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JOSHUA L. MILLER

Introduction

> It's not about Nao's now. It's about yours. You haven't caught up with yourself yet, the now of your story, and you can't reach the ending until you do.
>
> Ruth Ozeki, *A Tale for the Time Being*

While teaching a course titled "The Literature of Now: 21st Century US Fiction," I wondered how undergraduates understood the cultural and social dimensions of "now." We had been focused on literary uses of temporal paradoxes, like those suffusing Ozeki's narrative in the epigraph above, but our discussions broadened into the question of how we could decide what (and who) were our contemporaries. I improvised an exercise on the first day of my second time teaching the course and asked the class to answer the question, "When did the present literary or cultural era begin?" I anticipated that they would all have similar responses (2000 or 9/11) and that we'd have a predictable conversation about what constrains our definitions of the contemporary moment. To my surprise, only a few of the forty students gave those answers. Their ideas ranged widely across decades (from the 1960s to the 2010s) and historical trends (technology, politics, economics, and social/demographic). Two students cited the Y2K bug hysteria, leading me to wonder how they even knew about that nonevent. Another referenced Civil Rights movements as precursors to Occupy Wall Street, Black Lives Matter, and hashtag activism.

My inner historicist was euphoric, even as I fumbled through the rest of that class meeting; my plans for a discussion to reorient the class toward more complex approaches to cultural periodization were flipped on their head. Since then I have repeated this poll during the first meeting of each iteration of the course, with similarly wide-ranging and compelling results, including the invention of the Internet or digital media; the first Persian Gulf War; the fall of the Berlin Wall; the end of South African apartheid; the

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1990s; the presidential elections of 2000, 2008, and 2016; the subprime mortgage crisis; activism in Ferguson, Missouri after the 2014 police murder of Michael Brown; legalization of same-sex marriage; and mass protest movements deploying digital activism.

These informal surveys have no empirical value, but they offer anecdotal insight into both predictable (iPhones and social networks) and surprising (the rise of fast food, the Fyre Festival) ways current students understand their own historicity. For each self-oriented response (my first smartphone, my high school graduation) I received many others that posited the historical importance of events prior to the student's birth, demonstrating students' generational accounting for divergent historical origins (personal, social group, familial, transnational). The caricatures of Millennials and Gen-Zers as too self-absorbed to study history, obsessed with proliferating screens, and communicating through emoticons, is belied by my surveys suggesting that students are acutely politically sensitized, historically informed, confidently diverse in their social group affiliations, and intellectually independent.[1]

Now

As the second decade of the third millennium comes to a close, the contributors of this volume offer a varied set of perspectives on the present, and readers will find that the chapters hazard as many answers to the question of periodizing contemporary fiction as my students did. Arguments for both long and short twenty-first centuries emerge here (pop quiz: Which chapter makes the case for the earliest start to twenty-first-century fiction?), and they draw similarly diverse implications.

One unavoidable conundrum for this volume is whether and how to address the Trump presidency, which has altered definitions of the "now" by speeding up political time with what journalists have described as a firehose pace of scandals. Following President "No Drama" Obama, Donald J. Trump stepped from the set of a "reality television" show (or a gold-plated escalator) to campaign for the 2016 election.[2] His presidency merged so indistinguishably the techniques of television melodrama and political intrigue that authors of fiction have had to (again) reconsider what fiction can do that so-called reality cannot. Comedian Stephen Colbert anticipated the political trend of "truthiness" as a replacement for fact in the debut episode of *The Colbert Report* in 2005, but Trump took fictional license so far that one of his senior advisors found herself defending what she called "alternative facts"

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shortly after Trump took office.[3] In a column titled, "I Used to Write Novels. Then Trump Rendered Fiction Redundant," Richard North Patterson writes:

> To me, Donald Trump was more than the prototypical protagonist of a psychological novel – he was a fiction writer run amok, the hero of his own impermeable drama, resentful of editors who would prune his imaginings. He feels little need to heed advice, or to learn anything much from anyone. Most of what he says is provisional, ever subject to change, and based on nothing but his transient and subjective needs.[4]

Others have argued that the implications of twenty-first-century technological and political trends worldwide have rendered particular genres ineffectual. In a *New York Times* op-ed column, "The End of Satire" Justin E. H. Smith posits that the 2015 *Charlie Hebdo* attack in Paris represents a definitive cultural shift from print cultures to digital media amid the global reemergence of the alt-right and white nationalism.[5]

The usual problem of contemporary studies in distinguishing among epiphenomenal, residual, and emergent trends poses unique methodological challenges today when so many urgent crises have unknowable ends. Media and publishing platform transformations are ongoing as are the ramifications for narratives conveyed on paper and screens as well as in film and television. The digital integration of creators/authors, publishers/distributors, and readers/viewers signaled by the rise of Netflix and Amazon Prime/Kindle/Audible may intensify or change course. Copyright law and author compensation models in their current form are unlikely to survive the digital era, whether or not internet corporations are broken up into smaller entities. The gig economy may be the future of labor or a historical footnote. Are we on the cusp of genetically curated foods and humans? Will climate change be our downfall, or a new environmental horizon to which humans adapt? Is the global resurgence of populism and avowed white supremacism a short-term blip or a leading indicator? Will migration crises continue to inflict mass cruelty on those surviving under the conditions of the most severe precarity? At this juncture we cannot know which of these questions will remain exigent or become outdated in a decade or two.

This uncertainty regarding many kinds of precarity raises the stakes for the interpretive analysis of coevality. Is the primary methodological challenge within contemporary literary and cultural studies that we know the objects of study too well or that we cannot know what they mean until later? If we cannot historicize the present, are there more modest, yet illuminating,

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ways to temporalize it?[6] Are there distinctive problematics of contemporary literary studies in the twenty-first century? Adjusting Karl Mannheim's formulation, what is the problem of microgenerations (Gen X, Millennials, Gen Z)?[7] Authors of fiction are responding in real time to current events, such as regional and global migration crises, climatological collapse, police violence, and political authoritarianisms, using formal experimentation to explore the unknowability of the conclusions to their own stories, as in Valeria Luiselli's *Tell Me How It Ends* (2017).

The oft-cited first sentence of Fredric Jameson's *Postmodernism* (1989) now signals a new paradigm shift yet to be formulated. If postmodernism was "an attempt to think the present historically in an age that has forgotten how to think historically in the first place," perhaps the twenty-first century cultural imperative is to think historically in an age of mass, automated data aggregation in which the present is perpetually suspended between the accessible pasts we pocket (in photographs, texts, and documents in phones or watches, available to hackers, governments, and designated "followers") and futures foretold (by predictive algorithms and genetic testing).[8] The means and matter of literary narrative are in the process of adjusting to an age of information infinity. Similarly, the cultural implications of the machine-curation of knowledge are taking shape, as journalistic institutions are characterized as unreliable by a US president and information arrives on media platforms (television and social networks) that cater to preselected, "like"-minded audiences. The practical utility of navigation, reliable searching, and prioritization of information has become the definition of big business. Small wonder then that one of the largest corporations in 2020 began as an internet search portal. How different might our cultural landscape be if Google had lost the web search engine wars of the '90s to an early entrant, such as WebCrawler, Lycos, or AltaVista? Moreover, the ascendancy of Google (now Alphabet, Inc.) as a megacorporation epitomizes the experience of living awash in digital images, statistics, words, and sounds, to the sensory overload of always-on connections and an ever-increasing pace of everyday life. Even the titles of recent fiction allude to distinctive anxieties regarding numerical and alphabetic resequencing in the time of genetic experimentation, digital storage, and drone surveillance: Paul Auster's *4 3 2 1* (2017), Roberto Bolano's *2666* (2004), Ben Lerner's *10:04* (2014), Haruki Murakami's *1Q84* (2009), and Kim Stanley Robinson's *2312* (2012) and *New York 2140* (2017).

The rapid emergence of screen and device interactivity (text messaging, videophone conversations, photo- and video-sharing social networks,

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and always-on digital assistants like Alexa and Siri) generate the space-time of distant immediacy. The paradox hides within the etymology of the word *immediate* (occurring right away; direct, not mediated) in that speed has become so conflated with technology that the etymological meaning of im-mediate as unmediated is rarely invoked, while the usage of immediate for mediated speed is omnipresent. An unprecedented compression of space (between physically distant people interacting fluidly) simultaneously reinforces the distance created by the screen itself (drawing attention away from non-digital experience). Distant immediacy facilitates both mass mobilizations of political activism (Occupy Wall Street, #BLM, #metoo) as well as distraction, alienation, and political polarization. Claudia Rankine's *Citizen* (2014) engages these social and political undercurrents through a transtemporal present tense, one that demonstrates how the experiences of verbal or representational violence redraw links between embedded histories of brutality and the present-future of everyday life. Rankine further expands the textual present through each reprinting's ever lengthening list of names of African Americans killed by hate crimes and police violence on page 134.[9] In *City of the Future* (2018) Sesshu Foster represents what Ammiel Alcalay calls "the obliteration of the present": "Gentrification of your face inside your sleep. Privatization of identity, corners, and intimations. Wars on the nerve, colors, breathing .... You can't live here now; you must live in the future, in the City of the Future."[10]

In *Lost Children Archive* (2019), one of Valeria Luiselli's protagonists ponders why "we feel time differently. No one has quite been able to capture what is happening or say why. Perhaps it's just that we sense an absence of future, because the present has become too overwhelming, so the future has become unimaginable. And without future, time feels like only an accumulation."[11] A proliferation of fiction representing alt-temporalities distinguishes twenty-first-century fiction from the historical, futurist, and multitemporal novels of earlier periods: deep futurism without memory of our time (e.g., China Miéville's *Embassytown* [2011]), near futurism (Paolo Bacigalupi's *The Water Knife* [2015]), historical fiction remixed with near futurism (Jennifer Egan's *A Visit from the Goon Squad* [2010]), ongoing anachronism scrambling historical causality (Colson Whitehead's *Underground Railroad* [2016]), counterfactual alt-history (Foster's *Atomik Aztex* [2005]), unresolved parallel times (Aleksandar Hemon's *The Lazarus Project* [2008] and Ruth Ozeki's *Tale for the Time Being* [2013]), and metafictional rewritings of earlier novels (Mat Johnson's *Pym* [2011] and Victor LaValle's *The Ballad of Black Tom* [2016]). Discomfort with

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representing the present suffuses Ben Lerner's *10:04*, from the temporal themes of its intertexts (Robert Zemeckis's *Back to the Future* [1985] and Christian Marclay's *The Clock* [2010]) to its fictional artist character Alena who "deftly aged" and "distressed" her paintings so they "seemed as if they'd been recovered from the rubble of MoMA after an attack or had been defrosted from a future ice age" contrasted with a smaller, "unaltered" painted selfie that "was so located in the present tense that it was difficult to face."[12]

In some cases, recent works use temporal nonlinearity to signal reconsiderations of historical causality – not viewing history as inevitable, but rather infused with contingency and alternative paths – thus reckoning with the histories that did not take place, but were as likely (or more plausible) than those that did, as Mark Goble discerns in Chapter 11 with reference to William Gibson's *The Peripheral* (2014). Tommy Orange writes sardonically in *There There* (2018) of Native people who envision the irony that they have "been fighting for decades to be recognized as a present-tense people, modern and relevant, alive, only to die in the grass wearing feathers."[13] An earlier example is Ted Chiang's "Story of Your Life" (1998), which is narrated in spliced timelines to represent (spoiler alert) the protagonist's altered consciousness after learning an alien language that activates a nonlinear experience of time. As several contributors (Naimou [Chapter 1], Orbán [Chapter 4], Brady [Chapter 8], and Goble [Chapter 11]) demonstrate, temporal and geographic compression and extension in recent years have led to thoroughly reconceptualized narrative forms from flash fiction and microtemporalities to the definitionally inconceivable breadth of the Anthropocene. For example, Egan's *Visit from the Goon Squad* attenuates and expands temporality through categorically different techniques than modernist novels by Virginia Woolf or William Faulkner, while Luiselli's *Lost Children Archive* cites *Mrs. Dalloway* (1925), among other twentieth-century works, as a source.[14] Ruth Ozeki's narrative experimentation with presentness in *A Tale for the Time Being* is too multidimensional to sum up, but the pun of its young protagonist's name, Nao, broadens into multilingual, transtemporal, and metafictional speculation traversing Buddhist spirituality and physicist Hugh Everett III's "many-worlds" conception of quantum mechanics: "The observer was singular, and now you are plural. You can't interact and talk to your other yous, or even know about your other existences in other worlds, because you can't remember . . ."[15]

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You

> After today you'll never hear a plane in the same way again. But you don't know that yet.
>
> Mia Alvar, "Esmeralda"

> You can tell it any way you want, he said, you can be I or he or she or we or they or you and you won't be lying, though you might be telling two stories at once.
>
> China Miéville, *This Census-Taker*

The recent fiction by Ted Chiang, Jennifer Egan, Sesshu Foster, Ruth Ozeki, and Claudia Rankine referenced in the previous section share another distinctive formal innovation in addition to their representations of mixed temporalities – they also pursue what has been historically a rare narrative trick: emplotting second-person narrative perspective. Data analytics are not necessary to determine that something is afoot. Consider this initial inventory of recent partial or full second-person narratives: Alvar, "Esmeralda" in *In the Country* (2016); Chiang, "Story of Your Life"; Egan, "You (Plural)" and "Out of Body" in *A Visit from the Goon Squad*; Louise Erdrich, *Future Home of the Living God* (2017); Foster, *Atomik Aztex*; Mohsin Hamid, *How to Get Filthy Rich in Rising Asia* (2013); N. K. Jemisin, *The Broken Earth* trilogy (2015–2017); Akil Kumarasamy, "At the Birthplace of Sound" in *Half Gods* (2018); Luiselli, *Lost Children Archive*; China Miéville, *This Census-Taker*; Tommy Orange, "Thomas Frank" in *There There*; Ozeki, *A Tale for the Time Being*; Rankine, *Citizen*; Jeff VanderMeer, *Acceptance* (2014); Vendela Vida, *The Diver's Clothes Lie Empty* (2015); and Ocean Vuong, *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* (2019). In this volume, Angela Naimou (Chapter 1) discusses George Saunders's second-person story "Home" (2011), and Scott Rettberg (Chapter 5) considers second-person narration in digital fiction platforms. A 2013 anthology collected recent essays written in the second person, while the volume *Radical Hope* invited prominent authors to channel Baldwin's *The Fire Next Time* by writing "letters of love and dissent in dangerous times," many of which deploy the epistolary second person, such as Achy Obejas's contribution, "You."[16] Not only has the frequency of these narratives increased, so too have their genres and themes proliferated, as the epigraphs to this section signal. Mia Alvar's "Esmeralda" forebodingly depicts the experiences of a Filipino-American service worker in the World Trade Center prior to September 11, 2001, while China Miéville's spare, post-catastrophe *This Census-Taker*

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intersperses a third-person narrative of the protagonist's childhood with his second-person perspective as an adult.

Another telling, if unscientific, piece of evidence for the rise of second-person discourse comes from Google's Ngram graph of Google Books, which shows a recent and unprecedented rise in the word "you" in twenty-first-century publications (Figure I.1).

The upward curve of usage since the mid-1960s is notable (and perhaps unsurprising to some, like Tom Wolfe, who famously dubbed the 1970s the "Me" decade), spiking with no signs of a slowdown in the twenty-first century.[17]

Pronominal politics abounds throughout literary history, so that alone is not distinctive, but the twenty-first-century You-narrative form differs in signal ways from its prominent precursors: the Romantic self, the Transcendentalist I, the Lyric I (and apostrophized You), modernist free indirect discourse and shifting third person, literary manifestos, and post-modern metafiction. Although recent engagements with narratorial You are deeply engaged with social and political trends, they are also distinct in kind from prominent twentieth-century literary predecessors, including Ayn Rand's *Anthem* (1938) (narrated in the first person plural because singular pronouns have been banned), Albert Camus's *The Fall* (1956), Jay McInerney's *Bright Lights, Big City* (1984), Italo Calvino's *If on a Winter's Night a Traveler* (1979), and Lorrie Moore's *Self Help* (1985).

However, some twentieth-century works anticipate contemporary literary engagements. James Baldwin's *The Fire Next Time* (1963) famously begins with a second-person address to his nephew, while Jamaica Kincaid's *A Small Place* (1988) draws on multi-genre techniques of life-writing, reportage, and postcolonial theory in a narrative addressed to travelers in Antigua seeking exoticized escapism while overlooking the afterlives of slavery on the present-day tourist economy for Antiguans. The direct address of the narrator led some readers to feel, as the *New York Times Book Review* put it, that *A Small Place* "backs the reader into a corner," unintentionally validating the power of Kincaid's narratorial point of view.[18] Theresa Hak Kyung Cha's *Dictee* (1982) uses second-person narrative form in her "Epic Poetry" chapter to address the narrator's mother across migrant time in the present tense after fleeing the Japanese invasion of Korea: "you are eighteen years old . . .. The tongue that is forbidden is your own mother tongue. You speak in the dark . . .. I write you. Daily. From here . . .. You are here I raise the voice."[19]

If twenty-first-century second-person narratives are also attuned to the distant immediacy of digital interactivity, the contemporary proliferation of You-narratives may be an expression of a new set of relations between artists and audiences, in some cases a copresence between cultural producers and recipients. For example, Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter function as

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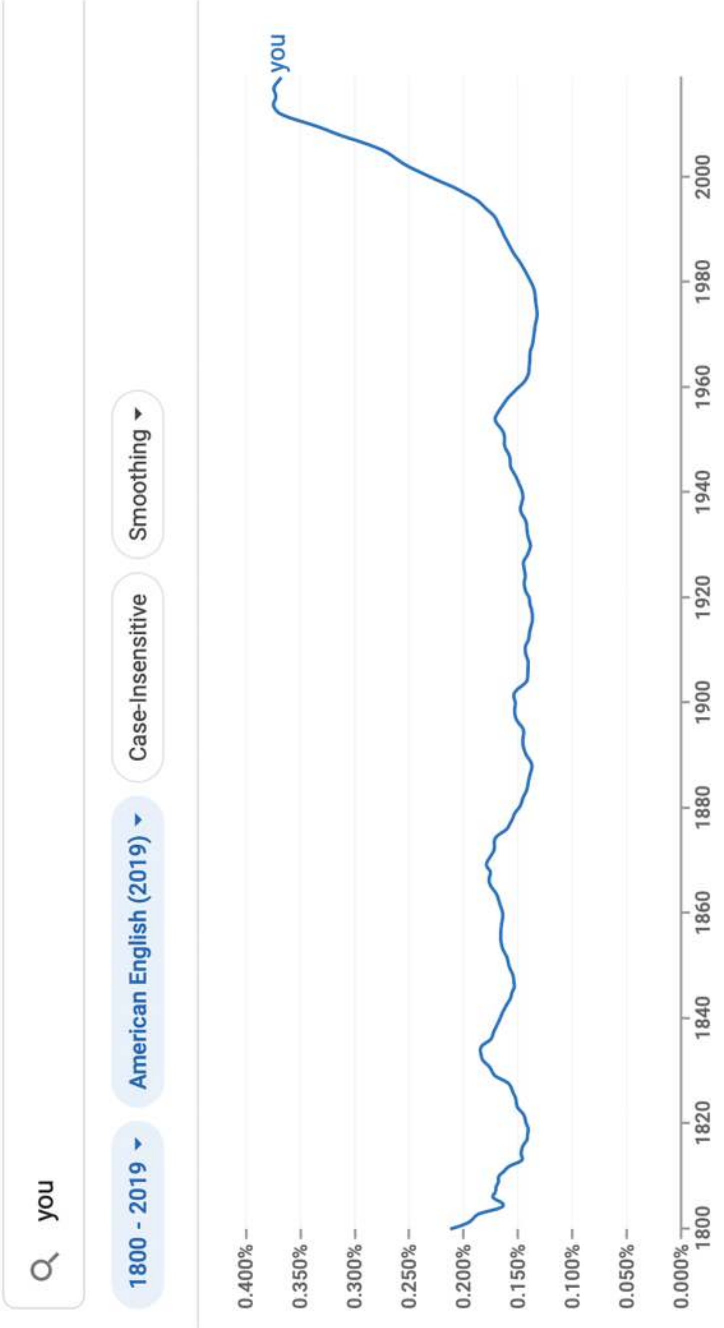

Figure I.1 Google N-gram, “you”

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serial, long-form self-publishing platforms. Digital environments offer compelling formats for You-narratives to represent simultaneity within an expanded present tense, as Scott Rettberg points out regarding interactive fiction in his chapter on "Digital Fiction" (Chapter 5). In addition to the examples in the previous two paragraphs, another key predecessor is the *Choose Your Own Adventure* series (1979–1998) of interactive narratives that drew on and extended the logics of the 1970s emergence of video gaming and personal computing.[20] Atari, Inc., for example, was founded in 1972 as an early game developer, and the first Commodore computer was sold in 1977 with the model number PET 2001). Edward Packard's original title for the book series was "Adventures of You," and the prolific Bantam publications retained the present-tense, second-person narrative form. Netflix sought to combine the two 1980s trends in a new form of "interactive movie": *Black Mirror: Bandersnatch* (2018) followed by *You vs Wild* (2019), the former of which was the basis for a lawsuit brought by Chooseco, the publisher of the *Choose Your Own Adventure* series, as a violation of trademark law. Although not interactive, the Netflix television series *You* (2018–present) (adapted from a novel by Caroline Kepnes) updates the serial killer narrative genre for the social network age.

The twenty-first-century post-privacy era of drone-, cell phone–, and selfie-surveillance is a media environment perfectly suited to the problematics of agency in the overlapping arenas of gaming, entertainment, journalism, politics, and everyday life. The faux realism of "reality television," with its winking confluence of naivete and irony, has roots in the traditions of documentary naturalism, the French New Wave, and satire (e.g., *This is Spinal Tap* [1984]). In retrospect, Steven Soderbergh's 1989 debut film, *sex, lies, and videotape* anticipates the mediatized relations among the ribald, voyeurist, isolating, and opportunistic. These cultural forces would be used by, for example, *The Office* (2005–2013), *The Jersey Shore* (2009–2012), and Donald J. Trump. The latter channeled the rage of white working-class voters in the 2016 presidential campaign through techniques drawn from the soap opera toolkit of reality television (*The Apprentice*, 14 seasons 2004–2015), including nickname insults, hairpin plot twists, and reiterative scandals.

In his 1994 second-person short story "Videotape," Don DeLillo narrates an experience of visual media fixation on a taped serial murder that anticipates internet-age reiterative viewing of violent scenes: "You sit there thinking that this is a crime that has found its medium, or vice versa – cheap mass production, the sequence of repeated images and victims, stark and glary and more or less unremarkable."[21] Soderberg's film and DeLillo's story all but explicitly challenge their audiences to confront their visual addictions, which

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