

SERIAL HISTORIOGRAPHY: LITERATURE, NARRATIVE HISTORY, AND
THE ANXIETY OF TRUTH

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ABSTRACT

Ben Bolling: Serial Historiography: Literature, Narrative History, and the Anxiety of Truth
(Under the direction of Megan Matchinske)

Dismissing history's truths, Hayden White provocatively asserts that there is an "inexpugnable relativity" in every representation of the past. In the current dialogue between literary scholars and historical empiricists, postmodern theorists assert that narrative is enclosed, moribund, and impermeable to the fluid demands of history. My critical intervention frames history as a recursive, performative process through historical and critical analysis of the narrative function of seriality. Seriality, through the material distribution of texts in discrete components, gives rise to a constellation of *entimed* narrative strategies that provide a template for human experience. I argue that serial form is both fundamental to the project of history *and* intrinsically subjective. Rather than foreclosing the historiographic relevance of storytelling, my reading of serials from comic books to the fiction of William Faulkner foregrounds the possibilities of narrative to remain open, contingent, and responsive to the potential fortuities of historiography. In the post-9/11 literary and historical landscape, conceiving historiography as a serialized, performative enterprise controverts prevailing models of hermeneutic suspicion that dominate both literary and historiographic skepticism of narrative truth claims and revives an ethics responsive to the raucous demands of the past.

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INTRODUCTION: THE LAW OF SERIALITY

As I finished drafting this project, Walt Disney Studios released *Star Wars: Episode VII- The Force Awakens*. At the time of this writing, the movie has generated global box office revenue approaching two billion U.S. dollars, becoming the third highest-grossing film of all time (McClintock). *The Force Awakens* has permeated the marketplace with apps, action figures, clothing, video games, comics, fan-generated content, and more *things* than I can begin to account for here. In the contemporary moment, I can think of few texts that are more resonant in American popular culture. So it wasn't surprising when, on different occasions during the months-long marketing build-up to the release of *The Force Awakens*, I found myself talking with parents of young kids about *Star Wars* literacy.

When does one begin building literacy in a ubiquitous transmedia narrative like this one? The *Star Wars Little Golden Book* library that adapts film episodes I-VI and accompanying titles like *I am a Droid* and *I am a Jedi* were popular primers among parents who patronized the comics shop where I worked during graduate school. But controlling—for the moment—for transmedia sprawl, *where* does one begin *Star Wars*? More specifically, how does one approach the feature-length, live-action films revered as ur-texts in the *Star Wars* metanarrative? Some argue that the movies should be viewed in the order in which they were released; one should begin with 1977's *Episode IV- A New Hope* and complete the original trilogy,

then circle back to what is commonly called the “prequel trilogy” kicked off by 1999’s *Episode I- The Phantom Menace* before returning to *The Force Awakens*. Viewers who prize continuity maintain that the films should be screened in chronological order beginning with *Episode I*. Still others question the place of feature-length films at the edge of the metanarrative like the 1984 made-for-TV *Caravan of Courage: An Ewok Adventure* (that saw theatrical release in Europe) or the truly bizarre *Star Wars Holiday Special* that has become a cult classic following its single televised broadcast in 1978.

In the first chapter, I define seriality as “the material distribution of a unified narrative in discrete components” and argue that this phenomenon is not historical, but rather a timeless function of narrative that transcends critical and aesthetic distinctions between high and low forms. The composition of this project, like most academic discourse, has been serial in nature. Each chapter has been consumed by different audiences, some with access to other installments in the project, others with only one piece of the overall argument. Considering the chorus of voices who have responded to this work as it was written, readers have rarely taken issue with my definition of “seriality,” but a number of respondents have questioned the boundaries of a serial’s resonance or, simply put, what determines which stories comprise a serial’s metanarrative. As I discuss in detail in chapters 1 and 2, because seriality requires the consumer’s active engagement to bridge a spatial/temporal gap between texts, the serial narrative is unrestrained.

The law of seriality is there are no laws. As *Star Wars* illustrates, serials are rowdy and capacious. Serials resist proscriptions governing their components and

their consumption. The *Holiday Special* and *The Force Awakens* are both constituent stories in the *Star Wars* metanarrative, the canonicity of each narrative only mediated by its resonance (which Wai Chee Dimock describes as a text's "timeful unwieldiness" as it generates new meanings moving through space-time, traversing semantic networks) (1062). Resonant stories vibrate across disparate media, forging narrative links like synaptic connections. Minority readings are no less valid than any sort of communal consensus. Furthermore, George Lucas may offer a recommended viewing order for *Star Wars* films, the Council of Trent may proscribe the canon of Christian biblical texts, and literary scholars may discount *The Plowman's Tale* as apocryphal within Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*, but rules for consumption generated by textual producers, critics, scholars, and among communities of consumers are only guides, not fundamental laws of media consumption.

To be clear: the transhistorical phenomenon of seriality has never been bound by medium. We have always been transmedia storytellers. In his seminal work *Convergence Culture*, Henry Jenkins defines transmedia as "a process where integral elements of a fiction get dispersed systematically across multiple delivery channels for the purpose of creating a unified and coordinated entertainment experience." ("Transmedia 202"). Marc Steinberg and Jenkins both trace the genealogy of this "media mix" or "convergence" phenomenon to Japanese anime, specifically the 1963 creation of Astro Boy by a chocolate manufacturer with a savvy marketing team (vi; *Convergence Culture* 110). Though I find Steinberg and Jenkins' respective cultural histories helpful in contextualizing the 20th- and 21st-

century proliferation of transmedia seriality, I contend that the dispersion of a unifiable narrative across multiple delivery channels is not a historically bound phenomenon. From classical pottery depicting stories from the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* “with marked deviations from Homer’s narrative” to the wide array of public performances, paraphernalia, and unsanctioned sequels that accompanied Samuel Richardson’s 18th-century novel *Pamela*, serialized stories *have always* been capable of resonating across media platforms (Birch 5; Fysh 58-60). The proliferation of media platforms in the 20th and early 21st centuries have, however, provided a means for consumers to engage serial narratives across more dialogic networks than ever before.

But ultimately the question at the heart of most concerns about what is included in the canon of a serial’s metanarrative is a question of authority. Who chooses what is a constituent part of a serial and what is not? Again, I find Dimock’s theory of resonance helpful for dispelling anxieties about the stability of textual meaning and proscriptions that provide illusory control of narrative. Dimock notes that as texts move through space-time “meanings are produced over and over again, attaching themselves to, overlapping with, and sometimes coming into conflict with previous ones” as textual encounters cause “unexpected vibrations in unexpected places” (1061-1062). Just as a single text generates a cacophony of meanings, achieving unexpected valences as it resonates further from its point of origin, I suggest that the serialized narrative becomes exponentially commodious as it is told.

The first section of this project outlines the theoretical and narratological parameters of serial historiography across media, forms, and genres. My analysis of the sprawling, transmedia Batman mythos and the popular 2014 podcast *Serial* suggests that all serialized texts draw our attention to the irreducible elements of their telling. They persistently return us to the truth claims that order their narrative worlds, at once undermining the ontological certainty of the event (i.e. a definitive telling) while honoring that truth claim's timeful unwieldiness. I argue that serialized discourse has a unique ability to acknowledge the complexity of historical referents in human time, figuring truth as history is represented in narrative rather than truth as history *happens* in space-time. In my second chapter, I consider common narrative strategies among three uncommon serial metanarratives: Marvel Comics' *Civil War*, William Faulkner's Yoknapatawpha, and the Tectonic Theater Project's *The Laramie Project Cycle*. Analysis of these diverse serial constructs reveals discursive forms that are self-aware of their representational limits and the ineffability of a totalized understanding of time while acknowledging the impact of communal and individual memory on narratives of the past.

Chapter three pivots to examine performance and the serialized accrual of narrative in the transmedia celebrity construct of Truman Capote. Through historical and literary analysis of texts ranging from the travelogue *The Muses are Heard*, the profile of Marlon Brando in "The Duke in His Domain," and the nonfiction novel *In Cold Blood*, I argue that Capote's most enduring text is his celebrity—an embodied serial that may be read as the performance of his "unfinished masterpiece" *Answered Prayers*. The following chapter considers the intersection of seriality,

narrative identity, and place in Big Stone Gap, Virginia, a small Appalachian town that resonates through American literature and popular culture in texts like John Fox's, Jr.'s novel *The Trail of the Lonesome Pine*, the films and theatre inspired by Fox's work, and most recently Adriana Trigiani's series of popular novels and her feature film *Big Stone Gap*. Fox was a key progenitor of the "hillbilly" stereotype and as his popular portrayals of Appalachian people accrued narrative gravity, the *place* of Big Stone Gap offers a sight for exploring the impact that stories have on conceptions of individual, ethnic, and regional identities over time. The long arc of the project analyzes the theoretical parameters of seriality and expands the corpus of texts and performances we may read as serials to examine how each of us is an embodied serial, imbricated in an expanding network of intersectional narratives that shape conceptions of self, place, and time.

Ultimately, my dissertation argues that history *is* a form of literature, but narrative history's *constructedness* does not necessitate the total foreclosure of history's claims to truth. Rather by refiguring truth as history is *told* rather than truth as history *happens*, we foreground critical analysis of the act of telling as an integral part of historiography. In fact, by examining some of the representational possibilities engendered by seriality in other forms of literature, it is my aim as an interdisciplinary scholar dually invested in history's claims of epistemological veracity as well as narratology's anxieties of representation, to refigure historiography as an ongoing, open-ended enterprise of human knowledge production in which the form reflects and *empowers* the contingency of the content.

CHAPTER 1: SERIAL HISTORIOGRAPHY: NARRATIVE, TRUTH, AND THE IRREDUCIBLE ELEMENTS OF THE PAST

To characterize conversations between postmodern theorists of history and historical empiricists as a dialogue or even a debate is misleading. Since the 1990s, scholars in opposing camps have squared off as *theorists* and *historians* in a recursive, intractable exchange regarding the communion of history and truth.¹ As the firebrand of postmodern historiography, Hayden White exemplifies the theorists' perspective, dismissing history's claims to objective truth by asserting that there is an "inexpugnable relativity in every representation of historical phenomena" ("Historical Emplotment" 37). White expands the critique of history's ability to objectively record or represent truths of the past beyond Jean-François Lyotard's *grands récits* (i.e. hegemonic grand narratives such as Progress, Marxism, and Enlightenment emancipation that order cultural knowledge). For White, "historiography is a species of the genus narrative" and "narrative is an expression in discourse of a distinct mode of experience and thinking about the world, its

¹ Some prominent interchanges that typify the trend include those between Perez Zagorin and Frank Ankersmit in *History and Theory* from 1989 to 1990, the volleys among Carlo Ginzburg, Hayden White, and Martin Jay in Saul Friedländer's seminal 1992 collection *Probing the Limits of Representation: Nazism and the "Final Solution,"* Georg Iggers and White in the pages of *Rethinking History* in 2000, and Zagorin and Keith Jenkins as most recently contextualized in Jenkins's 2013 collection *At the Limits of History: Essays on Theory and Practice*.

structures, and its processes” (*Fiction of Narrative* 112, 274). Simply put, every narrative is someone’s *grand récit*— enclosed, limited, and incomplete.

In the face of postmodernist critique, historians champion disciplinary and methodological convictions to fend off the twin anxieties of narrative constructivism and inherent bias. These historians claim that theorists have no practical knowledge of history as praxis; theorists ignore unique research and composition methods intrinsic to the practice of history by flattening all knowledge into forms of literary production, in the process opening history to a range of anxieties regarding the impossibility of representation in the wake of the linguistic turn (Sarkar 293-296). For Perez Zagorin, postmodernism and its jumble of tangential philosophies are the purview of literary scholars while “history, by contrast has shown itself to be considerably more resistant to postmodernist trends” (“History, Referent, and Narrative” 70). And indeed, through quantitative and critical analysis of responses to White’s body of scholarship, Richard Vann and others² conclude that contemporary historians regard White as “a decidedly marginal figure” and that overall, postmodern narrative theory has had little effect on the praxis of writing history (Finney 103-104). The fundamental stance of historians is perhaps best enacted in a quotation of a quotation when Zagorin notes:

² In “The Reception of Hayden White” Vann provides quantitative analysis of historians’ citations of White’s *oeuvre*. Patrick Finney offers an assessment of contemporary historians’ praxis vis à vis White’s core concerns about narrative and subjectivity in “Hayden White, International History, and Questions Too Seldom Posed.” In the second half of “*Metahistory*: Before and After,” Peter Burke examines the changing contexts in which White’s seminal text has been received since its publication in 1973.

To all appearances, the prevailing attitude of historians in the United States might be typified in the statement made in 1994 by Bernard Bailyn, a leading senior scholar of early American history, that “the accuracy and adequacy of representations of past actualities, the verisimilitude or closeness to fact of what is written about them, remain the measure, in the end, of good history...” (“History, Referent, and Narrative” 70).

The theorist/historian dichotomy in which scholars repetitively (in the words of Jenkins) “speak past each other,” fails to assuage anxieties about the legitimacy of history’s claims to an objective truth or steer historiography toward a praxis more responsive to the ever-elusive past figured by postmodernists (70). So I suggest we reconsider the concept at the heart of this ideological conflict: narrative.

In the pages that follow, I seek a middle ground between “historians” and “theorists” by expanding the postmodernist characterization of narrative to illustrate that narrative history *is always* incomplete and biased, but may still remain open and responsive to the raucous demands of an ephemeral past. Let me be clear, like White and other postmodern theorists, I believe that historiography is a species of narrative and narrative is inherently fragmentary and limited in its representational capacity. But unlike many postmodernists, I contend that the disavowal of narrative history is a dismissal of narrative narrowly defined—narrative as a hermetic discursive framework marked by a more or less linear temporality and limited perspective in service to the values of hermeneutic tidiness and the moribund illusion of a total knowledge that prizes breadth over depth.

My critical intervention reframes narrative history as a recursive, but *productive* process through analysis of the narrative function of seriality. Seriality, the material distribution of texts in discrete components, gives rise to a constellation of *entimed* narrative strategies that provide a template for representing human experience through self-conscious attention to what Paul Ricoeur terms “narrative identities” (274). Ricoeur argues in the three volumes of *Time and Narrative* that the phenomenology of time unveils innumerable aporias (e.g. failures in the representational power of language, gaps in historical accounts, logical disjunctions, etc.) that may only be untangled via the imposition of ordered human thought, specifically the “indirect discourse of narration” (241). But for Ricoeur, narrative does not resolve the aporias in the phenomenology of time; narrative may identify aporias as sights of human inquiry, but time as *signified* always escapes the human “will to mastery” (261). Our inability to represent the communion of time and human experience via language need not precipitate a wholesale disavowal of narrative in the face of time’s ontological elusiveness, however (274). Ricoeur suggests that “the idea of the unity of history, with its ethical and political implications” may be rescued from epistemological overreach in a form that lays bare the “limits of its validity,” namely the “narrative identities” of the individuals and communities who shape and receive a unified history-narrative (274).

I read the “narrative identities” that Ricoeur distinguishes as the only sufficient sites for investigating the correspondence between the “aporetics of time and the poetics of narrative” as the conception of human subjectivity as a serial enterprise (274). In her work on testimony and witnessing, Kelly Oliver frames our

sense of being a subject as a “fundamentally dialogic” structure of *witnessing*— a productive tension between subject-position (i.e. our changeable relations to culture, politics, and circumstance) and a sense of agency tantamount to one’s capacity to respond to otherness (81-82). To unpack the concept of witnessing, Oliver draws upon the research of psychoanalyst Dori Laub, providing a provocative example in which an Auschwitz survivor gives an eyewitness account of four chimneys exploding during a prisoner uprising (83). Historians participating in the Video Archive for Holocaust Testimonies at Yale insist that the eyewitness account is irrelevant and unreliable; the factual record asserts that only one chimney was destroyed during the failed rebellion (83). However, Laub and Oliver argue that the witness’s testimony is significant because it speaks to something ineffable: the radical possibility of resistance in the camps in which “[s]eeing the impossible— what did not happen—gave [the eyewitness] the strength to make what seemed impossible possible, surviving the Holocaust” (83). In this instance, by considering the socio-historical subject-position of the witness, we may learn something other than the factual “truth” that is nonetheless invaluable in achieving a more fulsome understanding of the past (84).

So in Oliver’s account the *inner witness* (or our experience of ourselves as subjects) is where subject-position and subjectivity converge, the point of tension between one’s finite socio-historical position and infinite response-ability to otherness. The inner witness is engendered and then shaped by dialogic interaction with other people and it is anterior to the human capacity to think, communicate, and act as an agent (83). Oliver notes, “we learn to ‘talk to ourselves’—to think—by

talking to others” (83). Recall that White defines narrative as “an expression in discourse of a distinct mode of experience and thinking about the world, its structures, and its processes” (*Fiction of Narrative* 274). I contend that this “distinct mode of experience and thinking” is described more robustly by Oliver’s *inner witness*, the subject’s experience of itself as subject. The jumble of experiences and perceptions that we order in our accounts of *human time* do not constitute time as it is, but time as *experienced* by a narrative identity. So on the most basic level, I define narrative as the imposition of human time via the act of inner witnessing (complete with the aporias intrinsic to narrative identity) onto space-time.

Building from Oliver’s conception of the experience of human subjectivity as a dialogical, recursive witnessing, I argue that we are each of us *embodied serials*: loci of constantly shifting, separate, but interrelated narratives—stories we tell ourselves about ourselves and the world, stories others tell us, stories we tell others, down to the genetic stories encoded in our DNA. Recent cognitive and neuroscientific research in memory grounds my analysis of narrative identities and *embodied seriality*.

An increasing collection of research³ posits that memories are far from the unchanging impressions on the wax tablet of the mind that Plato describes in *The*

³ As early as 1968, Donald Lewis and other researchers presented the results of an experiment in the journal *Science* suggesting that memories could be erased during the process of recall due to what would later be termed “memory reconsolidation,” the recursive *production* of memories in the brain. Karim Nader, Oliver Hardt, Einar Ö. Einarsson, and Joseph Le Doux are prominent figures in research of dynamic memory processes in the last two decades. Karim Nader, Glenn E. Schafe, and Joseph E. Le Doux’s “Fear Memories Require Protein Synthesis in the Amygdala for Reconsolidation After Retrieval” (2000) and Nader and Einarsson’s “Memory Reconsolidation: An Update” (2010) illustrate the trajectory of work in dynamic memory research during the

Theaetetus—a conception of memory that has remained dominant in the popular and scientific imagination for centuries (Burnyeat 90-94). In a finding published in 2000 in the journal *Nature*, Karim Nader asserts that memories are not forged and immaculately preserved (722-726). Rather, memories are constructed anew each time they are accessed by the brain. Nader's colleague, neuroscientist Joseph Le Doux, explains that "[t]he brain isn't interested in having a perfect set of memories about the past. Instead, memory comes with a natural updating mechanism, which is how we make sure that the information taking up valuable space inside our head is still useful" (Lehrer). So that seemingly pristine memory of my first encounter with the transmedia construct called Batman—replete with flashes of Michael Keaton and Jack Nicholson on the screen of a rural Tennessee movie theatre, the denim jacket with a Batman-logo button (ubiquitous in the summer of 1989) that would go missing next school year, the thrill of having talked my parents into a PG-13 movie—is not a film, a fixed, unchanging representation of the past digitally imprinted on a hard drive called the mind. Instead each time I call upon my knowledge of this past moment, the mind presents something more like a stage play, *re-creating, re-presenting* with nuanced differences the information that constitutes the memory. In

first decade of the twenty-first century. Ingie Hong, et al.'s "AMPA Receptor Exchange Underlies Transient Memory Destabilization on Retrieval" (2013) and Roger Pitman, et al.'s "Systemic Mifepristone Blocks Reconsolidation of Cue-Conditioned Fear; Propranolol Prevents this Effect" (2011) provide even more recent data and indicate pharmacological applications that arise from our expanding understanding of memory reconsolidation.

a subtle dance of proteins, “every time we think about the past we are delicately transforming its cellular representation in the brain, changing its underlying neural circuitry” (Lehrer). This paradigm termed *dynamic recollection* exemplifies on an individual, neuro-psychological level, the recursive nature of our own narrative identities and perhaps a more ‘accurate’ and ‘authentic’ accounting of historical truth by virtue of that fidelity to human memorialization. So rather than claiming a totalized knowledge via mastery of time, seriality foregrounds the contingency of human memory, understanding, and to borrow White’s terminology—the *content* of the *form*, the implicit meaning and biases that all narrative displays through valuation of received research and composition methodologies including representational strategies, emplotments, and philosophies that govern the presentation of evidence as truth.

Historians may balk at theoretical analysis of the form of history not only due to the scrutiny such analysis brings to potential ideological biases, but because narrative constructivist arguments seemingly strip history of *any* special correlation with truth. I contend that history *is* a form of literature, but narrative history’s *constructedness* does not necessitate the total foreclosure of history’s claims to truth. Rather by refiguring truth as history is *told* rather than truth as history *happens*, we foreground critical analysis of the act of telling as an integral part of historiography. In fact, by examining some of the representational possibilities engendered by seriality in other forms of literature, it is my aim as an interdisciplinary scholar dually invested in history’s claims of epistemological veracity as well as narratology’s anxieties of representation, to refigure historiography as an ongoing,

open-ended enterprise of human knowledge production in which *the form reflects the contingency of the content*. I contend that the representational possibilities of seriality address the anxieties of postmodern theorists by acknowledging the immensity and complexity of historical referents, eschew criticisms of univocality and enclosure often leveled at narrative histories, while respecting key historiographic methodologies including research practices, verisimilitude, and the representation of facts vis-à-vis evidence. In its persistent recursivity, seriality does not resolve the fundamental disjuncture between *signifier* and *signified*—the word and the thing— at the heart of postmodern disquietude regarding the inadequacies of language. Nor does seriality emphasize the limits of narrative in corralling the totality of space-time, but rather acknowledges the bounds of narrative identities’ experiences of human time while positing each as a part of a larger, ephemeral whole. Seriality foregrounds the representational limits of language not as a bleak, intractable reality, but as an impetus for history’s persistent, ongoing analysis of the aporetics of time.

This figuration of seriality is not a historically-bound discursive phenomenon formulated merely to assuage contemporary ideological conflicts regarding the limits of language and representation. Rather, seriality is a *transhistorical* function of narrative that transcends technological innovations, modes of production, historical circumstance, and postmodern anxieties regarding the insufficiency of language in the face of the linguistic turn. My definition of seriality as the material distribution of a unified narrative in discrete components is intentionally capacious because I believe similar ontological, aesthetic, and representational concerns

undergird a wide range of texts across time and cultures. A cursory review of key figures, events, and places in accounts of the past reveals that human attempts to order aporia via narrative result not in essentialized stories, but, as Ricoeur suggests in the conclusion of *Time and Narrative*, in a swirl of unresolved and ultimately unresolvable narratives that foreground narrative identities as components of both production and reception.

Consider Jesus of Nazareth, the central religious figure of Christianity and undoubtedly one of the most influential figures in human history. As C. Stephen Evans indicates in *The Historical Christ and the Jesus of Faith*, the “incarnational narrative” of Jesus as the Son of God who was born, died, and rose from the dead is the cornerstone of Christian theology, yet no single, unified narrative may contain the unwieldiness of the historical Jesus and/or the Christ of faith (2-26). Instead the Synoptic Gospels (the Christ narratives of *Matthew*, *Mark*, and *Luke*), the Fourth Gospel (*John*), other secondary accounts in the New Testament from *Acts* to *Revelation*, and a wide array of apocrypha such as the gnostic gospels (e.g. the gospels of *Mary*, *Thomas*, *Philip*, and *Judas*) present a constellation of stories that accentuate the narrative identities of textual producers while simultaneously entreating the textual consumer to forge a composite understanding of the “incarnational narrative” in toto. In this instance, the composite narrative elides the aporias of its telling when integrated into the narrative identity of the consumer via a hermeneutics of faith. Here the “incarnational narrative” is an example of a *metanarrative* or *mythos*, the amalgamated story that arises when the narrative

identity of the consumer synthesizes a unified narrative via multiple encounters with a serialized text.

As evidenced here, seriality knows no distinction between flimsy, socio-aesthetic distinctions between “high” and “low” discursive forms.⁴ *Days of Our Lives*, the popular American soap opera, is a serial narrative told over 50 years in more than 12,000 separate television episodes (at the time of this writing) (“Days”). So too is the *Odyssey* a serial because of its division into discrete books (due at least in part to its early history as an oral text) as well as its relationship to the interlocking narratives of the *Iliad* and the lost *Telegony* (Minchin 353). I linger on this claim to the transhistoricity of seriality because in the pages that follow, much of my focus is squarely on post-’45 American texts. My own interests and scholarly expertise—my personal narrative identity— shape my inquiry. In the interest of enacting the discursive form I set out to delineate, I will rely on autoethnography to engage my biases as I perceive them creeping into my analysis. However, I want to reiterate that seriality is an intrinsic, timeless function of narrative; it is the

⁴ In “Interpreting Serials,” Umberto Eco aligns himself with Walter Benjamin’s politics of mechanical production by using the language of consumerism to confound the distinction between high and low art. Eco suggests that an emphasis on values such as novelty and individual genius in Modern aesthetics has created a dichotomy between high and low art that relegates the pleasure of repetition to the subordinate arena of mass media and industrial production (83-84). However, Eco observes that in the postmodern moment “iteration and repetition seem to dominate the whole world of artistic creativity, and [...] it is difficult to distinguish between the repetition of the media and the repetition of the so-called major arts” (84). I find this account of the denigrated place of the serial in cultural discourse persuasive and for my own purposes the terminology of production and consumption proves most apt in discussing seriality because it persistently foregrounds aspects of material production that I find integral to a comprehensive analysis of the serial.

experience of narrative identities navigating the aporias of time via the poetics of narrative.

Serial historiography then is a process of intellectual systemization of knowledge of the past that relies upon forms of “re-vision” to audit not only *what* we know of the past but *how* we know it while adhering to the following methodological principles:

- 1.) The form recovers discursively the diathesis that was lost with the extinction of the grammatical middle voice.
- 2.) The rhetorical situation collapses the power differentials and the communicative distances among the producer, text, textual referent, and consumer.
- 3.) The text is self-conscious of its referential stability and acknowledges that as a form of discourse it is dependent upon human agency for its claims to truth.

The key concept necessary to unpacking the methodological principles above is the *irreducible element*. An irreducible element is a truth claim or historical referent in narrative that defies elimination, radical sublimation, and certain modes of emplotment. Building upon Ricoeur’s conclusions in *Time and Narrative*, the irreducible element is a site where narrative identities confront an aporia in the phenomenology of time resulting not in a unified, essential story, but in a proliferation of narratives. The irreducible element resists enclosure via a complexity that makes it a site of ongoing negotiation via the narrative function of seriality. I recognize that I am using three terms in close constellation, so let me

delineate among “seriality,” “narrative identities,” and “irreducible elements.”

Narrative identities are the *embodied*, mercurial swirl of stories that constitute individual human experience. Irreducible elements are the *sites* of aporias in the phenomenology of time that give rise to a plurality of unresolved and unresolvable stories via the *function of narrative* called seriality. Through the process I term serial historiography, then, the narrative identity does not perpetually act out or fetishize the irreducible element,⁵ but conscientiously draws ever-closer to the representation of a truth claim while respecting the ultimately unrepresentable totality of that irreducible element.

Let me provide a brief account of a historical irreducible element to flesh out the stakes of serial historiography: on November 22, 1963, United States President John F. Kennedy was fatally shot as his presidential motorcade travelled through Dealey Plaza in Dallas, Texas. Though a ten-month investigation by the Warren Commission from 1963 to 1964 concluded that Lee Harvey Oswald acted alone in assassinating the president, doubts regarding its *complete* truth haunt the Warren

⁵ Many responses to White’s proposed historiography rely on trauma theory for the argumentative framework of their objections. In “Notes on Trauma and Community,” Kai Erikson describes trauma as an event in which “[s]omething alien breaks in on you, smashing through whatever barriers your mind has set up as a line of defense. It invades you, takes you over, becomes a dominating feature of your interior landscape [...]” and Minrose Gwin adds that “the nature of trauma is its resistance to a departure into history” (Erikson 183; Gwin 22). In these terms, Dominick LaCapra aspires to a historiography that does not encourage a resistance to a Freudian working through by “convert[ing] trauma into an occasion for sublimity,” but rather fosters a “coming-to-terms with” the wounds of the past while avoiding specious claims of healing (Gwin 23; LaCapra 23, 42). While this conception of trauma is helpful in considering the ethical dimensions of historiography, I want to distinguish the persistent analysis of *seriality* from traumatic fetishization or acting out. To the point, serial historiography is not a catalogue of traumas resistant to working through, but rather a collection of truth claims resistant to ontological certainty.

Commission narrative. From the 1979 U.S. House Select Committee on Assassinations' conclusion that Kennedy "was probably assassinated as a result of a conspiracy" to Oliver Stone's 1991 film thriller *JFK* that offers what Roger Ebert describes as a "countermyth" of monstrous conspiracies to oppose "the official establishment myth" of a lone gunman, the irreducible element of Kennedy's death is a fount of narrative. A quick Google search turns up a genuinely overwhelming range of conspiracy theories and alternate hypotheses that dispute every imaginable truth-claim presented by the "official establishment myth." No matter how many times I watch the Zapruder film, I am no closer to the *truth* of Kennedy's assassination. I have seen a man murdered on film, but the truth that constitutes the history of the Kennedy assassination is the product of competing narratives told *about* the irreducible element, the one fact that is (rarely) denied: Kennedy's death. In this sense, I suggest that serial historiography never presents narrative or narratives as historical truth, but rather a practice of serial historiography is *productive* in our ongoing pursuit of historical truth, offering means of analyzing competing narratives to generate complex metanarratives of the past that remain self-aware of the narrative identities at play in their reception and ongoing production.

Considering the Kennedy assassination as an irreducible element asks us to order and adjudicate the truth claims of competing narratives while also analyzing truths that exceed facts (e.g. what does the proliferation of conspiracy theories tell us about Kennedy as President? About American paranoia in the late months of 1963 and beyond? About skepticism toward "official" narratives over time?) as we

forge a composite metanarrative bound by our own narrative identity. In the instance of Kennedy's assassination, as is the case with most historically referential irreducible elements, the ongoing accrual of knowledge and the dynamics of interpretation create a glut of information over time. So I suggest that an examination of serialized works across media may provide insight into narrative strategies common in plumbing irreducible elements, both fictional *and* historical, that may ultimately provide analytic strategies useful to both narratologists and historians.

To counterpose my account of the Kennedy assassination, consider the function of an irreducible element in a fictional metanarrative: a wealthy couple and their young son step out of the warm safety of the theater. The city looms dark, lost to cancerous urban decay. The family cuts down an alley where they encounter an armed robber. The gunman shoots the couple in cold blood. The woman's pearls clatter to the pavement. Footfalls clap as the murderer flees into the maw of the city. The boy is left alive to witness.

In the twenty-first century Batman has become a pervasive transmedia construct whose mythology is a constitutive part of American popular culture. Whether you have read an issue of *Detective Comics* or not, you likely recognize at least some aspect of the description above as an account of the traumatic event that drives young Bruce Wayne to become a superhero. The death of Batman's parents is an irreducible element of the Batman metanarrative. It is a story with narrative gravity; a story to which we return. It is a story with *resonance* (to borrow Wai Chi Dimock's term to which I will return in greater detail below); the story's meaning is

notable not for its timelessness, but for its “*timeful* unwieldiness,” its contingency (1062). There is no definitive telling of the deaths of Thomas and Martha Wayne. Each time we apprentice young Bruce in witnessing the murders, new details emerge. The story defies closure. As the irreducible element traverses media—comics, animation, live-action television, radio, video games, and feature films—artists harness the unique capacities of different genres and forms, extending the representative possibility of its telling.⁶ As evidenced here, as a site where narrative identities confront limits to representations of human time, the irreducible element does not foreclose the possibility of narrative representation, but rather the narrative function of seriality multiplies the range of narratives to be considered as the consumer integrates knowledge into her own narrative identity, in the process forging a composite metanarrative.

To clarify the process of creation, reception, and integration of narrative in the schema of serial historiography, I will return to the methodological principles outlined above. But first, I must clarify three key terms indispensable to literary studies, in general, but particularly germane to my analysis of seriality: medium, form, and genre. The slipperiness of these terms in literary studies is endlessly confounding to students of literature as well as scholars in related fields throughout

⁶ In 2014 multimedia journalist Abraham Riesman created “Batman’s Parents Dying: The Supercut” for the American pop-culture and entertainment blog *Vulture*. In the video, Riesman superimposes scene from live-action feature films (including Tim Burton’s *Batman* (1989) and Christopher Nolan’s *Batman Begins* (2005)), animated television shows (like *Super Friends* (1973-1986) and *Batman: The Brave and the Bold* (2008-2011)), and animated feature films based on Frank Miller’s widely celebrated comics (*Batman: Year One* (2011) and *The Dark Knight Returns-Part I* (2012))—to name a few. The simultaneous presentation of the Wayne murders in a wide-array of media, forms, and genres foregrounds the “timeful unwieldiness” of this irreducible element.

the humanities and social sciences. For my purposes, I want to delineate among what I perceive as one objective taxonomic category and two culturally determined categories. By no means do I advocate for taxonomy as a particularly fruitful enterprise of literary studies, but I do believe that precision in terminology is imperative to assuaging the doubts of historians like Zagorin who characterize postmodern strategies of interpretation as baggy or sloppy.

Medium is the broadest taxonomic category and is a generally stable term in literary studies because it relies on more-or-less objective descriptions of textual objects. Drawing heavily on the rhetoric of the visual arts, the medium describes the substances a producer uses to create a text. So, the medium of Pablo Picasso's iconic 1937 painting *Guernica* is oil on canvas. Though media may seem fixed and objective, complexity arises when a single text appears in multiple media. As I have chosen the sprawling Batman metanarrative as a site for examining the function of seriality, I will ground my textual analysis in a particularly resonant work in this transmedia construct, *The Dark Knight Returns*.

First published in 1986 by DC Comics, *The Dark Knight Returns* is a dismal meditation on the Batman mythos written and illustrated by Frank Miller with finishes by Klaus Janson, color by Lynn Varley, and lettering by John Costanza. *The Dark Knight Returns* opens in a dystopian future without a Batman: Bruce Wayne retired 10 years before the story begins following the death of Robin and a U.S. government injunction against superhero vigilantes. Now in his 50s, Wayne emerges from a brooding stupor to vanquish the anarchic gangs that have overrun Gotham City in his absence. When Batman reappears, however, he is confronted by

psychopathic opponents from his past and former allies anesthetized by Reagan-era double-speak and a supersaturated media landscape. Through a series of brutal altercations, Bruce Wayne grapples with his own sadistic motivations to wage urban warfare in a recurrent effort to rend order from violent chaos. It is genuinely difficult to overstate the narrative gravity of *The Dark Knight Returns* within the Batman transmedia construct. Numerous scholars and critics cite the text as one of the best Batman stories, one of the best comics, and one of the most influential stagings of the Batman mythos that reverberates across media to affect producers from Tim Burton to Christopher Nolan.⁷

When I ask students to read *The Dark Knight Returns*, some may encounter the text as a collected graphic novel (pen, ink, and watercolor illustrations juxtaposed with text and printed on paper), others may seek an ebook (pen, ink, and watercolor illustrations juxtaposed with text and rendered digitally), while the intrepid few may seek the narrative in its original print medium (pen, ink, and watercolor illustrations juxtaposed with text and printed on paper in four installments). Seemingly minor variations in the medium in which consumers encounter a text may have a significant impact on interface, reception, and understanding, particularly as an ever-expanding catalogue of texts are translated to

⁷ In a 2005 retrospective, critic Hilary Goldstein notes that *The Dark Knight Returns* “absolutely revolutionized” Batman following its publication in 1986. In describing *The Dark Knight Returns* as “one of the top ten graphic novels” for *Time*, Lev Grossman suggests that “[t]his is the book that begat the Batman of the movies.” And indeed, *The Dark Knight Returns* has been cited as a reference for filmmakers, comics creators, animators, and even Vincent Connare, designer of the ubiquitous, but often derided font “Comics Sans” (Steel).

digital formats.⁸ So although I argue that the medium is the most objective form of literary taxonomy, I also recognize its contingency and suggest we remain attuned to subtle variations when texts slide between media.

“Form” is one of the most ubiquitous, but slippery terms in literary criticism. Though the word is often used interchangeably with “genre” to describe either a literary type or structure, I want to delineate clearly between these terms. My conception of form draws on the Chicago School of criticism and the seminal work of R. S. Crane, in particular. In *The Language of Criticism and the Structure of Poetry*, Crane expands upon Aristotelian poetics to describe the form of a text variously as the author’s intent to evoke effects via adherence to received rhetorical methods, the plot, and the *dynamis* or “working power” of the text. Crane’s project is evaluative in that he seeks methods for adjudicating the ways in which a poet successfully actualizes principles signifying “good form”—that is, received *types* of texts distinguished by their ability to represent human action. As my purposes are less evaluative and more descriptive, my definition of form seeks to avoid the intentional fallacy (i.e. questions of authorial intent) and aesthetic judgment of plot and rhetoric, focusing primarily on the *dynamis* and received rhetorical conventions of a text. I define form as a discursive context made legible by a text’s adherence to rhetorical methods of representation. In this sense, form is the potential energy that a text draws upon to structure its presentation of information. As is the case with

⁸ In “Reading Digital Texts,” Maureen Walsh, Jennifer Asha, and Nicole Spranger report on a research study investigating the different ways that students read and navigate digital texts, focusing particularly on competency in the metalanguage of visual grammar.

genre, form is less an adjective that describes a text and more a verb the text may perform or participate in.

Returning to Miller's *The Dark Knight Returns* as an example, we find that the medium may limit and/or order form. If I encounter *The Dark Knight Returns* in its original medium, a print publication released in four installments, separated by temporal gaps in production and reception, then I would describe the form as a "comics miniseries."⁹ However, if, as is the case with most contemporary readers, I encounter *The Dark Knight Returns* as either a digital or print publication collecting the miniseries as a unified narrative, the form is most often described as a "graphic novel" in which the serial quality of the original form has been flattened if not effaced. In this instance, I contend that the rhetorical conventions of the text may signify multiple forms: comics, comic book miniseries, and graphic novel. The form of a text may be porous and far less objective than the description of medium. And formal descriptors are often laden with aesthetic value judgments. For instance, in literary studies the "graphic novel" is conventionally prized as a unified and thus superior work of art whereas the comic book series is more likely to be characterized as "popular arts."

⁹ In fact, in its original medium, each issue of what is today collected as *The Dark Knight Returns* had different titles. The first issue was called "The Dark Knight Returns," the second, "Dark Knight Triumphant," the third, "Hunt the Dark Knight," and the fourth, "The Dark Knight Falls." When the miniseries was collected as a "graphic novel," the title of the first issue was applied to the work as a whole and the original issue titles became chapter titles.

Genre, then, is the most complex and idiosyncratic category of literary taxonomy. As is the case with many contemporary genre theorists,¹⁰ I am a nominalist; I figure genre as a mercurial, socially and culturally contingent organizational strategy. Some scholars posit objective, observable (if historically fluid) discursive qualities such as linguistic function, textual organization, and rhetorical situation as metrics for diagnosing textual *belonging* within genre categories ranging from lyric and epic to sci-fi and chick-lit (Charaudeau 278–280). However, I find Jacques Derrida’s conception of genre as “a sort of participation without belonging—a taking part in without being part of” more compelling as it distances genre from an Aristotelian taxonomy that prizes a hierarchical, pseudo-biological resemblance among a *class* of texts and its constituents in favor of a performative model in which texts shape and are shaped by a constellation of received discursive conventions (227). As I merely seek to clarify my use of key terms and the concept of genre as a cultural category that exceeds texts to operate within the cultural practices of production, reception, and consumption, I echo John Frow’s assertion that:

[G]enres are cultural forms, dynamic and historically fluid guiding people’s behavior; they are learned, and they are culturally specific;

¹⁰ In his significant 2000 collection *Modern Genre Theory*, David Duff assembles a range of articles and excerpts representing theoretical explorations of genre in the twentieth century. In the context of Duff’s collection, genre emerges as a mercurial, but significant and persistent concern for literary scholars. Taxonomic descriptions of literary type as espoused by the likes of Russian Formalists, Mikhail Bakhtin, and Northrop Frye are derided as historically and socially contingent and hermeneutically limiting by scholars ranging from Frederic Jameson to Jacques Derrida and Maurice Blanchot. However, genre and generic distinctions continue to pervade literary discourse, criticism, and the marketplace for texts in all media in the early twenty-first century.

they are rooted in institutional infrastructures; they classify objects in ways that are sometimes precise, sometimes fuzzy, but always sharper at the core than at the edges; and they belong to a system of kinds, and are meaningful only in terms of the shifting differences between them. (128)

When I recently asked students to identify the genre of *The Dark Knight Returns*, they were almost unanimous in their first response: superhero. Pushed to distinguish the defining set of features that signify superhero genre, the class was scattered, suggesting types of characters (people with extraordinary abilities), themes (questions of morality and vengeance, the balance of power and responsibility, sacrifice), modes of dress (spandex, capes), and tropes (city as beloved, order as counterbalance to chaos) to name just a few. The students were also very quick to assert that *The Dark Knight Returns* is not *just* a superhero story; they described it as drama, sci-fi, dystopian, thriller, political commentary, and a host of other genres. My point here is that many contemporary consumers (myself included) seem to consider genre an unfixed, plural, and ultimately *pragmatic* means of classifying texts not for hierarchical valuation, but as a means of situating a text within multiple, converging discursive traditions in which it may participate.

I linger on distinctions among medium, form, and genre in service to the first methodological principle of serial historiography, namely that *the form recovers discursively the diathesis that was lost with the extinction of the grammatical middle voice*. I first wrestled with conceptions of the middle voice in the context of Hayden White's controversial essay "Historical Emplotment and the Problem of Truth" and

the responses it inspired from scholars including Carlo Ginzburg, Martin Jay, and Dominick LaCapra. In this text White issues what Jay refers to as an “injunction to jettison realist modes of historical writing in favor of modernist alternatives,” and more specifically advocates for a form of intransitive historical writing as prefigured by Roland Barthes and Berel Lang (Jay 97; White 47-48). Many scholars have addressed the flaws in White’s conception of what he calls “modernist historiography,”¹¹ but a number of postmodern theorists including Alun Munslow and Robert Rosenstone have reiterated White’s argument that formal experimentation is the only viable means of advancing historiography’s proximity to truths of the past. Even one of White’s most incisive critics, Dominick LaCapra, concedes that White’s critique of “conventional narratives seeking resonant closure” and subsequent championing of experimental techniques in the writing of history are

¹¹ In *Writing History, Writing Trauma*, Dominick LaCapra offers a fulsome critique of White’s arguments. LaCapra notes that in White’s intransitive writing the self-referential focus in the relation between writer and discourse eschews the issue of reference and in the process elides the authorial responsibility to truth claims (19). LaCapra also critiques the ethical implications of White’s characterization of the middle voice as the voice of “radical ambivalence” signified by its enactment of Derridian *différance* through language play that resists dichotomies such as past and present, transitive and intransitive, active and passive, and perpetrator and victim. The repercussions of such “unregulated *différance*” could lead to the collapse of all distinctions including those involving agency and tense (e.g. past and present), thus enabling what LaCapra describes as “post-traumatic acting out in which one is haunted or possessed by the past and performatively caught up in the compulsive repetition of traumatic scenes” (21). For LaCapra, “The question is whether historiography in its own way may help not speciously to heal but to come to terms with the wounds and scars of the past” (42). So in LaCapra’s schema where White’s middle voice is aligned with the Freudian notion of “acting out,” or “an endlessly melancholic, impossible mourning, and a resistance to working through,” a historiography based in the middle voice is unproductive and unethical in its confrontation of the historical referent (23). Finally, LaCapra notes that White problematically conflates the characteristics that he ascribes to “modernism,” “intransitive writing,” and the “middle voice.”

“often thought-provoking even when [White] does not show precisely how they might be applied or enacted” (16).

White’s provocative, though nebulous historiographic model deserves earnest reconsideration. First, like LaCapra, I suggest we jettison White’s “modernist” modifier. White relies upon a Manichean opposition between “modernist” and “realist” narratives while the historiography he envisions opposes closure, definitive representation, and claims to objective Truth— narrative qualities hardly exclusive to “Modernism,” however one chooses to define the term.¹² Parsing out the semantic confusion between White’s conflation of “intransitive writing” and the “middle voice” proves more challenging, but allows me to refigure *modernist* historiography more precisely as *serial* historiography. As such, I propose that we conceive of intransitive writing as a rhetorical situation and the middle voice as a question of diathesis and agency.

Barthes reminds us that any question of diathesis or voice is a question of “the way in which the subject of the verb is affected by the action” (18). When the subject is the agent of action the verb is active (as in “Tom beats the drum”) and when the subject is the recipient of action the verb is passive (“The drum is beaten by Tom”). Unlike languages such as Ancient Greek, Sanskrit, and Icelandic, contemporary English does not have a verb form for the middle voice. Until the

¹² Ultimately, I contend that self-consciousness or self-reflexivity is the primary textual quality that White describes as “modernist.” White is seemingly aligned with scholars like William Everdell who describes a Modernist “ontological discontinuity” in the late nineteenth century as a radical disjuncture from Victorian “realist” predecessors who figured the world as intact, knowable, and motivated by progress. Recently, historians and literary scholars ranging from Herbert Schneidau to Jay Winter have made compelling arguments against a radical modernist break, in favor of a more organic genealogy of “modernist practices” (e.g. self-conscious texts).

nineteenth century the *passival* construction was used in English to express an active progressive with passive meaning such as in the case of “the drums are beating” where the seemingly active verb in a state of incompleteness belies a passive subject position (i.e. the drums are *being beaten*) (Hundt 79-81). The passival and its remnants in contemporary English (e.g. the plane is boarding) offer a helpful means of conceptualizing a diathesis in which a subject may be both active and passive to the action of a verb.

Regarding historiography, if we define the middle voice as discourse in which “the subject is presumed to be *interior* to the action,” then the shrinkage of communicative distance requires that all of the communicative agents (i.e. producers, text, textual reference, and consumers) be interior to historiographic colloquy (White 48). This formulation of the middle voice is perhaps best exemplified in Barthes’s assertion that “the middle voice corresponds exactly to the modern state of the verb *to write*” in which “the subject is constituted as immediately contemporary with the writing, being effected and affected by it” as in the “exemplary case of the Proustian narrator” (18-19).¹³ In the context of serial historiography, a more fulsome account of a subject being interior to the *dynamis* of narrative may be found in Wai Chee Dimock’s theory of resonance.

In outlining her theory, Dimock offers a reading of Longinus in which “[t]he ear is not a passive receptacle; it is a force that remakes what it hears. The aesthetics associated with Longinus, Frances Ferguson notes, ‘culminates in a dissolution of

¹³ The Proustian narrator here points to the “petites madeleines” scene in *Swann’s Way* (the first volume of Marcel Proust’s seven part *À la recherche du temps perdu*) in which the speaker tastes a bit of cake and tea that conjures new thoughts, memories, and narrative connections that he writes into being (48).

the subject in the person of the author and in a reinscription of the subject in the person of the reader.’ The text “yield[s] the words to the hearer” (1067). In the Dimock/Ferguson reading of Longinus, both author and reader are configured as co-makers of text and thus contemporary with the subject of the text. Though this formulation seems to leave responsibility to the textual referent unchecked, Dimock suggests that “the traveling frequencies of literary texts: frequencies received and amplified across time, moving farther and farther from their point of origin, causing unexpected vibrations in unexpected places” encourage constant evaluation and re-evaluation of the text and its fidelity to the textual referent as “meanings are produced over and over again, attaching themselves to, overlapping with, and sometimes coming into conflict with previous ones” (1061-1062).

Dimock’s theory of resonance offers an account not only of the resonance of content through time, but of textual form as middle voice in the schema of serial historiography. As rhetorical strategies for confronting irreducible elements move through time, they are persistently adapted and re-inscribed in the narrative identities of consumers who may, in turn, re-present the discursive context as a producer, participating in and drawing upon the *dynamis* of form. Like memories in the paradigm of dynamic memory processes, a text’s form represents a complex network of recalled information newly staged and re-presented by both producers and consumers. Form is inescapable; even texts seeking to defy form are defined by their willful inattention to received rhetorical strategies. Through our narrative identities, discursive form reverberates across human time. In the consumer’s

perpetual reception and re-inscription and the producer's re-presentation, each of us is entrenched in ongoing negotiations regarding the content of myriad forms.

Returning to my previous example, the narrative of *The Dark Knight Returns* resonates within the Batman metanarrative; it re-presents irreducible elements of the mythos like the murders of Thomas and Martha Wayne, the Joker as Batman's nemesis, and the pseudo-familial relationship between Batman and Robin. But the content of the *form* of *The Dark Knight Rises* is equally resonant. As noted above, the text was conceived and initially produced as a comics miniseries—four installments released in a prestige format signified by square binding, glossy paper, and more pages than typically featured in a mainstream American comic book in 1986 (Daniels 149). It draws upon formal conventions of comics (e.g. juxtaposed images and text) but as a comics miniseries (i.e. a comics narrative bound by predetermined temporal, representational, or narrative limits) it also signifies “artistic independence” and more “developed” storytelling (Daniels 149). And yet *The Dark Knight Returns* is most often celebrated as an exemplar of the graphic novel—a “more complex single work of sequential art conceived or developed as a unified work, from periodical comic books” (“graphic novels”). The term “graphic novel” was popularized when it appeared on the cover of Will Eisner's *A Contract with God* in 1978, but following the publication of *The Dark Knight Returns* in 1986 and Alan Moore and Dave Gibbons' *Watchmen* in 1987, the formal modifier came to signify “mature” stories, sometimes the receptacles of “original” (i.e. never-before serialized) narratives, and more broadly sequential art texts with *literary* merit. So the form of *The Dark Knight Returns* proves as unwieldy as the narrative, itself. It is

a Batman comic that builds upon decades of preceding stories and has in turn influenced decades of stories in various media since its publication. It is a comics miniseries set outside the constraints of narrative continuity so that an auteur (i.e. Miller) may imagine Batman's "last case" (Miller 6). It is also a graphic novel that tells a unified story, a narrative that grounded Batman as a "dark" and "gritty" hero for a maturing comics audience in the last two decades of the twentieth century (Daniels 151). As the consumer contextualizes *The Dark Knight Returns* in terms of form, she reconstitutes the text in overlapping, sometimes contradictory discursive genealogies. The narrative identity of the consumer is where formal descriptors emerge via the active engagement of the consumer with the text in human time.

So, if we figure the middle voice as the consumer's interiority to the negotiation of literary form, the second principle of serial historiography frames intransitive writing as a *rhetorical situation that collapses the power differentials and the communicative distances among the producer, text, textual referent, and consumer*. In describing the distance-denying rhetorical situation of intransitive writing, White relies upon Lang's introduction to *Act and Idea*, noting that "[u]nlike the kind of writing that is intended to be "read *through*... designed to enable readers to see what they would otherwise see differently or perhaps not at **all**," intransitive writing "denies the distances among the writer, text, what is written about, and, finally the reader" (47). In Lang's formulation, it is not just the distance between writer and discourse that is collapsed, but also "the distances among the writer, text, what is written about, and finally, the reader" (Lang *xii*). By including both the consumer and the textual referent in the making or doing of historiography, this

rhetorical scenario encourages an active engagement with a referent while also collapsing the power differentials and communicative distances among *all of the agents* in the discursive circuit. Additionally, by condensing the agents of meaning-making and leveling the power ascribed to each, such a rhetorical situation avoids White and LaCapra's shared concern regarding the authoritarian position of the historian who purports to channel historical Truth through narrative emplotment.

Polylogism best describes the serial text's enactment of Lang's intransitive writing—the mode of composition in which writer, subject, text, and reader are imbricated in an ongoing act of meaning-making via mutual, circuitous exchanges (Figure 1).

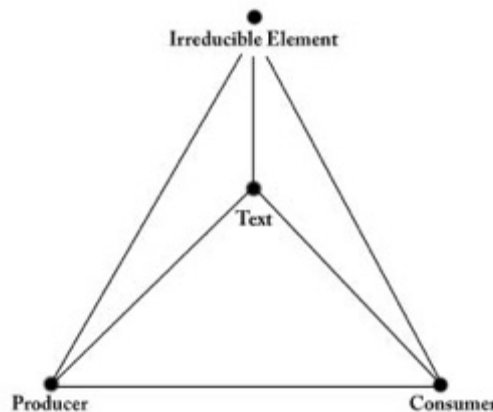


Fig 1.1. The polylogic text creates a rhetorical situation in which the producer and consumer negotiate meaning through the text in an effort to approach a more fulsome understanding of the irreducible element.

Batman comics offer an excellent example of polylogic material production. Since the character first appeared in *Detective Comics* #27 in 1939, most Batman comics have been created in a collaborative process that includes writers, pencilers, inkers, colorists, letterers, marketing specialists, and teams of editors. Collaboration requires multiple agents to act as writer and reader, artist and viewer, producer and consumer as they work to render a composite vision of a referent in a text (a text most often designed for integration into a larger metanarrative). However, comics producers are not the only agents negotiating the representation of an irreducible element; through forums such as blogs, letters columns, fan/industry magazines, message boards, and industry conventions, comics consumers have a number of means of interacting with creators and holding them accountable for the ways in which they present or re-present fictional irreducible elements. As I have noted elsewhere,¹⁴ although the perceived impact of these communicative exchanges varies among consumers and producers, all parties agree that at least in the contemporary moment purchase power is an effective way for consumers to communicate their ideas about ongoing narratives to textual producers. In this instance, the close proximity of producer and consumer smacks of commercialism, perhaps one of the most negatively connotative words in literary criticism. However, serial historiography inverts this schema in which the *literary* text eschews exchanges among consumers, producers, and texts in the marketplace of ideas. If

¹⁴ See my ethnographic essay on queer-identified comics consumers attending San Diego's Comic-Con International, "Queer Conversations: LGBTIQ Consumer/Producer Interface at Comic-Con and the Intransitive Writing of Comics" (Bolling and Smith).

serial historiography refigures *history* as *narratives* defiant to resonant closure, generative in their accrual of factual knowledge and formal analysis, and self-conscious of being tidily resolved into a composite metanarrative via the narrative identity of the consumer, then *literature* is the *texts* that spark communicative interchanges, that defy definitive readings, and that remain obstinately unresolved and unresolvable as they move through time.

For example, in the early 1980s, comics sales were in a major slump; in 1984 Batman's eponymous title sold around 89,000 copies annually, down from nearly half a million copies in 1968 despite fan and industry polls consistently naming Batman America's favorite superhero (Collura). The late 1960s *Batman* television serial had cast the mythos in a distinctly camp aesthetic. In the late 1970s and early 1980s, a number of producers including Julius Schwartz, Denny O'Neil, and Dick Giordano worked to distance the character from his campy small screen incarnation, in an effort to attract new consumers and re-engage lapsed readers nostalgic for the darker detective stories that typified Batman's early adventures in the 1940s (Collura). So when Frank Miller began devising the text that would become *The Dark Knight Returns* (as early as 1977), he was working in a rhetorical situation in which consumers were hankering for a more fatalistic Batman (Miller 6-7). From 1979 to 1983, Miller revitalized *Daredevil* for Marvel Comics, casting the street-level crime-fighter in downbeat, serious stories aimed at a more mature readership, earning praise from critics and consumers, and convincing DC executive Dick Giordano that he had a vision for the Dark Knight (7; Daniels 147). Miller delivered; though its prestige format was more expensive than most comics at the

time, fans responded enthusiastically to the “dark, gritty” take on Batman, the miniseries was quickly collected in a graphic novel form, and Miller was contracted to produce another reworking of the mythos, *Batman: Year One*, a dismal re-presentation of Bruce Wayne’s early days behind the cowl (151). My account above emphasizes exchanges between consumers and the textual referent (i.e. the swirl of irreducible elements that constitute “Batman”) and consumers and Miller-as-producer, but the rhetorical situation that gave rise to *The Dark Knight Returns* is much more complex. For instance, Miller collaborated with a number of editors at DC, his artistic co-producers Janson and Varley, and even colleagues such as writer-artist John Byrne who suggested that “Robin must be a girl,” a mandate that resulted in the creation of fan-favorite character Carrie Kelley (Miller 8). In this sense, *The Dark Knight Returns* as polylogic composition situates the text as a gateway between the producers and the irreducible elements (that constitute “Batman”) and the consumer and the same irreducible elements while the producers and consumers have communicative access to one another and work together to forge textual meaning that approaches, but never offers definitive representation of the irreducible elements.

Serial historiography’s resistance to definitive representation and narrative enclosure underscores the self-reflective quality championed in White’s “modernist” historiography, framing the final methodological principle in which *the text is self-conscious of its referential stability and acknowledges that as a form of discourse it is dependent upon human agency for its claims to truth*. My postulation here is that

the serial must necessarily consider the work performed by textual narrative as well as the text as a physical object.

In his aesthetics of seriality, Umberto Eco underscores the ways in which the discursive and material qualities of the serial are dependent. He notes that the serial's discursive function relies upon an aesthetic of the familiar in which the savvy consumer derives pleasure from perceiving the dialectic between schema and innovation, order and novelty that manifests during ongoing encounters with the "repetitive art" (91, 84). While Eco figures *repetition* as fundamental to the aesthetics of the serial, I propose *accretion* as a more precise concept in both the aesthetics and epistemology of seriality.

The distinction between "accretion" and "repetition" here is significant as it marks the difference between accumulation and tautology. Eco suggests that seriality rejects the modern values of innovation and originality in favor of a postmodern "neobaroque aesthetic" in which pleasure is rendered to consumers capable of perceiving the most miniscule of variations in a repeated scheme (97). Ultimately this neobaroque paradigm results in a "scheme-variation knot, where the variation is no longer more appreciable than the scheme" (98). But Eco arrives at a problem as he proposes that baroque music (the scheme-variation knot *par excellence*) is asemantic and abstract whereas a purportedly neobaroque text like a television serial is decisively figurative (99).

Michel Betancourt addresses this logical dead-end by observing that Eco fails to account for how familiar schemes arise or how these structures change over time (318). Betancourt suggests that mathematician John Holland's models of

complex adaptive systems (CAS) provide the necessary explanation for the creation and evolution of the schemes upon which serials rely (319). CAS account for the spontaneous emergence of structure and order from “the individual, disconnected actions of groups of organisms” via the creation of rules “for both storing previous experience and using that experience to guide future expectations” (319). One way that rules function is to serve as “alternative, competing hypotheses” that undergo testing and confirmation to determine which rules accurately anticipate a given outcome (Holland qtd. in 319-320). Rules that survive testing constitute established knowledge (the familiar) while the system perpetually expands by advancing new competing hypotheses and rendering different potentials (variations) visible (320). Ultimately, this proposition of an evolving scheme supports the familiar but variable progression of “accretion” rather than the mimetic reproduction connoted by “repetition.”

To unpack this concept, I return to my earlier account of the Batman origin story when I wrote, “The woman’s pearls clatter to the pavement.” Many readers are surprised to learn that the deaths of Thomas and Martha Wayne were not part of the first Batman story (*Detective Comics* #27 in 1939); the now ubiquitous origin narrative was first presented on two sparse pages in *Batman* #1 in 1940. “The Legend of the Batman- Who He Is and How He Came to Be,” opens on an armed robber as he confronts Thomas, Martha, and young Bruce Wayne, demanding, “I’ll take that necklace you’re wearing’, lady!” (*A Celebration of 75 Years* 15). From that single panel, Martha Wayne’s pearls have become an irreducible element of the Batman origin. Miller uses the breaking necklace to parallel the shattered psyche of

Bruce Wayne in *The Dark Knight Returns* (24-25). In a host of other media, the scattered pearls are framed against the Waynes' spilled blood to signify Bruce's loss of innocence, the senseless destruction of life, and the sullyng effect of gun violence (Figure 1.2).



Fig. 1.2. Martha Wayne's necklace has become an irreducible element of the Batman metanarrative as it resonates through texts and time. Clockwise from the top left, we see the first account of the Waynes' murders in *Batman* #1 (1940) and subsequent depictions in *The Dark Knight Returns* (1986), Tim Burton's *Batman* (1989), the animated adaptation of *Batman: Year One* (2011), the television series *Gotham* (2014-), and the animated film *Batman: The Dark Returns Part I* (2012).

There are certainly representations of the Wayne murders that omit Martha's pearls; the re-telling of the murders in *Detective Comics* #235 comes to mind as do the representations in texts like *Batman: The Animated Series* and *DC's Super Friends*.

And in fact, when I encounter the ur-text from *Batman* #1, I read Martha's necklace not as pearls, but as a chain with a pendant. Perhaps Martha's pearls simply offer a convenient constellation of metaphors for some producers to symbolize the Wayne trauma, but the pearls' narrative persistence across time and media ensconce them as irreducible elements in the metanarrative. Presented with "alternative, competing hypotheses" regarding Martha's jewelry on the night of her murder, consumers and producers are persistently reminded that claims to truth—what *really* happened to the Waynes in Crime Alley—are textually contingent. Via the accrual of narrative representations the consumer may test competing hypothesis for validity (i.e. proximity to truth), but in the telling, reception, and integration of narrative claims into a composite metanarrative (through the narrative identities of consumers), the fallibility of human agency is always foregrounded.

A serial text displays reflexivity when it is self-conscious of its referential stability. The reflexive text perpetually questions its modes of representation, methods of emplotment, and epistemic functionality with regard to the truth claims it purports to treat. The text does not destabilize claims to authenticity in its representation but rather persistently challenges its own ability to encapsulate the totality of an ephemeral irreducible element. To achieve reflexivity, the serialized narrative relies upon *intertextuality*. Though "intertextual" is a term loaded with connotations, with regard to seriality, I refer specifically to a work that is enmeshed in a textual network in which a discrete text may impinge upon the meaning of other texts in the narrative identity of the consumer to create a metanarrative. As such, the ideal enactment of serial historiography in fictive worlds occurs in open-ended texts

such as soap operas, comics, bodies of myth, and certain film franchises in which multiple agents mold narratives over time. But given the very different ethical concerns of historiography and fiction writing the question remains, what would a serial with historically referential irreducible elements at its center look like?

The 2014 podcast (serendipitously titled) *Serial* provides an example. Produced by WBEZ Chicago, *Serial* spun off from *This American Life* in October of 2014, distributing twelve more-or-less weekly episodes via digital download services such as iTunes. On its website, *Serial* describes its intention to tell “one story - a true story - over the course of an entire season. Each season, we'll follow a plot and characters wherever they take us. And we won't know what happens at the end until we get there, not long before you get there with us” (“Serial”). Even in this mission statement, the rhetorical situation is compressed—only via close proximity with a text produced in discrete installments will producers and consumers approach an understanding of the truth of the narrative. And as devoted *Serial* listeners well know, truth is maddeningly elusive in this story.

The first season of *Serial* focuses on the murder of Hae Min Lee, a student who disappeared after leaving her Baltimore County, Maryland high school on the afternoon of January 13, 1999 (Koenig “The Alibi”). When police discovered Lee's body buried in a park weeks later, they charged her ex-boyfriend, 17-year-old Adnan Syed with first-degree murder (“The Alibi”). Though Syed claimed (and continues to maintain) innocence, the police and prosecutors built a case against him based primarily on the capricious testimony of Jay Wilds, an acquaintance to whom Syed purportedly expressed premeditation and with whom he supposedly buried

Lee's body ("The Alibi"). After a dramatic mistrial, a second six-week trial resulted in Syed's conviction and subsequent life imprisonment for Lee's murder ("The Alibi"). The first season of *Serial* is not a cold case story; rather its focus is a narrative that has been legally resolved. Its first episode presents a story purportedly enclosed by legal discursive forms.

But *Serial* quickly unsettles the state's narrative claims to truth. In the first episode, listeners are introduced to Asia McClain, a classmate who provides an alibi for Syed during the time prosecutors allege the young man was strangling his ex-girlfriend ("The Alibi"). Due to defense attorney Cristina Gutierrez's missteps or malfeasance, state prosecutor Kevin Urick's alleged disincentivizing, and a fundamental misunderstanding of the exonerating power her testimony may have had, listeners learn that McClain never testified on Syed's behalf ("The Alibi"). McClain's story becomes one among legion that conflict with the state's account of Lee's murder.

The second episode, "The Break-Up" mines Lee's diary, friends' accounts of the relationship between Syed and Lee (recalled imperfectly 15 years after the fact), and other character witnesses to test the "jealous boyfriend" hypothesis advanced as motive in the state's narrative. Episodes four, five, and eight attempt to make sense of radical inconsistencies in the multiple, conflicting stories that Jay Wilds told police. In episode ten, Koenig investigates the ways in which anti-Muslim sentiment biased or at least colored the state's narrative of events. Each episode offers detailed, nuanced reporting in which Koenig and her production team uncovers

factual inconsistencies, lapses in memory, outright fabrications, and aporias in narrative time that unsettle the official story that put a 17-year-old man behind bars.

But *Serial* is not merely a counter to the state's legal narrative; the serial form brings consumers *into* the historiographic colloquy. Episode nine introduces Laura Estrada Sandoval, a listener who contacted *Serial* producers with anecdotal evidence disputing a key component of the prosecution's case (that a payphone existed in or nearby a Best Buy that plays a prominent role in the state's narrative of Lee's murder). Episode eleven features numerous conflicting accounts regarding Syed's reputation among members of his Mosque community. And the flurry of consumer participation in the narrative of *Serial* is not contained to the ur-text.

At the time of this writing, the *Serial* podcast has had over 68 million downloads (Londono). It has inspired other podcasts that offer commentary on each episode of the series (e.g. slate.com's "Serial Spoiler Special"), multiple parodies (by the likes of *Saturday Night Live* and *Funny or Die*), and more critical/journalistic responses than I can begin to account for.¹⁵ Perhaps most significantly, the podcast mobilized a community of interactive consumers on the social networking service Reddit to write themselves into the *Serial* metanarrative.

Members of the sub-Reddit devoted to *Serial* (numbering over 44,000 participants at the time of this writing) offer a staggering amount of information to the serialized narrative. They post transcripts of *Serial* episodes, interactive maps plotting cell phone data records against testimony regarding the whereabouts of key

¹⁵ A Google News search for "serial podcast" at the time of this writing netted over 42,000 results. I treat a number of high profile journalistic accounts in this essay, but I recognize that my metanarrative of *Serial* is intrinsically incomplete.

players on the day of Lee's disappearance, alternate hypotheses about the minutiae of conflicting accounts, official court documents, and a range of speculation that may only be described as sublime—beautiful and terrifying. In episode seven of the *Serial* podcast, Koenig and her team consult Deirdre Enright, director of the Innocence Project Clinic at the University of Virginia Law School and by the final episode, Enright reveals that her team has opened an investigation into Syed's conviction. In an interview with *Time*, Enright notes the very active role consumers have played in the narrative, saying:

Redditors and Slate podcast listeners and total strangers sent us charts that they put together of cellphone tower records, for instance. We had something like it in our own wheelhouse, but the one they put together was *fantastic*. And people have sent us even the identity of an alternate suspect who was not on our radar. We had a couple people who were on our radar but not this person. We can't say that it was this person, but it's certainly a person we now are going back and looking at the past and his history.

This set of active *Serial* consumers collapses the distances among themselves and the podcast's producers and the text itself by insistently inserting themselves into the narrative. Ultimately, the *form* of the podcast and its self-reflective epistemology foster this exceptional example of intransitive writing.

The weekly distribution of *Serial* created a nagging sense of urgency among many consumers. As "real time" events such as Laura Sandoval's anecdote about the Best Buy payphone, new conflicting character witnesses, and the involvement of the Innocence Project impinged upon the narrative time of the podcast, a readily discernable question emerged in social media commentary on the text: how will it end? In fact, in the final episode of the podcast, we hear Syed query Koenig in a meta-reflection on the topic:

Adnan Syed: “So you don’t really have— if you don’t mind me asking— you don’t really have no ending? Like it’s just—”

Sarah Koenig “I mean... Do I have an ending?”

Koenig did have an ending; episode twelve was the “final” episode in her telling of the narrative.¹⁶ In a passage worth quoting at length, Koenig says:

Of course I have an ending. We’re going to come to an ending today. Plus, a smattering of new information, a review of old information cast under a different light and an ending. In case you haven’t noticed, my thoughts about Adnan’s case, about who is lying and why, have not been fixed over the course of this story. Several times, I have landed on a decision, I’ve made up my mind and stayed there, with relief and then inevitably, I learn something I didn’t know before and I’m up-ended. Sometimes the reversal takes a few weeks, sometimes it happens within hours. And what’s been astonishing to me is how the back and forth hasn’t let up, after all of this time. Even into this very week and I kid you not, into this very day that I’m writing this. Because I’m learning new information all the time. (“What We Know”)

As suggested above, Koenig’s ending is equivocal. She refuses to offer closure in the form of advocating for Syed’s definite guilt or innocence in Lee’s murder.

Koenig’s tone in this passage is representative of her work across the first season.

She speaks casually, adept in legal and detective jargon, but transparent in her presentation. As consumers, we are privy to her ambivalence, frustrations, and uncertainties. As a material production, *Serial* “ends” encouraging the consumer to continue “learning new information all the time.” And as a narrative, Koenig goes to great length to *display* that the composite story that emerges from her serialized account is just one among many to be considered.

¹⁶ A February 11, 2016 email to *Serial* subscribers provides a link to daily commentary on Adnan Syed’s February 3-9, 2016 retrial hearing authored by Sarah Koenig and producer Dana Chivvis. Syed’s legal narrative continues. Regarding the retrial hearing, journalist Baynard Woods notes, “According to legal observers, the five-day proceeding was highly unusual for what is known as a post-conviction hearing – which generally has a very limited scope – often feeling more like a trial than a limited hearing.”

Since the end of season one in December 2014, the narrative of *Serial* continues to resonate beyond the bounds of the podcast. For instance, in an exclusive interview conducted by Natasha Vargas-Cooper for *The Intercept* and published in three installments from December 29-31, 2014, Jay Wilds explains why he did not consent to an interview with Koenig for the *Serial* podcast and offers yet another contradictory account of his actions on the day Lee disappeared. Following another exclusive interview with Kevin Urick, the lead prosecutor in Syed's trial, Vargas-Cooper ensconced herself as another irreducible element in the *Serial* metanarrative. Like many other producers of the narrative, Vargas-Cooper engaged consumers on social media—particularly Twitter—to vehemently defend her representations, her journalistic methodologies, and to account for or deny biases.

All the while, the irreducible elements of the narrative refuse enclosure. Redditors and non-interactive consumers alike espouse a wide array of theories regarding Syed's involvement in Lee's murder—from championing his total innocence, to maintaining his guilt, to suggesting his participation in a remarkably elaborate illicit drug cover-up worthy of David Simon's *The Wire*. As a consumer, I participate by continuing to analyze other irreducible elements: varying descriptions of the contents of Lee's car when it was abandoned, accounts of Leakin Park and the circumstances under which Lee's body was found, and Jay Wilds's remarkably inconsistent stories. At times, I've felt the gravity of *Serial*'s metanarrative so intensely that I considered turning the full focus of my research to analyzing the cacophony of stories that render the irreducible elements of Hae Min Lee's tragic death so maddeningly unknowable. But the story persistently continues.

On January 14, 2015, Maryland district attorneys asked the Maryland Court of Special Appeals to deny Syed's application for leave to appeal on the grounds of ineffective counsel (Linderman). Then on February 6, 2015, the Special Appeals court offered a rare ruling, granting Syed the opportunity to challenge his murder conviction on the grounds that Gutierrez provided ineffective counsel (George). Syed's attorney for the appeal filed a motion arguing that the cell phone records at the center of the state's case were inaccurate and should never have been admitted as evidence in the original trial (Linderman). Most recently, from February 3-9, Syed was granted an unusually long post-conviction hearing and as I write this sentence, we await judge Martin Welch's written opinion deciding whether Adnan should be granted a retrial (Woods).¹⁷ Regardless of the outcome of this appeal, the fervor with which narrative participants on Reddit advocate their accounts of the irreducible elements of the case convince me of one certainty: the story of *Serial* will remain open, unresolved, and ongoing.

In this ideal enactment of serial historiography, the narrative re-vision, introspective and intertextual conventions of seriality, and polylogic rhetorical situation engendered by the production of an ongoing swirl of stories coalesce in a discourse that denies authoritative narrative closure. Serialized discourse has the unique ability to acknowledge the complexity of historical referents in human time, figuring truth as history is represented in narrative rather than truth as history *happens* in space-time. Via open-ended discourse, seriality foregrounds the

¹⁷ I want to acknowledge the *serial* composition of this paragraph initially intended to update the reader on Syed's post-*Serial* legal narrative. I have revised and expanded this information over 11 drafts of this essay and narrative resolution or enclosure remains elusive.

contingency of its truth claims in a form that anticipates and makes explicit the *ongoing* enterprise of interpretation. Serial historiography devises countless means of questioning the irreducible element, seeing it anew, and imagining history without it. It attempts new means of representation, all the while honoring the ability of the historical referent to defy definitive representation. And serial historiography respects both producers and the “community of others” who consume and adjudicate their work. By treating “real world” irreducible elements in forms akin to ongoing, serialized works of fiction we would not perpetually fetishize these historical referents that other media enclose in narrative, but rather have an alternate means of historical representation that actively encourages coming to respect the past for its immensity, complexity, and ultimate ineffability.

Martha Wayne’s pearls may not have been pearls. But as they took on narrative gravity and scattered across media they have become something more than a broken necklace. The truth of Wayne’s pearls transcend their origin in *Batman #1* as they accrue meaning through re-telling, refusing tidy understanding and narrative enclosure. As I review my research notes on *Serial* to complete this chapter, I linger over accounts of Hae Min Lee’s diary and its stories of her stormy teenage romance with Adnan Syed. Stories that have been used to both vilify and exonerate Syed. Stories mobilized to create character profiles of Lee, Syed, and other key figures in the case. Stories mined for competing theories about Lee’s murder by detectives, Redditors, and casual *Serial* listeners. Like Martha’s pearls, any truth I approach via the stories in Lee’s private journal is imbricated in a host of narratives that emanate from the original text. And although my serialized experience of the diary may deny

closure regarding the circumstances of Lee's death, the serial offers a form that avoids definitive claims to truth, instead making explicit an imperative for ongoing, dynamic analysis that doggedly pursues its object of study as it resonates through time.

CHAPTER 2: NARRATIVE RE-VISION: THE ENGINE OF SERIAL HISTORIOGRAPHY

I was a lapsed comics reader when I started graduate school. But as I began thinking about the work of historiography, and narrative histories in particular, I was drawn back to comics, and specifically *superhero* comics. As Roz Kaveney notes, the notoriously complex story worlds in which the “big two” American superhero comics publishers (Marvel and DC) set their texts comprise “the largest narrative constructions in human culture (exceeding, for example, the vast body of myth, legend, and story that underlies Latin and Greek literature)” (25). When thinking about the dynamic and simultaneously recursive questions philosophers of history like Hayden White demand historiography pose to the past, I returned to superhero comics to consider the narrative strategies that generations of comics writers, illustrators, editors, and publishers have used to plumb the fictional histories of their sprawling story worlds.

So I first conceived serial historiography— the process of ordering knowledge of the past via multiple, intertextual narratives that holistically scrutinize information, sources, and context while foregrounding representational limits by

engaging consumers in the adjudication of truth claims—as a means of untangling the fictional histories in superhero comics. But as I expanded the scope of my research, engaging serialized texts across different media, forms, and genres I observed a constellation of common narrative strategies used to regulate the truth claims of each story world’s past. In this chapter, I will examine three very different serialized texts to argue that the serial function of narrative is *inherently* historiographic. Every serial—every narrative comprised of discrete parts partitioned by the incremental material distribution of texts in space or time—accounts for aporia in their telling, reviewing the past of the story world to make sense of both present and future narratives. Each installment of the serialized narrative is Janus-faced, suspicious of its own referential stability and claims about the past, while simultaneously driven by a future-oriented momentum to resolve aporia in narrative time. Serials foreground the possibilities of narrative to remain open, contingent, and responsive to the potential fortuities of historiography. And ultimately, in the post-9/11 literary and historical landscape, I argue that by conceiving historiography as a serialized, performative enterprise we may controvert prevailing models of hermeneutic suspicion (as rendered by Rita Felski in *The Limits of Critique*) that dominate both literary and historiographic skepticism of narrative truth claims.

The first section of this chapter begins in the gutters with the popular art of superhero comics where I outline the engine of seriality: *re-vision* or the historiographic narrative structures that probe the irreducible elements of a metanarrative as a means of adjudicating the fundamental truth claims of a story

world. I next read the Yoknapatawpha narratives of William Faulkner as a serial, analyzing the ways in which re-vision does historiographic work in a more conventionally *literary* corpus. And finally I turn to a non-fiction serial, *The Laramie Project Cycle*, to trace methods of literary narrative re-vision in the context of real world truth claims.

The Gutter

In “History and Graphic Representation in *Maus*,” Hillary Chute argues that “the graphic narrative is a contemporary form that is helping to expand the cultural map of historical representation. Its expansive visual-verbal grammar can offer a space for ethical representation without problematic closure” (352). I agree with Chute and others who note that at the rhetorical heart of the medium, the visual-verbal language of comics is dialogic. In his pioneering study of the medium, *Understanding Comics*, Scott McCloud defines comics as “juxtaposed pictorial and other images in deliberate sequence, intended to convey information and/or to produce an aesthetic response in the viewer” (9). This definition has been intensely scrutinized by critics such as Dylan Horrocks, but it remains the most functional, concise, and accurate at hand.¹⁸ And although the definition seems to indicate a conventional form of discourse where a producer reflects meaning for a consumer via a text that is “read through,” the suggestion that comics *produce* rather than *convey* an aesthetic response in the reader signals a more complicated rhetorical situation. In Figure 2.1, McCloud’s ruminations on the referential power of cartoon

¹⁸ In his article “Inventing Comics: Scott McCloud’s Definition of Comics,” Horrocks suggests that McCloud’s formulation of comics as “sequential art” that necessitates juxtaposed images excludes single-panel cartoons, children’s picture books, pictographs, and other texts at the fringes of comics and other media.

imagery are reminiscent of my formulations of intransitive writing in the first chapter in that the consumer is an agent of meaning-making on par with the producer, the text is self-conscious of its referential stability, and fidelity to the textual referent is dependent upon producer, consumer, and text.

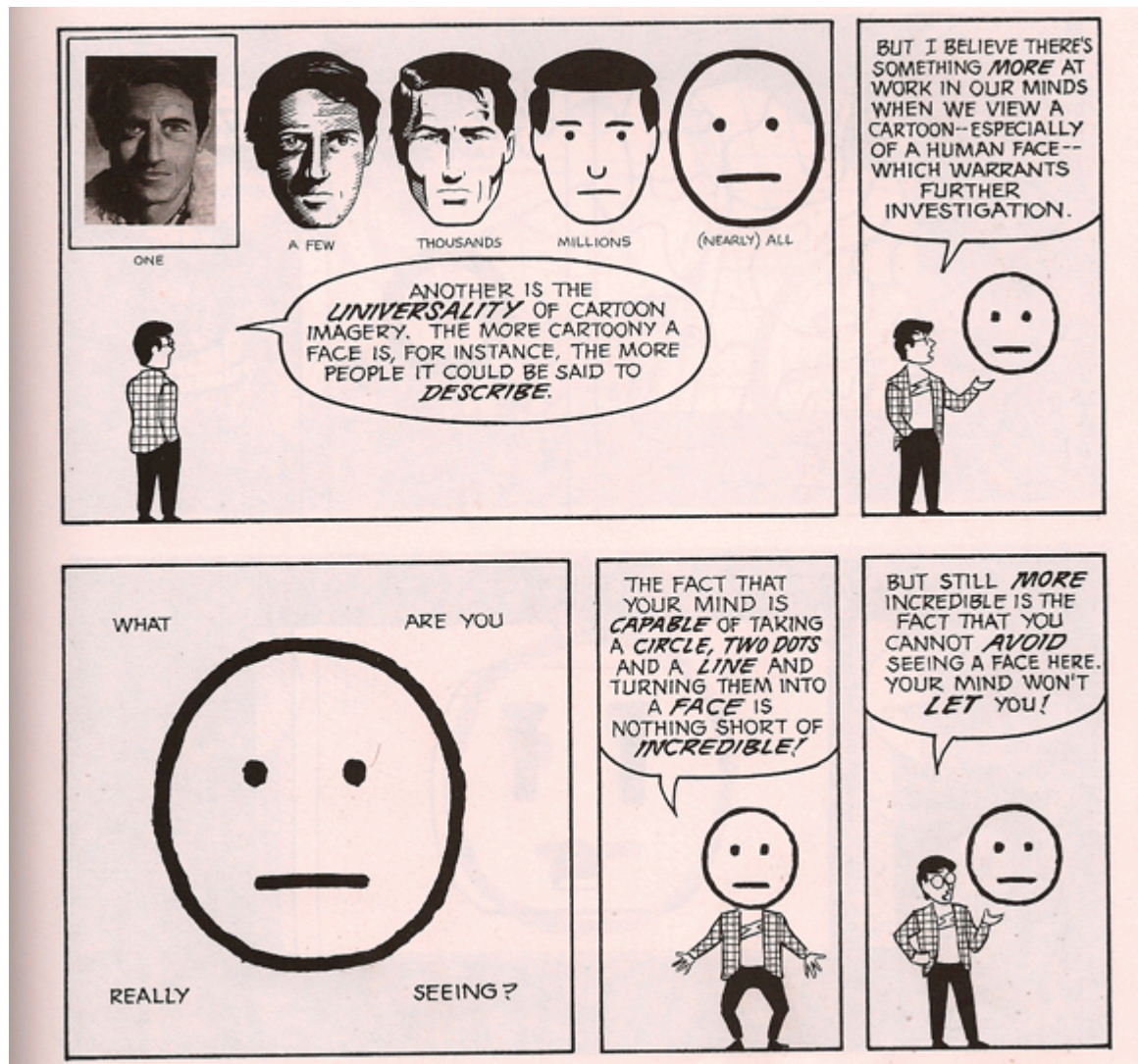


Fig. 2.1. Thoughts on the universality of cartoon imagery by Scott McCloud, *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art* (New York: HarperPerennial, 1994; print; 31).

In Figure 2.2, McCloud illustrates how comics use polylogism to construct time, space, and movement. The “gutter,” the space between juxtaposed images in comics, is the site where the producer gestures to the textual referent via the text and the consumer “does or makes” the referent by the process that McCloud defines as “closure” (66, 63). Closure is the “phenomenon of observing the parts but perceiving the whole” and in the gutter of comics, it is where “human imagination takes two separate images and transforms them into a single idea” (63, 66). So in comics, the gutter is where the elements of the rhetorical system converge to negotiate time, space, and most importantly, narrative, as illustrated in Figure 2.3.



Fig. 2.2. McCloud discusses the reader’s agency in *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art* (New York: HarperPerennial, 1994; print; 68).

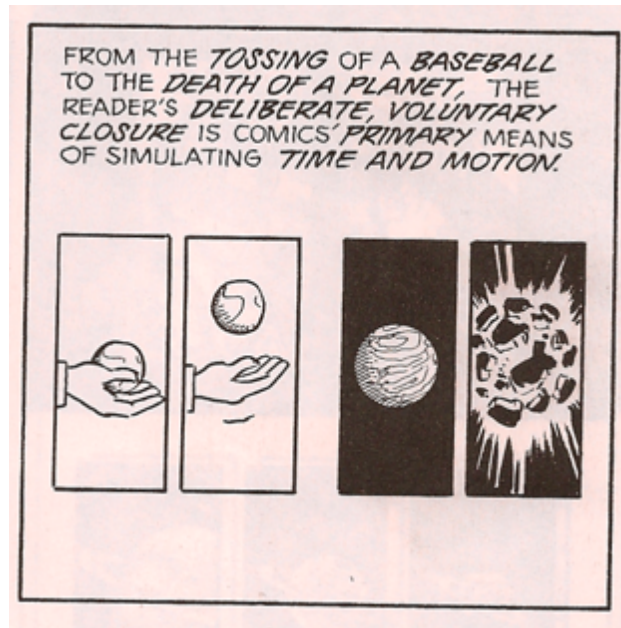


Fig. 2.3. The negotiation of time, space, and narrative in Scott McCloud's *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art* (New York: HarperPerennial, 1994; print; 69).

Critic Douglas Wolk asserts that “comics are closest to, in the way we physically experience them [...] prose books. We watch a movie, we look at a photograph (or a single, wordless drawn image), but we *read* comics” (25). Unlike prose books, however, comics rely upon multiple layers of signifiers to create composite meaning. Whereas the reader of a prose narrative must navigate the sign system of language and the occasional caesura in which narrative closure must be performed by the reader, the reader of comics works within a multi-sign system that includes visual representations that must be decoded, iconography that signals a wide range of phenomena from movement to thought, and language that carries an array of meanings depending upon font, size, and placement in space. But ultimately comics are an ideal medium for polylogical composition because of the gutter—the

discursive device in which the producer gestures to a textual referent so that the consumer must interpret both what is explicit in the text as well as *what is simply not there* as she actively constructs meaning.

In order for the consumer to approach the textual referent via the text, the producer must on some level, anticipate the needs of the consumer. But what recourse does the consumer have with the producer? Martin Jay proposes a “community of others that reads and judges” the work of the consumer—a sort of scholarly police—as a means of leveling the power differential between producer and consumer in a polylogic text (105). Jay notes that “accounts are, after all, only as persuasive as they are deemed to be by those who read them” (105). And as I note in the first chapter, unlike many other media, popular American comics often feature non-terminal narratives; their open-ended seriality models a site for *ongoing* discourse between consumer and producer(s) (via commercial mandates, comic industry conventions, fan correspondence, etc.).

Beyond a basic grammar that is akin to intransitive writing, superhero comics engage “continuity” using discursive features that model the narrative re-vision of serial historiography. Matthew Pustz defines continuity as “the intertextuality that links stories in the minds of both creators and readers,” and in broader terms, continuity is conceived as the fictional history generated by a body of serialized texts. In order to situate the narrative skill-set used to negotiate continuity in historiographic terms, I first want to examine the phenomenological ways in which continuity works within various superhero comics, as well as continuity’s similarities to “real history.”

Kaveney suggests that in superhero comics, meaning is partially made from the depth and breadth of gradually accumulated material. She writes:

Narrative universes as vast as those of the Marvel and DC continuities are not the product of any one person, even of an editor-in-chief as creative and innovative as Stan Lee of Marvel, but rather the process of slow accretion and of the desire to make sense of what were once quite random narrative choices as they came to impinge on each other. No one artist or writer is responsible for these continuities—they are collective works of art. (25)

The phenomenon that Kaveney terms “competence cascades” guides creators to “go with the grain of [the fictional] universe” while “the wisdom of continuity,” an intuitive knowledge of the workings of the fictional world, illuminates “the presence of a gaping hole in what has been done and imagined hitherto” that informs the future creative choices of individual creators (46, 74). Submitting to competence cascades, the comics creator allows continuity to manifest through her in terms similar to Jay’s rendering of White’s historiography in which “[w]riting intransitively, listening for the middle voice that speaks through us, we can serve as the vessels of the historically real” (Jay 100-101). Jay is skeptical of the promises of intransitive writing noting that “[i]f postmodernism means anything, it implies the abandonment of precisely the dream of submitting to the exigencies of pure language or pure vision” (101). However, beyond the polylogical features intrinsic to the comics medium, contemporary superhero comics do not purport to render a “pure vision” (or in historiographic terms, a historical truth). Instead, they perpetually push toward a *purer* vision of continuity—truth as narrative history is *told*—via polychronic and polylogic collaboration among the agents of the communicative circuit that is best described as a Habermasian consensual truth. For

Habermas, “genuine” consensus is a utopian desire for harmonious agreement free of coercion. Therefore, a consensual truth is not the resulting opinion of a dominant discourse at any given time, but rather the anticipation of a discursive situation in which all of the tools necessary to justify knowledge socially are symmetrically distributed (161-162).

In the “big two” American comics publishing houses, Marvel and DC, most texts are created in a collaborative process that includes writers, pencilers, inkers, colorists, letterers, marketing specialists, and teams of editors. A single issue of Marvel’s 2015-2016 blockbuster *Secret Wars* event features over 20 credits in its creative masthead (no. 9). Collaboration requires multiple agents to act as writer and reader, artist and viewer, producer and consumer as they work to render a composite vision of a referent in a single text. The variety of perspectives encourages negotiations regarding the representation of the referent as creators approach a consensual truth. Furthermore, when a narrative becomes intertextual, spanning multiple comics titles, the variety of perspectives increases as each title is guided by different creative teams, but united in a collective vision of continuity. Based on my count, the 2015 *Secret Wars* event spanned 66 different comics titles, bringing hundreds of creators into the forging of a composite metanarrative. However, comics producers are not the only agents negotiating a consensual truth; comics consumers have unprecedented power in shaping the textual representations of continuity.

In *Comic Book Culture*, Pustz quotes an anecdote written by Stan Lee regarding reader response to Marvel’s debut success, *Fantastic Four*, in 1961 (49).

Lee writes, “After a while I began to feel I wasn’t even the editor; I was just following orders—orders which came in the mail” (49). Pustz characterizes Lee’s promotion of fan influence in the construction of Marvel continuity as canny marketing to fabricate an invested community of readers who considered themselves “insiders” (48-50). However, as I note earlier, through forums such as blogs, letter columns, fan/industry magazines, message boards, and industry conventions, comics consumers have more direct means of interfacing with creators than the consumers of any other medium. And no other medium or producers involve their consumers as a “community of others that reads and judges their work” as actively as the producers of superhero comics (Jay 105).

From 2009 to 2014, I conducted ethnographic research at San Diego Comic-Con International, observing what H.L. Goodall, Jr. defines as the “verbal exchanges and practices” of queer-identified comics consumers and their interactions with comics producers regarding the treatment of queer identity politics in mainstream superhero comics (98,111).¹⁹ Many of the creators that I interviewed expressed genuine interest in consumer input in the creative process. For instance, writer Greg Rucka said:

There are certain things I don’t know about. I don’t know the queer experience in the United States—I’m a straight male—so if someone comes to me and hits me with something that is an error, is perhaps something I might have done that would have been offensive—if I’ve

¹⁹ This research project began as a part of Mathew J. Smith’s field study program, “The Experience at Comic-Con.” In 2014, Smith and I edited a collection of ethnographic essays produced by field study participants, *It Happens at Comic-Con: Ethnographic Essays on a Pop Culture Phenomenon*. For a full account of my study of queer comics consumers see my chapter “Queer Conversations: LGBTIQ Consumer/Producer Interface at Comic-Con and the Intransitive Writing of Comics.”

committed an error out of ignorance or negligence, I want to correct it.²⁰

Though Rucka situates consumer input as a primarily corrective force, writer Peter David attributes a more active influence to readers.²¹ Discussing his “outing” of gay superheroes Shatterstar and Rictor, David said, “Fans had been asking for Shatterstar to come back and pick up with Rictor where he left off for years—ever since Rictor first showed up in *X-Factor* [...]. At that particular point in the story, I thought this would be a really good time to stop dancing around it.”

Beyond these direct forms of creator-consumer interaction, the mandates of market forces also foster recursion. Though the commerciality of popular media is most often cast in pejorative terms, purchase power endows the comics consumer with, perhaps her most compelling means of impacting the discourse of continuity. The large majority of superhero comics are open-ended serials dependent upon continued sales to support their ongoing production. Lagging sales of a title can serve as a signal to creators that readers are displeased with the treatment of continuity. The voice of the market levels the power differential between producer and consumer while simultaneously expanding the network of perspectives involved in the negotiation of a consensual truth. For instance, in Marvel’s Spider-Man “Clone Saga” that ran in various titles from 1994-1996, swelling sales at first

²⁰ At the time of this interview (July 2009), Greg Rucka wrote DC Comics’ flagship title, *Detective Comics*, that for a stint of his tenure followed the exploits of two lesbian superheroes, Batwoman and the Question.

²¹ Peter David is a self-proclaimed “writer of stuff.” In issue number 45 of the 3rd volume of the comic *X-Factor* (2009), David wrote a kiss between superheroes Shatterstar and Rictor, ending years of fan and creator speculation regarding the ambiguous nature of their relationship. This was the first instance of two male superheroes kissing on panel in a Marvel comic.

mandated increased attention to the Spider-Clone narrative in continuity (Goletz 1-35). However, as the narrative progressed in a contrived effort to cash in on the event's popularity, consumer fatigue with the artificially protracted story led to a steep decline in sales that precipitated Marvel's timely termination of the Clone narrative (Goletz 10-35).

The forces that induce recursion make comic creators contemporary with their texts, perpetually challenged to re-view their work by collaborative, market, and consumer-driven forces. These same forces allow the texts more avenues to approach the undeniable, yet ultimately ephemeral irreducible elements of their telling. In the first chapter I define irreducible elements as sites of aporias in the phenomenology of narrative time that give rise to a plurality of unresolved and unresolvable stories. The superhero's origin story is an ideal site for exploring the irreducible element because this narrative is almost always a representation of trauma, a site charged with resistance to narrative ellision—Superman's home planet is destroyed, Spider-Man's uncle is murdered, the Incredible Hulk loses control of his humanity. And then there's Batman.

For *Whatever Happened to the Caped Crusader?* DC Comics commissioned Neil Gaiman to write "the last Batman story." In Gaiman's meta-commentary on the Batman mythos, continuity is fractured as characters from over 60 years of narrative gather at Batman's funeral to recount conflicting versions of the hero's death. Through the contradictory accounts, irreducible elements rise above the fracas, narrative noise ultimately allowing resonant consensual truth claims to emerge from the din. Just as Batman fades from his own wake, he observes, "I've learned...that it

doesn't matter what the story is, *some* things never change." He continues, "The Batman doesn't compromise. I keep this city safe... even if it's safer by just *one* person...and I do not *ever* give in or give up." So via Batman's reflection, Gaiman isolates the irreducible elements of *any* Batman narrative. Following his wake, Batman (notably not Bruce Wayne) speaks to his mother, admitting that he will fight as Batman until he dies and Martha replies, "[...] you keep fighting. Because you *have* to. Because you *can't* stop it from happening again. Because, no matter *how* many lives you save, you can't bring us *back*." The contrived "last" Batman story and its coming-to-terms-with Batman's origin trauma is highly uncharacteristic of the superhero genre. Planned obsolescence, which is intrinsic to the commercial production of superhero comics, requires that the serial narrative be open-ended, never complete, so that the protagonist may never work through—or even come to terms with—the traumatic origin upon which his narrative trajectory and commercial viability depends. However, superhero comics' perpetual retrieval of trauma is not merely a resistance to a Freudian working through; it also models a historiography that refuses to allow *any resonant narrative* to be tidily encapsulated and relegated to the past.

When I first began working on a theory of serial historiography in 2010, I chose Marvel Comics' 2006-2007 *Civil War* event as a site rich with irreducible elements in which to ground my analysis. Though I had a strong sense that the *Civil War* narrative would prove resonant in Marvel *comics* continuity, I could never have imagined the transmedia valences the story would pick up in just a few years. Since I first wrote about the comics story, *Civil War* has been adapted into a prose novel

and an audio book with a full voice cast, was the basis for the video game *Marvel Ultimate Alliance 2*, and has spawned one of the most highly-anticipated blockbuster films of 2016, *Captain America: Civil War*—to name a notable few. The commercial popularity of *Civil War* is certainly not without precedent; since the 1980s, mainstream American comics publishers have increasingly framed irreducible elements in “crossover” events—large-scale narratives often touted by marketers as the one story that will change the fictional universe forever. Kaveney notes that “[c]rossover narrative threads, which start in one of a house’s titles and continue over the months in several others, are an effective way of compelling readers to spend more money” (30). Beyond their commercial motivations, however, producers employ crossovers to craft more complex narratives, often relying upon intertextuality to achieve both epic scale and baroque detail. In the case of Marvel’s *Civil War*, a score of creators worked through 70 to 80 separate installments to craft an intelligent and complex political commentary that left an indelible mark on the Marvel story world (“Civil War Check List”).

When *Civil War* was first published serially from 2006 to 2007, the repercussions of the event were explored simultaneously in over 20 different titles (“Civil War Check List”). For the sake of brevity, I will provide an overview of the “core narrative” of the eponymous *Civil War* comic written by Mark Millar and illustrated by Steve McNiven. In this book, the New Warriors, a group of D-list superheroes filming a reality television show in Stamford, Connecticut, decide to engage a cabal of villains who are out of their league in an effort to boost their TV program’s ratings. This decision inadvertently leads to the death of 600 civilians

when the villain Nitro sets off a massive explosion outside an elementary school. The American public, long suspicious of unregulated superhero vigilantes, rally behind Miriam Sharpe, an activist whose son died in Stamford, to force the United States federal government to enact the Superhero Registration Act—legislation that would require all individuals with superhuman abilities to divulge their secret identities to a government agency that would then regulate their heroic activities. The “superhero community” is split over the Act. Some heroes rally behind Tony Stark (Iron Man) to support and enforce the law while others side with Captain America to form an underground resistance to the initiative. Following a series of escalating ideological and physical battles, the opposing sides square off for a climactic confrontation that starts in a clandestine prison built to contain unregistered heroes and spills onto the streets of Manhattan. Finally, realizing that their superpowered battles are incurring incredible collateral damage, Captain America orders his compatriots to stand down as he surrenders to the federal government enforcers as his alter-ego, Steve Rogers.

Civil War is shot through with irreducible elements (including the attack at Stamford, the public unmasking of Spider-Man, and the formation of an ideological schism between Captain America and Iron Man) that persistently refuse to retreat into the past of the narrative universe. As I was drafting this chapter I read that later in 2016, likely in time to coincide with the release of *Captain America: Civil War* in May, Marvel will publish *Civil War II*. But I get ahead of myself.

Civil War is also a distinct example of intransitive writing—working across myriad individual titles, with scores of creators, Marvel produced a commercially

and critically acclaimed text that wove a complex and multi-faceted political allegory establishing loose signifiers for a number of “real world” events including the P.A.T.R.I.O.T. Act, the Guantanamo Bay Detention Center, 9/11, minority rights movements, and the war in Iraq. However, it is the recursivity of the event—its insistence on contemporaneous re-vision—that marks it as a model of serial historiography. Narrative recursion that respects the ineffability of irreducible elements is one of the key features of re-vision and a generic quality that makes superhero comics particularly rich sites for the study of narrative.

By “re-vision” I refer broadly to historiographic narrative techniques that probe irreducible elements as a means of generating narratives of the past that engage shifting truth claims of a dynamic present. In the body of current media studies scholarship and popular critical discourse, re-vision is sometimes synonymous with “retcon.” Kaveney defines “retcon” or “retroactive continuity” as a narrative event “when the assumed past of a comic...is changed in order to make sense of current continuity” (23). I argue that the retcon is a *type* of re-vision; it is only a particular mode and not indicative of the narrative phenomenon as a whole. Rather, I suggest that superhero comics, and serials across all media employ four primary modes of re-vision as a means of plumbing the irreducible elements of their story worlds: review, the spile, the possible world, and the retcon.

In the context of *Civil War*, the first mode of re-vision I want to consider is *review*, narrative that re-tells an irreducible element or presents it again as if for the first time. Review may also serve the purpose of looking at an irreducible element from an alternate vantage or as a vehicle for delivering and honoring testimonies

that offer conflicting truth claims. One comic that employs review to achieve all of these narrative ends is the 1994 *Marvels* limited series written by Kurt Busiek and illustrated by Alex Ross. In this book, photojournalist Phil Sheldon witnesses some of the irreducible elements of Marvel continuity from the perspective of an average Manhattan resident. *Civil War: Front Line*, an 11-issue limited series intended to complement the core narrative of the titular *Civil War*, borrows many conventions from its predecessor *Marvels*. But *Front Line* is also an “anthology book” collecting stories too short to sustain an individual comic while allowing multiple creative teams to juxtapose narratives that are at times both complementary and contradictory within a single volume. Some of the feature stories in *Front Line* follow two investigative reporters, Ben Urich and Sally Floyd, as they cover the events surrounding the passage of the Superhero Registration Act. The eyewitness accounts of Urich, Floyd, and Speedball, the sole survivor of the New Warriors, interrogate the verity of *Civil War*’s core narrative.²² Similarly, *Front Line* provides contemporaneous review of some of the iconic events of *Civil War* such as the press conference in which Spider-Man reveals his secret identity (see Figure 4).

²² The television news media numbers Speedball amongst the dead in the Stamford explosion in *Civil War*. Therefore, his erasure from the core narrative is only recovered by testimonial accounts of his survivor’s guilt, brutalization in a clandestine prison, and estrangement from his family in the pages of *Civil War: Front Line*.



Fig. 2.4. Various images of Spider-Man’s unmasking from the cover of *Civil War Front Line* #2, the interior of *Civil War Front Line* #2, the interior of *Civil War*, and the cover of *Civil War The Amazing Spider-Man*.

In the original portrayal of the un-masking press conference, the atmosphere is celebratory, prompting Tony Stark to comment to a freshly un-closeted Spider-Man, “Soak it up, Peter. You’re bigger than **Elvis** now” (Millar). In the review we encounter in *Front Line*, the event is more brutal. Peter is bombarded with questions, having little opportunity to “soak up” his notoriety and Tony Stark is noticeably absent from the scene (Jenkins). The alternate perspective also situates the unmasking in terms of one of the resonant traumas of Spider-Man continuity: a reporter’s question prompts Peter to revisit his first love Gwen Stacy’s death and contextualize his long-term secrecy as a means of protecting his loved ones (Jenkins). As evidenced here, review ultimately serves the historiographic function of testing the consensual truth of the accepted narrative, interrogating events from multiple perspectives in an effort to arrive at a purer vision of the textual referent via *narrative told*.

The spile or “gap narrative” is a mode of re-vision attuned to aporia in narrative time. In popular usage a spile is a small spout driven into the hard exterior

of the sugar maple to extract the sap inside. In serials, the spile functions to account for a temporal gap in continuity, add spatial dimension to existing continuity, and/or insert an event into an imagined gap in continuity as if it had always been there. The 2005-2006 limited series *X-Men: Deadly Genesis* typifies the first two functions of the spile in its account of a forgotten team of X-Men assembled hastily by Professor Xavier. The narrative mines the aporia between the disappearance of the original team of X-men in *X-Men* #66 in 1970 and their rescue by the “all new, all different” team in *Giant Size X-men* #1 in 1975, while adding a great deal of moral complexity to the character of Charles Xavier. The latter function of the spile in which an event is inserted into continuity as if it had always existed is perhaps best exemplified by the acclaimed *Alias* series written by Brian Michael Bendis.²³ *Alias* follows the exploits of the super-powered private investigator Jessica Jones, a character whose fictional history intersects many of Marvel’s most prominent characters (including Spider-Man and the Avengers) but was not told contemporaneously with her more famous, primarily male counterparts. Much of Bendis’s work on *Alias* can be read as a feminist effort to recover the narratives of women who have remained underrepresented in Marvel’s superhero continuity until the mid-2010s.

The spile can sometimes be difficult to differentiate from the intertextual storytelling characteristic of comics, and serials in general. However, the spile is dependent upon imaginative anachronism for its narrative authority; spiles are not contemporaneous with the events they describe, but rather look *back* at the past of continuity to acknowledge an aporia in narrative time. Thus, the spile is often

²³ In her book *Superheroes!*, Roz Kaveney devotes a chapter to Bendis’ extraordinary work titled “The Heroism of Jessica Jones—Brian Bendis’ *Alias* as Thick Text.”

couched in terms of memory politics as Sandifer notes, “just like we cannot reasonably expect our own memories to function as linear narratives from birth to present, we ought to recognize that the memory of a comics character functions similarly—it moves cyclically, returning endlessly to particular moments, revising them, and, at times, forgetting them, whether accidentally or willfully” (177). The comic *New Avengers: Illuminati*, collected in *The Road to Civil War*, examines a secret cabal of some of Marvel’s most influential and powerful players working behind the scenes to anticipate and avoid the type of event that would precipitate legislation like *Civil War*’s Superhero Registration Act. The machinations of the Illuminati are situated in the past of continuity, though with the prescience of hindsight, the reader understands how this hitherto unrepresented narrative came to affect the present of continuity. For instance, in one of the Illuminati’s final meetings, Iron Man prophesies both the tragedy at Stamford and its repercussions. *Civil War* asks—among other ethical questions—how in a world of godlike beings, can a tragedy like the Stamford disaster not be anticipated and prevented? This spile is inserted into continuity to illustrate that such an event *was* anticipated, but the fallible heroes of the Marvel Universe still failed to prevent it. In this instance, the spile adds a depth of ethical complexity regarding the agency of various characters in the intertextual, polychronic representation of the Stamford Disaster.

In my formulation of the third mode of re-vision, the “possible world,” I draw upon the best known application of David Lewis’ modal realism—modality (5). Of modality, Lewis writes, “Presumably whatever it may mean to call a world actual, it had better turn out that the world we are a part of is the actual world. [...] Other

worlds are other, that is *unactualised*, possibilities” (5). Some cosmologists and physicists suggest our reality—our world—may be part of a multiverse or even a holographic mirage from higher dimensional space, but in the context of serial historiography, Lewis’ modality appears most prevalent, though not exclusively. As a mode of re-vision, the possible world typically reinforces the “correctness” of irreducible elements in one of three ways: it constructs a narrative that deviates from continuity to illustrate an alternate possibility (potentially including the eradication) of an irreducible element, it posits the irreducible element in an alternate circumstance, or it keeps the irreducible element in tact, but “reboots” the narrative outside of the previous continuity, effectively forging a new story world. Kaveney notes that one aspect of commercial works of art is that “there is always a crucial sense of how things might have been productively other, and sometimes we get to see how that might have worked” (24). The possible world is a means of viewing the “productively other,” but in most cases this vision serves to bolster the truth claims accepted by consensus, offering what Lewis calls “false propositions.” For instance, *Marvel 1602*, examines a possible world where the heroes of the Marvel Universe first appear in the “alternate circumstance” of the seventeenth century rather than the 1960s. In this book, the irreducible elements of some of Marvel’s most iconic characters are retained and their transposition to the dawn of the seventeenth century, while a generative plot device, ultimately shores up the *correctness* of their genesis in the early 1960s. In Marvel’s “Ultimate” imprint that ran from 2000 to 2015, popular character such as Spider-Man, the X-Men, and the Avengers are re-envisioned in a contemporary setting where most of the irreducible

elements of their mythos are retained, but their stories are “rebooted” or told anew outside of the mainstream continuity (Vandal). During its 15-year existence, Marvel’s “Ultimate Universe” provided a means of sifting through the irreducible elements of the prime Marvel continuity. In the reboot possible world, by evaluating which events are translated from one universe—from one “reboot” to the other, critics may productively adjudicate the nature of fictionality, question literary truth claims, and determine the modal status of propositions according to the theories of Lewis, Thomas Pavel, and Lubomír Doležel.

However, the way in which Marvel producers have most often employed the possible world is in the “what if?” tale, a narrative that diverges from continuity to imagine an altered version of an irreducible element. First published in 1977, Marvel has used *What If...?* comics to plumb irreducible elements ranging from the death of Spider-Man’s girlfriend, Gwen Stacy, to the origins of heroes like the Fantastic Four and the Avengers (Mantlo; Thomas). Shortly following *Civil War* a number of *What If...?* comics imagined alternate outcomes of the event. In one narrative, Captain America and Iron Man resolve their ideological differences regarding the Registration Act and the Civil War is averted while in another, the death of Iron Man precipitates an even darker conclusion in which ideologue Henry Gyrich enforces the Registration Act and oversees the fascistic murder of many of Marvel’s heroes (Brubaker, Grevioux, et al.). The 2015 *Civil War* limited series that ties in to the larger *Secret Wars* event imagines a world where the superhero civil war *never* ends. In all of these instances, the alternate universe is posited as a possibility unrealized—what might have, but did not happen. Thus, the possible

world questions the verity of a narrative's truth claims in the context of continuity, weighing the import of an irreducible element in the larger scope of continuity, and reinforcing the canon of narrative that comprises continuity as the consensual truth. Even in superhero comics, a genre quick to embrace the bizarre possibilities of cosmology like the aforementioned multiverse theories, narratives like DC's *Multiversity* and Marvel's *Secret Wars* (2015) may gesture to other realities just as valid as our own, but as modality suggests, the prevailing sense that "own own" actually means "the correct" reality endures.

As previously mentioned, the most controversial mode of re-vision, the "retcon" is the practice of revising or nullifying an irreducible element so as to drastically alter the consensual truth(s) undergirding representations of continuity. "Retroactive continuity" and its clipped form "retcon" first appeared in the lexicon of comics readers and creators, but the term has entered into popular and scholarly discussions of a wide range of serialized media including film franchises, episodic television, and series of novels more than any of the other terms I use above. So, I want to briefly trace the etymology of the word to justify my particular definition while providing another instance of comics consumers impinging upon the production of comics.

The first attested printed instance of the compound word "retroactive continuity" occurred in the fan letter pages of DC Comics' *All-Star Squadron* issue number 18, which was cover-dated February 1983, but was available for retail and distribution in December of 1982. *All-Star Squadron* was a comic book set in a possible world referred to as Earth-Two in DC continuity at the time. Earth-Two

was a possible world where the Golden-Age comics heroes were treated in “real time.” The “Golden Age of Comics” is generally regarded as the period of American comics publication between the first appearance of Superman in *Action Comics* issue number one in 1938 and the rise of gritty mystery and horror comics in the late 1940s and early 1950s. So, in the world of DC’s Earth-Two, Superman, who lived in “real-time,” was in his 60s by the early 1980s and Batman was dead. However on Earth-One, the setting of DC’s primary continuity, time worked differently so that Batman, Superman, and the other DC heroes were perpetually youthful adults in their prime. The cosmology undergirding the DC multiverse was intimidatingly complex until *Crisis on Infinite Earths* attempted to collapse all of these possible worlds into one single universe in an event that spanned 1985 (Wolfman 1).

However, *All-Star Squadron* was published in the early 1980s and therefore pre-dated the “tidying up” of continuity that occurred in *Crisis on Infinite Earths*. *All-Star Squadron* was set during Earth-Two’s World War II era (i.e. the past of Earth-Two). Therefore, narrative events that occurred in the *past* in *All-Star Squadron* could impinge upon the *present* of Earth-Two narratives set in the 1980s. This bafflingly complex historiographic phenomenon prompted comics reader Lee Allred to write a letter to *All-Star Squadron* writer Roy Thomas and the correspondence was published in the fan letters pages of the comic. In the letter Allred notes:

After forty years of pre-established Earth-Two events, writing for the *All-Star Squadron* must make you feel at times as if you’re painting yourself into a corner. *But what a paint job!* Your matching of Golden-Age comics history with new plotlines has been an artistic (and I hope financial) success.

Thomas responded to Allred's comment:

As for what [I am] trying to do, we like to think an enthusiastic *All-Star* booster at one of Adam Malin's Creation Conventions in San Diego came up with the best name for it a few months back: "*Retroactive Continuity*." Has kind of a ring, don't you think?

In this first printed usage, Allred defines a narrative phenomenon, the "matching of Golden-Age comics history with new plotlines," and Thomas offers the term that he thinks best matches the definition. Allred's definition suggests that the matching of history with new plotlines does not involve the disruption of continuity. In fact, Allred describes a phenomenon in which *new* narratives are calibrated so as to fit seamlessly with existing continuity. So, in its original usage, retroactive continuity refers to the anachronistic insertion of narratives into the past of continuity to add depth or breadth to knowledge of the past or to illuminate a heretofore-unseen aspect of the past—the narrative phenomenon I term the "spile" above.

After its first attested print usage in December of 1982, "retroactive continuity" seems to have spread through the burgeoning fan culture surrounding comic books. As Thomas suggests in his response to Allred's letter, comic book conventions—gatherings of fans to discuss, "create awareness for and appreciation of comic books and related popular art forms"—began to draw large crowds in the 1980s (San Diego Comic Con). These open forums for discussion of the often-maligned art fostered the development of a lexicon to address some of the unique aspects of comics. Simultaneously, the category of "related popular art forms" began to expand from comics to sci-fi, fantasy, and horror texts including television shows, films, anime, and video games. So just as the term "retroactive continuity"

entered the lexicon of comics readers, it was also introduced to fans of contiguous art media.

I was unable to positively identify when in the 1980s “retroactive continuity” was clipped to “retcon.” The clipping of the compound has been popularly attributed to Damien Cugley in a 1988 USENET post (*Wikipedia Retroactive Continuity*).²⁴ Though attested evidence of Cugley’s clipping has not been located at the time of writing, in a USENET posting from August 18, 1990 Cugley writes, “I am the originator of the word ‘retcon [...]’.” Regardless of the authenticity of Cugley’s claim, the 1990 post provides evidence that by the 1990s “retroactive continuity” had been shortened to “retcon” in the lexicon of comics fans. More germane to this story, however, is the documented semantic shift in the common usage of “retcon.”

Cugley’s August 18, 1990 post is a response to a post by R. David Francis on August 17, 1990 titled “Original meaning of RETroactive CONtinuity.” In his post, Francis writes:

For some reason, I think that the original retcons did not involve the invalidation of past stories, but rather carefully sliding new stories/facts into the existing tapestry of the character's life, in such a way that, while some significant change had occurred, [*sic*] no past stories were invalidated. [...] Over the years, retcons have become more disruptive/destructive of the established continuity, and so that's what we've come to expect.

Francis’s observation indicates an awareness that the popular usage of “retcon” was shifting from the Allred/Thomas definition to a meaning based more on *changing* or

²⁴ USENET, a clipping of “usernetwork,” is an Internet discussion system conceived by graduate students at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill and Duke University in 1979 and 1980. USENET is similar to a bulletin board system and is considered to be the progenitor of many web forums still used. For more on USENET see Stephen Daniel, James Ellis, and Tom Truscott, “USNET: A General Access UNIX Network,” 1980: <<http://ftp.digital.com/pub/news/a/a.news.tar.Z>>.

disrupting established continuity rather than *adding to* or *building upon* the accepted fictive history. Francis continues by suggesting a differentiation in the terminology used to describe the narrative phenomena. He writes, “Perhaps we should split this into two terms: retcon for a simple addition to the existing continuity without disturbing past stories, and revision for alterations that force some part of a story to no longer fit into the new continuity.” Though Francis offers a seemingly sensible solution to what he perceives as a confusing semantic shift, in his response, Cugley does not address Francis’s “retcon/revision” differentiation. Cugley simply notes, “I rather think that all the revisionism since ‘Crisis’ [*on Infinite Earths*] has got out of hand; people have got used to the bizarre tense formations like “... now never was ...” and old stories are routinely thrown away in favour of new stories that are no better or are worse. [...]Yeah, give me “Retcon Classic” any day... :-).”

However, “Retcon Classic,” with its original denotation of *addition* to continuity, was seemingly displaced by the end of the 1980s. In an August 16, 1989 posting on the science-fiction lovers USENET (rec.arts.sf-lovers), Bob Halloran responds to a dispute about the original title of *Star Wars: A New Hope* in the film’s opening title sequence. Halloran writes, “I’ll confirm that: Lucas retconned the opening credits after the release of TESB, once it was clear that the films were doing well enough that the first set would be completed. Had SW bombed, no one would have known the plans for a set of nine.” In this context, “retcon” has experienced a functional shift allowing the word to be used as a verb. The context also suggests that “to retcon” is to “go back and change the original” or disrupt the established truth.

In a post on the comics USENET group (rec.arts.comics) on May 10, 1990, Bob Mosley III uses “retcon” in a context similar to the posting of Bob Halloran in 1989. Mosley writes:

[...] they [DC Comics] allowed Paul Kupperberg to give her [Power Girl] an origin that effectively exorcised any and all ties to Superman and replaced them with ties to Arion. Now, while a lot of people liked Arion (and the Jan Duursema art), almost NO ONE has expressed positive remarks about Kupperberg's retcon. To be honest, I think he would have had better results if he had made her the daughter of Obnoxio the Clown...

In this instance, “retcon” is once again used as a noun and from 1990 forward there are numerous attested uses of the term as *either* a noun or a verb. In Mosley’s usage, “retcon” is once again aligned with a change in continuity that erases or disrupts previously established fictive history. Also, in this particular context Mosley notes, “NO ONE has expressed positive remarks about Kupperberg’s retcon” indicating the semantic pejoration that “retcon” undergoes as its meaning shifts from connotations of “addition” to “deletion.”

In dealing with the sprawling mass of continuity, comics creators often justify the retcon as a necessary paring-down of accrued narratives (as discussed in DC’s *Crisis on Infinite Earths* above), the tweaking of continuity’s truths to please the shifting tastes of consumers (something more like DC’s 2011 company-wide relaunch *The New 52*), or the resolution of a previous narrative choice that wrote the fictional universe into a corner. Unlike other forms of re-vision, even in scholarly discourse the retcon is most often cast as a “strip-mining of continuity,” Kaveney’s term for narrative decisions that inflict long-term damage on the past *and* future of a fictional history for producers’ commercial gain. However, I contend that the retcon

can be an ethical historiographic methodology. For instance, when the character Magneto appeared in *X-men* #1 in 1963, he was portrayed as a stock villain bent on world domination. In subsequent tales, however, Magneto's megalomania is retconned in favor of a more complicated motive for his violent actions and ideology; Magneto's family was executed by Nazis and he was imprisoned in Auschwitz-Birkenau where he became a Sonderkommando (Pak). In light of this retcon, as a Jewish Holocaust survivor, Magneto espouses mutant rights that are contextualized as a desire to prevent the horrors of the Shoah from being inflicted upon another oppressed minority.

Although there have been some positively received retcons, most often, consumers treat this form of re-vision as a breach of proper historiographic methodology akin to revisionist history. And like revisionist histories, consumers often police or entirely reject the truth claims of the retcon narrative so that producers must undo the "strip-mining of continuity" and restore the consensual truth. During the aforementioned Spider-Man "Clone Saga" of the 1990's, readers were led to believe that since the publication of *The Amazing Spider-Man* #149 in October 1975, the character they believed to be Peter Parker was actually a clone who had assumed the Spider-Man identity. Consumers responded so negatively to the return of the "real" Peter Parker (who had changed his name to Ben Reilly) that the narrative was re-retconned to reveal that Ben Reilly had been the actual clone all along (Mackie).

In the wake of *Civil War*, Marvel continuity saw another one of the most significant retcons in the history of the Spider-Man mythos. After his public

unmasking and defection to Captain America's resistance, Spider-Man becomes a fugitive from former friends and foes. While on the run, Peter escapes a sniper's bullet that instead strikes his beloved Aunt May (Straczynski *Civil War Amazing Spider-Man*). May's injury is critical and as she languishes in a hospital during the *One More Day* storyline, Peter seeks aid from all corners of the Marvel Universe only to be told that May's death is inevitable. In his desperation, Spider-Man welcomes the audience of the demon Mephisto who offers to restore May's life and vitality in exchange for Peter's marriage to Mary Jane. Over the course of a few pages of silent panels, Peter and MJ decide to make this Faustian bargain and in a bid for Peter's renewed happiness, Mary Jane offers to sweeten the deal with an unknown bonus. Thus, in order to render Spider-Man a younger, happy-go-lucky bachelor with a more accessible (i.e. less dense and complex) history, Peter and Mary Jane's marriage, the death of Peter's friend/foe, Harry Osborn, Spider-Man's iconic unmasking, and over 20 years of continuity are seemingly undone in a dozen or so pages. Though some fans characterized the narrative as the worst kind of commercially driven strip-mining of continuity, *One More Day* artist and Marvel Editor-in-Chief Joe Quesada said, "It's very easy to un-marry a character, or fix something like that: you just do a huge universal retcon, and say a few events in history didn't happen. But that's really not the way we do it here at Marvel" (Straczynski and Quesada). In 2010's *One Moment in Time (O.M.I.T.)* that ran in *The Amazing Spider-Man* 638 through 641, writer Quesada and artist Paolo Rivera catalogue the specific changes Mephisto made to Marvel continuity to save May's life and prevent Mary Jane's marriage to Peter from happening. Accounting for

Mephisto's mystical diegetic manipulation of narrative history does not mitigate the fundamental nature of the retcon, its radical erasure of an irreducible element—in this case Spider-Man's marriage. But, to paraphrase Marvel's iconic Stan Lee, never fear true believers: the 2015 *Secret Wars* event featured a possible world where Peter Parker and Mary Jane's marriage was never retconned in the self-referential limited series, *The Amazing Spider-Man: Renew Your Vows*.

These four modes of re-vision: review, the spile, the possible world, and the retcon, the introspective and intertextual conventions of superhero comics production, and the polylogic rhetorical situation of the comics medium coalesce to provide a model that highlights serial historiography's resistance to authoritative narrative closure. Superhero comics respect the complexity of stories of the past. These comics devise countless means of questioning the irreducible element, seeing it anew, and imagining their continuities without it. They attempt new means of representation, all the while honoring the ability of the irreducible element to defy definitive representation. And superhero comics revere both creators and the "community of others" who consume and adjudicate their work; when serialized comics fail to respect both creator and reader, they fall short of their potential as a medium. I posit the skill-set necessary to navigate the continuity of superhero comics as an exemplar of serial historiography because by embracing the parallels between continuity management and adjudicating historiography on its dogged analysis of history-as-narrative-told instead of history-as-direct-communion-with-the-past, we approach the "space for ethical representation without problematic closure" Chute envisions in her description of the comics medium (352).

On the Deadness of the Past

In his essay “Intertextuality, Transference, and Postmodernism in *Absalom, Absalom!*,” Martin Kreiswirth eschews the project of fixing Faulkner’s oeuvre in the exclusive domain of realism, modernism, or post-modernism. Instead, Kreiswirth seeks to “show that in identifying filiations with *what have been defined today as postmodern tactics, or presuppositions*, we can see Faulkner as he is being filtered through the present, assuming various positions on a kind of moving continuum, from modernism to postmodernism and back again” (110). In traversing this continuum, Kreiswirth identifies Faulkner’s self-conscious interrogation of the strategies used to narrativize the fictive history of Yoknapatawpha as characteristically postmodern. Alternately, he suggests that Faulkner’s modernist tendencies manifest in world-creating techniques that insist that the past “remains a provisional, contradictory construct, not a place where everything is correct or true, but one ‘where nothing is fault nor false,’ one where things are ‘probably true enough’” (121). Though he resists clear-cut categorization, ultimately Kreiswirth’s project is one of taxonomy. But in seeking to blur the lines between Faulkner’s modern and postmodern characteristics, Kreiswirth highlights a *stable* feature in Faulkner’s body of work— the pervasive attention to historiography in both the intratextual and intertextual construction of Yoknapatawpha.

Kreiswirth notes that from a “post-modern vantage” the multi-textual shaping of Yoknapatawpha shares some conventions with “historiographic metafiction”— what he and Linda Hutcheon identify as “*the* preeminent postmodern literary form”

(115). Hutcheon suggests that historiographic metafiction confronts “the problematic nature of the past as an object of knowledge for us in the present” and in doing so seeks a responsible methodology for *doing* history (92).

In early drafts of this chapter, I was quick to point out that Faulkner’s Yoknapatawpha texts are not an open-ended, polylogical serial like the Marvel Comics story world, but I want to make a radical proposition based on the law of seriality. While researching this chapter I read all of Faulkner’s fiction set in Yoknapatawpha County, but I also read a number of academic essays which I note in the pages that follow. Many of these essays, as this one surely does, offer recapitulations of Faulkner’s stories as well as close readings and hermeneutics. In this case, I suggest that the irreducible elements of Yoknapatawpha resonate through analysis. Yoknapatawpha remains an open site of meaning making because we, as scholars, continue to tell stories about it. Again: new historicist research, hermeneutics, close readings, fan-fiction—serials are capacious and pick up valences of meaning in unpredictable places, incorporating unforeseeable information in their ongoing evolution. But regardless of scholars, critics, and fans perpetuating their narrative resonance, the Yoknapatawpha texts do, as Martin Kreiswirth suggests, “make up a kind of supertext that reduplicates, on a higher plane, some of the various repetitions that form each of the individual works” (164).

Faulkner was fond of a number of popular serials and I believe the “supertext” of Yoknapatawpha shows telling aesthetic similarities to texts like comics and genre fiction. In *William Faulkner’s Library- A Catalogue*, Joseph Blotner observes that “Faulkner was, like his mother, a frequent reader of detective fiction,” and among

his collection were novels following the serialized, open-ended exploits of Rex Stout's Nero Wolfe and George Simeon's Commissaire Maigret.²⁵ Additionally, M. Thomas Inge writes, "Faulkner—himself once an aspiring cartoonist—had a fondness for the funny papers that is reflected in his fiction" (79). Inge explores the possible influence of *Mutt and Jeff*, *Thimble Theater*, and other comics on specific tropes, character names, and set pieces in Faulkner's work (82-85).²⁶ However, I suggest that Faulkner was also influenced by comics' ability to sustain narrative in disjointed, episodic installments while simultaneously crafting a fictive world governed by unique laws and principles. Inge notes that by the late 1920s, in Elzie Crisler Segar's *Thimble Theater*, the cartoonist was able to "develop continuity and interplay among his characters" and by forging an intertextual world took "the comic strip in new directions of story-telling power and adult interest" (90). The serial's ability to test the limits of textual boundaries especially intrigued Faulkner, particularly with regard to the elaborate world-formation techniques employed by Honoré de Balzac in *La Comédie Humaine*. In a 1955 interview, Faulkner said:

I like the fact that in Balzac there is an intact world of his own. His people don't just move from page one to page 320 of one book. There

²⁵ The Nero Wolfe and Maigret detective mysteries were open-ended serials in Faulkner's lifetime. Stout's Nero Wolfe corpus was developed from the 1930s through the 1970s (not including the posthumously published *Death Times Three* and "Assault on a Brownstone"). Simeon's Commissaire Maigret fiction was also published from the 1930s to the 1970s.

²⁶ *Mutt and Jeff* is one of the longest running, daily serialized American comic strips. *Thimble Theater* is most often remembered for its characters Popeye, Olive Oyl, and Bluto. For more on Faulkner's Popeye and the Popeye of the comics see Thomas L. McHaney, "Sanctuary and Frazer's Slain Kings," *Mississippi Quarterly*, 24 (Summer 1971), 237, note 25 and Pat M. Esslinger, "No Spinach in *Sanctuary*," *Modern Fiction Studies*, 18 (Winter 1973), 556-57.

is continuity between them all like a blood-stream which flows from page one through to page 20,000 of one book. (Meriwether 217)

Kreiwirth observes that in the construction of Yoknapatawpha, “continuity” and represented totality are simultaneously countered by “discontinuity, heterogeneity, dialogism, and contingency” (Transgression 165). He couches his analysis of Faulkner’s dual projects of continuity and mutability in the Freudian idea of “transgression,” or more specifically, “writing that is perpetually testing the limits of its own regularity; not for the sake of either stability or instability, but for a positive ‘contestation’ of ‘values’ that ‘carries them all to their limits’” (167). Considering Yoknapatawpha as a model of serial historiography, however, Faulkner’s seemingly *contradictory* narrative projects may be refigured as historiographic re-vision.

In the world of Yoknapatawpha, the American Civil War occurs with general outcomes similar to those in the real world, as does the evolution of the racial caste system of the American South from slavery to Jim Crow. These “historical facts” are stable irreducible elements in the fictional history of Yoknapatawpha. As we become more specific, however, the irreducible element is increasingly unstable. Consider for a moment three seemingly irreducible elements in *Absalom, Absalom!* and *The Sound and the Fury*: Quentin Compson commits suicide, Judith Sutpen and Charles Etienne de St. Velery Bon die of a common illness, and Quentin II climbs out her window to run away with Jason IV’s hidden stash of money. In the text of *Absalom*, Quentin and Rosa Coldfield visit the ruins of Sutpen’s Hundred in September of 1909. But in the original chronology appended to the novel, the date of the visit is given as September of 1910, though *The Sound and the Fury* asserts

the date of Quentin's suicide as June 2nd, 1910 (*AA* 378, "Faulkner's Chronology," *SF* 113). Similarly, the *Absalom* chronology states that Judith and Charles E. St. V. Bon die of smallpox, though in Chapter 7, Jason Compson III tells Quentin that both died of yellow fever. And finally, in the text of *The Sound and the Fury* we learn that Quentin II escapes her room by climbing down a pear tree, but in the appendix to the novel, she climbed down a "rain pipe" (47, 214).

In his groundbreaking 1963 monograph on the fictional landscape of Yoknapatawpha, Cleanth Brooks set the tone for scholarship on what has subsequently become one of William Faulkner's most often-overlooked novels, *The Town*. Writing on the middle volume of the "Snopes Trilogy," Brooks flatly dismisses the novel, arguing that "*The Town* [...] will seem to some readers a rather frail and limber board placed across two firmly based stools" (216) and expresses frustration with the novel's recapitulation of events that occurred in *The Hamlet*²⁷ and intratextual reappraisals that return again and again to the events of earlier chapters in *The Town*, itself. Brooks cites these summaries and often discrepant retellings as potential signs of "Faulkner's waning powers as a novelist," a claim echoed by Michael Millgate who notes that, "in writing [*The Town*] Faulkner seems to have referred back only rarely to [*The Hamlet*]; he certainly seems to have made no particular effort to ensure narrative consistency and continuity" (Brooks 192; Millgate 237). Kreiswirth suggests that all "these types of incongruities foreground difference and otherness, and function, not as a flash of text-to-text linkage, but as its obscure obverse, transgressing the limits of intertextual repetition itself" (171).

²⁷ Published in 1940, 17 years before *The Town*.

But I contend that the circuitous, contradictory, and sometimes repetitive ruminations characteristic of *The Town*, the *Absalom/Sound and the Fury* discrepancies, and the Yoknapatawpha texts in general, do not represent sloppy stylistic failures, but are rather orchestrated narrative techniques used to probe the limits and potential of narrative history. By considering how the four modes of re-vision work in the serial Yoknapatawpha, I argue that irreducible elements emerge in Faulkner's story world, persistently returning the reader to aporia in narrative time as well as sites of productive polyvocality.

Recall that the first method of re-vision, *review*, is the method of re-envisioning or re-examining an irreducible element previously installed in the narrative past. In one function, review may look at an irreducible element from an alternate vantage. For instance, in a 1957 interview, Faulkner addressed the plurality of perspectives in *The Sound and the Fury*:

I wrote the Benjy part first. That wasn't good enough so I wrote the Quentin part. That still wasn't good enough. I let Jason try it. That still wasn't enough. I let Faulkner try it and that still wasn't enough, and so about twenty years afterward I wrote an appendix still trying to make that book what—match the dream. (Gwynn 84)

Faulkner's "Compson Appendix" has been maligned, praised, and interrogated by critics, but without engaging questions of intentionality, Kreiswirth notes that "in almost every case, and despite occasionally desperate editorial urgings, Faulkner ended up letting certain textual discrepancies...stand" (172). I suggest that the information in the Compson Appendix (e.g. that Caddy escaped by climbing down a

rain pipe) is just as valid *and* just as suspect as the information provided in the narrative proper. In the text of *The Sound and the Fury*, the reader learns that Quentin II climbs down the pear tree from Benjy, the narrative perspective that is at once most susceptible to misapprehension and least likely to be altered by the intrusion of a superego (47). So in the rain pipe/pear tree case, review functions to illuminate two different perspectives of Quentin II's escape. Though the interrogation of a seemingly minor detail might seem immaterial, from a historiographic perspective, plumbing this minute discrepancy opens new valences of meaning. For instance, did Benjy actually see Quentin II climbing down the pear tree or was he witnessing Caddie's descent in her muddy drawers a generation earlier? And furthermore, how might this double vision impinge upon our reception of Benjy's narrative elsewhere in the chapter if we understand that his perception is compromised by the repetitive assertion of one of the fundamental traumas in his life—the absence of Caddie?

Absalom, Absalom! relies upon intratextual review for much of its narrative structure. The chorus of voices including Quentin, Rosa Coldfield, Jason III, General Compson, Charles Bon, and Shreve reveals information regarding the Sutpen dynasty in variously reliable tones, within oblique contexts, and through fallible discursive forms so that the reader is tasked with adjudicating the verity of competing, contradictory truth claims. The different birthplaces postulated for Charles Bon, the varying characterizations of Thomas Sutpen, and Rosa Coldfield's insistence that there are some facts that only she knows and "*they cannot tell you*"

all serve to interrogate the irreducible elements of *Absalom*'s narrative by problematizing unequivocal truth claims (140).

Similarly, *The Town* is a multivocal text that employs three first-person narrators, Charles "Chick" Mallison, Gavin Stevens, and V.K. Ratliff. The trifurcated focalization of the novel provides an organic mechanism for scrutinizing the ways in which a public oral history arises from the swirl of individual narratives that orbit an irreducible element. Again, I maintain that through persistent retellings, one does not perpetually act out or fetishize a narrative referent, but conscientiously draws ever closer to a more fulsome representation of a truth claim while respecting the ultimately unrepresentable totality of that irreducible element. And I use the term "oral history" self-consciously above to describe the discourse that constitutes the narrators' accounts as well as the discourse produced when these accounts are read *in toto*. Although *The Town* is a written text, its narrators persistently remind the reader that some of the information that they possess and impart has already been mediated by other *speakers*. Furthermore, the conversational tone, use of vernacular, and meandering orality of the narrators' direct address blurs the distinction between a transcribed oral history and a methodically crafted written account. In the opening passage of the novel, Chick offers a caveat in the interest of full disclosure that some of the information in his narrative was first relayed to him by Cousin Gowan (353). Chick proves hypersensitive in accounting for his sources, later noting, "Ratliff was how we first began to learn about Snopes. Or rather, Snopeses. No, that's wrong; there had been a Snopes in Colonel Sartoris's cavalry command in 1861 [...]" (354). But just as Chick tries to leave a responsible trail of

citations for the information he presents, he also gestures to the fallibility of orally conveyed historical knowledge. Hayden White has suggested that “[i]nformation about the past can be conveyed orally. You can carry around in your head all manner of facts and other kinds of information, but you do not have a history until you have brought all of this stuff together and written it up either in a narrative or in an argument of some kind” (ix). I am less interested here in prizing the written text as the gold standard of historiography for its materiality as for its ability to render more transparent the methods of narrativization used to order information of the past. As White persuasively argues, the information accrued via oral transmission serves as figures *in potentia*, not as stable knowledge; only via re-emplotment or retelling does knowledge of the past become history and in assuming narrative organization reflect the narrative identity of the speaker. When Chick offers himself as the mouthpiece of the town stating, “So when I say ‘we’ and ‘we thought’ what I mean is Jefferson and Jefferson thought,” he at once indicates his individual agency in the presentation of knowledge of the past while simultaneously claiming an empiricism via communal solidarity (353). The contradiction inherent in Chick’s posturing is, in short, the defining crisis of the postmodern historian suddenly aware of the contingencies of the verbal artifact.

So I suggest that it is this contingency of facts vis a vis the narrativization of historical knowledge that fuels a compulsive desire to *review* many of the irreducible elements in *The Town* and throughout Faulkner’s corpus. For instance, one such element that underpins not only *The Town*, but the long arc of the Snopes trilogy, is Linda Snopes’s conception and birth. Though drawn in detail in *The*

Hamlet, the events surrounding Flem Snopes's marriage to Eula Varner are recapitulated numerous times in *The Town* often with a sense of dissatisfaction for the source material, the ways in which the narrative is constructed, and gaps in narrative time. Of the event, Gavin Stevens says, "Ratliff had told me how they departed for Texas immediately after the wedding and when they returned twelve months later, the child was already walking. Which (the walking at least) I did not believe, not because of the anguish, the jealousy, the despair, but simply because of Ratliff" (466). Here Stevens vents his frustration with the inaccessibility of a perfect knowledge of the Texas elopement by coloring Ratliff as an unreliable narrator. In the process, he also delineates while distancing himself from, the power of emotion to contort the telling, reception, and retelling of an oral narrative. And in retelling Ratliff's account, Stevens not only perpetuates the narrative, but also transmogrifies it into a new narrative, highlighting the elusive nature of the irreducible element at the heart of both tellings.

In a subsequent consideration of the wedding that prevents Linda from being a bastard born to Eula and Hoake McCarron, Stevens says, "Anyway, [Flem] gave the child a name and then moved the mother herself completely away from that old stage and scene and milieu of her shame, onto, into a new one, where at least no man could say *I saw that fall* but only *This is what gossip said*" (584). In this retelling, Stevens not only approaches the event from a new angle, emphasizing the twisted valor of Flem's calculated matrimony, but also establishes a hierarchy of information for the construction of historical narratives. Experiential knowledge (i.e. "I saw that fall.") is in this way prized over information filtered through other

speakers—pejoratively labeled as gossip. But just as Stevens attempts to evacuate the mediated oral account of its validity in narratives of the past, he continues to rely on information about events for which he was not or could not have been present in the construction of his *own* narrative of the McCarron/Eula/Flem affair.

But perhaps the best example of narrative *review* in The Snopes Trilogy orbits one of its most unwieldy irreducible elements—Eula’s body. The focus of the entire second book of *The Hamlet* and an indefatigable presence that escapes the closure of death in *The Mansion*, Eula Snopes’ body consistently defies a definitive rendering in *The Town*. Eula is variously described as the vessel for Flem Snopes’s infiltration of Jefferson, a semi-divine receptacle of feminine excess, an embodied fantasy of heterosexual male desire, and a “loose-girdled bucolic Lilith”—to name a few (354, 355, 625). Each return to Eula’s body provokes a different telling from the narrator underscoring its importance, its unwieldiness, and ultimately its inability to be definitively confined in language.

In addition to serving as site where the shortcomings of language confound oral narrative, Eula’s body also becomes a locus for the insolvency of *material* history. Following her suicide, Flem Snopes erects a graveside monument to his deceased wife (651). Though Gavin stewards Linda in finding a photograph of her mother that can be carved into a marble medallion on the memorial, Ratliff is quick to remind the reader that the “authorship” of the monument falls solely to Flem Snopes (652). Ratliff says, “It was Flem that paid for it, first thought of it, planned and designed it, picked out what size and what was to be wrote on it—the face and

the letters and never once mentioned price. Don't make no mistake about that. It was Flem" (652).

Flem's authorship of the monument is meant to call the icon's fidelity to truth into question. When it is imported from Italy and placed over Eula's grave, the inscription that Flem chooses for the stone evacuates any lingering claims to authenticity reading, "Eula Varner Snopes/ 1889-1927/ A Virtuous Wife Is a Crown to Her Husband/Her Children Rise and Call Her Blessed" (657). Given Eula's well-known infidelity to Flem and her enigmatic (if not detached) relationship with her daughter, the monument's inscription is farcical. Furthermore, the marble image of Eula that Stevens labors to affix as an icon of her ethereal beauty is also a failure. Of the image, Ratliff remarks, "[...] that marble medallion face that Lawyer had picked out and selected that never looked like Eula a-tall you thought at first, never looked like nobody nowhere you thought at first, until you were wrong because it never looked like all women because what it looked like was one woman [...]" (656). Because Eula's body was such that it defied representation, even Gavin's most earnest efforts to fix her image in the material history of Jefferson are frustrated. Like any irreducible element, Eula's body eludes not only definitive verbal representation, but similarly frustrates efforts to narrativize it materially. I suggest that in the particular case of Eula, her consistent objectification points to one of the key reasons why she confounds narrative enclosure and invites review; without a knowledge of Eula as a subject, her physical trace in the world of Yoknapatawpha is a sign with an impossible referent.

Overall, I contend that Faulkner celebrates the necessity of historiographic review in the Yoknapatawpha universe, when he says, “Beginning with *Sartoris* I discovered that my own little postage stamp of native soil was worth writing about [...] and by sublimating the actual into apocryphal I would have complete liberty to use whatever talent I might have to its absolute top” (Meriwether 255). Joseph Uργο characterizes the “apocryphal” in the context of Yoknapatawpha as describing an uncertain world that is by nature multiple and dialogic in order to resist authoritative consistency and hermeneutic totality (3-15). Review thus functions to analyze the doubts and contradictions inherent in an unstable fictive history and synthesize a composite narrative that represents the complexity of its irreducible elements—unwieldy aporia that ultimately resist definitive representation.

The second mode of re-vision, the *spile* functions to fill such an aporia in narrative time, add depth or breadth to existing narrative space, and/or insert an event into an imagined gap in the narrative past as if it had always been there. Yoknapatawpha thrives on spile narratives. For instance, the non-sequential and spatially disjointed chapters of *The Sound and the Fury* and *Go Down, Moses* offer intratextual gap narratives in which the reader receives information in a non-chronological order so that she must piece together the threads of diegesis as she receives them.

Intuiting the rowdy nature of stories and the law of seriality, Faulkner as *auteur* offers little guidance as to the sequence in which his texts should be read. In 1958, he simply advised, “Probably to begin with a book called *Sartoris* that has the germ of my apocrypha in it. A lot of characters are postulated in that book. I’d say

that's a good one to begin with" (Gwynn 285). If one were to read Faulkner's novels in the order in which they were published (as I did to think about drafting this chapter), the narrative of *The Sound and the Fury* (1929) would precede *Absalom, Absalom!* (1936). In this case, the entire text of *Absalom* could then be read as a spile for the "June Second, 1910" chapter of *The Sound and the Fury*. Reading Quentin Compson's obsessive reconstruction of the rise and fall of the Sutpen dynasty—which culminates in his fanatical insistence, "*I don't. I don't! I don't hate it! I don't hate it!*" in reference to the South—not only fills some of the temporal gap of Quentin's tenure at Harvard, but also provides a great deal of insight into the forces that propel him to the Charles River (AA 395 ; SF 208). Spile narratives most often rely upon imaginative anachronism to look *back* at the *past* of a world's fictive history and illuminate a heretofore-unwitnessed narrative that could impinge upon the understanding of an irreducible element. However, if one were to read *Absalom, Absalom!* before *The Sound and the Fury*, the latter text (though it represents the future of Yoknapatawpha from the perspective of *Absalom*) would still provide information that could retroactively influence the reception of the former. For instance, Jason III's alleged alcoholism might call into question his narrative authority and Quentin's proto-incestuous relationship to Caddy might color his reconstruction of the triangular relationship among Charles Bon, Judith, and Henry. Therefore, the spile ultimately functions to reveal information that compounds the complexity of a truth claim by providing depth and breadth to an intertextual or intratextual narrative.

One might think that *possible world* narratives are the distinct purview of science fiction, superheroes, fantasy, and genre fiction in general, but this mode of revision that investigates irreducible elements by constructing a narrative that deviates from the fictive history of a world to illustrate an alternate possibility for that irreducible element, in the process testing its underlying truth claims, functions in serials across media and genres. Recall Roz Kaveney's supposition that one aspect of commercial works of art is that "there is always a crucial sense of how things might have been productively other, and sometimes we get to see how that might have worked" (24). In the juxtaposition of documents like the appended Chronology and the text of *Absalom, Absalom!* we see just such "productively other" accounts of the narrative past. Similarly, the text of "The Bear" that appeared in the May 9, 1942 issue of *The Saturday Evening Post* is significantly different from the version that would appear in *Go Down, Moses* on May 11, 1942 (Fagnoli 59). In addition to changing the unnamed "boy" and "father" to Ike McCaslin and his cousin Cass Edmonds, respectively, the version of "The Bear" that appeared in *Go Down, Moses* also considerably expanded the role of Sam Fathers and included a long philosophical section that explored the McCaslin family's brutal history of miscegenation, denigration, and incest (61). In this instance, the juxtaposed possible worlds require the reader to evaluate the narratives of each text and decide if one text should be prized over the other, if there are irreducible elements that transcend texts, and/or if the reader must reconcile the two texts via her narrative identity.

In a related capacity, possible worlds function intratextually in *Absalom, Absalom!* as Quentin and Shreve attempt to reconstruct a narrative past by

imaginatively erasing irreducible elements and observing the results of their absence.

For instance, in Chapter 8, the narrator(s) construct an interior monologue as

Charles Bon awaits a sign from Thomas Sutpen admitting his paternity:

Maybe he will write it then. He would just have to write 'I am your father. Burn this' and I would do it. Or if not that, a sheet a scrap of paper with the one word 'Charles' in his hand, and I would know what he meant and he would not even have to ask me to burn it. Or a lock of his hair or a pairing from his finger nail and I would know...
(341)

Each of Bon's scenarios is actually an imagining of Quentin and/or Shreve, but ultimately the possible worlds represented by these nonfactual situations shore up the *correctness* of the irreducible element: Charles Bon *is not* claimed by Sutpen and Charles Bon *must* die.

In *Absalom, Absalom!* the possible world also functions to disrupt any irreducible element that smacks of monologic authority. For instance, Quentin learns in a letter from his father that "*Miss Rosa Coldfield was buried yesterday. She remained in the coma for almost two weeks and two days ago she died without regaining consciousness and without pain [...]*" (180). And yet the presentation of the last weeks of Rosa's life as imagined by Quentin and Shreve are charged with pain and grotesque suffering. Quentin asserts that "he had not been there but he could see her, struggling and fighting like a doll in a nightmare, making no sound, foaming a little at the mouth [...]" until the house was burned and then, "[...] she went to bed because it was all finished now [...] And so she died" (393). In this instance, Quentin repeatedly asserts the narrative authority of his imagined world because "he could see her," and as the most detailed account of Rosa's final days, this possible world deeply troubles Jason III's truth claim of Ms. Coldfield's

painless death (393). In instances like this one, possible worlds live quick and fleeting existences, but nevertheless function to interrogate the narrative truth claims of irreducible elements.

Finally, the *retcon*, or retroactive continuity, the mode of re-vision often equated with revisionist history in which an irreducible element is erased, modified, or nullified so as to drastically alter continuity. As I've already noted, there are numerous examples of discrepancies among Faulkner's corpus that might be construed as retcons, but I caution that it is only when a narrative disparity has a fundamental impact on an irreducible element, and thus the fictive history of Yoknapatawpha, that it is truly a retcon. For instance, in *Sanctuary*, Temple Drake is eighteen when she is raped, but in *Requiem for a Nun*, she is said to have been seventeen. Though this discrepancy does not affect the irreducible element of Temple's rape, the difference between the ages of eighteen and seventeen connotes (particularly for contemporary readers) the difference between an adult and a minor. Because in the minds of some readers, the difference in Temple's age can affect the traumatic referent at the heart of the irreducible element, this discrepancy might be considered a retcon.

But perhaps one of the most glaring examples of retroactive continuity in Yoknapatawpha is the confusion surrounding Quentin Compson's death date. If we honor the date of June 2nd, 1910 from *The Sound and the Fury* then we must retcon the appended *Absalom* Chronology. If we honor the Chronology, then the inverse is true. And to further confuse the matter, the short story, "That Evening Sun" features Quentin at age 24 as its narrator, though according to both *The Sound and the Fury*

and the *Absalom* Chronology, Quentin was nineteen when he committed suicide. Regardless of which date the reader accepts, the discrepancy is jarring, as it underscores the uncertainty of the fictional terrain.

Ultimately, the balance of uncertainty and continuity, disjuncture and intertextual harmony is the key to Yoknapatawpha's serial endurance. Faulkner's Yoknapatawpha texts are undergirded by the artist's serial drive—the impulse of the clockmaker who cannot abandon his creation. In his body of work, Faulkner never seems completely satisfied with the capabilities of narrative and the hegemonic continuity it asserts. In 1957, he said:

[The residents of Yoknapatawpha] exist. They are still in motion in my mind. I can laugh at things they're doing that I haven't got around to writing yet. No, that's where the rules of the craft come in, that someone, some editor, has got to give the whole thing unity, coherence, and emphasis. To start at a decent starting-place and then stop it somewhere at a logical, reasonable place. But the characters themselves are walking out of that book still in motion, still talking, and still acting. (197-198)

Here Yoknapatawpha pushes at the seams of narrative confinement as Faulkner imagine his apocrypha beyond the imposed endpoint of each text. In this context, discontinuity, episodic narratives, and contradiction are tactics for channeling the vital energy of Faulkner's serial drive and, as Martin Kreiswirth suggests, “keeping the boundary between textual inside and outside productively mobile” (169).

Given Faulkner's documented interest in serial art, the prevalence of serial aesthetic qualities in the Yoknapatawpha corpus should come as no surprise. So by reconsidering the “paradoxical and outrageous discrepancy” in the continuity of Yoknapatawpha not as stylistic eccentricities or slovenliness, but as narrative techniques enacted to problematize tidy conclusions regarding immensely complex

and ongoing events in Southern history, I suggest that we may productively approach Faulkner's corpus as a pseudo-historiographic project (Kreiwirth 161).

As a prefatory note to the final volume of the Snopes trilogy, *The Mansion*,

Faulkner writes:

This note is simply to notify the reader that the author has already found more discrepancies and contradictions than he hopes the reader will—contradictions and discrepancies due to the fact that the author has learned, he believes, more about the human heart and its dilemma than he knew thirty-four years ago; and is sure that, having lived with them that long time, he knows the characters in this chronicle better than he did then. (xi)

So in his acceptance of the “discrepancies and contradictions” of Yoknapatawpha, Faulkner acknowledges that in terms of its fictive history, his “little postage stamp of native soil” is more like *the* world than *a* world in that it allows for those irreducible elements that defy definitive representation and yet require serial historiography to draw ever-closer to their elusive narrative truth claims.

We Need to Talk about Matt

Due to the law of seriality, the experience of the serial is neither subjective nor objective, but it is personal.

As an undergraduate, in the spring of 2003, I acted in the University of Virginia Department of Drama's production of *The Laramie Project*. Director Richard Warner, working with an eight-member cast of both graduate and undergraduate students, led us through rich dramaturgical research and performance work. As a part of the rehearsal process, each member of our company was charged with conducting an interview (in the vein of the members of Tectonic Theater

Project that I will discuss in greater detail below) and finessing it into a monologue. Among other characters, Warner had assigned me the role of Aaron McKinney, one of the young men convicted of Shepard's murder. Through my research I discovered that McKinney was, at the time, imprisoned at the Wallens Ridge State Prison in my hometown Big Stone Gap, Virginia. All roads lead to home.

I distinctly remember McKinney's close proximity to my hometown dredging up another memory as I sat in a UVA computer lab—another instance in which McKinney, Shepard, and Laramie intersected my life. As someone who is not particularly good with dates, I don't know if I would have remembered when I came out to my dad as gay were it not for the murder of Matthew Shepard. I knew I was a senior in high school. But what I recalled in that computer lab that day—the date was November 1999 because my dad said to me—a statement seared into my memory—"I'm not worried about you. I'm worried about all those other people out there. Look at that boy they just sentenced for what he did out there in Laramie, all because that boy was gay." In a moment when knowledge of the past collided with memory and place, *The Laramie Project* and its narrative truth claims took on a particularly personal resonance for me—as it has for many consumers—and has remained a site of serial engagement since.

Composed by Moisés Kaufman and the members of Tectonic Theater Project, *The Laramie Project* draws upon hundreds of interviews conducted by the theater company to stage a communal history of Laramie, Wyoming as its residents grapple with the 1998 murder of gay University of Wyoming student, Matthew Shepard. The play premiered in Colorado at Denver Center Theatre Company in 2000 (283). Since

its first performance, *The Laramie Project* has been one of the most frequently produced plays in America for over fifteen years (283). A sequel, *The Laramie Project: Ten Years Later*, premiered on October 12, 2009—on the eleventh anniversary of Matthew Shepard’s death—at Lincoln Center (288). The Lincoln Center production featured the original cast of *The Laramie Project* and was simulcast to 150 theatres globally, many of which staged live readings from *Ten Years Later* to accompany or supplement the webcast (288). Following the production of *Ten Years Later*, the two plays together are often described as *The Laramie Project Cycle*.

Whether you see the text in performance or read the script, *The Laramie Project* gives an account of its composition. In print form, the play is prefaced by “A Note from Moisés Kaufman” that begins:

The Laramie Project was written through a unique collaboration by Tectonic Theater Project. During the year-and-a-half-long development of the play, members of the company and I traveled to Laramie six times to conduct interviews with the people of the town. We transcribed and edited interviews, then conducted several workshops in which the members of the company presented material and acted as dramaturgs in the creation of the play. (26)

Kaufman’s prefatory remarks situate *The Laramie Project* as an exemplar of serial historiography: the composition process seeks to collapse the distances between text, producer (performers, company members), consumer (company members anticipating intended theatrical audience), and textual referent (intersectional communities in Laramie, Matthew Shepard’s murder, etc.) while foregrounding a polyvocality that accounts for the fortuities of human agency in narrating the past. Further signaling a goal of polyvocal historiography, the “Author’s Note” that

prefaces *The Laramie Project: Ten Years Later* states, “With the tenth anniversary of Matthew Shepard’s murder approaching, Moisés Kaufman, Artistic Director of Tectonic Theater Project, asked, ‘How does a community write its own history?’” (286).

So *The Laramie Project Cycle* delineates a historiographic project in its form—a form very much akin to the middle voice as the producers/company members seek a close communion with the textual referents/people of Laramie to render a text that is self-consciously contemporary with its telling. In the “About the Text” preface the company further outlines a performance and composition methodology that aims to shrink the communicative distance with the consumer/audience by relying upon the viewer for narrative closure. The script notes:

When writing this play, we used a technique that Moisés originated called “moment work.” It is a method to create and analyze theatre from a structuralist (or “tectonic”) perspective. For that reason, there are no “scenes” in this play, only “moments.” A “moment” does not mean a change of locale or an entrance or exit of actors or characters. It is simply a unit of theatrical time, a unit which is then juxtaposed with other units to convey meaning. (47-48)

I first want to note that I found training in moment work with the Tectonic Theater Company valuable for considering the ways *mise en scène* contribute to a unit of theatrical time²⁸, but more germane to this study, I argue that the “moments” that comprise the company’s works also leave gutters akin to the aporia in narrative time that I discuss above in the context of comics. When seeing a play or reading a script

²⁸ Tectonic Theater Company currently offers two levels of “Moment Work Training Lab Intensives.” For more see: <http://tectonictheaterproject.org/education/training-lab-structure/>

composed of moments, the consumer must imaginatively connect narrative memes, bridging aporia in the story's telling, participating in the discourse via narrative closure.

But perhaps most tantalizing to this analysis, I argue that the *Laramie Project Cycle* boldly delineates the irreducible elements of its own telling. Sandwiched between the dedication and the author's note in the script of *The Laramie Project: Ten Years Later*, a brief section called "The Facts" states:

On October 6, 1998, a gay University of Wyoming student, Matthew Shepard, left the Fireside Bar with Aaron McKinney and Russell Henderson. The following day he was discovered at the edge of town. He was tied to a fence, brutally beaten, and close to death. By the following day, Matthew's attack and the town of Laramie had become the focus of an international news story. On October 12, 1998, Matthew Shepard died at Poudre Valley Hospital in Fort Collins, Colorado. (282)

"The Facts"²⁹ sets a *suspicious* tone at the opening of *The Laramie Project* sequel, primarily, I argue, because by calling our attention to certain truth claims, the preface engenders skepticism. Though I will argue that *Ten Years Later*, through the law of seriality, ultimately draws in other irreducible elements, those "facts" outlined above serve as excellent guides for considering the modes of narrative revision in the *The Laramie Project Cycle*.

Review is a dominant mode in the polyvocal moment work that structures *The Laramie Project Cycle*. For instance, in approaching the first irreducible element proffered by "The Facts" (i.e. "On October 6, 1998, a gay University of

²⁹ I should note that a recursive interest in the "facts" of Matthew Shepard's murder manifest throughout *The Laramie Project Cycle*. For other instances, consider Matt Galloway's "just the facts" monologue, "Moment: The Essential Facts," and Catherine Connolly's monologue about "facts revealed in the trial" (109, 144, 354).

Wyoming student, Matthew Shepard, left the Fireside Bar with Aaron McKinney and Russell Henderson.”), “Moment: The Fireside” in *The Laramie Project* offers multiple accounts from the last people to see Matthew Shepard in public (107). Voices include company member Stephen Belber as he highlights his imbrication in the telling of the story, Matt Galloway the bartender who served Shepard and his assailants, Shepard’s friends Phil Labrie and Romaine Patterson who offer commentary of Matthew’s social habits, and Kristen Price, Aaron McKinney’s girlfriend who perpetuates the narrative that Matthew had come on to McKinney provoking him to concoct a plan to rob the young gay man (108-119). Galloway counters Price’s claims that Matthew initiated contact with his murderers and from a swirl of these colliding, contradictory moments, resonant truth claims emerge. Matthew Shepard *was* an openly gay University of Wyoming student. On October 6, 1998 he *was* seen at the Fireside bar. He left with Aaron McKinney and Russell Henderson. Beyond those claims staked out in “The Facts,” the din of voices resist tidy narrative encapsulation. Through closure, however, the *consumer* is imbued with meaning-making power to decide which critically important narrative details to believe.

In terms of intertextual review, one of the irreducible elements at the *center* of *The Laramie Project Cycle* is the murder of Matthew Shepard. Both plays give voice to a host of characters who recursively wonder exactly what did happen at the buck fence out past the Wal-Mart on October 6, 1998— and *why*. In my reading, *The Laramie Project*—the original play—actually provides a contained, canonical, and authoritative account of a hate crime. In “Moment: Aaron McKinney,” the

company presents the only portrayal of Aaron McKinney—the man almost universally believed responsible for Matthew’s murder—sourced from courtroom audio during McKinney’s trial. The prosecution introduces a tape recording of McKinney’s confession to sergeant Rob DeBree during which McKinney offers a fairly clear-cut gay panic narrative (251-255). He says, “We drove him out past Wal-Mart. We got there, and he starts grabbing my leg and grabbing my genitals. [...] I don’t know what the hell he was trying to do but I beat him up pretty bad. Think I killed him” (254). McKinney’s statement is interrupted by “Moment: Gay Panic” during which Zackie Salmon, an administrator at the University of Wyoming, and Rebecca Hilliker, a theater professor, reflect on McKinney’s gay panic defense, drawing parallels to Dan White’s “Twinkie defense” in his assassination of Harvey Milk and George Moscone (256). Also, in this aporia in McKinney’s narrative of the crime, Hilliker makes one of the very few references to drugs, a reference that become incredibly resonant as this story is told, when she says, “I was really scared that in the trial they were going to try and say it was a robbery, or it was about drugs. So when they used ‘gay panic’ as their defense, I felt this is good, if nothing else the truth is going to be told...the truth is coming out” (256). McKinney’s description of the murder picks back up immediately after Hilliker’s line, the juxtaposition grounding the brutal confession’s proximity to truth. McKinney provides the narrative of a hate crime— though at the time of its telling, the confession was not recognized by Wyoming or United States federal law as such.

But in this text, the irreducible element of Matthew Shepard’s murder, seemingly fixed as *something* approaching a consensual truth becomes increasingly

unstable as the serial is told. In some ways, I would argue that the dramatic impetus undergirding *The Laramie Project: Ten Years Later* is suspicion of Matthew Shepard's murder as the hate crime portrayed in *The Laramie Project*. The sequel wrestles with narrative's proximity to truth in interviews with a range of Laramie residents, some who prize the McKinney trial and the hate crime narrative as legal truth, others who espouse a range of counter-narratives (to which I will return in greater detail below), and those who wish the story of Matthew Shepard would stop being told *at all*.

In "Moment: Aaron McKinney," *Ten Years Later* offers review of McKinney's testimony from the first play. In the sequel McKinney appears in the context of a prison interview with Greg Pierotti during which the company member explains to Aaron that in *The Laramie Project* viewers hear the murderer confess to a hate crime based on his own words in trial transcripts (442). McKinney seems confused by the mediation of his testimony and insists he has little actual memory of the events of Matthew's murder because he was coming down from a methamphetamine binge. In one notable exchange, Pierotti pushes Aaron to clarify if *he* thinks his murder of Matthew was a hate crime:

Greg Pierotti: So it sounds like his being gay did have something to do with it.

Aaron McKinney: It's a possibility. The night I did it, I did have hatred for homosexuals. That mighta played a small part.

Greg Pierotti: So you're telling me hatred toward gays played a part.

Aaron McKinney: It might have played a small part, yeah.

Greg Pierotti: In your initial interview with Rob DeBree, you said he slid his hand like he was going to grab your balls and that was why you started hitting him

Aaron McKinney: I said that?

Greg Pierotti: In your interview.

Aaron McKinney: Then it might have happened. I barely remember

that interview at all. That's what I said? (450)

McKinney's coy forgetfulness and discrepant accounts of events draw attention to the instability of our understanding of Matthew's murder—an understanding largely dependent on the testimony of an untrustworthy, meth-addled, neo-Nazi. And in foregrounding that instability, the serial galvanizes other modes of re-vision to the site of aporia in the narrative of Shepard's death.

One of the most provocative *spile* narratives in *Ten Years Later* concerns Russell Henderson's involvement in Shepard's murder. Henderson is elusive in *The Laramie Project*'s rendering; he is primarily characterized as a good Mormon boy from a difficult background who fell in with the wrong crowd. But the play offers little narrative to explain how a rowdy young “follower” became a co-conspirator in a ruthless murder. In fact, the few character portraits we receive of Henderson in *The Laramie Project* come during the brief account of his trial, during which he changed his plea from not guilty to guilty in order to avoid a potential death sentence. In a humbling monologue, Henderson's grandmother begs the state and the Shepard family for mercy and for his part, Russell only speaks to acknowledge what he “did was wrong,” never giving voice to exactly what he *did* do (235).

Like Aaron McKinney, Russell Henderson appears in *Ten Years Later* in the context of a prison interview conducted by company member Stephen Belber. But unlike McKinney's interview with Pierotti, which largely serves the narrative purpose of *reviewing* his account of events, Henderson's testimony offers a new, heretofore *unheard*, story. In the *Ten Years Later* “Moment: Russell Henderson,” we first learn that Henderson and McKinney may have been “on the back end of a two-

week meth binge” when they approached Shepard at the Fireside, that Henderson’s mother was raped and abandoned to freeze to death and by reflecting on that event Russell has developed a sense of empathy for the victims of his crimes, and that Henderson had tried to stop McKinney from beating Matthew though Henderson admits “I tried to stop him but I didn’t try enough” (400, 403, 406). And when we hear from McKinney (later in the narrative time of the play), he baldly states, “I’d give my life for Russ. He didn’t do anything” (446). When Pierotti presses, “So he didn’t do anything that night?” McKinney confirms, “Nothing” (447). In this instance the spile of Russell Henderson draws attention to an aporia in the story’s telling, reminding us that in the context of *The Laramie Project* we learn very little about the man presented as the co-conspirator of one of America’s most infamous hate crimes.

At this point, I want to set aside any pretense of academic remove and present an autoethnographic account of *my* most recent experience consuming the serial of *The Laramie Project Cycle* to consider the *possible world* and *retcon* modes, and also further elucidate the law of seriality. After reading *Ten Years Later* for the first time I was shaken; I had always understood Russell Henderson to be an equal participant in Matthew Shepard’s death. If nothing else, I believed that Henderson tied Shepard to the fence leaving him to freeze, but in *Ten Years Later* he says, “Aaron told me to tie him to the fence. But I didn’t actually tie him. I just wrapped the rope around his hands. Because, you know, I figured... I wanted him to be able to leave” (402). I found that the Henderson spile fundamentally unsettled *my* understanding of the events of the murder. I do know that at no point did Russell

Henderson report that he had left the scene where a brutalized Matthew Shepard had been bound to that fence—and for that alone he is certainly *culpable* of a crime. But in that moment in which the irreducible element of Henderson’s *agency* in the event began to accrue multiple, conflicting narratives, I considered a possible world in which the nature of Henderson’s *active* role in Shepard’s murder shifted. And that moment of *suspicion* drew my attention to another irreducible element that accrued resonance in *Ten Years Later* and propelled my consumption of media beyond the proscribed confines of *The Laramie Project Cycle*: a 2004 20/20 report and the emergence of a radical possible world in which Matthew Shepard’s murder “wasn’t a hate crime, but a robbery or drug deal gone bad” (347).

Early in the first act of *Ten Years Later* a counter-narrative, a suspicious conspiracy theory, an *other* world where one of America’s most infamous hate crimes was not a hate crime *at all* emerges. In “Moment: Third and Custer,” Stephen Belber discusses the purpose of the company’s return to Laramie with a rental car agent:

Rental Car Agent: Well, I wish you luck with your project, but I do think it’s time to let the boy go. Now if you ask me, I think it was robbery and that his lifestyle was just an excuse. His lifestyle’s beside the point. It makes no difference to me.
Stephen Belber: Do you think it made a difference to his killers?
Rental Car Agent: No, I don’t. No. I think they set out to rob him, found out about his lifestyle, and then in the trial used it as an excuse... (318)

When Stephen Belber first encounters the possible world narrative that elides the hate crime irreducible element he, the stage directions note, is surprised (318). But that surprise is contextualized later in “Moment: 20/20.”

In this moment, we learn from Catherine Connolly (described in the cast notes as an “out lesbian professor, University of Wyoming” and “member of the Wyoming legislature”) that “there was a *20/20* episode that came out in two thousand and four—six years after Matthew was killed—and the implication of that TV program was that it wasn’t a hate crime, but a robbery or drug deal gone bad. And people here in Laramie at that time were pretty livid given the inaccuracies” (209, 346-347). The moment presents the story of a community re-victimized by sensationalist journalists, even offering a physical trace—a hard copy of an email mistakenly left behind by ABC News personality Elizabeth Vargas and producer Glenn Silber— in which the latter stakes out the media outlet’s agenda to unsettle the widely accepted narrative of Shepard’s murder noting, “Although Dave [O’Malley, lead investigator on the Matthew Shepard case for the Laramie Police Department] is a highly skilled investigator and was the key to solving the crime quickly, he fell into the hate crimes motivation early and our piece will ultimately discredit that flawed theory” (351). The moment gives Dave O’Malley, Jim Osborne (a friend of Shepard), and Catherine Connolly opportunities to rail against the *20/20* report as revisionist history. Connolly gets the final words in the moment in a resonant passage worth quoting in its entirety:

Catherine Connolly: (*Frustrated*) There were facts revealed in the trial, the reality of the actual confession, everything that happened in the trial gave us the truth... and we thought because it was the truth and the truth played out here—that the truth would prevail. But the reality is, that over time, that *20/20* piece has made a tremendous negative impact on how Matthew Shepard’s murder is perceived. And this is—this is personal—there’s a perception and belief now that it was a drug deal gone bad and that’s all. So you asked me how I felt?

I go catatonic after things like this. This is our history. (354-355)

Connolly insists that the truth of the Shepard hate crime was *fixed* in the legal narrative of events such that it should resist elision in the form of a possible world like *20/20*'s story. But in bringing the *20/20* story *into* the narrative space-time of *The Laramie Project Cycle*, I suggest that the serial not only assigns a historiographic function (i.e. the possible world narrative) to this *other* text, but in doing so effaces the boundaries of its own telling.

Because when I finished *Ten Years Later* I *really* wanted to see that *20/20* episode. As a graduate student in the early 21st century whose research interests include a wide array of media, I like to think I have become pretty resourceful at “finding” materials I need for research online. But for the first time in all of the research that went into the composition of this project, I was stumped. The Shepard episode was not available from any official outlets like the ABC and *20/20* archives, nor could I find the content on popular sites like YouTube. I will note that in retracing my research steps I found a readily available digest transcript of the *20/20* episode, though noticeably not the video, via ABC News.³⁰ But in that cursory first pass I visited some dark corners of the web looking for the video report—primarily extremist right-wing message boards and conspiracy theory subReddits. Ultimately, I found that the Law Library at UNC-Chapel Hill had a DVD copy of the episode. But as I slogged across the campus on a snowy December afternoon, I thought about how *inaccessible* this narrative was, a hard-to-find analogue form in a digital world, and I ultimately questioned Connolly's claims regarding the “tremendous negative

³⁰ See <http://abcnews.go.com/2020/story?id=277685&page=1>

impact” the story had “on how Matthew Shepard’s murder is perceived” beyond those fringe internet communities organized around a militant suspicion of queer propaganda (354).

And ultimately, I argue that without *Ten Years Later*, the 20/20 episode has little narrative resonance as a freestanding text. It is an episode of a sensational television news digest, hardly a medium, form, or genre I associate with lasting import in the discourse of cultural memory. But when imbricated in the network of *The Laramie Project Cycle*, the 20/20 episode takes on greater narrative gravity functioning as possible world or perhaps a *retcon* depending upon your reading.

My reading continued. As I researched the critical response to the 20/20 piece, I learned that one of the producers of the episode, Stephen Jimenez, was the author of a 2013 true crime narrative *The Book of Matt: Hidden Truths About the Murder of Matthew Shepard*. In brief *The Book of Matt* offers a radical cacophony of counter-narratives, all of which circle the irreducible element of Shepard’s murder. Matthew Shepard is presented as a prescription drug and crystal meth addict, the victim of brutal sexual violence at multiple junctures in his brief life, and near the end of his life, a chronically depressed meth dealer who not only *knew* Aaron McKinney before October 6, 1998, but had perhaps even had a sexual relationship with his killer. Oblique references to stories of a “drug deal gone bad” in *Ten Years Later* come into sharper focus in the context of *The Book of Matt*. Only by admitting the contingency of the hate crime narrative *as a narrative* does Jimenez create the rhetorical space necessary to consider a possible world—a world that is possibly our

own—where the murder of Matthew Shepard was not motivated by one man’s blinding hatred for gay men.

Some critics have suggested that *The Book of Matt* functions more like a *retcon* in its attempt to displace the hate crime narrative. But I want to push back against that claim because, as journalist and cultural critic Andrew Sullivan notes in response to characterizations of Jimenez’s work as revisionist history, “No one should be afraid of the truth. Least of all gay people...Shouldn’t we understand better why and how?” (Jimenez vi). In my consumption of this serialized narrative, *The Book of Matt* opened up productive possibilities for inquiry, providing more fulsome accounts of irreducible elements like the elusive “drug deal gone bad” story at the edges of *Ten Years Later*. *The Book of Matt* never *effaces* knowledge, as is most often the case in the *retcon*, but rather presents a journalistic account profoundly *resonant with* though not *proscribed by* *The Laramie Project Cycle*.

In my estimate, the *retcon* that resonates most profoundly through *The Laramie Project Cycle* is couched in the rhetorical context of political discourse. In *Ten Years Later*, Beth Loffreda, University of Wyoming professor and author of the book *Losing Matt Shepard*, first notes that “a Congresswoman from North Carolina just claimed that calling Matthew Shepard’s murder a hate crime was a ‘hoax.’” (386). Later in the play, the Congressperson in question, Virginia Foxx is presented without the mediation of reenactment via projected video when she says:

The hate crimes bill, that’s called the Matthew Shepard bill. It is named after a very unfortunate incident that happened where a young man was killed. But we know that the young man was killed in the commitment of a robbery. It wasn’t because he was gay. This bill was named for him. The Hate Crimes bill was named for him. But it—it’s really a hoax. (436)

Foxx's "hoax" remarks are the retcon of *The Laramie Project*. Whereas *The Book of Matt* opens up productive, generative lines of inquiry and narrative possibility, Foxx effaces narrative. In the second act of *Ten Years Later*, Matthew's mother Judy Shepard recalls, "When Virginia Foxx called Matt's death 'a hoax...'" drawing attention to the rhetorical act of the retcon—in this case to dismiss a tragic death as a hoax, effacing not just the "hate crime narrative" but the irreducible element of Matthew's life and murder (470). As my engagement with the irreducible elements of *The Laramie Project Cycle* illustrated to me, a sense of possibility is important, if not integral to the project of history. Rhetoric that attempts to contain the past or foreclose narrative possibility ultimately does disservice to truth, particularly if we value truth-as-narrative-told rather than truth-as-mystical-communion with the past.

When I first told friends and colleagues that I was researching *The Laramie Project Cycle* and the murder of Matthew Shepard from a historiographic perspective, almost inevitably someone would ask, "Do you still think it was a hate crime?" Initially, my response was canned, "What I think doesn't matter. The *story* of the murder as hate crime is what interests me." And from my perspective that resonant *story* has been marshaled to achieve social progress; if absolutely *nothing* else the narrative of Shepard's murder as hate crime galvanized a decade of political discourse, ultimately leading to the *Matthew Shepard and James Byrd, Jr. Hate Crimes Prevention Act* becoming law on October 28, 2009 (*Laramie Project* 472). As I sobbed through the 2013 documentary *Matthew Shepard is a Friend of Mine*, I found consolation that a young man's life could at least be memorialized in narrative, in legislation that aims to prevent the future brutalization of others.

And yet, the story's proximity to *truth-as-the-past-happened* does matter. To me. My own narrative identity, shaped by that memory of coming out and having my queerness contextualized in terms of danger, victimization, and the taboo, was certainly impacted by the Shepard hate crime story, as I know countless others were as well. I could not agree with Andrew Sullivan more when he notes that especially as queer consumers, we should not be afraid to interrogate the verity of the hate crime narrative because of all intersectional identities, we should understand the damage inflicted by ordering one's narrative identity around false stories. Returning to the irreducible elements of our histories should not provoke knee-jerk assumptions of a revisionist history/retcon project. By considering the range of historiographic work re-vision performs through its different modes in an open-ended consideration of history, we might refuse to let stories, no matter how convenient they are to dominant cultural narratives, become fixed. Rather, as I will examine in greater detail in the next chapter, by foregrounding the embodied seriality of our own narrative identities we also figure history as a living narrative—raucous, polyvocal, and ultimately unpredictable in its semantic travels through time and space.

CHAPTER 3: ON THE MAKE: TRUMAN CAPOTE, SERIALITY, AND THE PERFORMANCE OF CELEBRITY

In a letter written to publisher Bennett Cerf in late September of 1958 Truman Capote promises an imminent masterpiece. He writes that the work is “a large novel, my magnum opus [... it] is called, ‘Answered Prayers’; and if all goes well, I think it will answer mine” (*Too Brief* 257-258). Over 25 years later in August 1984, when a friend inquired about Truman’s progress on the still-unfinished manuscript, Capote exhaustedly replied, “Let’s not talk about *that*” (*Capote* 544). Then after a moment of reflection he added:

I dream about it and my dream is as real as stubbing your toe. All the characters I’ve lived with are in it, so brilliant, so real. Part of my brain says, ‘The book’s so beautiful, so well constructed—there’s never been such a beautiful book.’ Then a second part of my brain says, ‘Nobody can write that well.’ (544)

When Capote died on August 25, 1984, only three chapters intended for inclusion in *Answered Prayers* were found and each of these had previously been published in *Esquire* in 1975 and 1976 (*AP* xiv).³¹

³¹ A fourth piece entitled “Mojave” was initially intended to be the second chapter of *Answered Prayers*, but years after it was written, Capote “decided that it didn’t belong in

In his diary from the mid-1970s, James Michener recorded his initial reaction to the publication of the *Esquire* chapters. He writes, “I am sure that if he can bring off the whole, *Answered Prayers* will be the roman à clef of my decade, an American Proust-like work which will be judged to have summarized our epoch” (11). Capote’s sometimes nemesis and perennial frenemy Gore Vidal had a much lower opinion of Capote’s potential in *Answered Prayers* noting that “[i]f you are going to be a writer along the Proustian [...] line, you’ve got to know your cast. [...] He thought everyone was just like him: made up, on the make, malicious” (Plimpton 444). Vidal’s accusation that Capote was merely a vapid poseur enmeshed in Manhattan café society was certainly not a unique criticism.³² And in fact, some contemporary scholars, such as Peter G. Christensen, have issued a call to “bury *Answered Prayers*” so that Capote scholarship may move forward to productively explore other aspects of the artist’s legacy (Waldmeir 223). However, in his dismissal of what many of Capote’s contemporaries consider Truman’s most ambitious project, Vidal gestures toward a more dynamic means of analyzing *Answered Prayers* and Capote the public figure: as a serialized transmedia text distributed via the performance we call celebrity.

The fundamental supposition undergirding popular and scholarly characterizations of *Answered Prayers* as a failed or unfinished text is the

the book” (*AP* xiv). It was subsequently published as a short story in *Music for Chameleons* in 1980.

³² For similar critiques by the likes of Kurt Vonnegut, Norman Mailer, and Marguerite Young, see George Plimpton, Truman Capote: In Which Various Friends, Enemies, Acquaintances, and Detractors Recall His Turbulent Career, New York: Nan A. Talese, 1997.

hegemonic function of the “authorial work”—the empty, idealized signifier of an author and her oeuvre that W.B. Worthen identifies as a “site of regulation, containment, [and] a way to fix and stabilize meanings by predetermining the range of appropriate interpretation, of licensed reading” (14). However, a “text,” as Jerome McGann suggests, “is not a ‘material thing’ but a material event or set of events, a point in time (or movement in space) where certain communicative interchanges are being practiced” (21). So a text defies the closure inscribed in the material object of a work by placing emphasis on the act of composition or *performance*. Henry Bial contends that “[t]he term ‘performance’ most commonly refers to a tangible, bounded event that involves the presentation of rehearsed artistic action. [...] But performance is also a concept, a way of understanding all types of phenomenon” (59). I find the figuration of performance as “all types of phenomena” provocative, but rapacious. And yet, analysis of material production and distribution of both text and narrative is vital to my inquiry of seriality. As Clifford Geertz notes:

The great virtue of the extension of the notion of text beyond things written on paper or carved into stone is that it trains attention on precisely this phenomenon: on how the inscription of action is brought about, what its vehicles are and how they work, and on what the fixation of meaning from the flow of events—history from what happened, thought from thinking, culture from behavior—implies for sociological interpretation. (31).

To delineate more precise boundaries for the ways I use the term “performance” with regards to literary and sociological interpretation, I return to Paul Ricoeur’s description of “narrative identities” in *Time and Narrative*. As the only sufficient sites for investigating the correspondence between the “aporetics of time and the

poetics of narrative,” I read “narrative identities” as the conception of human experience as a serial enterprise (274). We are each embodied serials, the nuclei of shifting, separate, but interrelated stories. The human experience is one of constant consumption, negotiation, and presentation of narrative.

So then, I want to consider *Answered Prayers* not as an unrealized work, but as a performative, narrative text that Truman Capote—the artist “on the make”—enacted serially from its germination in the late 1950s through his death in 1984 and beyond. To contextualize the performance of *Answered Prayers* as symptomatic of Capote’s textual corpus, it is necessary to analyze his lifelong manipulation of various media to craft a complex metanarrative.

In this instance, I use “metanarrative” to refer to a semantic resonance that encompasses work, text, and performance. The vast number of films, monographs, plays, oral histories, and biographical profiles about Capote indicates a level of signification in his print oeuvre, in his character, and in his general “essence” that defies definitive representation and hermeneutic closure. Many “iconic” artists and public figures may lay claim to a metanarrative, but in this instance, I contend that Capote began his career by cannily orchestrating a public persona intended to reflect a *genuine* narrative identity. I argue that the plurality of Capote’s choreographed performances of author, celebrity, queer, sophisticate, and other roles, rendered his public persona/metanarrative more believably *real* because the fluid, contradictory, and overlapping texts that constitute his celebrity render something like the swirl of competing narratives that constitute our narrative identities and our felt sense of subjectivity as discussed in the first chapter. But as his career progressed, the

boundaries between roles and Capote's agency in the performance became increasingly troubled. And for many contemporary consumers, this blurring of the artist with his art has become a central feature of the Capote metanarrative.

So to approach *Answered Prayers* as a serialized performance, I first want to consider the two cultural roles most often used to frame Capote: celebrity and author. In *Celebrity and Power*, P. David Marshall configures the celebrity as a receptacle, stripped of its subjectivity so that its "denotative level of meaning [...] is the empty structure of the material reality of the actual person" (56-57). For Marshall the celebrity is a narrative façade, a construct of market forces that obfuscates the narrative identity of a subject so that any attempt to "uncover the 'real' person behind the public persona" or the "material reality" of the embodied celebrity figure, is quixotic (57). Based solely on semantics, the "author" may seem vested with more agency (i.e. *Authority*) in determining the presentation of his or her narrative identity in the public sphere. Yet scholars like Loren Glass draw upon the problematized notion of Authority posited in Foucault's "What Is an Author?" and Barthes's "The Death of the Author" to suggest that the author, much like the celebrity, is a narrative construct that belies any real sense of the subject it purports to signify.³³

³³ In *Authors Inc.*, Glass suggests that Foucault, Barthes, and Stéphane Mallarmé, despite their differences, "celebrate the liberation of the text from the author as opening up a new terrain of linguistic indeterminacy and free play" (4-5). However, Glass also notes that the call to overthrow the power of the tyrannical Author paradoxically illustrates the "historically variable functions of the author" while simultaneously elevating writers such as Foucault, Barthes, and Mallarmé to the iconic status of Author, themselves.

In the context of 20th and 21st -century cultural production when popular authors are regularly described as brands (e.g. John Grisham, Danielle Steel, Stephen King), both celebrity *and* author function as *signs* in that they are constructs that signify something other than an individual's narrative identity or subjectivity. Just as in Foucault's account of the author, celebrity also provides "a way in which meaning can be housed and categorized into something that provides a source and origin for the meaning" (Marshall 56-57). In this sense, the celebrity's power to "organize the legitimate and illegitimate domains of the personal and individual within the social" only becomes activated by "cultural 'investment' in the construction of the celebrity sign" (57).

This "cultural investment" necessary to the legibility of the celebrity sign describes the *polylogism* intrinsic to my account of seriality in that consumers are vested with meaning-making power via ongoing, circuitous exchanges with producers, texts, and subjects *over time*. Marshall aligns "cultural investment" with connotation, a secondary signification that builds upon the denotative meaning of the celebrity *sign* (i.e. the meaning ascribed to the imagined intentions of textual producers) to create specialized meanings that represent varying interests.³⁴ Again I find Wai Chi Dimock's theory of resonance a more efficient model for conceiving of the ways in which meanings accrue around a text over time, calcifying some

³⁴ Barthes suggests in *Mythologies* that the sign takes on generalized meaning when the connotative meaning that reflects the interests of the ruling classes is "conflated with the denotative level, so that social members no longer see the origins of the construction of representation and meaning and consider the given meaning as the real or natural meaning" (Marshall 57). However, Marshall contends that the construction of cultural signs is more complicated than the Marxist model outlined by Barthes because "[t]he term *connotation* indicates and implicates [...] a degree of indeterminacy of meaning in any sign" (57).

meanings while generating conflicting, overlapping, and symbiotic meanings as a text traverses space-time. The unwieldy resonance of the text through space-time, in this case the text of Truman Capote's public persona, is what signifies its *literariness*.

The *celebrity-Author*, and Capote in particular, resides in a highly unstable cultural space. He is the celebrity who inspires attempts to contain an ever-elusive and perhaps illusory subjectivity, but he is also, as Glass notes, an "individual authorial consciousness as elaborated by the practice of modernist authorship stubbornly persist[ing] as something more than an empty structure, complicating the easy dismissal of the celebrity's subjectivity [...]" (4). The performance of Truman Capote certainly relied on belief in the individualized capacity of the Author; for instance in "Nocturnal Turnings," Capote writes, "I'm not a saint yet. I'm an alcoholic. I'm a drug addict. I'm homosexual. I'm a genius" (*Chameleons* 263). So I find approaching Capote as a either celebrity—a mere receptacle of projected cultural desires— or as an Author—a *subject* imbued with the genius to manipulate language— problematic.

In *Star Authors*, Joe Moran offers an intervention by imbuing the hybrid celebrity-Author with a modicum of agency because unlike other cultural actors "authors actively negotiate their own celebrity rather than having it simply imposed upon them" (10). In 2015, when creators frame social media texts like Beyoncé's Instagram or the Twitter feed of most public figures as an intimate expression of the celebrity's agency in shaping a public persona, Moran's argument for Authorial exceptionalism seems obsolete. But in the context of Capote's 20th-century career, I

argue that Truman subscribed to something akin to Moran's thesis. Capote seemingly *reveled* in the ambiguity and indeterminacy that the liminal identity of celebrity-Author afforded him. In fact, I contend that Capote actively situated himself in that uncertain space in the 20th-century American cultural landscape in an effort to retain the prestige of agency that Authority afforded as he performed a celebrity persona as enduring and resonant as any of his prose texts.

In an interview with Lawrence Grobel in the early 1980s, Capote tells a commonly related anecdote about the publication of his first short story. Capote says:

I made a terrible mistake when I was about ten years old. The *Mobile Register* had a contest for readers to submit something that they had written and I took a whole lot of my journal, which was absolutely, literally true, about Mr. and Mrs. Lee, Harper Lee's mother and father, who lived very near. [...] Mrs. Lee was quite an eccentric character. Mrs. Lee was wonderful, but Mrs. Lee [...] was an endless gossip. So I wrote something called "Mrs. Busybody" about Mrs. Lee and I sent it to the *Mobile Register*. I won second prize and they printed the whole thing and it was just ghastly. It was sort of like when I began publishing those chapters of *Answered Prayers* and everybody was so upset. (53)

However, in a subsequent interview with George Plimpton, Truman's childhood acquaintance Eugene Walter offers a conflicting narrative. Walter says:

The *Mobile Press-Register* had a children's page called the Sunshine Page. It was for children who wanted to write, or thought they wanted to write[...] When he was a member of the Sunshine Club, Truman won a competition for a piece he wrote called "Old Mr. Busybody." It was to be published on the Sunshine Page [...] But his aunt realized that he had written about their next-door neighbor and called off the publication. Truman had used an eccentric recluse for Mr. Busybody. [...] Truman pretended all of his life that "Old Mr. Busybody" had been published... that his first publication was on the Sunshine Page. [...] But it was never published. Nobody knows what happened to "Old Mr. Busybody," because his aunt grabbed it in a hurry and ran it back to Monroeville. Because Truman said in some interviews here

and there that his first published piece was the Sunshine Club's "Old Mr. Busybody," there are people working on their doctorates, or whatever, searching the files of the *Mobile Press-Register* to this day. (16)

The conflicting truth claims of Capote's and Walter's respective accounts are ripe for close reading, but such a project is ultimately irrelevant. For celebrity-Author Truman Capote, the scandal of his first publication, his proximity to and intimate knowledge of his friend and colleague Harper Lee, the testimony to the "absolutely, literally" truthfulness of his non-fiction accounts, and the narrative that could verify his claims to child prodigy are all integral to the façade of his celebrity. Thus, the notion that Walters's anecdote in juxtaposition might allow a truer vision of the "real" Capote is misguided. I contend that Truman consciously manipulated his account to ornament the edifice of his celebrity while simultaneously inviting rebuttals so that he might wrap another layer of scandal and contradiction around his serially composed persona. In an exemplary performance of the celebrity-Author, Capote at once asserts the importance of his subjectivity (his individual genius) while simultaneously allowing himself to be objectified as a symbol of gossip, bitchiness, and scandal.

The June 2, 1947 issue of *Life* magazine featured an article on a group of young writers with the potential to become, what Gore Vidal termed, "the next Hemingway-Fitzgerald generation" (*Capote* 130-131). As one of the most powerful arbiters of mid-twentieth century celebrity, *Life*'s attention endowed the authors in its list with a great deal of cultural caché. Among the writers featured, including Jean Stafford, Thomas Heggen, and Vidal, each had already published at least one book— except for Capote ("Young U.S. Writers" 75-83). Yet, it was Truman whose

full-page photograph led the article (75). Bennett Cerf told Capote's biographer Gerald Clarke, "Truman had managed to promote that full-page picture for himself, and how he did it, I don't know to this day" (*Capote* 131). However, Clarke simply contends, "Truman instinctively knew how to seduce the camera [...] and the editors of *Life*, like many other editors in years to come, could scarcely avoid giving him the spotlight he craved" (131).

Clarke's insinuation that Capote, from very early in his career, learned how to manipulate the machinery of his own celebrity by using his body as text is perhaps best substantiated in the context of his first novel, *Other Voices, Other Rooms*. The novel, an obliquely autobiographical bildungsroman, charts the sexual awakening of the effeminate adolescent, Joel Knox, amidst a forsaken, gothic plantation and a supporting cast of grotesque non-traditional family members. The content of the book, with its treatments of male homoeroticism, gender transitivity, and sexually charged youth, drew many disparaging reviews.³⁵ The critic for *Time* magazine wrote, "[The book] is immature and its theme is calculated to make the flesh crawl [...]" while the *Library Journal* deemed it full of "illusory fancies of sick brains [...] [n]ot recommended for libraries" (*"Spare"* 102; Trimmier 95). However, the work was largely overshadowed by Capote's performance *surrounding* the text. As Clarke notes, "his photograph on the back cover probably caused more comment than his prose" (*Capote* 158).

³⁵ Though I highlight some of the most scathing reviews, overall, *Other Voices, Other Rooms* received a generally mixed response. For a full summary of the critical response to the work, see Gerald Clarke, *Capote: A Biography*, New York: Carroll & Graf, 1988, 155-158.

In *Lovers and Beloveds*, Gary Richards describes Capote's pose in the infamous dust-jacket photo of *Other Voices, Other Rooms*:

Languidly sprawled on an ornately carved Victorian settee, Capote turns a provocative, pouting face to the camera. His left hand holds a cigarette while his right hand lies draped across his crotch[...] almost all elements of [Harold] Halma's photograph work to establish utter passivity[...] Indeed, the photograph seems deliberately to counter the image of a similarly dressed Capote that appeared the previous year in *Life*. [...] Except for the replicated penetrative gaze [...] the later photograph removes all comparable activeness from Capote, presenting instead a brazen performance of one of the most frequently recurring gay types: the passive, effeminate, foppish gay man. (32)

Some of Richards's suppositions are skewed by his essay's general argument that Halma's photograph offered Capote's body as a keystone for the Foucauldian model of sexuality espoused by *Other Voices, Other Rooms* in which "gender transitivity and homosexuality [are] mutually constitutive" (33). However, Richards's vivid description of the photo provides insight into the scandal surrounding its reception in 1948.

According to Clarke, soon after the novel's release, the photograph became ubiquitous, an immediate *irreducible element* in the Capote metanarrative that appeared in newspapers, magazines, Random House advertisements, and as promotional posters in bookstores (158). Harold Halma purportedly overheard a conversation between two women studying one of the blown-up images in the window of a Fifth Avenue bookstore in which one woman said, "I'm telling you, he's just young," and the other responded, "And I'm telling you, if he isn't young, he's dangerous!" (158). When Halma's account was related to Truman, Capote expressed indignation, but "repeated the exchange to anyone who would listen,"

thus propagating the public perception of his persona while simultaneously shaping it (158). Years after it appeared, Capote disavowed any responsibility for the publication of the photograph that first characterized his celebrity. He said:

I had nothing to do with it. [...] They wanted a picture of me and I was in California, so I told my editor, Mr. Linscott [...] to go to my apartment and in the desk drawer there were quite a few photographs of me, just pick one that he liked. [...] I didn't see anything wrong with it. [...] But I guess it assumes that I'm lying on the sofa and more or less beckoning somebody to climb on top of me. (Grobel 38-39).

Counter to this narrative, Clarke states, "Truman claimed that the camera had caught him off guard, but in fact he had posed himself and was responsible for both the picture and the publicity" (*Capote* photo 27).

Despite conflicting accounts regarding Truman's influence in the composition and distribution of the Halma photograph, I again want to emphasize the performative aspects of the text. Capote's disavowal of agency imbues him with the notoriety of the celebrity forged by cultural investment while simultaneously, the contradictions regarding his calculated construction of his celebrity allow the Author to surreptitiously temper the qualities he desires in his public persona (e.g. canny, mercurial, transgressive, etc.). But perhaps most significantly, the attention paid to the Halma photograph allowed Capote to begin establishing, on a large scale, what Erving Goffman defines as "front"—"the expressive equipment of a standard kind intentionally or unwittingly employed by the individual during his performance" (63). Goffman defines "performance" as "all the activity of an individual which occurs during a period marked by his continuous presence before a particular set of observers and which has some influence on the observers" (63). So, the notoriety

afforded by the publication of *Other Voices, Other Rooms* firmly established Capote's observers as the American literati (and a growing portion of the general American public) and his personal front as an expanding set of expressive equipment including his body, sexuality, celebrity persona, and literary work.

In the late 1940s and early 1950s, as Capote's celebrity became more firmly established— especially in New York literary circles and Manhattan café society— Truman became increasingly shrewd about maintaining the agency that being a celebrity-Author afforded him. Andreas Brown (proprietor of the Manhattan landmark, the Gotham Book Mart) notes that Truman “was very sensitive and very alert to what the critics were saying” (Plimpton 438). Brown continues:

A considerable school of thought in contemporary American criticism at the time concluded that American creative writing had become stagnated—stuck in a kind of groove before, during, and right after World War II—and that there hadn't been any breakthroughs in style or concept. There was a lot being written about that—Trilling, Aldridge, Wilson—and Capote seemed to latch on to that. He was very sensitive to the idea of making a significant stylistic breakthrough. (438)

Perhaps the drive to make a “significant stylistic breakthrough” can account for Capote's writing across multiple forms including a collection of short stories *A Tree of Night and Other Stories* in 1949, both a novel and play called *The Grass Harp* in 1951 and 1952, respectively, a screenplay, *Beat the Devil* in 1953, and a Broadway musical, *House of Flowers* in 1954 (Long 49-64). Ultimately, Capote seemed unsatisfied with his work in each of these forms, until he made another formal shift in 1956. Brown notes, “Certainly he talked about [his breakthrough]...perhaps too much—the idea that he discovered it—this combination of journalism and fiction, bringing it together” (438).

Capote's "breakthrough" was a form he would later christen the "nonfiction novel." In an interview with Gloria Steinem in *Glamour*, Capote said:

Journalism always moves along on a horizontal plane, telling a story, while fiction—good fiction—moves vertically, taking you deeper and deeper into character and events. By treating a real event with fictional techniques (something that cannot be done by a journalist until he *learns* to write good fiction), it's possible to make this kind of synthesis. (239)

Though Capote's fusion of fiction-writing techniques and nonfiction reportage, is most often associated with 1966's *In Cold Blood*, I suggest that two texts, *The Muses Are Heard* (1956) and "The Duke in His Domain" (1957) are prototypes for the more resonant later work. In these pieces, Capote the Author sketches rhetorical techniques that would dominate his later works. Most significant among these rhetorical strategies is the assertion of the Author's narrative sovereignty in meting out truth claims. By situating the Author as an emplotter of truth, Capote seemingly reduces himself to a talented stenographer of history while surreptitiously expanding his narrative dominion beyond his own celebrity persona to the world in which his celebrity moves.

The Muses Are Heard was first serialized in two issues of *The New Yorker* in October 1956. Random House collected the work in a single hard cover volume at the end of the same year with the curious subtitle, "an account." The work documented Capote's travels with director Robert Breen's globetrotting Everyman Opera— a mostly African-American company— as they performed George and Ira Gershwin's *Porgy and Bess* in the Soviet Union in late 1955 and early 1956, becoming the first American arts delegation to enter the U.S.S.R. since the Bolshevik Revolution. Most of the players involved— both Soviet and American—

aimed to position the production as a historic event that would part the Iron Curtain and usher in a new era of mutual cultural exchange. However, Capote's "account" was not the chronicle of a momentous happening that many involved with the project had hoped for, but a biting satire that laid bare the egos, petty conflicts, and absurd posturing of the "makers of history."

In 1973, Capote wrote, "*The Muses Are Heard* is the one work of mine I can truly claim to have enjoyed writing, an activity I've seldom associated with pleasure" ("Dogs Bark" 308). Clarke suggests, "what gave him such pleasure was the tone of the writing, which mirrored his lunchtime conversations at its best—observant, gossipy, bitchy, and always entertaining" (*Capote* 294). And the character—the celebrity Truman Capote—is very present in *Muses*. He is the aloof, casual, but alert observer that is the counterpoint to hardboiled *New York Post* columnist Leonard Lyons, who inserts himself into the event at every turn as a choreographer of history. Capote writes, "Lyons had gone so far as to discuss with the cast the kind of action he would like. He wanted them to traipse around Brest Litovsk singing spirituals. 'It's a good story and it's good showmanship. I'm surprised Breen didn't think of it'" (*Muses* 107). Truman is the protagonist of *The Muses Are Heard*; the narrative is filtered through his first-person limited perspective. However, in direct opposition to Lyons, who is perpetually embroiled in the company's mishaps and pratfalls, Capote places himself as an Author above the fray, shaping his narrative, in his words, like "some Czarist *objet*, a Fabergé contrivance [...] that trembled with some flittering, precise, mischievous melody" ("Dogs Bark" 308).

In fact, Capote perhaps best casts his own image as the protagonist by delineating what he is not. He is the sophisticated and capable foil to Lenore Gershwin, Ira Gershwin's wife, who seems to tag along with the troupe merely for a free ride. Capote characterizes her as an *arriviste* with suspect taste who is "devoted to diamonds, and wears them, quite a few, at both breakfast and dinner" and whose speech is haphazardly plastered with terms of endearment like "darling" and "love." Capote configures himself against Wilva and Robert Breen, whose inflated sense of the historical moment renders them caricatures of American ambassadors who are incapable of connecting with their troupe, their Soviet hosts, and ultimately the audiences who attend the performances of *Porgy and Bess*. In contrast, Truman wanders the streets of Leningrad with gaggles of *real* Russian citizens in tow, befriends a young mathematician named Stefan Orlov who introduces him to the "workingman's" bars, and casually shops on the Nevsky Prospekt (*Muses* 125-127, 145, 135-138). Finally, Capote places himself on a plane entirely separate from the cast members of *Porgy and Bess* who he describes as "children on a visit to the neighbors" and whose buffoonery, much like stock gags from a minstrel show, provides many of *The Muses Are Heard*'s crudest punch-lines (133).

Beyond sculpting his persona as a counterpoint to the other characters in *Muses*, Capote also defined his *work* in opposition to that of the other Authors featured in the text. Truman describes the Leningrad opening of *Porgy and Bess* as a clash of cultures marred by conflicting individual agendas and only marginally redeemed by the underlying strength of the art itself. He concedes that the production was "[n]ot the 'bombshell' conquest the proprietors of Everyman Opera

had expected; but a victory of finer significance, one that would mature and matter” (175). However, when confronted with the questions, ““How did it go? What really happened?”” he is reluctant to reply “with any honesty” giving “a radiant account of the opera’s overall reception” (175). So when American news reports are conveyed to the troupe describing the performance as “fabulous” and a “tremendous hit,” Capote questions his closest friend on the trip, the Breens’ secretary Nancy Ryan, who responds, “Of course [...] that’s not *exactly* how it arrived. The Breens did a little adding and editing. [...] Well [...] why not make a good thing better?” (178). By calling attention to the manufactured narratives of the Breens and Leonard Lyons, Capote positions himself as the sole purveyor of truth and the only Author capable of recognizing the “fine significance” of the whole endeavor.

After *The Muses Are Heard* appeared (to almost unanimous critical acclaim), Capote was quick to align his work with that of Lillian Ross, a pioneer of what would become known as New Journalism, whose *New Yorker* pieces “Portrait of Hemingway” and *Picture* were widely celebrated in the mid-1950s (Clarke *Capote* 294-295). Capote’s “contributions” to the fledgling field of New Journalism included the reordering and conflation of events and characters for the sake of narrative quality, acts of ventriloquism in which he placed his own eloquent phrases in the mouths of “characters,” and in at least one case, the fabrication of an entire scene (294). Many of his fellow travelers, especially Leonard Lyons, were offended by Capote’s portrayal of them, but Clarke contends that Truman “recorded the things people actually said, not the things they wanted history to believe they had said” (294). And while Capote maintained that “every word of it was true,” Nancy

Ryan noted, “He fiddled with things[...] but he didn’t destroy basic truth or genuine spirit at all” (Grobel 112, Clarke *Capote* 294).

As Clarke suggests, *Muses* was a popular and critical success due in part to the textual performance of the Capote persona—the sharp-tongued, catty, and raucously entertaining celebrity whose individual brilliance allowed him to rub elbows with tastemakers such as the Guggenheims and the Vanderbilts, but also with Authors like Tennessee Williams and Willa Cather. Most important to his performance of the celebrity-Author, *The Muses Are Heard* was a forceful assertion of Capote’s *authenticity*. By contrasting himself with “fabricators of history” like Leonard Lyons and insisting that his unique gifts as an Author allowed him to render truth claims even *truer* for his reader, Capote augmented his celebrity front as an arbiter of truth.

Truman seized another opportunity to entrench this aspect of his front shortly after the publication of *The Muses Are Heard*. He learned that Warner Brothers was shooting a big-budget movie called *Sayonara*— directed by Joshua Logan and starring Marlon Brando— in the Japanese city of Kyoto (Clarke *Capote* 298). Capote anticipated great comic potential in the interactions among Logan, the eccentric Brando, what Truman assumed would be a bumbling production company, and their Japanese hosts. But, perhaps for the first time, he discovered that the celebrity-Author persona he was crafting via the curated accrual of narratives could not always be wielded with perfect control. Before Capote arrived in Kyoto, Joshua Logan had him banned from the set of *Sayonara* and explicitly warned Brando not

to speak with Truman (301). In his memoir, *Movie Stars, Real People, and Me*, Logan expresses his rancor for Capote. He writes:

The Muses Are Heard was vicious and personally humiliating to everyone, especially Ira Gershwin and Leonard Lyons. It treated human beings like bugs to be squashed underfoot. And Truman would have even juicier fodder to chew on with us. Boorish Hollywood invades Japan, and with golden ladies' man Marlon Brando. I knew from his conversation at many parties that he had it in for Brando and wanted to shatter his powerful image. [...] But with all our protests, I had a sickening feeling that what little Truman wanted, little Truman would get. (101)

Though Logan could do his best to keep Capote away from the set of *Sayonara*, he ultimately proved incapable of keeping him away from Brando.

Warned by Logan that Capote was “after him,” Brando, who had often voiced his contempt for the press, responded simply, “My soul is a private place,” and invited Truman to dinner in his hotel suite. Capote arrived at Brando’s room with nothing but a bottle of vodka and when he emerged over five hours later, he wrote in his journal, “What an experience. And how he loves to talk—and *such* a vocabulary: he sounds like an ‘educated Negro’—very anxious to display all the long words he’s learned. He talked nonstop, from 7:15 to 12:30 in the morning” (Manso 429-430). “The Duke in His Domain,” Capote’s intimate profile of Brando, was published in *The New Yorker* in November of 1956 and incited a public brouhaha. Walter Winchell, pioneer of the gossip column, said the piece was “the type of confession usually confined to an analyst’s couch,” Brando’s sister Jocelyn said the work was a “well-written, bitchy hatchet job,” and gossip columnist Dorothy Kilgallen called it a “vivisection” (Winchell, Manso 433, Clarke *Capote*

303). *The New Yorker* editor William Shawn, however, congratulated Capote saying, “Thank you for writing this piece—or, to come right out with it, masterpiece” (303).

In the profile, Capote eviscerates the celebrity persona of Marlon Brando. Largely parroting Brando’s own words, Capote unfolded the details of his evening with the celebrity, from the bitchiest of gossip to the most intimate personal confessions. Brando’s struggle with weight gain, disdain for show business, sexual dalliances with both men and women, feelings about other “movie stars,” “inability to love anyone,” and manipulation of friends are rendered in vivid detail (“*Duke*” 182-183, 197, 198, 200-201, 205, 206-207). But perhaps most emotionally damaging to Brando was the public disclosure of his mother’s destructive alcoholism and his ensuing abandonment of her (Clarke *Capote* 303).

Brando biographer Peter Manso notes that, “Despite the reams of copy previously written about Brando, never before had the elusive actor been so plumbed in print” (433). Just as he had behind the Iron Curtain, in “The Duke in His Domain,” Capote approached an evasive and inscrutable subject and rendered it knowable with seemingly little effort. Again, the Author Capote asserts his subjectivity and uniquely keen perception. The clamor of response was part of the textual performance and Truman reveled in it (430-431). Highlighting the performativity of the entire “Duke” affair Truman said:

The secret to the art of interviewing—and it is an art—is to let the other person think he’s interviewing you. [...] You tell him about yourself, and slowly you spin your web so that he tells you everything. That’s how I trapped Marlon. (Clarke *Capote* 302)

Brando later confirmed Capote’s description of events saying, “The little bastard spent half the night telling me all his problems [...] I figured the least I could do

was tell him a few of mine” (302). But Truman’s problems are absent from “The Duke in His Domain” just as the character of Capote is similarly deemphasized in comparison to the narrator of *The Muses Are Heard*. Perhaps as he considered his prototypes and honed his methodologies for the composition of his next nonfiction work, Capote realized that as both his celebrity and Author personas accrued narrative gravity over time, he would have to carefully partition each aspect of the composite identity to achieve his desired stylistic breakthrough.

To this point, Truman later said, “The great accomplishment of *In Cold Blood* is that I never appear once. There’s never an *I* in it at all” (Grobel 116). Though the “I” may have been absent in the work, it certainly was not absent in the text. Many scholars and popular biographers have examined Capote’s immense personal investment in the composition of *In Cold Blood*, so I will not treat the subject in any depth here.³⁶ I generally agree with scholars who suggest that the text marks a bouleversement in Capote’s life and work. But I argue that Capote’s textual production of *In Cold Blood* was particularly significant in that it damaged his narrative identity as a celebrity-Author by fundamentally distorting his notions of Authorial agency and muddling his control over his celebrity persona. More specifically, I mean that Capote’s emplotment of the lives of murderers Richard Hickock and Perry Smith inflated his conception of Authorial power and

³⁶ For in-depth analysis see George Plimpton, *Truman Capote: In Which Various Friends, Enemies, Acquaintances, and Detractors Recall His Turbulent Career*, New York: Nan A. Talese, 1997, 166-226; David S. Caudill, “The Year of Truman Capote: Legal Ethics and *In Cold Blood*,” *Oregon Law Review*, 86(2007):295; and Gerald Clarke, *Capote: A Biography*, New York: Carroll & Graf, 1988, 318-369.

subjectivity while simultaneously spotlighting the inhumanity and illusory material reality of his own celebrity.

Friend and colleague John Knowles supports the popular conjecture that *In Cold Blood* was a turning point in Capote's life. He said, "It was such an overwhelming success in every way, critically, financially. I think he lost a grip on himself after that" (Plimpton 176). One key example of Capote's crisis in the wake of *In Cold Blood* is his tête-à-tête with friend and columnist, Kenneth Tynan. In Tynan's review of the book, he suggests that Truman may have been maliciously negligent in that he could have saved Perry and Dick from execution had he expended more effort to help them with their insanity defense at the cost of *In Cold Blood*'s tidy ending (Clarke *Capote* 364). Tynan writes:

For the first time an influential writer of the front rank has been placed in a position of privileged intimacy with criminals about to die and—in my view—done less than he might have to save them...It seems to me that the blood in which his book is written is as cold as any in recent literature. (364)

Capote issued a counterassault in which he proved his innocence according to Kansas law, but Clarke contends, "Tynan's accusation stung more than it otherwise might have because it hit an exposed nerve. Truman could not have saved Perry and Dick if he had spent one million dollars...but Tynan was right when he suggested that Truman did not want to save them" (365). So, as Tynan's assertion that Truman used his Authority to write the endings of two lives inflated Capote's sense of Authorial agency, the much-publicized quarrel and the firestorm of exposure given *In Cold Blood* simultaneously wrenched away Truman's ability to carefully manage the quickly accruing narratives of his celebrity persona.

Perhaps writing *In Cold Blood* did function as a sort of trauma in that Capote resisted the departure of the work and its central “characters”— Richard Hickock and Perry Smith— into the past.³⁷ Scholars, biographers, and Capote’s contemporaries roundly characterize Truman’s work on *In Cold Blood* as some sort of “breaking point” for the writer.³⁸ But for the purposes of my argument, I am ultimately less interested in the imagined psychological effects of *In Cold Blood*’s construction and publication on Capote and more intrigued by the rapid accrual of narratives the work generated around Truman as celebrity-Author. From the Tynan review to William F. Buckley, Jr.’s comments on *The Tonight Show* with Johnny Carson that “... we’ve only had a certain number of executions in the last few years [...] and two of them were for the personal convenience of Truman Capote” to Ned Rorem’s letter to the *Saturday Review of Literature* in which the writer states, “Capote got two million and his heroes got the rope,” a host of critical responses, pop-culture references, and gossip minimize Capote’s Authorial agency in crafting and curating the serialized text of his celebrity front (Plimpton 215). The seemingly paradoxical expansion of Truman’s felt sense of Authorial agency in the emplotment of subjects (i.e. Smith and Hickock, Brando, and the *Porgy and Bess* company) counterposed with Capote’s loss of control over his celebrity is the most

³⁷ Minrose Gwin writes that “the nature of trauma is its resistance to a departure into history” and in her treatment of Dominick LaCapra’s *Writing History, Writing Trauma* she notes the distinction between working through and acting out trauma in which the former “seeks to counter the ‘disabling dissociation’ between affect and representation that trauma sets into repetitious play” whereas the latter “is characterized by ‘an endlessly melancholic, impossible mourning, and resistance to working through’” (23).

³⁸ See Chapter 22, “In Which *In Cold Blood* Stirs Up Comment” in Plimpton’s *Truman Capote: In Which Various Friends, Enemies, Acquaintances, and Detractors Recall His Turbulent Career* for a wide-ranging response to the work and its effect on Capote’s life and literary career.

significant context for understanding the final decades of his public career and my approach to the text of *Answered Prayers*.

A great deal of research and speculation has probed the historical and creative genesis of *Answered Prayers*.³⁹ I primarily want to note that Capote had conceived the idea of a large “Proustian novel” that examined America’s wealthy elite at least by the late 1950s, as the aforementioned letter to Bennett Cerf suggests. Based upon entries in Capote’s diary, Clarke contends that Truman “had been contemplating [the work] since he was first admitted to the company of the rich and powerful,” an entrée that was completely entangled with the rise of his literary celebrity (Clarke *Capote* 309). In the preface to 1980’s *Music for Chameleons*, Capote writes, “I called the book *Answered Prayers*, which is a quote from Saint Thérèse, who said: ‘More tears are shed over answered prayers than unanswered ones’” (xvi). A list of characters in a July 1958 journal entry including Anne Woodward, a former showgirl who shot and killed her aristocratic husband in 1955 claiming to have mistaken him for an intruder, seemed to sketch a thesis for the work Capote envisioned: those who pray for money and power would be happier if their appeals were denied (Clarke *Capote* 310). However, Capote’s work on the novel was interrupted by other projects including *Breakfast at Tiffany’s* (1958), the 1960 film adaptation of Henry James’s *Turn of the Screw*, *The Innocents*, numerous short “journalistic” profiles, and finally the long process of writing *In Cold Blood* (Plimpton 472). Capote wrote his former lover, literary scholar Newton Arvin, “I’m

³⁹ See Schultz, William Todd. *Tiny Terror: Why Truman Capote (Almost) Wrote Answered Prayers*. New York, NY: Oxford UP, 2011. xxi, 175 pp. Print.

on some dreadful treadmill of having to do dollar-making articles [...] Meanwhile, I have a novel, something on a large and serious scale, that pursues me like a crazy wind: *but!*” (Clarke *Capote* 310-311).

When Capote finally focused on the work, following the textual production of *In Cold Blood*, his identity as celebrity-Author had been compromised so that he could no longer divorce himself from the text that he conceived; his celebrity persona had become imbricated in the aristocratic and café society cultures that he had hoped to treat with the Authorial remove he purported to employ in *In Cold Blood*. Norman Mailer suggests:

He had to feel that his social life was swallowing him. Because the warmth, the entertainment, the humor, the creativity he brought to his relations with all these people had to have its reverse side, which is that he’d slowly get to hate them more and more because they swallowed his talent. He was very divided. (Plimpton, 444)

Capote signed a contract with Random House for *Answered Prayers* in January of 1966 with a delivery date of January 1, 1968 (Fox xi). In May 1969, the contract was replaced by a three-book deal extending the delivery date to January 1973 (xii). The date was subsequently extended to January 1974, then September 1977, and finally to March 1, 1981 at which point Capote’s final advance for the work was increased to one million dollars, to be paid only on delivery of the finished work (xii-xiii).

Capote claimed to have spent 1968 to 1972 culling his journals and letters from 1943 through 1965 in an effort to amass the raw material to be used in the construction of *Answered Prayers*. He also claimed to have started writing in 1972, constructing a work “not intended as an ordinary roman à clef, a form where facts

are disguised as fiction. My intentions are the reverse: to remove disguises, not manufacture them” (*Chamelones* xvi). Capote’s intense focus on removing masks, uncovering the material reality behind celebrity persona, and ultimately the forceful assertion of his own Authorial control is symptomatic of Truman’s preoccupation with questions of agency and celebrity in the wake of *In Cold Blood*.

Therefore, when the chapters “Mojave” and “La Côte Basque, 1965” were published in *Esquire* magazine in 1975, Capote was unprepared for the vicious backlash from his Swans, his society friends—the ladies who lunched. John Knowles said, “He was completely out of touch with the social world and how it reacted to those pieces,” and literary agent Maria Theresa Caen noted, “I think he really felt they would say, ‘Oh, Truman, you’ve been a naughty, naughty boy’” (Plimpton 346). However, in “La Côte Basque, 1965,” Capote skewered many of his best friends: Slim Keith was portrayed as purveyor of the crudest gossip, Bill Paley was presented covering up a grotesque affair from his naïve wife Babe, and Lee Radziwill and Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis were figured as ruthless, hateful shrews. Capote was seemingly blindsided by the furor his work incited. By the end of 1975, he was virtually abandoned by all of his society friends, and though he publicly lamented his estrangement from Barbara Paley and Slim Keith, he claimed to be otherwise unaffected by the tumult his piece had caused stating, “The artist is a dangerous person because he’s out of control. He’s controlled by his art” (Clarke *Capote* 473). For Capote, the performance of his art in *Answered Prayers* had encroached upon, if not consumed his material reality.

Just as his growing body of work resonated, accruing new meanings as it moved among audiences, time, and place, the text of Capote's celebrity front similarly accrued meanings unanticipated by and beyond the control of Truman's Authority. John Richardson suggests that Capote's disconnection from material reality manifested in his attempt to shore up his Authorial agency, treating real people as characters as he had done to public acclaim with *In Cold Blood*, in the publication of the *Esquire* stories. Richardson writes:

Take his treatment of Ann Woodward (Ann Hopkins in the book, "Bang Bang" in conversation, who had by-mistake-on-purpose killed her husband). After she called him a "faggot" in the bar of the Palace Hotel, St. Moritz, Truman decided to destroy her and her sons with *National Enquirer*-like revelations. Hearing that "La Côte Basque" was coming out in the November *Esquire*, Ann managed to get hold of an advance copy. By the time the magazine was on the stands, the wretched woman had committed suicide, as eventually would both her sons. "Bye-bye, Bang Bang," Truman said, not displeased with himself. (233)

In what would become a public cycle of performing his Authority, Capote seemed increasingly desensitized to the destructive power he might wield as a celebrity-Author. And, as Richardson suggests, "Bereft of his fashionable constituency, Truman went more and more to pieces, thanks to drugs, drink, and down-at-heel Irishmen (as always straight as a die yet madly in love with him)" (233).

Simultaneously, Capote's celebrity repeatedly slipped beyond his Authorial sovereignty. Truman responded by recalibrating his performance to match perceptions of his persona in a vain effort to maintain the illusion of his complete control. And as he struggled with depression and addiction, his performance of celebrity manifested physically in his transformation from the witty, mischievous

imp of *The Muses Are Heard* to what Nedda Logan described as a “dirty little toad” (Clarke Capote 469).

When Lawrence Grobel indicated in an interview that in his later years, Capote’s personality seemed to get more press than his work, Truman responded:

Isn’t that true of anybody? I mean, I *am* a personality I read in *The New York Times* about how difficult the publicity thing was for books and writers. [...] “And of course, this doesn’t apply to Truman Capote, because they consider him a personality as well as a novelist.” (*Laughs.*) I’ve had enough publicity to last an army of super rats. I don’t know anybody who gets as much publicity as I do for doing nothing. (37)

But Capote *was* doing something. He performed the role of Capote, no longer as he shaped it, but as it was presented to him. In November of 1977, he was removed from the stage of a Towson State University reading after only five minutes by university officials who alleged that he was drunk and mumbling obscenities (211). In July of the following year, he appeared on the Stanley Siegel show and rambled for seventeen minutes about his cocktails of alcohol and prescription medication, slurred a few saucy rumors, and predicted his eventual accidental suicide (211, YouTube). Following the composition of *Music for Chameleons*, which was largely facilitated by Andy Warhol and *Interview* editor Bob Colacello, Capote signed on for 14 “performances” at Lincoln Center and the reviewer notes, “It may be only readings, but the productions smack of theater [...]” (Richardson 234, Shepard).

Though no more excerpts from the work *Answered Prayers* were published, Capote claimed to be perpetually *at work* on the novel and its completion was always imminent. According to Capote’s friend and former editor Joseph Fox, “At least twice he announced to interviewers that he had just completed the book, had

handed it in to Random House and that it would be published within six months” (xix-xx). The declaration of his continued exertions as a writer was central to Capote’s performance of the celebrity-Author; though the celebrity Capote—a chemically-fueled entity that strained against Truman’s control—persistently reasserted itself, the narrative of the Authorial agent refused to be entirely subsumed.

Even after his death, Capote’s celebrity continued to upset his Authority in the scandal surrounding the manuscript of *Answered Prayers*. Capote’s frequent insinuations in the media that the novel was nearly or already finished led to widespread speculation about the missing work (xx). Joseph Fox writes:

There are three theories about the missing chapters of *Answered Prayers*. The first has it that the manuscript was completed and is either stashed in a safe-deposit box somewhere, was seized by an ex-lover for malice or for profit, or even—the latest rumor—that Truman kept it in a locker in the Los Angeles Greyhound Bus Depot. [...] The second theory is that after the publication of “Kate McCloud” in 1976 Truman never wrote another line of the book [...] A third theory, to which I hesitantly subscribe, is that Truman did indeed write at least some of the above-mentioned chapters [...] but at some point in the early 1980s deliberately destroyed them. (xx-xxi)

Many of Capote’s associates flamed the intrigue of the missing chapters, claiming that Truman had read the works aloud, often under the influence of drugs and alcohol, on multiple occasions, but with identical phrasing and content each time (xxi). Joanne Carson, in whose home Capote died, claimed not only to have read three of the missing chapters, but to have confronted Truman about the state of the book in the event of his death. She said:

So when it seemed that morning that there was a possibility he was dying, I said to him, “Truman, what happens to *Answered Prayers*; it’s not finished yet.” He said, “Oh, yes it is.” I said, “How will anybody know where or how to find them if something happens

to you?” He said, “Don’t worry, they will be found when they are ready to be found.” (Plimpton 449)

So finally, I contend that the serialized performance of Truman Capote had become the text of *Answered Prayers*. In his performance of Authority to manipulate the print and television news media, many of his friends, and countless readers into believing in the magnum opus— the work *Answered Prayers*— Capote, the celebrity persona, became a supratextual signifier for all that the work was to represent: the corruption brought about by wealth and power, the vanity of human wishes, and the vapidness of celebrity. But perhaps, again, Gore Vidal summarized the textual performance of *Answered Prayers* best. In a 1979 interview, he told Judy Halfpenny:

Mr. Capote never wrote *Answered Prayers*. It is the Madonna of the Future all over again. But as this is America, if you publicize a nonexistent work enough, it becomes positively palpable. It would be nice if he were to get the Nobel on the strength of *Answered Prayers*, which he, indeed, never wrote. There were a few jagged pieces of what might have been a gossip-novel published in *Esquire*. The rest is silence; and litigation and...noise on TV. (Grobel 201)

In his essay, “Life the Movie,” Neal Gabler writes about the interconnection of art, performance, and life. He notes:

[...]after decades of public-relations contrivances and media hype, and after decades more of steady pounding by an array of social forces that have alerted each of us personally to the power of performance, life has *become* art, so that the two are now indistinguishable from each other. Or, to rework an aphorism of the poet Stéphane Mallarmé, the world doesn’t exist to end in a book; when life is a medium, books and every other imaginative form exist to end in a world. (76)

Over the course of performing Truman as a celebrity-Author, Capote’s life became increasingly indistinguishable from his art. When asked by Grobel, “Do you think

that remarks can be literature?” Capote responded, “No, but they can be art” (epigraph).

From his early accounts of “Mrs. Busybody” in the *Mobile Register* to the publication of “La Cote Basque” in *Esquire*, Truman Capote’s literary career is characterized by the writer’s persistent efforts to shore up his Authority in an effort to curate his own celebrity front. But as his corpus of works grew and the text of his celebrity resonated through space-time, accruing new and unexpected valences (e.g. “murderer” in the wake of *In Cold Blood*), the illusion of Authorial agency wore thin in the performance of Capote’s public persona. By conceiving of Capote the celebrity as a serial text comprised not only of the writer’s cherry-picked narratives of himself, but also the unmanageable network of stories drawn to the narrative gravity of his celebrity front, we may approach *Answered Prayers*, not as an unfinished work, but as an ongoing, open-ended, *performative* text. Just like the work Capote purportedly set out to write, the performance of *Answered Prayers* plumbs themes of greed, fame, and the unstable relation of power to celebrity in a text that refuses closure. As recently as 2012, *Vanity Fair* published Sam Kashner’s article “Capote’s Swan Dive,” an account of the scandalous, serialized publication of the *Esquire* chapters of *Answered Prayers* along with “Yacht and Things,” a fragment of text the periodical describes as “newly discovered: perhaps the only unpublished piece of *Answered Prayers*” (200-208). Capote, the celebrity-Author divested of subjectivity and Authority, and his magnum opus *Answered Prayers* continue to resonate, persistently accruing more aspects of a text “so beautiful, so well constructed” that it could never be written.

CHAPTER 4: “WHERE THE STORY LIVES”: BIG STONE GAP AND THE SERIALITY OF PLACE

On the evening of Saturday, October 26, 2013, I warmed my hands by a heater on the set of a movie filming in my hometown, Big Stone Gap, Virginia. *Big Stone Gap*, the *film*, is based on a popular series of novels by Adriana Trigiani. Trigiani, who also directed the feature, had asked for my help in production, though my screen credit would eventually be “assistant to the director.” I spent most of my time on set as dialect coach. On this particular evening I had been running lines with actress Ashley Judd for a scene inside Carmine’s, a popular diner in the story world of the film. As I considered yet *another* cup of coffee, I was approached by a middle-aged man I didn’t know. The set was supposed to be closed to the public, but the police typically let spectators press in as close as the film crew would allow. As a good ol’ local boy, I’d been sent out to explain why folks couldn’t wander too close to the shot a few times before, so I’d become accustomed to spontaneous conversations with Big Stone Gap residents.

The man who approached me at the heater knew my dad (who had once been a coach at the local high school and led the football team to its first state championship in 1982—yes, my childhood was very *Friday Night Lights*) so I earned street cred early in our conversation. We chatted while the light crew made

adjustments and after he seemed convinced that I was, in fact, originally from Big Stone, the man said, “You know this isn’t the *real* Carmine’s?”

I did. We now stood close to the intersection of Big Stone’s main street, Wood Avenue East, and East Third Street. I’d heard my parents talk about the *real* Carmine’s—a restaurant gone before I could remember—a few blocks northeast on Wood Avenue, between 5th Street and East Jerome.

I got a call to set, so I suggested to the man that *this* Carmine’s was, perhaps, like most aspects of Trigiani’s telling of Big Stone Gap—heightened, saturated, saccharine. Considered in the spirit of generosity, *this* Carmine’s could be Trigiani’s *best* vision of what Carmine’s was in 1978 when the film takes place. So we shook hands and I headed back to the misty fiction-world of the movie set, though I heard the man say behind me, “But it’s not *real*.”

Just past the junction of US Highways 23 and 58 in southwestern Virginia, the roadside sign welcoming visitors to “Historic Big Stone Gap” situates the town and the traveler “On the Trail of the Lonesome Pine.” Businesses, a hospital, the country club, civic organizations, and numerous other sites throughout the town allude to *The Trail of the Lonesome Pine*, a 1908 novel by John Fox, Jr.



Fig. 4.1. Roadside sign welcoming visitors to Big Stone Gap, Virginia. Collection of the author.

At the time of his death in 1919, John Fox, Jr. was lauded by *The New York Times* as “one of America’s best-known authors.” Though contemporary literary scholars dismiss Fox as a minor talent who capitalized on the vogue of “local color” fiction in the early twentieth century, his novels *The Little Shepherd of Kingdom Come* (1903) and *The Trail of the Lonesome Pine* (1908) were among the first to sell one million copies in the U.S. (Davis 1060). In the discipline of Appalachian Studies, the resonance of these works in American popular culture galvanizes scholars such as sociologist Dwight B. Billings who claim that, more than any other literary figure, Fox widely propagated “many of the most enduring and pejorative images of the Appalachian mountaineer” that still find currency in contemporary American culture (14). Big Stone Gap is the setting for many of Fox’s most popular works—narratives that the author maintained were “anthropological” “case histories”

(Wilson “A Judicious” 102). These “more true than not” accounts often characterize the southern Appalachian mountains and the people who lived there in the late nineteenth century as morally perverse, culturally bankrupt, and violently opposed to narratives of American progress (103).

And yet, while most Appalachian Studies scholars cast Fox as one of the key disseminators (if not progenitors) of derogatory Appalachian stereotypes in the national consciousness, some Appalachian residents— from the time of the author’s writing to the present— have embraced Fox as a faithful interlocutor in the conversation between rural Appalachia and America at large. As evidenced by the preponderance of allusions to his most famous work throughout the town, Big Stone Gap proudly claims Fox as a native son, though the author only reluctantly relocated there from central Kentucky following his family’s bankruptcy in 1890— and only lived in the town intermittently until his death in 1919. Despite anecdotal and textual evidence implicating him in Appalachia’s systemic socio-cultural denigration, Fox remains a mouthpiece for the community memory of some Big Stone Gap residents.



Fig. 4.2. Photo collage of Big Stone Gap businesses. Collection of the author.

Curiously enough, nearly a century later, this Appalachian town and its history would be re-emplotted in Adriana Trigiani's best-selling series of novels *Big Stone Gap* (2000), *Big Cherry Holler* (2001), *Milk Glass Moon* (2002), and *Home to Big Stone Gap* (2006). The resonance of this unassuming *place* in American media gives rise to a flurry of contentious and often contradictory narratives making Big Stone Gap an ideal site for examining the ways in which individual narrative identity as well as collective memory are shaped over time by *serialized*, dialectical relationships with texts. Alison Landsberg argues that the rise of mass media in the twentieth century "makes possible and necessary a new form of public cultural memory" that she calls *prosthetic memory*, a "personal, deeply felt memory of a past event" that the individual did not directly experience, but that he or she may access via a historical narrative presented at a site of "commodified mass culture" (2). Pushing this concept beyond historical bounds, philosopher of cognitive science

John Sutton draws upon Andy Clark's idea that "there is no basic biological individual mind," but that humans are "natural-born cyborgs" who have *always* relied upon external, disembodied tools to facilitate cognition and extend the bounds of memory. Sutton effectively unsettles the exceptionality of modernity and mass culture in its ability to mediate individual and collective memory (25). Rather, he formulates a model of "distributed cognition" in which "remembering is an activity often spread across embodied brains and objects (or others)" but varies "in the extent, style, and form of reliance on cognitive artifacts" based upon "vast individual, cultural, and historical differences" (29). I find Sutton's historically and culturally diversified framework of distributed cognition most helpful in considering Big Stone Gap as a site where manifold texts pock the landscape in a serialized discourse of cultural memory.

Fox and his work serve as the fulcrum in my formulation of Big Stone Gap as a site where serial historiography orders public cultural memory because a great number of memoirs, articles, histories, novels, films, and other texts begin the narrative of the region in a manner that echoes Fox's fictional accounts or position an alternative in direct response to Fox's narrative. In the pages that follow, I argue that the serial re-vision of Big Stone Gap in public memory is bound to a disparate succession of commercial media projects—from Fox to Trigiani—texts imbricated in the memorialization of the physical place since the period of industrialization that began in the late nineteenth century. As I note earlier, one of the trademarks of the Appalachian construct as observed by scholars such as Ronald Eller is a regional stasis that resists the American narrative of progress (xi). However, the creative acts

of appropriation, remediation, and modification of the hegemonic media narrative illustrate the ways in which Big Stone Gap as irreducible element resists enclosure within a dominant cultural narrative. I want to underscore that I am not proposing that Big Stone Gap is necessarily a metonym for the larger construct of Appalachia or that it is an exceptional place. Rather, by analyzing transmedia narratives of this small Appalachian town and its people, I contend that texts—and particularly commercial texts—serve as a locus for processing the conflicting, evolving, and fundamentally *serial* lattice of memories bound to the history of a place.

Places are irreducible elements dense with narrative gravity; like palimpsests of memory these sites host a multitude of stories, accrued serially, though hegemonic narratives coalesce near the surface. And also like the palimpsest, the surface narrative of a place is often defined by its utility to the *agent* of collective memory—the individual or group who stands to profit economically or sociopolitically by the restrictive emplotment of the site. To this purpose, an agent of public memory may bring to the surface a previously obscured narrative or, as is most often the case, an existing narrative may be overwritten with a more useful inscription. However, attempts to completely efface communal histories are rarely complete. Competing stories remain just beneath the surface narrative, resistant to complete erasure, dormant until another agent of memory finds the narrative convenient to her material goals.

In Fox's *The Trail of the Lonesome*, Jack Hale, an ambitious engineer cum coal, iron, and timber prospector from the Bluegrass region of Kentucky, aggressively courts northeastern and British investors to fund the development of an

industrial city in the mountains of southwestern Virginia that would rival Pittsburgh in its production of the raw materials of industrialization. Hale's efforts result in a "Boom" in which the town of Big Stone Gap is carved from the untamed wilderness and stocked with all of the trappings of civilization including a railroad, a palatial hotel, a newspaper, and a country club (232-236). However, almost as quickly as it begins, the Boom busts. The geological impediments of the mountains hinder the efficient extraction of the land's natural resources so absentee financiers withdraw their capital leaving the town a "crude, lonely, lifeless" husk of promise unfulfilled (274).

At the heart of *The Trail of the Lonesome Pine*, Big Stone Gap's quick deterioration or reversion underscores the necessity of external stewardship in overcoming the "natural" backwardness of the region. Fox's construct of "backwardness" relies upon a conflation of the landscape and indigenous peoples for its claim to paternalistic authority—a rhetorical strategy that Katherine Ledford traces to seventeenth- and eighteenth-century colonial exploration narratives of the mountains of Appalachia ("A Landscape" 48). Fox configures Appalachian Virginia and Kentucky as a cloistered space, bound by "the wild coal-swollen hills" best described as sublime (41). The mountains contain the potential for unfathomable wealth and the raw materials of industrial progress, but are simultaneously impenetrable vaults that hinder human advancement. Ruminating on the effects of the savage landscape on its residents, Fox famously describes mountaineers as "our contemporary ancestors—" "Old World" pioneers arrested in their development having been "cut off from all communication with the outside world" by geological

impediments (Fox *The Trail* 97). Trapped in the “Middle Ages” by their material circumstances, mountain people face a “slow death” as “living visible tragedies” (41, 87, 389). The key ethical project of the novel is to model through Jack Hale a responsible intervention in which both the mountain and the mountaineer may be emancipated via the cultivation of their innate potential.

In direct contradiction to Fox’s central claim of backwardness, however, Ronald L. Lewis notes that “much of Appalachia [in the nineteenth century] was neither unusually isolated, physically or culturally, nor was its population uniformly more homogenous than that of other sections of rural America” (22). Therefore, Fox’s sensational and sentimental narrative of bereft mountaineers desperately in need of external intervention to bring them out of backwardness through the industrialization and subsequent taming of the mountains is often read by Appalachian Studies scholars as a form of domestic colonialism. Working within the paradigm of Edward Said’s landmark 1978 text *Orientalism*, Rodger Cunningham indicts Fox for situating the Appalachian subject in a static position, mired in antiquity, incapable of full self-knowledge, and “deprived of self-explanatory power as well as physical power” by the dominant, “outside” culture which defines itself vis à vis the mountain South as progressive, paternalistic, and naturally endowed with superior prowess (127).

Historian Darlene Wilson applies Cunningham’s colonialist schema to the site of Big Stone Gap by exploring the ways in which Fox’s personal life was imbricated in the purported project of his discourse— what she describes as “the felicitous convergence of mythmaking and capital accumulation” (“The Felicitous”

7). Wilson builds upon the work of Allen Batteau's *The Invention of Appalachia* by suggesting that Fox deliberately misrepresented the people and conditions of southwestern Virginia in the late nineteenth century in order to establish himself as the authoritative " 'interpreter' for the southern mountaineer," all the while working to publicize the interests of absentee land and mineral developers (6-9). The biographical narrative that Wilson constructs in service to her textual analysis locates three primary socioeconomic goals in Fox's construction of the "Appalachian other": the facilitation of "corporate and class hegemony by marginalizing indigenous peoples and existing socio-cultural structures," the subversion of "local resistance to the 'new order' and to absentee control by implementing land and political policies that encouraged depopulation," and the recovery of "the degraded national reputation of southern white manhood" following the Civil War and Reconstruction by offering the mountaineer foil against which the white Southern gentleman could define himself (7; "A Judicious" 101-102).

Drawing upon the vast, relatively unexplored, and highly problematic documents contained in the Fox papers at the University of Kentucky, Wilson suggests that John, Jr.'s life was, among other things, "one of intense poverty," "sibling rivalry," shaped by "a lifetime of sexual anxiety and malfunctioning, gender ambiguity and hostility," and a "hunger for luxury and an upper-class style of living that remained tantalizingly in view but beyond his reach" (9).⁴⁰ Born to "a

⁴⁰ In the notes to her article, "The Felicitous Convergence of Mythmaking and Capital Accumulation," Darlene Wilson describes a host of problems concerning the Fox papers. Wilson speculates that before the first gift of family papers in 1949 there may have

struggling schoolteacher with ten children” living near Paris, Kentucky, John Fox, Jr. earned a scholarship from “the local ‘Garth Fund for Poor Boys’” which he used to attend Lexington’s Transylvania University and later Harvard (10). At Harvard, Wilson notes that Fox suffered from illnesses including a lifelong affliction of what was probably chronic prostatitis, explored the fluidity of his masculinity, and began experimenting with creative acts of self-revision in order to conceal his poverty from his friends and school administrators (10-11).⁴¹ After an aborted attempt at Columbia law school, Fox supported himself with meager writing assignments at three New York papers—the *Sun*, *Times*, and *Commercial Advisor*—before he was recruited by his oldest brother James to use his Ivy League connections to sell coal and land options that his sibling was managing in southwestern Virginia (14-15).

Here Wilson’s narrative emphasizes the entanglement of John Jr.’s personal

existed a compendious and complete written record of the Fox family’s financial and social conditions from 1852 to 1920 (32). In an effort to center attention on John Jr., obscure interpersonal squabbles, and conceal family secrets such as John Jr.’s marital and health problems and Minerva Fox’s lack of education, many documents were destroyed, transcribed, or altered before they were presented to the University of Kentucky’s Special Collections in 1949 and 1962 (33).

⁴¹ Wilson notes that “[b]ecause of his small physique and ability to reach soprano tones, [John, Jr.] regularly took female roles in Harvard theatrical productions” (11). Additionally, she writes, “When Oscar Wilde visited Harvard on a national speaking tour in 1882, Johnny was one of a hundred or so students who dressed ‘aesthetically’ in outlandish male/female combinations or in overtly feminine costume for his lecture (11). Elsewhere, Wilson notes Fox’s insecurities about the physical prowess of body, his interest in both men’s and women’s fashion, a penchant for interior design, and “a deep flamboyant streak [...] that caused him some social anxiety” (10-11, 14). Without every stating so explicitly, Wilson clearly insinuates that John, Jr. was wrestling with his own queerness. I find Wilson’s intimations problematic, if only because she doesn’t advance a strong argument either for or against a reading of Fox’s sexual orientation and its impact on his textual production, but rather relies upon contemporary stereotypes about male homosexuality to hint at her position on Fox’s sexuality. However, Wilson does note that “[t]he boundaries of Fox’s construction of manliness seem remarkably elastic by late-twentieth-century conceptualizations but, according to some studies, may reflect with accuracy the fluidity of male/female identity formation a century ago” (10).

anxieties with exposure to sensationalist fin de siècle journalism and a call to aid his impoverished family by exploiting the resources of southwestern Virginia that would coalesce in Fox's literary career.

In 1890, the Fox family relocated from Bourbon County, Kentucky to the community of Three Forks (which would soon be renamed "Big Stone Gap") in Wise County, Virginia where "James and other Bluegrass-born entrepreneurs planned to build a new 'corporate village' where they could control the flow of money and wealth into and out of the region" (16). Between 1890 and 1905, John Jr. worked as a publicist for his brother and other venture capitalists in order to keep the Fox family and their speculative investments in the mountains financially viable (23). Under these circumstances, in 1894, John Jr. secured his first lecture tour in which he presented himself "as the 'interpreter' of southern Appalachian dialect and culture for the rest of the country" by aping the mountaineer in a white minstrel show that featured "banjo-playing, sweet singing, and quaint stories about a primitive people with bad manners, poor hygiene, and their own peculiar patois" (24). Fox's success on the lecture circuit increased the demand for his Appalachian accounts (a muddy blend of reportage and short story) in popular periodicals and eventually allowed for the blossoming of a lucrative career as a novelist (24-25). However, given the centrality of Appalachian "expertise" to his success and popularity, Wilson notes that between 1890 and 1905, John Fox, Jr. "may not have been physically 'in the mountains' more than six months" disdaining Big Stone Gap as "commonplace" and only returning to Virginia "when collapsing financial dealings demanded his presence or when he was under a publishing deadline (he

claimed that he could write better in the mountains where he was ‘free of the distractions of pleasant company’)” (30, 16-17). Wilson characterizes Fox at the start of his literary career as a zealous businessman primarily interested in his family’s financial stability. Big Stone Gap is at best incidental to the author’s textual output and at worst a crude tool to be manipulated for Fox’s personal and professional benefit.

However, Wilson’s account of Fox’s life and career is by no means definitive; the history of John Fox, Jr. is highly contested, especially as it intersects narrative histories of Big Stone Gap. The preface to Don Wax’s 1996 pamphlet, “Welcome to John Fox, Jr.’s Lonesome Pine Country” begins “Not everything you may read about John Fox, Jr. is true.” Wax continues, “The information about [John, Jr.] contained here was carefully extracted from personal letters and diary entries preserved and recorded by his family. Unverified or questionable material has been excluded.” Though Wax does not offer qualifications for what may be considered “unverified” or “questionable,” his reference to his primary source material places his narrative in calculated opposition to more disparaging biographies like Wilson’s. Additionally, two of the most recent monographs on Fox’s life and work, Warren Titus’s *John Fox, Jr.* (1971) and Bill York’s *John Fox, Jr., Appalachian Author* (2003), provide admiring portraits of the author and his work. In both of these texts, Fox is remembered as a Harvard-educated Kentucky gentleman who relocates to Big Stone Gap to help manage his family’s investments in the region’s land and mineral resources. But through close and amiable association with the native mountaineers

and hard work spent “interpreting” their lives, Fox becomes a literary sensation who brings the Mountain South to international awareness.

Evaluating the forces that undergird the competing narratives of John Fox, Jr.’s life provides an entrée to my analysis of the seriality of place because, as mentioned above, Fox (in addition to and apart from his texts) is an irreducible element to both the textual and economic epistemology of Big Stone Gap. Most, if not all, parties agree that Fox’s literary career was spurred by a need to bolster his family’s finances following the collapse of many Big Stone Gap enterprises in a series of recessions that began in 1893. Titus, York, and others situate Fox’s financial necessity as a catalyst for a mutually beneficial engagement between the author and the community of Big Stone Gap. In this account, Fox’s novels and local color sketches brought renewed interest among venture capitalists that would revive the region’s faltering economy while simultaneously generating a sense of notoriety and exoticism that would drive new interests to the area—including tourists. Wilson, however, figures Fox’s financial desperation as the impetus for the author’s entirely self-serving investment in Appalachian exceptionalism. In support of Wilson’s interpretation, Ronald Lewis suggests that “John Fox, Jr. perpetrated and then perpetuated the myth of Appalachian otherness to facilitate absentee corporate hegemony by marginalizing indigenous residents economically and politically” (22). Despite competing claims regarding the consideration of the interests of Appalachian residents in Fox’s work, all narratives underscore the centrality of commercial forces in the serialized emplotment of Big Stone Gap.

Though Fox's literary efforts to promote investments in Big Stone Gap business ventures did not realize visions of an industrial mountain metropolis, the author's widespread popularity ensconced his account of the region's landscape, people, and history as the hegemonic cultural narrative not only in the wider American imagination, but in local memory, as well. For instance, Bettie Duff Robinson's 1961 memoir, *Yesterdays of Big Stone Gap, Virginia*, has many striking parallels to *The Trail of the Lonesome Pine*. Robinson's text opens with the arrival of former Confederate General, John D. Imboden, in Southwestern Virginia (1). Imboden is a prospector hired by "Northern Capitalists" to explore the purported wealth of coal, timber, and iron ore contained in the mountains— all of the ingredients needed to produce steel and transform a sparsely populated wilderness into a booming industrial capital (1-3). In "Lonesome Pine Country," Don Wax writes that "[s]o glowing were the reports that [Imboden] took back to Pittsburgh that financiers and speculators were clamoring for a piece of the action" (3). Imboden, like Hale in Fox's novel, is the harbinger of a wave of land speculators, venture capitalists, and absentee investors who would transform the region during the "Boom" that lasted roughly from 1888 to 1891 (Ewing 9).

However, beginning the history of Big Stone Gap with the arrival of Imboden in the summer of 1880 belies the fact that Big Stone Gap did not *exist* until February 28, 1890 when the community of "Three Forks" was rechristened by developers and financiers including the Fox family (Robinson 3). Drawing upon the theories of cultural anthropologists Mindie Lazarus-Black and Susan F. Hirsch, Darlene Wilson suggests that the renaming of an established community like Three

Forks “effectively erases social memory and impinges negatively upon the sustainability of a coherent vernacular history” (“The Felicitous” 22). Katherine Ledford and others have suggested that conceptions of a distinct Appalachian region/identity appeared in literature long before Fox and the local color movement focused national attention on the area, so I want to examine the elements of both local and national narratives that are retconned by accepting “Boom” origins for Big Stone Gap.

In *The Bear Grass*, Lawrence J. Fleenor, Jr. begins his history of Big Stone Gap and the surrounding region with an invocation of Cherokee and Shawnee legends. In an attempt to ground the region in a narrative that predates Anglo-European contact, Fleenor writes, “The Great Spirit commanded all nations to remove themselves from Paradise because life there was too easy and their contentment too great while living there. Thus the vast region encompassing present Southwest Virginia, Eastern Kentucky, and East Tennessee was hunted by all nations, but inhabited by none” (6). Although he seeks to reclaim a history retconned or at least *obscured* by the Boom origin, Fleenor’s description of an idyllic landscape that is rich with promise yet stewarded by a population incapable of reaping its full benefits smacks of Fox’s rhetoric of industrial development. In both narratives, the space lies expectant, awaiting an *external* catalyst capable of realizing its potential.

Though it does often work within the rhetorical paradigm of Fox’s narrative, Fleenor’s text also serves as a *spile*, recovering aspects of regional history that have largely been eclipsed by the prominence of the Boom origin. For instance, *The Bear*

Grass acknowledges the histories of indigenous peoples in the region (including the Yuchi, Cherokee, Xuala, and Shawnee), details early European colonial ventures, explores local infrastructure such as pioneer roads and trading posts that made communities in this region commonly traveled thoroughways for early American colonists, and even addresses the natural history of the region in an attempt to divorce the land, flora, and fauna from the various peoples who would populate the area (6-20). Perhaps most significantly, however, Fleenor notes the coalescence of the Three Forks community (indicated by the organization of the Three Forks Primitive Baptist Church in 1798) nearly a century before the space was renamed “Big Stone Gap” (81). Although Fleenor treats Fox in laudatory terms, by representing a host of narratives that interrogate the truth claims of a Boom genesis story, *The Bear Grass* scrapes into the palimpsest site to recover stories concealed over time by the surface narrative.

In Fleenor’s *review* of Three Forks, a narrative emerges that directly contradicts many of the pervasive, pejorative ideas about the mountaineers of southwestern Virginia that are irreducible elements of the Fox surface narrative *and* the commercial forces that drove the author’s textual output. *The Trail of the Lonesome Pine* portrays the pre-Boom Gap as being devoid of social institutions, legal systems, organized religion, and schools, but an archival account of Three Forks proves these representations systematically untrue. For instance, with regard to the educational system, Wilson notes that in “the 1880s, Wise County’s school system [of which Three Forks was a part] set state records for per-capita access to education both in terms of the length of offered sessions [...] and the number of

locations” (*The Felicitous* 17). An established community populated by residents not unlike the peoples of other regions of rural America was harmful to developers’ narratives of potentiality and the presence of an educated populace was particularly detrimental to arguments for external stewardship. The retconning and creative reinvention that proved so advantageous to Fox in transforming himself from a poor schoolteacher’s son to a Bluegrass blueblood at Harvard parallels the author’s remediation of Three Forks as Big Stone Gap.

This calculated retcon of the mountain *person* is perhaps one of the best examples of Fox’s capital-driven textual enterprise. In order to disenfranchise the indigenous peoples of Three Forks, Fox not only excised the community’s governmental and social institutions, but he also dehumanized the mountaineer body. In many of Fox’s early drafts, his central mountaineer characters (including June Tolliver in *The Trail of the Lonesome Pine*) were “Melungeons—” a tri-racial isolate of contested origin indigenous to the central Appalachians who were first identified as “free persons of color” in early U.S. census records and were later disenfranchised in the Mountain South after 1830 (*The Felicitous* 28). Though the dark, mysterious racial other was not realized in Fox’s final drafts, remnants of the racialization of the mountaineer is evident in the author’s description of a physically and culturally homogenous populace that is rendered abnormal or even subhuman vis à vis the outside observer. Fox describes Hale’s first encounter with the Tolliver family in a passage worth quoting at length:

The old man spat into the fire and put his hand to his beard. The boy crossed his legs suddenly and shoved his muscular fingers deep into his pockets. The [old female] figure shifted position on the bed and the infant at the foot of it seemed to clench his toy dagger a little more

tightly. Only the little girl was motionless—she still looked at him, unwinking. What sort of wild animals had he fallen among?
(*The Trail* 24)

In this passage many of the enduring hillbilly stereotypes are on display: the savage, brooding men (the younger with his powerful hands suggestively fiddling in his pockets), the gnarled and lazy shrew, and the dark-eyed, nubile young woman. These figures are representative of the uniform “race” of mountaineers that Hale encounters; they are predisposed to violence, laziness, sexual fecundity, and a general hostility to law, order, and change.

The racial othering of the mountaineer was also a central project of Fox’s *performance* on lecture tours. Like much of the local color fiction that appeared in popular periodicals, these performances were geared toward the urban white middle class that emerged in late-nineteenth-century America and drew heavily upon the conventions of blackface minstrelsy to situate the mountaineer as a cultural foil. By positing the mountaineer as something *other than* his audience, Fox ensconced himself as an “interpreter.” In an 1895 interview describing one of Fox’s lectures for *Scribner’s*, Gabrielle Marie Jacobs writes, “With ready tact, and the wisdom born of his journalistic training, he threw aside his university polish of speech and manner [...] With pardonable duplicity, he played a different role with the mountaineers, assuming their garb, drawl, and mannerisms so successfully as to win their hearts.” Once again the act of creative self-fashioning allows Fox the interpreter to transgress the boundaries of class and culture in order to render the other intelligible through the familiar conventions of racialized minstrelsy including

songs performed in a “peculiar” dialect, the re-mediation of “folk stories,” and a burlesque of mountaineer manners and customs.

Ultimately, however, James Fox’s business contacts in Bristol, Roanoke, and Knoxville urged John Jr. to cast his mountaineers as the time-tossed descendants of “pure Anglo-Saxon stock” in a move to formulate a sympathetic culture of need (Wilson “The Felicitous” 28). Despite misgivings expressed in correspondence, Fox acquiesced to his benefactors, dehumanizing the mountaineer through gendered and racist tropes but foregrounding the mountaineer’s identity as an indigent “contemporary ancestor” or “the closest link we have with the Old World” (28; Fox *The Trail* 97). Through the rhetoric of ancestry, Fox preserves the oddity of the isolated and developmentally stunted mountaineer while creating a sense of pity and duty toward these pure people of good (i.e. Anglo-Saxon) stock in need of guidance to bring them in line with the American middle class narrative of progress and the cultivation of innate capabilities. By positing himself as an intermediary between the mountaineer and a wider American audience, the author fashioned himself as a benevolent shepherd giving voice to the indigent mountaineer’s needs while mapping parallel narratives of cultivation and development onto both the land and its residents. However, as we will later see, the racialized Melungeon resonance of the hillbilly construct was never completely effaced. Stories are strange and durable things.

As Fox’s popularity peaked in the early decades of the twentieth century, his role as interpreter of Appalachia simultaneously situated him as a broker of both truth and memory to a national as well as a local audience. Wilson argues that via

his popular fiction, Fox's "continual dramatization of emergence and difference legitimated the obliteration of indigenous vernacular history and social memory—schools, place-names, commercial and communication networks, even ethnicity—which Fox repetitively denied" ("The Felicitous" 28). And even as Fox's literary vogue dwindled in the last years of his life and in the decade following his death, the work that he had done to retcon memories of Appalachia in general and Big Stone Gap in particular spawned a host of textual prostheses—some of which built upon the surface narrative that Fox established while others reacted to it, through the law of seriality bringing an unpredictable flurry of narratives into the historiographic colloquy.

By the time of Fox's death in 1919, the underlying commercial project of attracting investors for Big Stone Gap industries was rendered null; the initial Boom of 1890 had been followed by a smaller economic upturn in 1900, but Big Stone Gap never developed into the mountain metropolis that its absentee developers had envisioned (Ewing 9). However, the narrative and collective memories brokered around the project remained in the local and national imaginations. In 1912 Eugene Walter adapted *The Trail of the Lonesome Pine* for the stage, in 1913 Ballard MacDonald and Harry Carroll wrote a popular song by the same title that was most famously performed by Stan Laurel and Oliver Hardy in the 1937 film *Way Out West*, and the novel was adapted into at least three feature films—a silent version directed by Cecil B DeMille in 1916, a talkie directed by Charles Maigne in 1923, and the first outdoor motion picture filmed in Technicolor by Henry Hathaway in 1936. Evacuated of its initial need to curry sympathy among investors, the surface

narrative of Big Stone Gap mutated with each re-mediation. As each text became increasingly distanced from its source material, however, the “peculiarities of the mountaineer” and the “backwardness of the space” were increasingly taken for granted as irreducible elements while the incestuous romantic plot between Jack Hale, June, and her cousin Dave Tolliver became the central focus of a hackneyed romantic plot. For instance, a 1924 review of Maigne’s film notes that “the picture is one of romance, thrills, hate, and love” while assuming the reader’s familiarity with the “bitter feuds” of the “simple folk of that district” (*The Daily Star*).

Appalachian Studies scholars have noted that as the wider American public came to “know” Appalachia through Fox’s surface narrative and the texts that evolved from *review* of it, “the colonized population became ‘imprisoned’ within the circle of its interpretation” (Wilson “The Felicitous” 29). However, this reading belies the fact that like those who reviewed Fox’s narrative for material gain in different media, Appalachian residents manipulated both the collective memory of Fox the celebrity-Author *and* the surface narrative of his texts to reap commercial benefits for themselves. Just as Fox once commodified Big Stone Gap in service to his own celebrity, various agents of public memory have commodified Fox, primarily to benefit the regional economy through literary tourism.



Fig. 4.3. Photo of Lonesome Pine painting in window of a Big Stone Gap business.

Collection of the author.

Since the Boom era of the late nineteenth century, the Big Stone Gap economy has been tied to the coal industry— particularly the operations of the Virginia Coal and Iron Company and Stonega Coke and Coal, the predecessors to coal conglomerates Penn Virginia, the Westmoreland Coal Company, and most recently Alpha Natural Resources. However, as mining has become increasingly mechanized, companies with thousands of personnel on their payroll have given way to smaller, regional mining operations that employ far fewer miners (Ewing 10). Over the course of the twentieth century, this industrial shift left many of the rural coalfields of central Appalachia economically depressed. In the late 1980s, researchers at the Virginia Polytechnic Institute identified tourism as one of the most promising means of supplementing the Big Stone Gap economy—tourism that would rely heavily on the creative redeployment of John Fox, Jr.’s celebrity for much of its ballast (United Press International). But as early as 1940, Fox was already being used to draw tourist capital to Big Stone. A *New York Times* travel article from March 1940 notes that “[o]ver numerous improved highways, all of which have been designated as ‘The Trail of the Lonesome Pine,’ tourists in

increasing numbers are following a new midsouth path of travel to this quiet little Southwestern Virginia town.” Implicit in the article’s opening sentence is the familiar narrative of progress. The “improved highways” signify safety and Appalachia’s coming into line with the forward-looking project of Americanization. But the preponderance of allusions to Fox and his popular texts also implies that Big Stone Gap was already very much aware of the market value of its proximity to Fox and his narrative of the region.

It is important to reiterate here that regional reactions to Fox have been widely varied from the time of his writing to the present. In his lifetime, John Fox, Sr. noted that many Big Stone Gap residents did not approve of the ways in which they were portrayed in John Fox, Jr.’s fiction. Having come to loathe the increasingly pejorative term “southern mountaineer,” Fox, Sr. notes that “[t]heir feelings of resentment (against Johnny) are strong. Deservedly so, I might add” (qtd. in Wilson “The Felicitous” 29). After Fox gave a lecture performance with Berea College’s traveling student choir in Cincinnati in 1896, “several male mountain-born members of the choir threatened to thrash him” and “promised that henceforth the ungrateful Fox would be a most unwelcome guest in their own Appalachian neighborhoods” (25). And as previously noted, yet other accounts by Big Stone Gap residents posit Fox as a respected, *integral* community member. In her memoir, Bettie Duff Robinson describes Fox’s work as having “added much to the business, educational, cultural, and social life of the [Big Stone Gap] community” (4). Furthermore, Big Stone Gap natives such as Don Wax writing in the last decades of the twentieth century seem to support Fox’s image as a faithful interpreter noting

that the author “learned to speak the unique dialect of the mountaineer and communicated it to his readers” in service to his “intimate portrayal” of the region (13). I suggest that this impetus on the part of Big Stone Gap residents to embrace Fox as an “intimate” mediator “liked by the mountaineers” who “would spend weeks at a time in their cabins gathering material that he would later incorporate into his stories” is sparked by a need to *review* the author to include him in the narrative of local community in support of regional tourism (Fleenor 152).



Fig. 4.4. (Left) Photo of sign welcoming visitors to John Fox, Jr. Museum. (Right) Photo of exterior of John Fox, Jr. Museum. Collection of the author.

In addition to the aforementioned highways and businesses that allude to Fox or his work, the author and his texts have been commodified and creatively written into the landscape of Big Stone Gap in a number of public history sites. For instance, the home that the Fox family inhabited in the late nineteenth century has been rechristened the John Fox, Jr. House and Museum and is now registered as a Virginia Historic Landmark as well as a National Historic Landmark. Each summer, visitors to the Museum are given a guided tour (by volunteers including my mom) of

the twenty-two room house scripted by John, Jr.'s youngest sister Elizabeth Fox (before her death in 1970) that offers very little insight into the author's history, but focuses primarily on trinkets and baubles in the museum's collection and the spectacle of the sprawling home.

But *The Trail of the Lonesome Pine* outdoor drama is one of the most conspicuous sites where the Fox narrative has been creatively re-viewed serially and integrated into the collective memory of Big Stone Gap. Staged each summer since 1963, the play was designated the official state drama of Virginia by Governor George Allen in 1994. Based more or less on Fox's novel, the outdoor drama draws hundreds of tourists to Big Stone Gap in the summer months. Promotional brochures from 1964 and in support of contemporary productions describe the play as "a musical drama of a proud mountain people" that is "staged on the historic site where the story lived." The first description takes ownership of the narrative, appropriating the story for the "proud mountain people" who are largely denigrated in the narrative of the performance that recapitulates Fox's most lurid hillbilly tropes. As with other instances in which Fox-as-literary-celebrity is commodified, *reviewing* the surface narrative for local commercial gain also means boosting the resonance of that narrative. Appalachian scholars have characterized Fox's work as "discourse on Appalachia that creates the very reality it purports to describe," and in attempting to appropriate that discourse, residents literally restage that act of creation cum description (Billings 12). Furthermore, by situating the play on the site "where the story actually lived," the lines between the Big Stone Gap of Fox's fiction and the remembered Big Stone Gap are further effaced.



Fig. 4.5. (Left) Promotional brochure for 1964 production of *The Trail of the Lonesome Pine Outdoor Drama*. (Right) Promotional brochure for contemporary production of the outdoor drama. Both courtesy of Lonesome Pine Arts and Crafts, Inc.

The serialized blending of public history and narrative fiction is equally prominent in advertisements for the June Tolliver House and Craft Shop located beside the amphitheater where the outdoor drama is staged. A pamphlet advertising this Virginia Historic Landmark notes that “[t]he heroine of ‘The Trail of the Lonesome Pine’ actually lived in the house shown above while attending school here [in Big Stone Gap].” This claim belies the fact that June Tolliver is a *fictional character*. Some local residents claim that the character was primarily modeled on Elizabeth Morris, a young girl from nearby Keokee who was brought to Big Stone Gap to be educated by Jimmy Hodge, a young geologist from Boston who is thought

to have been a model for Jack Hale (Lonesome Pine Arts and Crafts “2000 Program” 10). Once again, the need to anchor Fox’s popular texts in the *historical* public narrative of Big Stone Gap for the purposes of promoting tourism leads to the sublimation of a *real* mountaineer and the reification of the Fox surface narrative.

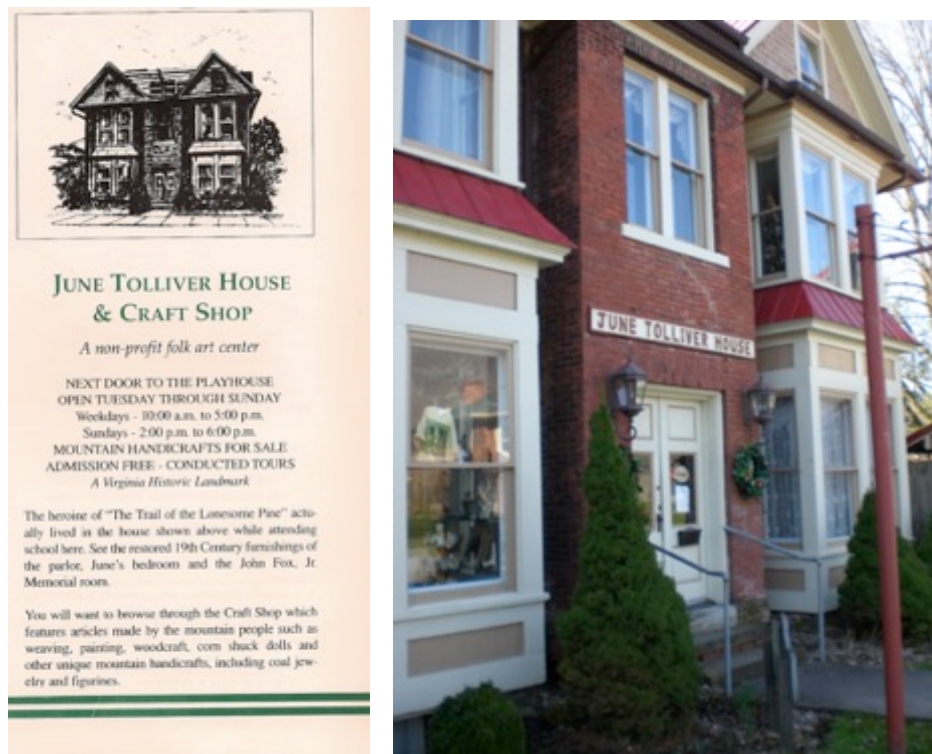


Fig. 4.6. (Left) Advertisement for June Tolliver House and Craft Shop. Courtesy of Lonesome Pine Arts and Crafts, Inc. (Right) Photo of the June Tolliver House in 2010. Collection of the author.

However, the surface narrative is never fully embraced unilaterally in Big Stone Gap or the surrounding region. As it is told serially, contestations, *possible worlds* that call the irreducible elements of Fox’s hegemonic narrative into question are drawn to the narrative gravity of the surface. In 1976, the Roadside Theater based in Whitesburg, Kentucky staged *Red Fox/Second Hangin’*, a piece that won critical acclaim touring the Appalachian region and off-Broadway at the Theatre for

the New City in 1977 and the Manhattan Theatre Club in 1978 (Baker and Cocke 59). Structured like an oral history and delivered by a cast that speaks directly to the audience, one of the central projects of *Red Fox/Second Hangin'* is the recovery of local collective memory regarding many of the events that John Fox, Jr. appropriated for his texts. For instance, the play contextualizes the “mindless, savage feuds” central to the Appalachian construct by tracing their ideological lineage to the bushwacking that occurred in central Appalachia and other rural regions where residents were violently divided by allegiances to the Union and Confederacy during the Civil War (70). The play primarily deals with the conflict between Doc Taylor (a.k.a. Red Fox), Bad Talt Hall, and Devil John Wright, complex local figures whose narratives were appropriated and re-mediated by Fox to fit his characterization of mountain men as ruthless, hateful, lawless, and prone to unprovoked violence.

Unlike other individuals and groups that generate texts that interface with the Fox surface narrative for commercial gain, Roadside Theater is part of Appalshop, a nonprofit cultural arts organization that counts among its guiding goals “tell[ing] stories the commercial cultural industries don’t tell, challenging stereotypes with Appalachian voices and visions” (*Appalshop*). By divorcing itself from enterprises such as tourism, Roadside Theater seeks to produce prostheses of memory organically linked to local communities rather than texts that review hegemonic narratives to suit commercial ends. The theater company’s website suggests that its textual output functions as a *spile* when it proudly states that “[b]y filling gaps in

the Appalachian historical narrative [...] Roadside has publicly proclaimed that Appalachian stories count.”

Whether narratives about Big Stone Gap support, oppose, or poach from the surface narrative, John Fox, Jr. and his textual corpus remain at the center of the town’s remembered past. Wilson argues that Fox’s hillbilly construct and the surface narrative of Big Stone Gap have proven especially durable because publishers’ canny marketing of the texts as young adult or women’s fiction “served to delimit critical analysis during his lifetime and allowed later critics to underestimate the popular persistence of his themes” (“The Felicitous” 8). Acknowledging the power of popular fiction to broker complex ideologies about a space is integral to understanding Fox’s Big Stone Gap and the dialectic relationship between public memory and commercial texts that serially forge new narratives of the place.

In 2000, former Big Stone Gap resident Adriana Trigiani published *Big Stone Gap*, the first of what is currently a series of four best-selling novels. Primarily marketed to women, book clubs, and young adults, Trigiani’s *Big Stone Gap* novels rely heavily on what I term “rural escape nostalgia” for much of their appeal—the characters are folksy, the setting is natural, sublime, yet simple, and many of the central problems of the plot are bound to the comedy of small town angst. Trigiani largely sidesteps the identity politics of Appalachian hillbilly tropes, though curiously enough the Melungeon racial/ethnic identity reappears in the *Big Stone Gap* texts.

C. S. Everett traces the first printed usage of “Melungeon,” a term used to describe a mixed-race population “present in one of the seldom-visited nooks hid away in our mountains,” to an 1849 local color account of Hancock County, Tennessee that appeared in the magazine *Littell’s Living Age* (618). In the superb ethnography *Becoming Melungeon*, Melissa Schrift builds on the research of Wayne Winkler to argue that the 1890 publications of Will Allen Dromgoole, a female reporter whose local color essays include “Land of the Malungeons,” “A Strange People,” and “The Malungeons,” brought “the most significant momentum to the popular Melungeon narrative” of racial otherness cloistered in the dark hollers of Appalachia. But Schrift’s most significant contribution to Appalachian studies and the discourse of Melungeon identity is her argument that “no evidence exists that anyone self-identified as Melungeon before the late 1960s,” at no time did “Melungeons exist as a culturally bounded group of people,” and drawing on the work of Mary Waters, suggests that the “contemporary revitalization of Melungeon identity borrows from the past to create a new white ethnicity that capitalizes on the cache of the cultural exotic while underplaying stigmatized aspects of heritage” (3-28). Schrift carefully traces the development of Melungeon identity in synchronicity with texts noting that in the context of the “roots craze” of the 1990s “Melungeons gave voice and presence to media characterizations, and these characterizations served as a primer for Melungeon identity” (26, 87). In her ethnographic research, Schrift also notes the narrative gravity of a particular text: “A consistent, and somewhat confounding, theme in my interviews in Hancock County was that few

remember hearing the term Melungeon before the production of *Walk Toward the Sunset*” (148).

Walk Toward the Sunset was an outdoor drama staged in Hancock County in the late 1960s and early 1970s. The production was conceived as an economic opportunity (i.e. tourism) for the depressed region given the successful ventures of nearby communities including Big Stone Gap’s *The Trail of the Lonesome Pine* (70). Schrift provides a detailed account of *Walk Toward the Sunset*, reiterating that respondents in her study of self-identified Melungeons “consistently remember having no sense of the term before the drama” (148). Ultimately, Schrift offers a provocative account in which the Melungeon ethnic narrative identity “has little to do with any lived experiences of an identifiable group of people” but is rather “an identity that existed almost, if not entirely, through media construction” (53, 85).

In the interest of full disclosure, the surnames Bolin/Bollin and Couch appear in my family tree and in the Melungeon lore of Wise, Lee, and Dickenson counties in Southwestern Virginia and adjacent parts of Eastern Kentucky. In high school, I attended lectures by Brent Kennedy whose 1994 book *The Melungeons* “catalyzed the Melungeon movement” around a swirl of exotic origin theses including tales of escaped Turkish or Moorish French Huguenot refugees, survivors of the “Lost Colony,” and shipwrecked Portuguese sailors (88). Ultimately, my DNA tests are in line with the results of a 2000 study conducted by Kevin Jones, a biologist at the University of Virginia at Wise, who found that self-identified Melungeon descendants reflect “a tri-racial group that is predominantly European with some African American and Native American ancestry” (108). In my reading this study

suggests that the exotic origin stories of a Melungeon phenotype offer avenues for racial tourism and romancing the past while the data suggests a much more mundane narrative: escaped African American slaves, Native Americans, and European settlers intermingled in some remote Appalachian communities. Nevertheless, the Melungeon, an early draft of the hillbilly, took on a narrative gravity of its own, becoming an irreducible element of regional narrative identity, as well as individual narrative identities—including my own.

When the Melungeon reappears in the serial historiography of *Big Stone Gap*, Adriana Trigiani largely *reviews* popular narratives like those advanced by Brent Kennedy. But because her *Big Stone Gap* texts are serials, over time Trigiani's representation of the Melungeon identity reveals narrative instability characteristic of any irreducible element. In the opening chapter of 2000's *Big Stone Gap*, narrator Ave Maria Mulligan defines Melungeons as "folks who are a mix of Turkish, French, African, Indian, and who knows what; they live up in the mountain hollers and stick to themselves" (6). But by the second book in the series, 2001's *Big Cherry Holler*, the saucy African-American pharmacy assistant Fleeta describes Melungeons as "mixed" noting "though lots of Melungeons don't like me saying they're mixed" (96). This shift from exotic off-white to *nonwhite* otherness readjusts the story of a Melungeon phenotype to account for African American heritage as supported by scientific narratives like the 2000 study described above, in the process calling attention to the white privilege inherent in Melungeon racial identity choice. And yet, in 2002's *Milk Glass Moon*, the exotic *mélange* story resurfaces when Ave notes, "Melungeons, our local mountain folk, once scorned, have become popular

lately, and their exotic looks have been celebrated in books and plays. Lyle has their bronze coloring, which indicates a mix of Cherokee, Turkish, French, African, and English” (100).

Through both overlapping and contradictory *review* of popular Melungeon narratives that presuppose there were ever communities of self-identified ethnic others in central Appalachia, Trigiani taps into the *instability* of the Melungeon-as-irreducible-element for the utility of her plots and commercial productivity. For instance, in *Big Stone Gap*, handyman Otto and Worley tell a tragic tale of lost love in which the Melungeon appears as persecuted *off-white* other, prone to medical ailments (a central trope in Kennedy’s *The Melungeons*) because “Melungeons git all sorts of things—they catch just about anything that’s out there, and they’re weak, so it tends to take ‘em” (29). But in *Big Cherry Holler*, Pearl’s *mixedness*, her distinctly *non-white* otherness is foregrounded when she develops a relationship with an East Indian doctor. Eschewing the specter of miscegenation, Fleeta notes, “He’s dark. But tain’t nothin’ wrong with it. Pearl’s Melungeon herself, so she’s mixed.”

Trigiani’s most recent treatment of Melungeons in the 2015 feature-film *Big Stone Gap* continues the review of Melungeon ethnic narratives, providing considerable narrative gravity to stories of persecution and proximity to an African American experience. Notably, Trigiani cast Erika Coleman a “multiracial actress of Hispanic, Caucasian, Native American, and African American background” as Pearl and Jasmine Guy (perhaps most often remembered as Whitley on the television series *A Different World*) as her mother Leah Grimes (“*Big Stone Gap*” *IMDb*).

Both actresses have conventionally been cast as African American characters and during the world premier of the film at the Virginia Film Festival in 2014, Guy said, “Well at first I thought that Adri [Trigiani] made up Melungeons so I could be in the movie” and jokes about the danger she perceived “going into the hills because all I could think of was *Deliverance*” (Howard). While name-checking one of the most pejorative, maligned depictions of Appalachians in the 1972 film *Deliverance*, Guy’s comment underscores the common misconception that Appalachia is devoid of racial diversity—a story debunked by a number of Appalachian Studies scholars.⁴² In response to a self-identified Melungeon audience member’s question about the experience of “playing Melungeon,” Guy says, “I actually talked to some ‘Melungeons’” (she makes scare quotes with her fingers here) “that talked about their history and how they came to be and why they were separate from the other folk and all of that, why there would have been some sort of animosity between the people, so that was very real for me” (Howard). In the context of Guy’s ethnographic account, the Melungeon experience becomes “real” when she hears primary accounts of racial otherness that parallel the social exclusion experienced by other non-white American ethnic minorities. Overall, the film plays Melungeons as the lowest class in an ethnic caste system that prizes racial purity despite “an overwhelming lack of oral history evidence that being Melungeon related to any kind of experiential reality distinct from being Appalachian” (Schrift 22).

⁴² See Crystal E. Wilkinson’s essay “On Being ‘Country’: One Affrilachian Woman’s Return Home” and Ronald L. Lewis’ “Beyond Isolation and Homogeneity: Diversity and the History of Appalachia” in *Confronting Appalachian Stereotypes*.

Beyond these narratives of Melungeon ethnic identity, what I find most intriguing about Trigiani's work in the context of this study is the *admitted* blending of history and fiction. The novel *Big Stone Gap* features an introductory note worth quoting at length:

Big Stone Gap is a work of fiction. While Chapter 6 and a few other references in this novel were inspired in part by a real-life campaign stop by John Warner and Elizabeth Taylor in Big Stone Gap, Virginia, in 1978, during which Elizabeth Taylor was hospitalized after choking on a bone, the visit described in this book is entirely imaginary and fictional. [...] All other characters, events, and dialogue are products of the author's imagination, and any resemblance to real people or events is entirely coincidental and does not change the purely fictitious nature of this work.

Trigiani's open effacement of distinctions between history and fiction places her in a rhetorical situation akin to John Fox, Jr. By emplotting the Taylor/chicken bone incident in her romantic comedy, Trigiani shapes a textual prosthesis in which faithful representation of public memory is secondary to the commercial goal of selling her book.

Also like Fox, Trigiani appropriates the names of "real-life" people and places and creatively reinvents them. For instance, "Jack Mac," Trigiani's male lead and romantic protagonist in the *Big Stone Gap* texts is also the nick-name of Jack McClanahan, a prominent Big Stone Gap business owner, frequent actor in *The Trail of the Lonesome Pine* outdoor drama, and Trigiani's friend.



Fig. 4.7 (Left) Photo of Ben Bolling with Jack McClanahan in costume as Worley Olinger on the set of *Big Stone Gap*. On right, from left to right, Jack McClanahan, John Benjamin Hickey, and Patrick Wilson who plays “Jack Mac” in *Big Stone Gap*. Collection of the author.

Adding another layer of semantic complexity, in the film McClanahan plays the aforementioned handyman “Worley Olinger” who was, himself, a *real* resident of Big Stone Gap. Jack Mac is merely one example among hundreds; Trigiani’s texts are peppered with people and places crafted from referents in the “real” Big Stone Gap.



Fig. 4.8. Photo of banner above L. J. Horton Florist in downtown Big Stone Gap.

Collection of the author.

Following the breakout success of Trigiani's novels⁴³ which brought new waves of tourists to Big Stone Gap, the LENOWISCO Planning District (an organization charged with regional development in Southwestern Virginia) created "The Big Stone Gap Map: A Map to Go with 'The Book.'" "The Book" in question would be ambiguous if the front cover of the brochure did not attribute possession of the town to the author: "Adriana Trigiani's Big Stone Gap." However, like John Fox, Jr. a century before her, Trigiani's total control of the town's surface narrative is illusory. The creators of "The Big Stone Gap Map" take care to indicate places of note that are alluded to in "The Book," but they also review the truth claims the novel presents as fact. Businesses that have changed hands, places that are

⁴³ *Big Stone Gap*, the first novel in Trigiani's series was featured on a number of bestseller lists including Amazon.com, *The New York Times*, and *Publisher's Weekly* ("Big Stone Gap" *Books in Print*). Trigiani's novels "have been translated and sold in over 35 countries" ("Adriana Trigiani: Author Central). The Big Stone Gap series has seen multiple printings including a 2007 volume released by Pocket Books that collected the first three novels in the series. Trigiani is also part of the *USA Today* Book Club, the Target Bookmarked Series, and Barnes & Noble book clubs (*Amazon.com*)

misnamed, and landmarks that are amalgamated in Trigiani's texts are all carefully differentiated on the map. All at once, this map is a supplement, a re-vision, a subtle possible world narrative to another prosthesis of memory.

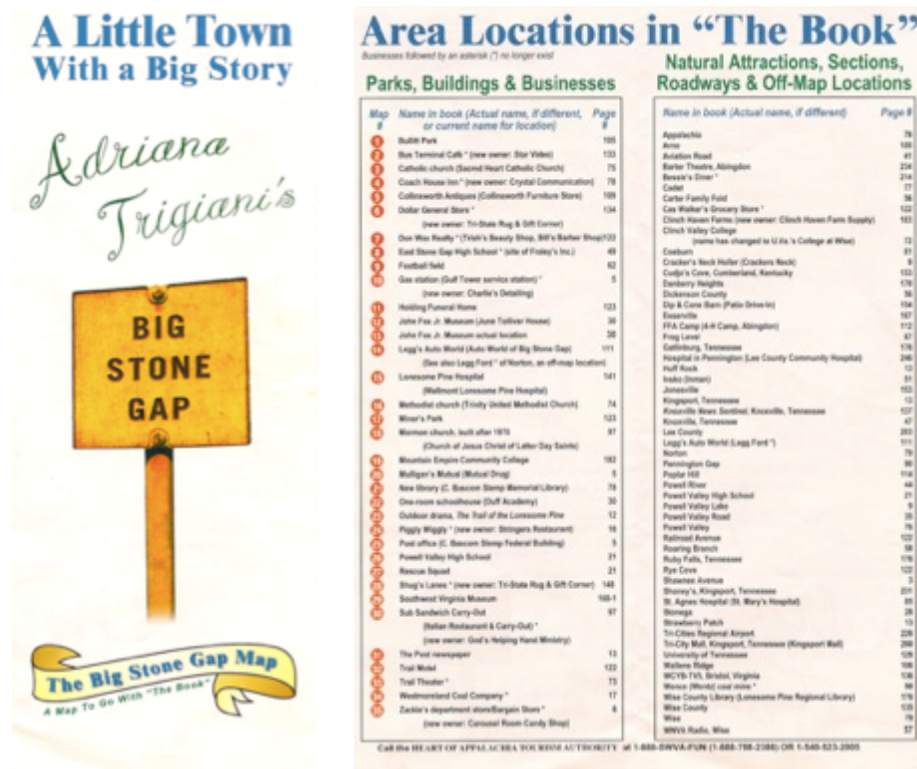


Fig. 4.9. (Left) Cover of “The Big Stone Gap Map.” (Right) Inside listing of area location mentioned in Adriana Trigiani’s *Big Stone Gap*. Both courtesy of LENOWISCO Planning District.

In this case the referent of these prostheses, Big Stone Gap or Three Forks or The Bear Grass, is an exemplary palimpsest of narrative memory—a place where memory is serially distributed over a wide variety of texts that perpetually shift to interlock, overlap, and efface one another. In considering this small town, like any narrative of place, the duty of the Memory Studies scholar is to render transparent the diverse forces that shape the narratives inscribed on the space. The main title of “The Big Stone Gap Map” describes the place as “A Little Town With a Big Story.”

In this instance, as is the case with all irreducible elements, the story is decidedly plural and open-ended.

In the months following the filming of *Big Stone Gap* in the fall of 2013, I was invited to a number of social media groups including “*Trail of the Lonesome Pine Outdoor Drama Alumni*” and “Big Stone Gap movie extras,” but I was most intrigued by the Facebook group “Carmines & Country Boy and that era...” In this public forum, contributors post photos, other primary documents, and nostalgic musings from Big Stone Gap’s past. Photos of the *real* Carmine’s reminded me of that fleeting conversation with a Big Stone Gap resident insistent that no matter how much Trigiani’s Carmine’s attempted to signify the landmark, it would never be the *real* thing.



Fig. 4.10. Clockwise from top: Photo of the “real” Carmine’s (a popular mid-20th century Big Stone Gap establishment). Photo of empty Big Stone Gap gas station. Photo of construction during which the gas station was converted to *Big Stone Gap* set piece Carmine’s. Collection of the author.

Of course not. The “real” Carmine’s shut its doors nearly half a century ago and the physical structure was destroyed by a fire on June 16, 2000. The set piece Carmine’s

was invented for a romantic comedy. But since the film was released, the Carmine's set has become an increasingly prominent fixture in the town; the building now serves as the tourist visitor center. As narratives of the “real” Carmine's are overwritten by the set piece, Trigiani continues to *review* the story of the space. In Figure 4.10, I provide a screencap of a Facebook post from February 6, 2016 in which the author celebrates Carmine's new utility as a visitor's center while telling the story of the building's design by Frank Lloyd Wright.



Fig. 4.11. (Left) Screencap of Adriana Trigiani's Facebook post telling the design story of the set piece Carmine's. (Right) Photo of the R.W. Lindholm Service Station in Cloquet, Minnesota with “World's Only Frank Lloyd Wright Service Station” sign. Collection of the author.

However, nowhere in my research could I find evidence to substantiate Trigiani's story. In fact, all of the information I found suggests that Frank Lloyd Wright rather famously only designed one gas station, the R. W. Lindholm Service Station in Cloquet, Minnesota (Fromson). Over time the serial telling of Big Stone Gap will

most likely revise the irreducible element of Carmine's again, perhaps reviewing the truth claims that orbit Trigiani's set piece and perhaps amplifying the resonance of her accounts. Regardless, the story of the past continues.

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