situations simply as they are, rather than as embedded in larger explanatory narratives. The different characters take up different positions along the narrative-descriptive epistemological continuum, with the result that the book as a whole simultaneously incorporates and conceals descriptive vignettes. Thus, readers are compelled to rely on both epistemologies, since these are entangled in one another, even as the book ultimately suggests that the story-based interpretations are not helpful in coming to terms with Echo Park.

Indeed, each individual short story, and in fact the whole cycle, is structured around a complicated enactment of the struggle between these two interpretive modes, where the final story, "*La Luz y la Tierra*," stages the ultimate failure of the narrative strands to come together and vindicates the fragmented, descriptive mode of interpretation. This structure might be described as a reversal, where one interpretive strategy—that of story-based explanation—initially seems both valid and worthwhile, but eventually turns out to be spurious. In the beginning of each short story, as homodiegetic narrators plunge into what seem to be ordered

accounts of their lives, readers are invited to begin the difficult work of piecing together the web of connections, in line with what we might expect from an ensemble narrative. Because this work is quite difficult, given that the points of connection are often ephemeral, readers need to invest a significant amount of energy into tying the strands of plot together. This investment directs attention away from the material circumstances of a changing Echo Park, circumstances which ubiquitous vignettes also make available, but which the primacy of narrative makes difficult to access. But the book's last short story, where the plots remain unresolved, stands for the necessary failure of an interpretive approach that seeks to assemble characters' connections and their intersecting pathways. Story yields no deep, underlying meaning: "*La Luz y la Tierra"* suggests that rather than shed light (*luz*) on Echo Park through the stories of their characters' lives, an attempt to radically engage with the neighborhood would need to focus on *tierra,* the ground itself. Thus, *Madonnas* suggests that in order to make meaningful sense of the conditions of life that Echo Park represents for Mexicans and Mexican Americans, we must pay attention less to what the characters reveal about their stories and more to what we might see as we glance into their lives. As Hector puts it in the epigram of this chapter, "I have no heartbreaking story of the journey here; the heartbreaking story *is* here" (20): rather than focus on clichéd representations of worn-out journey narratives traced across maps of the North American continent, we would do well to pay attention to "here," the ground itself, the *tierra* on which life unfolds. The map's view, the hackneyed story of the journey functions like what Aurora describes as "Faith" in the book's last chapter: it is "a luxury for those who are able to ignore what the rest of us must see everyday" (156). Stories, then, build "Faith," a naïve belief in ordering the world meaningfully which blinds our awareness to "what the rest of us must see everyday"—the conditions on the ground, directly in front of you, looked at from close, rather

than held at a distance, as on a map. The portals into that close, ground-view seeing, *Madonnas*' vignettes, might often be veiled or difficult to access, but not to see them is, Skyhorse suggests, a luxury afforded by the faith in connection, narrative explanations, and linear sense-making.

Hector, the narrator of the book's first story, "*Bienvenidos*" (after the author's note, itself a short story with a homodiegetic narrator figure), provides an example of a character who, himself entangled in an investment in causal, event-based interpretation, enacts the reader's difficulty with extricating themselves from that narrative-based logic. At the same time, Hector subliminally understands that his life is best understood as mired in static, unchanging conditions rather than as the outcome of some tragic narrative: it is he who highlights that "the heartbreaking story" is not the account of a journey but simply of what "*is* here." Thus, Hector's narration is torn between the simultaneous but contradictory drives to engage deeply with his material setting in Echo Park and to narrate his life as a story. This means that the situational representational model embodied by vignettes is, though omnipresent, frequently obscured in its entanglement with other narrative modes.

Hector, a former busboy at a Hollywood restaurant catering to movie stars, is now a day laborer at the mercy of the whims of exploitative employers, and his chapter is divided into the story, retold in a flashback, of his family and love life prior to his loss of a job, and the account in the diegetic present of a day performing construction work, in which Hector becomes implicated in his friend Diego's violent death. The competition of these two perspectives—one of a story that took place in the past, the other a description of a day in the present—is itself already an enactment of Hector's competing impulses to narrate or describe. But the descriptive account, that of the present day, provides an even clearer illustration of the entanglement of these two modes in Hector's narration, because in it, description never takes the upper hand, but is

always contained in extremely brief vignettes, and these vignettes are couched in other narrative techniques to a degree not seen in *Goon Squad* or *Olive Kitteridge*. Thus, the vignettes in Hector's narration complicate György Lukács's notion of the dichotomy of "narrate or describe" (201–02), since here description does not halt narrative action, nor does it ever fully become pure description: because of Hector's investment in story-based explanation and his simultaneous subconscious attention to his material circumstances, description and narrative become inextricably embedded in one another.

Indeed, "*Bienvenidos*" moves back and forth between moments of description and a larger story arc, in which Hector and fellow day laborer Diego are picked by the construction tycoon Tenant and begin working on a construction site. This main story will eventually culminate in Diego's death at the hands of the chronically raging overseer Adam, and in Tenant and Adam leaving Hector to dispose of the murder weapon—something the undocumented Hector cannot do without incriminating himself of the death and the concomitant peril of being deported.

As the work begins, Hector's narration demonstrates the embeddedness of vignettes in larger, narrative explanation within a single passage. At the beginning of the day, once Hector has finally been charted off to the construction site by Adam and Tenant, he describes the process of labor:

> The posthole digger slides in and out of the softened ground with ease. Diego, who's cutting sheets of plywood, jokes for me not to get a hard-on. The men laugh, and as Adam hovers around the different areas, tossing us tools like fastballs or rolling the command "*Rápido, mojados*!" off his tongue, we find the rhythms of an unusually cool summer's day. It's slower than restaurant work but much more exhausting, because the tasks here are repetitive without requiring the same sense of timing or orchestration with other men. A man working with you today could be arrested or deported or move on tomorrow. We work independent of each other, careful not to move too fast or too slow because no matter what our speed or competency, the wage is the same at the end of the day. (8)

Those parts of this passage in which Hector describes what his everyday life looks like as a day laborer constitute different rhetorical moves than those that attempt to connect this moment in his life with earlier moments, such as scenes from his job at the restaurant. The passage starts with a description of what the everyday of a wage laborer is like. We see the movements of the "posthole digger," the plywood being cut, and hear Diego's joke, the laughter of the men, and Adam's jarring shouted commands. This image is a vignette: it is a brief descriptive moment where narrative action is not halted and where sensory information abounds. Furthermore, as a vignette, this image is not narrativized: it does not explain anything or stand in as a plot point in a logical sequence of progression. It, like the heartbreaking story, simply "*is,*" or it "*is* here," in the conditions of the backbreaking work that constitute the lives of day laborers like Hector and Diego. Indeed, these conditions, *Madonnas* suggests, are just as bad, and certainly as important to understand, as the stories of the migration journeys on which such characters or their parents arrived in the United States.

But Hector's narration does not allow us to regard such images in isolation. After the passage's initial sentences, by the time the workers "find the rhythms of an unusually cool summer's day," Hector slips into pause: diegetic time is halted as he explains the differences between restaurant work and construction work ("It's slower than restaurant work but much more exhausting, because the tasks here are repetitive without requiring the same sense of timing or orchestration with other men"). This sentence is clearly abstract and has moved away from sensory information about the conditions on the work site. Then, in the final sentence of this passage, Hector combines the two narrative techniques. It is clear that his statement about wages ("because no matter what our speed or competency, the wage is the same at the end of the day") falls into the pause category as a general explanation that is unrelated to action. But what about

"We work independent of each other, careful not to move too fast or too slow"? Is Hector still pursuing his general reflections on the nature of work, or has he returned to relating the events of that particular, "unusually cool summer's day"? It is probably impossible to decide conclusively. However, because this complex clause centrally concerns the rhythm that the workers find in their work ("not to move too fast or too slow"), which seems to pertain to that particular moment rather than to the job in general, the beginning of this sentence constitutes a return to the description of the events of that particular day. It therefore returns us to the vignette from the beginning of the passage.

Thus, Hector's description of what it is like to work as a day laborer on a construction site is fragmented, brief, and entangled in more abstract observations. Such observations do perform some descriptive work of their own, but, importantly, they are also entangled in the characters' attempt to narrativize and thus make sense of their experience. The vignette parts of Hector's narration refrain from such attempts: they merely confront readers with what "*is* here." This passage, then, embodies what we might call *Madonnas*' vignettistic representational structure: by providing narrativizing impulses and embedding vignettes in them, *Madonnas* presents and yet obscures the glimpses into the conditions of the world. Thus, the book problematizes the necessity and the difficulty of gazing directly at the ground, and intimates the seductions of a narrative to organize experience.

Indeed, this structure characterizes "*Bienvenidos*" as a whole, and the book in its entirety as well. As the summary of "*Bienvenidos*" above makes clear, the story of which Hector is telling the beginning in this passage—the story of Diego's death and Hector's self-incrimination—ends up constituting a transformative moment in his life: not only does he become a witness to his friend's death, but he also ultimately gives the murder weapon to the police, and the short story

ends with the likely suggestion that Hector will be jailed or deported. Thus, this passage, though highly descriptive, does double as a plot point. This double function produces a complex effect: although the vignettes in the passage encourage the reader to look directly at "what the rest of us must see everyday," the short story as a whole makes that type of looking difficult, since it is easy to subsume this moment, too, under "the heartbreaking story" of how Hector is eventually deported.

This double valency or epistemological struggle is enacted in the book as a whole, although it differs in its manifestations from chapter to chapter. The narrator-characters of *Madonnas* are highly attuned to the gentrification of their neighborhood, and their numerous reflections on the various changes provide many occasions for vignettes: these are often the sites where such hidden or doubled vignettistic representational work takes place. In general, Skyhorse and his characters often seem more interested in the place of Echo Park than in the humans that inhabit it: thus, characters often talk about urban demographic events such as the dislocations of various ethnicities, the demolition of the Mexican housing blocks in Chavez Ravine to build Dodger Stadium, or the appearance of white hipsters in Echo Park. But the characters differ in their perceptions and attitudes towards the changes in the neighborhood: indeed, as Hsu argues, "*Madonnas* does not take a one-sided stance against either cultural assimilation or gentrification" (Hsuan L. Hsu 89).

Freddy, a self-proclaimed "hustler" who is just returning to Echo Park after his most recent time in jail, exemplifies a more explicit epistemological approach to the neighborhood and therefore also a more grounded, vignettistic view. Unlike Hector, Freddy is not primarily preoccupied with his pre-jail past, although he is interested in reconnecting with some of his previous lovers and hustles. More emphatically, though, Freddy is taking in the neighborhood as

the backdrop against which his newly free life is supposed to unfold. As he descends from the Greyhound that brought him back to the city, Freddy looks around:

> On the starting tip of Sunset Boulevard (which is now called César Chávez Avenue—when did that happen?) I survey my territory—the new apartment buildings and stores, the fresh coats of paint on the doors and window frames on abandoned shops, new storefront signs in English covering the old sun-bleached Spanish ones (which themselves were molded over the old English signs from the forties and fifties), the odd presence of young bearded white men with coffee, not six-packs, on the street corners. Where are the *Chicanos*? Or the *Chinos*? To keep me going, I picture Cristina's robin's-egg-blue kitchen and my face buried deep in a big home-cooked breakfast of *chorizo con huevos*, and a warm pair of loving thighs. (113)

Freddy, unlike Hector, is directly attentive to the now defining characteristics of Echo Park. First, as Freddy looks around to "survey [his] territory," we share his gaze as it focuses on the specific details of his surroundings. This glimpse is a fleeting impression of what the everyday looks like in the transformed neighborhood. New buildings, fresh paint, new storefront signs—these are the things that surround Freddy and the reader, and which constitute the conditions of life in Echo Park. No human action is described: the material things are motionless, and the bearded men do not appear to be acting, to be drinking the coffee, but merely to possess it, hold it in their hands. It is, notably, their "presence" that Freddy observes, not what they are doing. Certain populations are conspicuous by their absence: the neighborhood is by now constituted as much by the absence of "*Chicanos*" drinking six-packs in the street as it was earlier by their presence. Nonetheless, diegetic time is not halted: we follow Freddy's glance as he is looking around, and life in Echo Park has not stopped under his (and our) glance. Freddy's initial glimpse, then, is a vignette unobscured by other narrative devices. Though forcibly prevented from seeing what "the rest of us must see everyday" by his imprisonment, now Freddy is engaging directly with precisely those sights and environments.

But Freddy too struggles with staying with the immediacy of the environment without contextualizing it through historical interpretation, memory and narrative desire. In the parenthetical observations about the renaming of Sunset Boulevard to César Chavez Avenue and the history of the store signs, Freddy removes us from the visual immediacy of the vignette: we do not see these events as actions unfolding in space. Story time is paused during the parenthesis, since we are briefly absent from the action—and indeed from the setting—as we contemplate the transformation of Echo Park on a historical scale. After these contemplative detours, Freddy returns us to the streets, locating us back in the same vignette as we share his glance over the young white men. But again he does not remain there long: narrative desire takes over as he imaginatively reinscribes his present self into his past with his former lover, Cristina. Ironically, though, this imagined scene acts like something of a counter-vignette, produced to fend off the reality of Echo Park: it is mere illusion, since as it turns out, Cristina is dead and her house has been sold off to a white lesbian couple.

Thus, although Freddy is very present in and receptive to the immediate environment of Echo Park, and engages with that environment more directly than Hector, he too finds it difficult not to remove that engagement from its immediacy by inserting it into larger, historical or personal-historical, narratives. Like Hector's, Freddy's passage blurs the boundaries between the vignettistic depiction of the physical spaces and secondary thoughts, reflections, or interpretations of those spaces. The latter disrupt the felt immediacy of the glimpse by pausing narrative time and taking us out of the materiality of the moment.

Vignettes, on the contrary, offer no such pause: instead, they afford a glimpse into life as a continuous, ongoing process with momentarily stable, but otherwise changing material coordinates (buildings, plants, and so on). As long as Freddy's narration relies on vignettes, the

reader can experience the life of Echo Park unfolding before their eyes without pause. Here, as elsewhere, glimpsing *with* Freddy rather than *at* him is what permits the direct engagement with the environment: as soon as Freddy's narration veers into contemplation, our gaze and with it our engagement is cut short. In vignettes, then, Freddy positions the reader next to himself, able to share his gaze or just look around from next to his. Indeed, in Freddy's passage, we look *with* Freddy, and our gaze is in fact guided by his gaze to the street corner, the coffee-wielding men, and the shop signs. Thus, although Freddy's contemplation of historical changes, as well as his desire to revisit his amorous past, make it difficult for him to maintain an extended engagement with the environment, his narrative style, with its indulgence in vignettes, still enables more of the view from the ground than does Hector's.

Comparing Freddy's and Hector's encounters with the neighborhood to a third, more distant descriptive perspective provides a final example of *Madonnas*' exploration of the epistemological consequences of the map's view as opposed to the view from the ground. Angie, a young Mexican American woman who grew up in Echo Park, always wanting to move away but somehow never getting around to it, inhabits the most distanced, removed relationship to the neighborhood. The story "Cool Kids" follows Angie through her childhood and into young adulthood as she negotiates her most meaningful female friendships in relation to her position as a young girl in the Mexican culture of her Echo Park social world. As Angie moves through boyfriends, gets to know and then loses touch with the charismatic Duchess, and navigates fitting in among the "cool kids" socially and in her career, she struggles with how to ever fully inhabit Echo Park as her home.

Thus, when Angie describes Echo Park directly, she cannot offer the immediacy of vignettes: instead, her description reflects her disconnection from, indeed disavowal of, the

neighborhood. The passage that reflects this disconnection most clearly perhaps is one in which Angie elaborates on her reasons for staying in the neighborhood:

> Selling the house [Angie's mother's house] meant I was out of debt, free to go wherever I wanted. I discovered I didn't want to go anywhere after all, especially since the neighborhood started changing. House prices went up, neighbors chased out, and there were new bars, new restaurants, fewer *cholos*. I welcomed these fellow white, affluent (and sometimes openly gay—a shocker for the old-timers) strangers into a land that I'd inhabited for most of my life and that was now a foreign tourist destination. These new shops had so much beautiful, useless…stuff… (147)

We learn much about the neighborhood in this passage, but Angie, unlike Hector and Freddy, does not descend to street level and never confronts us with the materiality of the things she describes. She remains abstract: we cannot visualize house prices going up and populations being chased out. Indeed, what we have is a kind of map's view of the neighborhood—a view that cannot engage with the actual, material conditions of life on the ground. Angie does not give us a vignette here, either; the closest she gets to it is when she starts talking about the objects the new shops sell: "handmade designer handbags; overpriced 'folk' art paintings; hand-me-down T-shirts with iron-on decals of cereal boxes, cartoon raccoons smoking joints, and eighties icons like Michael Jackson and Madonna" (147). But here, too, though we can visualize the objects themselves, Angie does not situate us in a shop setting, or allow action to go on: instead, she is simply on the level of abstract description. Thus, Angie's sentence is not a vignette: it gives us an idea of the shops, but not a direct glimpse into the interior of one of them.

Although Angie has not moved out of Echo Park, the above passage suggests that she has become—or has always been—detached from the neighborhood to the point where she cannot experience it as actually constituting the material environment in which she lives and moves. Indeed, Angie's alienation is made more apparent by the fact that she identifies with the gentrifiers: she considers the newcomers to the neighborhood "fellow white, affluent …

strangers" (126). "Fellow" sounds strange here: as a Mexican, albeit of a "pasty" (126) complexion, Angie is not unambiguously white; though not poor, she is also not affluent; and as someone who was born and raised in Echo Park, she is no stranger to the neighborhood, either. The implication of Angie's affective identification is that it is less Echo Park that has become a "tourist destination" than Angie herself having become a "foreign tourist." Angie's passage, with its inability to descend to the street level and actually encounter the materiality of the space, demonstrates what the qualifier "fellow," when applied to outsiders to Echo Park, suggests: that Angie's relationship to the neighborhood that has been her home her entire life is characterized by distance, rupture, and disavowal.

Indeed, Angie's short story, "Cool Kids," is centrally concerned with the experience of a minoritarian identity defined by disavowal, and not only of the identity of Echo Park Mexicanness. Angie's one-sentence revelation that she considers the white newcomers her "fellow[s]" also contains a potential other disclosure: in writing that she "welcomed these fellow white, affluent (and sometimes openly gay…) strangers," Angie may perhaps unwillingly expose a closeted lesbianism, depending how far the reference of the qualifier "fellow" extends. This unconscious potential slip regarding Angie's sexuality is not irrelevant, given that "Cool Kids" revolves so centrally around Angie's most significant friendship, the one with Duchess, another woman—a friendship that Angie describes in amorous terms but whose erotic implications she constantly disavows. In other words, Angie's dislocation from the neighborhood, her distanced perspective, in fact mirrors a more general unwillingness to engage with the conditions of her body and her environment. That Angie cannot be part of the (seemingly) effortless Mexicanness of the "cool kids" is therefore paralleled by her inability to form, or even imagine, an alternative notion of "cool kids," one constituted by the nonnormative coolness of an amorous relationship

between her and Duchess. Put more blatantly, perhaps, the bird's eye view on Echo Park is just one among several of Angie's moves of disavowal.[50]

Angie's relation to the space of Echo Park, then, lies on the far end of the spectrum between immediate, material engagement and distant map's view, the spectrum along which Freddy is closest to the physical space itself, and Hector occupies a middle ground. Angie, with her dislocation from Echo Park and her inability to acknowledge her embeddedness in the space or even relate to it, allows *Madonnas* to dramatize the effects of being barred from the brief, sensory information that the situation affords. Lacking the kind of immediate, visual and sensory relation to the environment opened up by vignettes renders one's lifeworld abstract and alienated—and that even prior to any computer-mediated virtualization. Angie's distance from Echo Park is not the outcome of her use of computer technology: in fact, we rarely see her engage with any technology at all, except for television, which, ironically, she uses primarily to watch music videos by the one artist that she understands as authentically Mexican: Morrissey. *Madonnas,* then, suggests that televisual, digital, and social media are not the primary causes of an abstract, virtualized and ultimately uninhabitable relationship to the environment. Rather, such a relationship is caused by the temptations, experienced by all the characters to varying degrees, to contemplate the environment by inserting it into larger narrative frameworks that attempt to explain, and ultimately explain away, the specificity and immediacy of the material environment itself.

Madonnas suggests, then, that the microscopic and therefore intense engagement with the small details of environmental conditions is not easy either for the characters or for the reader.

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[50] A full consideration of these dynamics lies outside the scope of this study, but in a book so interested in the strategies with which different minority groups possess and construct space, the motif of gayness—another minority with a historically fraught relationship to urban space—would merit further discussion.

There are many types of concern with one's neighborhood, but they are all subject to the temptations of narrative explanation of one kind or another. Thus, the characters, and via them, the reader, have only very limited access to the minutiae of the space itself. Hector obscures his observations with an impulse toward story; Freddy reflects on and interprets the space in a historicized context; Angie distances herself from it in order to gain a tourist's perspective. The vignettistic moments where the material conditions can manifest themselves directly via sensory information, are thus always very brief, fragmentary, and intermittent, forever curtailed by other narrative strategies and often profoundly entangled in them. Thus, *Madonnas* demonstrates that the ways in which the impulse to narrativize and explain manifests can be highly different; but also that, though they may not be possible to escape entirely, such impulses undercut a direct engagement with the material conditions that characterize life and the world.

The reader's position, however, differs from those of the characters in one important respect: reading the entire short story cycle, the reader gains the collective of all the characters' glimpses. Like Hsu argues, these glimpses do not congeal into a larger, unified image of a collectivity or "ensemble," but they do confer to the reader the impression of a world constituted by a multitude of brief and momentary glimpses, glimpses that reveal, in highly sensory ways, the physical conditions that characterize Echo Park and the lives of its inhabitants. As Amaya Ibarrarán-Bigalondo puts it using tellingly visual language, Skyhorse's book "paints a mural of contemporary life in the barrio" (Ibarrarán-Bigalondo 80). Although the characters attempt to explain away the information afforded by these momentary situations, the reader need not do so. As readers, we are free to leave the vignettes unconnected, rather than try to piece them together into a coherent explanatory narrative, and to allow them to exert their sensual influence on our understanding of the world.

The Vignette and the Situation in the Realist Short Story Cycle

The above examples from *Olive Kitteridge, A Visit from the Goon Squad* and *The Madonnas of Echo Park* show how vignettes operate as formal devices within texts. They are brief textual instances, possibly interwoven with other narrative techniques, where description occurs without a halting of story time, and which afford readers with powerful, momentary, visual or otherwise sensory glimpses of the material conditions of the characters' lives. As a result, these short story cycles focus more on characters' situations than on their stories—on the conditions and settings of their lives, glimpsed in brief moments, rather than on their life events assembled in chains of narrative causality. This result, and its epistemological implications for realism, is what I address in this final section of the chapter by gathering the terms "condition," "material," "circumstance," "setting," and "frame" under the single term "situation," and by spelling out the representational paradigm of situational realism developed by *Olive Kitteridge, A Visit from the Goon Squad,* and *The Madonnas of Echo Park*.

Situations are the primary objects of representation in vignettes, and the short story cycles discussed in this chapter yield a notion of the situation that emphasizes the view from the ground—the glimpse that is both short and characterized by the attention to the minute. When vignettes allow readers to glimpse into the material circumstances of characters' lives, what they see are bodies, objects, and places; if events are shown, those events are depicted as though they were conditions. This is the primary work of vignettes, as opposed to the more story-focused structures of short stories considered by preclosure theory, discussed at the beginning of the chapter. The situation emerges from this vignettistic form of description as a socially, physically, and geographically determined space: it is the setting and condition of people's lives determined

by how physical objects, such as pine trees or cars, the presence and movement of bodies, such as the absence of Chicanos, and coordinates, such as the breadth of the street, impinge upon humans and their lifeworlds. The situation is physical in that it is created by the elements of the object world, both natural and man-made. It is also material, both in the Marxist sense of the material economic basis and in the more vernacular sense of relating to matter. It is also material in the Situationist sense of the word, where, for example in Guy Debord's description of the *dérive*, to be in a situation means to interact with and experience matter as well as objects and the man-made architectures of the human lifeworld—the features that Debord calls "attractions of the terrain," "encounters," and "psychogeographical contours" (62). An activity such as the interaction with passersby might not be physical (there might be no element of touch), but it is still material insofar as the paths and motions of these individuals do take place in physical space, human-made social space, and between physical bodies navigating both physical and social space by relying on their senses. Hector's relationship to the process of work is therefore material in the Marxist, Situationist, as well as popular senses, as is Freddy's engagement with the street: these characters interact with the psychological and physical givens of their environment as created by terrain, human activity, and human presence and absence alike. But Angie's perspective on the neighborhood is not material: her view enables only an account of histories and processes, with no room left for the "contours" of the world. The short story cycles of this chapter, then, rely predominantly on, and advocate as ethically adequate, an encompassing, Situationist as well as Marxist notion of materiality as the grounding for an ontologically humble, yet hopeful epistemological project to understand the world.

Yet, the situation developed by these stories differs from the Situationist notion in the sense that it does not encourage or even authorize the idea of willed political intervention in the

conditions it describes. Henry's routine car commute in "Pharmacist," for example, which constitutes a situation in the sense developed above, does not depict nor imply conscious political actions to change the prevailing state of being. On the one hand, Henry's drive is a situation outlining the physical and social space, the "psychogeography" in which his life takes place. It has coordinates in physical space: the layout of the roads he takes, the natural surroundings—raspberry bushes, pines, coastline—or the differing width of the roads he drives on. It is also shaped by material parameters, such as Henry's choice of the same route (determined at least in part by his job in the pharmacy), or his interaction with the smell and the cold of the air, which are both outcomes and expressions of his love for the rural Maine landscape. Finally, Henry's drive is not an autonomously existing natural object in which his life takes place; rather, it is a physically and materially embedded social space, product of Henry's own actions, that nonetheless frames or provides a setting for his life. Yet, to engage with this setting means for Henry merely to live his life—not to act politically for or against it. Thus, while Situationist psychogeography, with its emphasis on the material, physical, and socially constructed spatial "contours," fundamentally underwrites the realist situation in these short story cycles, the more interventionist dimensions in Situationalism—with notions such as the *dérive,* for example—are absent in the central concept of this study. The political charge comes from the emphatic, sensorial, and affective insistence with which such situations impress themselves upon readers, rendering affective disengagement difficult, if not impossible. The socially produced but physical, material setting of a character's life—this then is my definition of the situation. Crucially, plot cannot encapsulate such situations: only brief moments gain limited, momentary access. This is the function of the vignette in these short stories. The specific borders between such moments cannot easily be determined: indeed, the limits on our vision remain

indeterminate, even as their existence, though not their extent, is constantly reaffirmed by the brevity of the vignette form.

As an epistemological object, the situation in these vignettes also incorporates Goffman's notion of the situation as the setting in which the information available on the surface is the primary site for people's assessment of their surroundings and other people. That is, the situation is a "working consensus" at which the participants of an exchange arrive through their mutual projections and receptions of the information available on the surface about each other (9–10). Goffman's concept allows us to regard as meaningful, in fact as defining, the strictly sensory (often visual) aspects of character's situations. This is why it is important to insist on the visuality, and sometimes also on other types of sensuality, of the reader's experience in the vignette. In the examples above, that experience is constituted by the reader's presence with Henry in the car, taking in surface information such as the cold and the smell of the pines, and on the street with Freddy, for example, as the latter descends from the bus and glances around the street. Goffman's concept makes it a central aspect of our orientation in the world to make meaningful the information we receive from the surface without attempting directly to insert such information into narrative sequences.

Traditionally, however, it is a frequent assumption in literature that narrative sequences—stories—are precisely what readers rely on the most to form an understanding of the world and of the people who inhabit it. "Knowing" a character is often taken to mean knowing their story, knowing the development of how they came to be who they are, while the more mundane aspects of character, though perhaps interesting, are often relegated to the role of background information for whose interpretation story becomes necessary. Such a story, in which we see the formation and development of character, requires attention to what Olive Kitteridge calls "big

bursts," the important events in one's life "like marriage or children." But as Olive herself points out, and Goffman theorizes, humans make sense of their place in the world and their relations with others often without resorting to stories and merely on the basis of what they see: "little bursts," like "a friendly clerk at Bradlee's, let's say, or the waitress at Dunkin' Donuts who knows how you like your coffee." In the wake of postmodernism's recognition that the explanatory potential of stories is often spurious, and in the worst case even manipulative—as exemplified by the racist, capitalist-exploitative and heteronormative metanarratives that have routinely constituted the explanatory narratives of the West—, situations offer a non-narrativizing alternative for continuing to engage with the physical, material and social forces that shape our world.

The vignettes analyzed in this chapter provide some good examples of a Goffman-inspired understanding of the situation, but one final example, which concerns human interaction specifically, illustrates the importance of surface level situational clues vis-à-vis overly quick narratives constructed to explain them. "Out of Body," the tenth short story in *Goon Squad*, can be read as precisely about the difference between an in-depth and surface knowledge of other human beings. Rob, the main character of this short story and also the addressee of the narrator's "you," repeatedly struggles to unite these two types of knowledges about other characters. Although he thinks that he has other people figured out, that he can see behind their "masks," the short story shows his belief to be inadequate, if not outright wrong. Its wrongheadedness is attested by the fact that it leads to failure in both of the plots of "Out of Body:" in the first plot, Rob's apparent understanding of his love interest, Sasha, fails to secure her as his girlfriend, and in the second, his judgments about other people lead Rob to despair and substance abuse, which cause his death. Egan uses vignettes that separate the knowledge we can glean from situations

from knowledge resting on the assumptions of a too easy understanding of what other people are "really" like. Here is an example from early in the short story, taking place at a small college party:

> You look at Drew through layers of hash smoke floating in the sun. He's leaning back on the futon couch, his arm around Sasha. He's got a big, hey-come-on-in face and a head of dark hair, and he's built—not with weight-room muscle like yours, but in a basic animal way that must come from all that swimming he does. (186)

In this passage, the description delivered in a vignette supplies ample surface information and so contrasts sharply with Rob's interpretive thoughts offered in free indirect discourse. In the vignette portions of the passage, we once again get a glimpse into the lives of these young people without the action being paused: we look with Rob as he looks at Drew, while Drew is enjoying the effects of the joint on the couch. Drew's face is friendly, dopey: these are cues that an observer situated in the room can pick up. That Drew is built "not with weight-room muscle," however, is Rob's observation: it is an interpretation that is not immediately accessible from the surface. At this point in the passage, then, we're inside Rob's thoughts via free indirect discourse, the action is paused and the vignette has ended, at least for the moment. Rob's feelings, which color narration throughout the story, endow Drew's apparent friendliness with an easy smugness and his swimming habit with a masculine perfection to which Rob wishes he could aspire. But the point is that there is nothing in the vignette that allows us to draw Rob's conclusions, and nothing in the short story that suggests that Rob is right. Indeed, as a later short story, "Great Rock and Roll Pauses," suggests, Rob's "in-depth" knowledge of Drew's effortless perfection turns out to be entirely wrong, as Drew's married life with Sasha constantly teeters on the brink of collapse, in spite of Drew's increasingly desperate efforts. In fact, Drew's masculinity is put in question not merely in his role as a husband, but also in his position as father, which in "Great Rock and Roll Pauses" appears defective. But already in "Out of Body"

we are made aware of these differing epistemological projects through the separation of situational knowledge, delivered in vignettes, from Rob's supposedly "in-depth" knowledge, accessible via free indirect discourse. This short story, then, provides a local example of the failure of narrative attempts to explain other people as well as their predicaments; *Goon Squad* as a whole thematizes how grand narratives, such as that of the destruction of authenticity by technology, can obscure lived realities, rather than help illuminate them.

In this way, the situations produced by vignettes in these short story cycles destabilize any claim of objective knowledge in favor of Donna Haraway's epistemologically humbler notion of "situated knowledges" (Haraway 583–84). Situated knowledges allow writers to disentangle their realist aims from projects of domination by starting their inquiry with a gaze upon the specific physical and material situatedness of any attempt to comprehend. Situational realism, then, does not take its own vision for granted; instead, it steps back from large, universalizing questions to first interrogate the immediate and highly local environment that constitutes the observer's own situatedness. I argue that the short story cycles of this chapter use vignettes and situations precisely to stake a claim for situated knowledges instead of a more totalizing descriptive epistemology associated with more naïve versions of realism.

This does not mean that *A Visit from the Goon Squad, The Madonnas of Echo Park* and *Olive Kitteridge* discard plot entirely; neither are their descriptions entirely composed of vignettes. Rather, in balancing descriptive and narrative modes, Egan, Skyhorse and Strout enact the tension between the different epistemological consequences of these modes, and ultimately foregrounding the failures of the narrative approach while highlighting the more modest, but more urgent, representational claims of the situational project. This tension is one between the notion that "everybody has a story" (the "big bursts" of life, as Olive Kitteridge imagines) and

the idea that "everybody is situated somewhere" (among Olive's "little bursts"). It is also the tension between a multiplicity of narrative histories on the one hand and a multiplicity of visual glimpses on the other. When Virginia Woolf, in "Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown," imagines what the story of the woman seated next to her on the autobus might be, she is describing the task of the writer as supplying the missing backstory of the person whom we otherwise only encounter fleetingly. This is the story-focused approach—one that the short texts of many short story cycles adopt; this is the approach of famous cycles like *Winesburg, Ohio* or *Dubliners*. A situational approach, however, would remain with the image of the unknown woman seated next to one on the bus—or with the image of a transformed Sunset Boulevard, or with wild raspberry bushes growing in brambles beside snowy, rainy or summertime roads. What matters in the epistemological project of situational realism in Egan's, Skyhorse's, and Strout's short story cycles is not the stories of the things that surround us: it is rather that they surround us, that they constitute the situations in which we live.

CHAPTER 4: THE ETHICS OF THE GLIMPSE: OBSERVATION VERSUS PLOT IN THE SITUATIONAL REALIST NOVEL

With the proliferation of short representational forms across online, digital and print media, what is the role of the novel in the 21st century? More specifically, when the pressing issues of racism, economic dispossession, and the simultaneously isolationist and expansionist dimensions of globalization are increasingly depicted, negotiated and debated using minute communication forms such as the tweet, the GIF, and even the vignettistic short story, how can the novel participate meaningfully in political conversation? And while proponents of the novel might advance the genre's ability to depict intricate social systems in their complexity, that type of representation—captured most succinctly perhaps by Lukács's mandate that the novel depict the social totality (38)—has come under scrutiny during postmodernism. First, as has been a central underlying claim of this dissertation, the social processes that characterize late capitalism give rise to a fragmented experience of what it means to inhabit the world. That is, the connections enabled by internet technology and the global circulation of goods and people, have not catapulted us into a new world where we perpetually inhabit our connectedness as a structure of feeling. Rather, connections inhabit us in the sense that they render our lifeworlds simultaneously more virtual and more tenuous, subject to violent fluctuations beyond our control. But our experience remains a fundamentally embodied one, in which the now ever more precarious direct environment impinges upon us in what appear to be inscrutable and unpredictable ways. Second, as poststructuralist thought has effectively shown, no ever so complex representational mode can hope to adequately depict any notion of "the real:" an underlying truth remains inaccessible, and the attempts to narrate it are vulnerable to becoming

instruments of political projects of domination, as the grand narratives of history have made abundantly clear.

This chapter examines one particular response emerging among 21st-century American novels that attempts to overcome this seeming impasse. This strand, which I call situational realism, draws from the social media environment's attempts at critique as well as from the short story cycles' vignette aesthetics discussed in the previous chapter to advance a hopeful, yet non-naïve, commitment to the representation of social reality, especially as it pertains to questions of race, space and belonging, economic dispossession, and the impacts of global connections on local lived experience. If the vignette functions as a literary device in short story cycles that enables readers to dwell upon the single glimpse of people's immediate surroundings, in the novels of this chapter, the vignette serves to arrest reading and direct attention to the situations to which plot gives access. Thus, in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Americanah,* Viet Thanh Nguyen's *The Sympathizer,* Paul Beatty's *The Sellout,* and Atticus Lish's *Preparation for the Next Life,* plot is not so much deferred as it is subordinated to the direct glimpses constructed through vignettes. In each their own ways, these four novels shuttle readers along a long series of only tenuously connected vignettes that foreground an epistemological project of paying careful attention to the immediately available. Thus, albeit with not entirely overlapping objectives, these novels contribute to the articulation of a feminist situational epistemology that insists on the mandate to represent the world and especially its ongoing social issues, while also acknowledging, indeed emphasizing, the boundaries on perception and the tenuousness of any such observational and representational project.

In its claims about Adichie's, Nguyen's, Beatty's and Lish's novels as constructors of a new, situational realist representational ethic, this chapter builds on but departs from existing

scholarly frameworks on contemporary novels as well as on vignettes in fiction. A large group of scholars has examined novels that, in the wake of the exhaustion of the postmodernist project, navigated a middle ground between a renewed interest in the realist depiction of social issues and relationships and a felt necessity for formal experimentation. Such scholars have pointed to the emergence of new forms of realism that they have variously designated as new sincerity aesthetics (Kelly 131), neorealism (Konstantinou 110), critical realism (López and Potter 4–6), poststructural realism (Holland 7), and speculative realism (Saldívar 585). The proposition of situational realism as yet another such term is intended to reflect the difference as well as the debt that the current project owes to these prior theories. As these frameworks make clear, 21st-century fiction evinces a new political urgency, in which writers are not content merely to thematize the postmodern conundrums of the inaccessibility of any notion of truth and the intricacies of language. The fiction examined by these scholars tends to focus quite explicitly on questions of immigration, racialized space, as well as socially changing norms and family structures—and this is certainly true of the novels in question in this chapter as well. In this sense, this chapter join the larger scholarly project to delineate the contours of an emerging and multifarious new realist canon.

At the same time, existing accounts tend to position these new forms of realism in some kind of relationship to either a prior postmodernism or current new forms of avantgarde experimentation. Thus, for example, in Mary Holland's insightful account of the work of early 21st-century writers such as David Foster Wallace and Jonathan Safran Foer, the interests of these writers in questions of social relationships are expressed in explicitly experimental forms, influenced by poststructuralist thought—a term Holland therefore assigns to her designation of this strand of fiction (see e.g. Holland 11). By contrast, I argue that *Americanah, The*

Sympathizer, The Sellout, and *Preparation for the Next Life* are best understood as engaging instead in a direct relationship with the emphatically vernacular vignette aesthetics of the social media environment, and, more indirectly, with the longer media history of the vignette form throughout book history. Thus, while participating in the project of reinvigorating realist projects of understanding social conditions, these novels do so not through an engagement with culturally exclusive (or exclusive-seeming) experimental forms, but rather through formal decisions that seek dialogue with other more popular textual and visual discourses.

Consequently, the chapter decouples the notion of the vignette from the metaphorical way the term has often been employed in discussions of its use within fiction. While the vignette as a literary device within larger prose works has not garnered much attention, its appearance has often been predicated on the idea that its impressionistic representational form allows writers to explore the vagaries of time and the precariousness of the single moment. Such an approach inscribes the vignette, too, in a paradigm of avantgarde experimentation, as does Melissa Reimer, for whom this is the precise function of what she calls the "modernist vignette" in the longer fictional work of Katherine Mansfield (Reimer 36–38). Certainly, vignettes can enable the philosophical exploration of time, but this chapter argues that they need not necessarily do so within a framework of formal experimentation. Indeed, in the novels examined here, vignettes are literary devices whose primary function is to provide short, vivid descriptions of the immediately available situation—so short that sometimes readers do not even have time to take in the environment, but must flail to grasp the bare outlines of the situation in which they have landed.

In ascribing to vignettes the task to represent the world and thus to construct *Americanah*'s, *The Sympathizer*'s, *The Sellout'*s and *Preparation for the Next Life*'s epistemological aesthetic,

this chapter also engages, but departs from, the work of scholars such as Stephen Best and Mitchum Huehls, who, in diagnosing a turn in 21st-century fiction's forms of representation, have argued for the necessity to read differently. Fur Huehls, the problem that contemporary fiction attempts to overcome has to do with representation itself, specifically, with representation's inextricable imbrication in neoliberalism (Huehls 12). In order to avoid such political dead-ends, Huehls suggests, contemporary authors are "replac[ing] representational forms of meaning-making, which use referential language to depict, reflect or say something about the world, with more ontological forms of meaning-making, which derive value from the configuration and interrelation of beings, human or otherwise" (Huehls xii). The novels examined in this chapter are likewise interested in "the configuration and interrelation of beings:" these are often the very things that vignettes represent. But, differently from Huehls, I do not think that such "forms of meaning-making" are not representational or referential: on the contrary, they "depict, reflect or say something about the world," and what the vignettes of Adichie's, Nguyen's, Beatty's and Lish's novels say about the world lies at the center of their political impetuses. Rather, more in line with Best's description of the representational politics of Toni Morrison's *A Mercy,* the novels in this study suggest that the problems facing novelistic critique are not problems of representation as such, so much as they are problems of particular *forms* of representation—forms that aim to analyze, dissect, and proclaim too quickly. Best describes as one example of such overly hasty reading what he calls the melancholy mode in African American scholarship, which, he argues, predictably arrives at the same conclusions regardless of the diversity of texts examined (464). *A Mercy,* however, offers a different mode: in it, "Morrison throws into question the idea that the slave past provides a ready prism through which to apprehend and understand the black political present" (Best 473). Instead, *A Mercy* rejects the singular,

predictable explanatory narrative "by refusing to make the slave past the progenitor of the existential condition of black people" (Best 473). In other words, *A Mercy* works with representational strategies that disable the critical impulse to close down inquiry too quickly by arriving at *the* single conceivable explanation. To achieve this, the strategies of *A Mercy* are not, as Huehls suggests contemporary novels ought to be, "less representational" or less "referential" (Huehls 23): instead, *A Mercy* "awakens us to the past in its concretion" (Best 472) that baffles readers and resists being too easily integrated into narratives of explanation. Indeed, in the representational strategies employed by Morrison, "the reader [is] stranded along with the characters," in "abandonment" in the actuality ("concretion") of the world (Best 472). This confrontation with vivid reality enables, indeed demands, a pause constituted by an in-depth encounter with reality before that reality can be subsumed under structural or systemic narratives. In a similar way, the novels of Adichie, Nguyen, Beatty, and Lish examined below use vignettes to depict the "concretion" of the world and halt the explanatory process that risks reducing the lived experiences of encounters with racism, dispossession, and migration to predictable narratives of what Heather Love calls critique's "imponderables," such as "human experience or human nature (377).

It is the vignettistic form of description underlying the encounter with the world's concretion that constitutes the focus of this chapter. Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, Viet Thanh Nguyen, Paul Beatty and Atticus Lish are just a few among contemporary writers whose novels share the recognition that digital media, especially social media, have altered the ways in which the world is depicted and made known to us. Contemporary fiction, as these writers realize, needs to change its practices of representation if it is to continue to communicate meaningfully about the world in which we live. At the same time, the novels under discussion here also insist

on the political importance of representation itself: like Love, who ascribes ethical importance to description, these novels suggest that describing the world, rendering it present to and inhabitable by readers, is an urgent political task. Indeed, I argue that in Adichie's *Americanah,* Nguyen's *The Sympathizer,* Beatty's *The Sellout,* and Lish's *Preparation for the Next Life*, "the most relevant question always involves the way reality is now," to borrow one of Huehls's observations (21). The political intervention of fiction is not to allow us to point to racism or economic exploitation as underlying causes, since these causes have already been amply demonstrated: instead, "[p]olitics in this scenario involves accurately describing and then slightly shifting the given configuration of a particular system" (Huehls 21). The fictions analyzed in this chapter provide those descriptions, but—differently from Huehls's mandate—they do not tell us what shifts in configuration need to be enacted or how. Those questions remain with the readers.

Indeed, if the primary political task of the novel is to describe, the representational strategies of the novels discussed in this chapter have shifted from the more familiar descriptive forms of the realist novel. In a social media-permeated age, where narrative is continuously assuming new, multilinear and multimodal forms, traditional realist description might seem anachronistic or unproductive. The novels examined below, then, adopt more visual, sensory and flickering representational forms that confine the knowledge we gain of "the way reality is now" into brief glimpses, and simultaneously also enact the social media-sutured texture of our everyday lives. In similar ways to the short story cycles of the previous chapter, but in ways that differ even amongst the novels themselves, *Americanah, The Sympathizer, The Sellout* and *Preparation for the Next Life* develop their own versions of situational realism that draw from brief encounters with the world in highly visual and sensory vignettes. Thus, the novels examined here animate a new realist epistemological paradigm and ethic in which close attention, in the form of vignettes,

to the "concretion" of the social world and the experience of its conditions are important tasks, more urgent than jumping to conclusions about underlying systems of injustice. These tasks are also not fully hopeless, even though these novels maintain that sight and representation are always limited; and for this representational agenda, reckoning with the situatedness of vision as well as of its limits is part and parcel of the project of representation itself.

If short story cycles are, by virtue of their generic qualities, suitable for expressing those limits (by breaking up plot and foregrounding individual, brief glimpses), the novel might arguably be more resistant to such fragmented structures, in particular because of the traditional importance of plot and character interiority, features which Ian Watt famously describes as the foundational features of the English-language novel (Watt 21–22, 32). Indeed, Adichie's, Nguyen's, Beatty's and Lish's novels do not discard plot entirely but instead articulate a situational realist model of representation in which plot is restructured around the vignette. This structure disables too coherent character psychologies, too linear explanatory narratives, and the easy identification of underlying causes. It rests on the recognition that as digital modes of communication become more widespread, chains of connection are ever more tenuous, rendering such unified and unifying concepts difficult to sustain. Rather than lament this phenomenon as the evidence of a banal process of cultural degradation, these novels seize on the productive potential of the brief and fragmentary to eschew authoritative or all too declarative indictments of precise causes. Adichie's, Nguyen's, Beatty's and Lish's novels, then, each in its own way, challenge the perception that plot, with its ability to analyze, explain, and critique, would be the 21st-century realist novel's politically most efficacious contribution to the large questions of the age. In so doing, these novels also ask us to reconsider our roles as readers: though reading for story and identifying with characters remain possible, these are not, or no longer, readers' most

pressing or most promising tasks, either ethically or politically. Instead, these novels suggest that the deep, sensory engagement with the material parameters of characters' particular situations—the engagement afforded by vignettistic description—might be more equal to the task of sensing "the way reality is now," and might therefore perhaps incite readers to work towards "shifting the given configuration" of our current social system.

In the following, *Americanah*, *The Sympathizer, The Sellout* and *Preparation for the Next Life* will be considered in three categories relating to genre, structure and affective mode, categories which, as we will see, have important consequences for how vignettes function. *Americanah* and *The Sympathizer* are "well-made novels" in Alice Munro's phrase: they have perhaps the most popular appeal due to their reliance on clear plotlines and relatable protagonists (Munro, qtd in Slopen n.p.). Affectively, they both mix the humorous with the tragic, and their ultimate concern is with the question of sympathy: our ability or inability to comprehend another human being. Their approach to vignettes is therefore similar, but it also differs along an important axis. While *Americanah* employs vignettes primarily to dismantle linear time, disable too-quick analysis, and shift the locus of our attention to the body, *The Sympathizer* places characters in vignettes of milieus that typically embody larger ideological incongruities that the characters and the homodiegetic narrator cannot articulate. Paradoxes and contradictions thus become lived realities, material situations that characters and readers alike inhabit.

The Sellout will be considered here as a satire: the section devoted to this novel will demonstrate how Beatty uses plot as a producer of situational irony. What happens in this novel is not as important as the—usually absurd—situations in which the story lands the characters. Vignettes here dismantle continuity and explanations, but at the same time they also assemble a

contingent and only precariously connected map of how the racialized relations among the residents of Los Angeles look and feel.

Finally, *Preparation for the Next Life* is an example of a dirty realist novel. But rather than focus on a single, tightly-knit setting—the prison, the disappearing West—, a focus that, for Robert Rebein, typically undergirds the dirty realist novel, Lish's novel uses the outlines of a love story to move its readers from one to the next of a myriad, briefly glimpsed scenes from the lives of a diverse cast of characters. Vignettes here provide piercing and earnest glimpses into the settings of people's lives, but these settings do not coalesce into a larger, unified notion of the world, even though precarity, material hardship and struggle characterize life in New York City as much as in Northern China or Iraq. Vignettes, then, operate differently across these four novels, and yet in every case, they articulate a representational paradigm that emphasizes the importance of describing "the way reality is now" and which insists that such description needs to reflect social media's fragmented, sensory, multimodal approach. Although situational realism takes different shapes in these novels, vignettes provide the hinge point of a new realist representation that inscribes the 21st-century novel into the public debates around some of the century's most pressing political issues.

The Situated World: *Americanah* and *The Sympathizer*

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Americanah* (2013) is one of the most widely discussed novels of the decade, earning international acclaim for its author, who had established herself in her home country of Nigeria with the war novel *Half of a Yellow Sun*. Viet Thanh Nguyen's *The Sympathizer* (2015) has been similarly well received, with an instant claim for an important place in American as well as in global literature. Indeed, these two novels have much in common. Both

rely on some form of the immigration narrative to intervene in discourses on identity politics, race and cultural difference in the United States, while they also, in different ways, dislocate novelistic discourse from its traditional local-national space, moving it into the much more mobile sphere of the global. In fact, the question of how to navigate between two different national spaces as well as between the space of the national and the space of the global animates both of these novels. Both are also novels-of-ideas of sorts, thriving on setting up stages where different world views can clash. Affectively, too, *Americanah* and *The Sympathizer* share a predominantly quirky, tongue-in-cheek tone, which is only intermittently interrupted by moments of gravity to accommodate the tragedies that transpire across their pages. Ultimately, both novels seem committed to a kind of ontological optimism: a belief that understanding or bridging difference is possible in the end, even if it first requires arduous representational work—exactly that kind of work that these novels set out to do. This commitment to representation in the face of its difficulty is one of the main features that characterizes the new realism forwarded by *Americanah* and *The Sympathizer*, as well as by Beatty's and Lish's otherwise very different novels.

To undertake this kind of representational work, *Americanah* and *The Sympathizer* resort to what I have been calling situational realism. Both novels draw upon the vignette to depict brief moments from the characters' lives, moments that are important not because they decide characters' fates but because they capture something of the material constitution of their everyday lives. *Americanah* and *The Sympathizer* both contain what could be a called a strong plot, a plot that, on the first glance at least, seems to provide the central structuring mechanism of each novel. Additionally, Adichie and Nguyen both provide us with at least one vividly presented protagonist (or two, in Adichie's case) with whom the reader is invited to relate and

sympathize, if not necessarily to identify. Finally, both novels rely on fresh, vernacular language that dispenses with the linguistic experimentation, indeterminacy and playfulness that often characterized the postmodernists, opting instead for a language that appears to reflect the interiors of the protagonists. That is, out of the four novels examined in this chapter, *Americanah* and *The Sympathizer* are the ones that most resemble the traditional realist novel, the novel that Alice Munro so befittingly termed "the well-made novel."

Americanah follows Ifemelu and Obinze, a couple during their university years in Nsukka, Nigeria, as they each make their separate attempts to immigrate to the United States and the United Kingdom, respectively, and as they both eventually, though at different times and in different ways, return to Nigeria and make it their home. In both of their cases, migration is always also an act of choosing affective commitments—of deciding whether or not to identify with a place, whether or not one can belong there and make it one's own. The narrator-protagonist of *The Sympathizer*, an unnamed Vietnamese born out of wedlock to a Vietnamese woman of low condition and a French priest, similarly traverses countries and allegiances. Working as an undercover agent for the communist revolutionaries during the Vietnam War, he accompanies his ostensible employer, a high-ranked general in the US-backed Southern Vietnamese army, into exile in the United States, where the protagonist is tasked with reporting on potentially fomenting counterrevolutionary movements among the exiled Vietnamese. Though a convinced communist, the protagonist is quick to sympathize with both sides, including the supposed opposites of his own position, the anti-communist Vietnamese and Americans. Indeed, the novel quickly dissolves the Cold War's predominant binary structuring of the world: in any situation, there are usually more than just two "sides." The difficulty of maintaining these diverging affective ties ultimately leads our sympathizing protagonist back to

Vietnam, where, however, despite the triumph of the communist revolution, his allegiances do not appear clearer and he is subjected to ideological "reeducation." The end of the novel sees him once again fleeing into exile, now a split personality narrating in the first-person plural, for whom the novel offers no reconciliation between his diverging affective and ideological commitments. Both *The Sympathizer* and *Americanah*, then, are fundamentally about how, or whether, one can have attachments to multiple places and modes of existence. It is these modes, as well as the constant shuffling between them, that the vignettes in these novels serve to depict as material conditions that characterize life in a contemporary, global world.

In the case of both of these novels, critical discussion has tended to focus on content-related issues, issues that demand close attention to plot. *Americanah* has often been read as the examination of the "new African diaspora" and its relationship to the "old diaspora" (Chude-Sokei 61; McCoy 280; Bragg 122), a reading that relies strongly on Ifemelu's relationships with African Americans as well as other Africans in America. *The Sympathizer,* meanwhile, is frequently understood as problematizing the "translation" of a Vietnamese perspective on the war called (in America) the Vietnam War for an English-speaking, Western audience (Wu 239). Thus, for Timothy K. August, Nguyen himself embodies, with his novel and his book tour, a "unitary performative piece" which disturbs this notion of cultural translation (August 61). This reading draws primarily from the protagonist's journey between the cultural contexts of Vietnam and America, and treats these, like Nguyen's own trajectory, as the central dimension of the novel. This focus is justifiable, given that *Americanah* and *The Sympathizer* do fit the bill of the well-made novel, inviting a reading that invests plot, as well as character, with central significance. In terms of questions of form, however, both novels have received less comment. In *Americanah,* the blog is the single formal element that has garnered most critical attention

(Guarracino 2; Isaacs 175), and the novel's commitment to realist description, if discussed, has largely gone uninterrogated (Levine 589; Baucom n.p.). For *The Sympathizer,* such a discussion has been entirely absent as yet.

The approach of this chapter is to trace the ways in which plot and character are both displaced by a shift in significance toward vignettistic moments in each novel. This is not to say that the plot-based readings would be misguided or inadequate. On the contrary, the use of vignettes in *Americanah* and *The Sympathizer* serves to build upon but modify the meanings generated by plot and characterization. My reading of both novels takes issue with the gaps or lacks in the novels' "well-madeness" and seeks to explain these gaps in terms of a situational representational project.

Awkward Plots, Unstable Characters

In *Americanah,* plot and character are meaningfully awkward, almost beside the point. While both Obinze and Ifemelu invite emotional investment by the reader, their personalities never become truly complex or fully understandable. Next to this lack of well-developed interiorities for even the most central characters, *Americanah* gives its readers a plot that is conventional only at first glance. Initially appearing as a narrative structured around a series of extended flashbacks from Ifemelu's visit to a hair salon in Trenton as she contemplates her imminent return to Nigeria, the plot in fact breaks out from this embedded structure. The frame narrative—the visit to the hair salon—does not contain the entirety of the narrative; the events of the novel do not only precede the hair salon scene, but also follow it.[51]

[51] Confusingly, the narrative voice does not change substantially between these two parts of the novel. It is logical to suppose that Ifemelu's flashbacks to her past life should be retold in a narrative voice that is "closer" to her

But even during its apparently more conventional parts, plot is strange: events seem never to happen, exactly, but always rather to have already happened. For example, at some point during Obama's presidential run, the narrator suddenly informs us that Ifemelu's "application for citizenship had been approved but the oathtaking was still weeks away" (446): but there had been no prior mention that Ifemelu had even thought about such an application. Strange narratorial incidents like this one abound: in fact, most of the events relating to Ifemelu's career success—the increasing popularity of her blog, her invitations to talks, her growing financial security—are revealed to the reader not as processes but only once they have become accomplished facts—or, as already predestined facts that will only appear in the future.[52]

Taken together, plot and character—those two elements that realist novels traditionally rely on for their representational projects—make it clear why *Americanah* can seem puzzling to readers: characters lack nuanced personalities while plot events are often revealed out of context or withheld, so that explanatory narratives are never readily available. Therefore, Ifemelu's claim about the objective of her blog, "I don't want to explain, I want to observe" (386), can be read as a succinct formulation of the representational project of the novel as a whole.

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interiority than the omniscient voice located outside of Ifemelu's memories that narrates the events after the hair salon visit. But the narrative voice remains roughly the same: omniscient and frequently relying on free indirect discourse to approach the focalized character's thoughts and feelings. In fact, so consistent is this particular voice that it is likewise unimpacted by which character is being focalized. Whether the narrator attempts to capture Ifemelu's recollections of her experiences or retells Obinze's story in Britain, the tone and proximity to the respective character remains the same. The blog posts, whose writer is obviously Ifemelu, introduce further complications, since their tone is also rather similar to the omniscient narrator's usual voice.

[52] The blog's sudden and unexpected success constitutes an illustrative example of this phenomenon. Ifemelu herself seems unaware of the extent of that success until she—retroactively—realizes how much money she has accumulated. The accumulation itself is not presented: instead, suddenly Ifemelu finds herself in a situation where she is "startled… to realize she could afford the down payment [for a condo] in cash" (378). Next to such instances of suddenness, or temporal inconsistency, scholars frequently point to the unrealistic nature of the very fact of the blog's financial success, given the novel's post-2008 setting, squarely in the middle of the financial crisis. I take this aspect of the novel to be symptomatic for its aim to counter traditional realist modes of depiction.

Indeed, I argue that *Americanah* is best understood as a series of observations that are left unexplained and unconnected, save for their thematic relatedness, revolving around the same set of themes: race relations, migration and assimilation, home and belonging. In this way, *Americanah* eschews the kind of narrative explanation that has often been considered a defining characteristic of traditional realism, instead giving us an alternative understanding of the world—one that relies on the sensory, material understanding afforded by mere glimpses into the situations of people's lives. *Americanah,* then, exemplifies the signifying structure of the surface, as explained by Stephen Best and Sharon Marcus in their special edition of *Representations,* "The Way We Read Now." For Best and Marcus, an attitude that seeks overeagerly to identify the deeper underlying meanings behind social phenomena risks overlooking or even obscuring the details available on the surface (12), details which already contain meaningful information about the ways in which racism is experienced in 21st-century America. *Americanah* in fact suggests that the obsession with finding a deeper meaning is inadequate and misleading.

The Sympathizer employs a similar strategy. The first part of the novel is the account by the narrator-protagonist of his life up until his capture by the Vietnamese communists, and as we later learn, this account is actually the heavily revised series of confessions wrung out of the protagonist through reeducation administered by "the Commissar," who turns out to be the protagonist's lifelong friend and comrade, Man. What the reader has, up to this point, read as a conventional, highly subjective first-person account of a story, complete with details from the protagonist's private life, such as his embarrassing squid masturbation episode in childhood, is suddenly revealed to be the highly forced, maximally surveilled confession coerced by communist reeducation. This revelation prompts a series of narrative contortions, so that after 300 pages of what seemed a conventional first-person narrative, over the last 80 pages, we

encounter no less than three major shifts in narrative voice. First, our first-person narrator continues his homodiegetic narrative, but now outside of the written confessional account. Second, narration shifts to the third person. Finally, at the end of the protagonist's reeducation, his voice moves into the first-person plural.

Apart from raising some highly pertinent questions about voice, what such narrative instability does is retroactively dismantle the central structuring function of plot. If the events we had read so far turn out to be a censored account produced by reeducation, then whatever meaning those events seemed to have now appears as the direct inscription of reeducation. That is, the chain of events cannot be read as productive of meaning outside of the ideological meaning intended by reeducation—and this recognition comes at the novel's end, once we have already been encouraged to read the events as meaningful on their own terms.

Similarly, the revelation that the tale we are reading is a coerced confession, which is hinted at throughout the narrative, also works to destabilize our notions of character. The protagonist spends much time characterizing himself or evaluating either other characters or the dilemmas in which he finds himself, so that readers gradually develop a sense of him as a nuanced thinker, a lover of life and a perennial outsider, owing to his mixed heritage, his American schooling and his ability to sympathize with others. In fact, the narrator-protagonist's direct addresses to the commandant to whom he is writing the confessions ("Wouldn't you agree, Commandant?") serve not to dismantle, but rather to further embed the notion of the protagonist's dominant optimistic, cheerful and sympathetic outlook. Even these reminders of the Commandant's readerly presence only reinforce the general humor and cheerful tone of the narrative voice. However, the revelation that this account, replete with its ironies and squid-masturbation

episodes, was in fact written under coercion, in a condition of internment in a reeducation camp, throws the entire previously produced impression about character into a crisis.

Another way to put all of this is that *The Sympathizer* explicitly builds up a conventional sense of plot and character over 300 pages, only to deliver a crushing blow to both at the revelation of the narrator's reeducation—and at the hand of his closest friend, no less! Indeed, it is tempting to read *The Sympathizer* as suggesting that reality creates the need for the radical reeducation of readers as well—though for a reeducation of a different kind. The novel, with its open ending—a split-personality narrator now once again in flight, but this time with no certainty as to goal or direction—pointedly offers no narrative of the kind that ideological reeducation tries to do. The problem, the novel seems to say, is precisely with explanatory narratives, which are never free from an underlying ideological agenda.

Thus, *Americanah* and *The Sympathizer* both rely on but ultimately destabilize character and plot. These traditionally realist elements are made meaningfully awkward by the ways they are employed by Adichie and Nguyen. In the digital era, plot or character no longer provide stable anchoring for the project of knowing the world. On social media, the contexts of our seeing—where we see and how we see—matter more. Therefore, Adichie's and Nguyen's novels work to articulate those ways of seeing through the use of vignettes, which only ever allow momentary glimpses into particular situations, and do not ever allow these glimpses to converge into a larger, unifying analysis or account.

The Phenomenology of Scrolling through Instagram

Rather than assembling a linear plot of development, *Americanah* breaks events down to single moments so that much of the plot becomes the movement between causally unlinked

scenes. These short scenes, which tend to comprise a single image, cannot be subsumed into the forward momentum of plot; instead, they articulate important situations that encapsulate the experiences of structural phenomena such as racism. The novel draws on social media's "faster seeing" (Devereux 8) to enact a reading dynamic in which readers are exposed to many quickly alternating images that enable them to form a sensory, but not coherent, understanding of the 21st century's social world.

Americanah's many dinner or party conversations are emblematic of this tendency. The party at Ifemelu's first employer Kimberly's house, parties with Curt's friends, academic gatherings with Blaine's friends, election watch parties, Blaine's sister Shan's "salons," the Nigerpolitan Club meeting, or the party at Obinze's friend Emenike's house in London—these events provide many of those briefly glimpsed moments of Ifemelu's and Obinze's lives in which social dynamics are observed. In fact, Ifemelu's very first depicted social interaction with Americans occurs when her roommates in Philadelphia invite her to a frat party:

> "We're going to a party. Come with us, it'll be fun!" Jackie said, and Ifemelu pulled on her slim-fitting trousers and a halter-neck blouse borrowed from Ginika.
>
> "Won't you get dressed?" she asked her roommates before they left, all of them wearing slouchy jeans, and Jackie said, "We *are* dressed. What are you talking about?" with a laugh that suggested yet another foreign pathology had emerged. They went to a fraternity house on Chestnut Street, where everyone stood around drinking vodka-rich punch from plastic cups, until Ifemelu accepted that there would be no dancing; to party here was to stand around and drink. They were all a jumble of frayed fabric and slack collars, the students at the party, all their clothes looked determinedly worn. (157)

This passage epitomizes *Americanah*'s project to break down every event and plot point into minute, isolated moments. Here, it is difficult to visualize the room, and the sloppily clad undergraduates are barely described; we merely see something like a snapshot of the vodka-punch drinking people standing around. The passage takes a situation as its basis—the situation of being a foreigner among American undergraduates who are comfortable in their

surroundings—but does not develop it fully as a material, spatially determined setting. Employing what can be described as a vignettistic logic, this passage allows us to catch a glimpse of Ifemelu's first attempt to mingle with Americans. This glimpse is short, and it is difficult to ascertain where exactly it begins and ends. Thus, it resembles the glimpses enabled by vignettes such as those of Bewick, which only offer limited narrative potential, but whose precise boundaries are never quite clear.

In fact, *Americanah* often reads like an Instagram feed containing such vignette-like images. Like in a social media feed, the images are ostensibly connected by an underlying plot but the connections are dubious at best. The many parties of the novel constitute such vignettistic situations, for example, but so too do many plot developments that are reduced to one or a few representative situations. One example is the visit of Ifemelu's parents to America, which the novel represents merely in a few static images: her father "marvel[ing] at the industrial carpeting in the hallway of her apartment building," her mother "hoard[ing] faux-leather handbags at Kmart," both of them "pos[ing] for photos in front of JC Penney" (373). Images like these contribute to making *Americanah* a novel where events do not unfold over a longer period of time but are instead delivered in static image-snippets. Therefore *Americanah* ultimately reads like a catalog, or a social media feed, of more or less fully developed situations.

Chapter 31 of the novel is a good test case for analyzing the characteristics of *Americanah*'s situations. This chapter, whose central concern is the failure of mixed-race romantic relationships, gives us two important plot-events: the end of Ifemelu's relationship with Curt and the beginning of Ifemelu's blog. These events are, however, interrupted by a series of jumps in story time, as well as by briefly described situations, perhaps memories, interjected into any particular narrative present moment. As a result, the chapter epitomizes the difficulty to

determine what particular point in time constitutes the narrative present. The chapter begins by informing us in a subordinate clause that the relationship had ended: "After Ifemelu broke up with Curt, she told Ginika, 'There was a feeling I wanted to feel that I did not feel'" (355). Here, at our first encounter with the fact of the failed relationship, readers are placed in a narrative time for which the relationship's end is already past. Then, Ginika's response reveals that there was another significant event that had taken place in the past, an event which we had also not known: "What are you talking about? You cheated on him!" The very first sentences of the chapter upset the reader's sense of any stable position in time—all the while that the novel progresses, ostensibly, according to the linear development of Ifemelu's story.

Then, the conversation between Ifemelu and Ginika is cut short by a one paragraph summary of Ifemelu's sexual encounter with Rob, from which the narrative jumps to the scene where Ifemelu admits having cheated to Curt—all this in only a few pages. The confession scene, itself less than two pages long, consists almost only of dialogue and of Ifemelu's assessments delivered in free indirect discourse. A typical exchange will have a character say one sentence, with little description, followed by Ifemelu's thoughts. For example, when Curt says, "You gave him what he wanted," the narrator gives only the description that the "planes of his face" are "hardening" and then we hear Ifemelu's reflections: "It was an odd thing for Curt to say, the sort of thing Aunty Uju, who thought of sex as something a woman gave a man at a loss to herself, would say" (357). Ifemelu's spoken response is also a one-liner: "I took what I wanted. If I gave him anything, then it was incidental." Here, and often in this chapter, the narrator does not use reporting verbs (such as "said" or "replied") so that the character's speech is merely interjected, as if interrupting Ifemelu's recollections. For instance, when Curt replies, "Listen to yourself, just fucking listen to yourself," the narrator only suggests that it is him

speaking by following up this quote with, "Curt's voice had hardened." Then, again unintroduced, Curt adds, "How could you do this to me? I was so good to you," but either Ifemelu's next line does not respond to this question specifically, or it is omitted by the narrator, because what follows are the narrator's reflections on love, again a seeming approximation of Ifemelu's feelings:

> He was already looking at their relationship through the lens of the past tense. It puzzled her, the ability of romantic love to mutate, how quickly a loved one could become a stranger. Where did the love go? Perhaps real love was familial, somehow linked to blood, since love for children did not die as romantic love did. (357)

Only after this short musing do we hear Ifemelu speak again: "'You won't forgive me,' she said, a half question." Curt merely responds with a curt "bitch," which sets off another musing in Ifemelu, and also ends the scene by relocating the reader to a later time, a time when Ifemelu is no longer at Curt's apartment but in her own: "Alone in her apartment, she cried and cried" (357).

This chapter epitomizes how Adichie breaks up temporal continuity. The novel upsets the forwards movement of plot: the reader is tossed back and forth along time, and so much so that the sense for what is the narrative present is entirely destabilized. The beginning of the chapter, with the conversation between Ifemelu and Ginika, the briefly summarized encounter with Rob, and the abrupt shift out of the confession scene, makes this unstable temporality apparent. Within the confession scene itself, time is divided into more or less static images (characters' spoken sentences, the narrator's reporting of Ifemelu's thoughts) whose connections are obliterated. The succession of such images, coupled with the lack of description of characters or setting, render this chapter reminiscent of a series of social media posts—textual and visual vignette-like forms ranging from scattered observations about romantic relationships to snapshots of "the face when…," a common meme genre in which a situation is depicted through a person's facial

response to it. Differently from a film, where the sequence of images would be connected to form a continuous flow of moving images, the vignettes in *Americanah* form a sequence of discrete, static ones. Thus, rather than an account of events as part of a temporal and narrative continuity, *Americanah* appears like an assemblage of snapshots, some of which coalesce into a scene at best.

The rest of Chapter 31 develops in a similar way. When the confession scene is broken off, we see Ifemelu "[a]lone in her apartment" with some more thoughts retold in free indirect discourse. This is followed by a lengthy paragraph, depicting how Ifemelu "spent weeks calling Curt, waiting in front of his building until he came out, saying over and over how sorry she was" (358). With "over and over," the paragraph reads like a looped GIF, encouraging readers to visualize Ifemelu performing the same short action repeatedly. This "GIF" is itself short: it is cut off as the text homes in on a single situation, when Ifemelu goes "alone to their favorite bar downtown" and processes her recognition that the relationship is definitely over. As she ponders this, she reflects that the female "bartender, the one who knew them," would be a much better fit for Curt than she was. This more vivid, spatially anchored scene ends with an image that encapsulates the entire breakup for Ifemelu, and which is also more concretely, physically accessible for the reader:

> For a long time afterwards, her memory of the end with Curt was this: speeding down Charles Street in a taxi, a little drunk and a little relieved and a little lonely, with a Punjabi driver who was proudly telling her that his children did better than American children at school. (358)

This image, the most vivid one in the chapter so far, is followed by a time leap:

> Some years later, at a dinner party in Manhattan… a balding white man said, "Obama will end racism in this country," and a large-hipped, stylish poet from Haiti agreed, nodding, her Afro bigger than Ifemelu's, and said she had dated a white man for three years in California and race was never an issue for them.
>
> "That's a lie," Ifemelu said to her. (359)

This scene is delivered in much the same way that the confession scene was: with very little description, only a few reporting words, and the majority of the text being dialogue. Ifemelu, at this point in time "happily ensconced in a circle of Blaine's friends," explains what the novel seems to suggest is unquestionably true: that the only way that "race [is] not an issue" is "because you wish it was not." "And so she beg[ins] to talk about Curt" (360), which leads the novel into a series of situations from the relationship whose demise we just witnessed, situations that each illustrate one aspect of how race structured that relationship, including those rare instances when Curt exhibited "a flash of intuition, of surprising perception" (362). We jump from situation to situation: Ifemelu and Curt checking in at a hotel in Montreal where the receptionist "refuse[s] to acknowledge" Ifemelu (364), a visit to Curt's aunt who seems to bend over backwards to, as Ifemelu puts it, "overassure me that she likes black people" (363), a brunch with Curt's mother who claims with conviction that "America was now color-blind" (363), and, along with a host of other, similar situations, the scene where Curt suggests that *Essence* might be "racially skewed" because it only features black women (364). At this point, the novel seems, maybe even more than usually, to approximate social media's "faster seeing," where the reader scrolls through a series of captured snapshots, comments, and observations. Are readers to infer that Ifemelu recounts all of these stories to the guests at the Manhattan party? Or that she recounts some of them, but merely recalls others? Or perhaps we are already, without knowing it, scrolling through Ifemelu's blog?

The latter option is made more likely by the fact that the last situation, where the racial bias of *Essence* is at stake, is followed by the story of how Ifemelu came to start blogging, a story unlikely to be of relevance for the guests at the Manhattan party. After Curt shuts down Ifemelu's protests over his insensitive racial bias comment with a pacifying "Okay, babe, okay, I

didn't mean for it to be such a big deal" (366), Ifemelu writes "a long e-mail to Wambui," her friend from school, "about the bookstore, the magazines, the things she didn't tell Curt, things unsaid and unfinished" (366), an email that Wambui considers blog-worthy. Wambui's response, the reader is told, leads Ifemelu to make a first attempt at a blog: "She broke up with Curt a few weeks after that, and she signed on to WordPress, and her blog was born."[53] It is unlikely that Ifemelu would narrate this origin story to the Manhattan party guests, but there is another link between the two scenes: Ifemelu quotes her first post to the guests. Although the reader is at this point firmly in the temporal present of the breakup with Curt and the creation of the blog ("She broke up with Curt a few weeks after that, and she signed on to WordPress…Her first post was a better-punctuated version of the e-mail she had sent to Wambui"), we are now jerked back to the Manhattan party: Ifemelu "recited those words now, at the dinner table of the French and American couple, while the Haitian poet stared, arms folded" (366). "[T]hose words" are the words of that first blog post, which is given to the readers, though perhaps not in its entirety, in the passage immediately following. That post, a colloquially argued opinion of why "the problem of race in America will never be solved" (367), is in turn followed by the reaction of the host and guest:

> "Oh! What a wonderful story!" the French host said, her palm placed dramatically on her chest, looking around the table, as though to seek a response. But everyone else remained silent, their eyes averted and unsure." (367)

[53] Although the first subordinate clause of the chapter had also claimed, like this sentence, that Ifemelu "broke up with Curt" (355 and 366), the scene that gets us the closest to the breakup, the confession scene, suggests rather that it is Curt who ends the relationship and not the other way around. The fact that the narrator nonetheless insists on wording that makes Ifemelu the active agent suggests that Ifemelu's consciousness is influencing the narrator's account to a high degree, and also that Ifemelu is possibly attempting to narratively alter the past.

Finally, after this brief description of the reaction of the guests, the chapter shifts abruptly to a blog-post about hair, "A Michelle Obama Shout-Out Plus Hair as Race Metaphor," which ends the chapter.

As is clear from this description, the chapter's events are difficult to follow. In only the short space between pages 355-369, there are jumps to around ten different moments in time, out of which at least four (the conversation with Ginika, the confession scene, the Manhattan party, and the *Essence* magazine episode) contain such major events in the plot that they invite the reader to identify them as the narrative present. Next to this shifting temporality, the chapter also builds in other incongruities, such as the persistent lack of description of physical details, the narrator's insistence, contrary to presented events, that Ifemelu broke up with Curt rather than the other way around, or the French host's categorization of Ifemelu's reasoning as a "story," which seems to fly in the face of its being a quote from an opinion piece from the blog. The composite effect, for which this chapter as a whole is an instructive example, is that in *Americanah* plot is presented in a series of situations—brief, temporally and causally unlinked visual moments. Thus, if surface reading, for Best and Marcus, amounts to reading texts for the "structures" they "conceal" but "also wear … on their sleeves" (18), *Americanah* provides what one might call "surface description:" the briefly glimpsed, but immediately available, visual outlines of situations amongst which Ifemelu moves.

Caroline Levine has also noted *Americanah'*s reluctance to connect its observations through explanatory narratives and offers a reading of the value of "plain description" over "nuanced complexity" in Adichie's book (Levine 594–95). She argues that the function of "the plainness and straightforwardness of [Adichie's] descriptive prose" (594) is to "defamiliarize[e] … the habitual deceptions necessary to the ongoing work of racism" (593)—deceptions such as "habits

of pretending about race" (594). Levine links such "plain description" to realist form, arguing that *Americanah* "draws on longstanding realist traditions of description to defamiliarize both racism and electricity" (588). The primary effect of description, as opposed to plot, then, would be to interrupt "entrenched habits of perception" (Levine 593).

I share Levine's sense that *Americanah* privileges "plain description" over "nuanced complexity" in line with Ifemelu's professed goal, "I don't want to explain, I want to observe" (386)—and this in turn aligns with what Huehls identifies as contemporary fiction's turn away from critique—but I would argue that description in Adichie's novel works quite differently from the way it does in "longstanding realist traditions" because of its resemblance to social media textuality. Levine argues that description in *Americanah* is attuned, like the richly detailed 16th- and 17th-century paintings discussed by Ian Baucom, to "finely observed, psychologically arresting scenes of the everyday" (Levine 593; Baucom n.p.). But in what we have seen in Chapter 31 so far, the scenes, though certainly drawn from the everyday, do not exhibit the "the painstaking attention to the details of everyday life" (Baucom n.p.). Instead, each scene is itself a small detail, a snippet, reminiscent of social media's brief, though intense, attention rather than realist painting's expansive gaze. Indeed, these scenes resemble rather what Baucom calls, in his investigation of *Americanah*'s realism, "a miniaturist's care;" though for Baucom, too, Adichie's "miniaturism" must ultimately be "transform[ed]… into a new form of genre painting" in order to achieve an "invigorated" realism (Baucom n.p.). Thus, although both critics find the novel's attention to detail productive, they do not, unlike the thesis advanced here, observe the refusal of the minute to cohere into a large, richly detailed unity. That refusal, though, is precisely what renders *Americanah* more TikTok feed than realist painting.

Thus, when, for Levine, *Americanah* "show[s] that grasping the everyday means being surprised into recognizing precisely those entrenched habits of perception that mystify or occlude ordinary experience" (Levine 593), I would argue that it is *Americanah*'s enactment of social media ways of seeing that enables insight into the "ordinary experience" of American racism and xenophobia. Similarly, while for Baucom Adichie's achievement is to show "that history has not left Africa behind [but that] African history has, instead, expanded to encompass not only the nation and the continent but the diaspora and its circulating citizens" (Baucom n.p.), I think that *Americanah* situates Africa and Africanness not so much in history but rather precisely in the present, as a foundation of social life in 21st-century America.

Indeed, what Levine describes as "plainness" of description is arguably more adequately regarded as deliberate, often quite stark, brevity—a formal choice that focuses on a few visually apprehended snapshots. Adichie builds her social media-inflected aesthetic by concentrating on people's presence and their utterances, while the details of visual appearance gain less attention. In the Manhattan party scene, for example, we see the sketched outline of about ten people seated around a dinner table. There are no physical details: Adichie withholds information on the people's looks, including, with but few exceptions, their skin color. Blaine, who we are told is Ifemelu's boyfriend at this point, is conspicuously absent. Thus, the image produced achieves a high level of abstraction—some figures seated around a table—and although we do visually apprehend the characters, the focus is on the dialogue and the ideas. In this way, *Americanah* produces the impression as if the reader were an outside onlooker who is dropped into a particular situation, but only briefly, so that she barely has the time to register her surroundings and is compelled to limit herself to paying attention to the conversation.

In this way, *Americanah* builds on what Chapter 2 has described as a "digital vignette aesthetics," a representational paradigm whereby readers "scroll" through a large volume of collected, but only tenuously connected, snapshots. Drawing from social media's "faster seeing," *Americanah*'s vignettes give their readers a visual impression of a moment of time without offering spurious, potentially misleading explanatory narrative links. The novel's commentary on race relations in America, then, relies on this dynamic where race is experienced as a bewildering, rapidly shifting mass of the most minute and ordinary slights, aggressions, and misunderstandings whose overall "nuanced complexity" foils our attempts to understand it. To attempt to narrativize these minute and ordinary moments, Adichie's novel suggests, is to risk explaining away their constituting power. Like social media activisms such as #BlackLivesMatter, though, *Americanah* makes use of brief comments, momentary observations, and glimpsed images to offer up race relations as a fundamental, sensually experienced dynamic underlying every ever so ordinary social interaction in 21st-century America. As readers, we are exposed, repeatedly, to new settings and new encounters, but these settings dissipate before we can firmly locate ourselves in them. In this, our uncertain position is an extension of Ifemelu's: like Ifemelu, we are invited to recognize the necessary failure of our desire to understand "nuanced complexity" through intricate explanatory structures. Instead, we have to rely on our body to perceive these structures as they play out in the everyday: we must learn not to explain, but to observe. *Americanah*'s vignettistic structure, together with its fracturing of plot and character, thus yields a novel where plot events seem ultimately beside the point: the point, if there is one, resides in the myriad of momentarily and incompletely grasped situations.

Bodies and Environments: Differing Situatedness in *The Sympathizer* and *Americanah*

Americanah and *The Sympathizer* use vignettes to build quite different representational agendas even as both are invested in realist description and, in particular, in depicting race relations transnationally. The key difference lies in these novels' approach to the situation. As we have seen, *Americanah* puts large value on observation, privileging the assemblage of a large volume of minute details over anchoring each observation in a richly drawn backdrop. While *The Sympathizer* is also invested in moving characters across a series of briefly observed moments, its versions of those moments tend to exhibit more sensory information. Indeed, in Nguyen's novel, unlike in Adichie's, the material characteristics of each situation come to stand in for larger conditions as sensory, not explanatory, ways of apprehending the larger issues at stake.

Like *Americanah*, *The Sympathizer* often reads like an Instagram feed where the reader scrolls from one image to the next, with the protagonist always in the middle of new situations, but Nguyen's novel endows these situations with a symbolic significance that *Americanah*'s situations do not possess. Similarly to Levine's claim about how observation interrupts the "deceptions" that have become habitual in American society, an attention to the physical spaces and bodies in *The Sympathizer*'s situations allows key social contradictions to be "felt," though not traced to their origins or narrativized.

Indeed, the question of the destructiveness of the desire to know and explain lies at the heart of *The Sympathizer*'s epistemological inquiry into new forms of realist depiction. Like *Americanah*, Nguyen's novel is suspicious of narrative accounts that try to order experience into plots of development, projects of which perhaps the epic American war film directed by the "Auteur" (127) is the most blatant example. The film, a Vietnam war movie for which the protagonist is tasked with being the "native informant" (Wu 239), epitomizes both in content and

production processes the exploitation of marginalized populations necessary for knowledge-producing narratives. The film's and its production's overt violence toward subaltern voices that threaten the unity of narrative becomes apparent when the protagonist nearly loses his life as some of the set's bombs go off, supposedly accidentally, while he is roaming the set's cemetery.[54] Although the nearly fatal explosions are ostensibly entirely accidental, they nonetheless achieve their aim of removing the protagonist from the field's production, which has become necessary after he voiced dissent at the treatment of the Vietnamese characters as well as the Philippine locals enlisted to play them. Ordering narratives like the Auteur's film, then, force the world into a single mold, determined by those in power, and justify the active violence of the latter toward those who resist the unity of the mold. As the film makes apparent, it is not just the narrative itself but also the process of its fabrication that works to silence and obliterate alternative perspectives.

This dimension of violence accounts for *The Sympathizer*'s own mechanisms of displacement of plot and character psychology. As an alternative epistemological strategy, Nguyen's novel moves its readers through a series of situations anchored in what Levine calls "plain description." Sometimes these situations are sketched only in very broad strokes, sometimes they become quite elaborate, but regardless of the richness of their detail, they become sensory ways in which the contradictions of master narratives, and of the conditions they produce, become apprehensible.

[54] That the violence is directed at the subaltern displacements of plot is made even more apparent by the fact that the protagonist is on the set in order to lay flowers at one of the graves that he has declared the grave of his mother, who died in Vietnam without a relative to give her proper burial. The fiction of a place for his mother in the world created by Hollywood is so threatening to Hollywood's order that it warrants the bombing not only of the threateningly intruding grave but of the entire world of the set.

Early in the novel, we have an example of such a situation where the physical features of the setting and the bodies of the characters epitomize the corruption of the American-backed South Vietnamese political leadership. In this scene, the protagonist has been tasked with preparing his boss's escape from Vietnam as the Viet Cong are threatening to take over Saigon. These preparations offer a series of very brief vignettes that turn away from the main plot in order to describe conditions of life in South Vietnam. For example, when the protagonist seeks out various military individuals to bribe to secure seats on American planes for the General, his account of his interaction with one lieutenant becomes such a vignette:

> I had tracked him down on the louche major's information, to the canal-side slum he lived in with his wife, three children, parents, and in-laws, all of whom were dependent on his salary that was not enough to feed half of them. This was the typical lot of the young officer, but my task on the afternoon I visited last week was to discover what kind of man had been molded from this poor clay. In his skivvies, sitting on the edge of the wooden bed he shared with his wife and children, the half-naked lieutenant had the cornered look of a political prisoner freshly dropped into a tiger cage, wary and a bit frightened but not yet physically broken. You want me to stab my country in the back, he said tonelessly, the unlit cigarette I had given him in his hand. You want to pay me to let cowards and traitors escape. You want me to encourage my men to do the same. (31)

This vignette is exemplary of *The* Sympathizer's mechanism of diverting attention away from plot in order to home in on the minute, material details of the space and the characters' bodies. The first sentence contains plot ("tracked him down") as well as abstract information about the number of inhabitants in the lieutenant's house. The third and fourth sentences, however, give us a vivid picture of the slum environment in which the lieutenant lives. If only for a moment, we are there with the protagonist, seeing onto the "wooden bed" where the "half-naked lieutenant" is sitting, a "wary" look on his face, no tone in his voice and an "unlit cigarette" in his hand. It is as if the lieutenant's general poor condition—his and his family's emaciation, their slum-like abode—were reflective of or even produced by the protagonist's bribery. Indeed, the lieutenant's home already resembles the "tiger cage," his family already

gnawed by famine and poverty. In this sense, the vignette sidesteps plot and draws from the minute material details of the exchange to make the machinations of the South Vietnamese regime sensually apprehended. The bribery, then, is presented as only an instance, and a late one at that, of a corrupt and unjust system that has already produced the inequality and squalor from which the bribe can now profit.

In *The Sympathizer*, vignettes, like the lieutenant vignette above, often construct very brief situations that locate the characters in spatial settings whose material features stand in for the contradictions of larger master narratives. The protagonist sometimes verbalizes his doubts and criticisms, but more often a detailed description embodies that critique through a material presence. For example, when the protagonist goes on a date with Sofia Mori, his Japanese American clerical colleague at the ominously named "Department of Oriental Studies" (60), the tiki bar where the date takes place becomes the focus of the narrator's account. The tiki bar is here a materialization of larger processes of Orientalized exoticism to which the Japanese American woman and the Vietnamese man are both subject:

> I had taken up the invitation a few days later at a tiki bar in Silver Lake, frequented by heavyset men in Hawaiian shirts and women whose denim skirts barely harnessed their generous rumps. Flaming tiki torches flanked the entrance, while inside, ominous masks of some unknown Pacific Island origin were pinned to the planked wall, their lips seeming to say, *Ooga booga*. Table lamps in the shape of bare-breasted, brown-skinned hula girls in grass skirts cast an ambient glow. The waitress likewise wore a grass skirt whose faded straw color matched her hair, her bikini top fashioned from polished coconuts. Sometime after our third round, Ms. Mori cupped her chin with her right hand, elbows on the bar, and allowed me to light her cigarette, which, in my opinion, was one of the most erotic acts of foreplay a man can perform for a woman. (74)

In this scene, Nguyen situates his characters in the vicissitudes of Orientalized ways of knowing by literally placing them in a setting whose physical traits are determined by such knowledge systems. The paragraph introduces the date, setting the stage for what the reader might reasonably expect to be an account of how the date itself goes. The last sentence sets up

the expectation that that account is now to follow, but that is not what happens: instead, the narrator indicates that he has skipped a possibly substantial amount of preceding conversation, since they are now "after our third round." Rather, as if the setting generated the conversation directly, the narrator then focuses on Sofia's long invective against performed Japaneseness and white people's insatiable need for it ("the whole sukiyaki-and-sayonara show they love, the chopsticks in the hair kind of mumbo jumbo, all that Suzie Wong bullshit" [74]). In terms of plot, what we learn of Sofia's and the narrator's conversation is that she finds him "mysterious" (74) and that they ultimately decide to become lovers (76), but these developments do not constitute the center of the scene. Rather, although the characters do not, in their conversation, comment on the bar's terrible décor, the scene's focus is on how the tiki bar stands precisely for the performance that Sofia abhors.

Like with the Auteur's film, the tiki bar embodies the contradictions of a larger claim to knowledge. The central contradiction is that the bar's performance does not even know what it is performing, since the decorations are all generic ("of some unknown Pacific Island origin"), but its self-assured claims to knowledge do not rely upon familiarity with such details. Indeed, as Sofia realizes, white desires for performed Orientalness stake a claim on knowing what they want to perform without actually knowing it: when the department chair, whose office is ornamented with incense smoke and the frequent sound of gongs, accuses her of being a "nisei," a second-generation Japanese American who has "forgotten your culture," she complains that the chair acts "as if knowing that one word [nisei] means he knows something about me" (75). But the actual Sofia Mori remains a total unknown to white people like the department chair, because they are not interested in knowing anything beyond the outlines of a caricature. Thus all they

ever see is a "nisei," never a woman who, in her own words, "damn well know my culture, which is American, and my language, which is English" (76).

Ironically, however, ultimately even our sympathizing narrator, who is otherwise often sensitive to the points of view and situations of others, fails to acknowledge Sofia's perspective, even though he partially inhabits it as an Orientalized Vietnamese man. Not only does he reject Sofia's invectives by disengaging from them (he shifts to the amorous register instead), but he also refuses to call her by her first name, in spite of her repeated insistence that he do so:

> Ms. Mori?
> Hmm?
> I think I'm falling in love with you.
> It's Sofia, she said. (76)

The tiki bar, then, catering to the insatiable desire to perform, know and unknow Orientalized bodies, objects and places, materializes the dynamic that the rest of the scene, at least in Sofia's words, critiques.

A similar dynamic characterizes the scene where the protagonist and his friend and mentor, the Saigon-based CIA man Claude, are invited to dinner at the house of the protagonist's former undergraduate professor, Avery Wright Hammer, and his partner, Stan. The professor, who went to college with Claude, had been the one to arrange for the narrator's scholarship to study in Los Angeles when he had been sent by the revolutionary Vietnamese communist underground in order to learn the ways of the enemy (58). The professor is also the one, post the fall of the South Vietnamese regime, to enable the narrator to leave the refugee camp in San Diego by sponsoring his departure and procuring him a job at the university (58). Once the protagonist has arrived in Los Angeles, then, and Claude's "return to Washington," made necessary by the American evacuation of Saigon, is "imminent" (99), the professor invites them both to his house to celebrate their reunion.

In this scene, like in the tiki bar scene, the characters' reported conversation seems to arise directly from the physical space, and its inhabiting objects, in which the characters are located. The professor's "Craftsman bungalow in Pasadena" (100), with its interior decoration, as well as the meal that the professor cooks, become the focal points of the contradictions of the professor's, Claude's, and the protagonist's own embeddedness in a capitalist-conservative American ideology:

> The three-course meal was prepared by the professor himself, a salad of mixed greens, duck confit with rosemary potatoes, and a flaky tarte Tatin, preceded by martinis, accompanied by pinot noir, and finished off with single malt scotch. All was served in the meticulously restored dining room of the professor's Craftsman bungalow in Pasadena, everything from the double-hung windows, to the art deco chandelier, to the brass hardware of the built-in cabinetry either an original from the early twentieth century or a faithful reproduction. Every now and then the professor rose from the dining table and replaced the record on the turntable, choosing a new selection from his extensive jazz collection. Over dinner, we talked about bebop, the nineteenth-century novel, the Dodgers, and America's upcoming bicentennial. Then we repaired with our scotch to the living room with its massive fireplace of river rock and its stately Mission furniture of angular wooden frames and leather cushions. Books of all heights, widths, and colors lined the walls in a democratic parade of individualism, arranged as haphazardly as they were on the walls of the professor's campus office. Ensconced thus by letters, words, sentences, paragraphs, pages, chapters and tomes, the evening was a pleasant one, memorable for the exchange that took place after we assumed our seats. (100)

The professor's house stands for an erudite, literary sensibility on the one hand, but on the other it also suggests affluence, a comfortable attitude toward life and the stability of the professor's position in society—which is surprising, given that he is homosexual. Indeed, there is a potentially puzzling harmony in which seemingly contradictory impulses and interests come together in the professor's house. While the "letters, words, sentences" create an atmosphere of intellectual inquiry that the narrator thinks of as "pleasant," the professor also seems mired in the heaviness of his "leather cushions" and "massive fireplace," a heaviness suggestive perhaps of a stifled critical edge, as if he had sunk into a comfortable staleness.

Paradoxically, it is Claude, with his unambiguous allegiance to America's supposedly liberationist interventions, who voices the contradictions intrinsic to the professor's home. When the professor starts talking about Graham Greene's *The Quiet American,* Claude interrupts him with a snort, expressing his disdain for the book for reasons that include that "our American friend in that book also happens to look suspiciously like a latent homosexual" and that "[i]t's also a pro-communist book. Or at least anti-American. Same thing, anyway" (101). But having lumped in the professor's beloved novel with homosexual, pro-communist and anti-American tendencies, Claude then "wave[s] his hand at the books, the furniture, the living room, presumably the whole well-appointed home" and exclaims: "Hard to believe he was once a communist, isn't it?" (101). Suddenly, though the book had just been the object of Claude's contempt as a pro-communist object, now Claude dismisses the home, including its books, as irreconcilable with communism. The professor's books and furniture, then, come to stand in for two contradictory impulses: the nonheteronormative, communist-sympathizing or at least critical political perspective and the ideology of the American dream of wealth, possessions and a comfortable middle-class life.

How is the co-existence of these ideologies possible? The professor explains:

> I was your age…I was impressionable, I was passionate, I wanted to change the world. Communism seduced me like so many others…. Only by making that mistake could I be what I am today… I suppose you could call me a born again American. An irony, but if the bloody history of the past few decades has taught us anything, it's that the defense of freedom demands the muscularity only America can provide. (101)

Communism, and with it implicitly *The Quiet American*, are disavowed here in favor, ironically, of a muscularity that is arguably at odds with the intellectual endeavor intrinsic to the professor's own profession, literature (as well as, one might speculate, with the sedentary heaviness of the professor's home). If the professor's books embody contradictory ideologies,

the passage suggests that these contradictions characterize the professor himself, whose turn away from communism simultaneously constitutes his betrayal of his allegiances and, as he sees it, his awakening to his "true" self as a "born again American." This "rebirth" necessitates a reevaluation of the purpose of the professor's beloved literature, which must be defanged from its critical impulse and aligned with a propagandistic (and also static, sedentary) one. As the professor puts it: "Even what we do at the college has its purpose. We teach you the best of what was thought and said not only to explain America to the world… but to defend it" (101-102). Even the professor's view of literature, then, has changed to embrace the Cold War ideology that can conceive of cultural production only in terms of its promotion of one's own bloc.[55]

Explanation, this passage suggests, is once again suspicious, because it is difficult to disentangle any notion of pure explanation from impulses to "defend," that is, police, the borders of the narratives offered as explanation. The narrative of "America" becomes inextricably linked with the project of safeguarding the unity of this master narrative, and as the professor's language, as well as Claude's profession, suggests, such safeguarding usually involves aggressive military intervention in countries outside of the United States.

The opening vignette of this scene, then, centralizes and makes palpable the scene's main thematic concern, which is the ideological contradictions that can be espoused by an individual in the blindness of their adherence to a particular master narrative. Put another way, the objects, especially the books, gesture toward the sensory dimension in which master narratives in fact demand a blindness toward their internal contradictions. Like the Auteur's film, whose production involves bombing dissenting fictions, the professor too has to obliterate his inner

[55] Ironically, the novel that becomes the hinge point of this entire negotiation here, *The Quiet American,* concerns America only topically, since its author was English. The "best of what was thought and said," then, seems at least on the surface to encompass perspectives from the outside. Or, alternatively, "America" here stands in for a larger Anglo-Western project.

multiplicity of perspective. His books, which were once imbued with a questioning, descriptive rather than narrativizing, potential, have become integrated with the furniture, the home, the food, and all the other accoutrements of a comfortable lifestyle that sees consumption as part and parcel of the project of American cultural supremacy.

Although similarly skeptical of explanatory narratives, *Americanah* nonetheless treats objects and bodies differently from *The Sympathizer*. If, in Nguyen's novel, the physical spaces and objects become the embodiments of a social contradiction inherent in master narratives, settings and bodies demonstrate the impasse of attempting to narratively understand race and race relations in *Americanah*—relations that, the novel suggests, can only be apprehended through the sensory apparatus in brief glances that do not coalesce into a larger, rationalized understanding. In effect, these glimpses serve to suggest what we do not and cannot know—the restrictions on seeing and representation. A scene in which Ifemelu and her cousin Dike are lounging on a Miami poolside offers a striking example of the inaccessibility of any profound narrative truth. Dike has just recently attempted suicide, and Ifemelu is eager to accommodate his every wish:

> "How about we go to Miami?" he said, half joking, but she took him to Miami and they spent two days in a hotel, ordering burgers at the thatch-covered bar by the pool, talking about everything but the suicide attempt.
>
> "This is the life," he said, lying with his face to the sun. "That blog of yours was a great thing, had you swimming in the dough and all. Now you've closed it, we won't be able to do more of this stuff!"
>
> "I wasn't swimming, kind of just splattering," she said, looking at him, her handsome cousin, and the curl of wet hair on his chest made her sad, because it implied his new, tender adulthood, and she wished he would remain a child; if he remained a child then he would not have taken pills and lain on the basement couch with the certainty that he would never wake up again. (471-472)

Here, like in most of *Americanah,* we do not get much description of the place: the focus is on the conversation and especially on Ifemelu's thoughts. But the setting is more vivid than in earlier vignette-like scenes we have seen: the narrator pays more attention to the "thatch-covered

bar" as well as to the sun and the water on the characters' bodies than in any of the previously quoted scenes. This attention to the sensory information available on the surface is juxtaposed to the explicit lack of information that Ifemelu, or any other character, has about Dike's motivations for attempting to take his life. A page earlier, we witness Ifemelu argue with Aunty Uju about whether or not Dike's depression is "because of his experience" (470) as a black African in a mostly white American environment. Immediately before the trip to Miami, we see Dike's girlfriend Page equally shut out from Dike's inner experiences: in tears, the girl complains that "I just can't believe he didn't reach out to me" (471). The Miami situation, with its focus on the physical characteristics, even proximity, of the body, serves to highlight the inaccessibility of any deep knowledge about other human beings to whom we might even be closely connected. Dike remains as inaccessible for Ifemelu as any deeper knowledge is inaccessible for the readers in the situations discussed above: able to perceive only the poolside, the sun, the thatch-covered roofs and the wet hairs on Dike's chest, Ifemelu is allowed no deeper understanding than the reader who, in the Manhattan party scene, could only see the hazy figures around the dinner table, or, in the confession scene, saw no more than the mere shapes of Curt and Ifemelu. Indeed, *Americanah* suggests not only that access to such understanding is impossible, but also that such an understanding is not a solution to the issues at hand. Readers, like the characters, are not simply prevented from attaining such understanding; instead, we ought perhaps to resist the urge to analyze and simply observe.

Two scenes that demonstrate the limits of the usefulness of understanding are two scenes in which workmen are represented, in America and Nigeria respectively. The first of these scenes occurs early in the novel, when Kimberly, for whom Ifemelu works as a babysitter, has ordered a

carpet cleaner. Ifemelu is babysitting Morgan and Taylor, Kimberly's children, and goes to open the door when the carpet cleaner rings the bell.

> A burly, red-faced man stood there, carrying cleaning equipment, something slung over his shoulder, something else that looked like a lawn mower propped at his feet.
>
> He stiffened when he saw her. First surprise flitted over his features, then it ossified to hostility.
>
> "You need a carpet cleaned?" he asked, as if he did not care, as if she could change her mind, as if he wanted her to change her mind. She looked at him, a taunt in her eyes, prolonging a moment loaded with assumptions: he thought she was a homeowner, and she was not what he had expected to see in this grand stone house with white pillars.
>
> "Yes," she said finally, suddenly tired. "Mrs. Turner told me you were coming."
>
> It worked like a conjurer's trick, the swift disappearance of his hostility. His face sank into a grin. She, too, was the help. The universe was once again arranged as it should be.
>
> "How are you doing? Know where she wants me to start?" he asked.
>
> "Upstairs," she said, letting him in, wondering how all that cheeriness could have existed earlier in his body. (205)

Unlike in the Miami poolside scene, here Ifemelu's thoughts provide a running commentary, which initially would seem to attempt to break through the mere surface of the event. The scene maintains, however, a continuous tension between surface and interpretation: we are first presented with the image of the carpet cleaner, whose face and bearing "stiffen[s]" when Ifemelu opens the door, and immediately the narrator, who again is close to Ifemelu's consciousness, reads that stiffness as "surprise" and then "hostility." Then Ifemelu, again in free indirect discourse, attributes the carpet cleaner's "surprise" and "hostility" to his assumption that "she was a homeowner" and "not what he had expected to see." The moment after, when she has revealed that she is also only a help, we again first receive surface description, "[h]is face sank into a grin," followed by Ifemelu's freely reported interpretation of the cleaner's body, "The universe was once again arranged as it should be." Thus, the scene locates the racial import of the exchange in the domain of the body: in free indirect discourse, Ifemelu disables attempts at analysis by asking not how class interacts with race, but "how," once the carpet cleaner's moment of race panic is resolved, "all that cheeriness could have existed earlier in his body."

The scene, then, shows, with what Baucom argues is "a miniaturist's care," how race, but also to some extent class, reside in and gain expression through the body. Or, to be more precise, it is not so much race itself that is manifested in this interaction, but rather race *relations*—the way race structures intersubjective encounters.

Making these embodied manifestations explicit in the form of narrative or analysis is not an available possibility or an adequate solution. Ifemelu, who is in some measure interpellated to do this kind of "translation work" in her blog and diversity talks, frequently expresses her frustration with the explanatory mandate. Indeed, as Baucom points out, the blog post about this and similar encounters, "Sometimes in America, Race is Class," illustrates how interpretation takes away something from the political power of mere observation: as itself an act of explanation, the post "lacks much of the understated force Adichie has earlier invested in the direct narrative [*sic*] representation of the scene, the original account's affective energy now dissipated in an ironic recollection" (Baucom n.p.). Baucom places the emphasis on irony as the reason why the blog post is less effective than the novelistic depiction, but, as Miriam Pahl argues in a different context, Ifemelu's blog reflects the more general pressures that online writers face to satisfy the expectations of readers, or else be eliminated from the "very fierce and competitive space" of online expression (Pahl 78). In spite of the fact that Ifemelu aims to use the blog to counter the mandate to explain, those pressures do nonetheless manifest. Thus, for example, the blog post's lack of physical details—the manifestations of race relations felt in the body—remove the vignette's "affective energy" and disable the kind of affective understanding that the scene itself offers. Thus, Adichie juxtaposes social commentary, which is often subject to the mandates of explanation, and observation, where the latter refuses to read bodies and objects as symbols but simply maintains a perceptiveness toward their manifestations.

The other workman scene, in Lagos this time, similarly highlights how explanatory narratives fail to capture what the experience of life in Nigeria is like for those living there. Here, Ifemelu has moved back to Nigeria, and commissioned bathroom repairs for the apartment she is going to rent. When she goes to inspect the finished job, the scene that ensues once again locates the expressions of social realities in the body:

> In the bathroom, she stared in disbelief. The tile edges were rough, tiny spaces gaping at the corners. One tile had an ugly crack across the middle. It looked like something done by an impatient child.
>
> "What is this nonsense? Look at how rough this is! One tile is broken! This is even worse than the old tiles! How can you be happy with this useless work?" she asked the man.
>
> He shrugged…. "I am happy with the work, aunty."
>
> "You want me to pay you?"
>
> A small smile. "Ah, aunty, but I have finish [*sic*] the work."
>
> […]
>
> "I will not pay you what we agreed, no way, because you have not done what we have agreed."
>
> The tile man was staring at her, eyes narrowed.
>
> "And if you want trouble, trust me, you will get it," Ifemelu said. "The first thing I will do is call the commissioner of police and they will lock you up in Alagbon Close!" She was screaming now. "Do you know who I am? You don't know who I am, that is why you can do this kind of rubbish work for me!"
>
> The man looked cowed. She had surprised herself. Where had that come from, the false bravado, the easy resort to threats? (486-487)

Ifemelu's outburst, though unintended, is successful: the real estate agent promises that the tiles will be relaid. What takes place in this short scene is that Ifemelu is confronted with the physical manifestation of a situation that Ranyinudo, Ifemelu's friend, explains as: "The problem is that we no longer have artisans in this country" (488). This explanation, however, is neither necessary nor adequate, because Ifemelu and through her, the reader, have been made witnesses to the sensory evidence of what the lack of artisans means as lived experience. Ifemelu's first response is "disbelief," an intellectual reaction, but as she begins screaming and threatening, her body subconsciously takes up the physical comportment that is required by the situation. Ifemelu surprises herself, but as Ranyinudo points out, "You are no longer behaving like an

Americanah!" (488). This short scene, then, gives readers insight into the physical and embodied ways of lived experience in Lagos without enabling explanatory narratives as ways of making sense of that experience. Instead, like in the carpet cleaner scene, abstract social relations—race in that scene, class in this one—are acted out primarily by way of the body. These abstract relations become tangible, material—visible, audible or palpable.

Special Case: The Blog Posts

If *Americanah*'s use of narratively unlinked image sequences owes much to the social media format, it is logical to assume a similar interest in the blog posts, which would certainly strike many as the novel's most direct concern with internet media. I argue that Adichie uses these posts to experiment with a different, though related, mode of representation than in the main text, one that reworks many of the novel's glimpsed situations into virtual spaces for readerly comment. This argument relies on Baucom's observation that the blog posts are frequently a means for *Americanah* to tell many of the novel's events, such as the failure of the relationship with Curt or the carpet cleaner episode, "not once but twice," with the "second time" being "through the slight remove of Ifemelu's blog posts" (Baucom n.p.). The blog posts, I contend, open up spaces for Ifemelu's readers to become co-creators of the online text, which in turn invites the novel's readers to examine the ways in which they themselves might be the participants of Ifemelu's observational ethics.

Much of the critical discussion of *Americanah*'s blog has revolved around whether it provides a critical space for social commentary or whether it is subsumed by the market forces that support it, in particular forces that seek to capitalize on the commodification of exoticized postcolonialism and Afropolitanism (Guarracino 4; Pahl 80). But, as Pahl points out,

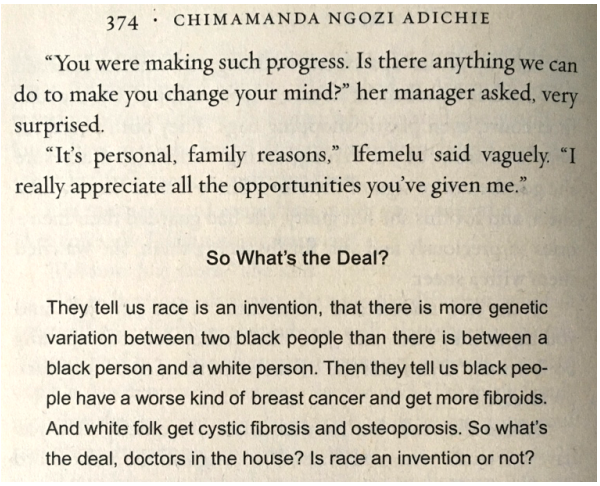
Americanah recognizes the alienating effects of the blog's underlying market dynamics (79), and as Huehls suggests about a larger corpus of contemporary novels, *Americanah* might simply not be interested in adopting a position fully outside of neoliberalism, because Adichie may have recognized that no such position is available. Instead, the different representational stance of the blog posts as compared to the main text reflects the novel's awareness that the observational ethic may be compromised when subjected to the market pressures of having to generate revenue from its readers, but also that, the compromise notwithstanding, observation remains an ethical mandate. Therefore, the juxtaposition of the blog posts with the main text's "plain description" problematizes the co-dependence of novelistic writing and social media in the internet age. The realist novel's representational forms, *Americanah* suggests, ideally reflect some aspects of social media, while at the same time, internet media also benefit from formal features drawn from vignettes in the history of the book, as we will see.

Some blog posts, like the one examined by Baucom, take as their starting point a single situation that has already been described in the novel, and deliver it with more "concision" than in the main text, as well as additional "insight" (Baucom n.p.). These blog posts do not typically embody the vignette's descriptive approach, because the condensing act usually removes descriptions of actual situations, while the "insight" with which the blogger Ifemelu imbues these posts functions as commentary that disables the reader's own inhabiting of the situation. The carpet cleaner blog post works in this way, but so too does the post that draws from the frat party scene analyzed above:

> *When it comes to dressing well, American culture is so self-fulfilled that it has not only disregarded this courtesy of self-presentation, but has turned that disregard into a virtue. 'We are too superior/busy/cool/not-uptight to bother about how we look to other people, and so we can wear pajamas to school and underwear to the mall.'* (157-158, emphasis in the original)

More succinctly than the original passage, this post observes the same phenomenon, dressing poorly, and it comments on it in ways that inscribe into the situation Ifemelu's reading of it. This approach forecloses the reader's own intimate engagement with, or experiencing of the situation, by jumping to perhaps predictable, but certainly determined interpretations. The situational logic of the vignette is thus not operational in blog posts like these: indeed, such posts therefore read as throwing in relief the dynamic that the main text uses to represent the lived and embodied experience of a situation like the frat party.

Other blog posts, on the other hand, experiment with the vignette's epistemological features explicitly and in different ways. For example, some posts negotiate the question of the margins of the text in ways resembling vignettes both visual and textual, from Bewick to Hemingway. Such posts function almost as tailpieces that end a chapter but simultaneously also perform an opening into a different narrative world. Like Bewick's vignettes, they invite the reader to use the vignettes as starting points to create their own stories. Most blog posts are set apart spatially from the main text as well as set in a different, sans-serif font; when brief posts appear at the end of chapters, with no relation to the preceding chapter, the resemblance to Bewick is apparent. For example, this is how chapter 32 ends: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"You were making such progress. Is there anything we can do to make you change your mind?" her manager asked, very surprised.

"It's personal, family reasons," Ifemelu said vaguely. "I really appreciate all the opportunities you've given me."

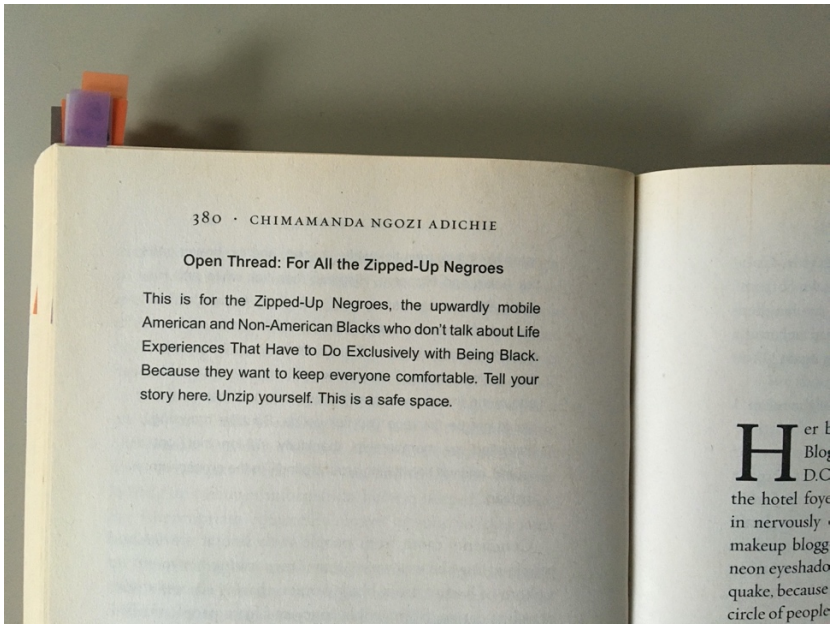
So What's the Deal?

They tell us race is an invention, that there is more genetic variation between two black people than there is between a black person and a white person. Then they tell us black people have a worse kind of breast cancer and get more fibroids. And white folk get cystic fibrosis and osteoporosis. So what's the deal, doctors in the house? Is race an invention or not?

Figure 52: Blog post "So What's the Deal?" in *Americanah*

Indeed, “So What’s the Deal” functions much like Bewick’s tailpiece vignettes: it closes the chapter, is unrelated to the chapter’s topic, and it contains an explicit invitation for readers to engage in the co-creation of the text: “So what’s the deal, doctors in the house? Is race an invention or not?” Thus, it, like the vignettes in *British Birds,* opens up a space apart from the main text, with a narrative potential of its own, but a narrative whose possible multivocality prevents it from being integrated into the linear developmental arc of plot.

An even more explicit example of the blog post’s invitation of readerly engagement is the blog post entitled “Open Thread: For All the Zipped-Up Negroes.” Located at the end of chapter 33, which details the growing success of Ifemelu’s blog, describes her “first diversity talk” (377) and recounts Ifemelu’s purchase of a condominium, this brief blog post is perhaps the novel’s clearest approximation of the autonomous world-creating work that characterized Bewick’s vignettes. “Open Thread,” like the minute images in *British Birds*, announces its purpose to provide an “open” “space” apart from the chapter’s own world:



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Open Thread: For All the Zipped-Up Negroes

This is for the Zipped-Up Negroes, the upwardly mobile American and Non-American Blacks who don't talk about Life Experiences That Have to Do Exclusively with Being Black. Because they want to keep everyone comfortable. Tell your story here. Unzip yourself. This is a safe space.

Figure 53: Blog post “Open Thread” in *Americanah*

Like "So What's the Deal," "Open Thread" invites its readers to engage with it, though in this instance, Ifemelu provides almost no starting point for that engagement. The post construes that engagement as one that opens up a new space, one that is unrelated to the chapter in which the post appears and removed from the world of the characters. This separation, characteristic of the blog posts in *Americanah* in general, enacts the function that the internet has in our daily lives, the function to open up a separate, virtual world. But "Open Thread" goes further than most of *Americanah*'s blog posts in that, rather than impart content to its readers, it explicitly performs the creation of a new and separate world. In asking its readers not to read but rather to "Tell your story here," and in claiming itself as a "space," "Open Thread" articulates the work that, like Bewick's vignettes, the blog post performs. That is, "Open Thread" makes explicit that Adichie's blog posts embody an interest toward what it means to capture a world by opening up a window into a separate, though ambiguously connected and framed, experience.

Are we to conclude that Adichie's blog posts are vignettes? I think not: most of the blog posts remain on the level of ideas and do not anchor the reader in a material space. But like the strangeness in *Americanah*'s characterization and plot, the blog is also a means to signal the novel's interest in displacing traditional concepts of representation, and to indicate what an alternative model of representation might mean. Further, while the main text is informed by social media ways of looking, the blog posts draw from book historical vignettes to articulate potentials for readerly co-construction that resist the integration into explanatory narratives. In this regard, vignettes and blog posts are two different ways, and two different degrees, to which *Americanah* reframes the realist novel's representational program. In some cases, they are also two techniques that share an underlying commitment to the momentary, and the static, newly

opened space. Thus, Ifemelu's already quoted claim that "I don't want to explain, I want to observe" (386) becomes doubly valid: while the novel is committed to the kind of observation that vignettes, with their mere glimpses of the world, allow, the blog posts serve to examine the boundaries of this type of representational stance, asking when such a model needs to be extended through a different medium (such as the vignette tailpiece) or when the pressures of its environment foreclose it altogether (as sometimes arises in Ifemelu's blog due to the financial mandates of the market).

Although similar in many respects, then, *Americanah* and *The Sympathizer* differ vastly in their use of vignette aesthetics. While they both use vignettes to direct attention away from plot, these vignettes operate very differently. In *The Sympathizer,* vignettes often open scenes and provide a physical setting, such as the professor's home, that comes to stand in for, even embody, the central contradictions discussed in the scene. In this way, Nguyen uses vignettes as a material frame in which the ideologies and affects of the characters are embedded. The specificity of the spaces is important insofar as it enables a sensory, palpable understanding of the ideological contradictions that the normative master narrative is violently trying to conceal. In *Americanah*, on the other hand, what matters are less the physical parameters of the setting as the briefly observed material situations in which relationships manifest themselves in people's bodies. In these glimpses, narrative logic is neither possible nor adequate to the task of grasping the structuring power that race relations have in the everyday. In this respect, readers inhabit a position much like Ifemelu, for whom the bodies, apartments, and clothing styles of other people never afford any deeper understanding of their lives and who refutes the mandate to expose and explain supposedly underlying deeper causal structures. Indeed, the reader's and Ifemelu's perspective in *Americanah* arguably resemble that of the Facebook user, who is afforded only

quick glances into the images of other people's lives but who is unable to establish larger connections between those images.

From One Absurd Situation to the Next: *The Sellout*

> Every year my father used to bring the new *Thomas Guide* home, and the first thing I'd do was turn to pages 704-5 and approximate the location of the crib, 205 Bernard Avenue, on the map. Finding my house in that giant tome grounded me somehow. Made me feel loved by the world. But 205 Bernard Avenue sat on a nameless peach-colored section of gridiron streets bordered by freeways on each side. I wanted to cry. (89)

Early in *The Sellout*, we learn that books—even ones, like the *Thomas Guide*, designed to capture the geographic essence of places—do not contain Dickens, the agrarian ghetto Los Angeles suburb that *The Sellout*'s narrator-protagonist calls home. Centered on Dickens's disappearance from the Los Angeles map, Beatty's novel therefore proposes an alternative strategy: in order to write (and draw) Dickens back into existence, one has to proceed in a piecemeal fashion. The protagonist thus embarks on a project with many small tasks—a road sign here, a city border line there—while the novel itself employs a similar strategy, affording the reader only glimpsed moments by which the life of Dickens can be understood. Indeed, Beatty's novel is concerned with the racialized dynamics that constitute place, dynamics which are too complex to be reduced to any explanatory narrative, but which produce ongoing relations in any particular situation. My reading argues that the co-constitution of race and space act as the main determinants of *The Sellout*'s own version of situational realism. Every situation seems absurd in isolation because of the way that it is suffused with racialized relations; at the same time, the absurdity cannot be resolved by pointing to a larger structure as its explanation, because these situations resist being linked in a causal chain. Segregation, itself a dynamics of separating parts of the population who may not be, and are usually not, intrinsically separate or different,

dictates a logic whereby space and plot itself must also fall into minute, unlinked, but ultimately absurdly isolated parts.

Critics disagree about the central concern of Beatty's novel but they share the sense that its overriding absurdity works to expose the contradictions of the rhetoric of a post-racial society. Readers have alternately read this exposition as functioning in favor of a critique of privilege critique (Delmagori 418), as problematizing the concepts of home and dwelling in a supposedly post-racial world (Astrada 106), or as tracing the emotional journey of an individual of color trapped between post-racial hypocrisy and overt racist oppression (Maughan 47). Different from the attempts to understand *The Sellout* in terms of a category of critique, the thesis advanced here is that Beatty's novel intervenes in the epistemological and representational question of how to grasp the lived experience of racialized notions of space in an ostensibly post-racial society. Certainly, Beatty's novel does feature elements of critique, but the absurdity of the situations in which Bonbon finds himself, and especially the novel's arguably puzzling sympathetic depiction of Bonbon's resegregation project, work to foreground the affective dimension of a myriad of minute, everyday experiences rather than their coherence as part of a larger critical agenda.

The Sellout features a deliberately disjointed, loosely sequential plot. The narrator, Me, nicknamed Bonbon, is an amiable loser raised by a psychologist father as a case study in the traumatic effects of racism. Bonbon, in an attempt to counter his hometown's erasure, draws a line around Dickens's boundaries, resegregates the school, the hospital, and local businesses, and accidentally becomes a slaveowner, for which crimes he ultimately faces a United States Supreme Court trial. This is how readers first encounter him: he is getting high on homegrown weed in the hallways of the Supreme Court, where the case "*Me v. the United States of America*" (21) is being heard. Tendentially, however, Bonbon's narration deviates from an account of the

main events themselves, and is preoccupied instead with various digressions, some of which offer glimpsed moments of the lives of characters both major and minor.

Indeed, as the novel opens with the account of Bonbon's trip to Washington, D.C. to attend his trial, a multitude of single, isolated images distract from the ostensible progress of plot. The account of Bonbon's trial has not even started when it is interrupted with images from Bonbon's sightseeing from the day before:

> Yesterday afternoon, like some sandal-shod Ethiop from the sticks of the darkest of the Los Angeles jungles, I ventured from the hotel and joined the hajj of blue-jeaned yokels that paraded slowly and patriotically past the empire's historic landmarks. (4)

Or:

> At the zoo, I stood in front of the primate cage listening to a woman marvel at how "presidential" the four-hundred-pound gorilla looked… When her boyfriend, his finger tapping on the informational placard, pointed out the "presidential" silverback's name coincidentally was Baraka, the woman laughed aloud, until she saw me, the other four-hundred-pound gorilla in the room, stuffing something that might have been the last of a Big Stick Popsicle or a Chiquita banana in my mouth. (5)

These passages, coming almost from before the account of the trial has even started, exemplify how Bonbon's account is constantly interrupted by interspersed images, snapshots, and observations. Here as elsewhere in the novel, much of the jumpy structure can be attributed to the narrator's indulgence in his own thoughts and witty philosophizing ("like some sandal-shod Ethiop from the sticks of the darkest of the Los Angeles jungles," or, later, "I'm getting high in the highest court in the land" [7]). Other interruptions consist of single images, such as that of the flow of the "hajj" of tourists, or short scenes, such as the scene at the zoo. If *Americanah* reads like social media commentary, then, *The Sellout* resembles even more strikingly the feed of an active, insightful Twitter user who incorporates many different media (short video, image, textual comment) going in many different directions at the same time. The composite effect is that Beatty's novel displaces the teleological movement of storytelling into a series of unconnected, sometimes visual, sometimes observational, situations.

When the suddenly inserted interruptions consist of a single, short flash to another scene, such flashes expose readers to the vivid, sensory depiction of how certain characters experience complex notions like race, community, or belonging. One example is Bonbon's sudden and quick depiction of a scene from the Los Angeles race riots. As he introduces readers to the Dum Dum Donut Intellectuals, Bonbon explains that the exceptional status of the Dum Dum Donut shop is partially due to it being "the only non-Latino or black-owned business that wasn't burned and pillaged in the riots" (45). Then, in his one sentence description of the riots, he suddenly snaps to a highly concrete image of "the pesky news crews" interrogating random people on the street:

> In fact, looters, police officers, and firemen alike used the twenty-four hour drive-thru window to fuel up on crullers, cinnamon twists, and the surprisingly good lemonade as they fought off the conflagration, the fatigue, and the pesky news crews who asked anyone within arm's length of a microphone, "Do you think the riots will change anything?"
> "Well, I'm on TV, ain't I, bitch?" (46)

Bonbon inserts this short and intense snapshot from the riots right into the middle of his account of how the donut shop became the locus of Dickens's intellectual life. The passage above is the entirety of the snapshot of the riot; it is followed by further description of the donut shop. And yet the passage is remarkably vivid—in particular the snippet where the news crew and their interviewee are quoted directly. Although we do not know who these individuals are, and in a sense they are not really individuals but types standing in for particular attitudes, the voices of the two speakers are so vividly present that their speakers do come alive. In other words, an extremely brief interaction, which does not explain or narrativize the riots themselves, makes felt the particular racialized realities that suffuse people's relations to the riots. To the interviewee, the riot becomes an event because it enables their presence on TV, that is, they lend a voice for an unnamed individual of color on the national medium of television. In the middle of

the description of the Dum Dum Donut shop, then, a highly condensed but vivid scene gives us insight, even if just a glimpse, into the ways that unnamed, unidentified people responded to the race riots. In a context where Dickens, far from being present on any media, is in the process of total erasure from the map, it is significant that the voice of one of its residents on TV registers for that resident as "change." Similarly, the snapshot of this resident's TV appearance marks a small moment in *The Sellout* where the experience of living in Dickens is presented in a sensory way, though not without mediation, to the reader.

Bonbon's narration of actual events in the novel similarly takes a disjointed form; specifically, he narrates the flow of events as if they were a series of static images. His planting of a rogue "DICKENS—NEXT EXIT" sign on the highway exemplifies this style. First, Bonbon is reminiscing about how, when his father used to drive them home from Dodgers games, the child Bonbon would be reassured by that road sign, now gone. But in the very next sentence he shifts to "The green-and-white placard didn't cost much" (87), and then we learn that

> Other than pouring and waiting for the cement to dry, installing a traffic control device isn't all that different from planting a tree, and in the light of the high beams I set to work. Cleared the ivy, dug the holes, and planted the sign, while Hominy passed out in the front seat, listening to jazz on KLON.
>
> As the sun rose over the El Segundo Boulevard overpass, the morning commute was starting in earnest. And amid the car honking, the rotors of the traffic helicopters beating overhead, and the grinding of truck gears, Hominy and I sat in the breakdown lane appreciating what we'd done. (88)

Here, like in the race riots scene, plot or description are interrupted by one or several vignettes that take over the work of the element they have displaced—plot in this passage, and description in the case of the race riots. The story of how Bonbon plants the road sign is thus delivered to us in two vivid images, not an account of a sequence of events: one of Bonbon working away in the dark to the sound of the car radio, and the other of the hustle of morning traffic as Bonbon and Hominy inspect the landscape with the new Dickens exit sign. If in the

race riots scene *The Sellout* opts for a vignette to do the work of description, here plot is conveyed by means of a series of brief glimpses, less through a verbal account. In *The Sellout*, then, it is these brief but vivid images that carry the novel's plot, and description too tends to be broken down into short snapshots.

The flickering, shifting delivery of the passage in which Bonbon plants the Dickens exit sign might appear innocent, but other similarly disjointedly retold incidents in the novel make it clear that this narrative mode actually reflects ways of attempting to cope with the degree to which the racialization of the everyday destabilizes, indeed traumatizes, the residents of Dickens. As Beatty admits in an interview, his novel "has a psychological framework" (Gatti 45), and it therefore makes sense to read its disjointed delivery as a sensory way of experiencing the mental and cognitive effects of the racialization of place. The psychological aspect of this fragmented narrative account is apparent, for example, in the scene where Bonbon recounts how, after his father's death, he takes over the latter's job as the community's "Nigger Whisperer" (58), a kind of emergency counselor who attempts to convince people in a crisis not to "commit suicide, murder, or both" (59). Bonbon begins this account with what could, in analogy to Levine's "plain description," be called "plain narration:"

> In the years after my father died, the neighborhood looked to me to be the next Nigger Whisperer. I wish I could say that I answered the call to duty out of a sense of familial pride and communal concern, but the truth was, I did it because I had no social life. (58)

From this account, Bonbon shifts into first a description of his "shrill" voice as opposed to his father's "bass profundo" (59), then to an image of himself "in my pajamas," "standing barefoot in an apartment complex courtyard, bullhorn in hand, staring up at some distraught, partially hotcombed-headed mother dangling her baby over a second-floor balcony ledge," and then to a discussion of the busiest "Nigger Whispering" days in the week for himself as well as for his

father (Wednesdays for Bonbon, Fridays for his father). The description of his father's Fridays, though, is of an unquotable length, a single sentence spanning 15 lines, with countless details about how "the bipolar poor" (59) crack under the strain of the everyday. From this description, Bonbon shifts to that of his Wednesdays, but these are depicted as a return to the image of himself gazing up at the woman threatening to kill her baby, an image that is then itself interrupted by a digression of the dangers of women who like Nina Simone (60). In the midst of the digression, though, suddenly we hear that:

> The crowd murmurs that I don't know what I'm doing. And I don't.
> "You don't stop fucking around, man, you gonna get that baby kilt."
> "Killed."
> "Whatever, nigger. Just say something." (61)

And then follows the account of Bonbon's college education, which, unlike what people "all think," was not in psychology but in animal sciences (61).

As this brief description of Bonbon's account makes clear, the retelling of how he inherited his father's position as "Nigger Whisperer" hardly qualifies as an account at all: it has neither forward development, nor coherent narrative, and it is sprinkled with too many too vivid images as well as unrelated observations and digressions. These images add up to a cumulative, but not coherent, image of an entire community in distress: people with their nerves on edge, ready to flip and threaten suicide or murder at any moment. Furthermore, that these images of the community are narrated to us in such a scattered fashion by Bonbon makes evident that the psychological distress of not just the people depicted, but also of the person doing the narrating—Bonbon. Obviously, the "distraught, partially hotcombed-headed mother," the people "tired and unsated from the [Friday] night's notoriously shitty prime-time television lineup," and those whose "mental health care professional" is their "chatterbox cosmetologist" are at the end of their tether, but so too is Bonbon, who has to respond to all these crises while admitting that "I

don't know what I'm doing" (61). His flickering, restless narration suggests that there is no overarching narrative that can account for this amount of personal, but systemically created, misery: cycling through these images is more effective in grasping their significance than trying to analyze them could be. Or, alternatively, looking these personal and communal troubles in the face becomes an ethical and epistemological necessity, given that what the community is now facing beyond their already dire conditions is complete removal from visibility on the map.

As a whole, then, the novel reads like a social media feed, with images, comments, and short scenes quickly alternating—a dynamic which staunchly refuses the notion that the experience of life in a racially othered, and for this reason simultaneously erased, city can be explained by a coherent narrative or assembled into meaningful units of sense-making. The supposedly desegregated city itself resists such assembly, and the social media aesthetic productively reflects this multidirectional, fragmented representational ethic. Differently from *Americanah* or *The Sympathizer,* however, the individual fragments are themselves defiant of sense-making because of their internal absurdity. That absurdity is only heightened by the jarring contexts of these snippets, interrupting description or disrupting the continuous flow of narrative accounts.

Apart from the textuality of social media, the disruptive use of vignettes as snapshots that interrupt the processes of reading and description is also reminiscent of the types of vignettes that were used as typographical structuring devices. The little print flowers would disrupt the flow of the text and organize it into units that sometimes ran counter to what might appear to be the text's own internal logic. I argue that this fragmented, jarring view on the novel's world reflects a situational realist ethos where place (Los Angeles/Dickens) has to accommodate the coexistence of a bewildering array of simultaneously lived realities linked only by the absurdity

of profoundly racialized dynamics. When the interviewee interjects their vision of change as consisting of being "on TV…, bitch," they are throwing in the reader's face the banality of Los Angeles's racialized reality. It is not a reality constituted by the racism of a powerful few, or by the troubling racism undergirding personal relations in *Americanah*, but rather by a racism that has suffused the spaces themselves so that every ever so ordinary activity is rendered absurd by its underlying twisted racial logic. This is why attempts to make sense of the supposedly colorblind city are constantly foiled by the interjection of absurdly discordant snapshots.

And, as Beatty suggests in his interview, although they are not exactly making sense of this discordant reality, Dickens's residents are grasping and living through its affects, a process that drains them both mentally and emotionally. In the words of Brian Massumi, "The body doesn't just absorb pulses…; it infolds contexts, it infolds volitions and cognitions that are nothing if not situated" (30). Arguably, the body's "infold[ing]" of contexts is what Beatty means by his claim that the novel has a "psychological framework;" accordingly, some critics have read the psychological consequences of navigating the simultaneous presence of racism and the rhetoric of the post-racial as a major theme in the novel. Philip Maughan, for example, thinks that *The Sellout's* "emotional core" consists of Bonbon's "personal journey" amid the commitments to his own well-being, that of Hominy, and that of the community; thus, his journey serves as a "reminder that identity is forged amid overlapping private and communal experiences" (Maughan 47). This chapter takes a different view: Bonbon does not go through a journey of development, but he does work through—at times through the lens of trauma, at other times humorously, but always through the flickering and fragmented texture of social media—the experiences, impressions and observations that continue to determine the lives of Dickens's inhabitants even as they are ostensibly erased out of existence.

While the lived reality depicted in *The Sellout* is one that is suffused through and through with racialized relations, part of the absurdity of this reality is that racialization also undergirds a sense of identity, though a difficult one, and even a love for some of the more dubious outcomes of racialized existence. For Bonbon, although he recognizes the violence of Dickens's segregated past, his entire project of "bringing back the city of Dickens" (100) rests on his love for the city that is being erased by a supposedly post-racial, colorblind society. That love is a tough love, however, a version of Berlant's cruel optimism, loving what it knows to be "an obstacle to [its] flourishing" (Berlant 1) because Bonbon knows that a separate, black city is no idyllic homeland of accomplished peace and harmony. His awareness is reflected, for example, by his consideration that he should probably also put up a road sign by the Dickens exit, warning "CAUTION—BLACK ON BLACK CRIME AHEAD" (89). Ironically, however, the contradictions and hypocrisies of the erasure of the color line—*de jure* desegregation and its attendant politics of colorblindness, embodied by misguided activisms— "mak[e] a return to the bad old ways seem somehow pragmatic, perhaps even humane" (Maughan 47). Although Bonbon knows that segregation was never "good," it is not clear for him—and I suggest that it is not clear in the novel either—that the current status quo of a supposedly post-racial society is that much better, if at all. As Bonbon imagines his father would have put it, "Just because racism is dead don't mean they still don't shoot niggers on sight" (43).

Like in *The Sympathizer*, then, the binary logic of two seemingly opposite sides—communists and anti-communists, segregation and desegregation—obscures a reality, perhaps even an ethics, of unresolvable entanglement and multidirectional sympathy. The protagonist of *The Sympathizer* earns his titular designation precisely because of his, apparently rare, ability to engage emotionally all sides of the supposed binary—or perhaps better said, his inability to

remain indifferent toward the emotional and cultural attachments of any one side. Bonbon, too, fails to subscribe to the socially sanctioned version of anti-racist activism propounded by dubious types like the hyper-politically correct academic Foy Cheshire. Foy, who "belong[s] to that scary subset of black lycanthropic thinkers" that Bonbon likes "to refer to as 'wereniggers'" (96) because of their tendency to live outside of the hood but come prowling intermittently in order to bask in its authenticity, is the one to award Bonbon the epithet of "Sellout." Foy's exclusion of Bonbon from community membership comes after the latter dismisses Foy's project to censor out every racial slur from the greats of the American literary canon, yielding results like *Uncle Tom's Condo, The Point Guard in the Rye, The Great Blacksby,* and *The Pejorative-Free Adventures and Intellectual and Spiritual Journeys of African-American Jim and His Young Protégé, White Brother Huckleberry Finn, as They Go in Search of the Lost Black Family Unit* (165-166, 95). For people like Foy, Bonbon does not even have to embark on his resegregation project in order to be a sellout: his ambivalent feelings toward the official perspectives on racial equality are enough.

It is precisely ambivalence, however, that drives not just Bonbon's actions but much of *The Sellout*'s representational ethic in depicting the society of supposed racial justice. This ambivalence is usually presented most succinctly in highly visual vignettes, where absurdity resides in the underlying tensions between how people should behave in a post-racial society and how they are actually behaving. For example, after a cinema showing of the *Little Rascals*, the racist short films in which Hominy acted as a child, we see these two types of behavior contrasted when a white man accosts Hominy after the show:

> "I just want to say, all those rappers running off at the mouth about being 'the last of the real niggers,' don't have jack shit on you, because you, my man, are more than the last Little Rascal, you're the last real nigger. And I mean 'nigger' with the hard *r*."
> "Why, thank you, white man."
> "And do you know why there aren't any more niggers?"

> "No, sir. I don't."
> "Because white people are the new niggers. We're just too full of ourselves to realize it."
> "The 'new niggers,' you say?"
> "That's right, both me and you—niggers to the last. Disenfranchised equals ready to fight back against the motherfucking system."
> "Except that you'll get half the jail time." (244)

Here, the white man does not, as could be expected from a post-racial society, treat all people, regardless of color, the same. Instead, he posits an essentialized notion of a marginalized social position with a kind of cultural capital or cachet ("real nigger"), which he uses to differentiate between Black people and white people (the latter have it, the former do not). For Hominy, however, "nigger" is not cultural capital: it is a material position of social, economic, and political disenfranchisement, for which reason for him, his interlocutor is a "white man" and he himself a "nigger." Like in the interview scene, we do not receive much information about the looks, tone or body language of the characters, and the setting is again unimportant: we have instead an extremely brief cutscene where the two different worldviews clash. The white man's romanticized notion of "nigger" as something like the cachet of alterity or countercultural status is a product of a post-racial society that, in claiming to be blind toward race, is instead blind toward the racist dynamics that continue to determine life conditions for Black people in ways that they do not for whites. Accordingly, Hominy's awareness that there is no equality before the law for the two of them ("Except that you'll get half the jail time") reflects his stubborn refusal of the rhetorics of a post-racial existence that he knows is not his own. This refusal grounds Hominy's firm belief in and nostalgia for the segregated society in which the absence of equality was openly admitted.

Furthermore, Hominy's longing for the "good ol' days" (87) of open racism is difficult to write off as merely funny or pathetic. On the one hand, this is because Bonbon sympathizes with him and is clearly willing to go to great lengths to enact a slave-holding fantasy in which

Hominy is Bonbon's "field nigger." As Bonbon admits, "They say 'pimpin' ain't easy.' Well, neither is slaveholdin'" (81). Hominy's bondage is certainly cumbersome and costly, because not only does he not do any work ("mostly Hominy's work consisted of watching me work" [82]) but he also demands the staging of elaborate fantasies such as the segregated bus or punishment whippings by the sex workers at the "Sticks and Stones, the BDSM club on the Westside" whom Bonbon "contract[s] to dole out my punishments for me" (84). The bus requires ingeniously designed replica signs as well as a hired white "actress" willing to take the bus through a stretch of town frequented only by people of color, to whom Hominy can yield his seat. These exertions aside, the whipping sessions at the BDSM club are also a severe blow to Bonbon's budget. "At two hundred bucks an hour plus 'racial incidentals,' the shit started to add up.… But after these sessions Hominy looked so happy it was almost worth it" (84).

On the other hand, Bonbon himself is involved with a restorative agenda that attempts to reinstate bygone racist practices, and that agenda is not merely concerned with Hominy's idiosyncratic happiness. Instead, as Bonbon is aware, "Hominy's happiness wasn't mine, it wasn't the city's" and "restoring Dickens" is a project that aims for a happiness that exceeds that of one eccentric individual. In other words, Hominy might initially appear as a funny figure whose scars from a lifetime of racism prohibit him from adjusting to a new, emancipated society, but it soon becomes clear that "the bad old ways" (Maughan 47) remain a touchstone not only to him, but to Bonbon and Dickens in general. Moreover, this touchstone is the basis of a large part of the characters' identities and sense of belonging: it is no accident that Hominy's name contains the word *home*.

If *The Sellout* is puzzling, then, in "making a return to the bad old ways seem somehow pragmatic, perhaps even humane" (Maughan 47), it is so because we are made to understand

how deeply the characters' identities are shot through with a painful, ambivalent love—what Maughan calls a "counterintuitive pride" (47). It is a love in spite of violence and a love caused by violence, making faith ('Foy') in simplistic narratives of racial justice difficult. Vignettes like the movie theater scene encapsulate the hypocrisies of the current situation, but when contrasted with a series of vignettes depicting harmonious, though separate, hood life, the emotional ambivalence becomes both visceral and jarring. The hood, with its gang violence and "BLACK ON BLACK CRIME" cannot afford but a precarious sense of identity, and yet a longing for the "authentic" Dickens permeates the whole novel.

The vignette that ends the Hood Day chapter, the annual celebration of Dickens's gangs, embodies the tension between a loving longing for home in the hood and the awareness of the omnipresence of potential violence:

> A gunshot rang out. In center field, Stomper, apparently still feeling the effects of the Carpal Tunnel [weed], was barefoot, lying on his back, aiming the gun with his feet, laughing his ass off and shooting with his toes at the clouds. It looked like fun, so most of the men and a few of the women went to join him, puffing on their joints, weapons out, and hopping through the dirt infield, one shoe on, one shoe off, hoping to spark a few rounds before the cops came. (237)

Arguably, randomly shooting a gun while being in limited control of your actions might not be most people's idea of "fun"—the vignette might even be said to open on an ominous note, with "A gunshot rang out"—but the image nonetheless has something almost childlike or innocent about it. The carelessly bare feet, the dirt, people lying around, looking at the clouds—there is something blissful, even otherworldly, in the way members of two rival gangs are fooling around together in this scene. Of course, ironically, the police showing up to end the communal bliss is already imminent, even though no crime has taken place here.

And yet, nostalgia for a segregated and ostracized black existence does not afford obvious solutions. *The Sellout* presents these contradictions through a stream of alternating vignettes that

represent snippets of people reacting in different ways to a particular situation. After Bonbon arranges for a local bus to be segregated on Hominy's birthday, and the signs guaranteeing priority seating for whites are accidentally left in the bus, Charisma Molina, the assistant principal at the local school, observes that

> Ever since you put those signs up, Marpessa's bus has been the safest place in the city…. people [are] treating each other with respect. Saying hello when they [get] on, thank you when they [get] off. There's no gang fighting. Crip, Blood, or cholo, they press the Stop Request button one time and one fucking time only. You know where the kids go to do their homework? Not home, not the library, but the bus. That's how safe it is. (163)

But Marpessa, Bonbon's love and the driver of the bus, has a radically different view of the situation than the harmonious one Charisma describes in the bus vignette above. She assures Bonbon that "You are a fucking sellout. That's why I fucking dumped your ass. You never stick up for yourself" (139). More specifically, in response to the segregated bus, she observes:

> You're a sick fuck, and those damn signs you made have fucking set black people back five hundred years… You know what you are? A fucking race pervert…. It's the goddamn twenty-first century, people died so I could get this job, and I let your sick ass talk me into driving a segregated bus. (130)

Meanwhile, Charisma muses: "it's like the specter of segregation has brought Dickens together…. Now, if I get these little motherfuckers [the schoolkids] to behave in school like they do on the bus, we'd be on to something" (163).

I have been quoting from a few different places in the novel here in order to show how rapidly *The Sellout* jumps from one vignette to the next, vignettes that usually embody jarringly different views on a particular question. Thus, *The Sellout* does not authorize a resolution of any of the urgent questions of racism, the racializing of space, and segregation; indeed, it suggests that narrativizing or attempting to analyze these issues as a novel of ideas might do, is not adequate to the task of coming to terms with the actual life conditions of the United States' African American population. Indeed, as Delmagori argues, Beatty's novel criticizes the critique

of white privilege as unable to provide productive avenues for anti-racist praxis: according to him, "the novel, while sharply critiquing white privilege, suggests that a focus solely on privilege is ultimately limited, because it does not address the system that creates the privileges" (Delmagori 423). But as I have been suggesting, *The Sellout* does not assume that "the system" can be addressed in any straightforward critical or analytical manner either: indeed, it needs to be captured affectively, through the lens of lived experience, and that too only in briefly glimpsed moments. Scott Astrada argues that "the line the narrator draws around the city" and the "'white's [*sic*] only' sign on the bus" depict segregation as "a web of Foucauldean relationships" constituting "a manifest reality relying on legal and perceptive power structures" (Astrada 117). Thus, in *The Sellout, de facto* segregation and the conditions of life that it engenders become graspable as the "manifest reality," rather than some underlying deeper structure—which is also how they are experienced by the racialized residents of Dickens.

Ultimately, the effect of the situational realist program of *The Sellout* is to depict and make viscerally felt the paradoxes of a racialized existence where identity is in many ways founded on precisely the mechanisms of oppression. It is difficult to leave the novel and not feel that the ongoing attempts to eradicate systems of racial differentiation are flawed and violent on their own terms, because they erase realities both present and historical that continue to determine how people experience themselves as racialized subjects. Yet at the same time it is difficult also to use *The Sellout* to articulate a narrative of oppression or verbalize a justice-oriented political agenda. Unlike Delmagori, for whom Beatty's novel ultimately directs us toward a view of the systemic (424) or Astrada, who argues that it urges us embrace "Unmitigated Blackness as the reprioritization of the individual" (119), I contend that *The Sellout*'s vignettes disable a systemic or individual-focused view. They do not permit the reduction of these affective and material

conditions to teleological narratives with clear conflicts and therefore clear resolutions, and indeed *The Sellout* as a whole resists the idea that such conflicts or resolutions can be determined. Instead, the vignettes disturb the notions of narrative, analysis and character, and in doing so, provide affective and sensory insight into the conditions of life in a racialized space in the 21st-century United States—insight that, no matter how brief and fragmentary, underlies an ethic of representation in the post-postmodern age.

Dirty Vignettes: Preparation for the Next Life

Preparation for the Next Life is a markedly different novel than *Americanah, The Sympathizer* and *The Sellout:* its precise language and cold, affectless tone set it apart from the novels previously considered. Its particular contribution to situational realism, then, takes a highly different form than in any of the novels previously discussed. Indeed, with its unsparing depictions of grueling poverty, war and gratuitous violence, Lish's novel sets itself a different task: to depict the post-9/11 condition of life as characterized in all aspects by uncontrollable excess. In an age where American warfare, migration and urban geographies have swelled to global proportions, Lish's novel proposes, instead of an ethics of observation, an ethics of experience, where readers are exposed to rapidly flickering, intense moments of sensory experience of life lived across a wide swath of geographic locales. This view, or rather perception, of life on the ground is counterposed with the highly complex abstract systems—capitalist expansionism, environmental extraction and destruction, national-chauvinist policing—that produce the structure of the everyday, systems that remain faceless and ultimately unrepresentable. Indeed, *Preparation for the Next Life* suggests that the most effective, and

perhaps only available, argument against the policies perpetrated by these organizational structures is the portrayal and inhabiting of the experience of life as shaped by them.

The two protagonists, Zou Lei and Brad Skinner, are both at the mercy of impersonal and gratuitously ruthless bureaucratic systems: Homeland Security and the US Army, respectively. A third important character, Jimmy Turner, becomes trapped in a third faceless system of unnecessary violence, the prison, leading to his radicalization as a white supremacist. Acting as a constant backdrop to these stories is the decrepit landscape of an ever-growing, chaotic, violent and mind-numbingly poor New York. Indeed, the derelict buildings, the junk and trash, and the uncontained violence of the city are presented as just another faceless and uncontrollable human-made system next to, and ultimately produced by, Homeland Security, the Army and the prison system. Global warfare, economic exploitation, racist and classist practices of surveillance and imprisonment are the deeper structures that give rise to the poverty, precarity and violence of a New York mired in hopelessness and trauma.

Preparation for the Next Life, then, seems like a paradigmatic example of the dirty realist novel and many reviewers and scholars have noted what they have variously called its "urban naturalism" (Sacks n.p.), "gritty realism" (Zappen 161) or "textured realism" (Dew 107). Described by Bill Buford as depicting the "belly-side of contemporary life," the dirty realist novel became, as Robert Rebein explains, popular in the 1980s and 1990s as an attempt out of what was increasingly regarded as postmodernism's tiresome arbitrage of literary value (qtd Rebein 41). Leaning on minimalists like Raymond Carver (whose editor, Gordon Lish, is Atticus Lish's father), dirty realist writers such as Denis Johnson or William T. Vollmann sought to respond to what Fredric Jameson calls postmodernism's waning of affect (10) with writing that meditated on the condition of loss, but that did not partake in postmodernist fiction's language

games and irony. In his study, Rebein lists an expansive array of directions in which the dirty realist agenda was taken, such as the new Western novel or the white prison novel. Common to these perspectives is their focus on a single, tightly defined setting: a single-family farmhouse, or a particular section of a prison. Indeed, confinement and claustrophobia are often what these novels are about: a specific type of space, which can accommodate only a certain way of life, is either disappearing or is otherwise difficult to inhabit, but the characters are ill suited for any other way of life.

Preparation for the Next Life follows Rebein's description of dirty realism in its focus on the grit and grime of life, but it is not interested in confined or delimited spaces. On the contrary, in what I argue is one of its central moves, this novel extends its gaze to many different spaces, making the experiences of poverty and decrepit landscapes appear nearly universal, or, as Zappen observes, shifting its perspectives on New York to a national, even global, scale (153). Where dirty realist novels tend to give their readers a highly detailed image of a precisely delimited space, *Preparation for the Next Life* presents us rather with a myriad of intense but small images from across a wide range of potentially distant spaces, moving us across vast distances within New York as well as in Iraq, on the northern border of China or in the various highway spaces along which Skinner and Zou Lei travel. While these spaces share some characteristics, such as a preponderance of inhabitants who can barely sustain themselves, no sense of connectedness emerges: New York, for example, does not become a fully understandable or encompassed space, as might the prison of a dirty realist prison novel. Such spaces, Lish's novel suggest, no longer exist, if they ever have.

This is not to claim that Lish's novel departs from dirty realist conventions so radically that it constitutes a new genre altogether, but rather that its approach to what it means to depict the

world reflects the recognition that under technological virtualization and globalized flows of goods and people, there exist no isolated spaces, no pockets of experience that could be described in separation from the webs in which they are embedded. At the same time, Lish's novel insists that the world is so vast and the systems of connection so complex that its only aspects that can be hoped to be representable are brief moments of bodily, sensory experience. Hence, *Preparation for the Next Life* draws from the representational paradigm that I have been calling situational realism in order to intervene in the dirty realist tradition. The novel makes copious use of vignettes to depict moments from a vast geographical and sociological range, and thereby insists on the accessibility and the importance of sensory experience to counter the narratives of overarching organizing systems such as immigration policy or the war on terror. Indeed, vignettistic moments are the only ones, *Preparation* suggests, in which the significance of larger systemic forces, as experienced by individual bodies in everyday life, can be adequately represented and made tangible.

Some of these systemic forces whose workings fundamentally shape the lives of ordinary people in this novel are Homeland Security and the Army. Zou Lei, a Uighur-Chinese immigrant to the US, who has already been jailed at the beginning of the novel, constantly faces harassment, arrest and possible deportation: for Zou Lei, Homeland Security is not just immigration officers or ICE, but any local police or other authority figure whose recognition of her undocumented status can deliver her to the mercy, or ruthlessness, of immigration enforcement. Thus, Zou Lei is forced to submerge herself in an underworld of people whose existence the law does not recognize, and which consequently is characterized by radical precarity and uncontained violence. Indeed, much of the novel is spent describing the lawlessness of this world, where every act of kindness is just as unwarranted and unjustified as

the acts of violence. It is a world whose lawless laws are the direct consequence of the policy that created Homeland Security and with it, the system of illegal human beings. This web of relations between the national security system and the world of illegality it creates, however, only becomes available through vignettes that depict immediate impacts as experienced by Zou Lei and a host of minor characters.

Army officials rarely ever appear as agents in Lish's novel, but the impacts of the Army as an institution are as determining as those of Homeland Security. *Preparation for the Next Life* suggests that the trauma of war is produced just as much by the Army's indifference towards its soldiers as it is by the gruesomeness of the violence witnessed, suffered, and committed. Again, however, readers gain access to this insight only through brief moments of encounters with an individual's experience. Skinner is a veteran of the Iraq wars, wars which are depicted in a series of flashbacks to before the novel's story time proper. Most of the novel takes place after Skinner has been released and is devoted to Skinner's struggle to find his way back into civilian life and especially to overcome his PTSD, a struggle in which the Army abandons him completely. Indeed, though the flashbacks to the war are certainly shocking, the novel spends far more time detailing the minute ways in which Skinner attempts to cope with his trauma, and on how hopeless it is for him to do so without institutional aid.

And this is not the Army's first failing with respect to Skinner. While in Iraq, Skinner is seriously wounded by a detonation that kills his friend, but though this incident leaves him nearly unable to function both physically and emotionally, he is still sent back to fight new missions after a period of convalescence. When he is finally released from service, the army shirks its duty to him by misdiagnosing, it appears knowingly, his PTSD, ignoring his array of alarming symptoms, and simply sending him back into the world to manage on his own, armed with a host

of dubious drugs. Thus, the Army does not undertake even the minimum to ensure that its soldiers are able to function either while in the Army or as veterans returning to civilian life.

Both Army and Immigration form a backdrop to a novel that is ostensibly organized by the interweaving of Zou Lei's and Skinner's plots. Zou Lei arrives to the United States, struggles with a faceless and inhumane immigration enforcement system, before submerging herself in the parallel world of illegal life in Queens. Skinner returns to the country after his deployment to Iraq, and drifts around New York City in a vague attempt to "have a good time," before his meanderings accidentally bring him face to face with Zou Lei, and they "form an army of their own, a two-person unit, to fight these difficult battles involving his mental recovery and her immigration status" (238). These battles, now appearing as a joint struggle, constitute the main conflict of the novel, and the love that ensues between Zou Lei and Skinner appears as the key to that conflict: if they can maintain a healthy "alliance," then Skinner's mental health issues as well as Zou Lei's immigration ones will have been successfully solved.

But if, as Dwight Garner puts it in his review of *Preparations,* Lish's novel "helps one understand the appeal of ready-made answers to life's vexations" (Garner n.p.), it is also critical of such answers precisely because they are propagated by the oppressive systems that have produced those vexations in the first place. To prevent Skinner's and Zou Lei's plot from attaining the status of a grand narrative, Lish devotes very little time to its development. Instead, as the plot advances, the reader is transported across many brief descriptive passages where a character is either observing their surroundings or is passing through an environment that takes up the entirety of narrator's attention. In moments like these, what readers encounter is simply time passing and the city living.

One of Skinner's early wanderings through town provides many examples of such moments:

> It was crowded and a woman bumped him with her shopping bags coming out of Caldor. He raised his hooded head and looked at her and she apologized. Along the curb, he noticed people sitting in the Asian squat, selling wallets, belts, New York hats, backpacks, and DVDs. It was very loud with people yelling. A truck was idling blocking the intersection, the engine spinning, and he could hear the diesel exploding in the shaking block of steel. Someone honked and Skinner twitched. (73)

Skinner is present as an observer here, and there is some indication that the perceiving consciousness delivered by the narrator may be Skinner's, since the main sensory experiences of the passage—being bumped by a passer-by, noticing people, hearing the engines and the honking—are his. But the passage is pointedly not about Skinner's state of mind: it is about the streetscape that he encounters, which is characterized by people hawking cheap wares and trying to make a living. The implied ethnicity of these people, "sitting in the Asian squat," the "loud… yelling" and the general disorder of the situation make this streetscape in New York reminiscent of the streets of some unspecified Global South city. In whatever way we are to read Skinner's reactions here, the street also produces effects that are independent of him: here, we are encountering in a sensory manner and from the outsider's perspective the experience of that sublegal world in which Zou Lei lives. It is almost as if Skinner's presence in this scene served merely as an excuse for Lish to present, instead of plot, a vignette, a glimpse into the lifeworlds of New York's many illegal or semi-legal immigrants.

Like in the vignettes that we have encountered earlier, this one is characterized by the fact that neither narrative time or story time are halted—Skinner continues moving through the landscape throughout the scene—though the narrator's focus is on describing the setting. We learn little, almost nothing, of character psychology here, and the plot does not advance, although story time keeps going, even if at an arguably slower pace (Courtney 182). Instead, there is a gaze—maybe Skinner's, or possibly just close to Skinner's—that hovers around the scene, charting the environment in its materiality. Unlike a novel like *Americanah,* Lish's novel does

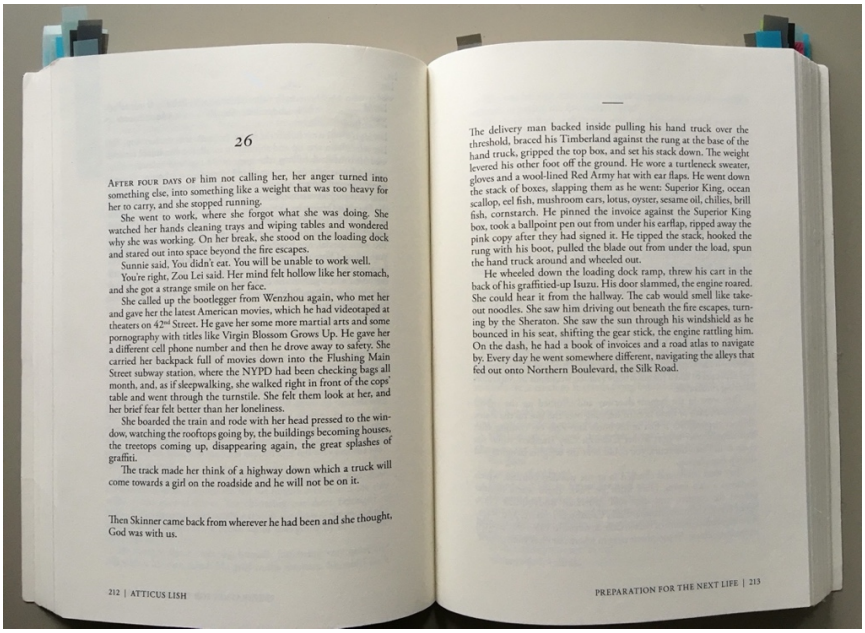
not, then, use these vignettes to render its story more visual; it does not either, like *The Sympathizer,* anchor its central issues in material settings, or employ vignettes to jarring, absurd effects like *The Sellout*. Instead, it exposes readers, in vignettes, to the sensory experience of the life conditions produced by the structural forces that the characters, on the level of plot, are trying to escape. Plot offers the backbone here for these visceral impressions that, *Preparations* insists, must be maintained if the cruelties perpetrated on a global scale by immigration policies, warfare and expansionist capitalism are to be captured and held up to subversive scrutiny.

For *Preparation,* the global reach of these policies means that it makes no sense to posit these experiences as clearly delineated or localizable. For this reason, although the described moments never exceed mere glimpses, their boundaries are also not distinct, making them seem to flow into one another. *Preparation* draws from the vignette's historical ability to navigate uncertain boundaries to interrogate the ways in which the depicted experiences relate to conditions of the world that have global reach. Like Bewick's vignettes, which play with the space of the page as simultaneously part of the text and of the image, *Preparation*'s pages feature a series of vignettes that can barely be distinguished from one another or from other textual functions, such as the narration of plot events.

Thus, the novel's structure is fundamentally organized around vignettes with intervening event fragments, which explains why so little happens by way of plot. In terms of physical layout, the novel consists of mostly brief chunks of text. For its 417 pages, *Preparation for the Next Life* has 56 chapters plus an epilogue, which means that an average chapter is barely more than seven pages in length. Within these chapters, however, there are often subdivisions, demarcated by either a horizontal line or an empty space. Sometimes, very brief chunks of text are isolated in this way, which visually recalls vignettes, but, as is usually the case in this novel,

vignette sections are difficult to demarcate from other textual elements. The overall effect is that although we merely experience brief slices of the lives of places, it becomes difficult to attach any of them to particular, localized places only: the information they carry about the state of the world becomes potentially applicable to many other, possibly distant places. Differently from the conventions of the dirty realist novel, *Preparation* suggests possible connections between vast expanses of different geographic places, but it refuses to render those connections available to narrative, logical explanations.

For example, chapter 26, a chapter consisting of only two pages, presents a sequence of vignettes and narration that suggests an underlying, if not representable, connection between Skinner's harmful behavior toward Zou Lei and an unnamed delivery man who seems to be travelling on Queens roads and the Silk Road simultaneously. The first page of the chapter details a part of the plot where Skinner, succumbing to a bout of depression and self-medicated stupor, disappears from Zou Lei's life without a word. Then, after a horizontal line, we find an unexpected description of food delivery, probably focalized by Zou Lei:



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After four days of him not calling her, her anger turned into something else, into something like a weight that was too heavy for her to carry, and she stopped running.

She went to work, where she forgot what she was doing. She watched her hands cleaning trays and wiping tables and wondered why she was working. On her break, she stood on the loading dock and stared out into space beyond the fire escapes.

Sunnie said, You didn't eat. You will be unable to work well.

You're right, Zou Lei said. Her mind felt hollow like her stomach, and she got a strange smile on her face.

She called up the bootlegger from Wenzhou again, who met her and gave her the latest American movies, which he had videotaped at theaters on 42nd Street. He gave her some more martial arts and some pornography with titles like Virgin Blossom Grows Up. He gave her a different cell phone number and then he drove away to safety. She carried her backpack full of movies down into the Flushing Main Street subway station, where the NYPD had been checking bags all month, and, as if sleepwalking, she walked right in front of the cops' table and went through the turnstile. She felt them look at her, and her brief fear felt better than her loneliness.

She boarded the train and rode with her head pressed to the window, watching the rooftops going by, the buildings becoming houses, the treetops coming up, disappearing again, the great splashes of graffiti.

The track made her think of a highway down which a truck will come towards a girl on the roadside and he will not be on it.

Then Skinner came back from wherever he had been and she thought, God was with us.

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The delivery man backed inside pulling his hand truck over the threshold, braced his Timberland against the rung at the base of the hand truck, gripped the top box, and set his stack down. The weight levered his other foot off the ground. He wore a turtleneck sweater, gloves and a wool-lined Red Army hat with ear flaps. He went down the stack of boxes, slapping them as he went: Superior King, ocean scallop, eel fish, mushroom ears, lotus, oyster, sesame oil, chilies, brill fish, cornstarch. He pinned the invoice against the Superior King box, took a ballpoint pen out from under his earflap, ripped away the pink copy after they had signed it. He tipped the stack, hooked the rung with his boot, pulled the blade out from under the load, spun the hand truck around and wheeled out.

He wheeled down the loading dock ramp, threw his cart in the back of his graffitied-up Isuzu. His door slammed, the engine roared. She could hear it from the hallway. The cab would smell like take-out noodles. She saw him driving out beneath the fire escapes, turning by the Sheraton. She saw the sun through his windshield as he bounced in his seat, shifting the gear stick, the engine rattling him. On the dash, he had a book of invoices and a road atlas to navigate by. Every day he went somewhere different, navigating the alleys that fed out onto Northern Boulevard, the Silk Road.

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Figure 54: The delivery man vignette in *Preparation for the Next Life*

Here, two jarringly different scenes are brought together in what seems like a deliberately short chapter, suggesting a connection between Skinner's disappearance (and then reappearance) and the delivery man's travels. The only such connection is travel itself, in Zou Lei's thoughts in the first part of the chapter, where the track reminds her "of a highway down which a truck will come towards a girl on the roadside and he will not be on it" (212). But in the vignette, Zou Lei, if it is to her that "she" refers, is present at most as an observing consciousness, and the emphasis is not on her thoughts or feelings. Instead, the delivery man's actions get all the attention: how he pulls in with his truck, unloads his delivery, and even what clothes he is wearing. We do not learn anything about what he is like as a person: he does not speak or even interact with another human. Instead, all his actions are determined by work, and all the objects to which Lish attaches brand names—the Timberland boots, the Red Army hat, the presumably Chinese food item Superior King, and Isuzu truck—are signs of the man's social, ethnic, and economic position. The lack of attention to the space here generalizes the experience, and the provenance of item names from across American, Soviet, Chinese and Japanese backgrounds further decontextualizes the scene. If Zou Lei is the observer here and if, assuming continuity from the previous page of the chapter, she is currently at work in the Chinese restaurant in Queens, then it is Queens that the vignette depicts. But, like in Skinner's vignette above, the American locale actually shares quite a bit with its unspecified Asian counterpart—a similarity that this vignette makes explicit in its stunning last line: 'Every day he went somewhere different, navigating the alleys that fed out onto Northern Boulevard, the Silk Road" (213). Possibly only in Zou Lei's head, but Northern Boulevard, on which the delivery man leaves the Chinese restaurant, merges

not onto some larger Queens highway but directly into the Silk Road. The underworlds and trade routes of the two continents thus emerge from these vignettes as directly connected.

Furthermore, that part of the romance plot between Skinner and Zou Lei in which he flickers in and out of her life likewise appears tenuously connected to the delivery man's simultaneously physical and yet dreamlike travels on Northern Boulevard and the Silk Road. The life conditions of Zou Lei's Queens existence might, then, be a product of American immigration policies, but the vignette suggests that the capitalist trade routes along which the delivery man and his ancestors have travelled for centuries are global and ancient phenomena that have connected far-flung places in similar conditions of poverty for centuries already. Simultaneously, the unreality of Skinner's presence—his flickering in and out of Zou Lei's life—is somehow also connected to this world through his inability to really be present in civilian New York after his war experiences in Iraq. In other words, *Preparation* suggests that the routes of exchange in a global capitalist system existing for centuries work in tandem with the forces of border policing and the isolationist nationalism that produces global warfare—but these systems do not yield narratable logics, only conditions of poverty, PTSD and dispossession that can be experienced in visceral but brief moments.

Although it thematizes the porousness of boundaries, this particular vignette is one of the rare examples in *Preparation for the Next Life* where a vignette's boundaries are actually relatively clear: the delivery man's scene is a fairly straightforward vignette, much like a vignette in Hemingway, Mansfield or even Cisneros might be. More often, however, Lish's vignettes formally enact the novel's concern with the difficulty of isolating particular spaces and conditions by not inhabiting their own, separate passages and not being set apart by layout. Instead, they tend to hover across passages, and become difficult to demarcate. Formally, then,

Preparation counters the dirty realist tendency to isolate particular experiences and spaces by positing that connections are both important and far-reaching, and yet not fully representable.

The vignette where Skinner observes the busy intersection discussed further above exemplifies this form. It is not differentiated from its textual environment by any physical markers of layout, so that my decision to begin and end it where I did could easily be challenged by a different interpretation of how far a single glance extends. For example, the paragraph immediately following my excerpt could be read as constituting part of the same glance:

> He lit a cigarette and watched pigs being offloaded onto the shoulders of Mexicans. They were carrying the heavy cold white carcasses through the crowd and in through the hanging plastic strips into the back of a Chinese market. (73)

The next paragraph, however, seems to introduce a new gaze, even if not immediately:

> Vertical Chinese signs were everywhere. Someone tried to give him a flyer and he said, I don't understand you, and dropped it. He went into a newsstand and got a Red Bull. In the back of the store, he stopped and stared at the magazines. All the metal slots were filled with porn. He saw a tan girl with her wet hair plastered to her face and her mascara streaked. (73-74)

In my reading, the first vignette begins when Skinner is on the sidewalk by the intersection and is bumped by the woman coming out of the store. The next paragraph might be argued to introduce a new perspective, or it might be considered the same one, but in any case, as soon as Skinner walks into the newsstand, we are given a different glimpse and the vignette has ended. Whether the quoted passages constitute one or two vignettes is thus not entirely clear: in this way, *Preparation for the Next Life* continues the interrogation of borders and frames that have characterized vignettes for centuries. Like Bewick's vignettes, each of these vividly described situations opens up a glimpse into the world whose limits become impossible to ascertain. Yet those limits are always there. Although it is hard, perhaps impossible, to tell how many glances into the life of New York's sublegal world Lish's novel affords us, the fact remains that our glance is always curtailed—limited to what the eye can take in in a single moment. Formally,

then, the vignettes in *Preparation for the Next Life* enact an epistemology where we never see more than glimpses—no matter how many—of the sensual, material experience of a particular environment. We cannot exactly pinpoint the limits of what we are seeing, nor establish with certainty the connections between the individual glances.

But, because so much of the novel is made up of sequences like this one, where vignettes with uncertain borders follow one another, this produces the overall sense that there are underlying conditions that connect these discrete glimpses, though they do not unite them in a greater narrative capable of providing simple narrative accounts of them. *Preparations,* then, challenges us to grapple with the wide-reaching conditions of disenfranchisement without escaping into what Garner calls "ready-made answers to life's vexations" (Garner n.p.).

That is not to say, however, that every line of description in Lish's novel is a vignette. For example, once Skinner has entered the newsstand, the few descriptive sentences that follow do not, at least in my reading, constitute a vignette. This is because they do not form an autonomous scene, taken in at a glance: they do not, in other words, compose a situation in themselves. Part of the reason that they cannot do so has to do with the fact that they describe not a setting, but some smaller components in it—not the newsstand as a scene of life, but the magazines. These latter merely contribute to, but do not of themselves compose a full situation.

This distinction is important, because if the novel consisted only of a sequence of vignettes, it could be argued that in their lack of clear borders between one another, the vignettes actually constitute a continuous stream of vision. The filler descriptions, however, interrupt any such stream, which prevents the suggestion of underlying connections from coalescing into a unified grand narrative. Thus, vignettes, other description and plot function as mutual interruptions to one another: in yet another instance of a flickering social media aesthetic, *Preparation* undercuts

any attempt to narrativize explanation and instead insists on the brief but vivid moments of experience.

The most prominent epistemological experience of the novel, then, is a kind of intermittent looking around, usually focalized by one of the two protagonists. For example, in the scene where Zou Lei first arrives to New York, which the reader could expect to be important in terms of her unfolding story, she actually drops out almost entirely. Sitting in the subway car, Zou Lei becomes nearly invisible, a mere consciousness gazing around:

> At two in the morning, everyone was black or Mexican and they were men, sitting with their knees spread out, sleeping with their mouths open. The door between the cars opened, letting in the roaring at full volume and a column of men came easing in, swinging along the bars, their jeans low and bunched around their ankles, rags on their heads, towels hanging from their pockets. (42)

Zou Lei might as well not be present; in fact, it might be the most accurate to say that she does not so much provide the reader with the consciousness that takes in the situation as that her presence in the subway car gives the narrator an alibi to dwell on what is of primary interest: place. Indeed, *Preparation for the Next Life* shows little interest in character action that might lead to plot development or psychological change. Lacking plot-directed purpose, the majority of characters' actions serve the development of static situations, such as the one depicted in the vignette above. These situations typically contain habitual or recurring events: for example, this vignette captures the subway commute habits of the early morning which have become racialized by the socioeconomic division of labor that demands that the jobs requiring after-hours or before-hours work be performed by people of color. These recurring events do not build up to a linear plot development: in their everyday repetition, they come to be the defining characteristics of their particular place.

The particular place that receives the majority of the novel's attention is New York, although, as I have argued, the city cannot really be considered in separation from the many

ways in which it is connected, as if directly, with spaces in China, Japan, the Mongolian border, and Iraq. Indeed, while the city is necessary for Zou Lei and Skinner's plots to converge, the descriptions of its myriad places as the central experiences of a global world system overwhelm its plot-related functions. A good example of this is Skinner's initial journey into New York, a trip which is orchestrated so as to allow the narrator to indulge in vignette after vignette detailing mundane sights in the city. Although a reader reading with an expectation of plot might surmise that Skinner needs to come to New York in order to meet Zou Lei, the sheer number of vignettes like the one below inhibits or at least delays the advancement of that story:

> Now he was cutting through monumental project towers, his silhouette distorted by what he was carrying, a burdened figure moving steadily across the great barren landscape of giant shadows and building structures and cold lights filtering down. A single car was parked against a line of gated storefronts exploding with graffiti—huge, wild, blazing—the letters pumped up like muscles about to burst, like smoke bulging, billowing, swelling in a bubble over the steel and concrete walls, like everything was on fire. He crossed the open area, a solitary figure carrying his gear, and reentered the shadow on the other side. (34)

Skinner, like Zou Lei in the vignette before, almost drops out of the picture; his journey, uncertain in its goal, becomes unimportant when contrasted with the urban landscape in which it takes place—one which, in this vignette at least, resembles a war zone with its expressions of masculinized force ("muscles about to burst"), explosions, smoke, and fire. Characters, whether in Manhattan, Queens, the Mongolian border, or Iraq, are repeatedly dwarfed by their surroundings, which seem to overwhelm the novel's attention.

Analogously, when characters travel, Lish's depictions tend to eschew motion itself, focusing instead on the individual moments where physical places constitute the conditions of travel. *Preparation* is not interested in the process of travel: it is only interested in place. Or, to be more exact, it is interested in the situations that make up place. Thus, while his entry into the city is depicted through a series of vignettes like the one above, we learn almost nothing about

Skinner's ride up to New York from the army base. In fact, the novel opens with the contrast between space and motion, where the indeterminacy of each vignette's boundary reflects the uncertainty of the places themselves:

> She came by way of Archer, Bridgeport, Nanuet, worked off 95 in jeans and a denim jacket, carrying a plastic bag and shower shoes, a phone number, waiting beneath an underpass, the potato chips long gone, lightheaded.
>
> They picked her up on the highway by a plain white shed, a sign for army-navy, tires in the trees. A Caravan pulled up with a Monkey King on the dash and she got in. The men took her to a Motel 8 and put her in a room with half a dozen other women from Fookien and a liter of orange soda. She listened to the trucks coming in all night and the AC running. (3)

This passage blends the abstract—that which cannot readily be visualized and which tends to be plot-related—with descriptions of concretely placeable moments in time and place. The first clause, "She came by way of Archer, Bridgeport, Nanuet," is abstract, but the second begins a concretization: we see a figure by the highway, a figure who later turns out to be Zou Lei, clad in denim, carrying meager possessions; and ultimately the place itself becomes specific as we learn that Zou Lei is "waiting beneath an underpass." This is the novel's first vignette: a complete image of a woman traveling in an unknown country, towards an unknown destination, but surrounded by a material environment that is definite despite all of Zou Lei's uncertainties. This opening image, then, perfectly captures the main representational gambit of the entire novel: Zou Lei's immigration story is too abstract, too complex and too vast for representation, possibly even for understanding, but what can and must be represented are the myriad material situations that Zou Lei goes through, which bear witness to the particularity of her experience.

The passage does not end there, however, and it is arguable whether the vignette does. Because the next sentence ("They picked her up") develops a full image, I would argue that it begins a new vignette. We are at a different place: still on the highway, but probably by an abandoned autobody shop or army-navy store or both, since we learn that there are "tires in the

trees" and "a sign for army-navy." We barely have time to register this place, however, before we see a Caravan pulling in and Zou Lei getting in. This action immediately cuts short the particular moment, for the next information ("They took her to a Motel 8") no longer pertains to this setting and does not in fact allow any concrete visualization in either space or time.

Thus, these first two paragraphs embody what is *Preparation*'s larger representational project: eschewing narrativizing migration and immigration, these passages capture instead the underlying physical and material conditions through which characters pass. Lish's novel does not allow a unified idea of what migration means and similarly undercuts the notion that representation could fully capture any particular place in isolation from the conditions that connect it to other places. *Preparation* disables any "ready-made answers" by exposing readers to intense moments of sensory experience that refuse to be tied together in a sense of direction or teleology. These moments, then, confront us in their mere being—as objects of the world, or what Huehls calls particular "configuration[s] and interrelation[s] of beings, human or otherwise" (Huehls xii). In their resolute presence as objects, these moments insist on the importance of confronting the conditions of poverty and dispossession that isolationism, national chauvinism and expansionism produce, but without narrating, analyzing, or critiquing the precise processes that underlie these inequities.

Indeed, *Preparation* proposes its own vignette aesthetics as a formal solution to what has become an impasse for dirty realism in the 21st century: to give a highly textured representation of the world without somehow also slipping into an explanatory critique which either regards particular settings as isolated from larger structures and global systems, or all too simply points to those larger systems as the underlying causes of every ever so local issue. Rather than seeking to explain or link causally the many abject conditions that this novel depicts, *Preparation for the*

Next Life gives its readers myriads of brief insights into the realities of the miserable conditions of life created by a global system of exploitation and migrancy. It is not a single, enclosed space that precipitates decline: the entire vast world seems potentially governed by decay, squalor, and people on the move from one site of struggle to the next. Like the "Chinese, … Guatemalans and Hondurans and other Central Americans" inhabiting Zou Lei's squalid apartment building, the people who have "left behind what they called the problems in their countries" are "here and everywhere" (53). Although the connections between these locales are too complex for narrative explanation, then, life "here" does share with life "everywhere" the same conditions of abject poverty produced by globalized exploitation and war.

It is for this reason that the road is the central undepictable figure in *Preparation for the Next Life*. While characters are always on the move, always presenting the narrator with new opportunities for descriptive vignettes, the road itself remains curiously invisible, though omnipresent. The Silk Road appears in Zou Lei's imagining of the delivery man's travels, but it is not described; American highways form the present but scarcely visible backdrop of Zou Lei's and Skinner's journeys to New York City; and the road on the Mongolian border becomes a static site which anchors Zou Lei's childhood in a sense of futility:

> The road began from nowhere, out of the desert, built so that tanks could roll down it four abreast. Now she traveled down it, dribbling a ball. Things were being built or broken down and the stones they were made of lay in piles, huge wedges of concrete with rebar coming out, a tooth extracted from the earth, excavations in the dust. The edges of the road were crumbling. A highway went overhead and stopped in midair. In a vast ditch was a sea of tires and a man climbing through them, examining the treads. (27)

As Zou Lei and her mother wait in vain for her father to return from the army, the road morphs from a site of connection among faraway places to a static place of crumbling buildings and lives—a place which yet provides the foundation, no matter how precarious, of the lives of locals, who attempt to gather possessions and sustenance from the debris. The road does not

offer escape from the barren "wedges of concrete" and the "sea of tires:" it has become them. In Lish's novel, then, the dense sensuality of the vignettes functions to contrast the material conditions in which characters are mired with the ineffability of the road, a road that promises escape or change but can only deliver the same conditions of grueling poverty and despair-induced violence in different forms everywhere. New York, northern China, or Central America—it makes no real difference in this novel. Characters might plot their escape, but they are, like the novel's reader, only ever moving from one vignette of poverty and desolation to the next.

Last Words on Vignettes in Novels

In sum, then, *Americanah, The Sympathizer, The Sellout* and *Preparation for the Next Life* employ vignettes in quite distinct ways and yet ultimately share an underlying agenda, which I have been calling situational realism, which results in different versions of an ethics of observation. These novels insist on the importance of using representation to confront "the way reality is now" without making that reality fit the mold of analysis, explanation and critique. While *Americanah* and *The Sympathizer* are more explicit in their skepticism towards the desire to know and explain, all four novels incorporate formal choices that disable the analytical impulse. Instead, these novels insist on the ethical importance of the sensory experience of the world, suggesting that readers' first political task might be the visceral engagement with the momentary glimpse.

All four novels problematize the adequacy of plot and character psychology—two traditionally important elements of the novel—to confront the complex issues of racism, systemic poverty, immigration and national chauvinism. Not only do these issues exceed our

ability to narrativize and thus explain them, but, as becomes apparent in these novels, our failed attempts to provide causal explanations lead to a political dead-end where spurious explanations actually shut down prolonged engagement with the ways in which racism or poverty impact the lives of humans in the world. At the same time, these novels also register that, as digital modes of communication become more widespread, any chains of connection, but especially those between communicative utterances, become more and more difficult to establish. Rather than lament this phenomenon as the evidence of a banal process of cultural degradation, these novels seize on the productive potential of the brief and fragmentary to eschew authoritative or all too declarative indictments of precise causes. This constitutes a democratizing impulse, where the political analysis that condemns current social conditions does not assume an objective and omniscient view, removed to a safe distance from those conditions. Rather, the political projects of these novels draw from the perspectives of social media activisms, which are mired in the stuff of everyday life rather than elevated to a privileged pedestal for observation and declarative assessments.

In *Americanah*, then, plotline is delivered in a flickering stream of images, resembling an Instagram feed. This representational structure highlights the constraints upon observation but insists on its necessity: rather than follow our desire to explain, *Americanah* suggests that we must sensually reckon with the racialized dynamics of the American everyday. In *The Sympathizer,* settings come to stand in for the complicated simultaneity of two or more ideological, political, national or ethnic attachments and the incongruities that such multiplicity produces for many people. Characters' attempts to articulate such incongruities often fail spectacularly, and the project to come to know others through analysis and explanation only produces violence, as in the Auteur's film or in the patronizing behavior of the chair of the

Department of Oriental Studies. The text encourages readers to disengage from such projects of explanation and critique, and instead participate in the physical settings that allow a sensory reckoning with the lives and contradictions of people mired in overarching ideologies. In *The Sellout*, place and the sense of identity that it can enable are the outcomes of vignettes that enact and make clash similar discordances. The entire idea of race is absurd because it is an omnipresent and at the same time disavowed dynamic that has suffused place and belonging. This absurdity renders futile any representational project that seeks to establish underlying causes or point to race as the object of critique. Such attempts to comprehend race fail because critique is inadequate to the task of reckoning with an ambivalently violent and loving notion of race that undergirds the senses of place, home and identity at the same time as it renders the experience of living difficult and, ultimately, absurd. Finally, in *Preparation for the Next Life*, plot is all but replaced by vignettes in which characters observe their setting in its various forms of squalor, threat, and violence, producing a series of glimpses that highlight how these forms of dispossession and precarity have become global, though varying, conditions of life. But to see them in their globality, as conditions that link the furthest parts of the globe, is not to reduce them to explanatory narratives or to integrate them in a causal chain of connection. Rather, *Preparation* posits a representational program that accounts for the materiality of lives lived in the conditions produced by these larger systems without attempting to unify either the experiences of those lives across the globe or the structures that create them.

Race relations and immigration are central to all of these novels: these complex processes inform the very materiality of the places that the characters inhabit. On the one hand, it is the complexity and global scale of these questions that puts the nail in the coffin of a plot-reliant realist representational program. The causes, links and interrelations among the global streams of

exploitations, historical enslavement, and migration do not lend themselves to being narrativized without reductiveness. In fact, these novels suggest, extractive analysis and narrative explanation do not do the political work that literary scholars have hoped from them; or, that a usefulness they may once have had has been exhausted through the new or changing forms of globalized racial capitalism. Furthermore, narrative explanation and critique may not simply be inadequate, but they also risk doing violence to the populations to whose stories they attempt to do justice because they reduce those stories to simplifying narratives that eschew confronting the materiality of the conditions in which those very people live. Therefore, these novels do not attempt, and in fact work actively to prevent, narrative explanations. They, like the ontological novels described by Huehls, constrict themselves to recording the situations that arise as outcomes of the underlying systems of oppression. And they insist that representing these situations, and the degree to which they have become suffused with the underlying processes of racialization, national chauvinist violence, and economic disenfranchisement, is a politically indispensable task in the 21st century—perhaps even the first and foremost task of the realist novel.

Indeed, the ethical imperative towards observation manifests in these novels not only on the levels of the characters and narrators, but also on the level of the reader. We have seen that the reader often inhabits similar positions to the characters, who act as observers with limited access to the reality in which they are part, and even less access to the underlying forces that continue to shape that reality. Importantly, readers and characters alike are mired in the myriad sensory experiences in which that reality manifests, invited to observe, participate in, and engage with the physical spaces, objects, and actions of the particular glimpse. That is, readers are actively encouraged to become participants of the novels' ethics of observation. Thus, while the lack of

fundamental understanding about the why's of these social predicaments may feel disempowering, the reader is actually treated, much like in social media activism, as an equal. No more or less privileged in their measure of insight than the characters themselves, and without the intimation of superior knowledge by an author or narrator, readers are invited to participate in the political work of bearing witness to the lived and sensory experience of other people's lives and conditions.

Ultimately, then, these four novels converge on a situational realist program that, informed by the fragmentary dynamics of the social media realm, employs vignettes in order to advance an observational ethic as an alternative to traditional social critique. Unlike critique, which has exhausted its political potential, observation constitutes an ethical and political act that reckons with the racialized, poverty-struck and xenophobic conditions of life in the 21st century, even as it recognizes and acknowledges its own limitations. Situational realist novels afford us glimpses of the world that are highly local and particular and do not claim to stand for a larger analytical project, but in which it becomes apparent that no individual experience is isolated from a much larger, ultimately global system of inequality. Indeed, this global scale makes a traditional realist critique all that more difficult, because the complexity of the system is that much higher. Yet, I argue that situational realist novels are successful in their political endeavor precisely because they insist on the importance of representing these issues at a global scale, while not attempting to reduce them to simplistic narratives of cause and effect. Like Bewick's tailpieces, the vignettes in these novels do powerful work by opening up brief but vivid glimpses into a world of seemingly daunting complexity—glimpses that claim our attention and invite us to engage with the ethical imperative of observation.

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