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Resonant Connections: Twitter, the Novel, and Diamedia Literary Practice

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BA, BA (Hons), MLitt

Submitted in fulfilment of the requirements of the Degree of PhD

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Abstract

The research represented by this thesis was prompted by a keynote speech given by author Teju Cole in 2013, wherein he suggested that, in relation to experimental prose, Twitter is one of the futures of the novel. As a novelist already publishing literary works on the platform at the time of his speech, both Cole's keynote and literary practice raised a number of pressing questions for literary and media studies, principal among which provides this thesis with its main impetus: if indeed Twitter is a future of the novel, as Cole asserts, then what does this mean in practical terms for the novelist, the novel, and Twitter? It is this central question that this thesis addresses, not only with regard to Cole but also the three other best-known novelists to have published literary works on Twitter: Jennifer Egan, David Mitchell, and Tao Lin.

While existing critical studies of Cole's, Egan's, Mitchell's, and Lin's Twitter-based literary practice have focused almost exclusively on their Twitter works without examining them as part of the author's wider literary practice, this thesis places the novelist at the centre of the study and embeds Twitter literature in a broader context of literary practice, showing that the authors' separate yet connected works on the Twitter platform and in the novel form constitute a prototypical form of literary practice inexplicable in existing critical vocabularies. Consequently, the thesis proposes a new term to conceptualise this prototypical form of literary practice: "Diamedia Literary Practice." This is intended to refer to a type of literary practice where an author operates strategically, systematically, and symbiotically across and through print and digital media environments in the production of two (or more) literary works, where each work is written with the specific form and medium in mind but where there is also a meaningful practical, narrative, or thematic connection between the works.

Here, the prefix "dia-" is pointedly used to mutually emphasise both "across" and "through" media in response to the theoretical frameworks predominantly deployed in existing criticism of Twitter literature, which have represented only one of the two analytical perspectives applicable to literary practice in print and digital forms: either "across" or "through" media. In order to theoretically underpin this new "diamedia" formulation, the thesis makes use of Marshall McLuhan's media studies. Born of his training as literary scholar, McLuhan's media studies combine the critical modalities of both media and literary studies and, particularly through his tetradic "laws of media", synthesise both "across" and "through" media-oriented perspectives, properly articulating Diamedia Literary Practice in its distinct, dynamic, and dialogic complexity.

Through the formulation of Diamedia Literary Practice and by utilising McLuhan's media studies, the thesis indicates that Twitter is indeed a future of the novel, but one constituted by a more complex connection than Cole's keynote initially implied and one in which the novelist is more explicitly engaged. More precisely, the thesis argues that Twitter is a future of the novel

specifically in the sense that Diamedia Literary Practice suggests; that is, one in which the forms and media are resonantly connected, where the novelist publishing on the platform explores and leverages the tension between the two, and where there is also an ongoing, underlying dialogue between print and digital media. In its analysis of Cole's, Egan's, Mitchell's, and Lin's literary practice, it establishes that, for each author, Twitter represented a way of simultaneously extending an aspect of their novelistic practice, retrieving an obsolesced form originally linked to print media, testing the platform's literary potential, and creating an experimental prose work on Twitter. These findings further emphasise the inadequacies of current critical vocabularies and theoretical frameworks, signifying, as the thesis ultimately argues, that the new critical perspective it demonstrates in answering the research questions extrapolated from Cole's keynote, in formulating Diamedia Literary Practice, and in utilising McLuhan's media studies, is necessary not only for the future of literary and media studies but is rather a necessary new critical perspective for literary and media studies now.

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Introduction

Resonant Connections

In August 2013, author Teju Cole presented the keynote speech at The Melbourne Writers' Festival. Addressing the future of the novel, Cole identified a specific connection between the novel form and Twitter, suggesting, in relation to 'experimental prose', that 'Twitter is one of the futures of the novel'.¹ It was this assertion and, indeed, Cole's own literary practice on Twitter and in the novel form, that provided the impetus for the research undertaken within this thesis.

Speaking of the novel form, Cole paraphrased Russian-American poet and essayist Joseph Brodsky in affirming that great writing elongates the perspective of human sensibility. This, he stated, 'is one understanding of what novels do: they take us to the limits of experience and of ourselves'.² Cole argued that the Twitter platform is performing a similar role: it is 'elongating the perspective of human sensibility' by virtue of its 'undivided, undifferentiated cascade of thoughts streaming past the timeline'.³ In the most straightforward of terms, by fulfilling one of the primary functions of the novel, he proposed that Twitter is one of the potential futures of the novel. For Cole, it followed that:

on Twitter there is no "novelist" but there is a novel: Twitter is the continuity of the published thoughts of all the people present on Twitter. It had a beginning, but it has no end. And each second, thousands of pages are added, millions of contributions per day. And each person, as Heraclitus might have promised, reads something different from everyone else. This is an inclusiveness [...] that might begin to affect even the practice of the conventional published novel.⁴

He posited that Twitter, in its ever-expanding aggregation of published tweets, is a novel without a novelist. In the contemporary technocultural context, in what he called 'a time of commercial publishing and excellent television', Cole believed that 'the novelist is smaller than ever before' while 'the novel itself', represented in part by Twitter, 'is getting bigger and bigger'.⁵ However, as Cole also made clear in both his keynote and the debate that followed, he did not believe 'Twitter kills the novel' in its print-published form.⁶ Rather, he felt that the naturalisation of Twitter's formal constraints, atomised mode of information dispersal, and ongoing inclusiveness will begin to affect the print-published novel as a persistent form.

¹ Teju Cole, 'After the Novelist', in *The 21st-Century Novel: Notes from the Edinburgh World Writers' Conference*, ed. by Jonathan Bastable and Hannah McGill (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2014), pp.52-3.

² Cole, 'After the Novelist', p.50.

³ Cole, 'After the Novelist', p.53.

⁴ Cole, 'After the Novelist', p.52.

⁵ Cole, 'After the Novelist', p.53.

⁶ Cole, 'After the Novelist', p.56.

Cole's keynote clearly raised a number of pertinent questions for literary and media studies, especially since he had already established himself as a novelist who published literary works on Twitter. In practice, his literary use of Twitter implied the connection between the novel form and on the platform was even more complex and dynamic than his speech suggested. At the time he delivered his keynote, Cole was best known as the novelist behind *Open City* (2011). Yet, in February 2011, the same month in which he published the novel, he also began publishing his first Twitter works. The *small fates* (2011-13) was a Twitter-based literary project in which he adapted the French literary and journalistic form of the *fait divers* – specifically Félix Fénéon's modernist literary interpretation of the *fait divers*, referred to as “novels in three lines” in Luc Sante's recent translated collection – to write tweet-length narratives based on strange, short news stories culled from Nigerian newspapers.⁷ The idea for the *small fates* had come to Cole in the very final stages of the publication process for *Open City*, while he was already in Lagos carrying out research for and rewriting his first novel, *Every Day is for the Thief* (2007; 2014), for republication. He had initially collected a large number of unusual stories from the local Nigerian newspapers with the intention of using them in the rewritten novel, but it soon became apparent that the material would be more suited to a different purpose and outlet.

Cole's decision to publish the *small fates* via Twitter was driven by its specific characteristics as a literary medium, in particular for its epigrammatic brevity, which had in turn inspired him to adapt Fénéon's *fait divers* form for his brief narrative works. But his decision was also informed by the particular quality of everyday life he believed the platform's undivided and undifferentiated cascade of thoughts represented.⁸ Rather than simply discarding the stories he had collected from the local Nigerian newspapers as unusable in the sense he originally intended within the novel, he turned to Twitter to find a purpose for the material. In the process, he extended his literary practice to incorporate a different form and to use a different medium, inspired by the different kind of literary outlet Twitter provided. However, the platform supplied more than simply a means of turning these strange Nigerian news stories into Twitter-based literary works, as shown in another traceable connection between the *small fates* and Cole's work in the novel form.

Published immediately following *Open City*, the *small fates* also operated as an indirect extension of the novel, with Cole exploring the same issues in both works and putting into practice his belief that Twitter, like the novel, elongates the perspective of human sensibility and takes users to the limits of experience. There was a clear thematic connection between the *small fates* and *Open City* constituted by Cole's specific message relating to contemporary cosmopolitan

⁷ Félix Fénéon, *Novels in Three Lines*, trans. by Luc Sante (New York: The New York Review of Books, 2007).

⁸ See: Teju Cole, 'Small Fates', 2011 <<http://www.tejucole.com/small-fates/>> [accessed 15 August 2015].

experience. In both works, he maintained that certain narratives – particularly African, immigrant, or other non-white narratives – tend to be simplified, ignored, or entirely excluded in Western contexts, regardless of whether these contexts are represented by a city (New York in *Open City*) or a platform (Twitter in the *small fates*). In doing so, he engaged with the perspectives and experiential limits of his readers in both the novel and via the Twitter platform. Precisely how he went about exploring this theme and engaging with his readers, though, depended on the specific characteristics of the medium at hand, so that the medium itself, whether Twitter or the novel, was an intrinsic part of his message.

While his keynote suggested that there was a distinct and dialogic connection between Twitter and the novel form, and despite the fact that (or likely because) the keynote was titled ‘After the Novelist’, the role of the novelist publishing literary works on Twitter and engaging with future of the novel in the terms Cole suggested was curiously absent from his concerns. This was particularly palpable considering his own preceding work in both forms, through the *small fates* and *Open City*. There may not, for example, be an individual novelist writing Twitter’s grand ‘novel’ as he contended, but what of the novelist who takes advantage of the platform to further elongate the perspectives and experiences of their readers? And what, then, of the novelist who is supposedly smaller than before, and whose literary practice is a part of Twitter’s growing ‘novel’? And who if not the novelist is responsible for naturalising Twitter’s formal constraint, atomised mode of information dispersal, and ongoing inclusiveness in the persistent novel form? The overarching question here is of course that, if Twitter is a future of the novel, then what does this mean in practical terms for the novelist, the novel, and Twitter? It is these research questions, extrapolated from Cole’s keynote and in light of his literary practice on Twitter and in the novel form, that this thesis intends to address, both in relation to Cole and other well-known novelists that have published literary works on Twitter.

In her recent survey of narrative literary works on Twitter, Bronwen Thomas refers to a range of platform-based works, including three ‘high profile authors’, primarily known as novelists, who have published literary works on Twitter: Jennifer Egan, David Mitchell, and Teju Cole.⁹ Regarding Mitchell, she refers to ‘The Right Sort’ (2014), his first Twitter story, and his subsequent novel, *Slade House* (2015); regarding Cole, she refers to the *small fates* project as well as his later Twitter works, *Seven short stories about drones* (2013) and ‘Hafiz’ (2014). She does not nominally refer to either of Cole’s novels and refers to Egan without referring to any specific works. However, since Egan has only published one Twitter work, ‘Black Box’ (2012), it would seem safe to assume this is indeed the work she is alluding to.

⁹ Bronwen Thomas, ‘Tales from the Timeline: Experiments with Narrative on Twitter’, *Comparative Critical Studies*, 13.3 (2016), p.353.

Being such high-profile authors and belonging to such a small group to have published literary works on Twitter, Cole, Egan, and Mitchell have understandably become synonymous with Twitter literature and have appeared alongside each other in a number of articles published by media outlets in addition to Thomas' academic work. 'The Great American Twitter Novel' describes Mitchell's 'The Right Sort' and includes reference to Egan's 'Black Box' and Cole's 'Hafiz'.¹⁰ 'Can You Write a Novel on Twitter?' surveys the status of Twitter literature as of the end of 2014, again including Egan's 'Black Box', Mitchell's 'The Right Sort', and Cole's 'Hafiz', and also refers to the *small fates*.¹¹ 'Authors are turning Twitter into a literary genre, 140 characters at a time' follows the early stages of Mitchell's second Twitter work, @I_Bombadil (2015), as well as 'The Right Sort', Egan's 'Black Box', and Cole's 'Seven short stories about drones'.¹²

'The Right Sort' was Mitchell's first foray into Twitter literature. It followed a young narrator in his Valium-framed journey to a mysterious house and garden down Slade Alley, which eventually paved the way for and appeared in a re-written form as the opening part of his subsequent novel, *Slade House*. @I_Bombadil then took a character from *Slade House* and provided him with a seven-week prelude to his ill-fated appearance in the novel, arriving on the platform in the period directly leading up to the novel's publication. 'Black Box' has been Egan's only Twitter work so far, taking a character from her novel, *A Visit from the Goon Squad* (2010), and re-framing her in a spy-thriller context and telling her story through a series of mission dispatches. *Seven short stories about drones* were seven tweets in which Cole re-wrote the opening lines of canonical novels to refer to the devastating consequences of drone strikes, while 'Hafiz' was a collaborative short story that utilised the platform's retweet function in telling a story about the situation surrounding a man who collapses on a busy city street, dealing again with the same kind of urban and cosmopolitan environment as *Open City*. The *small fates* project and its connections to *Open City* and *Every Day is for the Thief* have already been discussed above.

Although one of the very few scholarly attempts to consolidate Twitter literature as a form, Thomas' article is also symptomatic of current critical conversations concerning Twitter literature in that works have been discussed predominantly in isolation from authors' wider literary practice, even in circumstances where there is a clear and consequential connection between the work published on the platform and one of the author's novels. As stated above, in each of Cole's, Egan's, and Mitchell's Twitter works there was a resonant connection to at least

¹⁰ Ian Crouch, 'The Great American Twitter Novel', *New Yorker*, 2014 <<https://www.newyorker.com/books/page-turner/great-american-twitter-novel>> [accessed 22 April 2019].

¹¹ Ruth Franklin, 'Can You Write a Novel on Twitter?', *Foreign Policy*, 2014 <<https://foreignpolicy.com/2014/11/28/can-you-write-a-novel-on-twitter/>> [accessed 22 April 2019].

¹² Olivia Goldhill, 'Authors Are Turning Twitter into a Literary Genre, 140 Characters at a Time', *Quartz*, 2015 <<https://qz.com/499698/authors-are-turning-twitter-into-a-literary-genre-140-characters-at-a-time/>> [accessed 22 April 2019].

one of their novels, whether constituted by a practical, narrative, or thematic concern, a concept, a character, or a combination of these aspects. And yet, even where their Twitter works have been critically addressed in more depth than Thomas' survey structure afforded, the authors' novels have been for the most part excluded from this analysis.

Ella Mingazova published an article dealing with Cole's *small fates* and their debt to Féneon's *fait divers*, but she mentions *Open City* only in a passing and does not note the *small fates*' roots in his research for the rewriting of *Every Day is for the Thief*.¹³ Kristin Veel and Amelia Precup have respectively published articles concerning surveillance and posthumanism in Egan's 'Black Box', but both make very limited allusions to *A Visit from the Goon Squad*.¹⁴ Only Tore Andersen in his two articles (one co-authored with Sara Linkis) regarding the return of serialised literature through 'Black Box' and @I_Bombadil, and Jennifer Gutman's article addressing cyborg storytelling in 'Black Box' have made meaningful reference to the authors' novels alongside their Twitter works. Yet, in each instance, their articles still fundamentally focus on analysing the Twitter works independently of the novels.¹⁵

Thomas' survey and the more in-depth critical analyses referenced above are both representative of the current critical approaches to Twitter literature in that neither has intended to answer the questions prompted by Cole's keynote or analyse Cole's, Egan's, or Mitchell's Twitter works as a part of their wider literary practice in the novel form. This thesis therefore represents a new critical perspective in literary and media studies by reframing the conversation concerning Twitter literature around the novelist whose presence was absent from Cole's keynote and whose wider work has been set aside in existing critical studies. If, indeed, Twitter is a potential future of the novel, then the novelist publishing literary works on the Twitter platform is innately implicated in interpreting and inaugurating the potential futures of both forms as they negotiate the distinct, dynamic, and dialogic connections between them through their literary practice.

By placing the novelist at the centre of the study and focusing on a broader subset of Cole's, Egan's, and Mitchell's works, this thesis answers the questions extrapolated from Cole's keynote by analysing Twitter literature in relation to and as a part of wider literary practice in

¹³ Ella Mingazova, 'View of The Double-Take of Seeing: On Teju Cole's *Small Fates*', *Image [&] Narrative*, 19.3 (2018), 144–56.

¹⁴ Kristin Veel, 'Nothing to Hide and Nothing to See: The Conditions of Narrative and Privacy in Jennifer Egan's 'Black Box'', *Nordisk Tidsskrift for Informationsvidenskab Og Kulturformidling*, 3.2 (2014), 19–28; Amelia Precup, 'The Posthuman Body in Jennifer Egan's "Black Box"', *American, British and Canadian Studies Journal*, 25.1 (2015), 171–86.

¹⁵ Tore Rye Andersen, 'Staggered Transmissions: Twitter and the Return of Serialized Literature', *Convergence*, 23.1 (2017), 34–48; Tore Rye Andersen and Sara Tanderup Linkis, 'As We Speak: Concurrent Narration and Participation in the Serial Narratives "@I_Bombadil" and Skam', *Narrative*, 27.1 (2019), 83–106; Jennifer Gutman, 'Cyborg Storytelling: Virtual Embodiment in Jennifer Egan's "'Black Box"', *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction*, 2020.

the novel form. By embedding Twitter literature in a broader context of literary practice, this study shows that Cole's, Egan's, and Mitchell's separate yet connected work across and through Twitter and the novel constitutes a prototypical form of literary practice inexplicable in existing critical vocabularies. Accordingly, this thesis proposes a new term to describe this type of literary practice: "Diamedia Literary Practice."

Diamedia Literary Practice indicates a form of literary practice where an author operates strategically, systematically, and symbiotically across and through print and digital media environments in the production of two (or more) literary works, where each work is written with the specific form and medium in mind but where there is also a meaningful practical, narrative, or thematic connection between the works. As a means of differentiating Diamedia Literary Practice from existing terminologies and, at the same time, unifying these two critical and analytical perspectives, the prefix "dia-" is purposefully used to mutually emphasise "across" and "through" media. This is to accurately articulate the combined process of thinking through the specificities of an individual print or digital medium and also thinking about the resonant connections across multiple media environments that Diamedia Literary Practice represents.

Although the stated focus here is Cole's, Egan's, and Mitchell's experimental prose work on the Twitter platform and in the novel form, Diamedia Literary Practice is intended to be potentially applicable to any form of literary practice wherein an author (or poet) is working in a "diamedia" fashion, across and through print and digital media in the production of multiple literary works in a manner consistent with the above description. There is similarly scope for the notion of "diamedia" to be extended to forms of artistic practices beyond literature, but these are both regarded as anticipated and secondary outcomes resulting from the research undertaken within this thesis, indicative of future directions for further research rather than being of primary concern here.

However, while the definition of Diamedia Literary Practice solves the terminological problems presented by Cole's, Egan's, and Mitchell's prototypical literary practice and provides the conceptual basis to begin answering the questions prompted by Cole's keynote, Diamedia Literary Practice itself presents a problem when it comes to identifying a suitable theoretical framework for the discussion of a form of literary practice that is as of yet not fully formulated in the fields of literary or media studies. Existing critical analyses of Twitter literature, such as those referenced above, have used a range of theoretical frameworks from both literary and media studies, with several common approaches readily appreciable. These include N. Katherine Hayles' work on "electronic literature" and posthuman subjectivities (e.g. Precup; Gutman; Andersen; Veel), "digital fiction" scholars such as Alice Bell and Ruth Page's work on new media and narrative theory (e.g. Andersen; Andersen and Linkis), and Henry Jenkins' work on "transmedia storytelling" (e.g. Andersen; Andersen and Linkis). Yet despite the demonstrable utility of these

approaches in relation to Twitter literature, none provide a critical framework capable of addressing Diamedia Literary Practice in all its distinct, dynamic, and dialogic complexity.

A solution to this problem, as this thesis demonstrates, can be found in a critic whose work has been alluded to in analyses of Twitter literature without having been applied more extensively as a theoretical framework: Marshall McLuhan.¹⁶ Born of his training as literary scholar, McLuhan's media studies combine the critical modalities of both media and literary studies, providing the basis to address Cole's mutually media- and literary practice-based questions. Distilled as a paradigm of media effects by his two co-authored and posthumous texts, *Laws of Media* (1988) and *The Global Village* (1989), McLuhan's media studies present an empirical tool that can be used to analyse the dynamics of innovations and situations in which older and newer literary media are shaping and reshaping each other through processes of authorial perception, practice, and performance. The "laws of media" or "tetrad", referring to the paradigm's four-part structure, sets out four laws of media effects – "enhance", "obsolesce", "retrieve", and "reverse" – that apply to all media from the point of their creation and until their continuing utility is challenged by a newer medium. As a tool for analysing the dynamics of media rooted in the logic of literary studies, designed to apply to both the product of human endeavour (in this case, Twitter-based literary works and print-published novels) and the human endeavour itself (in this case, literary practice), the tetrad permits the requisite dexterity to frame the discussion of Diamedia Literary Practice and acknowledge its distinct, dynamic, and dialogic complexity.

With Diamedia Literary Practice providing the conceptual means to articulate Cole's, Egan's, and Mitchell's prototypical literary practice, and with McLuhan's media studies supplying the necessary theoretical framework to explicate Diamedia Literary Practice, taken together, these conceptual and theoretical innovations provide the basis upon which the thesis can begin answer its central research questions. Correspondingly, the thesis is structured as follows.

Chapter 1 begins by briefly charting the development of the Twitter platform in order to identify its key features and contextualise the Twitter works against the specific instance of the platform that they were written for and published on, before also establishing some of the key characteristics of the novel form in relation to Twitter. Chapter 2 then continues by addressing existing critical and theoretical perspectives that have predominantly been applied to Twitter literature and shows how McLuhan's media studies provide a more productive framework that more effectively accounts for Diamedia Literary Practice, setting the foundations for the case study chapters that follow. The chapter then focuses more directly on Diamedia Literary Practice and, initially, the ways in which existing critical theory – here grouped according to the three

¹⁶ Both Gutman and Mingazova briefly refer to McLuhan's media studies in their aforementioned articles.

aforementioned approaches principally represented by Hayles' work on "electronic literature", Jenkins' work on "transmedia storytelling", and Bell, Page, and Thomas et al's work on "digital fiction" – does not provide a suitable framework for its analysis. From here, the chapter profiles the contrasting productiveness of McLuhan's media studies as a theoretical framework around which to construct case study analyses of Diamedia Literary Practice.

Chapters 3, 4, and 5 then represent the case study analyses of Cole's, Egan's, and Mitchell's Diamedia Literary Practice, respectively. Each case study begins with a quotation from the author describing their impetus in using Twitter as means of innovating in their literary practice. They all follow the same format by focusing on a key conceptual concern of the author's literary practice which, along with the already established connections between the works and the theoretical framework provided by McLuhan's tetrad, brings the Twitter works and novels into productive critical dialogue. While more broadly framing the "diamedia" nature of the authors' literary practice, McLuhan's laws of media, and explicitly the "obsolesce" and "retrieval" elements of the tetrad, also reveal a distinct pattern across all the authors' literary practice in that each retrieves an obsolesced literary form originally linked to an outmoded print-based environment and updates it for the digital environs of the Twitter platform. Similarly, each case study focuses on a secondary, tetrad-related theoretical conception from McLuhan's media studies, illuminating another idiosyncratic aspect of each author's Diamedia Literary Practice.

Chapter 3 analyses Cole's Diamedia Literary Practice primarily across and through the *small fates* project and *Open City*, though with further reference to both 'Hafiz' and *Every Day is for the Thief*. It focuses on the concept of "noise" in Cole's literary practice as an aspect of his thematic concern with contemporary cosmopolitan experience, discussing Cole's aforementioned retrieval of the obsolesced *fait divers* form for the *small fates* and positing that the Twitter work operated as a thematic echo of *Open City*, exploiting the platform's specific characteristics to create a more literal version of the non-white narrative-based noise that arose throughout novel. In exploring this singular theme across and through digital and print media, Cole's Diamedia Literary Practice followed the logic of McLuhan's conceptions of "acoustic" and "visual" space, using the perceptive structures of each type of space in writing symbiotically through the specificities of both Twitter and the novel so that each medium and form was an inherent part of his message. The chapter argues that, through his Diamedia Literary Practice, Cole utilised Twitter's undivided, undifferentiated stream-based structure to indicate that its inclusiveness is not quite as universal as it appears, just as New York is not quite as "open" as suggested in *Open City*, with the platform performing the same role as the novel in elongating the perspectives and experiences of his readers.

Chapter 4 then analyses Egan's literary practice across 'Black Box' and *A Visit from the Goon Squad*, underscoring the importance of writing through as well as across different media

environments in the process of Diamedia Literary Practice in the manner exemplified by Cole in Chapter 3. By focusing on the concept of “time” as a central thematic concern in Egan’s work and as part of her premise in using the platform to extend a character’s narrative arc beyond the pages of the novel, it illustrates that time was also the reason Egan’s attempted retrieval of the obsolesced Victorian serial form for Twitter was ultimately ill-fated, failing to update the temporal dynamics of the form for the “acoustic” sensibility of the platform. Egan’s literary practice permits a closer examination of McLuhan’s conceptions of “obsolescence” and “retrieval”, showing that, despite its similarity in form and intention to Cole’s and particularly Mitchell’s literary practice, her work across ‘Black Box’ and *A Visit from the Goon Squad* is not a true example of Diamedia Literary Practice as she did not properly account for the particular forms and functions of Twitter in order to write through the platform for ‘Black Box’. The chapter argues that Egan’s exploration of time and its effect on the characters of *A Visit from the Goon Squad* is both intricate and nuanced, demonstrating the malleability of the print-published novel form and bearing the traces of the atomised mode of information dispersal, ongoing inclusiveness, and formal constraint of Twitter and digital media more generally. However, it also argues that Egan did not carry this level of intricacy and nuance into ‘Black Box’, with time and its effect on characters ironically proving problematic on the platform, emphasising the need for the novelist writing on Twitter to adapt to its specific characteristics as a literary medium.

In contrast to Chapter 4, Chapter 5 addresses Mitchell’s Diamedia Literary Practice principally across and through @I_Bombadil and *Slade House*, where @I_Bombadil represented a more successful retrieval of the obsolesced Victorian serial form for Twitter than demonstrated by Egan in ‘Black Box’. It similarly focuses on “time” as a central thematic concern of Mitchell’s work and his primary impetus in using Twitter to extend a character’s narrative arc beyond the pages of *Slade House* to the platform in @I_Bombadil, establishing his strategic and symbiotic leveraging of the temporal specificities of both Twitter and the novel form in connecting one work to the other. Intensifying the already complex temporal and spatial involutions of Mitchell’s literary practice, his work across and through @I_Bombadil and *Slade House* reflected McLuhan’s conception of the “resonant interval” in the way that it positioned the reader in-between Twitter and the novel, drawing them into an interstitial and oscillating zone of tension between each work and each media environment. The chapter argues that, through his Diamedia Literary Practice, Mitchell used the platform to further elongate the perspectives and experiences not only of his readers and, in a more symbolic sense, one of his characters but also in extending his perspectives and experiences as an author, eccentrically exploring the smaller role the novelist plays on the platform.

As a group, Cole, Egan, and Mitchell represent the most frequently referenced authors in relation to Twitter literature. Yet, there is another novelist whose name regularly appears in

articles regarding literary practice on the platform: Tao Lin. For example, ‘Twitter and the Novel’ profiles Lin and Mira Gonzalez’s *Selected Tweets* (2015), a print-published collection of Lin and Gonzalez’s tweets culled from their multiple Twitter accounts, and discusses Twitter literary practice more generally, including reference to Cole’s ‘Hafiz’, while ‘The Writer’s Mind: Tao Lin on Twitter’ deals with Lin’s literary practice on Twitter, referring to Lin as occupying the axis between Twitter and the novel, simultaneously referencing his Twitter account in writing his novels and writing novels based on his Twitter account.¹⁷ Although not as high profile as Cole, Egan, and Mitchell, Lin is similarly synonymous with Twitter literature while also bringing a different dimension to the discussion by virtue of his association with what was known as the “alt-lit”.

The “alt-lit” was a loose movement of young, self-promoting writers and small, independent press houses whose work, whether published digitally or in print, was usually filtered through digital and social media platforms, websites, and blogs, while also exploring the mores of digital and social media, the internet, and online existence. Perhaps most pertinent, though, is that the literary work produced by alt-lit authors was not confined to official publications and was instead part of every public-facing facet of their output. Moreover, their published works were customarily inspired by or drawn directly from the distinctively self-focused forms of writing they practiced via digital and social media, and often also culled from digitally-enabled private communications. In short, their work was inextricable from their lives and their lives inextricable from the digital and social media through which their lives were documented, which in turn motivated their works.¹⁸

Arguably the most renowned writer whose roots can be traced back to the alt-lit, Lin’s work displays a more direct relationship between Twitter and the novel than is evident in Cole’s, Egan’s, and Mitchell’s work. Each of the aforementioned authors saw the platform as a means of extending an aspect of their literary practice in the novel form through individual instances of Twitter-based literary practice, whereas, for Lin, his literary practice on the platform is an ongoing concern that closely reflects Twitter’s user norms and instead overlaps at key junctures with his novels: rather than being another outlet, his Twitter writing is always inevitably and

¹⁷ Andrew Marzoni, ‘Twitter and the Novel’, *Review 31* <<http://review31.co.uk/essay/view/29/twitter-and-the-novel>> [accessed 22 April 2019]; Samantha Hurley, ‘The Writer’s Mind: On Tao Lin’s Twitter’, *The Stray*, 2017 <<https://thestrays.org/2017/11/03/the-writers-mind-on-tao-lins-twitter/>> [accessed 24 April 2019].

¹⁸ Lin himself is credited as having given rise to the tag, “alt-lit”, through the works published via his publishing house (Muumuu House), in his general visibility as an author, and by virtue of having inspired a number of other writers whose work often took less conventional forms, such as instant messages, text messages, personal essays, image macros, tweets, and Tumblr blogs. This included authors like Megan Boyle, Mira Gonzalez, Darcie Wilder, Gabby Bess, Noah Cicero, Jordan Castro, Steve Roggenbuck, and Melissa Broder. The alt-lit is discussed in more detail in Chapter 6.

intrinsically linked to his novels, and vice versa. Lin therefore supplies a useful counterpoint to Cole, Egan, and Mitchell in rounding out the case study analyses.

Chapter 6 consequently analyses Lin's Diamedia Literary Practice across and through his primary Twitter account, @tao_lin (2008-), and his novel, *Taipei* (2013). It focuses on the concept of "self-presentation" central to Lin's literary practice, where there is always a version of Lin at the centre of each of his works, whether as the primary protagonist, participant, and producer of his multiple Twitter accounts or the central character, narrator, and novelist behind his novels. Through his Twitter-based, fictionally autobiographical literary lifestreaming, Lin retrieves the obsolesced epistolary novel form and updates it for a contemporary technocultural context increasingly characterised by and chronicled via digital and social media. However, Lin's Diamedia Literary Practice differs from Cole's and Mitchell's in the more direct connection between his Twitter and novel-based literary practice. This means that his retrieval of the epistolary form for Twitter via @tao_lin is also already innately tangled up with his writing in *Taipei* that the novel also bears traces of the retrieval, with both works examining the effect of an existence mediated by and documented via digital tools. In order to explore this effect on Twitter, Lin retrieves and transforms the epistolary form as a literary impulse to document his life in a continuous, repetitive, and affectless way, driven by the characteristics of the digital tools with which his life is essentially entangled. But in order to explore this same, digitally driven effect in a print-based media environment via the novel form, Lin had to attune his writing to the characteristics of the print medium so that, despite dealing with the same central concern and with himself at the centre of each work, his writing in the novel and on Twitter took emphatically distinct forms. In his unusual ability to adapt so strikingly and thoroughly to different media environments, Lin's work across and through @tao_lin and *Taipei* manifested McLuhan's conception of "robotism", with Lin able to instantly adjust to shifting media-based contexts in pursuing ideal literary performance. The chapter argues that, through his Diamedia Literary Practice, Lin shows the notion that the novelist is smaller than ever before can be leveraged to achieve an ideal literary performance, but also that the novelist's role can be multifariously expanded into a number of related roles. At the same time, it argues that, through Lin's Diamedia Literary Practice and the malleability of the print-published novel form, the novel may be influenced by the atomised mode of information dispersal of Twitter and digital tools in general, but not necessarily in as literal or straightforward a form as might be anticipated.

Collectively, Chapters 3, 4, 5, and 6 provide a number of practice-based answers to the research questions extrapolated from Cole's keynote, which, when taken together, indicate a distinct, dynamic, and dialogic connection between Twitter and the novel at the level of form and media, which novelists play a crucial role in exploring and defining. By answering the questions raised by Cole's keynote and in light of his, Egan's, Mitchell's, and Lin's literary practice, the thesis

shows that Twitter is indeed a future of the novel, but one constituted by a more complex connection than Cole's keynote implies and one in which the novelist is more explicitly engaged. By focusing on Cole, Egan, Mitchell, and Lin as novelists publishing literary works on the platform and participating in the future of the novel in the terms Cole suggested, the thesis argues that Twitter is a future of the novel specifically in the sense that Diamedia Literary Practice suggests; that is, one in which the forms are distinctly, dynamically, dialogically, and ultimately resonantly connected, where the novelist publishing on the platform leverages the tension between the two so that each form mutually and recursively affects the other, while also subject to the underlying and ongoing dialogue between digital and print media.

For each of the authors analysed, Twitter represented a way of simultaneously extending an aspect of their novelistic practice (or, in Lin's case, vice versa), retrieving an obsolesced form originally tied to print media, testing Twitter's literary potential, and creating an experimental prose work on the platform. Their work on Twitter and in the novel form was tangled up in such a way that analysing each work, each form, and each media environment in isolation only provides part of the picture, presenting an incomplete understanding of the authors' place at the centre of this type of literary practice and of the ongoing and reciprocal tension between digital and print media. In this way, Diamedia Literary Practice is itself a future of literary of practice: a "future" this thesis shows is already here, indicating any prior conceptions of clear demarcation or unidirectional development between print and digital literary works no longer hold. The research undertaken within this thesis was only possible through the conceptual, critical, and analytical innovation innate in defining Diamedia Literary Practice, simultaneously addressing both the "across" and "through" media aspects of literary practice while also accounting for the author's crucial role in establishing and exploring connections between works and media environments. By extension, then, the thesis argues that the new critical perspective demonstrated in answering the research questions extrapolated from Cole's keynote, in formulating Diamedia Literary Practice, and in utilising McLuhan's media studies, is necessary not only for the future of literary and media studies but is rather a necessary new critical perspective for literary and media studies now.

The "resonant connections" alluded to by the thesis' title are therefore intended to signify the profound connections it contains: in terms of the literary practice it addresses, the meaningful practical, narrative, and thematic connections between the Twitter works and novels intended by the author to elongate the perspectives of the reader, evoke a particular image or emotion, and echo across and through the works, reverberating across and through print and digital media; and in terms of the analytical approach it takes, the productive connection between literary and media studies constituted by the terminological and theoretical formulation of Diamedia Literary

Practice, enabled by McLuhan's media studies, that allows literary practice across and through Twitter and the novel to be addressed in all its distinct, dynamic, and dialogic complexity.

Chapter I

Twitter and the Novel

As stated at the very beginning of the Introduction, the research undertaken within this thesis was prompted both by Teju Cole's assertion that Twitter was a future of the novel, and his own literary practice on Twitter and in the novel form. However, the thesis was also motivated by the aforementioned and highly influential work carried out by researchers such as N. Katherine Hayles, Henry Jenkins, Bronwen Thomas, Alice Bell, and Ruth Page. Although their analyses do not account for Diamedia Literary Practice – a form of literary practice where an author operates across and through print and digital media environments in the production of two (or more) literary works, where each work is written with the specific form and medium in mind but there is also a meaningful connection between the works – the approach undertaken here is nonetheless indebted to their formative research and indeed adopts aspects of their approaches in the way that it applies McLuhan's media studies. The primary purpose of Chapter 2 is to discuss Diamedia Literary Practice with specific regard to literary practice across and through the Twitter platform and the novel form in order to show how the existing critical frameworks do not fully account for or articulate its complex dynamics and, by contrast, how McLuhan's media studies provide a more adequate framework for analysis, which addresses Diamedia Literary Practice at the interconnected levels of practice, form, and media.

But before discussing McLuhan or Hayles, Jenkins, Bell, Page, and Thomas, or dealing with Diamedia Literary Practice directly in Chapter 2, this chapter first briefly charts the evolution of Twitter as a platform. This is necessary in order to establish its characteristics as a medium for the purposes of discussion in relation to Diamedia Literary Practice later in the chapter, and to contextualise its development and features for discussion in the case study chapters. For the same reasons, the chapter also briefly identifies and discusses some key characteristics of the novel form to further contextualise, compare, and contrast with Twitter before discussing Diamedia Literary Practice in more depth in Chapter 2. Consequently, and as the title suggests, the chapter is organised into two sections: Twitter and The Novel.

Twitter

One of the principal challenges in charting Twitter's development is in how it has developed relatively organically around user practices and user innovation. As Jean Burgess and Nancy Baym note in their recent platform biography, the ambiguity of the Twitter's core function and purpose, especially in its earliest iterations, more or less required that users develop their own uses for the platform and their own interpretations of its features, often developing workarounds

in order to express these.¹ In instances where these workarounds became more universally utilised across the platform, they were regularly ratified by Twitter’s developers and formally built into the platform as features. As a result, Twitter has seen more iterative, feature-based development than radical overhauls, making its development more difficult to track. Furthermore, as Burgess and Baym also emphasise, social media platforms are constituted of both the core underlying technologies that host and create them, as well as the affordances that define their uses and meanings. These underlying technologies are perpetually being updated, which in turn drives changes to the platform’s features and affordances, enacted in part by both developers and users. This means that platforms exist in a state of “permanent beta”, continually in the process of being remade.²

In order to address the analytical challenges Twitter presents, Burgess and Baym build their platform biography around what they identify as its three key features, tracing their development through the platform’s various iterations: ‘the @ (created as a way to address and connect to other users); the # (a way to coordinate groups and topics); and the retweet (a way to share other users’ contributions accurately and with attribution).’³ These features and ongoing development thereof, Burgess and Baym argue, has ‘become part of the grammar for understanding different uses of Twitter’, informing the distinct social media culture that evolved on the platform.⁴ Primarily using a mixture of existing scholarship, publications, tech industry materials, news sources, Twitter’s own development blog, and user blogs and interviews, Burgess and Baym provide a compelling and comprehensive narrative of how Twitter became what it is now, or at least at the time *Twitter: A Biography* (2021) was published. While the aim in this section is rather more modest in seeking to contextualise the Twitter works discussed in the case study chapters against the instance of the platform available to the author at the time, it is nonetheless informed by Burgess and Baym’s broader platform biography approach.

This section therefore traces Twitter’s development by focusing on the key features that have come to characterise platform, how they came into being, how their uses and meanings have shifted over time, and how these shifts are often the subject of significant tensions between the platform and its users. The features discussed include those identified by Burgess and Baym – the @mention/reply, the hashtag (#), and the retweet – but also the “favourite” button or star (★), which is a notable absence in Burgess and Baym’s broader analysis of the platform’s key features. It similarly draws on existing scholarship of Twitter – including Burgess and Baym’s work as well as that of many scholars whom they themselves reference – publications, tech industry materials,

¹ Jean Burgess and Nancy Baym, *Twitter: A Biography* (New York: New York University Press, 2020), pp.7-8.

² Burgess and Baym, *Twitter: A Biography*, p.25.

³ Burgess and Baym, *Twitter: A Biography*, p.35.

⁴ Burgess and Baym, *Twitter: A Biography*, p.35.

news sources, and also makes extensive use of Twitter's Product Blog archives. However, where Burgess and Baym mine their own Twitter post archives and interview a range of regular users to provide their text with the requisite user perspectives, the users this thesis is most concerned with is the authors whose work it addresses. Consequently, these user perspectives are primarily reserved for the case study chapters, with the remainder of the section below devoted to providing the necessary contextual and developmental framework in which to discuss them more fully.

Since its launch in July 2006, Twitter has seen numerous iterations while retaining the core aspects of its operational structure, which revolves around users posting their own short messages, or "tweets", and subscribing to other users' messages. Originally, Twitter was designed to work within the constraints of the short message service (SMS), which in turn provided the rationale for its maximum character length of 140 characters per tweet: one SMS message is 160 characters long, where 20 characters were reserved for the username, leaving the other 140 for the message.⁵ Any messages longer than the initial 140 characters had then to be split into separate, subsequent tweets, always subject to the same character limitation. This ensured, as well as being available via web browsers and personal digital assistants (PDAs), that Twitter was compatible with even those most rudimentary of mobile phones.

At the outset, Twitter was an open, real-time mobile channel for primarily textual communication, where all tweets posted on the platform responded to a single, present-tense question: 'What are you doing?'⁶ In line with the present-tense nature of the prompt, posted tweets appeared in reverse chronological order; that is, newest first, where newer tweets appeared at the top of users' feeds, or "streams". This present-oriented prompt and stream-based structure created the platform's persistent presence: its sense of liveness or "nowness". Tweets posted from accounts set to "public" were visible online to anyone who wished to view them, whether they had a Twitter account or not, and also appeared in the tweeting user's own stream as well as in the streams of all other users that subscribed to their tweets. Those whose tweets a user subscribed to and those who subscribed to their tweets were called "friends". Accounts could also be set to "protected" or "private", meaning tweets were only visible to other users approved by the account holder, but the norm and default setting was for accounts to be set as public.

These simple features amounted to Twitter's core functionality in its nascent stages of existence and helped define the platform going forward: as Alexander Halavais states, it was 'a

⁵ Richard Roger, 'Debanalising Twitter: The Transformation of an Object of Study', in *Twitter and Society*, ed. by Katrin Weller and others (New York: Peter Lang, 2014), p.x.

⁶ Biz Stone, 'What's Happening', *Twitter Blog*, 2009
<https://blog.twitter.com/official/en_us/a/2009/whats-happening.html> [accessed 1 May 2019].

revolution in simplicity [...] nearly bereft of formal structures'.⁷ Indeed, this was part of Twitter's *raison d'être* from the very beginning. As co-founder Jack Dorsey (@jack) explains, the idea was initially for it to be a utility that 'fades into the background, something that's just a part of communication.'⁸ While this sense of simplicity and openness undoubtedly attracted users, it also caused a great deal of confusion about just what Twitter was actually for. Explanations of what it did would often be met with responses such as "Is that it?" or "I don't get it."⁹ As José van Dijck notes, 'During the first years after its emergence, Twitter was often called a service in search of a user application.'¹⁰ Compared to existing platforms and services such Facebook, Google, and YouTube, Twitter lacked a single, discernible application to denote its primary purpose. As van Dijck again suggests, understanding of Twitter's purpose during these early stages was variable and contested, and this remained the case for the first few years of the platform's operation.¹¹

Although between 2006 and 2011, many of the features that are now part of what would be thought of as Twitter's core functionality were introduced, these mostly served to enhance existing features, codify common workarounds, or subtly redefine nomenclature. For example, in November 2006, developers rolled out "timestamps" to more precisely indicate when a tweet was posted, the "favourite" button or star (★) allowing users to save a tweet, the ability to delete one's own tweets, send private, direct messages to other users, and a search function. In August 2007, "friends" were redefined as "followers", better reflecting users' subscription relationships, and in November 2009, the platform's present-tense prompt subtly shifted from 'What are you doing?' to 'What's happening?'¹² With its core functionality remaining largely consistent and its primary purpose still debated, and with its founders willing to let its application(s) develop organically, Twitter's uses remained potential, open to be explored and discovered by its users.¹³ This led to a high level of user innovation, with users fashioning practical workarounds for desired functions that the platform did not formally meet. Once these practices became widely enough used, they were typically co-opted by Twitter developers and incorporated into the platform's core

⁷ Alexander Halavais, 'Structure of Twitter: Social and Technical', in *Twitter and Society*, ed. by Katrin Weller and others (New York: Peter Lang, 2014), p.29.

⁸ Caroline McCarthy, 'Twitter Co-Founder: We'll Have Made It When You Shut up about Us', *CNET*, 2009 <<https://www.cnet.com/news/twitter-co-founder-well-have-made-it-when-you-shut-up-about-us/>> [accessed 13 May 2019].

⁹ Halavais, p.29.

¹⁰ José van Dijck, *The Culture of Connectivity: A Critical History of Social Media* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), p.70.

¹¹ José van Dijck, 'Tracing Twitter: The Rise of a Microblogging Platform', *International Journal of Media and Cultural Politics*, 7.3 (2012), p.333.

¹² Biz Stone, 'Six More Twitter Updates!', *Twitter Blog*, 2006 <https://blog.twitter.com/en_us/a/2006/six-more-twitter-updates.html> [accessed 19 May 2019]; Stone, 'What's Happening'.

¹³ For more details regarding Twitter's founders and their initial desire to let the platform develop organically, see: Nick Bilton, *Hatching Twitter* (London: Sceptre, 2013).

functionality. The three most salient examples of this practice, as Burgess and Baym argue, are the @mention/@reply, the retweet, and the hashtag.

Although Twitter was not built with conversations in mind, conversations were happening on Twitter and users were creating innovative conventions to permit these conversations to take place. As Biz Stone (@biz), another of Twitter's co-founders, wrote on an official blog post, 'At some point, Twitter-ers came up with their own method of directing updates to one another using an @ symbol.'¹⁴ By using the @ symbol followed by the username of the user they were responding to (i.e. @<username>) within a tweet, Twitter users had started tagging each other in tweets. Where the @<username> appeared at the start of the tweet, indicating it was a direct response to another user, this was known as an "@reply"; where the @<username> appeared anywhere else in the tweet, indicating another user was being referred to in the tweet, this was known as an "@mention". In late 2006, these two conventions were the first informal functions to be formally incorporated into the platform by Twitter developers, and in May 2007 developers created a "replies" tab on every user's profile page to collate replies directed at their usernames, an "in reply to" link that hyperlinked the tweet the reply was in response to, and hyperlinked the @<username> to that user's profile page.¹⁵

After the @mention and @reply had been formalised, another informal user practice that developers looked to formally incorporate into the platform was the "retweet". Where the @reply convention had allowed users to reply to each other's tweets and the @mention convention had allowed users to tag each other in tweets, the retweet convention was being used to draw attention to another user's tweet. By placing an "RT" at the start of tweet, users denoted the tweet's status as a retweet of another user's tweet, sharing it with their own followers. As Stone explained in another blog post in August 2009, 'When you want to call more attention to a particular tweet, you copy/paste it as your own, reference the original author with an @mention, and finally, indicate that it's a retweet.'¹⁶ Once again, he noted that 'Some of Twitter's best features are emergent', acknowledging user innovation as the source of the convention, stating, 'Retweeting is a great example of Twitter teaching us what it wants to be.'¹⁷ In response, Twitter developers created a retweet button, allowing users to (re)tweet another user's tweet for their followers without having to copy and paste the original tweet or write "RT", and where the

¹⁴ Biz Stone, 'Are You Twittering @ Me?', *Twitter Blog*, 2007

<https://blog.twitter.com/en_us/a/2007/are-you-twittering-me.html> [accessed 1 May 2019].

¹⁵ More recently, in December 2017 and again based on user innovation, the platform introduced "threading" as a way of connecting more than one tweet (for example, when @replying to yourself) as a "thread" of several tweets. See: Sasank Reddy, 'Nice Threads', *Twitter Blog*, 2017

<https://blog.twitter.com/en_us/topics/product/2017/nicethreads.html> [accessed 1 May 2019].

¹⁶ Biz Stone, 'Project Retweet: Phase One', *Twitter Blog*, 2009

<https://blog.twitter.com/en_us/a/2009/project-retweet-phase-one.html> [accessed 1 May 2019].

¹⁷ Stone, 'Project Retweet: Phase One'.

retweet was instead reflecting by a small icon in the tweet metadata and the retweeting user was noted next to a “Retweeted by” message at the bottom of the tweet.

While both the @mention/@reply and retweet functions’ genesis was through general user innovation as conventions that emerged from widespread user practice and, potentially, from other communications media, the hashtag has a single, identifiable originator. On the 23rd of August 2007, product designer Chris Messina (@chrismessina) posted a tweet:



Figure 1.1 Tweet from @chrismessina re: the hashtag

Messina had been an active user on IRC (Internet Relay Chat) and the chat rooms they hosted had “channels” that you tagged using a pound symbol (#) and a word.¹⁸ The idea of “groups” had been mentioned before to allow users to focus on certain tweets or conversation on Twitter, and in September 2007, around the same time as Messina was starting to think about his channel tagging proposal, Twitter developers had formally released a function called “tracking” that allowed users to receive updates on their phone or IM (Instant Messenger) for specified keywords (e.g. “track NYC”, which would update the user when anyone tweets mentioning “NYC”).¹⁹ The “groups” idea never came to fruition, with chat rooms such as those available via IRC already providing space for these kind of focused conversations, and with users seeming to agree with Messina that groups were not the best idea or fit for Twitter.²⁰ Likewise, Twitter’s own keyword tracking function went largely unused and ‘made little impact’ on the platform.²¹ As Messina explained, what he wanted was ‘a better eavesdropping experience on Twitter’, which he felt was achievable by focusing on improving ‘contextualization, content filtering and exploratory serendipity’.²²

Having formulated his concept of channels, Messina decided to visit Twitter’s headquarters to propose the idea to Stone, who responded, ‘OK, but what do you want me to do

¹⁸ Lexi Pandell, ‘The Hashtag: An Oral History’, *Wired*, 2017 <<https://www.wired.com/2017/05/oral-history-hashtag/>> [accessed 19 May 2019].

¹⁹ Jack Dorsey, ‘Tracking Twitter’, *Twitter Blog*, 2007 <https://blog.twitter.com/en_us/a/2007/tracking-twitter.html>.

²⁰ Chris Messina, ‘Groups for Twitter; or A Proposal for Twitter Tag Channels’, *Factory Joe*, 2007 <<https://factoryjoe.com/2007/08/25/groups-for-twitter-or-a-proposal-for-twitter-tag-channels/>> [accessed 19 May 2019].

²¹ Halavais, p.37.

²² Messina.

about that? Go ahead and do it.’²³ And so Messina began to champion the use of the pound sign, reaching out to other Twitter users. These users included his friend, Stowe Boyd (@stoweboyd), who began to refer to the pound sign as a “hash” in relation to the operator in the C programming language, and Nate Ritter (@nateritter), a prolific Twitter user who, at the time, was posting about the 2007 San Diego fire and began using “#SanDiegoFire” to tag his tweets at Messina’s suggestion.²⁴ Between Ritter’s prolific posting and the ongoing devastation caused by the wildfire, the “hashtag”, as it became known, quickly became a widespread convention on the platform. This, in turn, led Twitter developers to formalise the feature in July 2009, hyperlinking hashtags as an automatic search tool that returned all tweets including that hashtag, and, in March 2010, tweaking the Twitter homepage to include “trending topics”, highlighting the most popular hashtags at any given moment.²⁵

The purpose in describing these developments in detail is not just to explain some of the key features that are discussed in the case study chapters, but also to show that user innovation is one of the platform’s key characteristics. More than any other digital and social media platform or service of its scale, Twitter has developed in line with its usage by relying heavily on users to provide its purpose and its functions.²⁶ As Axel Bruns states, Twitter has been a site of such significant user-led innovation that its users, not its engineers, essentially developed and honed many of its core features, building user-led innovation into the platform’s fabric from the very beginning.²⁷ As the root of so many of the platform’s key features, users have understandably demonstrated strong feelings when it comes to the features they popularised and ultimately helped develop. Borrowing a term from Taina Bucher, Burgess and Baym call these features ‘objects of intense feeling’, acting as ‘mediators between multiple media ideologies, individual human desires, and business logics’.²⁸ These features are sites of significant innovation on users’ parts, meaning that users correspondingly felt a great deal of ownership over them and, by extension, how the platform developed and formalised these previously informal features. This

²³ Pandell.

²⁴ Pandell.

²⁵ Doug Bowman, ‘Tweaking the Twitter Homepage’, *Twitter Blog*, 2010
<https://blog.twitter.com/en_us/a/2010/tweaking-the-twitter-homepage.html> [accessed 19 May 2019].

²⁶ At the time of writing, Twitter’s user base amounts to 126 million daily users and 321 million monthly users, just over 88% of which are public accounts. See: Bianca Bosker and Dino Gradoni, ‘9 Quirkiest Facts About Twitter: Gaze Into The Soul Of The Twittersphere’, *Huffington Post*, 2017
<https://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/entry/quirkiest-facts-twitter-users_n_1956260> [accessed 13 May 2019].

²⁷ Axel Bruns, ‘Ah Hoc Innovation by Users of Social Networks: The Case of Twitter’, *ZSI Discussion Paper*, 16 (2012), p.5.

²⁸ Jean Burgess and Nancy Baym, ‘@RT#: Towards a Platform Biography of Twitter’, in *The 17th Annual Conference of the Association of Internet Researchers* (Berlin, 2016)
<<https://eprints.qut.edu.au/107070/1/1236-1286-1-PB.pdf>>.

in turn has meant that these features have also been sites of significant tension between the platform and its users.²⁹

In May 2009, as a part of its ongoing formalisation of the @reply features, Twitter developers made a change to the visibility of replies so that users would no longer see replies from users they did not follow if they were not directed at their username, limiting the experience of serendipitous eavesdropping that Messina referred to above. As a result, #fixreplies was the top trending hashtag on Twitter the day after the change came into effect, with users deeming both the transparency of the change process and the outcome of the change itself unsatisfactory.³⁰ In response, in a blog post titled ‘The Replies Kerfuffle’, Stone tried to placate users, stating that ‘Twitter evolves and thrives on how folks use it’, noting that, ‘Some of [Twitter’s] best features are invented by users’.³¹ He explained that the steps taken to remove the replies setting were to resolve what they saw as a design flaw and a technical problem on the platform, the fix for which only affected 3% of the entire user population. In practice, though, it appeared a much greater proportion than 3% of users were dissatisfied with the change. In their search for a workaround that would allow them to revert the @reply functionality back to its desired operation, all a user had to do was insert any character apart from a space before the @<username> tag at the beginning of a tweet.³² As a result, Twitter was soon flooded with @replies with a full stop at the beginning of the tweet (i.e. .@<username>), circumventing the new functionality and turning @replies back into @mentions.³³

Similar recursive cycles of informal user innovation and formal platform development followed by intense reactions and further informal innovation from user communities can be found in relation to many of Twitter’s key features. In November 2015, Twitter took the decision to replace the “favourites” features and star (★) button with “likes” and an analogous heart (♥) button, resulting again in widespread dismay among the users.³⁴ The change was an attempt on

²⁹ Although, where relevant, the case study chapters (and particularly in Chapter 3 focusing on Teju Cole’s work) touch on the disruptive political potential of the platform, more work is required to fully explore the connections between the tensions that characterised its development to its increasingly prominent role in political movements, especially in terms of protest and acts of political resistance such as series of uprisings in the Middle East and North African known as the Arab Spring, and as a source of news (and “fake news”) through the recent presidency of Donald J. Trump. However, these are once again regarded as future directions for further research rather than being of primary concern in this thesis.

³⁰ Halavais, p.34.

³¹ Biz Stone, ‘The Replies Kerfuffle’, *Twitter Blog*, 2009 <https://blog.twitter.com/en_us/a/2009/the-replies-kerfuffle.html> [accessed 1 May 2019].

³² Anneke Jong, ‘Mystery Dot Is the Best Kept Secret on Twitter’, [n.d.], *Muse* <<https://www.themuse.com/advice/mystery-dot-the-best-kept-secret-on-twitter>> [accessed 19 May 2019].

³³ Examples of this practice can be seen in Chapter 5 in @I_Bombadil’s tweets @TuttieLottie.

³⁴ Biz Stone, ‘Six More Twitter Updates!’, *Twitter Blog*, 2006 <https://blog.twitter.com/en_us/a/2006/six-more-twitter-updates.html> [accessed 19 May 2019]; Aki Kumar, ‘Hearts on Twitter’, *Twitter Blog*, 2015 <https://blog.twitter.com/official/en_us/a/2015/hearts-on-twitter.html> [accessed 19 May 2019].

Twitter developers' part to adopt a more universal, more expressive, and less confusing symbol than the star had been. Instead, it demonstrated they misunderstood that the ambiguous, nuanced, and multifaceted nature of the star symbol was the very reason for its popularity. As Robinson Meyer explained, 'there's no English word that fits how [users] use the ★ button. There's no language that captures ★ in all its layered glory because ★ [...] can mean many things'.³⁵ It could be used as a bookmark, a reminder to return to a tweet later, an indication a tweet has been seen or read, positive reinforcement of a tweet, or to denote the end of a conversation, among many other things. Farhad Manjoo referred to the ★ as 'Twitter's digital body language', providing a gestural, nuanced response that is often unavailable in online communication environments that accentuate brevity.³⁶ The favourite button was, in effect, unique to Twitter and users took to the platform to vent their anger and disappointment about its replacement, many noting that Twitter should instead be focusing on addressing abuse on the platform rather than replacing features users were happy with.³⁷

As a platform, Twitter is fundamentally characterised by the opposing forces that created it and define it to this day. It operates from a site of tension between intended and actual use, between innovation and imposition of features, between user and platform. As van Dijck puts it, 'users are shaping the platform's direction at the same time, and by the same means, as the platform is shaping users' behavior'.³⁸ Despite the platform having been in operation since 2006, there is still a sense of potentiality about Twitter, generated by the tension between users and the platform. Even now, if developers impose changes intended to shape users' behaviours that are deemed undesirable, users have demonstrated a capacity for resistance in their ongoing use of the platform.³⁹ When Twitter introduced arguably the most significant change to the platform's core functionality in September 2017, expanding the 140 character length for a tweet to 280

³⁵ Robinson Meyer, 'Why Twitter Replaced Its Stars With Hearts', *Atlantic*, 2015 <<https://www.theatlantic.com/technology/archive/2015/11/twitter-unfaves-itself-hearts/413917/>> [accessed 19 May 2019].

³⁶ Farhad Manjoo, 'Save the Fav, Twitter's Digital Body Language', *New York Times*, 2014 <<https://bits.blogs.nytimes.com/2014/08/25/save-the-fav-twitters-digital-body-language/>> [accessed 19 May 2019].

³⁷ See, for example: Brian Barrett, 'Twitter Reacts to Hearts Replacing Stars', *Wired*, 2015 <<https://www.wired.com/2015/11/twitter-reacts-to-hearts-replacing-stars/>> [accessed 19 May 2019]; Laura Vitto, 'The Best Reactions to Twitter's Blasphemous New Heart "like" Button', *Mashable*, 2015 <<https://mashable.com/2015/11/03/twitter-like-button/?europa=true>> [accessed 19 May 2019]; Hannah Jane Parkinson, 'Twitter Is Replacing Favourites with Likes – but Does Anyone Heart It?', *Guardian*, 2015 <<https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2015/nov/03/twitter-replacing-favourites-with-likes-does-anyone-heart>> [accessed 19 May 2019].

³⁸ van Dijck, *The Culture of Connectivity: A Critical History of Social Media*, p.76.

³⁹ In the aforementioned case of the heart ("like") replacing the star ("favourite") button, a Chrome extension called FavForever was developed by a user that 'brings stars back'. See: Kaitlyn Tiffany, 'If You Can't Live without Twitter's 'favorite' Star, You Can Bring It Back', *Verge*, 2015 <<https://www.theverge.com/2015/11/3/9665182/twitter-likes-favorites-chrome-extension-hearts-stars>> [accessed 1 May 2019].

characters, there was once again dismay among user communities, with users again pointing out that Twitter should instead be focusing on addressing abuse on the platform.⁴⁰ The “tweet” and its 140 character form, as van Dijck again argues, was Twitter’s ‘most distinctive contribution to online culture’.⁴¹ To lose this, in many users’ eyes, portended the end of Twitter as the platform it was. However, in practice, users again proved this need not be the case. Just over a year later, in October 2018, Twitter reported that the change to the character length for tweets had not substantially changed the length of posts: since the change had come into effect, only 12% of tweets were longer than 140 characters, only 5% were longer than 190 characters, and only 1% reached the 280 character limit.⁴² Moreover, prior to the change, the most common length of a tweet was 34 characters; after the change, it was 33 characters.⁴³ Brevity, like user innovation, seems so inveterate to Twitter that users do not want to use extra characters even when they are made available.

Arguably, these two characteristics are Twitter’s most definitive as a platform: brevity and user innovation. The former is what Cole referred to when he spoke of Twitter’s formal constraint and atomised mode of information dispersal, while the latter provides a further gloss on what Cole called its ongoing inclusiveness in that the platform’s users’ multitudinous voices not only have an outlet via Twitter but also significant input into its ongoing evolution. Although Twitter has many distinctive features, many of which are mentioned above, the majority of these features derive from or are closely related to either one or both of these characteristics. Furthermore, and as discussed in more detail in the case study chapters, for the authors addressed in this thesis, it was principally the opportunity for formal innovation presented by the platform’s character constraints coinciding with the more general opportunity to use the platform as a means to innovate in their literary practice that inspired their Twitter works. When Cole, Jennifer Egan, and David Mitchell published their Twitter works and when examples were selected from Tao Lin’s primary Twitter account, the platform’s character constraints were still 140 characters.⁴⁴ Cole published the *small fates* between 2011 and 2013, and also published

⁴⁰ Aliza Rosen and Ikuhiro Ihara, ‘Giving You More Characters to Express Yourself’, *Twitter Blog*, 2017 <https://blog.twitter.com/official/en_us/topics/product/2017/Giving-you-more-characters-to-express-yourself.html> [accessed 14 December 2019]. Regarding criticism of the change, see also: Natasha Lomas, ‘So Why Oh Why Is Twitter Doing #280?’, *TechCrunch*, 2017 <<https://techcrunch.com/2017/09/27/so-why-oh-why-is-twitter-doing-280/>> [accessed 1 May 2019].

⁴¹ van Dijck, *The Culture of Connectivity: A Critical History of Social Media*, p.76.

⁴² Sarah Perez, ‘Twitter’s Doubling of Character Count from 140 to 280 Had Little Impact on Length of Tweets’, *TechCrunch*, 2018 <<https://techcrunch.com/2018/10/30/twitters-doubling-of-character-count-from-140-to-280-had-little-impact-on-length-of-tweets/>> [accessed 26 August 2019].

⁴³ Perez.

⁴⁴ As the only author still tweeting in the same literary sense described in the case study chapters, Lin is the only one to tweet when 280 characters are potentially available. Yet, in terms of tweet length, little has changed in Lin’s tweeting practice on his primary account and his usage patterns are similarly aligned with the statistics referenced regarding character usage.

'Hafiz' in 2014. Egan published 'Black Box' in 2012, Mitchell published @I_Bombadil in 2015, and Lin's @tao_lin account has been regularly updated since 2008 with most of the examples selected coming from 2016.

Although this section contextualises the Twitter works in relation to the development of the platform's key features, as described above, a timeline of Twitter's development has also been included in the Appendix. And while the key features relating to each author and work are discussed in depth in the case study chapters, the timeline also includes the Twitter works published by Cole, Egan, Mitchell, and Lin to place them within the platform's developmental context.⁴⁵ As with this section itself, the timeline is not intended to be a comprehensive record of Twitter's development but rather intends to provide a more straightforward and visual reference with which to contextualise the Twitter works discussed against the instance of the platform available to the author at the time. The timeline also includes the publication dates of the authors' related novels for the sake of context and to further frame the temporal connection between the Twitter works and novels. But before bringing the authors' Twitter works and novels together in discussing Diamedia Literary Practice, it is pertinent to contextualise, compare, and contrast the novel form with Twitter. While the main differences between Twitter and the novel form are perhaps somewhat obvious, there are also key similarities between the forms that show why novelists have been attracted to the platform as a literary medium and why, in Cole's terms, Twitter represents a future of the novel.

The Novel

As with the previous section, this section is not intended to be a comprehensive history of the novel but rather an attempt to begin to bring Twitter and the novel form into critical dialogue prior to the case study chapters. However, this is also partly for the reason that, unlike Twitter, numerous comprehensive critical histories and accounts of the development of the novel form already exist. And yet, as these works show, the novel is not an easy form to define. This is perhaps the one aspect of the novel that unites the various critical works addressing its history and development.

In his account of the novel's oft-overlooked development prior to 1600, Steven Moore argues that the novel has actually existed since at least the fourth century BCE, despite the prevalence of the "standard" history of the novel that tends to suggest that it was born in the eighteenth century with the realistic narratives of authors such as Jonathan Swift, Daniel Defoe, Samuel Richardson, Henry Fielding, and Laurence Sterne.⁴⁶ It is through these authors' works that many the more pervasive and persuasive definitions of the novel were established. And yet,

⁴⁵ See: Appendix A and B.

⁴⁶ Steven Moore, *The Novel: An Alternative History* (London: Bloomsbury, 2010), p.3.

as Moore demonstrates, one of the abiding characteristics of the novel form throughout its development is its inherent resistance to straightforward categorisation. Consequently, despite suggesting that ‘any book-length fictional narrative can be called a novel’, Moore himself disagrees with overly tidy definitions.⁴⁷ In terms of what ‘book-length’ equates to, he refers to E. M. Forster’s opinion that a fictitious work over 50,000 words is a novel, though he also notes that he prefers Abel Chevally’s less precise definition upon which Forster’s is based: ‘a fiction in prose of a certain extent’.⁴⁸ From Jane Smiley, he takes the assertion that a novel is a lengthy, written, prose narrative with a protagonist, before stating his admiration for Italo Calvino’s definition of a novel as ‘a prose composition longer than a short story, either fictitious in content or in its treatment of historical events, worked out with an eye toward a strategy of effects’.⁴⁹ Content, Moore adds, does not matter; a novel can be about anything. Taken together, these definitions suggest that a novel is a relatively long piece of fictitious or partly fictitious prose narrative, featuring a protagonist, which creates some sort of effect. In lieu of a more exacting list of formal aspects and given their general acceptance within the field, these are the essential features considered to comprise “a novel” as it is discussed in this thesis.

At this point, it is worth noting that all the novels primarily addressed in the case study chapters can indeed be characterised in these terms, affirming reference to the works as “novels” throughout the thesis. However, in an attempt to be as precise as possible, *A Visit from the Goon Squad* is also referred as a “story cycle”, as it has been elsewhere, having been originally based on a number of separate but thematically connected short stories and featuring a number of protagonists.⁵⁰ Egan’s work is already used within the thesis as an example of connected novelistic and Twitter-based writing that does not constitute Diamedia Literary Practice, so the fact that her “novel” is more specifically a “story cycle” does not affect the scope or purpose of her case study chapter. Rather, the story cycle structure may indeed indicate the novel form being influenced by the atomised mode of information dispersal and ongoing inclusiveness of Twitter, as Cole suggested in his keynote. This is discussed in more detail in Chapter 4. Similarly, *Slade House* features a different protagonist in each its five parts, even if, as with *Goon Squad*, they tend to overlap from part-to-part. In this case, though, the publisher’s website explicitly refers to the text as “A Novel” and this is also the term reviewers and critics have used to describe the text.⁵¹

⁴⁷ Moore, p.5.

⁴⁸ Moore, p.5.

⁴⁹ Moore, p.5.

⁵⁰ See, for example: Jennifer J. Smith, *The American Short Story Cycle* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2018); Alec Michod, ‘The Rumpus Interview With Jennifer Egan’, *The Rumpus*, 2010 <<https://therumpus.net/2010/06/the-rumpus-interview-with-jennifer-egan/>> [accessed 5 March 2020].

⁵¹ ‘Slade House by David Mitchell’, *Penguin Random House* <<https://www.penguinrandomhouse.com/books/252856/slade-house-by-david-mitchell/>> [accessed 22 February 2020]; See, for example: Liz Jensen, ‘Slade House by David Mitchell Review – like Stephen King

Slade House is consequently treated as a novel in Chapter 5. Otherwise, the only non-primary “novel” referred to within the case study chapters that does not fit within the range of conditions offered by Moore is *Every Day is for the Thief*. Being only approximately 37,265 words long, it falls short of the 50,000-word threshold proposed by Forster.⁵² This would perhaps place the text more correctly in the “novella” category. But since *Every Day is for the Thief* is referred to only very briefly for the sake of context within Cole’s case study chapter, neither does this alter the scope or purpose of Chapter 3.

Despite lacking more definitive characteristics, the novel already appears in some ways to be diametrically opposed to Twitter. Even if one was to accept the assertion that the novel was born in the eighteenth century rather than the fourth century BCE, the novel is centuries old. Twitter, by comparison, is not yet decades old. Even if one believes that a novel need not be 50,000 words, a novel is still tens of thousands of words long. A tweet, by comparison, is at most 280 (and previously 140) characters long. On a surface level, given their apparent opposition, it seems unlikely that a novelist whose literary practice is principally rooted in the long-form prose traditions of the novel would be drawn to Twitter as a literary medium, or that Twitter’s enforced economy of language would represent a future of the novel. This was certainly the view taken by novelist Jonathan Franzen, whose infamous criticisms of the platform suggested Twitter was incompatible with the kind of literary practice associated with the novel form.

Franzen decried Twitter as ‘the ultimate irresponsible medium’, asserting that its ‘radical contingency’ and ‘unspeakably irritating’ 140-character constraint meant it was a medium unsuited to ‘serious readers and writers’.⁵³ As noted above, it is possible to detect a kernel of truth beneath Franzen’s scorn for the platform’s character constraints – one may not find them irritating but they do place Twitter in opposition to the novel – but his assertion regarding its radical contingency is more difficult to accept. Franzen interpreted Twitter’s persistent present-orientation, stream-based structure, and perceived digital ephemerality as a profound lack of certainty, especially when compared to the ostensible certainty provided by the print-based traditions of the novel form. However, this is to crucially misunderstand both Twitter and the novel form.

in a Fever’, *Guardian*, 2015 <<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2015/oct/29/slade-house-david-mitchell-review>> [accessed 22 February 2020].

⁵² See: ‘Every Day Is for the Thief’, *Reading Length* <<https://www.readinglength.com/book/isbn-0812985850>> [accessed 5 March 2020]. For reference, *Reading Length* comparatively puts *Open City* at approximately 79,025 words, *A Visit from the Goon Squad* at 88,015, *Slade House* at 62,495, and *Taipei* at 72,645.

⁵³ Alison Flood, ‘Jonathan Franzen: “Twitter Is the Ultimate Irresponsible Medium”’, *Guardian*, 2012 <<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2012/mar/07/jonathan-franzen-calls-twitter-irresponsible>> [accessed 30 October 2017].

While the platform is fundamentally structured around brevity and its related, primary present-oriented stream of tweets, it was announced in 2010 that all public tweets would be archived by the Library of Congress (LoC).⁵⁴ Although the LoC later signalled a shift in the scope of the project, announcing that from the 31st of December 2017 onward it would only archive a selection of public tweets based on themes of national interest, all public tweets were still being archived in 2012 at the time of Franzen's remarks.⁵⁵ Moreover, even if a tweet does disappear from the most actively viewed areas of users' streams – the time it takes to do so being known as the tweet's "half-life", which is a process estimated to take anything from a few minutes to a few hours – the tweet does not actually disappear from the platform.⁵⁶ Twitter permanently stores all public tweets unless a specific tweet is deleted by a user or a user deletes their Twitter account, in which case all of their tweets are deleted thirty days later; otherwise, every single public tweet is searchable via the platform's search function.⁵⁷ Twitter's radical contingency is therefore far less radical and far less contingent than Franzen suggested. Similarly, his allusions to the relative certainty of the novel in its traditionally print-based form were at best an oversimplification of a more complex form.

As detailed above, Moore's survey of definitions demonstrates most palpably what Ian Watt refers to as 'the poverty of the novel's formal conventions'.⁵⁸ As a form, the novel mortgages definitive, identifiable formal conventions in favour of its malleability; that is, its continuous evolution via stylistic and formal innovation, new techniques and approaches: essentially everything that keeps the novel "novel". The novel's resistance to stable definition is the necessary counterpoint to its openness as a form to innovation and experimentation. It is this, more than any other quality, that Moore believes characterises the history of the novel. And it is this characteristic of the novel that Mikhail Bakhtin discusses at length in his authoritative essay, 'Epic and the Novel'.

In the essay, Bakhtin compellingly argues that the novel is undefinable in terms of specific characteristics, arguing that 'experts have not managed to isolate a single definite, stable

⁵⁴ Matt Raymond, 'How Tweet It Is!: Library Acquires Entire Twitter Archive', *Library of Congress Blog*, 2010 <<https://blogs.loc.gov/loc/2010/04/how-tweet-it-is-library-acquires-entire-twitter-archive/>> [accessed 10 February 2020].

⁵⁵ Lizzie Plaugic, 'The Library of Congress Will No Longer Archive Every Tweet', 2017 <<https://www.theverge.com/2017/12/26/16819748/library-of-congress-twitter-archive-project-stalled>> [accessed 20 February 2020].

⁵⁶ See: Benjamin Rey, 'Your Tweet Half-Life Is 1 Billion Times Shorter than Carbon-14's', *Wiselytics*, 2014 <<http://www.wiselytics.com/blog/tweet-isbillion-time-shorter-than-carbon14/>> [accessed 30 August 2019].

⁵⁷ Samuel Gibbs, 'Twitter Just Made Every Public Tweet Findable ... Here's How to Delete Yours', 2014 <<https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2014/nov/19/new-twitter-search-makes-every-public-tweet-since-2006-findable>> [accessed 20 February 2020].

⁵⁸ Ian Watt, *The Rise of the Novel: Studies in Defoe, Richardson and Fielding* (London: Peregrine, 1963), p.14.

characteristic of the novel – without adding a reservation, which immediately disqualifies it altogether as a generic characteristic'.⁵⁹ This, he posits, is a consequence of the novel's ongoing contact with contemporary reality, where its open-endedness reflects the open-ended nature of the present. In its contact with the ever-evolving and spontaneous present, the novel is a form required to be repeatedly renovated through innovative and experimental literary practice in order to remain connected to reality; as a form, 'It is plasticity itself.'⁶⁰ For Bakhtin, contemporary reality is the true subject of the novel and, in order to properly engage with and represent the unfolding present, the novel inevitably evolved by reconceptualising the nature of narrative time: 'From the very beginning,' Bakhtin states, 'the novel was structured not in the distanced image of the absolute past but in the zone of direct contact with the inconclusive present-day reality.'⁶¹ The novel is therefore not certain or absolute in the sense that Franzen suggested, but necessarily contingent on the unfolding present and the nature of contemporary reality for both its subject and form. It is here, in the novel's purposefully close temporal contact with present reality and despite its ostensible diametrical opposition with the platform, that the reasons novelists such as Cole were drawn to Twitter and why Twitter is a potential future of the novel come more clearly into focus.

As discussed in the previous section, when posting a tweet all Twitter users always respond to a single, present-tense prompt: 'What's happening?' When a user accesses their Twitter home page, the default page to which they are directed after logging in, they are greeted by this, the platform's persistent prompt. The tweet composition box and its ever-visible prompt is pinned to the top of the page, always orientating the user in relation to their present reality. As newer tweets are posted, whether by the individual user or by the other users whom they follow, older tweets are pushed further and further down the stream, perpetually in the process of being displaced by more temporally present tweets. 'Twitter is', as the platform's "About" page asserts, 'what's happening the world and what people are talking about right now.'⁶² Like the novel, Twitter's subject is contemporary reality. Like the novel, in Bakhtin's terms, Twitter is structured in the zone of direct contact with inconclusive present-day reality.

The novel, Bakhtin maintains, is always incomplete, always in the process of developing through its contact with the unfolding present, and a result, the novelist is by their nature drawn in their literary practice to any process that is not yet complete.⁶³ Like the novel, Twitter's development is incomplete and it remains in "permanent beta", always in the process of being

⁵⁹ Mikhail M. Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*, ed. by Michael Holquist, trans. by Michael Holquist and Caryl Emerson (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981), p.8.

⁶⁰ Bakhtin, p.39.

⁶¹ Bakhtin, p.39.

⁶² 'About Twitter' <https://about.twitter.com/en_gb.html> [accessed 9 March 2020].

⁶³ Bakhtin, p.27.

shaped by user interpretation and user innovation; it operates in the same present-oriented sphere as the novel, providing another outlet for novelists to explore the open-ended, still-developing present. The novel's success in this endeavour, as Bakhtin explains, is in its ability to portray contemporary reality without significant temporal distance; as a form, the novel "demolishes" this distance.⁶⁴ Through its real-time functionality, Twitter further "demolishes" or, more precisely, "atomises" this distance, permitting novelists to publish instantly and for readers to receive the work instantly, negating the need for publication processes and printing presses.

If the novel developed in the eighteenth century as a means of reflecting 'more deeply, more essentially, more sensitively and rapidly, reality itself in the process of its unfolding', then Twitter (and digital media more generally) present a similar development for the twenty-first century.⁶⁵ As Watt argues in *The Rise of the Novel* (1963), an account of the form's development in the eighteenth century, novelists Defoe, Richardson, and Fielding located the events of their novels in 'an unprecedentedly detailed time-scheme' based on the minute-by-minute consciousness of their characters, which was often reinforced by dates and times arising from the epistolary form.⁶⁶ Twitter, by comparison, provides novelists with the ability to locate events and characters in a second-by-second time-scheme, reinforced by tweets' timestamps. Despite their conspicuous differences – in terms of traditions and length, as well as through their respective digital and print bases – Twitter and the novel are similarly constructed upon ongoing innovation and around their concern and close contact with present reality.

In his keynote, Cole consciously brought Twitter and the novel into discourse by speaking of the novel's ability to elongate the perspective of human sensibility and how Twitter fulfilled the same function. By tracing the development of both Twitter and the novel and identifying some of their key features and characteristics, it is clear their similarities are even more profound than Cole indicated; it is clear, in other words, why he identified a distinct, dynamic, and dialogic relationship between the two, and also why he, as a novelist, was drawn to Twitter in his own literary practice. Twitter presents compelling opportunities and provocative challenges for the contemporary novelist, respectively as a potential future of the novel and as part of the digital media landscape that has precipitated a general decline in the pre-eminence of print-based media.⁶⁷ This produces a tension between the platform and the novel that is an intrinsic part of their dialogue.

As Cole stated, Twitter does not necessarily spell the end for the novel in its print-published form – at least not yet and certainly not on its own – and as such, the development of

⁶⁴ Bakhtin, p.23.

⁶⁵ Bakhtin, p.7.

⁶⁶ Watt, p.25.

⁶⁷ For a more in-depth discussion of the novel's real and potential decline, see 'The End of the Novel' in: Christoph Bode, *The Novel: An Introduction*, trans. by James Vignus (Oxford: Blackwell, 2011).

neither Twitter or the novel is complete and nor is their ongoing dialogue. Being drawn to processes that are incomplete, the novelist will therefore continue to explore the opportunities, confront the challenges, and operate from the site of tension between Twitter and the novel, as Cole, Egan, Mitchell, and Lin demonstrate in their literary practice. This is why Diamedia Literary Practice provides a crucial new perspective for the present and future of literary and media studies.

Neither Twitter nor the novel developed or will they continue to develop in a vacuum. They may retain their own separate and distinct futures but, in terms of literary practice, one of their futures is as resonantly connected forms. As this chapter has shown, they share key characteristics in being predicated upon the core concept of continuing innovation and through their close contact and concern with contemporary reality, so that novelist publishing works on the platform and in the novel form is innately implicated in their development as resonantly connected forms. In order to ascertain the implications of this ongoing development and to understand the ways in which novelists are currently interpreting and engaging with the opportunities and challenges Twitter presents, the questions prompted by Cole's keynote must be answered with reference to the novelists – Cole, Egan, Mitchell, and Lin – most prominently working across and through Twitter and the novel form.

As the next chapter shows, existing approaches in the field have variously tended to analyse print and digital literature in isolation, interpreted the process of media change represented by the proliferation of digital fiction in a unidirectional sense, or ignore the underlying media dynamics at play between print and digital media that inevitably informs literary works in both media. In formulating Diamedia Literary Practice and by utilising Marshall McLuhan's media studies as a theoretical framework, as the next chapter details, this thesis can begin to provide practice-based answers to its central research questions in the case study chapters that follow and provide this crucial new perspective for literary and media studies.

Chapter 2

Diamedia Literary Practice

Before addressing the existing critical approaches and theoretical frameworks that have been predominantly applied to Twitter literature, it is important to properly define Diamedia Literary Practice. In the most concise sense, Diamedia Literary Practice indicates a form of literary practice where an author operates strategically, systematically, and symbiotically across and through print and digital media environments in the production of two (or more) literary works, where each work is written with the specific form and medium in mind but there is also a meaningful practical, narrative, or thematic connection between the works.

For Cole, this connection was represented by a thematic concern with a specific aspect of contemporary cosmopolitan experience explored in both his novel, *Open City*, and on Twitter, via the *small fates* project; for Egan and Mitchell, this was a character from their novels, *A Visit from the Goon Squad* and *Slade House* respectively, whose narrative arc was extended via Twitter in 'Black Box' and @I_Bombadil; and for Lin, this was the partially fictionalised version of himself that exists at the centre of both his novel, *Taipei*, and in his ongoing Twitter practice via his primary account, @tao_lin.

As a conception, Diamedia Literary Practice respects the role of both media and author in the production of literary works, reflecting the author's engagement with the characteristics and features of the medium at hand. In Cole's case, this refers to how he used the specific characteristics of Twitter to create a more literal version of the non-white narrative-based noise that arose throughout *Open City* in the *small fates*, writing with the platform's western bias in mind; in Egan's case, how she attempted to use the real-time dimensions of the platform to relocate a character from *A Visit from the Goon Squad* within a futuristic, spy-based thriller via 'Black Box'; in Mitchell's case, how he more successfully took advantage of the real-time dimensions of the platform to provide a character from *Slade House* with a prelude to their appearance in the yet-to-be-published novel via @I_Bombadil while also embedding the hacker-character in the user norms of the platform; and in Lin's case, how he idiosyncratically used the long-form, print-based novel to create an effect that reflected his partially fictional protagonist's entanglement with the digital tools that both define and document his existence.

In its formulation, Diamedia Literary Practice is intended to combine two separate critical and analytical perspectives that have dominated literary and media studies: what might be called "across" and "through" media-oriented perspectives. As discussed in more detail later in the chapter in reference to Hayles' work on "electronic literature" (and more specifically her conception of "media-specific analysis") and Jenkins' work on "transmedia storytelling", existing

approaches have tended to take one or the other perspective without attempting to consolidate them.

“Through” media-oriented approaches, such as Hayles’ “media specific analysis”, focus on the relationship between medium and content in individual works of literature written for print or digital media, analysing how these works are affected by, utilise, or otherwise leverage the specificities of that print or digital medium in the process of writing through the medium in the production of that literary work. “Across” media-oriented approaches, such as Jenkins’ “transmedia storytelling”, focus on multiple creative works, including but not limited to literary works, that are systematically connected across more than one media environment in order to create a more extensive narrative or fictional world. “Through” media-oriented approaches tend to respect the role of the medium and author in the production of an individual literary work but neglect to extend this analysis to multiple connected works, while “across” media-oriented approaches tend to respect the connections between works without closely analysing the media dynamics or role of the author(s) in interpreting the media dynamics at play both in and in-between the works. Each perspective therefore has a corresponding and complementary limitation when considered in relation to the aims and intentions of this thesis, and it is these limitations that the formulation of Diamedia Literary Practice redresses.

As a means of differentiating “diamedia” from existing terminologies and, at the same time, as a means of symbolising the combination of these two critical and analytical perspectives, the prefix “dia-” is purposefully used to mutually emphasise “across” and “through” media. This is to accurately articulate the combined process of thinking through the specificities of an individual print or digital medium while also thinking about the resonant connections across multiple media environments that Diamedia Literary Practice represents. The prefix “dia-” can, however, also connote “apart”. This lends the term further symbolic resonance in indicating that the two (or more) literary works must also stand apart, as separate but connected works in print and digital media environments. Since Hayles’ term refers to a mode of analysis rather than a type of work, the most common terms likely to be applied to the work addressed in this thesis are “transmedia”, “crossmedia”, or “multimedia”. It is to these terms that “diamedia” is primarily intended to provide an alternative formulation.

As Jenkins notes, “transmedia” simply means “across media”, emphasising ‘the flow of content *across* media’.¹ “Crossmedia” generally refers to a single piece of content published in multiple media formats, emphasising the maxim ‘create *once*, publish everywhere’.² And

¹ Henry Jenkins, “Transmedia 202: Further Reflections”, 2011 <http://henryjenkins.org/blog/2011/08/defining_transmedia_further_re.html> [accessed 25 February 2018]. Emphasis mine.

² Hannele Antikainen, Sonja Kangas, and Sari Vainikainen, *Three Views on Mobile Cross Media Entertainment*, 2004 <<http://www.vtt.fi/tte/multiplemedia/>> [accessed 14 March 2020]. Emphasis mine.

“multimedia” refers to the use of more than one medium in a single location, such as using a combination of text, images, and video on a single platform and in relation to one particular piece of content. While “diamedia” overlaps with elements of each of these terms, none articulate all elements of Diamedia Literary Practice.

While the clear focus here is Cole’s, Egan’s, Mitchell’s, and Lin’s experimental prose work on the Twitter platform and in the novel form, Diamedia Literary Practice is intended to be potentially applicable to any form of literary practice wherein an author (or poet) is working in a “diamedia” fashion, across and through print and digital media in the production of multiple literary works in a manner consistent with the above description. Certainly, the opportunities and challenges Twitter and other digital media pose for the novel – as identified by Cole and explored by the authors addressed here – also apply to other traditionally print-based literary forms, while similar resonances are likely to be found in relation to other media platforms and experimental poetry as well as prose. And there is also scope for the term “diamedia” to be applied to forms of artistic practices beyond literature, despite the explicitly literary focus here. These are however regarded as anticipated and secondary outcomes resulting from the research undertaken within this thesis, indicative of future directions for further research and the broader potential applications of the “diamedia” perspective formulated and demonstrated here. This is discussed in more depth in the Conclusion, while the remainder of this chapter attends to the existing critical approaches and theoretical frameworks that have been predominantly applied to Twitter literature.

In recent articles regarding Cole’s, Egan’s, Mitchell’s, and Lin’s Twitter works, Ella Mingazova Kristin Veel, Amelia Precup, Jennifer Gutman, Tore Andersen, and Justin Russell Greene all focused primarily on the authors’ Twitter works while making relatively limited reference to their novels. Mingazova focuses on Cole’s *small fates* and their debt to Félix Fénéon’s *fait divers*, but mentions *Open City* only in a passing reference to Cole’s concern with the urban environments and does not mention the *small fates*’ roots in his research for the rewriting of *Every Day is for the Thief*.³ Veel and Precup both focused on surveillance and posthumanism in Egan’s ‘Black Box’ but also make very limited reference to *A Visit from the Goon Squad*, only noting that the Twitter story’s protagonist originated as a character in the story cycle.⁴ Greene focuses on Lin’s Twitter presence, primarily via @tao_lin, and refers to overlap between his Twitter work and his novels without actually analysing any of his novels.⁵ Only Andersen, in his two articles (one co-authored with Sara Linkis) regarding the return of serialised literature via ‘Black Box’

³ Mingazova.

⁴ Veel; Precup.

⁵ Justin Rusell Greene, ‘Tweeting the Author: Tao Lin’s Performance of Authorial Identity’, *Authorship*, 7.1 (2018) <<https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.21825/aj.v7i1.8618>>.

and @I_Bombadil, and Gutman, in her article addressing cyborg storytelling in 'Black Box', have made meaningful reference to the authors' novels alongside their Twitter works.⁶ Yet even in the case of Andersen (and Linkis) and Gutman, the Twitter works are still evidently the primary analytical object. As demonstrated in Chapters 3, 4, 5, and 6, without fully tracing the resonant connections between the authors' Twitter works and novels, and despite their undeniable insights, these articles only provide part of the picture regarding the authors' Twitter-based literary practice. It follows, then, that the majority of these works refer to critical and theoretical frameworks that reflect either the "across" or "through" perspectives highlighted above, lacking the synthesis of these two perspectives that "diamedia" provides.

Precup, Gutman, Andersen and Veel all refer to Hayles' work on "electronic literature" and posthuman subjectivities; Andersen, and Andersen and Linkis refer to Jenkins' work on "transmedia storytelling", as well as Alice Bell and Ruth Page's work on new media and narrative in "digital fiction".⁷ Despite not providing a means of fully articulating Diamedia Literary Practice, each of these critical and theoretical frameworks has laid the foundations for research undertaken here. Hayles' and Jenkins' work respectively represent the aforementioned "through" and "across" perspectives that are both crucial in answering the questions prompted by Cole and addressing Diamedia Literary Practice; as Digital Fiction scholars, Bell and Page have helped literary and media studies move beyond its initially productive pairing of poststructuralist critical theory and hypertext literature; and as a fellow Digital Fiction scholar, Thomas, whose work was discussed in the Introduction, has played a crucial role in legitimising the study of Twitter-based literary practice. In order to further show how this thesis builds on the foundational frameworks, each critical and theoretical approach is discussed in more detail below, beginning with the "through" and "across" perspectives primarily represented by Hayles' work on "electronic literature" and Jenkins' work on "transmedia before moving on to the work of Digital Fiction scholars Bell, Page, and Thomas.

N. Katherine Hayles and Electronic Literature

Hayles' concept of "media-specific analysis", which provides the theoretical basis for her analysis of what she termed "electronic literature" throughout her oeuvre, is the key tenet of her text, *Writing Machines* (2002). The text is, in Hayles' terms, 'an experiment in forging a vocabulary and set of critical practices responsive to the full spectrum of signifying components in print and electronic texts by grounding them in the materiality of the literary artifact'.⁸ The text followed

⁶ Andersen; Andersen and Linkis; Gutman.

⁷ Greene refers to Alice Marwick and danah boyd's conceptions of identity presentation and Twitter usage in his analysis of Lin, which are also referred to here in Chapter 6.

⁸ N. Katherine Hayles, *Writing Machines* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2002), p.6.

the same approach she prototyped in *How We Became Posthuman* (1999) and refined in later texts such as *My Mother Was a Computer* (2005) and *How We Think* (2012), setting out her theoretical position before deploying exegetic case studies of literary texts, which Hayles uses to argue in favour of “media-specific analysis”: ‘a mode of critical interrogation alert to the ways in which the medium constructs the work and the work constructs the medium’.⁹

For Hayles, media-specific analysis is a necessity brought about by the rise of “electronic literature” – literature, as she asserts in *Electronic Literature* (2008), ‘generally considered to exclude print literature that has been digitized, [and] is by contrast “digital born”, a first-generation digital object created on a computer and (usually) meant to be read on a computer’.¹⁰ As she suggests in an article subsequent to *Writing Machines*, ‘Print is Flat, Code is Deep’ (2004), further outlining the timeliness and pertinence of media-specific analysis:

Lulled by somnolence by five hundred years of print, literary studies have been slow to wake up to the importance of media-specific analysis. Literary criticism and theory are shot through with unrecognized assumptions specific to print. Only now, as the new medium of electronic textuality vibrantly asserts its presence, are these assumptions coming into view.¹¹

Electronic literature, by which it should be noted she means “digital” as much as “electronic”, prompted Hayles to connect the logic of media studies to literary analysis and address the limitations of existing literary theory in relation to non-print-based literary works. But this is not to say that she felt a media-specific approach should only apply to the new medium of electronic textuality to which she refers. In electronic literature, as she states, she ‘saw the opportunity to think more rigorously about interactions between content and digital environments’, but crucially also emphasised that ‘these insights could be reflected back onto print to see it more clearly as well’.¹² Hayles pivotally posited that literary studies had long considered the “materiality” of works, and especially print-based works, an unnecessary problematic:

within humanities and especially literary studies, there has traditionally been a sharp line between representation and the technologies producing them. [...] literary studies has generally been content to treat fictional and narrative worlds as if they were entirely products of the imagination.¹³

⁹ Hayles, *Writing Machines*, p.6.

¹⁰ N. Katherine Hayles, *Electronic Literature: New Horizons for the Literary* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2008), p.3.

¹¹ N. Katherine Hayles, ‘Print Is Flat, Code Is Deep: The Importance of Media-Specific Analysis’, *Poetics Today*, 25.1 (2004), p.68.

¹² Hayles, *Writing Machines*, p.7.

¹³ Hayles, *Writing Machines*, p.19.

As Hayles contends, electronic literature made it abundantly clear that literary studies could no longer ignore the material basis of literary production, in either print or electronically based literary works. Materiality – that is, the intrinsic relationship between content and its material basis in media – she suggests, ‘emerges from interactions between physical properties and a work’s artistic strategies’; it is a dynamic and emergent property that arises from the work as a physical artefact and through users’ interpretative interactions with the work, both physical and conceptual, as they develop strategies to create meaning from the work.¹⁴ So, for Hayles, media-specific analysis, and indeed the broader application of media studies logic in literary analysis, is a direct and requisite response to the need for literary studies to attend to materiality: it is ‘a kind of criticism that pays attention to the material apparatus producing the literary work as a physical artifact’, whether the work is based in digital or print media.¹⁵

As stated above, Hayles’ media specific analysis represents “through” media-oriented approaches, analysing how literary works are affected by, utilise, or otherwise leverage the specificities of their individual print or digital medium. In *Writing Machines*, in order to demonstrate the efficacy of her media-specific approach, Hayles carries out case study analyses of what she terms “technotexts”: literary works, digital or print, that interrogate the ‘inscription technology’ (a device that ‘initiate[s] material changes that can be read as marks’) that produces them, effecting a reflexive relationship between its imaginative world (content) and material apparatus (medium).¹⁶ These interrelated definitions and approaches – technotexts and media-specific analysis – are the centrepiece of the text, where Hayles argues they prompt and permit literary criticism to make the material turn she proposes, thus enacting a more extensive understanding of literature. Hayles’ main focus is therefore the ‘complex dynamic interplay’ between medium and content that occurs within an individual digital or print literary work, not so much the complex, dynamic connections between multiple literary works or the complex, dynamic dialogue between print and digital media more generally.¹⁷

In *Writing Machines*, the technotexts Hayles primarily examines are Talon Memmott’s electronic DHTML/JavaScript work *Lexia to Perplexia* (2000), Tom Phillips’ revised and reworked found-object book project *A Humument: A Victorian Treated Novel* (1970), and Mark Z. Danielewski’s typographically experimental print novel *House of Leaves* (2000), and she studies the ways in which these individual works are written “through” a specific medium, and how this is an inextricable aspect of their literary operativity. While she analyses each work individually,

¹⁴ Hayles, *Writing Machines*, pp.33-4. Hayles’ argument regarding the materiality of literary works is an extension of her argument regarding the “embodiment” of information – the separation of information from a material basis – which she discusses at length in her earlier text, *How We Became Posthuman* (1999).

¹⁵ Hayles, *Writing Machines*, p.29.

¹⁶ Hayles, *Writing Machines*, pp.24-5.

¹⁷ Hayles, ‘Print Is Flat, Code Is Deep: The Importance of Media-Specific Analysis’.

focusing on the way each work interrogates its specific material basis and the particular qualities this material basis supplies, she avoids privileging either print or digital formats by addressing each on an equal basis. However, at the same time, *Writing Machines* treats each technotext as a singular instance of media-specific, interrogative literary practice and does not examine, for example, the same author's explorations of both print and digital media across more than one work.

Although Hayles herself suggests that in proposing media-specific analysis, she does not mean 'that media should be considered in isolation from one another', she interprets their connection based solely on similarity and extension, or, in her terms, "simulation" and "instantiation".¹⁸ Drawing on Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin's concept of "remediation", as formulated in *Remediation* (1999), Hayles points out that different media are always in a recursive process of imitating each other.¹⁹ For Bolter and Grusin, "remediation" was one of three traits upon which they constructed a genealogy of new media: "immediacy", "hypermediacy", and "remediation". "Immediacy" refers to a medium's ability to appear transparent, neutral, or intuitively accessible to the user; "hypermediacy", immediacy's counterpoint, refers to a medium's ability to draw attention to itself and remind the user of its characteristics; and "remediation" is the combination of strategies represented by immediacy and hypermediacy, representing the 'formal logic by which new media refashion prior media forms'.²⁰ Thus, for Hayles, "simulation" is where a medium simulates a recognisable feature of another medium, such as an electronic text allowing users to dog-ear a page or a print text including hyperlinks to other chapters or sections, whereas "instantiation" is the existence of a specific form or genre in a different medium. Her main way of making this connection across media and where she believes media-specific analysis could be most beneficial is in relation to "hypertext" literature.

Tracing the invention of "hypertext" to its mechanical roots in Vannevar Bush's seminal essay, 'How We May Think' (1945), Hayles argues that "hypertext" literature should not only be considered as electronic texts instantiated in digital media.²¹ This is the position taken by Bolter and Grusin when they define "hypertext" as a 'method of organizing and presenting text in a computer' featuring 'electronic links that the reader chooses to follow', and most directly as 'the remediation of the printed book'.²² For Hayles, hypertext is rather a literary genre characterised

¹⁸ Hayles, 'Print Is Flat, Code Is Deep: The Importance of Media-Specific Analysis', p.69.

¹⁹ Hayles, 'Print Is Flat, Code Is Deep: The Importance of Media-Specific Analysis', p.69.

²⁰ Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin, *Remediation: Understanding New Media* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1999), p.273.

²¹ See: Vannevar Bush, 'As We May Think', *Atlantic*, 1945

<<https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/1945/07/as-we-may-think/303881/>> [accessed 16 March 2020].

²² Bolter and Grusin, p.272. It should also be noted that Hayles later diverges from Bolter and Grusin regarding remediation, preferring her own term, "intermediation", as it does not have the disadvantage of locating the starting point for dynamic interactions in a particular medium, which, for Bolter and Grusin,

by three main features: ‘multiple reading paths, text that is chunked in some way, and some kind of linking mechanism that connects the chunks together so as to create the multiple reading paths.’²³ As such, in Hayles’ view, hypertext literature can equally be instantiated in digital or print media.²⁴

Hypertext is the closest Hayles comes in her media-specific analysis to taking an “across” as well as “through” media-oriented perspective, with hypertext acting as the constant that allows her to examine how different media shape a text through the constraints and possibilities they present. This means that Hayles’ particular interpretation of “across” media is somewhat limited, only applying to instances of hypertext literature in print and digital media that simulate each other’s features. Indeed, the tendency for hypertext to serve as a constant in her work is also evident in the corpus of literary works she analyses throughout her texts, which, despite the development of her ideas and concepts, still largely abide by the categorisation of hypertext she set out in her earlier texts.

In *Electronic Literature*, her case studies include Michael Joyce’s *afternoon, a story* (1990) and *Twelve Blue* (1996), Judd Morrissey’s *The Jew’s Daughter* (2000), as well as Memmott’s *Lexia to Perplexia*, and Danielewski’s *House of Leaves*, which she also analyses in *Writing Machines*. In *How We Think*, she returns again to Danielewski, this time analysing his similarly typographically experimental novel, *Only Revolutions* (2007), while Storyspace-affiliated writers such as Michael Joyce, Stuart Moulthrop, and Shelley Jackson’s electronic hypertexts also feature repeatedly throughout Hayles’ texts, even if not always receiving a dedicated case study chapter.²⁵

Hayles’ conception of media-specific analysis makes a critical contribution to literary and media studies, but it is more attuned to the complex dynamic interplay of media and the reflexive relationship between medium and content than it is to the relationship between different media; that is, once again, more “through” media-oriented than “across”. The foundations of her approach and her analysis are also very much biased toward hypertext literature, meaning that the specific outcomes of her analysis are not necessarily applicable to a broader spectrum of literature, including the novel and Twitter literature, which also limits the ongoing timeliness and

via immediacy and hypermediacy, was typically in the older medium. See: N. Katherine Hayles, *My Mother Was a Computer: Digital Subjects and Literary Texts* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2005), p.33.

²³ N. Katherine Hayles, ‘The Transformation of Narrative and the Materiality of Hypertext’, *Narrative*, 9.1 (2001), p.21.

²⁴ Here, Hayles echoes George Landow’s influential analysis of Roland Barthes’ ‘S/Z’ and his wider assertions regarding hypertext. See: George P. Landow, *Hypertext: The Convergence of Contemporary Critical Theory and Technology* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992); George P. Landow, *Hypertext 2.0: The Convergence of Contemporary Critical Theory and Technology* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997); George P. Landow, *Hypertext 3.0: Critical Theory and New Media in the Era of Globalization* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2006).

²⁵ Storyspace was created by Jay David Bolter and Michael Joyce and released in 1987 as a software platform for writing and reading hypertext literature. See: ‘Storyspace’ <<http://www.eastgate.com/storyspace/index.html>> [accessed 18 March 2020].

pertinence of media-specific analysis in the form she demonstrates. In many ways, and despite more recent developments, literary and media studies is still following the trajectories set by hypertext literature, which, regardless of its relatively niche authorship and readership, has played a pivotal role along with critics such as Hayles in connecting the fields of literary and media studies.²⁶ Indeed, the relatively narrow corpus of (hyper)texts upon which so much digital literature scholarship constructs its concepts, frameworks, and approaches is a wider issue in the fields, noted in particular by digital fiction scholar Ruth Page, whose work is discussed later in this chapter. Despite her own largely hypertext-focused analysis, though, Hayles does appear to recognise the need for more wide-ranging work in literary and media studies.

In one of her more recent texts, *How We Think* (2012), Hayles calls for “Comparative Media Studies”, long established in the Humanities as an umbrella term for the comparison of manuscript and print culture, oral and literate cultures, and their associated artefacts, to be extended to locate digital literature within print traditions and print traditions within digital media.²⁷ Here, she seems to suggest a more expansive approach that attends to the kind of complex dynamic interplay between print and digital media and literary works in each medium without losing sight of the importance of materiality. As an exemplar of such an approach, she references Matthew Kirschenbaum’s *Mechanisms* (2008). In his text, Kirschenbaum expands upon Hayles’ hypertext-focused analytical basis by examining different types of texts and, through his accounts of “formal” and “forensic materiality”, he takes Hayles’ media-specific approach and her “through” media-oriented perspective to its logical conclusion.

While Kirschenbaum calls materiality ‘a watchword’ of his text, he also draws attention to Hayles’ bias toward to what he terms “forensic materiality”, suggesting that what is missing from Hayles’ account of materiality is “formal materiality”.²⁸ For Kirschenbaum, this is a crucial distinction. “Forensic” materiality is ‘revealed in the amazing variety of surfaces, substrates, sealants, and other matériel that have been used over the years as computational storage media, and in the engineering, ergonomic, and labor practices that attend to computing’.²⁹ “Formal” materiality, by comparison, is ‘the imposition of multiple relational computational states on a data set or digital object’, where the different states manifest, somewhat misleadingly, ‘in terms of layers’ rather than discrete states and ‘content will only become visible when the data object is subjected to the appropriate formal processes, which is to say when the appropriate software

²⁶ Regarding hypertext’s relatively niche authorships, see: Steven Johnson, ‘Why No One Clicked on the Great Hypertext Story’, *Wired*, 2013 <<https://www.wired.com/2013/04/hypertext/>> [accessed 15 May 2021].

²⁷ N. Katherine Hayles, *How We Think: Digital Media and Contemporary Technogenesis* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2012), p.7.

²⁸ Matthew Kirschenbaum, *Mechanisms: New Media and the Forensic Imagination* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2012), p.9, fn.16.

²⁹ Kirschenbaum, p.10.

environment is invoked'.³⁰ Forensic materiality, then, attends to the physical, or hardware, while formal materiality attends to the processual, or software. However, this should not be taken to indicate an absolute distinction: as Kirschenbaum warns, such associations should not be taken as received, 'not least because the lines between hardware and software are themselves increasingly blurred'.³¹ The dialectic between the two aspects of Kirschenbaum's materiality might, as he suggests, better be envisaged as resting upon inscription (storage) and transmission (or multiplication) respectively, which further represents the 'fundamental duality of a mechanism as both a product and a process'.³² Kirschenbaum therefore builds on Hayles' media-specific analysis by going beyond – or perhaps more precisely, deeper than – the level of code to the physical materials involved in storing the work itself.

Kirschenbaum's bipartite account of materiality is perhaps the fullest "through" media-oriented perspective in the field and, given the nature of works he addresses in *Mechanisms*, absolutely necessary. Like Hayles and so many other electronic literature scholars, he addresses Michael Joyce's work, and specifically, *afternoon, a story* (1987). But as suggested above, he also analyses the text in a far more forensic manner, tracing its production, multiple versions, and the different means by which it can be accessed. Most notably, though, Kirschenbaum examines William Gibson and Dennis Ashbaugh's experimental *Agrippa* (1992), a project which comprised of a disk-based electronic poem/short story (written by Gibson) encrypted so as to allow only a single, auto-scrolled reading and a limited-edition artist's book (created by Ashbaugh) supposedly treated with photosynthetic chemicals that caused its images to start to fade as soon as it is opened and exposed to light. Such works demand the attention to forensic materiality and the principle of individualization – the idea that no two things in the physical world are ever exactly alike – that Kirschenbaum posits.

Taken together, then, Hayles and Kirschenbaum's approaches are representative of the kind of "through" media-oriented perspectives that the diamedia-oriented approach demonstrated by this thesis seeks to retain and combine with an "across" media-oriented perspective. The approach profiled here is therefore intended to build on Hayles' foundational work, both in terms of the critical and analytical perspective it adopts and the works it addresses. Indeed, as well as enabling the questions prompted by Cole's keynote and his literary practice to be answered, the formulation of Diamedia Literary Practice and diamedia's mutually "across" and "through" oriented approach is also proposed as a direct response to her call for more Comparative Media Studies approaches that locate print and digital literature in relation to each other without losing sight of media-specificity. Here, the author replaces hypertext as the

³⁰ Kirschenbaum, pp.12-13.

³¹ Kirschenbaum, p.13.

³² Kirschenbaum, p.15.

constant between the digital and print works analysed so that the author's interpretation, utilisation, and examination of the features of specific print and digital media is at the centre of the study. This helps the analysis move beyond notions of simulation and instantiation to focus instead on extension and transformation, which is key to understanding how the authors have used Twitter as a means of extending aspects of their novelistic literary practice and in retrieving and transforming obsolesced, traditionally print-based literary forms for the platform. In other words, the authors are not simply simulating the features of one medium in the other or instantiating one form in two different media environments, but rather strategically, systematically, and symbiotically leveraging the Twitter platform and the novel form to radically extend and transform both works. Furthermore, by focusing on Twitter literature and non-hypertext novels, the case study analyses carried out here add to the relatively narrow corpus of hypertexts that have thus far been used as the primary basis of much of digital literary studies and its concepts, showing how these concepts can be limited when applied to a broader corpus of digital texts.

With regard to the deeper interpretation of materiality formulated by Kirschenbaum, despite its more comprehensive nature, the interpretation of materiality and media-specific analysis used here as the "through" media perspective remains primarily at the formal level demonstrated by Hayles. This is for two main reasons, neither of which is intended as a refutation of Kirschenbaum's assertions. Firstly, on the print side, all the novels analysed here are mass-produced paperbacks. This means that while each is unique at the microscopic, forensic level – whether through the quality of the ink transfer to paper, through the type setting, the glue used in binding, the method of pulping employed in creating the paper, the chemical make-up of the pulp itself, and so forth – these forensic differences do not substantively affect the work as it is analysed here. The very process of mass production is intended to eliminate forensic individualisation, and although it may not always fully succeed in this endeavour, the intention of the author, publisher, and printer that all readers receive the same homogenous text is respected. Secondly, on the digital side, Twitter is a networked digital and social media platform currently accessible via almost any internet-enabled device. This means that users can access the platform from an almost infinite variety of devices, including mobile phones, tablets, laptops, desktop computers, and other "smart" devices, all of which will potentially affect the work at the forensic levels Kirschenbaum suggests. At the same time, Twitter uses hundreds of thousands of servers spread out across numerous data centres to store tweet data.³³ Tracing the forensic materialities of this vast array of potential devices and servers is simply not possible and, in any event, unlikely

³³ Mazdak Hashemi, 'The Infrastructure Behind Twitter: Scale', *Twitter Blog*, 2017 <https://blog.twitter.com/engineering/en_us/topics/infrastructure/2017/the-infrastructure-behind-twitter-scale.html> [accessed 23 March 2020].

to be materially impactful enough to fundamentally alter any of the arguments presented in the case study chapters.

However, Kirschenbaum's conception of forensic materiality does provide a pertinent reminder of how the devices used to access Twitter further enhance its present-oriented perspective and its progressive atomisation of temporal distance from the present. According to research carried out by Nielson and reported by Twitter, 80% of UK users access the platform via a mobile device and also from a range of locations throughout the day.³⁴ This means that Twitter is always available, always prompting users to access the platform through push notifications and by virtue of only being a swipe and touch of a screen away. And the same applies to users accessing the platform via a laptop or desktop computer: Twitter is only a new window or click away and possibly also pushes notifications to the user, depending on their browser settings. Although applying full forensic materiality to the Twitter works addressed may not be possible, it should still be noted that no specific device is assumed as the point of access for the user reading the work; inasmuch as is feasible, the analysis is intended to reflect all potential means of accessing the platform. And this potential range of access points provides a convenient link to the researcher whose work occupies the opposite, "across" media-oriented end of the spectrum from Kirschenbaum and Hayles' "through" media-oriented, materially-focused perspective: Henry Jenkins.

Henry Jenkins and Transmedia Storytelling

Despite their common roots in the changing media landscape of the contemporary technocultural context, Hayles' and Jenkins' perspectives exist as counterpoints to one another at opposing ends of the media analytical spectrum, running in parallel without overlapping. As discussed above, Hayles believes media-specific analysis is more important than ever in the contemporary technocultural context.³⁵ Jenkins, meanwhile, states that 'Because digital media potentially incorporate all previous media, it no longer makes sense to think in media-specific terms.'³⁶ Hayles, for her part, displayed a similar lack of interest in Jenkins' approach when she included a chapter on what she termed the 'Transcendent Data and Transmedia Narrative' of Steven Hall's *The Raw Shark Texts* (2007) in *How We Think*, a text published a number of years after Jenkins had popularised "transmedia storytelling", without discussing the term in depth or referencing Jenkins in the chapter, or indeed anywhere else in the text as a whole.

³⁴ Gordon MacMillan, '80% of UK Users Access Twitter via Their Mobile', *Twitter Blog*, 2014 <https://blog.twitter.com/en_gb/a/en-gb/2014/80-of-uk-users-access-twitter-via-their-mobile.html> [accessed 19 March 2020].

³⁵ The subtitle of Hayles' foundational 'Print Is Flat, Code Is Deep' article is also 'The Importance of Media-Specific Analysis'.

³⁶ Henry Jenkins, 'The World of Theory in the Age of Digital Transformation', in *A Companion to Film Theory*, ed. by Toby Miller and Robert Stam (Oxford: Blackwell, 2004), p.250.

Jenkins originally posited and popularised the concept of “transmedia storytelling” in his text, *Convergence Culture* (2006), as the inevitable result of what he called “convergence”. ‘By convergence,’ Jenkins states, ‘I mean the flow of content across multiple media platforms, the cooperation between multiple media industries, and the migratory behavior of media audiences who will go almost anywhere in search of the kinds of entertainment experiences they want.’³⁷ Media convergence, he suggests, drives consumers and spectators to seek new information and make connections between content dispersed across multiple media platforms. This in turn makes consumers participants, who in making sense of the content in a new media landscape also use the tools new media provide to start conversations among themselves, making their consumption and sense-making a more collective process. For Jenkins, media convergence is a paradigm for thinking about media change that moves away from the more straightforward conception of media change as a process of newer media replacing older media; as a process, media convergence therefore requires the rethinking of older assumptions regarding how media operate, especially in relation to each other and with particular regard to consumption and participation. In this sense, Jenkins and Hayles begin at the same point of intellectual enquiry before diverging based on the aforementioned “across” and “through” perspectives they adopt, but also, as his conception of convergence suggests, in the much wider variety of content in both print and digital media that Jenkins addresses.

“Transmedia storytelling”, then, as a feature of convergence and as Jenkins expounds in a supplementary blog post, ‘represents 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. Ideally, each medium makes its own unique contribution to the unfolding story’.³⁸ Each piece of dispersed content should serve at least one of the following functions: offer a backstory, map the world, offers other characters’ perspectives on the action, and deepen audience engagement.³⁹ The example Jenkins principally uses to outline the concept in *Convergence Culture* was *The Matrix* franchise, which spanned three films, a program of animated short films, numerous graphic novels and comic books, and two video games. As he explains, ‘*The Matrix* is entertainment for the age of media convergence, integrating multiple texts to create a narrative so large that it cannot be contained within a single medium.’⁴⁰ There is no definitive, single-source ur-text where a consumer can find all the information needed to comprehend the whole narrative or map the entire fictional world that has been created. This

³⁷ Henry Jenkins, *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide* (New York: New York University Press, 2006), pp.2-3.

³⁸ Henry Jenkins, ‘Transmedia Storytelling 101’, 2007
<http://henryjenkins.org/blog/2007/03/transmedia_storytelling_101.html> [accessed 25 February 2018].

³⁹ Jenkins, ‘Transmedia 202: Further Reflections’.

⁴⁰ Jenkins, *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide*, p.95.

also means there is no individual medium in which the entire narrative or fictional world is fully available. As a result, transmedia storytelling creates multiple potential points of entry across various media for different audience segments and, at the same time, each individual entry point, episode, or work should be accessible on its own terms and ‘make a unique contribution to the narrative system as a whole’.⁴¹ This is to focus on the “extension” of works across different media rather than on the “adaptation” of or allusion to one work in another work, form, or medium, and move beyond existing notions of intertextuality.⁴² These types of adaptation, allusion, and intertextuality have been the focus of researchers in the fields like Bronwen Thomas and Alice Bell, whose work is discussed later in the chapter.

Jenkins’ transmedia storytelling therefore represents an “across” media-oriented approach, addressing the extension of multiple related works or ‘complex fictional worlds’ across more than one media environment.⁴³ Since he believes convergence ‘makes the flow of content across multiple media platforms inevitable’ and that it therefore no longer makes sense to think in media-specific terms, transmedia storytelling is not directly concerned with the medium itself.⁴⁴ Instead, when Jenkins says ‘each medium’ must make a unique contribution, it should be taken to mean ‘the content of each medium’, or what he calls ‘media content’, must make a unique contribution.⁴⁵ Rather than being concerned with the types of media utilised, and indeed in the unique ways in which they are utilised as part of an expansive narrative, transmedia storytelling is primarily concerned with how multiple interrelated narratives and fictional world-building can be used to drive an ‘encyclopedic impulse’ in both creators and consumers, whereby the former is driven to expand narratives and worlds and the latter is driven to participate in the process of expansion, consuming all aspects of these works in pursuit of narrative closure.⁴⁶ The medium itself only matters within transmedia storytelling insofar as it permits the consolidation and expansion of the larger narrative system.

While certain allowances can of course be made in that Jenkins is admirably attempting to address a new form of creative and artistic practice itself in the nascent stages of its development, to collapse content and media into one another in the way transmedia storytelling does is to suggest that media itself does not matter. This is to not only to diverge from and disagree with Hayles’ far more persuasive and in-depth analysis, but also to contradict decades worth of media studies research and the sort of foundational arguments put forth by critics such

⁴¹ Jenkins, ‘Transmedia Storytelling 101’.

⁴² Jenkins, ‘Transmedia 202: Further Reflections’. When such references or movements across works or what Jenkins refers to as “textual structures” within the same medium do occur within a transmedia storytelling system, he also differentiates this by calling it “radical intertextuality”.

⁴³ Jenkins, ‘Transmedia Storytelling 101’.

⁴⁴ Jenkins, *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide*, p.104.

⁴⁵ Jenkins, *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide*, p.3.

⁴⁶ Jenkins, ‘Transmedia Storytelling 101’.

as Marshall McLuhan and Neil Postman.⁴⁷ Media studies as a field is predicated on the premise that media does in fact matter, as W.J.T. Mitchell and Mark B.N. Hansen, echoing McLuhan's assertions, remind readers in their edited collection, *Critical Terms for Media Studies* (2010): 'Media can no longer be dismissed as neutral or transparent, subordinate or merely supplemental to the information they convey.'⁴⁸ For Jenkins to imply otherwise within a primarily media-focused text makes his arguments very difficult to accept. Moreover, in terms of additionally problematic statements, his central argument that convergence should be understood as a 'cultural shift' rather than a technological one presents a false binary based on a seemingly straightforward separation of technology and culture that is refuted in several sections of the field, especially when dealing with artistic works.⁴⁹ For example, echoing Postman's assertions in her influential text on narrative theory and new media, *The Arc and the Machine* (2007), Caroline Bassett argues against presuming any sort of simple division between technology and culture: 'Technologies transform cultures and those who live in them. But they themselves are not simply formed by, but are integral elements of, cultures at particular moments in their history.'⁵⁰ Again, for Jenkins to present the relationship between technology and culture as a simple dichotomy is very difficult to accept. Similar oversimplifications and underdeveloped aspects unfortunately undermine Jenkins' formulation of transmedia storytelling, presenting problems in relation to its potential applications.

Jenkins' tendency to collapse things together and blur the boundaries between them is a consequence of his conception of convergence, which is at the root of all his arguments and his formulations. At times, this can be a persuasive basis for his assertions, but typically only when applied to the economic imperatives of transmedia storytelling. He asserts, for example, that transmedia storytelling 'reflects the economics of media consolidation or what industry observers call "synergy" [...] an incentive to spread its brand or expand its franchises across as many media platforms as possible.'⁵¹ This means that transmedia storytelling purposely blurs the boundaries between "marketing" and "works" and instead focuses on the necessarily unique contribution the piece makes to the larger narrative system being constructed, where each piece of media content represents an entry point accessible on its own terms while also providing a

⁴⁷ For example, via McLuhan's idiomatic assertion that 'the medium is the message' and that the study of media is as important – if not more so – than the study of content in *Understanding Media* (1964), and Postman's theorisation of "media ecology" as the study of media environments in, for example, Neil Postman, 'The Reformed English Curriculum', in *High School 1980: The Shape of the Future in American Secondary Education*, ed. by Alvin C. Eurich (New York: Pittman, 1970), pp. 160–68, among other texts.

⁴⁸ W. J. T. Mitchell and Mark B. N. Hansen, 'Introduction', in *Critical Terms for Media Studies*, ed. by W. J. T. Mitchell and Mark B. N. Hansen (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010), p.vii.

⁴⁹ Jenkins, *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide*, p.3.

⁵⁰ Caroline Bassett, *The Arc and the Machine: Narrative and New Media* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2007), p.43.

⁵¹ Jenkins, 'Transmedia Storytelling 101'.

potential link to another piece of media content within the same narrative system. This reframes the value of a work around its ability to extend a narrative, engage an audience, and connect them to other works, acknowledging the economic changes and new revenue models new media have enacted.⁵² The most gifted transmedia artists, Jenkins argues, are able to “surf” the marketplace pressures produced by the media industrial cooperation inherent to convergence in order to craft a more expansive and extensive story than would have otherwise been possible, as they work across multiple media environments in order to shape the story-world and create more potential entry points for the consumer and more avenues leading to some sort of economic outcome for the creator(s). However, Jenkins’ propensity for oversimplification once again undermines transmedia storytelling, even in relation to his otherwise more persuasive arguments.

Taken together, for example, his use of terms such as “flow”, “dispersed”, and “surf” in articulating transmedia storytelling suggest that it is a relatively frictionless process. This is perhaps to imply the inevitability of transmedia practice as a result of media convergence and to further underscore the need for transmedia artists to make the routes for consumers crossing media environments as seamless as possible, persuading them to engage with the works as a collective narrative system. Yet, this also fails to recognise the significant work carried out by the so-called gifted transmedia artists to which Jenkins refers in creating the flow of content across media, ensuring that content is dispersed in such a way that encourages consumers to move from work to work, and in surfing the marketplace pressures intrinsic to transmedia storytelling in order to balance the artistic and economic value of the works that make up the narrative system. This kind of synergy may be driven by an economic imperative and a desire to extend engagement with narratives, but there is still an artistic and creative aspect to its achievement that is largely overlooked in Jenkins’ formulation. Instead, convergence, and by extension transmedia storytelling, collapses creators and consumers into one another collectively as “participants”, who interact with each other in ways that Jenkin asserts are yet-to-be fully defined.⁵³ Even if, at times, this underdevelopment is to be expected when addressing a new form of creative and artistic practice in the nascent stages of its development, it has also led to a range of applications that Jenkins himself felt were contentious enough to require a response in another supplementary blog post.

⁵² This is something Jenkins discusses in more detail in *Convergence Culture*: ‘Convergence, as we can see, is both a top-down corporate-driven process and a bottom-up consumer-driven process. Corporate convergence coexists with grassroots convergence. Media companies are learning how to accelerate the flow of media content across delivery channels to expand revenue opportunities, broaden rules, and reinforce viewer commitments. Consumers are learning how to use these different media technologies to bring the flow of media more fully under their control and interact with other consumers.’ See: Jenkins, *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide*, p.18.

⁵³ Jenkins, *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide*, p.3.

In the post, Jenkins argues that the controversies arising through the burgeoning theoretical application of transmedia storytelling are caused by three main issues: that some adopters are not familiar enough with his writings on the concept to understand it fully; that different groups are applying their own definitions to the concept within different contexts and to fit their own purposes; and that some of these groups are purposely attempting to expand or blur the scope of the concept for their own benefit.⁵⁴ It is possible that these issues are a factor in transmedia storytelling's imprecise application, however it seems far more likely they are primarily rooted in Jenkins' underdeveloped formulation, exposing oversimplifications that demand more thorough analysis and less ambiguous articulation. It is for this reason that, as a paradigm for examining literary practice across print and digital media, transmedia storytelling has only limited value to this thesis and, indeed, why this thesis is instead built upon the new formulation of Diamedia Literary Practice to describe the artistic and creative practice it addresses.

Diamedia Literary Practice is intended as a direct response to Hayles' call for more Comparative Media Studies approaches that locate print and digital literature in relation to each other without losing sight of media-specificity, as stated above. But it also expands upon her "through" media-oriented perspective to account for a crucial, corresponding "across" media-oriented perspective in order to provide a fuller picture of literary practice across and through print and digital media. This is a perspective that Jenkins' work on transmedia storytelling represents, providing a necessary counterpoint, albeit a flawed one, to Hayles' work on media-specific analysis. As such, while it is influenced by Jenkins "across" media-oriented perspective, Diamedia Literary Practice it is also intended as a direct response to the limitations of transmedia storytelling. Jenkins' work undoubtedly provides a prompt for more developed "across" media-oriented perspectives by indicating the potential forms of extension of creative and artistic works new media make possible, the kinds of participatory culture and migratory behaviour these extensions engender, and by indicating how analysis of print and digital media-based creative and artistic works can move beyond notions of hypertextuality and intertextuality. However, more thorough and developed conceptions are required. As Marie-Laure Ryan, one of Jenkins' most thorough critics, notes, one can argue that his formulation of transmedia storytelling is more "catchphrase" than definition but that 'memorable catchphrases are [also] a powerful way to promote new ideas and start theoretical conversations'.⁵⁵ Her article constitutes the start of such a theoretical conversation, wherein Ryan helps underline one of the key issues with transmedia storytelling and shows why an alternative formulation in the form of Diamedia Literary Practice is particularly pertinent at this juncture.

⁵⁴ Jenkins, 'Transmedia 202: Further Reflections'.

⁵⁵ Marie-Laure Ryan, 'Transmedia Storytelling and Transfictionality', *Poetics Today*, 34.3 (2013), p.362.

In the article, Ryan examines the relationship between the narratological concept of “transfictionality” and transmedia storytelling to ascertain the degree of overlap between the two. Originally defined by Richard Saint-Gelais, “transfictionality”, is the kind of relation formed between two (or more) texts share common elements such as characters, locations, or fictional worlds.⁵⁶ Ryan distils the difference between the two concepts down to media: transfictionality operates via the extension or migration of these common, fictional elements across texts within the same medium, whereas transmedia storytelling operates in the same way but across multiple media; hence, she suggests that transmedia storytelling be regarded as a ‘special case of transfictionality [...] that operates across different media’.⁵⁷ The issue Ryan’s article highlights but does not deal with directly is that, with specific regard to literary practice, concepts such as transfictionality have been created with the assumption that the default medium is and will be print, whereby the medium is at best an analytical afterthought. In this sense, transfictionality is a conspicuous example of what Hayles meant when, as quoted above, she suggested literary critics have been ‘lulled to somnolence by five hundred years of print’ and ‘slow to wake up to the importance of media-specific analysis’, meaning that both literary criticism and theory are hindered by unrecognised assumptions in relation to print and are therefore unprepared for the analysis of digital literature.⁵⁸ These kind of assumptions, allied with the underdevelopment of transmedia storytelling and Jenkins’ tendency – despite Ryan’s distillation – to mean ‘media content’ when he says ‘media’, the propensity for transmedia to be used – as Jenkins himself recognised – imprecisely and with differing agendas, and the nomenclative slippage between terms such as transfictionality and transmedia, result in confusion among critics, misapplication of theoretical frameworks, and incomplete analysis with literary and media studies, especially when confronting digital forms of literature.

In addressing literary practice across and through print and digital media environments, where two (or more) works are written with the specific form and medium in mind and where there is also a meaningful practical, narrative, or thematic connection between them, Diamedia Literary Practice is unambiguously attentive to media. Media-specific analysis provides the foundation upon which Diamedia Literary Practice is built, ensuring that the medium, whether print or digital, is never assumed. Furthermore, in symbolising the synthesis of “across” and “through” media-oriented perspectives through its nomenclative use of the prefix “dia-” as opposed to “trans-”, Diamedia Literary Practice aims to prevent further confusion with existing terminology and avoid adding to the number of critics Jenkins identified who have interpreted

⁵⁶ Ryan, p.362; Richard Saint-Gelais, ‘Transfictionality’, in *The Routledge Encyclopedia of Narrative Theory*, ed. by David Herman, Manfred Jahn, and Marie-Laure Ryan (London: Routledge, 2005), pp.612–13.

⁵⁷ Ryan, p.366.

⁵⁸ Hayles, ‘Print Is Flat, Code Is Deep: The Importance of Media-Specific Analysis’, p.68.

and blurred the scope of transmedia storytelling to suit their own purposes. Similarly, while there is scope for the concept of diamedia to be extended to apply to a broader range of artistic and creative practices than literature, this is regarded as an anticipated and secondary outcome of the research undertaken within the thesis, indicative of future directions for further research rather than being of primary concern here.

The principal purpose in formulating diamedia here is to better understand literary practice. This is partly in line with the aforementioned aim to build upon Hayles' media-specific analysis and to respond to her call for more Comparative Media Studies in relation to print and digital literature, but it is also to avoid the misinterpretations and scope creep that have plagued transmedia storytelling. Although, as Ryan notes in another article, transmedia storytelling often begins with a novel, rather than focusing on the sort of ambitious, large-scale, multi-novel, franchise-producing works like *The Lord of the Rings* and *Harry Potter* that helped give Jenkins' research its impetus, this thesis begins with a much narrower scope prompted, as stated, by Cole's keynote and his literary practice in the novel form and on Twitter.⁵⁹ This much narrower scope permits the thesis to prove the efficacy of Diamedia Literary Practice as a form of Comparative Media Studies that fully articulates a form of literary practice as of yet not formulated in the fields of literary and media studies before it is potentially applied to a wider subset of literary practice, or indeed before diamedia is applied to a broader range artistic and creative practices.

In focusing on literary practice across and through the Twitter platform and in the novel form, the thesis also (re)positions the author at the centre of the study, as the constant between the print and digital works, recognising the unacknowledged and indispensable role that they play in creating the connections between the works, which in turn drives the types of migratory behaviour among audiences Jenkins' refers to. This is intended as a corrective to the oversimplified collapsing of creators and consumers into participants within transmedia storytelling and, while it respects the increasingly participatory role the reader plays as Jenkins rightly notes, Diamedia Literary Practice also respects the creative and artistic efforts of the author in extending aspects of their literary practice across print and digital media, between the novel and Twitter, strategically, systematically, and symbiotically leveraging both media and forms to radically extend and transform each work. In intending to be especially sensitive to and cognisant of both media and the author in determining the outcome of the works, Diamedia Literary Practice also aims to avoid presenting an overly simplified binary between technology and culture, hence the use of the compound, "technocultural", throughout the thesis to refer to the context in which Cole, Egan, Mitchell, and Lin are writing; this term is deliberately deployed in the sense initially expressed by Constance Penley and Andrew Ross in their edited text,

⁵⁹ Marie-Laure Ryan, "Transmedia Storytelling: Industry Buzzword or New Narrative Experience?", *StoryWorlds: A Journal of Narrative Studies*, 7.2 (2015), p.5.

Technoculture (1991), exploring the complex and indivisible relations between technology and culture in Western society.⁶⁰

Nonetheless, in spite of the lengths taken in this chapter to explain how Diamedia Literary Practice builds on Hayles' media-specific analysis, responds to her calls for more Comparative Media Studies approaches, addresses the limitations of Jenkins' transmedia storytelling, and synthesises the "across" and "through" media-oriented perspectives they respectively represent, as a conception it is at this stage still open to the same criticisms that Ryan levelled at transmedia storytelling: that it is more "catchphrase" than definition, representing a starting point for a more thorough theoretical conversation. Diamedia Literary Practice provides the conceptual means to articulate Cole's, Egan's, Mitchell's, and Lin's prototypical literary practice on Twitter and in the novel, but it still requires a theoretical framework that underpins its conception of how literature operates across and through media; it is this theoretical framework that McLuhan's media studies uniquely provide. But, before discussing McLuhan's media studies in more detail, there is a third common approach that has been appreciably applied in existing studies of Twitter literature, which must be addressed: the collective work on new media and narrative of "digital fiction" scholars such as Alice Bell, Ruth Page, and Bronwen Thomas. Where, as discussed above, Hayles analyses print and digital literature in depth but largely in isolation from each other, and where Jenkins analyses multiple creative works but ignores the underlying media dynamics at play (among other issues), "digital fiction" scholars have, at least to some extent, interpreted the process of media change represented by the proliferation of digital fiction in a unidirectional sense. This is because, as a group, they rely primarily on extant literary theory to provide a framework for their analysis.

Digital Fiction

The study of "digital fiction" – that is, 'fiction written for and read on a computer screen that pursues its verbal, discursive and/or conceptual complexity through the digital medium, and would lose something of its aesthetic and semiotic function if it were removed from that medium' – was established in 'A [S]creed for Digital Fiction' (2010).⁶¹ The [s]creed (a creed for the screen) is attributed to a group of international scholars – Alice Bell, Astrid Ensslin, David Ciccoricco, Hans Kristian Rustad, Jess Laccetti, and Jessica Pressman – who propose 'a platform of critical principles, seeking to build the foundation for a truly "digital" approach to literary study'.⁶² This "digital" approach constitutes concepts that recall the "through" media-oriented perspectives of

⁶⁰ *Technoculture*, ed. by Constance Penley and Andrew Ross (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991).

⁶¹ Alice Bell and others, 'A [S]Creed for Digital Fiction', *Electronic Book Review*, 2010 <<https://electronicbookreview.com/essay/a-screed-for-digital-fiction/>> [accessed 10 November 2019].

⁶² Bell and others.

both Kirschenbaum and Hayles, with the [s]creed speaking to the importance of “medial” and “modal affordances”, and “multimedial” and “multimodal interplay” in analysing digital fiction. “Medial affordances” is to pay attention to the means of dissemination (screen, software, etc. – what Kirschenbaum would call the means of transmission) as well as the fictions they transmit, while “modal affordances” is to pay attention to the means of representation (text, image, etc. – what Kirschenbaum would call the means of inscription) as well as the fictions they construct. “Multimedial” and “multimodal interplay” is then the interplay between these affordances, between media and modes, or what Hayles would call intermediation, in works of digital fiction.⁶³ In this way, the [s]creed seems to want digital fiction to avoid the oversimplified collapsing of content and media together seen in transmedia storytelling and follow a more “through” media-oriented perspective similar to Kirschenbaum and Hayles. Indeed, Hayles’ influence is further emphasised in Bell, Ensslin, and Rustad’s edited collection, *Analyzing Digital Fiction* (2014), which serves as an expansive and demonstrative text for the ideas proposed in the [s]creed.

Echoing the [s]creed, editors Bell, Ensslin, and Rustad state that there is a need for media-specific analysis that considers attributes such as interface design, software, hardware, links, images, and sounds in accounting for digital works that are ‘tactile and audiovisual’ in a way that print works are not.⁶⁴ And, in a manner that recalls Hayles’ prompt for more Comparative Media Studies, the editors summarise the collection’s *raison d’être* as response to the need for digital fiction scholarship to catch up with digital fictive practice and provide ‘more replicable approaches through which [digital fiction] can be methodically analyzed’.⁶⁵ In this, the collection is timely and admirable in the authors’ attempts to move beyond the analysis of the type of hypertext works that, as discussed above, have laid the foundations for and set the trajectories for much of the literary and media studies fields. Alternatively, they seek to draw attention to an array of underexposed digital literary practice and focus on ‘digital works that have so far received little or no analytical attention and [...] [profiling] replicable methodologies that can be used in the analyses of other digital fictions’.⁶⁶

The collection includes contributions focusing on lesser-addressed forms of digital literature such as Twitter works, Flash works, and narrative-driven video games, and the editors argue that these types of works are often not acknowledged as having literary value, or whose authors are recognised as ‘[saying] something important about literature as an art form, about the media ecology of our time, and about our society and cultural practices’.⁶⁷ However, the

⁶³ Bell and others.

⁶⁴ Alice Bell, Astrid Ensslin, and Hans Kristian Rustad, ‘From Theorizing to Analyzing Digital Fiction’, in *Analyzing Digital Fiction*, ed. by Alice Bell, Astrid Ensslin, and Hans Kristian Rustad (London: Routledge, 2014), p.7.

⁶⁵ Bell, Ensslin, and Rustad, p.3.

⁶⁶ Bell, Ensslin, and Rustad, pp.3-4.

⁶⁷ Bell, Ensslin, and Rustad, p.3.

collection also unexpectedly contains several contributions analysing well-established hypertext literature, including chapters focusing on authors and works already analysed by Hayles, such as Stuart Moulthrop's work and Judd Morrissey's *The Jew's Daughter* (2000), or works already analysed by other digital fiction scholars, such as Kate Pullinger's *Flight Paths* (2010).⁶⁸ Notwithstanding digital fiction's persuasive conception and the laudable aims expressed in both the [s]creed and Bell, Ensslin, and Rustad's edited collection, digital fiction scholarship is often compromised by the kind of contradictions exhibited by the incongruous inclusion of analyses of critically-established hypertext works in a collection whose stated purpose is to avoid (re)examining the very same type of work.

In their introduction to the collection, the editors also expressly distance the analytical approaches profiled among *Analyzing Digital Fiction's* contributions from critical theory-based approaches originally developed or applied in relation to print literature. They refer primarily to the logistical difficulties posed by digital fiction and their medial affordances, to which critical theory is not specifically attentive, questioning the value of falling back on poststructuralist models of analysis such as Roland Barthes' notion of the "writerly" text, Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's concept of the "rhizome", and Jacques Derrida's theory of "deconstruction", which have all been variously applied to hypertext and the first wave of digital literature by critics Jay David Bolter, J. Yellowlees Douglas, George P. Landow, and others.⁶⁹ As Bell, Ensslin, and Rustad argue, the aligning of poststructuralist theoretical models and hypertextuality means that analysis remains at a largely abstract level, failing to address the full material depth and media specificity of digital fiction. Yet, simultaneously, while Bell, Ensslin, and Rustad question the value of poststructuralist critical theory in the analysis of digital fiction, contributions to *Analyzing Digital Fiction* mainly rely on extending and reformulating existing literary theory, which surely begins with the same set of issues that affect poststructuralist theory in its application to digital works.

To name but a few examples from the text, Bronwen Thomas' chapter uses reception theory, Bell and Daniel Punday's chapters both use possible world theory, and David Ciccoricco's chapter uses narrative theory. As Bell et al state in the [s]creed, 'We are unabashed about our

⁶⁸ Hayles refers to Moulthrop's works in several of her texts, including *My Mother Was a Computer* (2005) and *Electronic Literature* (2008), and analyses Morrissey's *The Jew's Daughter* in depth in *Electronic Literature*; Kate Pullinger's *Flight Paths* also appears in Ruth Page and Bronwen Thomas' edited collection, *New Narratives (New Narratives: Stories and Storytelling in the Digital Age, ed. by Ruth Page and Bronwen Thomas [Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 2011])*, alongside other works previously analysed by Hayles, such as Shelley Jackson's *Patchwork Girl* (1995) and Talan Memmott's *Lexia to Perplexia* (2000), which featured in *My Mother Was a Computer* and *Electronic Literature* respectively.

⁶⁹ See: Jay David Bolter, *Writing Space: Computers, Hypertext, and the Remediation of Print*, 2nd edn (New York: Routledge, 2001); J. Yellowlees Douglas, *The End of Books--Or Books without End?* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2000); Landow, *Hypertext: The Convergence of Contemporary Critical Theory and Technology*; Landow, *Hypertext 2.0: The Convergence of Contemporary Critical Theory and Technology*; Landow, *Hypertext 3.0: Critical Theory and New Media in the Era of Globalization*.

structuralist predilections and flaunt our formalist leanings', listing narrative theory, stylistics, semiotics, and reception theory as indications of the types of systematic methodologies employed within the digital fiction field.⁷⁰ The contradiction between argument and application regarding poststructuralist and structuralist critical theory and the similar issues they inevitably present when applied to digital fiction is not addressed at any point within the text. However, extending and reformulating critical and literary theory, whether structuralist or poststructuralist, is admittedly a viable means of grounding digital fiction in a broader ecology of literary practice and it therefore achieves some of digital fiction scholarship's stated aims: to assert that works of digital fiction say something important about literature as an art form, and about wider society and cultural practices; and to profile replicable methodologies that can be utilised in the analyses of other digital fictions. By aligning digital fiction with established literary theory, Bell et al assert that digital fiction is a valid form of literature, worthy of the same treatment as the canonical print literature in relation to which such literary theory has been developed and applied. Concurrently, *Analyzing Digital Fiction* demonstrates the efficacy of literary theory as an analytical tool applicable to digital fiction, providing replicable methodologies by utilising and extending theories already familiar to literary scholars. It is an approach that brings digital fiction and literary theory into productive dialogue. But although utilising literary theory achieves some of digital fiction scholarship's stated aims, it fails to fully locate digital fiction within a wider media ecology and consequently assert that digital fiction says something important about contemporary media ecology.

In the [s]creed, Bell et al refer to the kind of "close analysis" digital fiction embraces. 'We take a bottom-up approach. We base our conclusions on examples. We substantiate every critical assertion with a case. Theory is vital to us but analyses provide the evidence on which we base our conjectures.'⁷¹ The issue with digital fiction and the replicable model of analyses it demonstrates as it pertains particularly to the aims and intentions of this thesis is not in the analysis itself, per se, but rather how its use of literary theory sets the analytical baseline – the 'bottom' from which the analytical approach moves 'up' – at the level of narrative, stylistics, semiotics, or reception. In other words, despite the significant and productive work undertaken by digital fiction scholars in pushing the field forward by fundamentally re-evaluating existing literary theory in light of digital literature, the level of analysis is rarely deep enough to address the underlying media dynamics at play; the analysis is indeed "close" but not necessarily deep. As such, despite the palpable influence of Hayles' media-specific analysis and the lengths to which the [s]creed goes to avoid conceptually collapsing content and media together in its reference to medial and modal affordances, in practice, as a theoretical framework, digital fiction effectively

⁷⁰ Bell and others.

⁷¹ Bell and others.

has the same issue as transmedia storytelling. This is perhaps most pertinently evident in Bronwen Thomas' contribution to the text, which addresses Twitter-based literary practice.

Thomas' chapter, '140 Characters in Search of a Story: Twitterfiction as an Emerging Narrative Form', is the only contribution to the collection that attends to digital fiction on Twitter, which she separates into two distinct categories: discrete, tweet-length, prose works – a "shorty", in Thomas' terms – or multi-tweet, serialised narratives.⁷² The two works she examines in detail in the chapter reflect and reinforce these definitions, with one work falling into each category: the discrete, tweet-length "shorties" are Arjun Basu's (@arjunbasu) *Twisters* (2009-2017), a series of self-contained narratives that focused on the relationship between an unnamed man and woman, and the multi-tweet, serialised work is *Epic Retold* (@epicretold, 2009-2014), a Twitter-based retelling of ancient Indian epic, *The Mahābhārata*, written by her colleague, Chindu Sreedharan. Basu's *Twisters* were published weekly on the platform while *The Mahābhārata* was "retold" over forty multi-tweet episodes, published at irregular and often infrequent intervals. While, with wider reference to the types of work being published on the Twitter platform at that time, these distinctions do broadly hold, the works themselves also contribute to the lack of media-focused, analytical depth provided by the theoretical model used by Thomas, which in this case is reception theory.

On his website, Basu states that the *Twisters* project's inspiration came while he was editing a short story and started thinking about the formal possibilities offered by Twitter's character constraints.⁷³ His first attempt at crafting a piece for the platform came in at exactly 140 characters and this in turn became the sole requirement of and justification for the *Twisters*: that each one was exactly 140 characters in length. For Basu, Twitter therefore provided the structural basis for formal experimentation at the composition stage, and this was the full extent to which Twitter was a part of his literary process. The *Twisters* were also published weekly on an arbitrary schedule that did not take advantage of the platform's affordances for real-time communication, meaning Basu's publication cycle seemed more suited to a printed newspaper or magazine than the imperative temporal dynamics of Twitter. Nonetheless, at the time Thomas was writing, Basu's work was representative of the kind of literature being published on the platform.

Benjamin White, editor of *Nanoism* (@nanoism, 2009-), a Twitter-based publication for fiction, notably includes "twisters" when he defines the work the magazine publishes as 'Shorter than traditional flash fiction [...] Call it nanofiction, microfiction, twiction, twisters, or tweetfic – it doesn't matter'.⁷⁴ As White suggests, despite the variety of terms used to describe tweet-length

⁷² Bronwen Thomas, '140 Characters in Search of a Story: Twitterfiction as an Emerging Narrative Form', in *Analyzing Digital Fiction*, ed. by Alice Bell, Astrid Ensslin, and Hans Kristian Rustad (Oxford: Routledge, 2014), pp. 94–108.

⁷³ Arjun Basu, 'Twisters' <<https://arjunbasu.com/twisters>> [accessed 31 August 2019].

⁷⁴ Benjamin White, 'Nanoism' <<http://nanoism.net/about/>> [accessed 27 May 2019].

Twitter literature, the terms themselves are essentially redundant given they all describe a form of prose work contained entirely within a single tweet. By 2014, at the time Thomas was writing, these types of work were widely published on the platform, with works/accounts such as *140 characters* (@twitterfiction, 2007-2012), *twiction* (@twiction, 2008-2012), James Miller's *A Small Fiction* (@ASmallFiction, 2009-), and Sean Hill's *Very Short Story* (@VeryShortStory, 2009-) all following the same single tweet-length, prose fiction format.⁷⁵ As with Basu's *Twisters*, these were all works premised upon the structural basis for formal experimentation that Twitter's then-140-character constraint provided, with little or no regard for the platform's wider affordances.

Similarly writing on his website, Sreedharan explains that the inspiration for his multi-tweet, serialised narrative, *Epic Retold*, was in Thomas herself drawing his attention to some articles about mobile fiction – Japanese “cell phone novels”, written and shared via SMS, known as *keitai shōsetu* – and Twitter literature.⁷⁶ The articles Thomas shared on Twitter literature focused mainly on Matt Richtel's (@mrichtel) *Twiller* (2008), a “real-time thriller” published on Twitter (hence “twiller”) about an amnesiac man waking up in the mountains of Colorado, haunted by the suspicion that he committed a murder.⁷⁷ The story followed the man's ‘quest of self-discovery’, written in text-speak and posted on Twitter, 140 characters at a time, using his only possession: a partly operational cell phone.⁷⁸ Richtel's work was written around Twitter's then-reliance on SMS and its ability to operate on even the most rudimentary of, and, for the sake of verisimilitude, potentially only partly operational mobile phones. *Keitai shōsetu* are similarly written around mobile technology, with SMS providing the apparatus for composition, delivery, and feedback. Originating in Japan around 2000, *keitai shōsetu* developed as an amateur form of storytelling embraced particularly by young women, permitting them to read and write about aspects of their domestic lives typically only privately discussed.⁷⁹ By 2002, the form had become so popular that one of the best known works, *Deep Love*, was picked up and print-published,

⁷⁵ It is worth noting that, as of 2014, “micropoetry” was also widely published on the platform. This was predominantly in the form of haiku, the three-line, seventeen syllable Japanese poems, which, when published on the platform, came to be known as “twihaiku” or as similar compounds of “Twitter” and “haiku”. This includes works/accounts such as *Only Haiku* (@onlyhaiku, 2009-2013), *Daily Haiku* (@DailyKu, 2009-2013), *Haiku Diem* (@HaikuDiem, 2010-), and *Haiku Poetry* (HaikuPoetry575, 2012-2017). However, in line with the thesis' roots in Cole's prose-based literary practice and novel-focused keynote, this research exclusively focuses on prose works of Twitter literature that are connected in some sort of meaningful way to the same authors' novels.

⁷⁶ Chindu Sreedharan, ‘How The Mahabharata Was Retold On Twitter’, *An Indian in England*, 2017 <<https://chindu.co.uk/how-the-mahabharata-was-retold-on-twitter-286bb113b6c5>> [accessed 11 June 2019].

⁷⁷ Matt Richtel, ‘Introducing the Twiller’, *New York Times*, 2008 <<https://bits.blogs.nytimes.com/2008/08/29/introducing-the-twiller/>> [accessed 7 September 2019].

⁷⁸ Claire Martin, ‘A Thriller on Twitter? “Twiller,” Naturally’, *Denver Post*, 2008 <<https://www.denverpost.com/2008/10/09/a-thriller-on-twitter-twiller-naturally/>> [accessed 7 September 2019].

⁷⁹ Larissa Hjorth, ‘Stories on the Mobile: Women, Micro-Narratives, and Mobile Novels in Japan’, in *The Mobile Story*, ed. by Jason Farman (New York: Routledge, 2014).

selling 2.7 million copies.⁸⁰ But despite its success in Japan, it was not until around 2007 or 2008, a year after the launch of Twitter, that *keitai shōsetu* became known to Western critics.⁸¹ It was at this point that Thomas and Sreedharan became aware of *keitai shōsetu* and Richtel's Twitter work, and although *keitai* novels are a culturally and technologically distinct phenomenon that largely preceded the launch of Twitter, both were instructive of Thomas and Sreedharan's conceptions of multi-tweet Twitter literature, with both being directly referenced in Thomas' article and in Sreedharan's blog post.

Twiller and *keitai shōsetu* were principally written around the character constraints of SMS technology, but also exceeded these limitations in their multi-part narrative structures. They at once affirmed the importance of composing with 140- and 160-character counts foremost in mind, but also required that each individual tweet or message be part of an overarching narrative structure. This question of balance, between the brevity and fragmentation of discrete tweets and the cohesive structure of extended narratives, inspired Sreedharan's *Epic Retold*. As he explains, it was the ironic formal challenge of 'fitting the world's longest epic' into Twitter that drove the project, his sense of the challenge again emphasising the extent to which *Epic Retold* was composed with the platform's character constraints foremost in mind.⁸² In the end, it took Sreedharan 1605 days to 'fit' *The Mahābhārata* into Twitter and re-tell the epic story in its entirety. During the process, Sreedharan received the offer of a book contract to publish *Epic Retold* in print, meaning he also followed the same path to print publication as *Deep Love* and many other *keitai shōsetu*.

Epic Retold was published as a book in 2015, including each and every tweet that appeared on @epicretold in the four and a half years it took Sreedharan to re-tell the story, arranged sequentially and narratively on the page.⁸³ Each individual tweet appeared in its original 140-character form, despite the justification for that form having been removed in the process of recontextualising the work in a print format. At the same time, in the process of recontextualising the tweets in print, the unique contextual information Twitter provides through its usernames, avatars, timestamps, replies, retweets, and favourites/likes was also discarded. Beyond the words on the page, the only traces of Twitter in the print-based version of *Epic Retold*

⁸⁰ Yukiko Nishimura, 'Japanese Keitai Novels and Ideologies of Literacy', in *Digital Discourse: Language in the New Media*, ed. by Crispin Thurlow and Kristine Mroczek (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011).

⁸¹ See, for example: Jonathon Green, 'The next Chapter in Reading', *Guardian*, 2007 <<https://www.theguardian.com/books/booksblog/2007/sep/27/thenextchapterinreading>> [accessed 10 September 2019]; 'In Japan Half The Top Selling Books Are Written On Mobile Phones', *Tech Crunch*, 2007 <<https://techcrunch.com/2007/12/02/in-japan-half-the-top-selling-books-are-written-on-mobile-phones/>> [accessed 10 September 2019]; Dana Goodyear, 'I ♥ Novels', *New Yorker*, 2008 <<https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2008/12/22/i-love-novels>> [accessed 10 September 2019].

⁸² Sreedharan, 'How The Mahabharata Was Retold On Twitter'.

⁸³ Chindu Sreedharan, *Epic Retold: #Mahabharata #Twitter Fiction #Bhima #140 Characters* (Noida: HarperCollins, 2015).

are the empty tokens of the username/account, the hashtag added to the start of each “episode” title, and, somewhat bizarrely, the favourite, reply, retweet, and menu icons all arbitrarily adorning the margins. By including these symbols stripped of their functions and with the work constituted purely by the 140-character sections of words on the page, the print version of *Epic Retold* only emphasises the narrow interpretation of Twitter’s affordances taken in the composition and publication of the platform-based version. It is only through taking such a narrow interpretation, believing that the unique contextual information and affordances the platform provides can be discarded as long as the 140-character structure is retained, that works of Twitter literature can be print-published without losing anything essential to their literary operativity. To Thomas’ credit, this is something she touches on in her chapter.

Thomas notes the difficulty of capturing or remediating ‘the experience of Twitter’ in a print form, stating that a particular ‘dynamism’ is generally lost in the transfer from platform to page.⁸⁴ Capturing or remediating the experience of Twitter is not, as Thomas appears to argue, simply to write in 140 characters or 140-character sections. Yet, despite seeming to make this argument, she then refers to Alexander Aciman and Emmett Rensin’s ‘highly successful’ *Twitterature* (2009) as an example of a book ‘based on tweets’. *Twitterature* is a parodic, print-based anthology of canonical works of fiction re-told in tweet-length segments, whose subtitle claims it contains ‘the world’s greatest books retold through Twitter’, despite the fact that the anthology’s material never actually appeared on Twitter.⁸⁵ *Twitterature* is not a book based on tweets, as Thomas suggests, but rather a book based on the conception of Twitter literature as any work written in 140-character components. Popularised by the anthology, the term “Twitterature”, as a compound of “Twitter” and “literature”, cemented the concept of Twitter literature as any works written in 140 characters or 140-character components, even when those works are arbitrarily reduced to 140 characters or 140-character components and exclusively print-published.⁸⁶ This is notably also the term Thomas uses to describe Twitter literature throughout her chapter.

Regardless of whether they are single- or multi-tweet narratives, the Twitter works Thomas analyses are limited in their utilisation of and engagement with the platform’s affordances, only taking its characteristic brevity as a prompt for formal experimentation in a manner reminiscent of the work of Oulipo authors such Raymond Queneau and Georges Perec. The primary theoretical model of analysis she uses in her chapter, the reception theory

⁸⁴ Thomas, ‘140 Characters in Search of a Story: Twitterfiction as an Emerging Narrative Form’.

⁸⁵ Alexander Aciman and Emmett Rensin, *Twitterature: The World’s Greatest Books Retold through Twitter* (London: Penguin, 2009).

⁸⁶ It is likely interpretations such as these and works such as *Twitterature* – which promises to provide the reader with ‘everything [they] need to master the literature of civilized world, while relieving [them] of the burdensome task of reading it’ – that led Franzen to his infamous criticisms that Twitter is ‘unspeakably irritating’ and a medium unsuited to ‘serious readers and writers’. See: Flood.

represented by Wolfgang Iser's "reader-response" model of literary criticism, also provides interesting avenues of enquiry with regard to the narrative "gaps" inevitably created in the publication of serialised works on Twitter but similarly does little to address the platform's more extensive affordances, its operational utility, or its structural biases. And while she also draws on television studies in her analysis of the multi-tweet, serialised works, being that television studies directly addresses an entirely different medium, neither does this help Thomas' analysis get at the deeper role the platform plays in Twitter-based literary practice. As noted above, this is not merely an issue in Thomas' work but in the largely literary theory-based approaches proposed and profiled by digital fiction scholars.

Of all the literary theoretical frameworks deployed by digital fiction scholars, narrative theory is the most frequently and fundamentally utilised; narratology is the thread that runs through all digital fiction scholarship, even where other theoretical perspectives are also employed in parallel.⁸⁷ Indeed, the narratological perspective is foundational enough to digital fiction scholarship that it warrants being the only theoretical approach explicitly referenced in the [s]creed. 'Narrative theory allows interpretations of (digital) narrative fiction to be based on sound structural foundations but we explore the extent to which print-oriented narratological approaches apply to non-print texts.'⁸⁸ As the [s]creed makes clear, digital fiction scholarship is as concerned with using digital fiction to extend and reformulate existing, print-oriented and especially narrative-based literary theory as it is with using literary theory to formulate replicable approaches for the analysis of digital fiction. This effectively interprets media change as a unidirectional process of newer media replacing older media: digital media replacing print media so that the old methods of analysis (print-oriented literary theory) should be extended and applied to new, digital media (digital fiction).

Even in the cases where significant effort is made to update existing literary theory through its application to digital fiction, there is the potential for carrying over unrecognised, print-oriented assumptions instead of addressing the more complex, dynamic, and multidirectional relationship between and print and digital media, which Hayles has warned against in her analysis. While narrative theory does provide the 'rigorous methods and well-established terminology' digital fiction scholars seek to guide their close analysis and while it also helps ratify the study of digital fiction more generally, due to its print-oriented bias, narratology does not provide the basis for a deeper, more media-oriented analysis of print or digital media.⁸⁹ The need for narratology to be combined with a more media-contextual analysis is an issue that

⁸⁷ Note, for example, that Thomas' chapter's sub-title describes "Twitterfiction as an Emerging Narrative Form".

⁸⁸ Bell and others.

⁸⁹ Bell and others.

has, however, been noted elsewhere among digital fiction scholars, particularly and once again most pertinently by Thomas.

Before contributing to *Analyzing Digital Fiction*, Thomas also edited a collection that explicitly focuses on the relationship between digital media and narrative theory. Co-edited with Ruth Page, *New Narratives: Stories and Storytelling in the Digital Age* – which also features contributions from Bell, Ensslin, and Punday – argues for a new phase of digital narratology: ‘one that revisits the relationship between narrative theory and digital technology but that explicitly grounds that relationship in a range of contextually oriented perspectives’.⁹⁰ The editors note the debt that digital narratology owes media studies in this regard, where media studies ‘concerns itself less with the stylistic or textual characteristics of new narrative forms than with the environment and social and cultural formations that produce and consume them, as well as the cultural uses to which narrative practices may be put’.⁹¹ The editors therefore frame digital narratology as a response to what they see as the challenges facing narratology and media studies, which is, echoing Kirschenbaum, ‘to find a language to replace the concept of the text as a static object with the idea of texts as dynamic processes’.⁹² Yet again, though, as with digital fiction scholarship more generally, this translates to an aim for the collection to show, via a wide range of contributions, how extending and reformulating existing structuralist models of narrative theory has been enabled by new media storytelling.

Despite being a productive means of re-evaluating existing narrative theory, there are once again limitations to this type of approach, both in relation to the specific aims and intentions of this thesis and regarding digital literature more generally. Firstly, not all digital literary works are narrative works in the classical sense. This applies particularly to Twitter, where works such as Cole’s *small fates*, Lin’s literary lifestreaming, or indeed Basu’s *Twisters* are more comparable to collections of discrete units than sequential narrative instalments. As Lev Manovich notably reminds readers in his influential text, *The Language of New Media* (2001):

Many new media objects do not tell stories; they do not have a beginning or end; in fact, they do not have any development, thematically, formally, or otherwise that would organize their elements into a sequence. Instead, they are collections of individualised items, with every item possessing the same significance as any other.⁹³

Narrative, as Manovich later continues, is often used as an all-purpose term in relation to new media ‘to cover up the fact that we have not yet developed a language to describe these new

⁹⁰ Ruth Page and Bronwen Thomas, ‘Introduction’, in *New Narratives: Stories and Storytelling in the Digital Age*, ed. by Ruth Page and Bronwen Thomas (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 2011), p.3.

⁹¹ Page and Thomas, p.7.

⁹² Page and Thomas, pp.7-8.

⁹³ Lev Manovich, *The Language of New Media* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2001), p.218.

strange objects'.⁹⁴ As stated above, although narrative theory provides a means of grounding digital literary works in a wider ecology of literary practice and helps legitimise the study of digital literature, it also neglects many of the specific characteristics of digital media that makes them “new” and fails to properly ground digital fiction within the broader media ecology.

Secondly, one of the features that makes new media “new” in relation to “old” media is their unpredictable cycles of utility and obsolescence, driven by the complex, dynamic, and multidirectional relationship between them. Media do not develop in a vacuum but always in relation to each other in the wider media ecology and embedded within the contemporary technocultural context. This is something that Thomas and Page seem to understand even if the “digital narratology” approaches collected in *New Narratives* do not fully commit to a more comprehensive, media studies-based approach, highlighting once more the contradiction between argument and practice often evident in digital fiction scholarship.⁹⁵

Despite the credit digital fiction scholarship – and Thomas in particular – deserve for highlighting a range of non-hypertext digital literary works deserving of critical analysis and, with specific reference to the work undertaken within this thesis, helping legitimise the study of Twitter literature, their concern with and use of print-oriented literary theory as the basis of and for their analysis does not provide the kind of media-oriented approach required by Diamedia Literary Practice, which not only locates digital literature in a wider ecology of literary practice but also locates literary practice in a broader media ecology.⁹⁶ Digital fiction scholarship interprets media change in a manner that too closely resembles the unidirectional logic of “new” media replacing “old”, where the locus of attention is purely the changes “new” media enact that require existing, print-oriented theories of literature to be updated. Media change occurs in ways that are exponentially more complex, dynamic, and multidirectional, as both Hayles and Jenkins have argued from the vantage of their own individual perspectives and as Cole’s keynote also suggests.

Through his keynote – in its title, ‘After the Novelist’; in referring to Twitter as ‘one of the futures of the novel’; by suggesting ‘the novelist is smaller than ever before’ while ‘the novel itself’, represented in part by Twitter, ‘is getting bigger and bigger’; while simultaneously refusing to

⁹⁴ Manovich, p.228.

⁹⁵ Like *Analyzing Digital Fiction, New Narratives* also includes a number of contributions that focus primarily on already well-established hypertext literary works that have been addressed by Hayles and by other digital fiction scholars, once again including Stuart Mouthrop’s work, as Talan Memmott’s *Lexia to Perplexia* (2000), and Shelley Jackson’s *Patchwork Girl* (1995), as well as to another work by Kate Pullinger.

⁹⁶ Thomas also deserves due credit for her survey of Twitter literature, ‘Tales from the Timeline: Experiments with Narrative on Twitter’ (2016), which featured prominently in the Introduction and helped identify the authors whose work makes up the case study chapters here, despite, once again, not demonstrating a suitable theoretical framework for analysis in its survey structure, through its focus on narrative, and in its inclusion of adaptations alongside extensions (to use Jenkins’ terms).

believe that ‘Twitter kills the novel’ in its print-published form, and rather that the naturalisation of Twitter’s formal constraint, atomised mode of information dispersal, and ongoing inclusiveness will begin to affect the print-published novel as a persistent form – Cole is clearly speaking to issues of obsolescence and utility, and of a conception of media change, visible through the lens of literary practice, that is complex, dynamic, and multidirectional, where neither form or medium, or indeed author and literary practice itself, is left unchanged by their dialogue.⁹⁷ Through his literary practice in both the novel form and on the Twitter platform, he further engages with notions of obsolescence by retrieving the *fait divers* form for Twitter while also extending aspects of his literary practice from the novel form into Twitter’s environs in a manner that leaves neither medium’s affordances unexplored, unchallenged, or unclear. This same pattern of engagement with obsolescence and retrieval can be seen in each of the authors examined in this thesis, where Egan (unsuccessfully in her case) and Mitchell retrieve the obsolesced Victorian serial form, and Lin retrieves the obsolesced epistolary novel form, and where their separate-yet-connected work across and through the novel form and on the Twitter platform engages with both forms, media, and the questions regarding contemporary literary practice Cole’s keynote prompted.

As the above sections have shown, while the research undertaken within this thesis has been influenced and informed to varying extents by Hayles, Jenkins, and digital fiction scholars such as Thomas, Cole’s, Egan’s, Mitchell’s, and Lin’s prototypical literary practice demands the new formulation Diamedia Literary Practice represents, along with a theoretical framework of analysis that addresses Diamedia Literary Practice at the interconnected levels of practice, form, and media while also speaking specifically to the nuanced notions of obsolescence and retrieval represented within. As the next section shows, Marshall McLuhan’s media studies, and specifically his tetradic laws of media, provide exactly this type of theoretical framework.

Marshall McLuhan’s Tetradic Laws of Media

In recent years, Marshall McLuhan’s media studies have undergone somewhat of a critical renaissance, where, as Jacqueline McLeod Rogers and Tracy Whalen write in the introduction to their edited collection, *Finding McLuhan: The Mind, The Man, The Message* (2015), ‘there is increasing recognition across the academy that the world anticipated and foretold by McLuhan makes sense of the world that we now inhabit [...] [and] in contemporary times, readers now have a better vocabulary for understanding the sometimes inchoate patterns that he admitted were

⁹⁷ Cole, ‘After the Novelist’, p.56.

difficult to articulate.⁹⁸ Similarly, speaking of the global catalogue of events that took place to mark the centenary of his birth in 2011 and the number of texts recently published dedicated to re-evaluating his work within this context, Elena Lamberti notes that the ‘occasion certainly brought renewed attention to both the man and his work, and a reappraisal of his theories and role as an intellectual in the twentieth century.’⁹⁹ In short, there is a pervasive sense among media studies critics that the contemporary technocultural context has brought McLuhan’s ideas into much sharper focus and, correspondingly, that McLuhan’s media studies provide the means with which to articulate media ecology in the contemporary technocultural context.

Arguably, the beginning of McLuhan’s remarkable renaissance can be traced back to decades ago, in 1988 and 1989, and the publication of two closely-related, posthumous, co-authored works: *The Laws of Media: The New Science* (1988), co-authored with his son, Eric McLuhan, and *The Global Village: Transformations in World Life and Media in the 21st Century* (1989), co-authored with Bruce R. Powers. Both works focus on revisiting, refining, and extending his ideas, and further elucidating his core concepts. In effect, they were a late riposte to the chief criticisms of McLuhan’s earlier media writing while still retaining the principles of his poetics and the essence of his ideas. It was these works that, for many scholars, laid the foundations for the re-evaluation of his media studies, and it is these works that provide the theoretical basis for fully analysing and articulating Diamedia Literary Practice in the paradigmatic distillation of McLuhan’s media studies that both texts produced: “the laws of media”, otherwise known as the “tetrad” owing to its four-part structure, as shown in Figure 2.2.

In its simplest formulation, the tetrad presents four laws of media effects, posed as questions, which are true of every man-made technology or artefact: what does the artefact “enhance” or intensify or make possible or accelerate; what is pushed aside or “obsolesced” by the artefact; what does the artefact “retrieve” from previously obsolesced forms; and what does the artefact “reverse” or flip into when pushed to the limits of its potential. It is through these four laws, through the tetrad of media effects and their related concepts, that McLuhan’s work provides full and proper articulation for the dynamic complexities of Diamedia Literary Practice, especially with regard to the aforementioned aspects of obsolescence and retrieval evident in Cole’s, Egan’s, Mitchell’s, and Lin’s Twitter works.

⁹⁸ Jacqueline McLeod Rogers and Tracy Whalen, ‘Marshall McLuhan: Transformations/Adaptations’, in *Finding McLuhan: The Mind, The Man, The Message*, ed. by Jacqueline McLeod Rogers, Tracy Whalen, and Catherine G. Taylor (Regina: University of Regina Press, 2015), p.xii-xiii.

⁹⁹ Elena Lamberti, *Marshall McLuhan’s Mosaic: Probing the Literary Origins of Media Studies* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2012), p.9. See also: ‘2011 Centennial Events – The Estate of Marshall McLuhan’ <<https://marshallmcluhan.com/centennial/>> [accessed 4 March 2018].

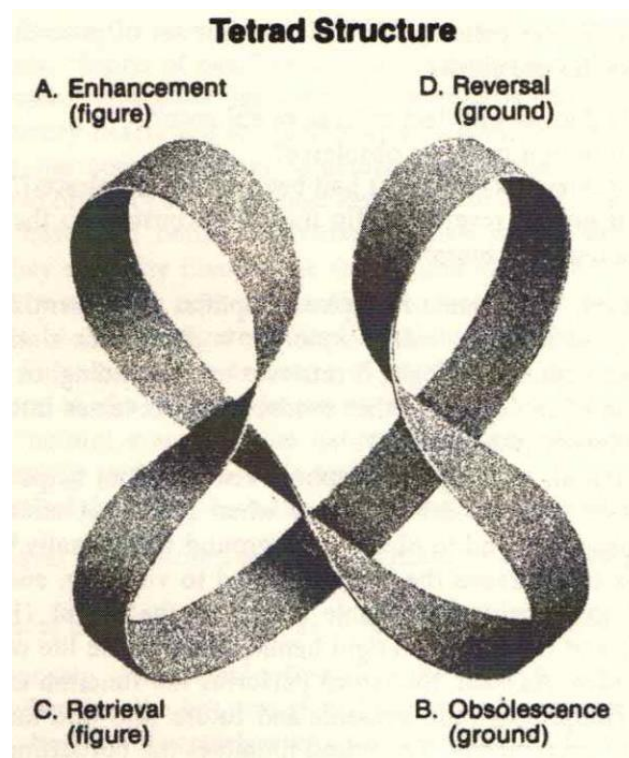


Figure 2.2 Tetrad diagram from *The Global Village* (1989)

The laws of media are designed to exist in the form of a tetrad of simultaneous effects, all inherent to a form of technology or artefact from the beginning of its lifespan, acting as an instrument for revealing and predicting the dynamics of situations and innovations. Its four interrelated, interacting elements can be expanded as follows. The “enhancement” element asks what the new technology/artefact improves in relation to existing technologies/artefacts; what new activities or processes it enables or makes possible. This is the most straightforward element of the tetrad, as a new technology must inevitably improve upon an existing technology/artefact as part of its *raison d’être*. This is therefore a complementary action to “obsolescence” in the sense that, in enhancing something in relation to an older technology/artefact and improving upon it, a newer artefact/technology inevitably pushes aside the older technology/artefact. Although this element also appears relatively straightforward, it is crucial to note that, in McLuhan’s terminology, ‘Obsolescence is not the end of anything.’¹⁰⁰ This means that the relationship between obsolescence and “retrieval” is much more subtle than that between obsolescence and enhancement, asking what is brought back and updated by the new technology/artefact. With retrieval, it is not a case of bringing something back exactly in the same form as ‘Some translation or metamorphosis is necessary to place it into relation to the new ground.’¹⁰¹ When a technology/artefact is retrieved from earlier technocultural conditions, it is transformed as it is

¹⁰⁰ Marshall McLuhan and Eric McLuhan, *The Laws of Media: The New Science* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1988), p.100.

¹⁰¹ McLuhan and McLuhan, p.101.

placed in relation to its new ground; it gains new meaning in its new technocultural context. Both the retrieval and reversal aspects of the tetrad involve this kind of contextual metamorphosis. And the final element of the tetrad, “reversal”, asks what a technology/artefact reverses into once it reaches the limits of its potential. McLuhan states that this transformative aspect of the tetrad can be exemplified by a maxim from information theory: ‘data overload equals pattern recognition.’¹⁰² When it reaches its potential, a technology/artefact reverses its characteristics and becomes a complementary form. The example McLuhan typically provides to clarify this aspect of the tetrad is physical cash-money (hardware), pushed to the limits of its operating potential, reversing back into a lack of money: that is, credit (software/information) and the credit card.¹⁰³

The four elements of the tetrad are also further subdivided into two categories. In a mode of thinking borrowed from the *Gestalt* psychology of the Berlin School, the obsolesce and reverse aspects represent “ground” elements, whereas the enhance and retrieve aspects represent “figure” elements. For McLuhan, the figure is the artefact, medium, or technology and the ground is the context or environment from which the artefact, medium, or technology arose and to which it will eventually return, including the changes it effects in the process. At the time he was writing, he believed that almost all existing critical approaches to the study of media only performed a partial analysis of technologies and artefacts, paying exclusive attention to the figure and ignoring the ground. Although he is writing decades after McLuhan, this is similar to the way in which Jenkins’ formulation of transmedia storytelling tends to oversimplify the distinction between media and content by collapsing the two together.

By taking both a technology’s figure and ground into consideration, in comparison, McLuhan attempts to consider the ‘total situation’ of the media-ecological context.¹⁰⁴ In addition, in underlining the simultaneity of the four elements of the tetrad, McLuhan states that ‘there is no connection between figure and ground, but only interface’.¹⁰⁵ Connection, for McLuhan, implies a fixed position, visual bias, and a linear concept of cause and effect, similar to the way that digital fiction scholarship interprets media change in a unidirectional sense of old media being replaced by new. Interface, conversely, implies a more dynamic and recursive interplay of the different elements of the tetrad, accounting for both the technology or artefact itself and its context or environment. And since the four elements are always interacting, the focus of the tetrad inevitably shifts to the interface, or the space(s) in between. The interface between the

¹⁰² McLuhan and McLuhan, p.107.

¹⁰³ For a more detailed description, see: McLuhan and McLuhan, p.99; pp.106-7.

¹⁰⁴ McLuhan and McLuhan, p.109.

¹⁰⁵ McLuhan and McLuhan, p.109.

obsolesce (ground) and retrieve (figure) elements of the tetrad require particular elucidation in this regard.

As noted, McLuhan states that ‘Obsolescence is not the end of anything’; rather, ‘it’s the beginning of aesthetics, the cradle of taste, of art, of eloquence and of slang. That is, the cultural midden-heap of cast-off clichés and obsolescent forms is the matrix of all innovation’.¹⁰⁶ Obsolescence is a form of displacement, not replacement: it is not a straightforward, linear process but simply the figure returning to ground. It is in this way that obsolescence is directly related to the retrieval element of the tetrad. For McLuhan, obsolescence is the collective wasteland (ground) of obsolesced artefacts, but one where the artefacts remain, ready to be retrieved in a new, transformed form (figure). The person responsible for this innovative task of retrieving obsolescent artefacts is the artist. As McLuhan explains, ‘The needs of the poet, musician, and artist for ever-new means of probing and exploring experience send them back again and again to the rag-and-bone shop of abandoned cliché.’¹⁰⁷ Through retrieval, the obsolescent is not simply brought back: retrieval involves metamorphosis so that the new form is transformed and translated for its new context, so that ‘The old thing is brought up-to-date, as it were.’¹⁰⁸ These complementary actions of obsolescence and retrieval emphasise the complex and multidirectional dynamics at play between media, articulating the aforementioned and idiosyncratic aspect of Cole’s, Egan’s, Mitchell’s, and Lin’s Twitter works, wherein they retrieve obsolesced literary forms originally tied to print-based publication for the digital platform.

As the obsolesce and retrieve aspects of the tetrad indicate, the artist – here, specifically the author – is conferred a pivotal role through the laws of media; they are the vanguard of the new ground, tasked with maintaining a sensitivity to new environments, exploring and probing to raise the collective awareness of a situation. According to McLuhan, the artist is:

the only person in our culture whose whole business has been the retraining and updating of sensibility [...] The business of the artist has been to report on the current status of ground by exploring those forms of sensibility made available by each new mode of culture long before the average man suspects that anything has changed.¹⁰⁹

McLuhan, here foreshadowing Cole’s paraphrasing of Joseph Brodsky noted in the Introduction, asserts that the artist is responsible for exploring and raising awareness of shifting technocultural contexts, ‘updating the sensibilities’ of ‘the average man’ through their work by drawing their audience’s attention the contextual changes that have occurred. This is essentially the

¹⁰⁶ McLuhan and McLuhan, p.100.

¹⁰⁷ McLuhan and McLuhan, p.100.

¹⁰⁸ McLuhan and McLuhan, p.101.

¹⁰⁹ McLuhan and McLuhan, p.5.

relationship between artist and audience as set out in McLuhan's media studies and it expresses the role authors play in Diamedia Literary Practice, where Cole, Egan, Mitchell, and Lin have extended their literary practice into the new, digital environs of Twitter, exploring its literary potential and drawing their audience's attention to the new forms of literary engagement it permits. In order to underscore the artists' suitability for this cultural role, McLuhan often cited Ezra Pound's famous, Modernist metaphor, stressing the acuity of their situational radar: 'artists of our culture, "the antennae of the race", had tuned in to the new ground and begun exploring of discontinuity and simultaneity.'¹¹⁰ That the artist would explore 'discontinuity and simultaneity' was a reference to the intersection of two contrasting media environments in what was one the most foundational and prevalent concept across McLuhan's body of work, his visual-to-acoustic thesis.

McLuhan's visual-to-acoustic thesis was born in *The Gutenberg Galaxy* (1962), as an intrinsic aspect of what he saw as four epochs, four instances where the dominant communications media was obsolesced and displaced by a newer medium: from an oral (or tribal) to a manuscript culture; from a manuscript to a print culture; and then, as he observed and argued was currently in progress, from a print culture to an electronic age. It is in the latter ecological shift that McLuhan identified what he saw as a return to the "acoustic space" of oral or tribal culture from the "visual space" of print culture, enacted by electronic technologies. This was, in effect, 'the tearing apart of the ethos of print by radio, film (television), and recording', where 'emerging mediums such as the satellite, the computer, the data base, teletext-videotext, and the international multi-carrier corporations, such as ITT, GTE, and AT&T [would] intensify the attack on the printed word as the "sole" container of the public mentality'.¹¹¹

"Visual space" was the sensibility of the printed word: it is continuous, connected, logical, sequential, homogenous, static, and defined by fixed boundaries. "Acoustic space", by contrast, was originally the sensibility of oral or tribal culture which was being retrieved by the proliferation of electronic technologies: it is conversely discontinuous, nonhomogenous, resonant, multi-centric, and defined by a lack of boundaries. 'Visual space is a man-made artefact, whereas acoustic space is a natural, environmental form.'¹¹² Each space is defined by the other's antonymic descriptors, representing McLuhan's central diametric, dialectic pair, where 'acoustic space is a complete contrast to visual space in all of its properties'.¹¹³ As ever with McLuhan's dialectic pairs – which included several variations on his visual vs. acoustic theme, such as phonetic alphabet vs. speech, and eye vs. ear – the intended locus of attention is in the space in

¹¹⁰ McLuhan and McLuhan, p.47.

¹¹¹ McLuhan and Powers, p.46-7.

¹¹² McLuhan and McLuhan, p.22.

¹¹³ McLuhan and McLuhan, p.33.

between the two as much as in the separate spaces themselves. McLuhan's interest in diametric and dialectic couplings is another aspect of his media studies that make them such an apt theoretical framework for addressing and articulating Diamedia Literary Practice, emphasising in the same way as the prefix "dia-" of both across and through, of things apart but also in dialogue. This conception of visual and acoustic space, representing the transition of technocultural contexts in progress, also gave rise to his notion of "biculturalism" is key, giving further definition to the role of the artist in such conditions.

To be "bicultural", McLuhan suggests, is to straddle visual and acoustic space: it is to be in two different spaces simultaneously; it is to be in-between spaces; it is to be at their point of interface. Ernest Hemingway and Alexis de Tocqueville, McLuhan suggests, are prime examples of writers/thinkers whose time spent immersed in non-native cultures meant they were in practice bicultural by virtue of having travelled from one space to another, effecting a spatial displacement in terms of their technocultural environment. However, as with his reference to "electronic" rather than "digital" technologies, McLuhan's definition of biculturalism points to the inevitable disconnection emerging technologies have created with his some of his terminologies since the context in which he was writing. As Rogers and Whalen explain, 'Sometimes the language he uses is out of sync with current usage – for example, his "electronic" or "electric" world is "digital" or "virtual" to us.'¹¹⁴ The "global village" that McLuhan foresaw in the rise of electronic (analogue) technologies has come to fruition through digital technologies and in the advent of the Internet, World Wide Web, and networked mobile devices, time and space has contracted to such an extent that spatial displacement is no longer a requirement of biculturalism.

McLuhan did not live to experience digital media, passing away before the publication of both *The Laws of Media* and *The Global Village* in 1980. As a result, there are fundamental differences between the electric mass media (e.g. telegraph, cinema, radio, and television) he analysed and the new, digital media (e.g. computers [hardware and software], the Internet and World Wide Web, networked mobile devices) that characterises much of the current technocultural context. This needs to be addressed in order to employ McLuhan's media studies in this context.

As much as he was clearly aware of developments in computing technology, he did not differentiate between specific technological breakthroughs, treating all electronic technologies in a somewhat uniform manner, as Robert K. Logan suggests, 'perhaps because each involved the electric speedup of information'.¹¹⁵ For McLuhan, electronic technology was about the global and instantaneous dissemination of information and the changes this effected in spatial and temporal

¹¹⁴ Rogers and Whalen, p.xiv.

¹¹⁵ Robert K. Logan, *Understanding New Media: Extending Marshall McLuhan*, 2nd edn (New York: Peter Lang, 2016), p.34.

experience. In his recent text, *Understanding New Media* (2016), Logan – a contemporary and collaborator of McLuhan’s – aims to develop an understanding of new media and their impact on McLuhan’s ideas and methodologies, extending and updating McLuhan’s media analyses. Addressing this specific issue, Logan identifies some of the key differences between electronic and digital media:

The users of electric media are merely passive consumers of information, whereas the users of digital media can interact actively with the information they access. They can also use these digital to reorganize and remix information and create new forms of knowledge. [...] Mass media provide the user with a flow of information over which they have no control other than to turn the device off. With digital media the user is in control of the two-way flow of information.¹¹⁶

Ultimately, Logan argues in favour of recognising the bifurcation between electronic mass media and new media. This is also the position taken here, but with some additional exegesis as there are two potential means of delineating this distinction. Firstly, the digital age could be interpreted as an extension of what McLuhan terms the electronic, which is to say, the electronic technologies he describes have merely been extended into digital forms (as evident in each of the television, telephone, and radio) as a microcosmic feature of the macrocosmic shift McLuhan describes; or, secondly, that the digital age could be interpreted a distinct media-ecological shift in its own right, following the electric age McLuhan identifies and characterised by a shift from analogue to digital technology. As is fitting in the context of McLuhan’s media studies, the most accurate answer likely lies somewhere in between the two interpretations.

To argue that the digital age is an extension of the electric age is to ignore the fundamental differences in how analogue and digital technologies operate, which fails to acknowledge the sequential characteristics of analogue electronic technologies that align them more closely with print culture. Yet to take the latter position is to insinuate that the translation of culture from a visual, print-based environment into an acoustic, electronic one was fully realised, which is an argument that bears little scrutiny. Mobile networked digital devices such as smartphones, tablets, and laptops operate in ways that engage all senses in an acoustic manner through their speakers/headphone jacks, track pads, buttons, and touchscreens, but they are still inextricable from the visual stress of the phonetic alphabet: they are devices designed and used to read and write (or type) as much as they are to listen to music and podcasts, play games, watch videos, television, and films, or to speak to someone. As such, the shift from visual to acoustic space is best articulated as operating on two levels concurrently: the earlier and more seismic shift away from a more purely print-based media ecology towards an electronic one; and a simultaneous and more subtle translation in which the electronic mass media became digital media. In other

¹¹⁶ Logan, pp.34-5.

words, the current media-ecological shift is between print-based media and digital media, but in which electronic mass media are also implicated. As Cole's, Egan's, Mitchell's, and Lin's *Diamedia Literary Practice* demonstrates, digital media is perpetually developing and proliferating but print media has also persisted; through digital media and in digital forms, the written word and the phonetic alphabet still play an elemental role in the contemporary technocultural context. This is something that McLuhan seems to have anticipated.

In *The Gutenberg Galaxy*, McLuhan proposes that 'long-literate cultures have naturally more resistance to the auditory dynamic' being enhanced by newer electronic technologies.¹¹⁷ Certainly, as noted above, the persistence of the written word and the phonetic alphabet, in both print and digital media, would point to the veracity of this claim and suggest a "hybrid" contemporary technocultural context comprised of a combined print and digital media ecology. McLuhan originally discussed the concept of these "hybrid" media ecologies in *Understanding Media*, writing that "The crossings or hybridizations of the media [...] release great new force and energy as by fission or fusion."¹¹⁸ Hybridization, he continues later in *The Global Village*, was 'the adding to and partial integration of one system with another' and that 'the resultant "child" of hybridization is not the same as one or the other of its parent systems'.¹¹⁹ McLuhan believes this sense of technocultural in-betweenness meant transitional processes in progress across and through rival media ecologies offered 'an especially favourable opportunity to notice their structural components and properties'.¹²⁰

Cole's, Egan's, Mitchell's, and Lin's *Diamedia Literary Practice* across and through print and digital media, across and through the novel form and the Twitter platform, provides a compelling example of the kind of innovative energy generated by a hybrid media ecology, presenting a particularly productive opportunity to examine print and digital media through the lens of literary practice. Cole, Egan, Mitchell, and Lin are technologically bicultural by virtue of working resonantly across and through distinct media environments, and across and through visual and acoustic space. Considered in this light, it becomes clear that the questions Cole's keynote prompted regarding the future of the novel, the novelist, and Twitter are questions about media as much as they are questions about literary practice, speaking to the hybridity and fluidity of the contemporary technocultural context. As an analytical tool, examining exactly this kind of complex and dynamic situation was the precise purpose of the tetrad:

In presenting the laws of media in tetrad form, our object is to draw attention to situations that are still in process, situations that are structuring new perception

¹¹⁷ Marshall McLuhan, *The Gutenberg Galaxy: The Making of Typographic Man* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1962), p.29.

¹¹⁸ Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (New York: Routledge, 2001), p.51.

¹¹⁹ McLuhan and Powers, p.126.

¹²⁰ McLuhan, *Understanding Media*, p.54.

and shaping new environments, even while they are restructuring old ones: the structures of media dynamics are inseparable from performance.¹²¹

This once again points to the unique suitability of McLuhan's media studies as a theoretical framework to address and articulate Diamedia Literary Practice by underlining the importance of the author-as-artist and, especially via his earlier reference to Ezra Pound, pointing towards their roots in his doctoral training as a literary scholar under I. A. Richards and F. R. Leavis at Cambridge. As Jessica Pressman notes, McLuhan 'adapted the New Critical practice of close reading and applied it to objects that the New Critics did not consider literary', which provided the genesis of his media studies.¹²² Indeed, the tetrad is perhaps best considered a tool for "close-reading" literary works in a media-specific manner while also respecting the role of the author in exploring and negotiating the relationship between medium and content, as well as helping situate the work in the wider media ecology.

In a crucial clarification, McLuhan explained that the laws of media:

applied to more than what is conventionally called media: they were applicable to the products of all human endeavour, but also to the endeavour itself! [...] everything that man makes and does, every procedure, every style, every artefact, every poem, song, painting, gimmick, gadget, theory, technology – every product of human effort – manifested the same four dimensions.¹²³

As with McLuhan's wider work, the laws of media are ultimately anthropocentric in that they actively position the 'human' at the centre of media studies, both in the sense of how technologies and artefacts enable (and constrain) certain actions and in the necessity of human actors in applying and testing his theories: they are 'empirical, and form a practical means of perceiving the action and effects of ordinary human tools and services'.¹²⁴ The tetrad therefore provides a guide for close-reading artefacts and their contexts and, in applying to all human endeavour, procedures and artefacts, artworks and technologies alike, the laws of media also collapse the distinction between the media studies and the arts. As Rogers and Whalen note, 'McLuhan opposed the fragmentation or disciplining of knowledge into fields. [...] He welcomed interdisciplinarity as a contemporary turn'.¹²⁵ This also underscores one of the primary reasons the tetrad is such a suitable theoretical framework for the analysis and articulation of Diamedia Literary Practice.

¹²¹ McLuhan and McLuhan, p.116.

¹²² Jessica Pressman, *Digital Modernism: Making It New in New Media* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), pp.23-24.

¹²³ McLuhan and McLuhan, p.ix.

¹²⁴ McLuhan and McLuhan, p.98.

¹²⁵ Rogers and Whalen, p.xv-xvi.

In applying to both artefact and endeavour, the tetrad meets the principal challenges in approaching Diamedia Literary Practice. In applying to the artefact, it can be applied to the literary medium in question – the print-published novel or the Twitter platform – in order to analyse the specific underlying media dynamics and affordances of that medium. In applying to the endeavour, it can be applied to the literary practice itself to analyse how the author engages with the media dynamics and affordances of each medium and how these dynamics and affordances inform the work itself. The former allows for media-specific analysis of each work while the latter allows the works to be brought into productive dialogue using the author’s literary practice as a bilateral basis for analysis. In other words, the former addresses how the author writes “through” the individual medium while the latter addresses how the author’s literary practice works “across” multiple media environments. This layered or nested approach to deploying the tetrad – what McLuhan terms a “cluster” in *The Laws of Media* – provides a theoretical paradigm for critically addressing Diamedia Literary Practice in all its distinct, dynamic, and dialogic complexity, straddling the two perspectives represented by Hayles’ and Jenkins’ work, interpreting media change in a more multidirectional sense than in digital fiction scholarship, and providing a fuller picture of Cole’s, Egan’s, Mitchell’s, and Lin’s works and their literary practice than presented in existing studies. It is therefore in this clustered method that the tetrad is applied throughout the case study chapters that follow in Chapters 3, 4, 5, and 6.

While other recent studies of McLuhan’s media studies in relation to literary practice – perhaps most notably the aforementioned Elena Lamberti’s *Marshall McLuhan’s Mosaic* (2012) and Jessica Pressman’s *Digital Modernism* (2014) – have focused on re-evaluating his ideas in relation to the contemporary technocultural context and with particular regard to the canonical Modernist writers such as Ford Maddox Ford, James Joyce, Ezra Pound, and Wyndham Lewis whose work helped lay the foundation for his media studies and informed his poetics, this thesis represents an attempt to more directly demonstrate the utility of the tetradic laws of media, as distilled by his two posthumous texts, *Laws of Media* and *The Global Village*, as a theoretical framework that allows for the analysis and articulation of a contemporary, prototypical literary practice constituted by Cole’s, Egan’s, Mitchell’s, and Lin’s Diamedia Literary Practice. Each case study begins with a quotation from the author describing their impetus in using Twitter as means of innovating in their literary practice and focuses on a key conceptual concern of the author’s literary practice which, along with the already established connections between the works and the theoretical framework provided by McLuhan’s tetrad, brings the Twitter works and novels into productive critical dialogue. While more broadly framing the diamedia nature of the authors’ literary practice, McLuhan’s laws of media, and explicitly the obsolesce and retrieval elements of the tetrad, also reveal a distinct pattern across all the authors’ literary practice in that each retrieves an obsolesced literary form originally linked to an outmoded, print-based environment

and updates it for the digital environs of the Twitter platform. Similarly, each case study focuses on a secondary, tetrad-related theoretical conception from McLuhan's media studies, each of which is explained in more detail in the individual case study chapter, illuminating another idiosyncratic aspect of each author's Diamedia Literary Practice.

Chapter 3 therefore analyses Cole's Diamedia Literary Practice primarily across and through the *small fates* project and *Open City*, though with further reference to both 'Hafiz' and *Every Day is for the Thief*, focusing on the concept of "noise" and McLuhan's conceptions of acoustic and visual space; Chapter 4 analyses Egan's literary practice across 'Black Box' and *A Visit from the Goon Squad*, focusing on the concept of "time" and more closely on McLuhan's conceptions of obsolescence and retrieval; Chapter 5 addresses Mitchell's Diamedia Literary Practice principally across and through @I_Bombadil and *Slade House*, focusing once more on the concept of "time" as well McLuhan's conception of the "resonant interval"; and Chapter 6 analyses Lin's Diamedia Literary Practice across and through his primary Twitter account, @tao_lin (2008-), and his most recent novel, *Taipei* (2013), focusing on the concept of "self-presentation" and McLuhan's conception of "robotism".

Chapter 3

'Black Noise': The Visual and Acoustic Sensibilities of Teju Cole's *small fates* and *Open City*

'[A]s I was doing my research I found that there was certain material that I couldn't really put into the book. Odd stories, news of the weird – strange little things of the kind that would happen in any complicated modern society. And what was I going to do with this material?'

Teju Cole

The *small fates* project began in 2011 when Cole was in Lagos writing *Every Day is for the Thief* and it finished two years later, after nearly a thousand *small fates*, in 2013. The genesis point for the project came once Cole had amassed a collection of Nigerian news stories from the crime section of local newspapers which he felt contained 'a different quality of everyday life [...] life in the raw'.¹ As they did not fit with the tone of the text he was working on, being too abstract or too bizarre, Cole decided to find another medium for these stories of everyday life. The medium he chose was Twitter. As a digitally networked social media platform, Twitter provided a very different kind of outlet to the print medium novel he was working on and the *small fates* then needed a form compatible with the form of Twitter. The form he chose was the *fait divers*.

Cole adopted and adapted his project's name from the *fait divers*, a French form of literary journalism that has no direct translation in English. The closest translation may be "incidents" but the form itself is that of "news briefs", "sundry events", or "strange news". The *fait divers* has 'a long and important history in French literature. Sensationalistic though it is, it has influenced the writing of Flaubert, Gide, Camus, Le Clézio and Barthes. In Francophone literature, it crossed the line from low to high culture'.² Cole retrieved the *fait divers* in the concisely crafted miniature novels popularised by Félix Fénéon, a Parisian writer, journalist, art critic, editor, and anarchist born in 1861. Fénéon published his *fait divers* anonymously in *Le Matin*, a French daily newspaper of the period, as *Nouvelles en Trois Lignes* (News in Three Lines). For Cole, Fénéon 'was probably the greatest practitioner of the form' in whose hands the *fait divers* 'became a modernist form'.³ Although their basis was in news events, Barthes stated that 'the *fait divers* is literature'.⁴ They are very brief pieces, but complete in and of themselves – Barthes suggested that, if anything, 'It is immanence which defines the *fait divers*'.⁵ Their causality, their past and outcome, was 'without

¹ Teju Cole, *Small Fates*.

² Cole, *Small Fates*.

³ Cole, *Small Fates*.

⁴ Roland Barthes, 'The Structure of the Fait-Divers', in *Critical Essays* (Chicago: Northwestern University Press, 1979), p194.

⁵ Barthes, p.187.

duration and without context'.⁶ They were small and self-contained, but they engaged with the human element of world at large; its 'disasters, murders, rapes, accidents, thefts, all this refers to man, to his history, his alienation, his hallucinations, his dreams, his fears'; the tumult of everyday life.⁷ They were 'the classification of the unclassifiable'.⁸ They were typically witty and often, but not always, featured an ironic twist of fate; they spoke of 'scandal, sensation, disruptions of the norm [...] which occur in the byways of everyday life'.⁹ For example:

A dishwasher from Nancy, Vital Frérotte, who had just come back from Lourdes cured forever of tuberculosis, died Sunday by mistake.

There was a gas explosion at the home of Larrieux, in Bordeaux. He was injured. His mother-in-law's hair caught on fire. The ceiling caved in.¹⁰

In essence, Cole retrieved the *fait divers* as a modernist literary form, à la Fénéon, from obsolescence and obscurity, translating it from the French language and cultural context to a Nigerian one, and transforming it for the current technocultural context via the digital medium of Twitter. To denote the process of metamorphosis, Cole called them *small fates* as opposed to *fait divers*, partly because he appreciated 'the near-rhyme of fates and fait, though they have nothing to do with each other'.¹¹ Transposed to Twitter, his *small fates* took the below form:

Children are a gift from God. In the returns department: a baby girl, left by the side of Effiom Ekpo Street in Calabar.

Police will never catch Ojo, alias Paraga, one of Akure's most notorious criminals. With a noose, he escaped to the afterlife.

Wives are flammable, a police inspector, Waisu, of Okokomaiko, has found.¹²

Though there are fundamental differences, understanding the *fait divers* provides a means of not only understanding the *small fates*, but also recognising how many of the ways in which they differ relate to the specificities of the medium in the Twitter medium in which Cole chose to work.

In spatial terms, on Twitter, a tweet is firstly defined by and expressed as a number of characters within a set range: between 2011 and 2013, at the time Cole was writing and posting the *small fates*, this was 140 characters. The name of the platform itself similarly emphasises

⁶ Barthes, p.187.

⁷ Barthes, p.186.

⁸ Barthes, p.185.

⁹ David H. Walker, *Outrage and Insight: Modern French Writers and the 'Fait Divers'* (Oxford: Berg, 1995), pp.1-2.

¹⁰ Félix Fénéon, *Novels in Three Lines*, trans. by Luc Sante (New York: The New York Review of Books, 2007).

¹¹ Cole, *Small Fates*.

¹² Cole, *Small Fates*.

concision, as well as hinting at the supposed immateriality of the communication it enables. “Twitter means *bird calls*, as well as “a short burst of inconsequential information”.¹³ Therefore, in both its functional characteristics, structural biases, and its nomenclature, Twitter enhances brevity. In this way, Twitter was an ideal medium for the *small fates*: they were purposely concise and each *fate*, though part of the larger collection, stood alone as a self-contained piece.

The *small fates* were defined by their brevity. The only extant collection of Fénéon’s work in the *fait divers* form, from which the two earlier examples are culled, bears the title *Novels in Three Lines* (recalling *Nouvelles en Trois Lignes*), and many of Cole *small fates* were even shorter; they were often as brief as a single line. For example:

Arrested for theft in Mecca, the Nigerian immigrant Ibrahim is now learning to use his left hand.¹⁴

In this way, the *small fates* utilised Twitter’s encouraged and ultimately enforced brevity. Although incredibly short in relation to a novel or even short story, the *small fates* appeared entirely average in length – or in spatial terms – against the backdrop of Twitter, in that they were not significantly shorter or longer than any other material published on the platform.

Simultaneously, the character restrictions and stand-alone nature of each individual tweet – its separation from surrounding tweets – also suited the essential immanence of the *small fates*. Each *small fate* was complete in and of itself, telling a whole story if, indeed, not the whole story:

Boarding her London-bound flight in Lagos, grandma Fatimat Abike absent-mindedly exceeded the cocaine carry-on limit by 1.74 kg.

Ude, of Ikata, recently lost his wife. Tired of arguing with her, he used a machete.¹⁵

All the necessary details are included in the *small fates*, yet they provided little elucidation as to the motivation or the consequence of the events and actions described; as Barthes stated, their causality was without context. Why did Ibrahim steal? What did he steal? Why was a grandmother carrying several kilograms of cocaine onto a plane? Was she arrested? Did she go to jail? Why was Ude arguing with his wife? Did he also go to prison? There was an enigmatic quality to the *small fates*; a feeling that something is excluded or withheld from the reader and yet known by Cole. Hence, the *small fates* were also defined by the spaces, or gaps, they left in their narratives.

¹³ Roger, p.xi-ii. Roger’s emphasis and quotation marks, referencing Twitter founder’s Jack Dorsey’s description of the definition of the term, ‘twitter’, which he found in the dictionary.

¹⁴ Cole, *Small Fates*.

¹⁵ Cole, *Small Fates*.

Both the *fait divers* and the *small fates* were concerned with how much of a story can be excised and still remain a story: how to create something seemingly slight, but at the same time self-contained. In the hands of both Fénéon and Cole, it became a process of distillation. It was not only about what elements were excised, but also what was retained and purified to leave only the key constituent parts of the story. What was included and what was excluded from the *fait divers* and the *small fates*, as part of the composition process, was critical to the form itself. For both writers, the spaces (or gaps) created by the necessity of brevity allowed them to create strange narrative causalities; the happenstance and often ironic turn the tales took.

However, on the one hand, Fénéon's excisions – though still most likely expressed as a word limit in the editorial process – were ultimately necessitated by the tangible and visible spatial limitations of the printed page. His stories needed to fit into the margins or higher-numbered pages remaining outside of or following the main news stories, which underlined the secondary nature of the *fait divers* in relation to the other content of the newspapers in which they were initially published. The *fait divers* derived much of their meaning by the virtue of not being the central content of the newspaper and, concurrently, in opposition to the central content. They were immanent within their own spatial restrictions, but they did not exist in a vacuum. Although complete in and of themselves, they were defined as marginalia or sundries, collected together on account of their not being deemed important enough to be stand-alone stories. Their intrinsic brevity, the space they were permitted to take up, was therefore a condition of the secondary status of their content in relation to the more expansive and avowedly more important news of the day, and their marginality was expressed in a spatial and visual sense on the printed page. If headline stories appeared in the highways of the newspaper, then the *fait divers* occupied its byways.

Just as the form of the *fait divers* was dependent on the relationship between what was included and what was excluded and the narrative gaps this created, their function was contingent on the play between their own immanence and their connection, or lack thereof, with the material that surrounded them: the recursive relationship between what existed inside and outside of the *fait divers*. This related primarily to other news stories, which although lacking their bizarre subject matter and unusual causalities, did have the same broad basis as “news”. Furthermore, the *fait divers* tended to be collected together, providing them with a functional context-in-numbers, with their strange otherness being diluted by their abundance and homogeneity. While the *small fates* also pivotally relied upon the recursive relationship between what existed inside and outside their parameters, in the medium of Twitter, this relationship became more complex and more extreme.

Cole's excisions and distillations in the *small fates*, rather than being based on the physical space available on the printed page, were imposed by the less tangible but no less visual character

restrictions of Twitter. These same strictures are imposed upon every tweet published on Twitter so that no tweet is intrinsically secondary to any other tweet. The *small fates* were not differentiated from any other content by virtue of their length, as the platform applies the same logic of brevity universally to all tweets. Nor were they marginalised in visually, as all tweets broadly follow the same standard operational logic once they are published on Twitter, regardless of their content. The fact that the *small fates* are not differentiated in a spatial sense – by their length, size, and position on the page; the space they occupy – is crucial to their place, and how it is defined, within the global milieu of Twitter. The rationale for the project meant that the *small fates* had to appear among other tweets amid users' streams and seem, at first glance, to be typical tweets. And, of course, in many ways, they were. Given the sheer volume and relative variety of material published on Twitter it can be difficult to define non-typical material on Twitter or differentiate a particular tweet from the larger body of tweets published on the platform at any given time, even if that is the author's express intention. But even though they appeared to be the same as any other tweet at first glance, they gained much of their meaning and effect in their pivotal difference. The *small fates* recreated the *fait divers* spatial marginality and defined themselves in opposition to the more typical types of content on Twitter through their lack of context. As Cole states:

Part of the appeal of the Small Fates is that I could put something into people's day that I knew was completely different from what they were seeing. It wasn't the only serious thing in their timeline, but it would be the only thing that would arrive with this extreme lack of context - because you have a context for the jokes, you have a context for the news reports that had links [...] the Small Fates sort of arrive with a kind of intricate and decontextualized detail about lives that you knew nothing about. Each Small Fate was completely new and completely out of context.¹⁶

While the *fait divers* had the context of being based on news stories and being published within a newspaper, the *small fates* had no such contextual link to Twitter. Cole also chose not to directly explain the project to his followers or readers during the period in which he was publishing the *small fates*. Although he did eventually post a description of the *small fates* on his own website shortly after the project had begun in 2011, he did not link to this via Twitter and it was not until much later in the year that news and cultural outlets such as *NPR*, the *New Yorker*, and the *New Inquiry* reported and explained the project.¹⁷ As a result, *small fates* simply started appearing in

¹⁶ Sarah Zhang, 'Teju Cole on the "Empathy Gap" and Tweeting Drone Strikes', *Mother Jones*, 3rd March 2013 <<http://www.motherjones.com/media/2013/03/teju-cole-interview-twitter-drones-small-fates>> [accessed 1st March 2015].

¹⁷ See: 'Simple Tweets Of Fate: Teju Cole's Condensed News', *NPR* <<http://www.npr.org/2012/04/09/150068298/simple-tweets-of-fate-teju-coles-condensed-news>> [accessed 1 March 2015]; Marcy Halford, 'Teju Cole's Small Fates', *The New Yorker*, August 2011 <<http://www.newyorker.com/books/page-turner/teju-coles-small-fates>>; Matt Pearce, 'Death by

Cole's follower's streams – strange, often tragic short stories from the periphery of Nigerian everyday life without elucidation or rationale appearing at random among the links (news, articles, etc.), updates, images, gifs, and all the other miscellaneous tweets that make up Twitter's environment. As Barthes states, as noted above, the *fait divers* occurred in 'the byways of everyday life' and were 'disruptions of the norm', in reference to the stories they told. The *small fates* described similarly unusual events, but also disrupted Twitter's functional norms through their extreme lack of context in relation to the other material on the platform. As such, the *small fates* operated as a form of noise.

Many observers have argued that the urge to update and communicate is secondary to maintaining a connected presence on Twitter, where the communication itself is merely the means of maintaining connection. Richard Roger states that, 'The point of Twitter is the maintenance of connected presence, and to sustain the presence, it is necessarily almost completely devoid of substantive content'.¹⁸ He refers to Twitter as 'shallow media'.¹⁹ Similarly, Vincent Miller believes that, as social networks have developed in the digital age, there has been a shift from the point of these networks being to facilitate users' exchange of 'substantive content' to 'a situation where the maintenance of a network itself has become the primary focus. Here communication has been subordinated to the role of the basic maintenance of ever expanding networks and the notion of a connected presence'.²⁰ As a result, the content of their communications is rendered phatic. Twitter intensifies this connected presence by providing an environment which not only allows users to communicate with other users, by tweeting or sending direct messages, but also allows them to choose to follow other users' updates, which will then appear in their stream.

At the time Cole began to use Twitter for his *small fates* in 2011, its reputation was characterised by inconsequentiality and superficiality. It had no standing or utility as a more profound, literary medium, nor seemingly any indications of developing a reputation or function thereof. He recognised that Twitter had few serious contributors outside of a handful of poets and comedians, and that 'most see it as a sort of ephemeral and unworthy venue. My view is: that's where the people are, so bring the literature to them right where they are'.²¹ There was no context at the time for the type of literary material that Cole was posting in his *small fates*; at the time, simply by using Twitter as a literary medium, Cole was disrupting the norm. By bringing his strange, tragic, violent, poignant, and blackly humorous *small fates* to Twitter, he was providing

Twitter', *The New Inquiry*, 2011 <<http://thenewinquiry.com/essays/death-by-twitter/>> [accessed 7 April 2015].

¹⁸ Roger, p.xiv.

¹⁹ Roger, p.xv.

²⁰ Vincent Miller, 'New Media, Networking and Phatic Culture', *Convergence*, 14 (2008), p.398.

²¹ Matt Pearce, 'Death by Twitter', *The New Inquiry*, 13th October 2011 <<http://thenewinquiry.com/essays/death-by-twitter/>> [accessed 1st March 2015].

the type of substantive content the platform had previously lacked, in terms of the literary craft in retrieving and repurposing the *fait divers* for a digital medium. He was carving out a space for literary work on Twitter; paving substantive byways in and among the phatic highways of the platform.

The *small fates* represented the collision of high and low culture in both their content and the space they occupied on Twitter, much as Barthes noted that the *fait divers* ‘crossed the line from low to high culture’ in Francophone literature. With their roots in modernist literary practice, they brought a new type of intellectual and artistic material to the platform, but at the same time, their sensational, scandalous subject matter often flirted with yellow journalism and even camp:

Lesbians! There are reports of more and more of them in Calabar, which is great. Greatly worrisome. And terrible. Terribly exciting.²²

As an unfamiliar form of literary material, the *small fates* brought a new depth to Twitter’s purportedly shallow media in comparison to the other material – links, updates, images, gifs, etc. – more commonly associated with the platform. At the same time, through their fusion of high and low sensibilities in their form and content, they also cultivated a depth – from high to low – within their own self-contained structure. Once again, the *small fates* relied upon the play between their own immanence and the material that surrounded them; or, in other words, the play between the parameters of their inside and outside.

The *small fates* were inherently concerned with their own space within the greater milieu of Twitter, but like any other user at the time, Cole had no agency in how, when, or even if the *small fates* were read by his followers. While a user can control the content of their tweet and when they publish it, they cannot control when it will be read by their followers or ‘how a tweet will be accessed (i.e. by which device) or what other context (textual and visual) may surround a tweet as it appears in the individual timelines of each and every follower’.²³ Once published, a tweet is subject to the logic of the platform and its algorithms, as filtered through the specific choices of each and every individual user as to whom and how many other users they follow. ‘The network is therefore a collaborator in the identity and content presented by the speaker’.²⁴ Or rather, as Ganaele Langlois et al put it, ‘Web 2.0 spaces serve to establish the conditions within which content can be produced and shared and where the sphere of agency of users can be

²² Cole, *Small Fates*.

²³ Bronwen Thomas, ‘140 Characters in Search of a Story’, in *Analyzing Digital Fiction*, ed. by Alice Bell, Astrid Ensslin, and Hans Kristian Rustad (Oxford: Routledge, 2014), p.105.

²⁴ Alice E. Marwick and Danah Boyd, ‘I Tweet Honestly, I Tweet Passionately: Twitter Users, Context Collapse, and the Imagined Audience’, *new media & society*, 13 (2010), p.130.

defined'.²⁵ The user's agency is largely restricted to controlling the content (inside) of the tweet and when it is published, whereas the context surrounding the tweet (outside) is defined by the platform itself: its operating logic provides the framework within whose limits any concept of agency must function.

Cole published the *small fates* without adhering to any particular timetable as to when they were published, or how frequently, thus indicating the impertinence of the time of publication within the sphere of agency he was cultivating. In choosing to publish the *small fates* via Twitter, Cole was ceding to a concept of agency that applied only to the content of the works. As soon as Cole tweeted a new *fate*, it was ultimately in the hands of the Twitter platform and its operational logic. In practice, the platform became a collaborator in the works in the sense that its logic decided when and how each *small fate* appeared in each individual follower's stream: Cole controlled the content (inside), and Twitter controlled the context they appeared in (outside). While there was a degree of user input on the part of Cole's followers, in terms of their personal norms and behaviours on and in relation to the Twitter – for example, in how often they accessed the platform, how long for, and the number of other users they had chosen to follow – the network effectively controlled how long a *small fate* stayed in users' streams, its half-life, and it controlled what other tweets the *small fate* was displayed next to. And what the *small fates* appeared next to could have been any tweet from the exceedingly broad range of material that routinely appears on Twitter, such as other news stories, celebrity selfies, commuters' journey updates, pictures of food, opinions, and promotional material.

The *small fates* existed in constellation with the tweets that surrounded them on the platform. Unlike the *fair divers*, they were not grouped together in a collection. Each individual *small fate* was a singular story that stood alone amid the other material that filled Cole's followers' streams. As a medium, Twitter emphasised the immanence of the *small fates* in that each (now, non-threaded) tweet on the platform is distinctly and spatially divided from each other. Appearing spaced out, in constellation rather than collection, and in a position operatively decided by the platform's algorithms rather than the author, amplified the *small fates* lack of context in relation to other material and reflected the same strange causalities and happenstance that they described. Twitter, as both collaborator and context, was an inextricable part of the work. The *small fates'* content, the bizarre stories from the periphery of Nigerian everyday life they described, was mirrored by the space they occupied within Twitter where they appeared as strange, singular tweets that arose in and among users' streams out with the control of their author. In other words, how they materialised, how long they remained in users' streams, and in

²⁵ Ganaele Langlois et al, 'Mapping Commercial Web 2.0 Worlds: Toward a New Critical Ontogenesis', *Fibreculture*, 14 (2009) <<http://fourteen.fibreculturejournal.org/fcj-095-mapping-commercial-web-2-0-worlds-towards-a-new-critical-ontogenesis/>>.

what specific context in terms of which other tweets they appeared next to, was in itself an act of *fate*, albeit it one based the operational logic of the Twitter's algorithms.

Through its operational logic, the Twitter platform pushes aside the notion of sequentiality. While a certain degree of sequentiality is built into the platform by virtue of the time stamping of each tweet and, more strictly at the time Cole was writing, displaying these in order of newest first, what Twitter displaces is the concept of a unitary or total sequentiality. There is no means of viewing Twitter as a totality, or all active tweets, as a single linear stream. Accounting for the volume of tweets being published every day, this would not even be potentially possible. In 2018, for example, some five hundred million tweets were published every day on average.²⁶ This equates to nearly three hundred and fifty thousand tweets every minute, almost six thousand per second. Without even considering the processing power that would be required in order to display each and every tweet live, as and when they were published, they would simply move far too fast for the human eye to read. Twitter, then, can only be viewed in a sequence that reflects the specific user's network selections, depending on the other users that they follow. It recalls in this sense what McLuhan described as acoustic (oral or tribal) space: Twitter is 'spherical, discontinuous, non-homogeneous, resonant, and dynamic'.²⁷ Its 'focus or centre is simultaneously everywhere'; its centre, and therefore the perception of Twitter's sequentiality, depends on the specific user and cannot be collapsed into a unitary, total perspective.²⁸

In this way and at the same time, Twitter also pushes aside the singular perspective. There is no single focus or point of view in Twitter; no one perspective that shapes perception. The user may engage with the platform's interface from a first-person perspective, but using Twitter fundamentally involves participating in other perspectives in the way users choose to follow other users. Following another user is to adopt or, at the very least, engage with their perspective. Following multiple users, which is the norm, is then to bring numerous perspectives into dialogue as they are synthesised in the accessing user's stream. In a manner that reflects McLuhan's description of acoustic space, Twitter 'gets everyone involved with everyone with everyone else'.²⁹ The platform operates by enabling and encouraging multiple and diverse points of view, where 'Audience members [each] take turns creating and producing content, and in this "many-to-many" model the network constantly centers on who is talking, responding, or replying.'³⁰

²⁶ See: 'Twitter Is What's Happening in the World and What People Are Talking about Right Now.' <<https://about.twitter.com>> [accessed 2 March 2018].

²⁷ Marshall McLuhan and Eric McLuhan, *The Laws of Media: The New Science* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1988), p.33.

²⁸ McLuhan and McLuhan, p.70.

²⁹ Marshall McLuhan and Bruce R. Powers, *The Global Village: Transformations in World Life and Media in the 21st Century* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), p.94.

³⁰ Marwick and Boyd, p.130.

Where various users create content, Twitter also pushes aside unidirectional communication. Audience members can also be active producers and, using the reply function within Twitter, can respond directly to another user by using the @ function to tag the appropriate username within the tweet, or use the direct message function to send another user a private message. As with acoustic space, the communicative space created by Twitter provides ‘an escape from single, private, or abstract points of view’ through the decentralised and resonant perspectives of its multiplicity of users who both act as audience and producers of content.³¹

The concept of “space” arises throughout and is illuminating in relation to the *small fates* in numerous ways. By thinking about space as an occupied or unoccupied area, both in size and position and how this is delineated, what is inside and what is outside, as a gap or excision, as a dimension (depth, length, and perspective), and how these tweets (the *small fates*) move through space itself, its importance to Cole’s work becomes clear. But, at the same time, that it is also a constitutive element of the *small fates* that emphasises the importance of the role of Twitter-as-medium in the works themselves.

Twitter’s unilateral brevity meant that the space the *small fates* occupied was not marginal and nor did their intrinsic concision differentiate them from other material on the platform. Twitter’s brevity also enhanced the immanent quality that the *small fates* transposed from the *fait divers* and, through its character restrictions, encouraged the gaps in the *small fates*’ narratives that created their odd causalities. At the same time, these odd causalities, combined with their (often) strange subject matter, meant that the *small fates* were out of context in the extreme in comparison to the other types of material posted on the platform, effectively (re)creating a sense of marginality. Their lack of context, which was also enhanced by the general absence of more substantive material on the Twitter platform at the time, and their functional immanence encouraged a degree of play between the *small fates* tweets and those that surrounded them; between inside and outside. While Cole, as the author, controlled the content (inside) of the *small fates*, he did not control the context or what tweets they were published next to (outside). The platform itself becomes a collaborator, its algorithms and logic deciding where and for how long the *small fates* appeared in Cole’s followers’ streams. Cole’s sphere of agency in the *small fates* was restricted to the content of the tweets and when to publish them, with the context in which they were published being left to *fate*, albeit a fate filtered through Twitter’s operating logic. Insofar as fate was a part of the publication process of the *small fates*, Twitter, as a medium, was dynamically, recursively, and symbiotically a part of the work by adding another semiotic layer to the content: the happenstance and the inevitability of the events they described corresponded to how they appeared on the platform.

³¹ McLuhan and McLuhan, p.44.

Twitter's structural biases, its operational and functional characteristics, its norms and utility, made the *small fates'* particular literary explorations of space possible and the type of space it provides for the works to exist within both shapes and becomes an inextricable and symbiotic part of the work itself. This type of space is unique to the Twitter platform, as are the forms of literary explorations of space the platform allows. For the *small fates*, this was a type of space in which their brevity and self-contained structure was normalised, but their lack of context and strange causality of their stories amplified as they were spread across the platform's streams; a space which permitted play between inside and outside of the tweets. It was also a space in which the *small fates* collision of high and low culture in their subject matter also described the space they carved out for more serious literary work on the platform. And it was a space in which the content producer's – the author's – sphere of agency was restricted to the content of the material published on the platform.

However, spatiality and Cole's interest in it transcended the specific medium of Twitter as a part of his wider, Diamedia Literary Practice. The notion of space is also illuminating in relation to and arises throughout his print novel, *Open City*.³² As with Twitter and the *small fates*, the type of space provided and spatial explorations encouraged by the print medium in *Open City* shows how it shapes and becomes an intrinsic part of the work, in combination with its content and linguistic properties. It simultaneously indicates that Cole's literary practice is spread across the specific medium in which he works, but also underscores how these interests are ultimately filtered through and fashioned by the biases and specificities of that medium.

Published in 2011, *Open City* is the story of Julius, a young German-Nigerian resident psychiatrist, and his metropolitan existence in the city of New York. Julius is the sole narrator of the novel, and everything is presented from Julius' first-person perspective and through his own narration. Speech or the relaying of conversation, when rarely it occurs in the novel, is not denoted by quotation marks or any other formatting features. Instead, speech and conversation are conveyed in Julius' own narrative voice and from his perspective, emphasising the importance of Julius as the "I", and the eye, of the text. The novel is presented from this singular perspective throughout, and the reader does not experience any different points of view. Everything is focused by and filtered through Julius' lens of experience and interpreted in his idiosyncratic manner. In spatial terms, whereas Twitter's streams of users' tweets represented the competing and heterogeneous perspectives the platform encouraged, the print medium permits a singular perspective to the exclusion of all others: in *Open City*, the print medium replaces Twitter's streams of users with a single "stream of consciousness".

³² A note on temporal specificity regarding tense: *Open City* is referred to in the present tense, as is the typical mode of literary studies; the *small fates* has been referred to in the past tense, as a completed, time-specific work, underlining the temporal specificities of the Twitter platform.

In the novel, Julius talks of the ‘the solitary territory [his] mind had been crisscrossing’, uniting his routine walks throughout the city’s spaces, his movement, with the stream of thoughts it sparks, while also underlining the solitary nature of the endeavour.³³ He ‘encountered the street as an incessant loudness’ that often jarred against the quiet and reflective process of his own walking-based reverie.³⁴ When he walked through the busier, more crowded parts of the city, the sea of ‘countless faces [did little] to assuage [his] feelings of isolation; if anything, it intensified them.’³⁵ Julius does not see the crowd as a collective or a community, nor does he find any sense of belonging, just ‘thousands of others in their solitude’.³⁶ The closer he gets to these other individuals – huddled together in a subway car, for example – rather than feeling more a part of a crowd or more connected to his fellow commuters, he conversely finds that ‘the solitude intensified’.³⁷ Being among others in the city only serves to turn Julius’ gaze introspectively inward. The novel’s stream of consciousness narrative means it is wholly concerned with the thoughts of and contained within the mind-space of Julius, where any competing perspective is rejected and only succeeds in driving him further towards introversion.

The novel has two epigraphs, denoting the first and second sections of the text. The second of these epigraphs is telling in the kind of perspective it explores: ‘I have searched myself. Throughout the novel, Julius demonstrates little expansion in perspective beyond the limited horizon of the “I”, his at times pathological self-obsession, to include or acknowledge the interests of the “non-I”, the other characters of the novel. Instead, to Julius, New York presents itself as a city where cosmopolitan, metropolitan existence produces interiority, detachment, and isolation: Manhattan is ‘the island that turned in on itself [...] The shore was a carapace [...] the millions who lived on the tiny island had scant sense about what flowed around them’.³⁸ This passage could equally describe Julius. He is consumed with concern for his own tribulations, such as being unable to remember his ATM pin code, where he is far more worried about his own mental fragility than the money he owed and was supposed to pay an accountant with his withdrawal. As with Julius’ metropolitan existence, the print medium, contrary to networked digital environments, enhances this kind of interiority in its detachment from the perspectives and discourses of others. Whereas Twitter innately forces users to be involved with others and their multifarious, conflicting narratives as its *modus operandi*, the print medium can emphasise the introspective thoughts of an individual character or narrator, if indeed an author so chooses, without the interruption or disruption of disparate perspectives. In other terms, while the

³³ Teju Cole, *Open City* (London: Faber and Faber, 2011), p.12.

³⁴ Cole, *Open City*, p.6.

³⁵ Cole, *Open City*, p.6.

³⁶ Cole, *Open City*, p.7.

³⁷ Cole, *Open City*, p.7.

³⁸ Cole, *Open City*, p.54.

immanence of the *small fates* only extended to each individual tweet in the medium of Twitter, where they were islands among the sea of other tweets on the platform, *Open City's* immanence, symbolised by Julius' introspective narrative, extends to the whole novel.

Structurally, *Open City* is ostensibly split into conventional chapters and two main parts, yet the novel is also a near-continuous, impressionistic record of Julius' wanderings in the city. The convention of assigning chapters shows the structural bias of the print medium applied to the novel. Although some do, not every chapter denotes an evident shift – a certain lapse in time, a change in subject – and are inconsistently positioned throughout the text, unlike, for example, as in an epistolary novel, as discussed in Chapter 6 in relation to Tao Lin's work. In some instances, the chapter breaks in *Open City* represent a passage of time, in others a change of season. Sometimes they indicate a shift to a recollection of Julius' past, or a change in location such as his trip to Brussels. The chapters are effectively a reading guide, splitting up the text into discreet sections to be read in sequence, bringing a degree of structure to what is an otherwise unsystematic narrative, even if they are unsystematic themselves. At the same time, the novel contains numerous spaces (again, gaps) in the narrative within the chapter itself. Like the chapters, these are inconsistent in what they indicate – shifts in time, subject, recollections – and in some instances, are demarked by a short sharp line. Again, this line is used infrequently and inconsistently, in terms of what kind of gap it is indicative of.

The refracting of the narrative through Julius' singular perspective, his idiosyncratic mind-space, aligns the inconsistency of the chapter placement and of the spaces within the narrative with the inconsistent machinations and non-linearity of Julius' thought processes. The gaps, pauses, and demarcations are those made by the conscious mind reacting to stimuli – or a lack thereof – leaping from one thought, idea, or memory to the next. The leaving of elliptical spaces expresses the elliptical nature of thought processes themselves. That is, the chapter-based and spatial structure of *Open City* is an organisational tool that articulates the disorganisation of the stream of consciousness narrative it centres upon. Cole's novel uses the structural and spatial biases of the print medium as a compositional tool that signifies the mode of narration, adding another semiotic layer to the content.

The novel synthesises the sequential logic of a chapter-based structure that encourages reading the book in a pre-defined order, from the first page to the last, with inconsistent pauses or gaps and a subjective narrative in which time or any other organisational motif is difficult to gauge. The novel's chapter structure and, by extension, its page numbers create a unitary sequentiality in suggesting how it should be read, imposing a level of linearity upon the text. This sequential structure, although inconsistent, is stable and static, where the second chapter will always start on page twenty-three, the fifteenth on page one hundred and seventy-seven and so forth, regardless of where and when the novel is picked up and read. As *Open City* follows the

singular perspective of its narrator, it suggests a unitary sequentiality in how all readers should approach it. This suggested sequentiality is amplified by the traditions of the print form that, a relatively small number of notable experimental texts aside, uniformly emphasises linearity. Centuries of reading print texts have entrenched the process of reading left-to-right and up-to-down as the behavioural norm in Western society. Yet, concurrently, this linear sequentiality can be used to convey non-linearity and non-sequentiality; it can be made to signify, as well as organise, during the progress of a novel.

Open City is the psychogeographic journey of Julius, his movement through space and the reveries this provokes. It is about his movement through a particular place and time, but it is also a novel about seeing. It is a story intently focused on one man and his solitary perspective. The reader follows him through the physical space of the city, both in New York and Brussels, but also deeper into the thoughts and memories triggered by what he sees. It is movement operating on two axes at once: laterally, page-by-page, in Julius' and the reader's progression through the text; and vertically, temporally, as Julius drifts between the narrative present and pasts of various proximity. There is the sense of a journey; a feeling that the novel is moving towards something, albeit something intangible and enigmatic, encouraged both by its sequential structure and the way that the narrative unfolds, revealing more and more of Julius' character through his thoughts and prejudices. As Julius himself states, 'I covered the city blocks as though measuring them with my stride, and the subway stations served as recurring motives in my aimless progress.'³⁹ The reader follows the same journey, with each chapter representing another block of text by which one's progress can be measured, but simultaneously, that this progress is not necessarily the object.

As a digital medium, Twitter presents a snapshot of everyday life that is in a state of flux, an image of that is continuously and recursively evolving. This is most evident in the way Twitter algorithmically determines trends by analysing the key words and hashtags used in tweets. These trends highlight the most common subjects being tweeted about on the platform and are partially tailored to a user's local geographic location, but also include key words and hashtags that are trending globally, providing a snapshot of everyday life, in a digital medium, on both micro and macro levels. The sense of place Twitter creates is at once global and local.

In the conflation of all these details of everyday life on global and local scales and the multitudinous voices of what amounts to, as of 2018, some 288 million monthly active users sending 500 million tweets per day, Twitter represents a noisy environment.⁴⁰ With as many users and as many tweets as the platform supports, Twitter is not neat nor tidy. Global concerns overlap with local and seismic events are intermingled with the quotidian as users' tweets from

³⁹ Cole, *Open City*, p.7.

⁴⁰ See: 'About Twitter'.

across the globe flow together in streams throughout the platform. Through its networked platform dynamics and social media-based functionality, Twitter collapses distance between its users. As of 2018, Twitter supports thirty-three languages and sixty-one tweeted-in languages have been detected on the platform.⁴¹ While it is worth noting that broader restrictions in relation to internet access and usage in some countries (China, for example) undermine the platform's rendering of users' geographic location secondary to the content of their tweets or their interactions with other users on the platform, these controls exist out with Twitter, which makes no such restrictions. Outside of these broader restrictions or any specific language barriers, Twitter's essential functionality is the same for users across the globe, regardless of their location.

In practice, Twitter cultivates a sense of place that is cosmopolitan in nature: it connects users from all over the world and brings their (digital) lives into collision, encouraging a cosmopolitan perspective that places the user in among the perspectives of users from potentially diverse countries and cultures. However, Twitter has not always been quite so pointedly cosmopolitan in its tweet prompts. Between 2006 and 2009, during the earlier days of its existence, Twitter's original tweet prompt was the somewhat singular, 'What are you doing?', accentuating the importance of the individual user and their own unique perspective. But in 2009, Twitter dropped the second-person pronoun and asked more generally, 'What's happening?', reflecting a subtle shift toward a broader perspective that prompted the individual user to locate themselves within in a larger context.⁴² As a platform, it 'is both potentially public and personal' and more and more it blurs the line between the two spheres.⁴³ The other users an individual user chooses to follow are not geographically restricted in any way and thus their network, their audience, is 'potentially limitless'.⁴⁴ The use of 'potentially' so thoroughly in relation to the cosmopolitan perspective promoted by Twitter denotes the possibility that an individual user could decide not to take advantage of this aspect of the platform, where they could instead use Twitter in a much narrower fashion by only following other users from homogeneous countries and cultures. Yet, a broader perspective and usage of the platform is emphatically stressed, as indicated by Twitter's collating and conflating of global and local trends, and also in how it constructs its networks of users.

Twitter users 'are connected not only to the [specific tweeting] user, but to each other, creating an active, community network'.⁴⁵ A tweeting user's audience are not only connected to the author as an isolated follower, but also to each other by virtue of being the author's followers

⁴¹ See: 'About Twitter'; 'The Many Tongues of Twitter', *MIT Technology Review*, 2013 <<https://www.technologyreview.com/2013/12/10/174973/the-many-tongues-of-twitter/>> [accessed 14 May 2015].

⁴² See: Stone, 'What's Happening'.

⁴³ Marwick and boyd, p.129.

⁴⁴ Marwick and boyd, p.115.

⁴⁵ Marwick and boyd, p.129.

plural, as a group. And, as a group, they can also choose to directly follow each other as a consequence. At the same time, Twitter retrieves a follower's closeness to the user they are following; that is, the audience member's proximity to the author of a tweet, in which 'the networked audience has a clear way to communicate with the speaker through the network'.⁴⁶ The tweeting user is brought into closer and more direct connection with their audience and vice versa. Rather than be connected to each other by being present in a specific place at a specific time, Twitter transforms this physical connection into a digitally networked one signified by the visibility of other users and their tweets. The concept of place – viewed more specifically through the lens of a collapsed global/local context, contemporary cosmopolitan existence, and notions of community – is something that is explored throughout Cole's writing.

The *small fates* were pointedly about a particular place, describing events that transpired specifically in Nigeria. But of principal importance was that, although the events they described were bizarre, they were not more or less bizarre than the events that transpired anywhere else. Part of the *small fates* *raison d'être* was to show that the everyday occurrences that took place in the rest of the world, and especially in the Western world, also occurred in Nigeria. They were not so much about Nigeria as a place, per se, as the conception of Nigeria as a place. Describing the project, Cole stated that he 'wanted people who were not Nigerian to know something about everyday life in Nigeria ... all the texture of everyday life that is basically missing from the news stories that we hear about Africa'.⁴⁷ The *small fates* utilised Twitter's placelessness to place stories of Nigerian everyday life in a cosmopolitan context, beside tweets from and about a diverse range of countries and continents, to show that 'what happens in the rest of the world happens in Nigeria too, with a little craziness all our own mixed in'.⁴⁸ Although the *small fates* were primarily provincial in content, referring explicitly to Nigeria in the news stories used as source material and in the names of people and places they referred to, once published they entered the global milieu of Twitter. Once there, they carved out a place for Nigerian everyday life as a part of the platform's global context, threaded through its algorithms so that the *small fates* existed in constellation, scattered throughout the rest of the material on the platform. The *small fates* were about a specific place, or the conception of a specific place, becoming placeless through the medium of Twitter.

Open City, by contrast, is emphatically about New York as a metropolitan and cosmopolitan city. This is made clear from the opening lines of the novel:

⁴⁶ Marwick and boyd, p.129.

⁴⁷ 'Simple Tweets Of Fate: Teju Cole's Condensed News', *NPR*, 9th April 2012
<<http://www.npr.org/2012/04/09/150068298/simple-tweets-of-fate-teju-coles-condensed-news>>
[accessed 1st March 2015].

⁴⁸ Cole, 'Small Fates'.

And so when I began to go on evening walks last fall, I found Morningside Heights an easy place from which to set out into the city. The path that drops down from the Cathedral of St. John the Divine and crosses Morningside Park is only fifteen minutes from Central Park. In the other direction, going west, it is some ten minutes to Sakura Park, and walking northward from there brings you toward Harlem, along the Hudson, though traffic makes the river on the other side of the trees inaudible.⁴⁹

Morningside Heights/Park; the Cathedral of St. John; Sakura Park; Harlem; the Hudson River: these landmarks create a specific map of the city that underscore the importance of place for Julius, in which 'New York City worked itself into my life'.⁵⁰ Julius' journeys structure the text in the absence of any discernible plot, literally and figuratively creating a map of his movement and sparking the associations and reveries that drive the stream of consciousness narrative. But the focus remains on Julius' stream of consciousness, rather than on the streets, districts, boroughs, and landmarks of New York itself. It is about Julius' experiences as an outsider to the city, his attempts to effectively read the city as a place and understand his own position in and amongst it as he completes his residency at a New York hospital. The opening lines of the novel also indicate something more about Julius' metropolitan and cosmopolitan existence, foreshadowing his interactions with the other characters with whom he crosses paths throughout the text.

The novel begins with the phrase, 'And so when I began'. It is a conjunction ('And') but a conjunction to nothing. It suggests the search for connection, for linkage to something else. On the surface, Julius' interactions with the other characters he encounters follow this reading: that he is looking for a connection to another human being. But when the chance to form a connection or sense of community, Julius actively rejects it, particularly in the case of other African men. There is the Liberian refugee/inmate, Saidu, at the Queens detention centre that Julius visits with his then-girlfriend, Nadège's, church group. Saidu tells Julius the long and tragic story of his past and the reasons for and details of his journey to America. As Julius is leaving, Saidu says to him, 'Come back and visit me, if I am not deported', to which Julius confesses flatly, 'I said that I would, but never did.'⁵¹ There is the post office worker/writer/poet/activist, Terry, who refers to Julius as 'brother', recites a poem to him, and gives him his contact card in order that they may see some poetry together stating, 'I'd like to talk to you'.⁵² 'Sure thing', Julius responds, 'making a mental note to avoid that particular post office in the future'.⁵³ But his self-removed position is demonstrated most plainly in his dealings with a cab driver who, as Terry did in addressing him, Julius calls 'brother'.⁵⁴ But the cab driver is not happy with the way Julius 'came into [his] car

⁴⁹ Cole, *Open City*, p.3.

⁵⁰ Cole, *Open City*, p.3.

⁵¹ Cole, *Open City*, p.70.

⁵² Cole, *Open City*, p.188.

⁵³ Cole, *Open City*, p.188.

⁵⁴ Cole, *Open City*, p.40.

without saying hello', particularly given Julius is African, just like him, inferring a form of community or bond between them.⁵⁵ Julius apologises, but then instantly states that he 'wasn't sorry at all' and that 'he was in no mood for people who tried to lay claims on [him]'.⁵⁶ He only uses the term, "brother", to describe another African in his first conversation with Farouq, even though Farouq, Saidu, Terry, and the cab driver are all variously of African origin. In doing so, he checks himself at once, worrying 'how this aggressive familiarity had struck' Farouq and also wondering 'why he had said it'.⁵⁷ Julius cements both their and his isolation by affirming his own lack of attachment to them.

At every opportunity, Julius eschews any notion of relatedness, connection, or community with others, especially those, like him, who are not native to the cities they inhabit. What at first seems like a desire for connection is superseded by the preservation of Julius' own introverted and isolated intellectual state. He would rather parse these moments of connection and the stories they prompt from those with whom he connects for their intellectual value in relation to his own thoughts and ideas, for what they mean to him as opposed to their emotional content or the bond created by the sharing of stories and perspectives. These men who Julius meets, and in the case of Dr. Saito befriends, have been able to immigrate to New York with varying degrees of success – the city is "open" to them, as the title of the novel suggests – but the nature of metropolitan and cosmopolitan existence in the city leaves them lonely and alone, desperate for a substantial, emotional connection to another human being. Each of the men he meets seeks this connection, in some form or another, in Julius. But in Julius they find a man more concerned with himself than others: like the city itself, while Julius may seem open, he is ultimately closed.

His encounters with these others leave little mark on Julius and their existence within the text is demoted to white noise that periodically interrupts the tranquillity of his own mind-space. These men who Julius encounters are rarely more than the figures on the crowded streets that manifest as 'an incessant loudness' that 'shattered the calm of [his] private chapel'.⁵⁸ His walks in the city are not to prompt encounters that would relieve Julius' companionless existence, they are to allow Julius to explore his own solitary thoughts in relation to the city. On the streets, he is 'not alone, exactly: in the company of a hundred others, but all strangers to [him]' and, in the end, this is how he would have it.⁵⁹ Even on his walks, he seems compelled to seek situations of quiet solitude, being drawn to parks, museums, and concerts. Throughout the novel, the white – or, more accurately, given the non-white identities of the men he encounters, black – noise of metropolitan and cosmopolitan existence in New York City is filtered out through the focusing on

⁵⁵ Cole, *Open City*, p.40.

⁵⁶ Cole, *Open City*, p.40.

⁵⁷ Cole, *Open City*, p.102.

⁵⁸ Cole, *Open City*, p.6.

⁵⁹ Cole, *Open City*, p.29.

Julius' perspective. Through the print medium, the novel constructs a quiet environment that excludes the noise and interruptions of others' narratives – their thoughts, their concerns – that otherwise characterise metropolitan and cosmopolitan existence. Julius, and by extension the novel, is closed off to these other, non-white narratives. They may be made visible, but they are filtered through Julius perspective are not permitted material impact upon his narrative. They are made visible, but in a marginalised and diminished form in their being other in relation to Julius himself, just as they are other in relation to the city they inhabit.

Compared with Twitter, where the *small fates* relied upon the way in which the platform applies the same logic and importance to each and every tweet, the print medium permits this more exclusionary and centred narrative. The *small fates* in particular actively adopted the status of being other to the majority of content on the platform as a means of becoming more visible, where their intrinsic marginality and difference is part of their intentionality. Twitter may have a Western bias, as Cole suggested, in terms of the content published on the platform, but this also depends on user choice and the type of online communities and networks users choose to create. Even within carefully curated communities, or indeed cultural biases, there is an element of noise represented by other material and the perspectives of other users outside of the community retweeted by users within it. Noise is impossible to exclude on Twitter: it is a fundamental part of its environment and of its functional logic. For any tweet published on the platform, there is a context created by the other material it appears among and each tweet is always in dynamic and recursive with its surrounding tweets, whether harmoniously or discordantly. For the *small fates*, this noise was used as a point of entry to add a peculiarly Nigerian perspective to the stories of everyday life to the platform. Whereas the *small fates* relied upon Twitter's noisy environment, *Open City* relies on the print medium's ability to filter out noise to permit Cole to create a story that fashions New York into a quiet and contemplative environment that belies its metropolitan and cosmopolitan reality and focus on a single protagonist's place within the city.

It is telling that his closest connections with other characters occur during Julius' trip to Brussels, not in New York. Brussels is the more literal embodiment of the novel's title, having been declared an "open city" during the Second World War. While he mostly 'stayed indoors, reading' and when he did venture out, again frequented solitary and tranquil, 'the parks and in the museum district' where he 'wandered aimlessly', by virtue of being abroad and away from his home and routine, he encounters two characters: first, an elderly Belgian surgeon, Dr. Maillotte; and second, a young Moroccan internet café attendant, Farouq.⁶⁰ Julius meets Farouq while using an internet café to search for his grandmother and check his email. Even this connection is made in self-interest, a feeling that 'it was best to make friends' to attempt to proactively diffuse any

⁶⁰ Cole, *Open City*, p.108.

awkwardness during Julius' repeated visits to the internet café during his stay in Brussels.⁶¹ But Julius is soon cerebrally attracted to Farouq's intelligence, in his ability to switch 'seamlessly into French, and back again into English', and noticing that the book he is reading is Walter Benjamin's *On the Concept of History*.⁶² But as with so many of Julius' relationships, there is something that corrupts his connection; something typically within Julius that turns him inward and away from the other person. In Farouq's case, it is his intellect that begins to make Julius feel ill at ease, in that Julius is worried that it exceeds his own. As Farouq is discussing the Moroccan writers Tahar Ben Jelloun and Mohamed Choukri, Julius states that he 'didn't quite grasp all the distinctions [Farouq] was making but [he] was impressed with the subtlety in them', that Farouq's 'calmness' put him off balance.⁶³ But then Julius reminds himself that Farouq was 'just a man in a shop'.⁶⁴

Later, Farouq discusses his 'deeper project', outside of his studying to be a translator: investigating his belief that people can live together in a true, cosmopolitan sense in which their difference and its value is maintained yet simultaneously within an egalitarian system, and how such a society could conceivably function.⁶⁵ As he is expanding upon his beliefs and theories, Julius 'gave no indication of [his] thoughts', only nodding, 'signalling that [he] was listening'.⁶⁶ Rather than engaging with Farouq, Julius can only focus on Farouq's self-referential use of the term, 'autodidact', in their previous conversation, possibly in relation to himself or possibly to Mohamed Choukri. Julius carefully notes the 'certain imperfection in Farouq's recall', 'minor lapses – and there were others' that were 'irrelevant', but 'made [him] feel less intimidated by [Farouq]'.⁶⁷ It is probable that, as well as his intellect, Julius is intimidated by Farouq's 'deeper project' and its cosmopolitan nature.

Throughout *Open City*, Julius demonstrates his disease with the connections that his metropolitan and cosmopolitan existence prompts. But it also indicates the way in which Julius' search for fault in others is not a part of his self-reflection, his inward focus. Earlier in the novel and back in New York, Julius' lack of self-awareness is hinted at when he meets a runner going home after competing in the New York Marathon. Speaking of the runner, he states that 'There were no friends or family present to celebrate his achievement. I pitied him then'.⁶⁸ When Julius is mugged later in the text, there are no family members or friends that he calls after the event, or anyone he even informs of it later. He is seemingly unaware of his own, self-imposed isolation and his lack of support network populated by family, friends, or colleagues. The reader becomes

⁶¹ Cole, *Open City*, p.102.

⁶² Cole, *Open City*, p.103.

⁶³ Cole, *Open City*, p.104.

⁶⁴ Cole, *Open City*, p.106.

⁶⁵ Cole, *Open City*, p.113.

⁶⁶ Cole, *Open City*, p.115.

⁶⁷ Cole, *Open City*, p.114.

⁶⁸ Cole, *Open City*, p.15.

complicit in Julius' narratorial unreliability, clouded by his astute eye (and "I") for describing the city in such frequently poetic terms and the intellectual flourishes in his drawing connections between art, theory, and history. The result is that the reader ultimately searches for the same flaws in other characters as Julius, forgetting, for example, that the reason for his taking a trip to Brussels was originally with the intention of finding his grandmother. It is a mission whose urgency and importance decreased at an alarming rate, amounting to the skimming of a phonebook and the brief use of an online search engine, and whose failure that is conveniently unaddressed. But Julius' unreliability and lack of self-awareness is exposed most painfully in a jarring revelation late in the novel, which simultaneously reveals the novel's creation and exploration of a particular type of time relation.

Of the characters that cross Julius' path in New York, it is perhaps Moji that is able to get closest to him. The sister of a former childhood friend in Nigeria with whom Julius becomes reacquainted, Moji bumps into Julius in a grocery store and instantly remembers him, even if he characteristically has no recollection of her. He describes her as an 'apparition', the physical embodiment of 'what seemed to have vanished entirely [that now] existed once again'.⁶⁹ For Julius, Moji represents 'some part of myself I had relegated to childhood and to Africa'.⁷⁰ They strike up a friendship, or as close to a friendship as Julius seems able to maintain, mostly through Moji's assurance that he would hear from her again. In the context of Julius' narrative, the episode is not especially noteworthy. It is only much later, towards the end of the novel when Moji invites Julius to a party at her boyfriend's house, that their meeting is revealed as a subtle set up for the greater meaning it will eventually take on. Arising earliest out of the revellers who stayed over after the party, Julius is sitting on the balcony overlooking the Hudson River when he is joined by Moji. She says there are some things she wants to say to Julius, describing a party that she and her brother had hosted at their house in Nigeria when she was fifteen and Julius fourteen, during which she states Julius 'had forced himself on her'.⁷¹ She goes on to say that:

in the weeks that followed, in the months and years that followed, [Julius] had acted like [he] knew nothing about it, had even forgotten her, to the point of not recognizing her when [they] met again, and had never tried to acknowledge what [he] had done. This torturous deception had continued until the present.⁷²

Moji continues, describing the party in detail and providing a precise account of what had happened between her and Julius. At no point during the episode does Julius affirm or deny Moji's allegations, nor does he even speak at all. Moji seems to expect this, saying that she knew instantly

⁶⁹ Cole, *Open City*, p.156.

⁷⁰ Cole, *Open City*, p.156.

⁷¹ Cole, *Open City*, p.244.

⁷² Cole, *Open City*, p.244.

upon seeing him again that he had lost none of his 'callousness', confirming, 'I know you'll say nothing'.⁷³ Julius seeks out the unreliability and flaws of others (Moji, for her part, was 'too tall, and her eyes were small [...] not beautiful in the way [Julius] expected dark women to be') but is unable to see his own unreliability or his own flaws.⁷⁴ The positioning of this revelation so late in the novel makes it truly jarring within the context of the novel, as does its being relayed, like the rest of the novel, by Julius himself. It suddenly and violently draws attention to the readers' complicity in Julius' 'torturous' self-deception and the extent to which a reader, when invited into the sort of private mind-space his stream of consciousness narrative represents, becomes attuned to seeing events through the lens of that narrator. But the episode speaks most directly to the type of time relation the novel explores throughout and pulls tight the threads that tie Julius' narrative to his explorations of the city-space.

'Things don't go away just because you chose to forget them.'⁷⁵ For Moji, 'the luxury of denial had not been possible'; Julius and what happened that night at the party 'had been ever-present in her life, like a stain or a scar'.⁷⁶ For Moji, the events of the party were not erased by Julius' evasion or selective amnesia. They left a mark on her that although not literal or tangible in itself, was nonetheless a visible reminder of what had transpired that night. But ultimately despite his evasion and selective amnesia, neither have the events been erased for Julius. They remained in the past, distant and remote, but always waiting to be brought hurtling back into the present. Framed by Julius' description of Moji's appearance in New York, in the grocery store on the day they met, the type of time relation Moji's startling revelation articulates becomes clearer. At the start of the section in which he describes meeting Moji, there is a short prefacing passage in which Julius reflects:

We experience time as a continuity, and only after it falls away, do we see its discontinuities. The past, if there is such a thing, is mostly empty space, great expanses of nothing, in which significant persons and events float [...] But there was another, irruptive, sense of things past. The sudden reencounter, in the present, of something or something long forgotten⁷⁷

The reader experiences the novel as a continuity, a journey from one point in time to another within Julius' mind space. However, as discussed with regard to the novel's structure, its continuity is undermined by arbitrary chapter breaks, inconsistent gaps, and lapses backwards and forwards in time that symbolise the discontinuity of Julius' stream of consciousness. The novel is written in the past tense, which, when taken with Julius' reflective description, marks the

⁷³ Cole, *Open City*, p.245.

⁷⁴ Cole, *Open City*, p.198.

⁷⁵ Cole, *Open City*, p.245.

⁷⁶ Cole, *Open City*, p.244.

⁷⁷ Cole, *Open City*, pp.155-6.

novel as an expanse of nothing – blank pages – populated with significant events and persons from Julius’ perspective. But, at the same time, the novel’s use of past tense articulates the irruptive sense of the past in its ability to temporally and temporarily become present again, as the Moji episode demonstrates. The past is always resolutely the past, in the sense that it is time that has passed. But within this ‘great expanse’ there are various degrees of past - smaller, more specific pasts (events, people, memories) – that are recursively moving nearer or farther in proximity to the present in relation to a particular individual’s perception. This is reflected in the memories that continually interrupt Julius’ narrative present.

For *Open City*, the present is the past. This, paradoxically, is how the print medium engages with the present. It provides the reader with a static archive of their own reading experience which they can return to and re-read or re-think in relation to later parts of the text. Following Moji’s late-novel revelation, the reader is forced to re-think their reading of Julius as a character or indeed, re-read his earlier encounters with Moji or other characters to parse these for any indication of the disclosure to come. It simultaneously makes the reader an accomplice in Julius’ act of ignorance through the aspects of his character and the novel itself that they themselves have chosen, consciously or otherwise, to ignore, such as Julius’ self-interest but lack of self-awareness (his unilateral critique of others) and his misdirection (the unaddressed failure to find his grandmother during his trip to Brussels, for example). Both of these elements of Julius’ character are painfully exposed in his response to Moji’s allegations.

After Moji has said what she has to say, she asks Julius, ‘Will you say something?’⁷⁸ He does not respond. Instead, he unhurriedly leaves the party, saying his goodbyes to the other remaining revellers who were now waking up and rising as he went. He then reflects upon an anecdote that Camus used to tell about Nietzsche. He does not return to address or even acknowledge Moji’s allegations within what remains of the novel other than to note that, several days later, he had mistaken a particular detail of the Nietzsche anecdote. Though jarring in its sociopathic lack of empathy, Julius’ response is again alluded to in his prior reflection that:

we are not the villains of our own stories. In fact, it is quite the contrary: we play, and we only play, the hero, and in the swirl of other people’s, insofar as they concern us at all, we are never less than heroic.⁷⁹

In *Open City*, Julius is the hero of the narrative he has constructed. But try as he might, traces of the villainous past that he has tried to erase remain distantly visible, waiting to rise up and engulf the present. This motif, the past rising up and engulfing the present, runs throughout *Open City* in Julius’ engagement with the cityscapes of both New York and Brussels:

⁷⁸ Cole, *Open City*, p.245.

⁷⁹ Cole, *Open City*, p.243.

That afternoon, during which I flitted in and out of myself, when time became elastic and voices cut out of the past into the present, the heart of the city was gripped by what seemed to be a commotion from an earlier time.⁸⁰

During Julius' walks in the city, the past repeatedly rises up and interrupts the present – sometimes literally. When describing a building built upon an African burial site, Julius states that, 'the dead returned when, in 1991, construction of a building on Broadway and Duane brought human remains to the surface'.⁸¹ The dead bodies literally rose to the surface from a site in which some 'fifteen to twenty thousand blacks, most of them slaves' had been interred, and 'then the land had been built over and the people of the city had simply forgotten that it was a burial ground'.⁸² What Julius encountered 'was the echo across centuries, of slavery in New York', of 'bodies that bore traces of suffering'.⁸³ Julius, and by extension the novel, is concerned with how cities are constructed upon veneers of selectively forgotten pasts, particularly in relation to ethnic minorities whose non-white narratives are both crowded out and glossed over.

The novel is constantly engaged with the interpretation of the past in relation to the present: the ability of the past, or pasts, to retain meaning that is rendered legible by the present, irrespective of their lack of temporal proximity. For Julius, 'The site was a palimpsest, as was all the city, written, erased, rewritten'.⁸⁴ The past(s) and present exist as objects and reflections and become so blurred for Julius that he 'could no longer tell where the tangible universe ended and the reflected one began'.⁸⁵ 'To be alive', it seemed to Julius, 'was to be both original and reflection, and to be dead was to be split off, to be reflection alone'.⁸⁶ To be alive, for Julius, is to exist in both past and present at once, while to die is to be isolated in the past in a way that bears no meaning in the present.

In comparison, as a platform, Twitter 'favours the present, the popular, and the ephemeral' where tweets, regardless of their content, are always composed in response to a present tense prompt.⁸⁷ It cultivates an exigent sense of time, enabling and encouraging instant updates and real-time publishing: 'Twitter is all about updating and responding instantaneously to what is happening'.⁸⁸ This has a palpable effect on users' patterns of linguistic expression on the platform, providing evidence of the ways in which this perpetual sense of nowness influences

⁸⁰ Cole, *Open City*, p.74.

⁸¹ Cole, *Open City*, p.220.

⁸² Cole, *Open City*, p.220.

⁸³ Cole, *Open City*, p.221.

⁸⁴ Cole, *Open City*, p.59.

⁸⁵ Cole, *Open City*, p.192.

⁸⁶ Cole, *Open City*, p.192.

⁸⁷ Roger, p.xv.

⁸⁸ Bronwen Thomas, '140 Characters in Search of a Story', in *Analyzing Digital Fiction*, ed. by Alice Bell, Astrid Ensslin, and Hans Kristian Rustad (Oxford: Routledge, 2014), p.98.

their communications. In her analysis of communication practices on Twitter, Ruth Page compared temporal references usage on Twitter to that in general language, using two reference corpora as her sample set. She found that references to time occurred three times more frequently on Twitter than in general usage. Of the temporal references used on Twitter, she found that the adverbs ‘*tonight, today, and tomorrow*’ were the most commonly utilised and that ‘*yesterday*’ was ten times less frequently used than ‘*today*’ on Twitter.⁸⁹ Her analysis of the reciprocal deictic pairs ‘*now*’ and ‘*then*’ and ‘*here*’ and ‘*there*’ bore out the same sort of conclusions in that, in each case, ‘the adverb which indicates close proximity to the time and the place of the speaker (*here* and *now*) occurs more frequently [...] than those that indicate distance (*then* and *here*)’.⁹⁰ In her study, Page also noted the typicality of nonfinite verb forms on Twitter. The clausal ambiguity nonfinite verb forms create, when combined with temporal adverbs such as ‘*tonight*’, ‘*today*’, and ‘*tomorrow*’, establishes a feeling of perpetual present. The results of Page’s analysis underlined the emphasis on the present moment – the sense of *nowness* – fostered by the Twitter platform, in which ‘Any sense of retrospection is diminished, as each episode is received within the context of an ever-present *now*’.⁹¹ However, this sense of *nowness* was notably absent from the *small fates*.

As a general rule, the *small fates* did not contain temporal adverbs to anchor them in any particular time frame. Of a sample of forty-five *small fates* compiled by Cole, not one contained any of the three most prevalent temporal adverbs noted by Page – ‘*tonight*’, ‘*today*’, and ‘*tomorrow*’ – nor did they contain any temporal adverbs at all.⁹² On one occasion, a day of the week (Monday) is referenced, but only in order to draw out the ironic twist in the tale:

Prince Monday Whiskey was, on Monday, whisked away by persons unknown.⁹³

The *small fates* are separated from the majority of the content published on Twitter on the basis of their temporal ambiguity: they are out of step with its exigent time dynamics. This adds to enigmatic quality of the tweets, where many observers noted that they stood out from the other content in their streams. Unlike more typical tweets that emphasised the platform’s pervasive sense of *nowness*, the *small fates* seemed to exist in a free-floating state of abstractedness, both in terms of their *raison d’être* and their temporality, amid the dynamic ebb and flow of Twitter streams.

⁸⁹ Ruth E. Page, *Stories and Social Media: Identities and Interaction* (Oxford: Routledge, 2012), p.102. Page’s emphasis.

⁹⁰ Page, p.102. Page’s emphasis.

⁹¹ Page, p.103. Page’s emphasis.

⁹² See: Teju Cole, “‘I Don’t Normally Do This Kind of Thing’: 45 Small Fates”, *The New Inquiry*, 2013 <<http://thenewinquiry.com/blogs/dtake/i-dont-normally-do-this-kind-of-thing-45-small-fates/>> [accessed 12 April 2015].

⁹³ Cole, *Small Fates*.

The *small fates* utilised Twitter's focus on what is happening now as a means of defining themselves as other in relation to this. As with the *fait divers*, they gained meaning in relation to the content that they were not as much as what they were, as a form of black noise. The *small fates* were not about what was happening now, as Twitter pointedly prompts: they were an echo, like the bodies rising to the surface; a (re)interpretation of an event that had already transpired; a story composed from the news clippings collected by Cole. This is underlined by the ambiguity of tense evident in the *small fates*, as they often drift between past, present, and future tense. They told stories of things that had happened, framed not only as past events, but also as things that were happening, and would happen. The *small fates'* temporal ambiguity lent them an inevitability, a sense that their outcome, whether fires, arrests, or deaths, had been unavoidable - as their name suggests, they described acts of *fate*. Out of ambiguity, they create a certainty through their linguistic form that is matched by the inevitability of the events they describe. Again, there is a correlation between the content and expression of the *small fates* and their Twitter medium in the way that tweets are published on the platform.

Chapter 4

'Time's a Goon': Non-Metamorphic Retrieval in Jennifer Egan's 'Black Box' and *A Visit from the Goon Squad*

'[W]hat kind of story would need to be told in these very short bursts?'

Jennifer Egan

On the 25th of May 2012, between 20:00 and 21:00 Eastern Time, Jennifer Egan began tweeting a short story, 'Black Box', on the *New Yorker* magazine's Fiction Department's Twitter account (@NYerFiction). She posted one tweet per minute, for one hour, over ten days, until the story was completed, six hundred and six tweets later. The story, a near-future spy-thriller, centres on the mission imperatives of an unnamed narrator engaged in an intelligence gathering operation. To readers of Egan's novel, *A Visit from the Goon Squad* (2010), though, the narrator is recognisable as Lulu, a character first seen as the precocious, nine-year-old daughter of a disgraced PR executive in the employ of a violent dictator and later as a similarly astute twenty-something Marketing student working for a record company executive. By the time she re-appears in 'Black Box', Lulu is thirty-two. Each subsequent encounter and each successive leap forward leaves a substantial spatial and temporal lacuna in Lulu's character arc which is never reconciled. As a character, she therefore symbolises two key aspects of Egan's literary practice within the context of these two texts: transportation and ellipsis.

'Black Box' represented an extension of Egan's literary practice, from the novel form to the Twitter platform. As a work, 'Black Box' was tied to *Goon Squad* by virtue of its central character, Lulu, carried beyond the final pages of the novel in a process of chronological extension and transportation from one work to the next. Here, transportation is given to indicate the transfer of data from one point to another, in reference to the transportation theory of communication. In the transportation process, another temporal and spatial – between the pages of the novel and Twitter, between New York and the Mediterranean – ellipsis, an interruption or emission, opened up in her character arc, between the Lulu last seen in the employ of Bennie Salazar in *Goon Squad* and the Lulu of 'Black Box'. In each instance, Lulu appears in the near future. Each one is also already foreshadowed by the events of the 'Selling the General' chapter of *Goon Squad*, which serves as Lulu's initial introduction. Lulu is the unitary device that connects these two works. Therefore, predicated on the process of transportation and the ellipses it inevitably constructs, 'Black Box' and *Goon Squad* are at once thematically and structurally linked. This constitutes a textual relationship particularly noteworthy in the context of Egan's wider literary

practice, where she has previously stressed her preference for the ‘discomfort and excitement’ that comes from there being little or no overlap between her projects.¹

The working title for what became ‘Black Box’ had initially been ‘Lessons Learned’, referring to the reflective and didactic quality of Lulu’s narrative.² However, this could equally refer to what Egan saw as the opportunities presented by Twitter as a delivery mechanism for literature and for extending the literary lifespan of an existing character from her oeuvre. At the same time, by adopting Twitter as medium for ‘Black Box’, Egan was also able to recontextualise Lulu within the spy-thriller genre. She constructed the narrative around serialisation, in clipped, cryptic dispatches compatible with the concise character counts of Twitter. Hence, as a literary work, ‘Black Box’, although thematically and structurally linked to *Goon Squad* via transportation and ellipsis, formally differed markedly as these aspects of Egan’s work were threaded through Twitter. In short, by working across and through print and digital environments, in the novel format and on Twitter, Egan, like Teju Cole, demonstrates a double-logic of extension and transformation in relation to key aspects of her literary practice. And, as with Cole, the utilising of Twitter as medium also includes the retrieval of a previously prominent but obsolesced print form for digital environs – in this case, the Victorian serial.

In extending her literary practice into a new media environment, however, Egan did not fully account for the underlying operational specificities of the Twitter platform. This chapter, then, examines the effects of Egan’s failure to do so as an unsuccessful example of Diamedia Literary Practice. It follows these two strands: extension and transformation. With regard to extension, it connects *Goon Squad* and ‘Black Box’ by virtue of Egan’s structural use of and interest in transportation and ellipsis, through the character of Lulu. And with regard to transformation, it explores ‘Black Box’ and Twitter through McLuhan’s paradigmatic laws of media and reflects upon *Goon Squad* as a means of emphasising and unpacking transformation as a process, exposing the ways in which the functional characteristics and structural biases of each medium – and how they are negotiated – are an inextricable part of each work-as-literary production.³

Bruce Robbins has argued that prolepsis, flashing-forward, is present in the classical tradition of the third-person narrative, where it ‘intrudes, if often inconspicuously, in order to refer to the character’s death’, or, ‘more interestingly, it refers to a judgment of the character’s

¹ Meredith Maran, “‘Goon Squad’: Jennifer Egan’s Time-Travel Tour de Force”, *Salon*, 2010
<http://www.salon.com/2010/06/13/jennifer_egan_interview_ext2010/> [accessed 14 October 2015].

² Deborah Treisman, ‘This Week in Fiction: Jennifer Egan’, *The New Yorker*, 2012
<<http://www.newyorker.com/books/page-turner/this-week-in-fiction-jennifer-egan>> [accessed 17 October 2015].

³ A note on temporal specificity regarding tense: *A Visit from the Goon Squad* is referred to in the present tense, as is the typical mode of literary studies; ‘Black Box’ is referred to in the past tense, as a completed, time-specific work, underlining the temporal specificities of the Twitter platform.

whole life that could only become available at the moment of death'.⁴ Prolepsis speaks to an impulse to temporal closure, to view a character's life as a whole unit of time that begins with their textual birth and ends with their death. The narrator leaps forward and promises the reader a perspective not available to the character, 'not because the character is obtuse but merely because she or he is living in linear time'.⁵ It suggests a closure that, for Robbins, stands against the apparent endlessness of social relations, as if social relations really could be closed, and as if narrative resolution were in fact real.

In light of its shifting narrative perspectives, including first- and second-person perspectives, and its temporal nonlinearity, *Goon Squad* would appear incompatible with the desire for temporal closure that gives rise to the proleptic impulse. Yet, as Robbins also identifies, there are several examples located within the novel's fourth chapter, 'Safari'. For example, in reference to an African native seen working at the resort where record producer Lou and his two children, Charlie and Rolph, are holidaying:

The warrior smiles at Charlie. He's nineteen, only five years older than she is, and has lived away from his village since he was ten. But he's sung for enough American tourists to recognize that in her world, Charlie is a child. Thirty-five years from now, in 2008, this warrior will be caught in the tribal violence between Kikuyu and the Luo and will die in a fire. He'll have had four wives and sixty-three grandchildren by then, one of whom, a boy named Joe, will inherit his *lalema*: the iron hunting dagger in a leather scabbard now hanging at his side. Joe will go to college at Columbia and study engineering, becoming an expert in visual robotic technology that detects the slightest hint of irregular movement (the legacy of a childhood spent scanning the grass for lions). He'll marry an American named Lulu and remain in New York, where he'll invent a scanning device that becomes standard issue for crowd security. He and Lulu will buy a loft in Tribeca, where his grandfather's hunting dagger will be displayed inside a cube of Plexiglas, directly under a skylight.

'Son', Lou says into Rolph's ear. 'Let's take a walk.'⁶

Although only a minor character restricted to his appearance in this chapter, the proleptic revealing of the African warrior's fate introduces both his grandson, Joe, and Lulu, and further includes the proleptic presaging of their marriage, which is an event beyond the furthest point of the novel's timeline. It does not, however, go as far as to portend their death.

The episode underlines the novel's recursive rejection of temporal closure, where any allusion to closure is accompanied by another opening: the introduction, in this case, of two new characters and an incomplete proleptic prediction of their marriage, or a denial, despite the analeptic return to the narrative present, of the closure provided by the portending of a

⁴ Bruce Robbins, 'Many Years Later: Prolepsis in Deep Time', *The Henry James Review*, 33.3 (2012), pp.194-5.

⁵ Robbins, p.195.

⁶ Jennifer Egan, *A Visit from the Goon Squad* (London: Corsair, 2011), p.64-5.

character's death. This entangling of closures and openings is not addressed by Robbins, although *Goon Squad* is only briefly mentioned in his article, and then only in relation to the 'Safari' chapter as part of a broader discourse on prolepsis, analepsis, and Henry James. But there are also three more examples included in the 'Safari' chapter, relating to Charlie, Mindy (Lou's girlfriend), and Rolph, which Robbins does refer to as proleptic. Yet in each case, closure is once more denied through the presenting of another opening or through the withholding of a character's death. For Charlie and Mindy, the prolepsis presents a specific point in their futures, filling in some, but certainly not all, of the gaps between this point and the narrative present, but once again denying the closure of death. For Rolph, although his death is foretold, it is only as a by-product of another proleptic leap into Charlie's (then, 'Charlene's') future, revealing that she has a son whom she privately calls 'Rolph', which is another opening represented by birth.

The 'Safari' chapter articulates in microcosm the greater themes of the novel itself. *Goon Squad* is not concerned with the impulse to temporal closure. It is concerned with the often messy effects of time in the transportation from one point to another rather than comparative cleanness of prolepsis and, specifically, the temporal and spatial ellipsis it produces. At this point, it is worth considering the purpose of prolepsis in a text that comprehensively rejects linear temporality. As Mark Currie states, prolepsis can only exist relative to an established linear sequence where it is 'meaningful in [a] narratological sense only when there is a clear first narration in relation to which a flashforward can be seen as anachronous'.⁷ In texts where linear sequentiality is absent, Currie suggests that prolepsis is essentially emptied of its narratological meaning and functions principally as a means of making the reader's primary hermeneutic activity reconstructing the text's events in a chronological sequence. But this does not comprehensively explain prolepsis' presence in *Goon Squad* either.

The novel is split into two parts, *A* and *B*, to which the character Scotty Hausmann refers while pithily summarising its central preoccupation: 'I want to know what happened between *A* and *B*.'⁸ Scotty's statement emphasises the temporal anxiety that pervades the novel through the characters' inability to reconcile the past, present, and future. But in this failure, both the reconciliatory attempt and the unreconciled temporal ellipsis itself are imbued with meaning through the characters' frustration. The novel's epigraph refers to Marcel Proust's *À la recherche du temps perdu* [*In Search of Lost Time*] (1871-1922) and underlines its *idée fixe*:

Poets claim that we recapture for a moment the self that we were long ago when we enter some house or garden in which we used to live in our youth. But these are most hazardous pilgrimages, which end as often in disappointment as in

⁷ Mark Currie, *About Time: Narrative, Fiction and the Philosophy of Time* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2007), p.36.

⁸ Egan, *A Visit from the Goon Squad*, p.106.

success. It is in ourselves that we should rather seek to find those fixed places, contemporaneous with different years.⁹

Paul Ricoeur stated that, although all fictional narratives are ‘tales of time’, very few are ‘tales about time’ in which the experience of time is principally what is at stake in the narrative.¹⁰ For Egan, though, time is only principally at stake in the sense of its nonlinearity and irretrievability. As David Cowart notes, ‘Like Proust, too, she thematizes “lost time.”’¹¹ One can, of course, reconstruct the chapters of *Goon Squad* in chronological order, but this does not resolve the ellipses in characters’ narrative arcs, or in the wider novel: ‘Readers may assemble, order, and recapitulate the novel’s component parts, but they discover no mythic, valorizing narrative of the type that structures and conveys meaning.’¹² The function of prolepsis within the novel is to underline the intrinsic incompleteness and impertinence of narratological closure. The point is not perfect reconstruction but the impossibility of perfect reconstruction, for both the characters and reader. Thus, the novel’s concern with transportation and ellipsis is thematic as well as structural. *Goon Squad* depicts the lack of closure of social relations, the unfinished business and discontinuity of life, and represents lives as they are experienced.

‘Resist the impulse to reconstruct what has just happened.’¹³ The tweet does not appear until the second instalment of ‘Black Box’, but it aptly articulates the story’s similar rejection of the impulse to closure. As well as being a field instruction for the ostensibly unnamed narrator, it acts as an imperative reminding the reader that connecting the past with the present moment is not the objective. The tweet appears once the narrator has successfully engineered a moment of intimacy with her target, referred to as her ‘Designated Mate’, in which she deployed a ‘Dissociation Technique’ in order to distance her conscious self from her physical self. The technique involves counting backward from ten: ‘With each number, imagine yourself rising out of your body and moving one step farther away from it.’¹⁴ It is another example of transportation and ellipsis, where a gap is created between the narrator’s mind and body and hence also in the narrative. Instead of the sexual act, the reader is only privy to her abstract, dissociated thoughts, which also serve to underline the impertinence of reconstruction:

White clouds spin and curl.

A blue sky is as depthless as the sea.

⁹ Egan, *A Visit from the Goon Squad*, epigraph.

¹⁰ Paul Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative, Vol. 2*, trans. by Kathleen McLaughlin and David Pellauer (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985), p.101.

¹¹ David Cowart, ‘Thirteen Ways of Looking: Jennifer Egan’s *A Visit from the Goon Squad*’, *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction*, 56 (2015), p.245.

¹² Cowart, p.249.

¹³ Jennifer Egan, ‘Black Box’, 2012.

¹⁴ Egan, ‘Black Box’.

The sound of waves against rocks existed millennia before there were creatures who could hear it.

Spurs and gashes of stone narrate a violence that the earth itself has long forgotten.¹⁵

If the earth has forgotten a history of violence, then so should I, the narrator suggests. But the final tweet also emphasises the inescapability, the inevitability of the oft-unacknowledged traces of this violence, the significance of which will be addressed later in the chapter. Once she has returned to her body, however, immediately following the instruction to resist reconstructing the events from which she dissociated herself, the narrator is reminded to ‘Focus instead on gauging your Designated Mate’s reaction to the new intimacy between you.’¹⁶ Her focus should instead remain on the present moment and the intimacy inherently involved in its immediacy.

‘Black Box’ began *in media res*, pointedly placing the reader in the narrative present: ‘People rarely look the way you expect them to, even when you’ve seen pictures.’¹⁷ But it was the second tweet that most immediately grounded the story in the narrative present: ‘The first thirty seconds in a person’s presence are the most important.’¹⁸ The tweet again functioned both as field instruction for the narrator’s mission and as an imperative to the reader as to the pertinence of the present moment. Nothing was revealed regarding the impetus for the mission, the intended target, or even what year it is, though the advanced nature of the technology embedded in the narrator’s body points to the near future. Whereas *Goon Squad*’s rejection of reconstruction and refers to the nonlinearity and irretrievability of time, it is a reminder to remain in the present. But, as Currie states, the present is inextricable from the past and future since it can always be divided into the parts of it that have been, so are not-now, and the parts of it that have not been, so are not-yet. So long as the present has any duration at all, ‘the very duration of its existence consigns it to non-existence’.¹⁹ ‘Black Box’ embedded the reader in the narrative present, but this present was constructed from elements that have already been or are yet to be. This was symbolised by its transportation of Lulu from *Goon Squad* beyond the timeline of the novel and into ‘Black Box’.

The first connection to Lulu did not appear in the story until the third instalment, when the narrator’s husband was said to be ‘from a culture of tribal allegiance’ and she alluded to a ‘professional life fomenting musical trends’. But it was not until the fourth instalment, where the narration drifts toward an absent father and the reflection that ‘publicists occasionally have

¹⁵ Egan, ‘Black Box’.

¹⁶ Egan, ‘Black Box’.

¹⁷ Egan, ‘Black Box’.

¹⁸ Egan, ‘Black Box’.

¹⁹ Currie, p.8.

affairs with their movie-star clients', that the link to *Goon Squad* became clear enough to identify the narrator as Lulu.²⁰ Not including her passing inclusion in the proleptic vision of the African warrior's fate, Lulu is first introduced in *Goon Squad's* 'Selling the General' chapter as the daughter of Dolly, the chapter's protagonist and shamed PR executive formerly known as 'La Doll'. Dolly describes Lulu as the central tenet of a coterie of influential girls at a prestigious private school. 'Overhearing her daughter on the phone with her friends, Dolly was awed by her authority: she was stern when she needed to be, but also soft. Kind. Lulu was nine.'²¹ Already, at a relatively tender age, Lulu is able to manipulate those around her.

The chapter takes its title from the dictator, General B., Dolly's sole remaining client, whose need of an image overhaul leads him to employ 'La Doll' based on some out-of-date magazine articles written prior to her fall from grace. The job eventually requires Dolly travel to the dictator's (unnamed) sovereignty, accompanying a similarly disgraced former starlet, Kitty Jackson, who Dolly plans to romantically link with the General as part of a plan to leverage some mutually beneficial press coverage. When Lulu is asked if she would like to stay with a friend while Dolly is on the business trip, Lulu asks if she could come, but only after 'performing some mental calculation that might have involved measuring the peer impact of missing school versus being a guest in someone's house'.²² As well as controlling her peers, Lulu makes situational calculations that belie her callow years.

Unfortunately for Lulu, Dolly's plan turns out to have been woefully misguided as it transpires Dolly has grossly underestimated the unpredictable nature of Kitty Jackson. After initially playing the role of seductive beauty to the General's violent beast, Kitty reveals herself as a vehement critic of his regime, using Dolly's contrived photo-op as an opportunity to interrogate the General regarding his supposed war crimes. After asking him whether he buried the bodies or ate them, Kitty is surrounded by soldiers as Lulu screams at Dolly, "Mommy, do something, do something! Make them stop!".²³ It is the last time they see or hear Kitty before being ushered away in private cars to the airport and sent back to New York aboard the General's plane. Upon arriving home, Dolly sits in her office in a state of stasis, panicking, trying to ascertain the best course of action. Lulu appears from her room, hair brushed and dressed in her school uniform, telling Dolly, 'It's time to go.'²⁴ "You're going to school?", Dolly replies, to which Lulu responds, "Of course I'm going to school. What else would I do?".²⁵ After her initial alarm at Kitty's

²⁰ Egan, 'Black Box'.

²¹ Egan, *A Visit from the Goon Squad*, p.154.

²² Egan, *A Visit from the Goon Squad*, p.155-6.

²³ Egan, *A Visit from the Goon Squad*, p.169.

²⁴ Egan, *A Visit from the Goon Squad*, p.170.

²⁵ Egan, *A Visit from the Goon Squad*, p.170.

detainment, Lulu is calm, collected, and able to return to her daily routine in a manner beyond her mother.

Lulu does not reappear until the novel's final chapter, 'Pure Language', by which time the narrative has leapt ahead to an unspecified point in the near future, though judging by Lulu's age, it is somewhere in the 2020s. The chapter focuses on Alex, a character last seen in the novel's opening chapter as Sasha's date, now employed by Bennie Salazar to promote a Scotty Hausmann gig. The final chapter once more functions as a pretence to narrative closure, coming full circle, from *A* to *B*, to Alex, whose perspective was not a part of the opening chapter. But the chapter provides more openings than it does closures or tying up of narrative threads. Lulu is (re)introduced as a graduate marketing student and Bennie's full-time assistant, now in her early twenties, where she was 'a living embodiment of the new "handset employee": paperless, deskless, commuteless, and theoretically omnipresent'.²⁶ She is said by Alex to possess 'an arresting, wide-eyed symmetry' with a 'radiant shine' to her hair.²⁷ Alex admits he 'felt a perverse need to go backward, to understand Lulu, to pinpoint why exactly she disconcerted him', all the way back to her point of conception, both indicating the impulse to closure evident in the attempts to retrieve the irretrievable past that recursively haunts the novel's characters and suggesting that the Lulu seen in 'Pure Language' can be traced back to an earlier time.

Later in the chapter, a nervous Scotty tries to abandon his own gig and both Bennie and Alex fail to pacify him. It is eventually Lulu who calms the situation, walking off arm-in-arm with Scotty and convincing him to play the gig: "Lulu", Alex said to Bennie, and shook his head. "She's going to run the world," Bennie said."²⁸ The chapter provides another glimpse of the precocious nine-year-old who remains calm in stressful situations and is able to manipulate others, linking the final chapter back to the 'Selling the General' chapter where these qualities were foreshadowed. But Alex's desire to reverse engineer Lulu goes unfulfilled, and although Lulu's uncanny abilities to control people and situations can be traced back to her younger self, her transportation from the 'Selling the General' chapter to the 'Pure Language' chapter also creates several ellipses within the text. The reader is reminded of Lulu's link to Bennie via Bennie's ex-wife, Stephanie, who previously worked for 'La Doll'. But the state of Dolly and Lulu's relationship is left vague, as is her choice to study marketing and her being Bennie's assistant. The chapter does provide one tantalising hint of closure in Lulu's arc, however, in tying her back to the proleptic interlude concerning the African warrior of the 'Safari', where Alex is introduced to Lulu's fiancé, Joe, the warrior's grandson, 'who hailed from Kenya and was getting his PhD in

²⁶ Egan, *A Visit from the Goon Squad*, p.325.

²⁷ Egan, *A Visit from the Goon Squad*, p.325.

²⁸ Egan, *A Visit from the Goon Squad*, p.343.

robotics at Columbia', which Alex even refers to this as 'closure achieved'.²⁹ It is the final mention of Lulu in the novel and stands against the pattern of transportation and ellipsis, of giving and withholding, but ultimately rejecting the impulse to closure evident throughout. It is perhaps this point which provided Egan with the spark for what became 'Black Box': the urge, once more, to deny the thematic closure provided by the relatively clean tying up of this narrative thread, and by the structurally implicit (though never explicit) closure brought by the end of the novel and of the physical book itself.

'Black Box' represented the revisiting and reopening Lulu's character arc, taking her beyond the implied closure of the text, from the printed pages of the novel and transporting her into the digital environs of Twitter. In the process, she made another temporal and spatial leap further into the future from the already speculative near future of 'Pure Language', where the Lulu of 'Black Box' was thirty-two, putting the year somewhere in the 2030s. The story became a part *C* for Lulu, in which she now appeared in the Mediterranean, embroiled in espionage. The reader was not privy to the reasons for Lulu's involvement in the mission, whether it was on a voluntary basis or an act of conscription, as this was rendered elliptical by the process of transportation from novel to Twitter. However, as the narrative slowly unfolded, the traits of the younger Lulu of 'Selling the General' are seen once again as she manipulated her target, or 'Designated Mate', posing as an ingénue as a tool for seduction. Every movement and response was an act of projection designed to elicit a specific response: 'Eagerness and pliability can be expressed even in the way you climb from the sea onto chalky yellow rocks [...] Giggling is sometimes better than answering.'³⁰ But it is not only her actions that tide the Lulu of 'Black Box' to the Lulu of *Goon Squad*.

Her mission and her role bore many similarities to her experiences in the 'Selling the General' chapter: the exotic location, symbolised in *Goon Squad* by the star fruit; the 'violent and ruthless' male figure of power; the 'constant danger'; the 'beauty' as whom Lulu posed and the need to seduce the violent male power figure, mirroring Kitty Jackson's purported role in *Goon Squad*. At no point, either in the 'Pure Language' chapter of *Goon Squad* or in 'Black Box' is/was the subject of the potential lasting effects of a nine-year-old Lulu having seen Kitty Jackson dragged away by armed men at the hands of a violent dictator directly broached. But perhaps 'Black Box's allusion to the abiding 'Spurs and gashes of stone' that narrate the violence of the past served to remind the reader of the irreducibility of previous events. Otherwise, this is another elliptical element of Lulu's character arc. The parallels between her experiences in the 'Selling the General' chapter and those of 'Black Box', however, are too numerous to consign to coincidence.

²⁹ Egan, *A Visit from the Goon Squad*, p.346.

³⁰ Egan, 'Black Box'.

It is clear that Lulu represents a link between *Goon Squad* and 'Black Box'. She is not simply a character recycled and repurposed to reduce composition time, but a unifying presence germane to both texts. Firstly, and in relation to *Goon Squad*, Lulu's continued transportational arc underlines the novel's rejection of the impulse to closure. The novel, any novel, even once complete, is never truly closed. But, in *Goon Squad*, the lack of closure what is principally at stake in the novel: it is a novel about about time, in Currie's (and by extension Ricoeur's) terms and, more pointedly, about about the irretrievability of time, where its very irretrievability is imbued with meaning in the attempt to find meaning. Lulu's narrative and its ellipses, its interruptions and omissions, created by her transportation across three distinct decades to three particular points in her life, are imbued with meaning in the reader's desire, like Alex, to make connections between each 'Lulu' and especially in their inability to fully reverse engineer or perfectly reconstruct her backstory. Secondly, and in relation to 'Black Box', Lulu – or, more precisely, the slow reveal that the unnamed narrator was indeed Lulu – effectively operated as plot point to be uncovered by readers of *Goon Squad*, at which moment the narrative of 'Black Box' was extended and connected back to the novel, albeit somewhat elliptically.

'Black Box' was also an opportunity for Egan to transform both Lulu and her interest in transportation and ellipsis in relation to the digital environment of Twitter. Ultimately, however, although the specific affordances of the platform were central to Egan's decision to compose 'Black Box' in the manner that she did, with the idea of using the platform as a delivery mechanism pre-dating the story itself, Twitter's functional characteristics and structural biases both enabled and undermined 'Black Box' in such a manner as to simultaneously draw attention to the specificities of the print form as utilised in *Goon Squad*.

'So, the question was', Egan asked, 'what kind of story would need to be told in these very short bursts?'.³¹ Her use of the term, "short bursts", recalls founder Jack Dorsey's explanation for the choice of "Twitter" as the platform's name, and underscores once again its enhancing of brevity and concision. 'Black Box' was compatibly constructed from the terse dispatches of an undercover Lulu, a mix of the mission imperatives/directives that constitute her 'Field Instructions', the events she observes and records as part of her mission file, her reflections on her training, her circumstances at any given moment, and personal thoughts of her family. For example:

Your goal is to become part of his atmosphere: a source of comfort and ease.

A man disabled by an elbow blow will have little reaction to infant cries.

If you are within earshot of his conversation, record it.

³¹ Treisman.

Your unchildishness is something your husband has always loved in you.³²

The “short” aspect of Egan’s (and Dorsey’s) description is relatively straightforward in that it clearly expresses brevity. But the “burst” aspect is somewhat more complex, denoting a suddenness of expression, based on how the platform cultivates an exigent sense of time, enabling and encouraging instant updates and real-time publishing: ‘Twitter is all about updating and responding instantaneously to what is happening’.³³

Twitter’s exigent sense of time, its nowness, served to enhance the main tropes of the spy-thriller genre within which Lulu was recontextualised as a part of ‘Black Box’. The spy-thriller form stimulates suspense, tension, utilises fast pacing, and explores spy-based themes such as surveillance. The spy-thriller genre allowed ‘Black Box’ to exploit its primary conventions in, for example: assuming the protagonist’s perspective; the threat of death as part of the protagonist’s journey; and their need to overcome challenges and outwit an antagonist. The story was narrated in the present tense from Lulu’s perspective, unlike in *Goon Squad* where she is only seen from other characters’ perspectives, in the second person voice, with her mission imperatives relayed in a future progressive tense that drives the story forward. The unusual deployment of the second person voice had the effect of addressing both Lulu and the reader simultaneously, closely aligning the reader with Lulu’s perspective and blurring the boundaries between protagonist and reader. This is often combined with anaphoric repetition for emphasis:

You will be tempted to pull the cord when he surrounds you with arms whose bulky strength reminds you, fleetingly, of your husband’s.

You will be tempted to pull it when you feel him start to move against you from below.

You will be tempted to pull it when his smell envelops you: metallic, like a warm hand clutching pennies.³⁴

Synchronously addressing the reader and protagonist generates the sense of suspense critical to the spy-thriller. The use of ‘will’ in the imperative also urges the reader to continue reading in order to connect the present moment with an intangible and intriguing point in the near future, providing the narrative drive necessary to generate suspense. And Twitter’s emphasis on the present moment, evinced by its enabling of the real-time publishing, also serves to amplify the story’s narrative suspense. The reader tracked Lulu’s mission, overcoming challenges and eluding capture or mortal danger as she did, following the narrative as it unfolded, one tweet at a time.

³² Egan, ‘Black Box’.

³³ Thomas, ‘140 Characters in Search of a Story: Twitterfiction as an Emerging Narrative Form’, p.98.

³⁴ Egan, ‘Black Box’.

The dispatches appeared as if relaying present events: the dispatches seemed to reflect something that was happening now, in some exotic location, and ‘you’, the reader, were receiving these messages from Lulu’s mission log in real-time. But this was not the manner in which ‘Black Box’ materialised within the platform’s milieu. Despite representing outward compatibility with the brevity and newness of Twitter, particularly through its exploiting of the spy-thriller genre, ‘Black Box’ betrayed its incompatibility in its publication cycle in when and how often its tweets appeared. Through its innate incompatibility with the functional characteristics, structural biases, and operational norms of the Twitter platform and, more specifically, in the way that ‘Black Box’ retrieved but was ultimately unable to reconcile the Victorian print serial format with its new digital media environment, it exposed its own discordant nature.

As with the construction of the story in short bursts, the retrieval of the Victorian serial was part of Egan’s composition process. She was ‘interested in the way that some nineteenth-century fiction was constructed around its serialization’ and built ‘Black Box’s spy-thriller story around serial publication for the Twitter platform.³⁵ But, in retrieving the Victorian serial for Twitter’s digital environs, ‘Black Box’ failed to fully acknowledge the process of transformation McLuhan stated was an immutable part of retrieval. It is not simply a case of bringing something back as it was. Rather, ‘Some translation or metamorphosis is necessary to place it into relation to the new ground.’³⁶ In order to be compatible with its new ground (the medium, Twitter, in comparison to its old ground, the print periodical) the figure (the content, the serial) must be transformed in relation to the functional characteristics and structural biases of the new ground.

Originally coming to prominence in the Victorian era with the rise of periodical publishing, the serial became the dominant literary mode of its period. Jennifer Hayward provides a relatively straightforward definition of the serial as ‘an ongoing narrative released in successive parts’.³⁷ Linda K. Hughes and Michael Lund similarly refer to the serial as ‘a continuing story over an extended time with enforced interruptions’.³⁸ Rob Allen and Thijs van den Berg state that serials were ‘something devoured, in frequent doses’ where ‘Each installment created the expectation for the next, each narrative episode created the demand for its successor’.³⁹ The serial then, it can be extrapolated, has several key characteristics. It requires an ongoing or continuous narrative over an extended period of time. This narrative should be split and published in

³⁵ Egan, ‘Black Box’.

³⁶ Marshall McLuhan and Eric McLuhan, *The Laws of Media: The New Science* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1988), p.101.

³⁷ Jennifer Hayward, *Consuming Pleasures: Active Audiences and Serial Fictions from Dickens to Soap Opera* (Kentucky: University of Kentucky Press, 1997), p.3.

³⁸ Linda K. Hughes and Michael Lund, *The Victorian Serial* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1991), p.2.

³⁹ Rob Allen and Thijs van den Berg, ‘Introduction’, in *Serialization in Popular Culture*, ed. by Rob Allen and Thijs van den Berg (New York: Routledge, 2014), p.3.

successive parts or instalments. Each instalment should appear regularly, each one creating a demand, through its continuous narrative, for the next instalment. And, finally, there should be interruptions between each instalment.

'Black Box' fulfilled these key characteristics, through its ongoing narrative following Lulu's mission, its spy-thriller basis aiding in the cultivation of suspense and narrative tension to whet the appetite for the next instalment, and its separation into instalments of sixty (or so) tweets published at one-hour intervals each day over ten days, with a twenty-three-hour gap interruption between each instalment. It is only when the more complex elements of the Victorian serial – which involve grounding the serial in audience relations and the specific temporality and paradoxical double-logic of linearity and non-linearity, of continuation and interruption, located in the greater context of nineteenth century's burgeoning modernity and print culture – that 'Black Box's incompatibilities with Twitter became apparent.

Expanding her more straightforward definition of the serial, Hayward suggests that the form was perhaps best defined by its most famous practitioner, Charles Dickens, when he assured his readers 'that "we shall keep perpetually going on beginning again, regularly"'.⁴⁰ Hayward believes Dickens' statement belies the complex temporal involutions and audience-author relations of the serial text. The use of 'we', rather than I, reflects the intimate relation between audience and author, as well as blurring the boundaries between the reader and the text, while 'keep perpetually going on and beginning again' stresses the time- and loss-defying temporality of the serial, its boundlessness and eternal rebirth. And lastly the use of 'regularly' suggests a reassuringly prompt period of time between, and the numerousness of instalments.

Mark W. Turner steps back from the form itself to locate the serial as innate to 'emerging modernity itself, in which the fleeting and ephemeral become integral to the fabric of everyday life, with its new forms of labour and leisure, with its encounters with fragments of time'.⁴¹ He continues:

Even if it is not our intention, we often tend to discuss serials borrowing a term inherited from the nineteenth century itself, and that is "progress". One result of the inclination toward linearity and the forward-moving trajectory of seriality is that we implicitly understand serials as ultimately rational. Titles, date stampings, methods of binding – all of these help give the impression that a serial is an organized part of print culture. When we "read" serials, we seek to make sense of them, to learn their codes, to interpret them in coherent ways, and there is nothing so surprising in that. We "read" for sense, not for nonsense. We focus on textual unity, even as we talk about fragmented form. However, the serial can as easily be thought of as *discontinuous* or *interruptive* as it can continuous, as *irregular* as

⁴⁰ Hayward, p.2.

⁴¹ Mark W. Turner, 'The Unruliness of Serials in the Nineteenth Century (and in the Digital Age)', in *Serialization in Popular Culture*, ed. by Rob Allen and Thijs van den Berg (New York: Routledge, 2014), p17.

regular. This is not to denigrate the serial as a form or object of study. On the contrary, I believe we ought to celebrate the serial's unruliness and explore further its stuttering, uncertain, nonlinear, and often unpredictable qualities.⁴²

The Victorian serial, as Turner suggests, was temporally tied to the increasingly industrial context of the nineteenth century. Rob Allen refers to the "rhythm of modernity" that structured and was simultaneously structured by serial fiction.⁴³ Serial fiction was published in periodicals that typically reflected weekly, monthly, and quarterly cycles. As a result, the periodical press played a part in constructing the temporality of Victorian life around these key cycles and intervals, as well as organising readers' sense of media time to suit the structural biases of the periodical press itself. Hence both the cycle of publication and the gaps between each publication are meaningful and not simply arbitrary. As Turner suggests:

In the breaks in the narratives of periodicals and in the lapses in time – over a day, over a week, over a month – is where meaning resides. That pause is when the interaction and communication occurs, and that period of waiting and reading is the link between the past and the future.⁴⁴

The meaning that resides in the pauses – of a day, week, or month – is intrinsically tied to the Victorian era's industrial organisation of time, reflecting the contemporary social milieu of the nineteenth century, and to the Victorian print culture of the periodical press. Turner has referred to this as "periodical time". Any discussion of temporality in relation to serial fiction must therefore account for the time of the technological and cultural context in which the work is grounded, as well as the narrative time of the work itself.

In discussing fictional narrative temporality, Currie identifies three 'time loci' that structure the communication: the time locus of the narrated, the time locus of the narrator, and the time locus of the reader.⁴⁵ He states that this framework of temporalities has become the basis of much of the narratological study of fiction. Currie's analysis lacks the technocultural dimension, indicated by Turner. When addressing narrative fiction threaded through networked digital platforms such as Twitter, where the agency of both author and reader becomes entangled with the structural biases and functional characteristics of these digital environments, a fourth category must be added to Currie's three time loci: the time locus of the digital. Within digital environments, literary narratives come to fruition within the tension created by all four of these time loci.

⁴² Turner, p.20. Turner's emphasis.

⁴³ Rob Allen, "Pause You Who Read This" Disruption and the Victorian Serial Novel", in *Serialization in Popular Culture*, ed. by Rob Allen and Thijs van den Berg (New York: Routledge, 2014), p.44.

⁴⁴ Mark W. Turner, 'Periodical Time in the Nineteenth Century', *Media History*, 8 (2002), p.194.

⁴⁵ Currie, p.31.

With regard to 'Black Box', the time locus of the narrated was bifurcated into two temporal measures: the single day in which the story takes place; and the actual publishing time of the story, of one hour a day across ten days, and the two hundred and forty hours (including the twenty-three-hour pauses) that it eventually spanned. The former measure of narrated time is closely aligned to the time locus of the narrator, Lulu, while the latter measure is more closely aligned to the time locus of the reader, although this depended on their having followed the story "live" on the platform, as it was tweeted. There was also the possibility that they picked up the story partially or fully completed on the *New Yorker* magazine's Fiction Department's Twitter account timeline. The fourth temporality, the time locus of the digital, complicates all three narrative time loci. It refers to Twitter's focus on 'What's happening?' now – its nowness – and exigent time dynamics. When the serial form is deployed within digital environs, the author's sphere of agency is bound up with the structural biases and functional characteristics of the specific digital environment in which the serial has been deployed.

This can once more be framed by McLuhan's concept of figure and ground. The first three time loci – the time of the narrated, the time of the narrator, and the time of the reader – are part of the figure, the content and serial, while the time of the digital is part of the ground, Twitter. Therefore, a process of transformation must take place among the first three time loci when they are placed in relation to the time of the digital. The resulting tension created between these four temporalities, and especially between the time of the digital and the three narrative time loci, can either be leveraged in productive or unproductive ways. In retrieving the Victorian serial for the new digital environment of Twitter and locating the narrated time, narratorial time, and readerly time in relation to digital time, 'Black Box' ultimately failed to leverage this tension for productive purposes.

Readers of 'Black Box' were routinely left to wait twenty-three hours between instalments. The story takes place during a single day, opening in the sunlight of a rocky shoreline and ending in the darkness of a boat on the water. These pauses signified nothing in terms of the story and were as long (if not longer) than the time of the story itself. Neither were the final tweets of each instalment selected to function as a cliff-hanger, to leverage the twenty-three-hour pause between instalments for the tense suspension of desire. The first instalment ended between, 'With each number, imagine yourself rising out of your body and moving one step farther away from it', and, 'By eight, you should be hovering just outside your skin'; the second between, 'You need not identify or comprehend the language your subject is using', and, 'Your job is proximity; if you are near your Designated Mate, recording his private speech, you are succeeding'; while the third ended between, "'Very black" is somewhat less gentle, especially when accompanied by a

pointed stare', and, 'House-party hosts are universally eager to make guests eat'.⁴⁶ None of the junctures between instalments revealed a crisis point that cultivated suspense or the desire to devour the next instalment. As with the pauses, the delineation of instalments was made arbitrary by 'Black Box's temporal disjuncture with the Twitter platform, and hence also through the temporal disjuncture between the narrative time (of the narrated, narrator, and reader), and the time of the digital.

'Black Box' retrieved the Victorian serial for the contemporary social milieu of the twenty-first century, as symbolised by Twitter, but brought with it the now-anachronistic cyclical pauses of the periodical press. By publishing one tweet per minute, for one hour, over ten days, between 20:00 and 21:00 Eastern Time, 'Black Box' constructed a sense of serial time incompatible with Twitter's digital time: its amplifying of the present moment through its focus on 'What's happening' now. In not being transformed to assimilate Twitter's temporality and more broadly the temporality constructed by digitally networked environments, 'Black Box's pauses were rendered meaningless.

Had 'Black Box' retrieved the serial and brought it up to date for the new digital media environment of Twitter, it would have also obsolesced periodical serial publication cycles. The serial refers to the seriality of publication, not the specific regularity. The regularity of publication is tied to the medium and the context, the ground, of the serial itself, hence the name, "periodical", which infers a periodic gap in publication. In other words, it is the medium and its context that grounds the weekly, monthly, or quarterly gap in publication. Grounded in Twitter, the serial should also be transformed in relation to the norms of its new environment. For Twitter this means short pauses in publication, where the focus is always on updating and what is happening now. The elements of suspense and tension that 'Black Box' gleaned from its serial publication and spy-thriller genre similarly needed to be located within Twitter's amplified nowness, taking advantage of its enabling and encouraging of real-time publishing. The pauses and gaps in publication – and lack thereof – would then have taken on symbolic meaning in what they represented as a part of Lulu's narrative, both helping foster the tension and suspense that is central to the spy-thriller genre, and turning the pauses and gaps into functional ellipses, as per *Goon Squad*, where they were imbued with resonant meaning.

As a story cycle, *Goon Squad* is constructed out of thirteen discrete-yet-connected chapters, each with its own particular narrative perspective and central character, spanning three continents and four decades, from the late seventies to an indefinite point in the not-too-distant future. The text's timeline is expressly nonlinear, jumping from one narrative perspective to the next, both forwards and backwards in time. As with Lulu, this produces a spatial and temporal

⁴⁶ Egan, 'Black Box'.

disjuncture and leaves unresolved narrative gaps between chapters. Structural unity is achieved through the recurrence of certain characters at certain points in their lives – though often from different narrative perspectives – and the thematic thread of the music industry that ties together many of the characters. But a sense of unity is also paradoxically attained through the text's temporal disjuncture, which is both its organising principle and main thematic preoccupation: the “goon” to which its title refers is explicitly stated, on several occasions and by several characters, to represent the tyrannical effects of time. Through its thematic focus on the ostensibly despotic nature of time, the text's structural narrative gaps also become thematic and take on symbolic meaning in omission: they become functional ellipses.

In fact, such is the extent of the ellipses, temporal dislocation, and shifting perspectives in *Goon Squad*, Egan has argued that she does not consider the text a novel at all as it does not fit with archetypal parameters of the genre. But nor does she argue it is a collection of short stories, even if some chapters were previously published as stand-alone pieces through various media outlets.⁴⁷ Yet it seems clear that its overlapping characters and thematic unity, as well as the consistency of its structural inconsistency, constitute a singular work. Taken with its print publication, its relatively typical length and chapter-based structure, it is more a novel than any other literary form. This is a position consolidated by the majority of critics.⁴⁸

The goon of time, the text's structural disorganisation of time, is the axis around which the novel rotates, moving from one character's perspective to another. But the gaps created by this nonlinear temporal disjuncture are rendered meaningful, and elliptical, both in the omission these represent in the characters' narrative arcs and in the characters' recursive attempts to find meaning in the gaps themselves. Both the novel's Proustian epigraph and Scotty Hausmann's succinct *A to B* summation state this plainly and, at some point, each of the text's characters attempts to fathom the gulf between who they have become and who they once were; or, rather, who they once thought they were and who they once thought they would be. There is the now forty-three-year-old Jocelyn, once a teenage friend of The Flaming Dildos band members Scotty and Bennie and girlfriend of significantly older record producer, Lou, who visits a now seriously ill Lou in hospital. As she surveys Lou in his hospital bed, poolside at his empty house, she says, ‘So this is it – what cost me all that time’, lamenting how ‘Everything went past without [her]’.⁴⁹ There is Jules, the disgraced once-promising journalist imprisoned for attacking Kitty Jackson, now freed from jail, stating “‘I go away for a few years and the whole fucking world is upside down [...] Buildings are missing. You get strip-searched every time you go to someone's office. Everybody sounds stoned, because they're emailing people the whole time they're talking to

⁴⁷ Maran.

⁴⁸ See, for example: Robbins, 2012; Kirby, 2013; and Cowart, 2015.

⁴⁹ Egan, *A Visit from the Goon Squad*, p.91; p.90.

you”, to which his sister, Stephanie, similarly responds, “I don’t get what happened to you”.⁵⁰ And there is Bosco, the once rakish, manic pop-icon and lead singer of The Conduits, now a morbidly obese shut-in with a failed hip replacement and a new album called ‘A to B’, saying “And that’s the question I want to hit straight on: how did I go from being a rock star to being a fat fuck no one cares about?”.⁵¹ As the novel moves from perspective to perspective, creating omissions and leaving the characters’ searches for meaning in these gaps mostly unresolved, ‘the reader is left to dwell on the ellipsis of the text’.⁵²

Anne Toner suggests that, speaking explicitly of ellipsis marks, ellipses are an ‘acknowledgement of the interactive dynamic of communicative acts’.⁵³ As such, the interpretative act is explicitly handed over to the reader who is left to make sense of the omission. She argues that ellipses are ‘strongly associative with the affective’.⁵⁴ They denote characters’ interiority, complexity, and narrative irresolution; ‘The novel in particular has aspired through its history to reach closer to realizations of human interiority, including its incoherencies and blanks.’⁵⁵ This is how *Goon Squad*’s structural and thematic narrative gaps operate as functional ellipses. They paradoxically express the inexpressible: they express the irreconcilable nature of their narrative arcs over time; they express the characters’ attempts and ultimate inability to find meaning in lost time. As Toner states, they operate as a means of disambiguation that make lapses in connection explicit for the reader, but in doing so, they can also seem to flirt with the vacuous. This is the balance that must be struck in the tension between a text’s applicable time loci and in the relationship between the author, reader, and the medium of publication, and in how ellipses are utilised within literary works. All of the above must be reconciled and/or leveraged productively in order for ellipses to be meaningful and not lapse into vacuity. This, once more, underlines the process of transformation that McLuhan argues must take place in the locating of a figure against a new ground.

With regard to *Goon Squad*, perhaps the most memorable and sonorous exploration of ellipses in the text is the ‘Great Rock and Roll Pauses’ chapter. Its narrative represents the PowerPoint slide diary of Sasha’s daughter, Allison, with each page of the chapter containing a single slide. It documents the difficult relationship between Allison’s father, Drew, and her younger brother, Lincoln. In using slides as a narrative tool, a mix of pictorial elements and text

⁵⁰ Egan, *A Visit from the Goon Squad*, p.130; p.131.

⁵¹ Egan, *A Visit from the Goon Squad*, p.134.

⁵² Danica van de Velde, “‘Every Song Ends’”: Musical Pauses, Gendered Nostalgia, and Loss in Jennifer Egan’s *A Visit From the Goon Squad*, in *Write in Tune: Contemporary Music in Fiction*, ed. by Erich Hertz and Jeffrey Roessner (London: Bloomsbury, 2014), p.133.

⁵³ Anne Toner, *Ellipsis in English Literature: Signs of Omission* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), p.20.

⁵⁴ Toner, p.13.

⁵⁵ Toner, p.13.

rather than purely text, the chapter disorganises the standard left-to-right, top-to-bottom directional bias of the printed page. Even outside of its more typical digital deployment and in print form, the entire slide appears at once and all its content is initially seen by the reader simultaneously before they orient themselves within the slide's configuration. The slides are also printed horizontally on each page, forcing the reader to physically reconfigure the book itself, flipping it ninety degrees clockwise. Although this landscape orientation of the slides may have been a decision informed by the desire for the most straightforward physical publication process possible, it also has the effect of underlining the difficulty of Drew and Lincoln's relationship, as the reader is forced to reorient awkwardly and hold the book in a way that would in most situations be thought of as irregular. In a visual sense, the slides are also able to represent pauses, ellipses, more effectively than the more traditional narrative form of the printed word. The slides include more blank spaces than a page of text and, on more than one occasion, are left completely blank to illustrate a pause or silence. An empty slide frame reads as a pause, silence, or omission, while a blank page of a novel, absent of text, would more likely be labelled a suspected publishing error.

The subject of many of the slides is Lincoln's obsessions with pauses in rock 'n' roll songs, as the novel's chapter title suggests. Lincoln collects songs that contain pauses, not including those at the start or the end of the track. He enthuses about each one he finds to both his sister and mother, but his father has trouble understanding the importance of the pauses and what they mean to Lincoln. Frustrated and unable to coax Lincoln into explaining why the pauses matter so much, Drew finally loses his temper and shouts at him. Lincoln starts to cry, prompting a furious Sasha to explain to Drew: "The pause makes you think the song will end. And then the song isn't really over, so you're relieved. But then the song *does* actually end, because every song ends, obviously, and THAT. TIME. THE. END. IS. FOR. REAL."⁵⁶ Again, the pauses are meaningful in both thematic and structural ways in that they are visually represented on the page, and they indicate the space between Drew and Lincoln in their inability to communicate effectively with each other.

Returning to 'Black Box', Sasha's statement about the meaning of the pauses also reveals another enhancement quality of Twitter and the incompatibility of the serial form retrieved by Egan in relation to the platform. As McLuhan described acoustic space, symbolic of the space of electronic environments: it is 'spherical, discontinuous, non-homogenous, resonant, and dynamic'.⁵⁷ By retrieving the serial still mapped to the homogenous publishing cycles of the periodical press, in its publication across ten days during specific time windows, Egan already provided readers with the endpoint of 'Black Box'. This prevented the story from taking advantage of Twitter's enhancement of real-time publishing. Twitter, unlike most narrative

⁵⁶ Egan, *A Visit from the Goon Squad*, p.289. Egan's emphasis.

⁵⁷ McLuhan and McLuhan, p.33.

fiction in which ‘the future lies there to the right, awaiting its actualisation by the reading’, allows an author to write in response to reader reactions and compose on-the-fly or, at the very least, feign an unwritten future.⁵⁸ It is this characteristic of electronic environments that McLuhan suggests has roots in oral culture, where a story always appears as if being composed as it is told. In this sense, the telling of a story on Twitter – as in the oral telling – presents an author with the possibility of representing a type of time similar to lived experience as opposed to ‘a block view of time which is never offered to us in lived experience’.⁵⁹ Twitter obsolesces this block view of time.

Goon Squad had already shown that the print form could be manipulated, through the use of functional ellipses, to portray the lack of closure and broken connections of social relations indicative of lived experience. The novel rejects the block view of time implied by the cover of the physical book by leveraging all narrative time loci – the time locus of the narrated, the time locus of the narrator, and the time locus of the reader – productively in its rendering all three difficult to comprehensively define. The novel spans at least four decades of narrated time, none of which are directly dated, it eschews a single narrator, or even single narratorial perspective, throughout the novel, and the reader’s role, rather than reconstruction, is to dwell on the impossibility of reconstruction. Thus, the time of the narrated, the narrator, and the reader are reconciled in their collective irreconcilability, leveraged productively to foster and emphasise the novel’s central preoccupation with time.

In ‘Black Box’, the rhythmic publishing of one tweet per minute, while fitting broadly within the Twitter’s amplified sense of nowness if the twenty-three-hour gaps between instalments are ignored, held no symbolic value, and neither did the arbitrary grouping of tweets in the instalments. Had the rhythm of publishing been less homogeneous and more dynamic, based on an individual tweet as the unit of instalment and tied to the narrative time loci – covering the same block of time as the story itself; speeding up during the getaway scene, slowing down while Lulu is sitting reading on the beach, stopping altogether during her sleep; and bringing the reader into closer temporal relation to Lulu – the story would have taken advantage of the affordances of the platform and reconciled the narrative time with the time of the digital. The ellipses between every tweet would then have represented a symbolic part of the narrative, embedded within the exigent time dynamics of the platform itself, creating the type of tension and suspense punctured by arbitrary gaps between instalments. Without setting a specific end date, the serial could also be extended indefinitely, as long as its readership maintained its desire for further instalments, representing Lulu’s lived experience through her mission. And, like

⁵⁸ Currie, p.18.

⁵⁹ Currie, p.18.

Lincoln, without a set end in sight, a reader would spend each long(er) pause wondering if this time the end was for real.

Referring to the dramatic works of Samuel Beckett, Toner argues that the ellipsis mark offers the potential for extremely precise temporal measures, where the playwright often instructed his actors to count the number of dots within each ellipsis as beats in time. For Beckett, the ellipsis was temporally performative. Pauses could be longer or shorter, malleable dependent on what they signified. It is this performative element that was absent from the pauses between tweets and instalments in 'Black Box'. Within Twitter, and specifically in relation to its sense ofnowness, encouraging real-time publishing, constant connection, and regular updating, the pause can become a powerful and evocative narrative tool through its withholding of communication when a narrative future (even when undefined) is assumed. The rhythm of publication, as a temporal narrative measure, needs to be reconciled and/or leveraged productively with the time of the digital.

In continuing her discussion of Beckett's dramatic works, Toner refers particularly to his monologue, *Not I* (1972). She states that, "The ellipsis often stands in the place of the first person in *Not I* and seems a deliberate negation of the self. The ellipsis is also the textual manifestation of the self obscured by darkness in performance."⁶⁰ This negation of self is already evident in *Goon Squad*, where the novel's ellipses obscure parts of a character's narrative arc from both characters and readers alike. The temporal and spatial ellipsis between the Lulu of *Goon Squad* and 'Black Box' is functional in the same sense as the ellipses of *Goon Squad* in that the interpretative act is explicitly passed on to the reader in their attempt to make sense of the narrator, her mission, and her motivations. For the reader, this process involved uncovering the narrator's identity-as-Lulu and connecting her to the previous instances of 'Lulu' seen in *Goon Squad*, dwelling on the elliptical gaps in her narrative arc and attempting to make sense of them. However, as Kristin Veel states, the story itself was not driven forward by the search for meaning, either in relation to Lulu as a character, her mission, or motivations, but rather how she reacted to the situational stimuli she encounters: 'In this sense, it is Lulu herself who is the 'Black Box' function and the vehicle for our narrative drive'.⁶¹

Veel, referring to Alexander Galloway and Bruno Latour, argues that the story's title referred to Lulu herself. Lulu was the "'Black Box'" inasmuch as the reader could see the inputs (situational stimuli) and outputs (Lulu's [re]actions) but not the interior workings (her character, mission, and motivations). Lulu herself, like the self in *Not I*, was elliptically obscured by the by the surveillance technologies that have been implanted throughout her body. Her function as a

⁶⁰ Toner, p.167.

⁶¹ Kristin Veel, 'Nothing to Hide and Nothing to See: The Conditions of Narrative and Privacy in Jennifer Egan's 'Black Box'', *Nordisk Tidsskrift for Informationsvidenskab og Kulturformidling*, 3 (2014), p.22.

surveillance device was her defining characteristic. But although these technological implants enhanced her function as a surveillance device, they were poorly integrated into Lulu's body and caused difficulties for her in her mission.

When using the camera implanted in her left eye, she needed to 'cover [her] non-camera eye to shield it from temporary blindness occasioned by the flash'.⁶² The audio recording device in her right ear canal emitted 'a faint whine as recording begins', which 'In extreme quiet, or to a person whose head is adjacent to yours [...] may be audible'.⁶³ The 'Data Surge' – a technique utilised to capture the content of a target's handset via a universal port embedded between the fourth and pinkie toes on her right foot – 'must be deployed with extreme caution' as 'it may prompt unconsciousness or short-term memory loss' and leave 'a ringing in [her] ears that may obscure the sound of another person's arrival'.⁶⁴ Only the 'Primal Roar', 'the human equivalent of an explosion, a sound that combines screaming, shrieking, and howling' that transformed 'a beauty into a monster', actually aided Lulu in her mission, allowing her to evade capture. The lack of integration between Lulu and the embedded surveillance technologies could equally describe 'Black Box's lack of compatibility with the Twitter platform.

Egan's interest in transportation and ellipsis across both *Goon Squad* and 'Black Box' materialises in Lulu. Through her transportation from the pages of the novel to Twitter's digital environs, she represents the rejection of closure of the novel and the chronological extension of *Goon Squad's* narrative world into 'Black Box'. Simultaneously, her transportation across three distinct decades to three particular points in her life represents and inevitably brings into being a set of ellipses in Lulu's character arc. The two texts are structurally and thematically linked via these two aspects of Egan's work, and their extension from *Goon Squad* to 'Black Box'. However, as McLuhan's tetradic laws of media articulate, when something is retrieved from obsolescence, it must be brought up to date and a process of transformation must take place in order for the content to be compatible with the newer environment.

Lulu, transformed for the Twitter environment, became a technologically enhanced recording device and spy, embroiled in a thrilling mission. Lulu's repositioning within the spy-thriller genre and her repurposing as a surveillance device was outwardly compatible with the Twitter platform's enhancing of exigent time relations in its sense ofnowness and its potential to reverse into data tracking and surveillance. Similarly, 'Black Box's retrieval of the serial form and Egan's professed desire to tell a narrative story in short bursts was outwardly compatible with Twitter's amplifying of brevity in its character restrictions. Yet, it is in its retrieval of the serial form still tied to the Victorian era's industrial organisation of time, which reflected the

⁶² Egan, 'Black Box'.

⁶³ Egan, 'Black Box'.

⁶⁴ Egan, 'Black Box'.

contemporary social milieu of the nineteenth century, it brought with it the now-anachronistic cyclical pauses of the periodical press (periodical time) which were incompatible with the digital time of Twitter, which in turn reflected the contemporary social milieu of the twenty-first century. As such, 'Black Box' was unable to reconcile its narrative temporalities (the time of the narrated, narrator, and reader) with the time of the digital, symbolised by Twitter's exigent time relations which enhanced and encouraged real-time publication and composition, or leverage the tensions between these narrative time loci productively. Had 'Black Box' transfigured the serial form for Twitter's digital environs, it would have obsolesced the cyclical pauses of periodical time in favour of the nowness and real-time nature of the digital, as well as obsolescing a block view of time.

Instead, the gaps and omissions between tweets and instalments in 'Black Box' are rendered meaningless and vacuous through their fundamentally arbitrary nature and in the temporal discordance between the narrative and digital temporalities. In the case of 'Black Box', this temporal discordance was ultimately unproductive (and arguably unintentional). However, in the case of *Goon Squad*, temporal discordance was the novel's central preoccupation. It is a novel about about time: it is a novel that rejects temporal closure and underlines the impossibility of perfect reconstruction of timelines and narrative arcs; it is a novel that leverages the tension between its narrative temporalities against the functional characteristics and structural biases of the print format productively in order to turn its gaps into operative ellipses, imbued with thematic and structural meaning. Through its lack of integration with the Twitter platform's temporal affordances, 'Black Box' was essentially like Lulu herself, recursively and jarringly betraying itself through the lack of compatibility between its form and technological elements. As a result, the compelling transportation of Lulu from the pages of the novel and into the digital environs of the Twitter and is obscured through 'Black Box's inability to recreate the functional ellipses, productive engagement with time, and leveraging of temporal tension so sonorously explored within *Goon Squad*. As Bosco says to Jules, "Time's a goon, right? Isn't that the expression?"⁶⁵

⁶⁵ Egan, *A Visit from the Goon Squad*, p.134.

Chapter 5

'Time Is, Time Was, Time Is Not': The Resonant Interval Between David Mitchell's @I_Bombadil and *Slade House*

'[W]hat if a character from *Slade House* begins tweeting in the real world as himself, seven weeks before the reader encounters [them]?'

David Mitchell

For author David Mitchell, the boundaries separating works are never absolute. The process of repeatedly returning to and referencing prior works, methodically expanding and stretching his corpus by thematically and structurally folding each new work into an extant literary universe, is the central characteristic of his literary practice. Time and time again, Mitchell has returned to previously published works to reuse characters and concepts in the composition of newer works. However, enabled by the real-time affordances of the Twitter platform, Mitchell has more recently applied the progressively retrospective logic of his literary practice to an already completed, but yet to be published work. As the chapter's epigraph suggests, in September 2015, seven weeks prior to its publication, Mitchell began tweeting as a character from his then-forthcoming novel, *Slade House* (2015). The tweets appeared on an account, @I_Bombadil (2015), specifically set up for the character, a twenty-something male hacker using the pseudonym "Bombadil". The account represented a real-time record of Bombadil's life and thoughts, rendered in five hundred and thirteen tweets over the seven-week interval, providing a prelude to the character's appearance in the fifth and final part of *Slade House*, 'Astronauts'.

By digitally extending Bombadil's narrative arc beyond the pages of the novel in seven weeks' worth of regularly published, sequential tweet-based instalments, Mitchell retrieved and updated the Victorian serial form for a contemporary technocultural context including digital and social media tools that permit potentially real-time publishing. Unlike Jennifer Egan's unsuccessful retrieval discussed in Chapter 4, Mitchell reshaped the temporal affordances of the Victorian serial form around Twitter while at the same time demonstrating the platform's affordances for literary practice, especially in enabling the extension of existing, print-published (or, in this case, completed but yet to be print-published) literary works. Writing across and through the Twitter platform and in the novel form with his unique conception of time clear in mind, Mitchell worked in a diamedia capacity that ensured the two works stood apart, written with the specific affordances of each media environment in mind, but also in direct connection,

with Bombadil's final tweet posted the same day the novel was published and with the Twitter narrative ending where 'Astronauts' began.¹

In connecting characters and concepts across multiple works, producing prologues or epilogues to extend extant works, and using one work as the foundation of another – all of which applied in the case of @I_Bombadil's connection to *Slade House* – Mitchell's work effectively synthesises the temporal and spatial while still retaining the tension manifest in the two-way movement of time generated by his narratives as they shift recursively between discrete succession and cyclic repetition. In Mitchell's work, time is therefore expressed in spatial terms as a perpetual sense of forward narrative momentum that is simultaneously and repeatedly disrupted by a series of doublings back. In *Slade House* and @I_Bombadil, this tension hinged upon Bombadil's extended narrative arc, which in turn positioned the reader at the threshold of both works so that they were suspended in the intertextual interstices in-between. From this position, the reader was drawn in two directions at once: following the forward narrative momentum of each individual work, but also doubling back to trace the connections across and between the works. While this is a basic feature of Mitchell's literary practice, what separates *Slade House* and @I_Bombadil from his wider canon is that the connections across and between the works were also connections across and between different media environments, represented by the print-published novel and the Twitter platform.² As a result the reader was not only positioned at the intertextual threshold of *Slade House* and @I_Bombadil, but also at the dialogic threshold of the novel and Twitter identified by Cole in his keynote.

In McLuhan's terms, as print and digitally based literary works, *Slade House* and @I_Bombadil were emblematic of the dialogue between "visual" and "acoustic" space. As discussed in more detail in Chapter 2 with regard to McLuhan's media studies and in Chapter 3 in relation to Cole's Diamedia Literary Practice, visual space is the sensibility of the printed word, characterised as continuous, connected, logical, sequential, homogenous, static, and defined by fixed boundaries, while acoustic space was the sensibility of oral and tribal culture, returning

¹ A note on temporal specificity regarding tense: *Slade House* and @I_Bombadil could only be read in parallel, as discussed in this chapter and as intended by Mitchell, for a brief window of time. At the time of writing, @I_Bombadil is no longer an active, ongoing work. The account is now also locked, which prevents new readers from viewing it. In order to reflect the ephemerality of the reading experience Mitchell intended, both works are referred to in the past tense throughout the chapter.

² Although Mitchell had previously published on the Twitter platform with his story, 'The Right Sort' (2014), @I_Bombadil was the first time he had utilised the platform as a means of explicitly extending an existing print narrative. 'The Right Sort' was not connected directly to his then-forthcoming novel, *The Bone Clocks*, but very broadly existed in the same universe. The story was instead a standalone piece, primarily originating as an idea pitched by the author's publisher as a way of generating publicity for forthcoming novel, and it did not engage with Twitter's affordances to the same degree as @I_Bombadil. In fact, 'The Right Sort' is most notable as the basis of *Slade House*'s first chapter, also titled 'The Right Sort', and the inspiration for the novel as a whole, further underscoring the progressively retrospective nature of Mitchell's literary practice.

alongside electronic (and now digital) technologies, characterised as discontinuous, non-homogenous, resonant, multi-centric, and defined by a lack of boundaries. What is of crucial importance here is that, for McLuhan, and as with the boundaries between Mitchell's works, the separation between visual and acoustic space is not absolute. As the two spaces are drawn together, whether as a consequence of the hybrid nature of the contemporary technocultural context or more directly and specifically via Mitchell's Diamedia Literary Practice, a "resonant interval" exists between them. Rather than representing a division in absolute terms, the resonant interval is an invisible borderline better described as a dynamic zone of tension that is, in McLuhan's terms, "where the action is".³ It is no coincidence that an "interval" can equally refer to a gap in time or space, synthesising the two in the same way that the temporal and spatial are synthesised in Mitchell's writing: it was in the resonant interval, in-between visual and acoustic space, in-between *Slade House* and @I_Bombadil, via Bombadil, where the "action" of Mitchell's Diamedia Literary Practice was.

Through his retrieval of the Victorian serial form and by operating in the resonant interval between the digital environs of the Twitter platform and the print-based context of the novel in writing across and through each media environment, Mitchell demonstrates the distinct sensibilities of Diamedia Literary Practice. *Slade House* and @I_Bombadil are connected on a practical level in the way that the real-time temporalities and specific affordances of the Twitter platform permitted the extension of Bombadil's narrative, which, in turn, constituted a narrative connection between the works. In extending *Slade House* with @I_Bombadil, Mitchell presented an alternative interpretation of Cole's assertion that, through Twitter, the novel is getting bigger and bigger. While Cole suggested that Twitter itself represented an ever-expanding novel, his assertion became much more literal in Mitchell's hands with the platform providing the material means of expanding *Slade House*. Moreover, as a corollary to the expansion of the novel via Twitter's inclusiveness and the larger challenges posed for literary practice by the proliferation of digital media, Cole's belief that the novelist is smaller than ever before finds somewhat eccentric exploration in @I_Bombadil when Mitchell himself (via his own Twitter account, @david_mitchell) appeared on the account, replying to and interacting with Bombadil's tweets and becoming part of the extended narrative. Through his Diamedia Literary Practice, Mitchell showed that Twitter can be a future of the novel in a more direct sense than Cole anticipated, and one in which the novelist is more explicitly implicated. By leveraging the dynamic tensions between Twitter and the novel, Mitchell amplifies the temporal and spatial entanglements that are already a key part of his literary practice, producing an innovative, symbiotic pair of works

³ Marshall McLuhan and Bruce R. Powers, *The Global Village: Transformations in World Life and Media in the 21st Century* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), p.77. Speech marks McLuhan's.

whose temporal specificity symbolised their thematic concerns, echoing the ephemerality of the titular Slade House at the centre of both works.

This chapter therefore begins by addressing the Victorian print periodical roots of the serial form and its retrieval via @I_Bombadil for Twitter, before addressing the “resonant interval” between @I_Bombadil and *Slade House*.

@I_Bombadil, Twitter, and the Retrieval of the Victorian Serial Form

As discussed in Chapter 4 regarding Jennifer Egan’s ‘Black Box’, temporality was perhaps the definitive aspect of the Victorian serial form. Mark W. Turner locates the form within ‘emerging modernity itself, in which the fleeting and ephemeral become integral to the fabric of everyday life, with its new forms of labour and leisure, with its encounters with fragments of time’.⁴ Put another way, the serial form was temporally tied to the increasingly industrial technocultural context of the nineteenth century. Rob Allen similarly refers to the ‘rhythm of modernity’ that structured and was simultaneously structured by serial fiction.⁵ Serial fiction was published in periodicals that typically reflected weekly, monthly, and quarterly cycles; that is to say, periodically, at fixed intervals. The periodical press therefore played a part in constructing the sociomaterial temporality of Victorian life around these key cycles and intervals, as well as organising readers’ sense of media temporalities to suit the structural biases of the periodical press itself. Consequently, both the cycle of publication and the intervals between each publication are meaningful and not simply arbitrary. The meaning that resides in the pauses, whether a day, week, or month, is intrinsically tied to both the Victorian era’s organisation of time, reflecting the contemporary social milieu of the nineteenth century, and the print culture of the periodical press. Turner has elsewhere referred to this phenomenon as “periodical time”. Thus, the temporality of serial fiction must take into consideration the temporality of the technocultural context in which the work is grounded, as well as the narrative temporality of the work itself.

McLuhan stressed that this process of transformation was an immutable part of retrieval. In order to be compatible with its new ground (Twitter and its contemporary context, in comparison to its old ground, the print periodical and its Victorian context) the figure (the serial form) must be transformed in relation to the affordances and contextual situation of the new ground. Tore Rye Andersen has similarly traced the return of serialised literature via the Twitter platform and through @I_Bombadil, connecting Mitchell’s Twitter work to the temporal and

⁴ Mark W. Turner, ‘The Unruliness of Serials in the Nineteenth Century (and in the Digital Age)’, in *Serialization in Popular Culture*, ed. by Rob Allen and Thijs van den Berg (New York: Routledge, 2014), p.17.

⁵ Rob Allen, “Pause You Who Read This” Disruption and the Victorian Serial Novel”, in *Serialization in Popular Culture*, ed. by Rob Allen and Thijs van den Berg (New York: Routledge, 2014), p.44.

interactive aspects of the Victorian serial form.⁶ However, this chapter augments Andersen's analysis by examining more extensively the return of the serial form via @I_Bombadil as a form of retrieval, in the specific sense McLuhan's media studies suggest, and as a part of Mitchell's Diamedia Literary Practice, paying particular attention to its relationship with *Slade House*.

In his article, Andersen also argues that, as an ongoing fictional narrative published regularly in sequential instalments over an extended period of time, @I_Bombadil, via Twitter, represented the return of the print-based Victorian serial form. Here, Andersen's argument is reframed from a straightforward return to the retrieval of the Victorian serial form from obsolescence and its transformation for a twenty-first century technocultural context whose organisation of time is tangled up with social media and digital culture. Unlike readers of Egan's 'Black Box', who often had to wait a narratively arbitrary twenty-three hours between instalments, readers following @I_Bombadil were not routinely left to await instalments unless the pauses in publication were narratively significant. In Victorian serial publication, instalments typically ended with a suspenseful cliff-hanger that generated the desire for future instalments as readers awaited the publication of the next instalment. The pauses in publication were rooted in the temporality of print culture, reflecting the print cycles of periodicals rather than the narrative. In @I_Bombadil, the pauses in publication were meaningful in that they indicated or emphasised something narratively resonant. Desire for future instalments functions as a product of the follower relationship on the platform, where readers subscribed to have Bombadil's tweets appear in their stream, and suspense was generated in not knowing when the next instalment would come, particularly through Mitchell's leveraging of this indefinite hiatus to signify danger for the narrator.⁷

Towards the end of his Twitter narrative, for example, Bombadil took a trip into the "orison" in which Slade House was located. According to Bombadil, an orison is 'a bubble reality inflated inside reality [...] | ...a room in a room. A micro in a macro. [...] Folded-up dream in unfolded reality', which "astronauts" such as himself risked their safety to enter and explore.⁸ Symbolising his entry into the Slade House orison, as shown in Figure 5.1, at 07:57 on the 30th of October, he tweeted, '...&in I go'.⁹ There was an interval of nearly nine hours before he tweeted again, stating, 'BACK! In at 7.57am; got back 4.52pm. Spent 45mins inside. Orison unchanged.

⁶ Andersen.

⁷ By the end of Bombadil's narrative, @I_Bombadil had 800 followers on Twitter.

⁸ David Mitchell, '@I_Bombadil: ...But4UsAtronauts', 2015

<https://twitter.com/I_Bombadil/status/648153880841293824> [accessed 31 January 2020]; David Mitchell, '@I_Bombadil: ...A Room in a Room', 2015

<https://twitter.com/I_Bombadil/status/648155133428277248> [accessed 31 January 2020].

⁹ David Mitchell, '@I_Bombadil: ...&in I Go.', 2015

<https://twitter.com/I_Bombadil/status/660002456659755008> [accessed 31 January 2020].

Misty&grey. Walked up closer2Slade House. Windows...'.¹⁰ During the pause, users replied to the first tweet, expressing their concern. At 16:24, @JayEmmTee1 asked, 'Where are you? Are you out yet?'. At 16:45 and alluding to the temporal disruption of the orison, @Kovacs88 wrote, '45 mins in is long enough, come back?'

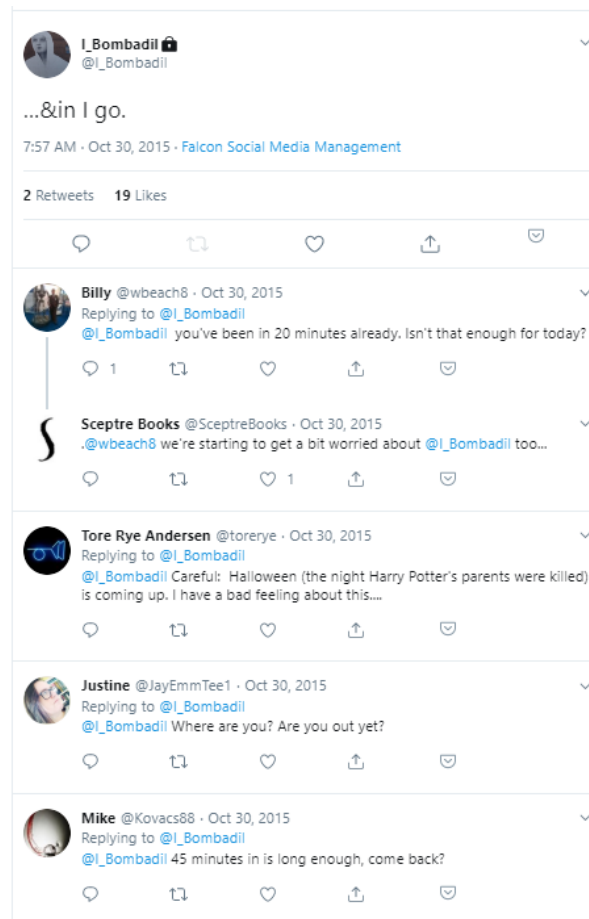


Figure 5.1 Readers' replies to @I_Bombadil's tweet, '...&in I go.'

The interval spoke to readers' desire for more instalments, with a threat to Bombadil interpreted as a threat that the instalments would cease and the narrative would end. Upon Bombadil's confirmation of his safe return, @christina2012gr replied, 'Glad to hear from you again! I was certain you were gone forever'.¹¹ As such, Mitchell's retrieval of the serial form via Twitter transformed the type of non-narratively resonant pauses in publication rooted in the temporality of the periodical print culture. Indeed, it was only through this logic of metamorphic transformation that @I_Bombadil came into existence.

¹⁰ David Mitchell, '@I_Bombadil: BACK!', 2015
<https://twitter.com/I_Bombadil/status/660137852362207233> [accessed 31 January 2020].

¹¹ '@christina2012gr: Glad to Hear from You Again!', 2015
<<https://twitter.com/christina2012gr/status/660138446657310720>> [accessed 31 January 2020].

With the final galley of *Slade House* submitted, there was an inevitable interval in the print publication process before the novel became available to the public. As the novel awaited publication, its narrative became a future-dated destination that could be appended by another work as long as this work was published prior to the novel. With Mitchell's tendency to revisit extant works already a central aspect of his literary practice, the next logical evolution was to take advantage of the temporal affordances of digital media to enable the further enhancement of this aspect of his practice. Twitter provides a real-time medium through which authors such as Mitchell can connect to readers and produce material that generates interest for and extends the narrative of forthcoming and otherwise pre-existing texts without being subject to the usual temporal lags that characterise the print publication process. In this broader sense, Mitchell's employment of the Twitter platform as a literary medium also obsolesces enforced non-productive intervals in the publication cycle.

In order to take advantage of Twitter's temporal affordances in retrieving the serial form, though, Mitchell also had to compose his serial narrative in such a manner as to embed @I_Bombadil in the temporally driven user norms of the platform. This involved publishing tweets at times symbiotic with and symbolic of the narrative at that time, not just in leveraging the pauses to create suspense. When @I_Bombadil began appearing on Twitter, its first six tweets appeared in 16 min, as shown in Figure 5.2.



Figure 5.2 @I_Bombadil's first six tweets

Another sixteen tweets appeared at irregular intervals throughout the day, ranging from eight in the morning to eleven at night GMT (Greenwich Mean Time), covering a day in the life of the character in a conceivably temporally accurate manner. The tweets' timestamps were instantly and visibly significant narrative cues in that they represented a real-time narrative, outwardly published by Bombadil, reflecting the structure of his day. The earliest tweets, as shown in Figure 5.2, began at 08:00 and indicated his Twitter activity as he travelled to work, while later tweets referred to his having long-since arrived at his place of work and, at 11:47, the morning having almost passed into afternoon: 'I am on the tube2work right now [...] | So how's yr morning gone [...] I'm @my desk, pretending2work'.¹² Though no geographic location appeared on Bombadil's profile page, which is a compositional choice Mitchell would have made when setting up the account, he made reference to its London setting in his third tweet ('Clue2: I'm working@ yr office on Victoria Embankment, London HQ of that internet colossus&genius factory affectionately known as #Gargoyle. xB').¹³ He also referred to London another four times in his tweets, as well as areas of the city such as Gravesend and Greenwich, making it clear that events were taking place in GMT, as suggested by the timestamp. This ensured Bombadil's tweets were temporally attuned to the timestamp so as not to appear out of sync with Twitter's temporal norms and biases, demonstrating the sensibilities of Diamedia Literary Practice in Mitchell's ability to think through the affordances of the Twitter platform.

Properly embedded within Twitter's present-oriented temporal bias, Bombadil's serial narrative took the form of a stream of status updates, always focusing on 'What's [currently] happening?' from his subjective perspective. As Andersen and Sara Tanderup Linkis rather eloquently put it, this meant @I_Bombadil was 'not so much a tweeted story as a story made up of tweets'.¹⁴ This is where @I_Bombadil diverged most markedly from 'Black Box', where, as discussed in Chapter 4, Egan only tweeted in the same hour-long window between 20:00 and 21:00 Eastern Time (ET) once a day, regardless of the location of the action or events being recounted in the narrative.¹⁵ Since the narrative ostensibly followed Lulu's ongoing mission dispatches from her assignment in the South of France – which would make the appropriate time zone Central European Time (CET), six hours ahead of ET – Egan's publication schedule created discernible temporal dissonance between the narrative and the real-time affordances of the

¹² David Mitchell, '@I_Bombadil: .@TuttiLottie the Receptionist', 2015 <https://twitter.com/I_Bombadil/status/640781558278975488> [accessed 31 January 2020]; David Mitchell, '@I_Bombadil: So How's Yr Morning Gone', 2015 <https://twitter.com/I_Bombadil/status/640838673626451968> [accessed 31 January 2020].

¹³ David Mitchell, '@I_Bombadil: Clue2', 2015 <https://twitter.com/I_Bombadil/status/640783560425754624> [accessed 31 January 2020].

¹⁴ Tore Rye Andersen and Sara Tanderup Linkis, 'As We Speak: Concurrent Narration and Participation in the Serial Narratives "@I_Bombadil" and Skam', *Narrative*, 27.1 (2019), p.88.

¹⁵ David Barr Kirtley, 'Let's Hope Jennifer Egan's Twitter Story Heralds the Return of Serial Fiction', *Wired*, 2012 <<https://www.wired.com/2012/05/jennifer-egan-black-box-twitter/>> [accessed 2 February 2020].

platform. In Andersen and Linkis' terms, 'Black Box' was very much a tweeted story rather than a story made up of tweets, often clashing with the temporal biases and norms of the platform. In contrast, where Egan's publication schedule was static, Mitchell's publication schedule was impressionistic so as to coincide with the narrative temporality of the story, routinely ceasing during conceivably realistic blackout hours when Bombadil was asleep, occupied at work and, later, once he passed through the door to Slade House. As a platform, Twitter amplifies this temporally specific sense of nowness, which it renders through its enabling and encouraging of real-time publishing.

In their article, Andersen and Linkis align Twitter's real-time publishing mechanisms with the related concepts of "concurrent narration" (Uri Margolin, via Bronwen Thomas) and "real-time narration" (Ruth Page), describing the illusory simultaneity of narrated events, narration, and publication potentially created by digital serialised narratives. As they rightly point out, this potential illusion of simultaneity is reified by the types of digital social media and networked devices that permit access to and engagement with serial narratives from any place, at any time, creating the appearance of narrative uncertainty as to how, if, and when the story will end, without necessarily indicating any genuine uncertainty in this regard. Drawing in particular on Page's work on real-time narration, Andersen and Linkis note that this "real-time" narration is effectively "quasi-real-time", with the narration occurring near to, rather than simultaneously with, the time of the narrated events. The illusion of narrative uncertainty and of real-time narration in digital serial narratives is produced by the author "acting as if": acting as if the narrated events are concurrent with the narration and publication, even when they are not; and acting as if the narrative's closure is not preordained, even when it is. Although Page briefly discusses the role of Twitter's timestamping as an aspect of narrative temporality on the platform by virtue of it inferring the sequence of narrated events, it is crucial to understand that the timestamp of tweets simultaneously constructs and deconstructs Twitter's sense of real-time, further complicating the already inherent complex temporalities of serialised narratives and, more specifically, of @I_Bombadil.¹⁶ This is an issue unaddressed in Page, Margolin, or Thomas' narrative analysis, or in Andersen and Linkis' analysis of @I_Bombadil.

As Andersen and Linkis state regarding real-time narration, Twitter's real-time publishing is similarly illusory. However negligible, there is always an incontrovertible temporal lag created as the platform processes users' tweets, timestamps them, and assigns them a queued position within the streams in which they are eventually published. This means that, despite Twitter's present-tense prompt, tweets are always already in the past when they are published. While most technical definitions of "real-time computing" (RTC) allow for microseconds or

¹⁶ Ruth E. Page, 'Seriality and Storytelling in Social Media', *StoryWorlds: A Journal of Narrative Studies*, 5 (2013), 31–54.

milliseconds of latency, generally referring to a processing delay imperceptible to the user, no tweet ever appears on the platform symbolically timestamped as “Now”. The nearest-to-present a tweet can be timestamped is “1s” (one second), although more typically tweets appear with a timestamp of “3s” or “4s” (three or four seconds). The lack of “Now” value and the tendency for tweets to instead appear with timestamps of three or four seconds draws users’ attention to the processing delay and, as a result, underscores the performative nature of the platform’s real-time temporality. Here, it is worth referring to the principles of Taina Bucher and Anne Helmond’s platform-sensitive concept of affordances.

As Bucher and Helmond indicate, many interpretations of affordances tend to focus on what technologies do to users or make users do, but rarely what users do to or afford the technology to do, following a rather unidirectional concept of relationality from technology to user.¹⁷ This expanded and multidirectional interpretation of affordances provides a reminder that the user is as important as the technology in establishing a tool’s affordances, as exemplified by Twitter users’ role in fabricating its ostensibly real-time temporal dynamics. While the timestamp serves to reinforce the exigent temporality and queue-based structure of platform’s streams, it also simultaneously and symbolically undermines its technical real-time functionality so that its sense of real-time ultimately comes instead from users’ actions in response to its linguistic and structural biases, via its cues and queues: it is the user who ultimately ratifies the platform’s sense of real-time operability by forging functional norms that reflect a real-time functionality. In other words, as Mitchell recognised, the impetus was on the author to “act as if” he is telling Bombadil’s story in real-time in order to take advantage of Twitter’s real-time affordances in his retrieval of the serial form.

Fabricated or not, then, Twitter’s real-time temporalities are ineradicable and inexorable, meaning that narrative temporalities must still operate within the conditions established by the platform. It is certainly probable that, if not the entirety of the principal narrative – that is, excluding replies to readers – Mitchell had pre-written the vast majority of Bombadil’s tweets prior to publishing them on the platform. This was in part purely a practical concern for the author, ensuring @I_Bombadil converged with *Slade House* as and when he intended in terms of the time of narrated events, narration, and publication. But, in his performative engagement with the platform and through his Diamedia Literary Practice, Mitchell “acted as if” so that even in the act of deciding when to publish tweets, @I_Bombadil was subject to and ratified Twitter’s real-time temporalities. As such, the story appeared as if it was being told live, even if and when it was not.

¹⁷ Taina Bucher and Anne Helmond, ‘The Affordances of Social Media Platforms’, in *The Sage Handbook of Social Media*, ed. by Jean Burgess, Alice Marwick, and Thomas Poell (London: Sage, 2018), pp.233–53.

Nevertheless, even if Mitchell had pre-written @I_Bombadil's principal narrative, the replies he posted to the readers' responses, which became a feature of Bombadil's narrative and reflected the more interactive aspects of the serial form, were by necessity written live. Twitter's real-time temporal affordances are also palpable in how users are prompted to respond instantaneously to replies to their own tweets or to reply to other users' tweets by push notifications and other updates, so that they are always occupying the platform's ever-pervasive present and focusing on "what's happening" now or what has just very recently happened. At the same time, @I_Bombadil was written from a first-person perspective, in the present tense, and it contained numerous temporal adverbs – such as 'now', 'today', 'this morning', and 'yesterday' – that further grounded the narrative in the present or very-near past so that it appeared as if Bombadil was responding instantaneously to what was happening now or reflecting on what had just happened. These aspects of Twitter and @I_Bombadil, along with the way Twitter enhances audience interaction through its "reply" function, encouraged and enabled readers following Bombadil's narrative to respond to his tweets as they were being published. As readers replied, and as Mitchell-as-Bombadil replied, these combined replies became a divergent aspect of Bombadil's narrative, taking the story on unexpected tangents that complicated the narrative and illustrated the potential for readers' replies to represent Twitter's innate environmental noise and hence reverse into distraction, as discussed in more detail in relation to Cole's *small fates* in Chapter 3. However, as with the *small fates*, the platform's environmental noise – that is, its innumerable voices and myriad perspectives – can also be productive in certain instances of literary practice, and this was similarly the case regarding readers' replies in @I_Bombadil.

Beyond the seven-week prelude the story would provide to Bombadil's appearance in *Slade House*, the chapter's epigraph shows that another aspect of Mitchell's conception of @I_Bombadil and its difference from the novel was of a character 'tweeting in the real world'. Twitter promises users 'real-time updates about what matters to [them]', wherein 'Twitter is [their] window to the world'.¹⁸ These mission statements, taken from Twitter's About pages at the time Mitchell was writing, purport that it provides users with a subjective view of the world that functions in real-time. The platform effectively defines the "real world" it represents through a combination of its universal 'real-time' temporalities, as discussed above, and 'the world' defined by the subjective subscription and location choices made by each individual user.

Though at first @I_Bombadil gained few respondents, reader responses increased as the narrative progressed, which in turn prompted responses in kind from Mitchell-as-Bombadil. This can be seen in Figure 5.3.

¹⁸ See: 'Twitter Is What's Happening in the World and What People Are Talking about Right Now.'

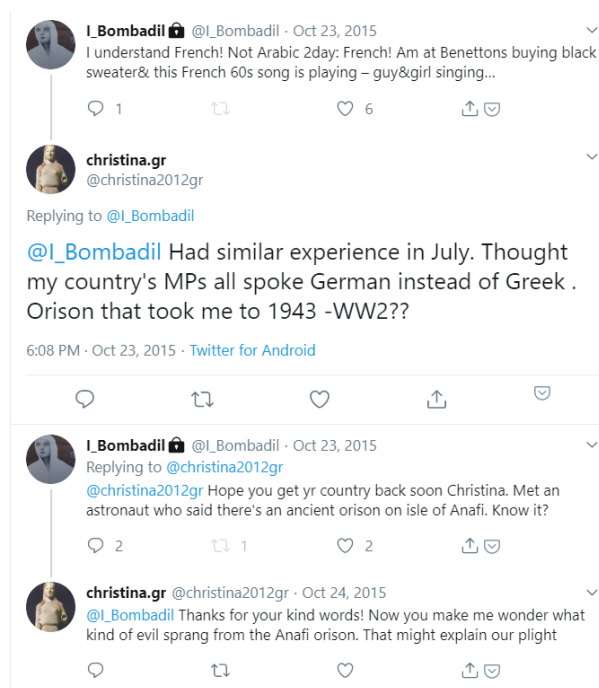


Figure 5.3 @christina2012gr replies to @I_Bombadil's tweets

The responses showed the reader, @christina2012gr, playfully engaging with the character, sharing in the narrative experience of @I_Bombadil, and further embedding the narrative in a real-world context by drawing parallels with her own subjective experiences and referring to events outside of the story and platform. Regarding user engagement on the platform, Alex Maireder and Julian Ausserhofer explain that ‘Twitter users often connect current events to personal experiences, opinions, and world views: they explain, classify, interpret, and reinterpret what they have received.’¹⁹ This was evident in @I_Bombadil where, as a reader based in Greece according to her location tag, @christina2012gr linked Bombadil’s unexpected understanding of French and the experience of time displacement induced by orisons to her interpretation of the then-current political climate in her country. Mitchell-as-Bombadil also replied to @christina2012gr, further endorsing this extension of his narrative by suggesting there is ‘an ancient orison on [the] isle of Anafi’. Moreover, through his reply, Mitchell-as-Bombadil prompted another response from another reader. @janelythell replied to both @I_Bombadil and @christina2012gr, relating their respective replies regarding the island of Anafi to a previous holiday experience, which @christina2012gr further incorporated into @I_Bombadil’s narrative by asking if there was ‘any indication of the ancient orison [to which Mitchell-as-Bombadil had referred] on the island’. This can be seen in Figure 5.4.

¹⁹ Axel Maireder and Julian Ausserhofer, ‘Political Discourses on Twitter: Networking Topics, Objects, and People’, in *Twitter and Society*, ed. by Katrin Weller and others (New York: Peter Lang, 2014), p.310.



Figure 5.4 @christina2012gr replies to @janelythell's tweets

These kinds of replies created unexpected connections and narrative strands that helped continue the kind of world-building that was a feature of Mitchell's wider work, while also grounding the more fantastical elements of the story in a real-world context that readers could relate to. As Maireder and Ausserhofer again explain, users engage with the material they receive in such a way that 'Events may get connected to other topics by the way they are framed by the users', much as @christina2012gr connected the narrative to the political context in Greece, which in turn, via Mitchell-as-Bombadil's reply, allowed @janelythell to connect the now-expanded narrative to her experiences of Anafi.²⁰ In this way, through its enhancement of audience interaction and via Mitchell-as-Bombadil's replies, Twitter also permitted Mitchell to place Bombadil in a real-world context that readers could literally relate and respond to.

By amplifying and providing all readers with the ability to respond, contribute to, and essentially effect narratives, Twitter amplifies environmental noise so that Bombadil's first person narrative was frequently and recursively disrupted and diluted by readers. On Twitter, a singular first-person narrative inevitably becomes the narratives of multiple first persons; a monologue becomes a dialogue; and readers become users in their ability to contribute to and affect narratives. As Ganaele Langlois et al suggest, platforms such as Twitter 'serve to establish

²⁰ Maireder and Ausserhofer, p.310.

the conditions within which content can be produced and shared and where the sphere of agency of users can be defined'.²¹ On Twitter, as an author and in a manner similar to that discussed in relation to Cole's *small fates* in Chapter 3, Mitchell's sphere of agency was set by the platform. This meant that even though @I_Bombadil represented Bombadil's narrative stream of consciousness, as indicated again by the chapter's epigraph in which Mitchell refers to the character tweeting 'as himself', readers' replies frequently disrupted the flow of the narrative stream and channelled it in new directions. This meant that Mitchell, and in a more symbolic sense Bombadil, was never entirely in control of his own narrative. Though not established until later in 'Astronauts', Twitter's limited sphere of agency turned out to be a more meaningful feature of Bombadil's narrative than it first appeared.

In 'Astronauts', the final part of *Slade House*, the narration alternated between the first and third person instead of exclusively following the first person seen in each of the novel's previous four parts. As the chapter progressed, it became clear that this indicated, via contrivances more clearly established elsewhere in Mitchell's corpus, that Bombadil had been inhabited by Norah Grayer, the pseudo-immortal, soul-decanting vampire occupant of Slade House. As the narrative shifted between first and third person, between the initially unidentified Norah (speaking as herself) and either Bombadil or Norah-as-Bombadil (Norah speaking as Bombadil), the reader was left to wonder who was in control of the narrative. As discussed in more depth below with regard to the resonant interval between the works, @I_Bombadil initially seemed the narrative counterpoint to 'Astronauts', providing Bombadil with the narrative agency he was denied in *Slade House*. But instead, the novel revealed that Bombadil's narrative agency was more limited than it appeared in @I_Bombadil, as his final tweet elliptically alluded: 'Ever feel yr just a passenger in yr own head?'.²²

Bombadil's limited narrative agency reflected Mitchell's limited degree of authorial agency on Twitter. While writing in a print format allowed Mitchell, within reason, to dictate the parameters of his own authorial agency in terms of how each page was filled (the number of words, spaces, and order), chapter or section lengths, typographical appearance, and so forth, these decisions are predefined on Twitter. The number of words per tweet is set by the platform's character constraints, the order in which tweets appear is defined by the platform's algorithms and timestamping, text appears in the platform's universal font, Helvetica Neue, and other users can engage with tweets via likes, retweets, and replies. Mitchell was only in control of the unfolding tale to the extent that the platform allowed him to be, just as Bombadil was only in

²¹ Ganaele Langlois and others, 'Mapping Commercial Web 2.0 Worlds: Toward a New Critical Ontogenesis', *Fibreculture*, 14 (2009) <<http://fourteen.fibreculturejournal.org/fcj-095-mapping-commercial-web-2-0-worlds-towards-a-new-critical-ontogenesis/>> [accessed 7th October 2015].

²² David Mitchell, '@I_Bombadil: Ever Feel like Yr Just a Passenger in Your Own Head?', 2015 <https://twitter.com/I_Bombadil/status/660449402042122240> [accessed 31 January 2020].

control of his narrative to the extent that Norah allowed him to be. Through the level of awareness and depth of understanding his Diamedia Literary Practice demonstrated, Mitchell was able to not only symbiotically utilise the platform's specific affordances in the creation of @I_Bombadil but also leverage these symbolically in relation to the narrative's themes, as discussed in more detail below with respect to Bombadil's cyberstalking of Lottie.

Another aspect of Mitchell's conception of Bombadil tweeting 'as himself' is the way in which the platform enabled Mitchell to inhabit the character to an enhanced degree. One of the most distinctive aspects of *Slade House* was the idiosyncratic narrative voice of each of the novel's five parts. Nathan Bishop, Gordon Edmonds, Sally Timms, Freya Timms, and Bombadil/Norah-as-Bombadil each had distinct registers that reflected their individual personality traits, with the nuance of each perspective constructed by Mitchell in his word choice, sentence structure, and description of their thought processes. As an author, he inhabits his narrators much as Norah inhabited Bombadil, writing from their perspective and creating a unique narrative voice. Where @I_Bombadil differed from the novel was in Mitchell's ability to create an account for the character complete with Twitter handle, profile picture, and even a tagline. With all the profile information referring to Bombadil, the only place that Mitchell's name appeared was in the "Followed by" section, which denotes any users that follow the account in question that you as the user viewing the account also follow. As such, Mitchell's name only appeared on @I_Bombadil if the reader also followed Mitchell's own account (@david_mitchell) on the platform; otherwise, the account looked like a typical Twitter account. Compared with *Slade House*, where the cover and spine prominently featured the author's name as a means of identifying the work and as a reminder of his intellectual property, the platform permitted Mitchell to obscure his own presence behind his character so that Bombadil appeared as the author of his own tweets. This is what Mitchell meant when he referred to the reader encountering a character from *Slade House* tweeting 'as himself'.

By enhancing sharing, Twitter requires that users grant the platform 'a worldwide, non-exclusive, royalty-free license (with the right to sublicense) to use, copy, reproduce, process, adapt, modify, publish, transmit, display and distribute such content in any and all media or distribution methods now known or later developed'.²³ Although they still ultimately own their content, authors publishing on the platform partially mortgage the ownership of their tweets as a condition of the platform's utility. In publishing @I_Bombadil on the platform, like all users, Mitchell may have lost the exclusive rights to his intellectual property, but as an author he gainfully used the platform's amplified sharing and accepted diminished content rights in order to distance himself from the work, occupy his character, and embed Bombadil fully in Twitter's

²³ 'Twitter Terms of Service' <<https://twitter.com/en/tos#intlTerms>> [accessed 31 January 2020].

functional norms. At the same time, by creating @Bombadil as an account separate from his own, Mitchell also ensured he was able to interact with his own character and join in the cacophonous conversations that Bombadil's tweets encouraged, as can be seen in Figure 5.5:



Figure 5.5 @david_mitchell and readers reply to @I_Bombadil's tweet

There were clear linguistic differences between Mitchell's own tweets and Bombadil's, representing his inhabiting of and obscuring himself behind the character so that Bombadil appeared as if tweeting 'as himself'. On his own account, Mitchell writes much as he does in *Slade House*: generally in grammatically correct, Standard English, save a small number of @ mentions and abbreviations such as 'pls', 'yr', '&', 'tho', and 'thru'. On @I_Bombadil, he conversely wrote in

a combination of text speak, compounds, and abbreviations, for example, '&thanx2every1who', 'down2breakfast&got', 'Leaf=ginkgo', 'can't concentr8', sometimes also including emojis. This not only helped Mitchell distance himself from his narrator but also added further depth to his characterisation of Bombadil by embedding him, in the manner a hacker would likely be embedded, in the functional norms of the platform itself; or, at the very least, Bombadil reflected Mitchell's interpretation of how an avid Twitter user and hacker would tweet. Although a small number of press outlets had advertised him as the author of @I_Bombadil, it was again incumbent on Mitchell to act as if in retaining the fabricated sense of separation between himself and Bombadil, no matter how tongue-in-cheek.²⁴

On his own, sparingly used Twitter account, Mitchell made four initial references to @I_Bombadil in order to draw his followers' attention to the work, as shown in Figure 5.6:



Figure 5.6 @david_mitchell tweets about @I_Bombadil

Mitchell playfully frames @I_Bombadil as either 'a person/persons unknown [...] tweeting as a character from [his] upcoming novel' or as '[his] character from SLADE HOUSE', which in both instances serves to show him performatively distancing himself from the work so as to underline the intentional slippage between reality and fiction, between Mitchell and Bombadil. Mitchell's playful, performative tweets added a metanarrative perspective to the work, as he himself alluded when suggesting anyone encountering the person/persons behind @I_Bombadil 'alert the metafictional authorities ASAP'.²⁵ But furthermore, by performatively distancing himself from the Bombadil, he simultaneously and paradoxically brings himself closer to his audience as an author

²⁴ See, for example: Sarah Shaffi, 'David Mitchell Pens New Twitter Story', *The Bookseller*, 2015 <<http://www.thebookseller.com/news/david-mitchell-pens-new-twitter-story-slade-house-release-311481>> [accessed 2 February 2016].

²⁵ David Mitchell, '@david_mitchell: ... The Public Is Urged NOT to Approach @I_Bombadil as He's an Unhinged Fantasist', 2015 <https://twitter.com/david_mitchell/status/640857470617976832> [accessed 31 January 2020].

through his ability to have the kind of direct and ongoing conversations with his readers shown in Figure 5.5. It was by obscuring himself behind his narrator but also by simultaneously bringing himself closer to his readers that Mitchell somewhat eccentrically explored Cole's belief that, in the contemporary technocultural context, the novelist is smaller than ever before.

In his keynote speech, Cole spoke of the diminished role he believed the novelist played in the contemporary media landscape, in what he called 'a time of commercial publishing and excellent television'.²⁶ As a corollary, he believed that the novel itself was growing via Twitter, which he referred to as an inclusive form of novel without an individual novelist. So, one of the key questions extrapolated in terms of the research undertaken here is what this means for novelists writing on Twitter. In Mitchell's eccentric interpretation, this diminished authorial role is manifested in his pretending to be a bystander to his own fictive creation by tweeting as himself, playfully engaging with the character and receiving responses from Mitchell-as-Bombadil, as can be seen in Figure 5.7.



Figure 5.7 @david_mitchell replies to @I_Bombadil's tweet

Mitchell performatively played with the anonymity @I_Bombadil afforded him, whereby his role as author, pushed to the limit of its operating on Twitter, reversed into the role of audience member. However, the kind of anonymity platforms such as Twitter afford users also have far more negative presentations. And while Twitter allowed Mitchell to inhabit his character while also playing the role of (quasi-)anonymous-author-as-audience-member, the platform also

²⁶ Teju Cole, 'After the Novelist', in *The 21st-Century Novel: Notes from the Edinburgh World Writers' Conference*, ed. by Jonathan Bastable and Hannah McGill (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2014), p.53.

permitted him to engage more directly and thematically with the negative aspects of anonymity on social media.

In @I_Bombadil, Bombadil introduced himself by tweeting at another user named Lottie, @TuttiLottie, ostensibly the receptionist at his place of employ. ‘.@TuttiLottie the Receptionist, I am on Tube2work now, thinking of U U U the truest star by light-years in Borg Cube we call Work. xBombadil’.²⁷ Readers wishing to view Lottie’s Twitter account would find the account locked. Five tweets later, Bombadil states, ‘Btw, hope u don’t mind me “visiting” yr locked twitterfeed. Clue4: Am a tech-head. (Mind u, at GargoyleHQ, techies=needles in haystacks!)xB’.²⁸ As the story progresses, it became apparent Bombadil’s hacking skills seemingly permitted him access to any digitally accessible material he so desired. Beyond Lottie’s Twitter account, he also hacked networked data sources and devices such as NHS records, Oystercard account data, mobile phones, credit card records, and email accounts. He had access to material to which most are excluded and, more importantly, in Lottie’s Twitter account, he had access to information from which the reader is restricted.

Early on, the narrative mainly focused on Bombadil’s romantic pursuit of Lottie, where he wrote tweets such as, ‘Happy Bday Lottie! :-)) :-)) :-)) Yup I am mystery sender of 24 red roses 🌹 Think of me when u blow out yr candles&make a wish l8er. AllmyxxxB.’²⁹ But it soon became clear that Bombadil’s overtures are decidedly one-sided, as he later wrote: ‘Just read yr email to yr Team Leader, Lottie. “Stalker”? Not nice+not fair+not true. World=dirty+dangerous place. Bombadil=Yr guardian angel’.³⁰ Even in the act of hacking and cyberstalking Lottie, Bombadil is unable to recognise his own hacking and cyberstalking behaviour and considers it an act of protection and/or affection. The early part of the story highlighted the potential of Twitter’s enhancement of sharing to reverse into over-sharing, a lack of privacy, surveillance, and cyberstalking. Although Lottie’s Twitter account was locked and therefore private, this was no real hindrance to Bombadil. Yet the reader was left only with Bombadil’s singular perspective of events, underscoring the potential for users of the Twitter platform to reverse into solipsism.

But even in following the story unfold, tweet-by-tweet, the reader takes on the position if not of a cyberstalker, given Bombadil’s account was public, then of a social media lurker watching on vicariously from the digital distance. In doing so, the reader became complicit in Bombadil’s at best dubious hacking practices. But when Bombadil later found himself the victim of hacking, the

²⁷ Mitchell, David, ‘@I_Bombadil: .@TuttiLottie the Receptionist’, 2015

<https://twitter.com/I_Bombadil/status/640781558278975488> [accessed 31 January 2020].

²⁸ Mitchell, David, ‘@I_Bombadil: Btw, Hope You Don’t Mind Me “Visiting” Yr Locked Twitterfeed’, 2015

<https://twitter.com/I_Bombadil/status/640785573914017792> [accessed 31 January 2020].

²⁹ Mitchell, David, ‘@I_Bombadil: Happy Bday Lottie!’, 2015

<https://twitter.com/I_Bombadil/status/641189279931232256> [accessed 31 January 2020].

³⁰ Mitchell, David, ‘@I_Bombadil: Just Read Yr Email to Yr Team Leader, Lottie.’, 2015

<https://twitter.com/I_Bombadil/status/642337554151407618> [accessed 31 January 2020].

story briefly took on the form of a morality tale, allowing the reader to feel somewhat vindicated of their lurking behaviour. ‘Just found Philip Glass song from THE TRUMAN SHOW on iPhone. No memory of downloading it. Puzzle+Worrying. I’m unhackable.’, Bombadil stated.³¹ It is again Norah who, in occupying Bombadil, downloaded the song. Bombadil has not been hacked in the manner he expected, but in Norah’s having ensconced herself within his body, the effect is essentially the same. In ‘Astronauts’, Norah-as-Bombadil casually says that she ‘locates Philip Glass’s music for *The Truman Show* on Bombadil’s iPhone and listen[s] to it’.³² It is Norah-as-Bombadil that downloaded the Philip Glass score onto his iPhone. To a reader reading the works in chronological order, the presence of the Philip Glass song is a mystery that is not uncovered until ‘Astronauts’ when, as it is revealed that Norah has occupied Bombadil, the revelation simultaneously applies to both *Slade House* and @I_Bombadil. Both works are connected and brought into dialogue, not only by connecting the notion of supernatural and fantastic body snatching to the more realist and digitally inspired concept of hacking and making sense of Bombadil’s larger narrative arc, but also through the tangled temporal involutions that are a key part of Mitchell’s literary practice, drawing the reader into an in-between space between the works, spaces, and media environments.

The Resonant Interval Between @I_Bombadil and Slade House

By using the Twitter platform to extend Bombadil’s narrative arc, Mitchell gave the character a life beyond the text, and it is through this extended arc that McLuhan’s concept of the “resonant interval” can be applied to articulate the more dynamic temporal involutions across and between @I_Bombadil and *Slade House*.

Through Bombadil’s extended narrative arc Mitchell led the reader, in Paul A. Harris’ terms, ‘iteratively and recursively’ from one work to the other.³³ Bombadil occupied the threshold between the works, as, ineluctably, did the reader encountering both @I_Bombadil and *Slade House*: Mitchell positioned the reader so that they were never reading only one work or the other, but always, inexorably, both. He suspended the reader in the dialogic double-space between @I_Bombadil and *Slade House*, an invisible zone of tension between the works and print/digital media environments. In McLuhan’s terms, this zone is the “resonant interval” created when two contrasting media environments, in this case print and digital, are brought into dialogue. McLuhan argued that the meeting of print and electronic (digital) media environments was effectively the meeting of “visual” and “acoustic” space, wherein acoustic space was the

³¹ Mitchell, David, ‘@I_Bombadil: Just Found Philip Glass Song from THE TRUMAN SHOW on iPhone.’, 2015 <https://twitter.com/I_Bombadil/status/659482331867164672> [accessed 31 January 2020].

³² Mitchell, *Slade House*, pp.193-4.

³³ Paul A. Harris, ‘Introduction: David Mitchell in the Labyrinth of Time’, *SubStance*, 44 (2015), p.4.

counterpoint to visual space, representing a complete contrast in all of its properties. Visual space is 'structured as static', while acoustic space is 'a flux'.³⁴

In their dialogue, the two spaces are interlaced, interfaced, and rendered inextricable from each other, obscuring the borderline between them. It is the in-betweenness of the resonant interval, then, that fundamentally comes to define both spaces. It is in this in-between space that figures and grounds are dynamically reshaping one another. In relation to literary practice, the content and the medium of the work, along with its contextual services and disservices, are continually in a dialogic state from which the work itself arises. It was by writing across these two media environments and positioning the reader in the resonant interval between them that Mitchell's works made most apparent the role that each medium and context plays in the emergence of the literary work. As McLuhan pointed out, the resonant interval is irrefutably 'where the action is'.³⁵

Situated in the resonant interval between @I_Bombadil and *Slade House*, Mitchell placed the reader where the action is. The "action", in this instance, was the very specific and unique way in which these two works were orchestrated to stimulate a resonant, diamedia reading practice. In other words, what was perhaps most interesting about these works lay in the space in-between them, rather than within the works themselves. Led iteratively and recursively from one work to the other by Bombadil's extended narrative arc, the reader iteratively and recursively traversed the space in-between. As Harris notes, Mitchell's narratives '[oscillate] between discrete succession and cyclic repetition'.³⁶ Bombadil was the oscillation point between discrete succession and cyclic repetition, persistently presenting the reader with motivation to both read on in *Slade House* and circle back to @I_Bombadil, with Mitchell ensuring the reader was repeatedly required to decide between pressing ahead or returning to trace narrative connections between the works. The tension between the discrete succession and cyclic repetition was then reified by the reader as they followed Bombadil back and forth. Through @I_Bombadil and *Slade House*, through Bombadil's extended narrative arc, Mitchell utilised the resonant interval to leverage this tension and amplify the effects of his literary practice, always moving forward but also simultaneously circling back to more acutely address obtuse elements from earlier in the narrative(s). Bombadil was the impetus to this two-way movement of time across the works, drawing the reader into the interstices between works, spaces, and media environments.

Around the mid-point of @I_Bombadil's narrative, Bombadil recounted a dream, as shown in Figure 5.8.

³⁴ McLuhan and McLuhan, p.33.

³⁵ McLuhan and McLuhan, p.77.

³⁶ Harris, p.3.

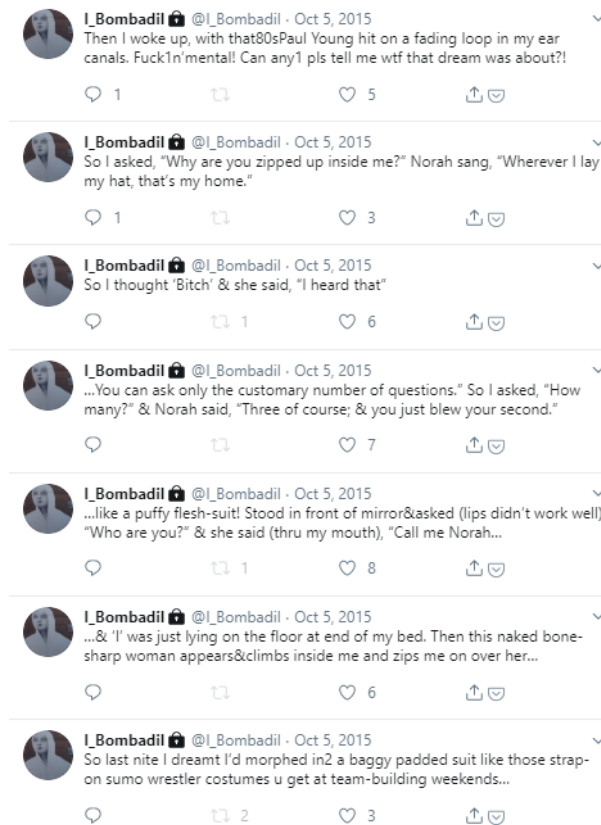


Figure 5.8 @I_Bombadil recounts his dream

In the context of @I_Bombadil, the episode was a strange non sequitur, as indicated in Bombadil's exclamation, 'Can any1 pls tell me wtf that dream was about?!'.³⁷ Here, he directly addressed the users reading his narrative. It suggested those readers could or should know something that he did not, which proved to be a prescient indicator of Bombadil's eventual fate. Within @I_Bombadil, it registered as the fever dream of a reliably unreliable narrator, an insignificant episode that was never resolved or returned to again. However, by the beginning of 'Astronauts', the fifth and final part of *Slade House*, the details of the dream came perspicaciously into focus:

Bombadil's iPhone vibrates over his heart. With his cold fingers, I fish out the device from the large skiing jacket I made him buy near our anonymous hotel this morning when I saw the ominous that of the sky. Sleet peppers the screen.³⁸

Towards the end of @I_Bombadil, Bombadil confusedly stated, 'Leaving John Lewis department store wearing knee-length padded coat I apparently just bought... | ...Weird thing is, I don't recall even going in. Huh'.³⁹ As with the dream, these tweets seemed strangely superfluous to

³⁷ David Mitchell, '@I_Bombadil: Then I Woke Up', 2015 <https://twitter.com/I_Bombadil/status/650932690221432832> [accessed 31 January 2020].

³⁸ Mitchell, *Slade House*.

³⁹ Mitchell, David, '@I_Bombadil: Just Found Philip Glass Song from THE TRUMAN SHOW on iPhone.', 2015 <https://twitter.com/I_Bombadil/status/659482331867164672> [accessed 31 January 2020];

@I_Bombadil's narrative, beyond, perhaps, indicating a brief lapse in memory that only signified the reliability of the narrator's unreliability. To the reader of *Slade House* encountering the above paragraph at the beginning of 'Astronauts', though, they were imbued with resonance.

Having read the four preceding parts of the novel, the reader had already encountered Slade House's occupants, the pseudo-immortal, soul-decanting Grayer twins, Jonah and Norah. Every nine years, the Grayer twins had to consume the soul of an "engifted" mortal – one with a specific "psychovoltage" signature – in order to continue living beyond the standard human time scale. As *Slade House's* narrative unfolds throughout its first four parts, each representing an individual engifted mortal's journey down Slade Alley to Slade House, it was also revealed that (via contrivances more clearly established elsewhere in Mitchell's corpus) the Grayer twins were able to occupy the bodies and minds of the novel's mortal characters.

During the dream sequence, Bombadil had been inhabited by one of the novel's primary antagonists, Norah Grayer. But it was not until later, during the final part of *Slade House*, that this was finally revealed. 'Astronauts' was the only part of the novel in which the narration alternated between the first and third person, rather than exclusively following the first-person form. This differentiated the final part from the four that preceded it, marking the point at which the two (practical) preludes to 'Astronauts' – the first four parts of *Slade House* and @I_Bombadil, respectively – converged. The alternating narrative registers at this juncture emphasised the tension between the two works. Mitchell pulled the reader in both directions at once, between discrete succession and cyclic repetition: between following the narrative thread and revelation of Norah Grayer's occupation of Bombadil in *Slade House* or circling back to the narratively prescient dream sequence of @I_Bombadil. Norah Grayer was 'Norah', the 'bone-sharp woman' who 'climb[ed] inside' Bombadil in his dream.

The reader, following the two works' chronological timeline, reaching 'Astronauts' already having read @I_Bombadil, encountered and unravelled this narrative mystery simultaneously in the dialogic relationship between the works. It was through the connective narrative thread of the forgotten skiing jacket, echoing between @I_Bombadil and *Slade House*, that Norah's possession of Bombadil was illuminated in both works. McLuhan described the resonant interval as an interval where 'resonant and interpretative processes are simultaneously related with centers everywhere and boundaries nowhere'.⁴⁰ With Bombadil occupying the resonant interval between @I_Bombadil and *Slade House*, Mitchell attempted to ensure reader's interpretative processes were resonant, reverberating between the works so that the centre, the reader's position, their focus, was simultaneously in both. The boundaries between the works

Mitchell, David, '@I_Bombadil: ...Weird Thing Is, I Don't Recall Even Going in. Huh.', 2015
<https://twitter.com/I_Bombadil/status/660418951185375232> [accessed 31 January 2020].

⁴⁰ McLuhan and Powers, p.45.

would then be iteratively and recursively traversed and the reader would be drawn into an arena of spiralling repetition and replay, of input and feedback, of interlace and interface, that at once relied upon and disrupted narrative chronology.

Maria Beville has written of ‘the tension that exists in Mitchell’s writing between the simultaneous desire to find, and to abandon coherent notions of time and subsequently, history’.⁴¹ @I_Bombadil preceded the publication of and led up to the events of the final part of *Slade House*. This created a two-way movement of narrative time that simultaneously moved forward, consecutively, from @I_Bombadil to *Slade House*, and from ‘The Right Sort’ to ‘Astronauts’ (the first to last parts of *Slade House*), but also iteratively and recursively circled back from *Slade House* to @I_Bombadil as the reader reached ‘Astronauts’. Yet, in terms of the time of publication, @I_Bombadil also referred to other narrator-protagonists and characters that appeared in *Slade House*, chronologically before they appeared in the not-yet-published novel. However, these references were also chronologically disjointed from the historical timeline constructed by the novel in its five-part structure of nine-year cycles spanning from 1979 (‘The Right Sort’) to 2015 (‘Astronauts’). In alluding to almost every other narrator-protagonist of *Slade House* – ‘No sign of Nathan Bishop&mother, Gordon Edmonds or X-Files Six; or any1 referred2by Fred Pink’ – in @I_Bombadil, Bombadil both found and abandoned a coherent notion of narrative temporality and narrative history.⁴² This combination of what Beville refers to as the ‘circularity and causality’ of Mitchell’s writing is redolent of the resonant interval and the interlacing of visual and acoustic space.⁴³

Where visual space was linear and continuous, homogenous and uniform, acoustic space was spherical, discontinuous, non-homogenous, resonant, and dynamic. While visual space created a spatial and temporal continuum, acoustic space provides ‘simultaneous access to all pasts’ so that ‘there is no history. All is present’⁴⁴. In their dialogue, and through the resonant interval, visual and acoustic space become ‘inseparable’⁴⁵. Situating the reader-via-Bombadil in the resonant interval between works, spaces, and media creates a taught two-way pull in narrative space and time that oscillates between circularity and causality, between discrete succession and cyclic repetition where, under the strain, as Harris states, ‘time may be broken into episodes causally connected in complete story arcs, or bent in concentric circles’⁴⁶. The two-way movement of narrative space and time is most dynamic and recursive as ‘Astronauts’ calls

⁴¹ Maria Beville, ‘Getting Past the ‘Post-‘: History and Time in the Fiction of David Mitchell’, *[Sic]*, 6 (2015), p.17.

⁴² David Mitchell, ‘@I_Bombadil: No Sign of Nathan Bishop&mother’, 2015 <https://twitter.com/I_Bombadil/status/659694175617683456> [accessed 31 January 2020].

⁴³ Beville, p.5.

⁴⁴ McLuhan and McLuhan, pp.102-3.

⁴⁵ McLuhan and Powers, p.6.

⁴⁶ Harris, p.3.

back to @I_Bombadil: astronauts typically measure time as a compression of space and time (a light-year) in the same way they are synthesised in Mitchell's narratives and in the notion of an interval. The two-way temporal and spatial movement creates temporal involutions both within and across the works. As Harris suggests, these types of temporal entanglements are characteristic of Mitchell's work. As a consequence, there is a double-bind at play.

As Beville notes, Mitchell's writing desires to both find and abandon coherent notions of history.⁴⁷ Similarly, for McLuhan, through the resonant interval, the historical continuum of visual space and the simultaneous lack of history of acoustic space collide. Through the resonant interval, and through Mitchell's resonant literary practice, this simultaneous construction and deconstruction of history presents itself in readers' limited window of access to Bombadil's full narrative. As the chapter has already stressed in its use of past tense, the ideal reading experience of the two works was to follow @I_Bombadil "live" in the lead-up to *Slade House's* publication. With @I_Bombadil only being active for seven weeks, the reader only had seven weeks in which to experience the story as ideally intended. Shortly after Bombadil's final tweet on the 31st of October 2015, Mitchell set @I_Bombadil to "private", locking the Twitter account so that it was not visible to new readers/users.

After having relied on a coherent notion of history to create a prelude to the events of 'Astronauts', Mitchell then made sure only the readers who originally followed @I_Bombadil could access his tweets, abandoning the coherent notion of history he had initially relied upon. As a result, the type of idealised reading experience of @I_Bombadil and *Slade House* discussed here was temporally specific to the seven-week timeline Bombadil's tweets represented, ironically not unlike the "aperture" that only briefly and periodically appears to permit access to Slade House. It could be that Mitchell intended to lock @I_Bombadil from the outset, in which case it could be referred to as a form of literary planned obsolescence, which may in turn underscore the capitalist imperative for the work as a marketing exercise for the forthcoming *Slade House*, even as it similarly supports the assertion regarding Mitchell's simultaneous construction and deconstruction of narrative history.

As noted with reference to Egan's *A Visit from the Goon Squad* in the previous chapter, Ricoeur stated that very few fictional narratives are actually 'about time' in the sense that the experience of time is principally what is at stake in the narrative, which Currie extends to suggest that certain narratives can also be even more focused on time, so as to effectively be 'about about time'.⁴⁸ In *Slade House*, through its cyclical five-part structure, recurring nine-year intervals, and

⁴⁷ Beville, p.7.

⁴⁸ Paul Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative, Vol. 2*, ed. by Kathleen McLaughlin and David Pellauer (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985), p.101; Mark Currie, *About Time: Narrative, Fiction and the Philosophy of Time* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2007), pp.4-5.

in its thematic preoccupation with the literal consumption of time, it was a novel about about time, in which time itself is pointedly and principally at stake.⁴⁹ The print format allowed Mitchell absolute authorial control over narrative temporality whereas Twitter's exigent time relations were ineradicable and inexorable, meaning that narrative temporality needed to operate within these conditions. In @I_Bombadil, seven weeks of narrative created an inelastic timeline that inevitably led to the beginning of the final part of *Slade House*. Yet both works eventually led to the same point, with @I_Bombadil and *Slade House's* first four parts converging at 'Astronauts'. Through the resonant interval between the works, @I_Bombadil did not merely act as a prelude – a beginning to *Slade House*, ending as 'Astronauts' begins – nor did *Slade House* itself solely act as an ending to @I_Bombadil.

'For one voyage to begin, another voyage must come to an end, sort of'.⁵⁰ The final line of *The Bone Clocks*, Mitchell's last publication prior to @I_Bombadil and *Slade House* aptly articulates the spiralling repetition and replay, the input and feedback, interlace and interface, the circle of rebirth and metamorphosis evident in his literary practice and across his corpus. It is also fitting that this chapter end where it began, at the point preceding the publication of *Slade House*. Mitchell used the Twitter platform as a means of extending Bombadil's narrative arc and his life beyond the novel, in manner that, following *Slade House's* publication, became quite literal. When the novel was published on the 27th of October 2015, at which point Bombadil was effectively still-born, always already dead within its pages, he was still actively tweeting about his visit to Slade Alley on his yet-to-be-locked Twitter account.

His death in the novel marked the end of his voyage down Slade Alley to Slade House, but this was the necessary end that precipitated the beginning of Bombadil's new life on Twitter. This rendered his death in the novel only a 'sort-of' ending. In a sense, Bombadil still exists, undead and disjointedly out of time, visible only to previously "live" readers and followers of @I_Bombadil on his now-locked Twitter account. Here, once again, he is ironically not unlike the novel's other protagonists, lured down Slade Alley to Slade House and their 'sort-of' deaths, visible only to those who are likewise lured to Slade House. The tension between circularity and causality, discrete succession and cyclic repetition, and the dynamic, recursive, and – as this chapter has suggested – ultimately resonant nature of Mitchell's literary practice were crystalized in the four days during which Bombadil tweeted from beyond the grave, dead and undead, his fate certain and uncertain, caught, as he is, was, and was not, in the resonant interval between

⁴⁹ It is worth noting that, while this argument refers to time being principally at stake on a practical, narrative, the same argument applies to @I_Bombadil and *Slade House* on a thematic level, where antagonists the Greyer twins must consume the soul of the stories' various protagonists in order to continue living beyond the standard human time scale. Thus, across the two works, on a thematic level, time is also what is principally at stake.

⁵⁰ David Mitchell, *The Bone Clocks* (New York: Random House, 2015).

Slade House and @I_Bombadil. However, in his death and through @I_Bombadil and *Slade House*, he helped provide a number of answers to the questions prompted by Cole's keynote.

Through his Diamedia Literary Practice, across and through the novel form and the Twitter platform, Mitchell demonstrates a decidedly literal interpretation of Cole's assertion that, partially represented by Twitter, the novel was getting bigger and bigger. Through @I_Bombadil and via Twitter, Mitchell found a means to extend *Slade House*, following his expansive instincts as an author and providing a character from his yet to be print-published novel with a prelude via the platform. In doing so and choosing to create a standalone account for Bombadil, Mitchell also allowed himself to explore, and rather eccentrically interpret, Cole's conception of the novelist being smaller than ever before by playing with the (quasi-)anonymity Bombadil permitted him by to somewhat meta-textually yet expressly engage with his own fictive creation, as well as members of his audience. Thus, Mitchell presents Twitter as a future of the novel in a more direct sense and in which the novelist is more directly implicated than suggested by Cole in his keynote, which further enabled Mitchell to amplify the temporal and spatial concerns of his literary practice in order to construct and deconstruct the notion of a 'future' of the novel itself by embedding it within the temporal-spatial involutions of his wider corpus and using the platform's affordances to challenge existing notions of narrative history.

Chapter 6

'I Can't Feel My Avatar': Robotic Readjustment Across Tao Lin's @tao_lin and *Taipei*

'I don't view my memory as accurate or static – and, in autobiographical fiction, my focus is still on creating an effect, not on documenting reality – so “autobiographical,” to me, is closer in meaning to “fiction” than “autobiography.”

Tao Lin

“Tao Lin” is less a person than an amorphous concept. It is impossible to separate Tao Lin the author from his work, his thinly veiled protagonists, his multiple Twitter accounts, and each from the other. His novel, *Taipei* (2013), and its narrator and protagonist, Paul, are based on Lin and his life between November 2009 and July 2011, including excerpts from interviews he gave, a written account of *Mumblecore* (2011) – the film he made with fellow “alt-lit” author Megan Boyle, known as Erin in the novel, in the period leading up to and including their Las Vegas wedding – and various verbatim tweets from his numerous Twitter accounts. *Taipei* and his Twitter work come from the same impulse to use his life as the source of his literary practice in all its forms. Yet, Lin does not seek to objectively record events, thoughts, or memories as an unadulterated life-archive; rather, as the chapter's epigraph suggests, Lin uses his life as the basis for autobiographical fictive works that create “an effect”.

Lin's work emerges from the inextricability of his life and his literary practice, containing aspects of his own experiences manipulated, curated, and appended to create a desired effect. He pursues a reflexive and reflective form of literary practice in which he is primary protagonist, participant, and producer, working in a diamedia capacity, across and through the Twitter platform and in the print-published novel form, where everything he publishes is equally part of his literary output. Through his nebulously self-centred, fictionally autobiographic literary practice, Lin retrieves and updates the epistolary form for a contemporary technocultural context increasingly characterised by and chronicled via digital social media. In the process, Lin reshapes the temporal and authenticity-based affordances of the epistolary novel form around Twitter and, more importantly, in relation to the dynamic dialogue between the platform and the novel Cole so crucially identified, in order to produce his desired effect.

The effect Lin seeks to create in his Twitter writing and in *Taipei*, and indeed across much of his work, relates directly to his existential experience in an environment where experiences are increasingly defined by and filtered through digital media. His work is deeply rooted in the mores of social media and the conditions of life in a progressively digital age, which he renders as an oscillating tension between hesitancy and urgency, self-consciousness and solipsism, connection and disconnection, resulting, for Lin, in a restless form of existential ennui. Creating

this effect in both print and digital environments, though, requires different forms of engagement with the affordances of each medium and an ability to adapt to the different environmental contexts of Twitter and the novel. However, through his amorphous “Tao Lin”-ness – as primary protagonist, participant, and producer in and of his work; as writer, artist, and internet “personality”; as the ‘(shameless) self-promoter’ and ‘unnaturally socially anxious’ introvert; as the genesis and emblem of what was known as “alt-lit” and being ‘not really alt lit’ – Lin seems less to adapt to, than simply exist differently in different environments and in relation to different impetuses and impulses.¹ His writing in *Taipei* and across his multiple Twitter accounts, is emphatically distinct, seemingly effortlessly grammatically and stylistically attuned to the affordances of the specific print or digital medium in which he is working.

In this sense, Lin’s literary practice reflects McLuhan’s notion of “robotism”.² For McLuhan, robotism is an individual’s flexibility in the face of environmental stimuli, their ability to readjust instantly to shifting environmental contexts. It is the individual as attuned to and subsumed into the collective perspective rather than their own singular, fixed perspective. It is the suppression of the observer-self as a means of achieving ideal performance. For Lin, ideal performance is the obscuring of himself as an individual, identifiable observer-self in favour of an effect: for Lin, the effect is the ideal performance. Through his indistinct identity, Lin is able to instantly readjust his self-contradictorily self-centric literary practice to different contexts, whether they be media environments or literary forms. ‘At the speed of light’, McLuhan states, ‘you become a narcissist because only the figure of the self remains’.³ Yet, at the same time, ‘Once placed in relation to the computer/transponder, the user is everywhere at once.’⁴ These paradoxical aspects of robotism aptly describe the same paradoxically self-regarding yet nebulously self-effacing aspects of Lin’s literary practice.

Through his retrieval of the epistolary novel form and via his robotic readjustment across and through the digital environs of the Twitter platform and the print-based context of the novel, Lin demonstrates the distinct sensibilities of Diamedia Literary Practice. His Twitter writing, here exemplified by @tao_lin, his primary Twitter account, and his novel *Taipei* are connected at a

¹ John Sunyer, ‘Tuned Out’, *Financial Times*, 2013 <<https://www.ft.com/content/aecc38da-e7b9-11e2-babb-00144feabdc0>> [accessed 22 January 2017]; ‘Great American Novelist’, *The Stranger*, 2010 <<http://www.thestranger.com/seattle/great-american-novelist/Content?oid=4940853>> [accessed 3 November 2016]; Josh Spiker, ‘Lexicon Devils: What Exactly Is Alt Lit? A Conversation With Frank Hinton, Noah Cicero and Stephen Tully Dierks’, *Vol. 1 Brooklyn*, 2012 <<http://www.vol1brooklyn.com/2012/06/20/lexicon-devils-what-exactly-is-alt-lit-a-conversation-with-frank-hinton-noah-cicero-and-stephen-tully-dierks/>> [accessed 15 November 2016].

² Similarly, Tao Lin himself recalls some of the criticisms aimed at Marshall McLuhan at the height of his fame. For example, Donald F. Theall refers to him as a ‘guru cum prophet cum philosopher cum promoter cum populizer cum pseudo-artist’: Donald F. Theall, *The Medium Is the Rear View Mirror: Understanding McLuhan* (Montreal: McGill-Queens University Press, 1971), p.1.

³ McLuhan and Powers, p.100.

⁴ McLuhan and Powers, p.118.

practical and thematic level by Lin's ideal performance-as-effect – his recreation of a digitally-driven existential ennui of at the centre of each work – but separated by the singular means by which he creates the same effect in different media contexts.⁵ On Twitter, through his ongoing, carefully curated and consciously constructed stream of self-obsessed tweets, he turns the status update into a literary form. In doing so, Lin explores the limits of his own experiences and of his sense of self in a way that it is both readable and relatable to his audience, displaying one of the functions of the novel Cole argues Twitter also fulfils. Through his nebulous notions of identity presentation, Lin depicts the novelist as smaller than ever before in a more multifarious manner than suggested by Cole, represented by the multiple amorphous roles he adopts in the various aspects of his work. In the novel, similarly, he shows that Cole's assertion that Twitter will begin to affect the print-published novel need not necessarily be taken or depicted so literally as to involve character constraints or atomised information dispersal, but rather that the exigent temporalities and repeated refreshing of tools such as Twitter are perhaps more pervasive and require more elaborate portrayal in a print format. To reflect the temporalities of digital media in a print medium that constructs a fundamentally different experience of time, Lin paradoxically embraces a form of ornate sentence construction, grammatical complexity, and strange stylistics wildly incompatible with digital tools such as Twitter. However, in the process, he innovatively induces the kind of recursively looped, refresh-based reading practices that characterise digital media and, by extension, expresses the protagonist Paul's tangled temporal relationship with the digital tools that define his existence. As a result, Lin presents Twitter as a future of the novel in the sense that it provides an archive of lifestreamed material from which novelists can draw while also progressively influencing and informing the novel as a persistent form.

This chapter therefore begins by addressing the roots of the epistolary novel form and its retrieval via @tao_lin for Twitter, before addressing the “effect” Lin creates across and through @tao_lin and *Taipei*, and how his “robotic” readjustment enables the creation of this “effect”.

@tao_lin, Twitter, and the Retrieval of the Epistolary Novel Form

The novel form was, from its inception, a solution to the temporal inadequacies of other literary forms to capture the existential experience and precision of new industrial, technologically driven time dynamics, arising from the cultural and social milieu of the eighteenth century. In his influential account of the rise of the novel in Britain, Ian Watt argued that writers such as Samuel Richardson, Daniel Defoe, and Henry Fielding ‘could not have created the [novel] form unless the conditions of the time had also been favourable’.⁶ It was, in Watt's terms, ‘the logical literary

⁵ A note on temporal specificity regarding tense: *Taipei* is referred to in the present tense, as is the typical mode of literary studies; @tao_lin is also, in this instance, referred to in the present tense, as an active Twitter account at the time of writing.

⁶ Watt, p.9.

vehicle of a culture'.⁷ It is in this period that the epistolary novel also arose, primarily through the letter and journal-based narratives of Samuel Richardson's *Pamela* (1740), *Clarissa* (1748), and *The History of Sir Charles Grandison* (1753). However, despite being originally characterised as a novel in letters based on Richardson's prototypical work, the epistolary novel is not restricted to such a particular style. Acknowledging epistolary fiction's 'lack of formal essence', Joe Bray suggests that its changing styles permit it to 'interact with changing social and cultural realities'.⁸ Indeed, descriptions of the exact features of the epistolary novel are conspicuous by their absence and, in lieu of such definitive markers, critics have tended to focus on the experiential intentionality of the form.

For Watt, 'the novelist's primary task is to convey the impression of fidelity to human experience'.⁹ The novel, he suggests, was defined by its realism and experiential fidelity; that is, its authenticity to the lived experience of its audience. Time was the essential category of this authenticity, as the novel was preoccupied 'much more than any other literary form in the development of its characters in the course of time'.¹⁰ He continues, stating that the form's 'closeness to the texture of daily experience directly depends upon its deployment of a much more minutely discriminated time-scale than had previously been employed in narrative'.¹¹ This was the temporal solution the novel, and by extension the epistolary novel, provided for authors struggling to engage with the then-contemporary existential experience of the eighteenth century:

The main problem in portraying the inner life is essentially one of the time-scale. The daily experience is composed of a ceaseless flow of thought, feeling, and sensation; but most literary forms – biography and even autobiography for instance – tend to be of too gross a temporal mesh to retain its actuality; and so, for the most part, is memory. Yet, it is this minute-by-minute content of consciousness which constitutes what the individual's personality really is, and dictates his relationship to others: it is only by contact with this consciousness that a reader can participate fully in the fictional life of a character.¹²

In the increasingly industrial technocultural context of the late eighteenth century, daily experience was rooted in the increasingly Taylorist, technologically driven organisation of time. This is what Watt refers to as the 'minute-by-minute content of consciousness which constitutes [...] the individual's personality': this is the individual's temporal experience as it was progressively defined by the prevalent clock-time sparked by the Industrial Revolution. He also

⁷ Watt, p.14.

⁸ Joe Bray, *The Epistolary Novel: Representations of Consciousness* (London: Routledge, 2003), p.3.

⁹ Watt, p.14.

¹⁰ Watt, p.23.

¹¹ Watt, p.23.

¹² Watt, p.199.

suggests a latent intimacy in the ability to conceive of and measure a person's consciousness on a more minute timescale. As Watt notes, biographical and autobiographical forms were too vague in their conception of time to portray contemporary inner life authentically or intimately. What the epistolary form provided, originally in the form of letters or journal entries, was a more momentary and measurable narrative structure that mimicked the comparatively fragmented temporal experience of the eighteenth century, which in turn imbued the inner life of its characters with a greater degree of verisimilitude. The epistolary novel's authenticity in representing human experience is therefore derived from its temporality, which was in turn tied to the increasingly industrial technocultural context of the late eighteenth century.

This conception of epistolary authenticity, the depiction of an inner and personal life via the minute-by-minute content of consciousness, derives from the same cultural logic as Lionel Trilling's exhaustive definition. His definition is similarly rooted in the cultural changes taking place in Western society in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries that came to emphasise the individual as a unique entity and distinguish private from public lives. Although lacking a quotably concise expression, Trilling's definition of "authenticity" can be loosely summarised as the display of an inner and private life, including all the passion, pain, and potential unpleasantness that this entails.¹³ As a concept, he crucially separates authenticity from the earlier conception of "sincerity" in that authenticity stresses an autonomousness, being true to oneself for one's own sake, while sincerity suggests an honesty for the benefit of others in society. For Trilling, amid these cultural changes and the shift towards authenticity in art, the goal of the artist 'is to be as self-defining as the art-object he creates'.¹⁴ Authenticity is not sincerity or honesty but an inner, individual, and self-regarding sense of truth. Arising at the same time as the novel through the progressive individualisation of Western society, it is this type of authenticity that was an intrinsic part of the development of the epistolary form. Yet, as Trilling's account suggests, conceptions of authenticity are culturally contextual, arising from and referring to specific societal and cultural conditions, including temporal experience of everyday life at the time. Epistolary authenticity is therefore contingent on the context in which the work exists, which, in turn, explains the epistolary form's lack of formal essence.

Watt argues more widely that the novel's comparative poverty of formal conventions was ultimately 'the price it must pay for its realism'.¹⁵ In generating its realist fidelity to eighteenth century existential experiences, as he continues, 'attention to any pre-established formal conventions [could] only endanger success'.¹⁶ In order to capture the *zeitgeist* of eighteenth-

¹³ Lionel Trilling, *Sincerity and Authenticity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1972).

¹⁴ Trilling, p.100.

¹⁵ Watt, p.14.

¹⁶ Watt, pp.13-14.

century life, the epistolary form needed a new and original prose style that provided an air of authenticity. As Watt states, the break that authors such as Richardson, Defoe, and Fielding made with received, canonical notions of prose style was ‘not as an incidental blemish, but rather the price they had to pay for achieving the immediacy and closeness of the text to what is being described’.¹⁷ This was of course, as the focus of Watt’s text indicates, the rise of the novel in which the term “novel” referred to the innovative nature of form. However, as the novel form developed over time, renovating and reconstructing itself over and in line with centuries of shifting technocultural contexts, the dominant epistolary mode of the eighteenth century was left behind.

In *Graphs, Maps, Trees*, Franco Moretti shows that the epistolary novel’s earlier hegemonic dominance of the novel form declined sharply in 1790, with the gothic novel first coming to the fore before it too was supplanted by the historical novel.¹⁸ Godfrey Frank Singer describes an almost identical pattern when appraising the history and decline of the epistolary novel, writing that it ‘reached its height in England about 1785, after which the fashion for writing novels in the form of letters and correspondences having waned, the graph of the novel in letters may be seen to enter upon a sharp and distinct decline’.¹⁹ He continues to state that, ‘At no period [...] may there be said to be a revivification of the epistolary impulse to the extent that it results in a large and concentrated epistolary literature such as has already been found in the eighteenth century.’²⁰ Singer is correct, in one sense: that the epistolary form has not been revived to the point of its eighteenth century prominence. But a revival of epistolary writing would not be in the form of a novel of letters or correspondences. These forms were tied to and a condition of the epistolary form’s necessarily authentic depiction of eighteenth-century inner life, in relation to the technocultural context of the period.

In the contemporary technocultural context, the ‘epistolary impulse’ instead thrives on social media where it is threaded through the micro-temporalities of digital media. Users document their inner lives in ever-more minute detail and ever-more publicly, constantly connected to networked platforms to update their profiles with their most recent thoughts, feelings, and/or communicate the current events of their lives. It is through digital and social media that the revival of the epistolary form finds its genesis. Once again, as Chapters 3, 4, and 5 have already discussed regarding the *fait divers* and the serial form, the return of the epistolary form is not simply a revival. The changing technocultural context and medium mean that the epistolary form is, in McLuhan’s terms, retrieved rather than revived. Once more, it is important

¹⁷ Watt, p.30.

¹⁸ Franco Moretti, *Graphs, Maps, Trees: Abstract Models for Literary History* (London: Verso, 2005), pp.14-17.

¹⁹ Godfrey Frank Singer, *The Epistolary Novel: Its Origin, Development, Decline, and Residuary Influence* (New York: Russell & Russell, 1963), p.156.

²⁰ Singer, p.156.

to recall that the process of retrieval, as McLuhan emphasised, immutably involved a process of transformation, translation, or metamorphosis to recontextualise the epistolary form in its new environment. In order to be compatible with its new ground (the medium, Twitter, in comparison to its old ground, the print novel) the figure (the content, the epistolary form) must be transformed in relation to the functional characteristics and structural biases of the new ground. It is in this way that Lin's ongoing, literary status updates on the Twitter platform retrieve the epistolary novel for a contemporary technocultural context. If the eighteenth-century epistolary form addressed the contemporary texture of experience and provided an authentic depiction of an inner life within cultural, social, and technological milieu of the period, then the retrieved epistolary form must be transformed to address the same issues in the cultural, social, and technological milieu of the twenty-first century.

Lin's Twitter writing retrieves the epistolary form for the twenty-first century by grounding the epistolary form in a digital medium implicated in the progressively infinitesimal measurement and atomised experience of time characteristic of existential experience in the contemporary technocultural context. It is the epistolary form's grounding in the very medium that amplifies the progressively infinitesimal temporal measurement of the *zeitgeist* that complicates the form's engagement with and authentic portrayal of the texture of experience in a twenty-first century social and cultural milieu. The atomised experience of time in the digital age is both the subject of Lin's Twitter writing and generated by the platform itself. Lin's Twitter work retrieves the epistolary form as a means of exploring the problematic nature of the present as an experiential phenomenon and as a mode of literary discourse in the digital age, but one in which the digital tools and technologies that characterise the experience and discourse are inherently implicated, enhancing the already problematic present of epistolary narratives.

In defining the problematic nature of the present of epistolary writing, Janet Gurkin Altman wrote that the epistolary present tense acts as a 'pivot for past and future', where the writer is 'anchored in a present time from which he looks toward both past and future events'. 'The letter writer', she continued, 'is highly conscious of writing in a specific present against which past and future are plotted'.²¹ The pivotal time of epistolary writing is the present and the pivotal narrative tense is the present of narration, as opposed to the time of narrated action. Altman distinguished these two narrative temporalities as *Ehrzählzeit* and *erzählte Zeit*, respectively, while, as discussed in Chapter 4, Currie similarly referred to these two 'time loci' as the time of the narrator and the time of the narrated.²² For epistolary writing, the present is always the *Ehrzählzeit*. It is the present of the narration and narrator. It is writing grounded in its own telling.

²¹ Janet Gurkin Altman, *Epistolarity: Approaches to a Form* (Columbus, OH: Ohio State University, 1982), pp.121-2.

²² Altman, p.123.

It is writing moments. It is immediacy and spontaneity. It is plunging a ‘reader in media res so that he feels tuned in to the hotline of events narrated as they occur by the persons experiencing them’.²³ It is writing from a present ‘vibrant with future orientation’.²⁴ But, as Altman continued, despite its anticipation and speculation about the future, it is just as oriented to the past. “Now” defines itself relative to a retrospective or anticipated “then.” The epistolary present is caught up in the impossibility of seizing itself, since the narrative present must necessarily postdate or anticipate the events narrated.’²⁵

Altman outlines three impossibilities of the epistolary present: the impossibility of the narrative’s being simultaneous with the event, the time of narration being out of sync with the time of the event being narrated; the impossibility of the written present’s remaining valid, being valid only for that moment and until subsequent moments render it past; and the impossibility of the present dialogue between writer and the addressee. The epistolary form is characterised by its temporal multivalence, including inexorable and performed temporalities alike. It is in the performative sense that the epistolary form creates its paradoxical present, typically through its dynamic use of grammar. The problematic nature of the narrative present and, specifically, the impossibility of the epistolary present also find expression within the digital environs of Twitter. Where the epistolary impulse thrives within digital (social) media and is transformed in relation to its new ground, the complicated nature of epistolary narrative is also inevitably altered. It is amplified by the exigent and multivalent temporalities of digital media, simultaneously shaping and becoming the content of Lin’s work as he engages with the existential experience of living in the digital age. This is something Altman was acutely aware of in relation to the epistolary form in print media, referring to McLuhan and stating, ‘we have come to appreciate that form can be more than the outer shell of content, that the medium chosen by an artist may in fact dictate, rather than be dictated by, his message’.²⁶

The most readily identifiable characteristic of Twitter is that it enhances brevity. Although at platform’s character restrictions are now 280 characters per tweet – double the length of the previous, long-standing 140-character limit, as noted in Chapter 2 – at the time Lin was tweeting concurrently to *Taipei* and when the examples of his tweets were taken for this chapter, the platform’s character constraint was still the even more stringent 140 characters. At the time, any message exceeding this threshold was split into a separate tweet and linked, if intended, through the reply function to visually link the tweets with a connecting line. Lin does not use this function,

²³ Altman, p.124; Currie, p.31.

²⁴ Altman, p.124.

²⁵ Altman, p.127.

²⁶ Altman, p.8.

and his tweets remain exclusively within the (then 140-)character threshold of a single tweet. In many cases, they are significantly shorter, as shown in Figures 6.1-3:



Figure 6.1 A short tweet from @tao_lin



Figure 6.2 A short tweet from @tao_lin



Figure 6.3 A short tweet from @tao_lin

His tweets always eschew hashtags, he mostly avoids contractions, and his profile page is only infrequently interrupted by retweets or replies. He does post images (particularly of vegetables/herbs and his “mandala” artworks), links, and music videos, but his tweets are, in the main, exclusively text based. In their purely text-based form, they maintain a spare, affectless quality. They are epigrammatically short, where the extraneous is culled before tweeting. Lin pointedly stresses the importance of editing as a part of his composition process and, as much as the brevity and simplicity of the tweets suggests spontaneity, this is a product of his editing process prior to publishing on the platform. Previously, he used a Gmail email draft to store draft tweets and, later, also Google Drive to store tweets that he wanted to edit before publishing. Although more recently his process has changed, he still uses drafts and an editing process. ‘I

started only mostly tweeting via iPhone, and Twitter on the phone has the “save draft” option. So at any moment I might have 5-30 drafts now.’²⁷

Lin withholds tweets if he is unsure about whether he likes what he has written or feels unable, due to low self-esteem or shyness, to publish the tweet at that time. This underlines the emotional antinomy of his Twitter writing. On the one hand it appears spontaneously affectless and devoid of emotive content or intention, but on the other it is emotional and intimate enough to lead him to sometimes withhold tweets. His hesitancy to publish tweets seemingly bereft of emotive content or intention for emotional reasons suggest that, for Lin, the content is not necessarily the only way he attempts to convey and produce intimacy. His tweets may have an affectless quality, but they are also always paradoxically and publicly personal, written with an awareness of a networked audience. As Alice Marwick writes:

One of the most important benefits is the [...] ambient awareness of others, or the development of “digital intimacy”. While Twitter is frequently characterised as a chattering stream of irrelevant pieces of information, these pieces of information, gossip, small talk, and trivia serve to create and maintain emotional connections between members of the networked audience.²⁸

Twitter also enhances constant connection with one’s audience. Lin is acutely aware of the reception of his tweets among his constantly connected, networked audience. As Marwick notes, this enhanced connection is not only between users and the platform, but also between networks of users. At the same time, Lin’s awareness of audience reception underlines the performative nature of his Twitter practice. He has often described the different potential reactions he has to other users’ reactions to his tweets, based on their interaction with his tweets via likes and retweets, and his inability to avoid thinking about his tweets self-consciously.²⁹ All of his reactions are rooted in his networked audience’s response, or lack thereof, to his tweets. In the development of a ‘digital intimacy’, Lin’s tweets make ‘emotional connections’ through their overt affectlessness, via a shared sense of ennui and a latent, humorously bleak (or perhaps bleakly humorous) outlook among Lin and his networked audience.

The cadre of writers typically referred to by media outlets and the literary establishment as “alt-lit” – a tag Lin is credited as having given rise to through his publishing house (Muumuu House), his general visibility, and his having inspired other young, internet-based or -focused

²⁷ Sheila Heti, ‘What Would Twitter Do?’, *The Believer*, 2014
<<http://logger.believermag.com/post/91248036044/what-would-twitter-do>> [accessed 20 August 2016].

²⁸ Alice E. Marwick, *Status Update: Celebrity, Publicity, and Branding in the Social Media Age* (London: Yale University Press, 2013), p.216.

²⁹ See: Heti.

writers – respond to and share each other’s work on Twitter via “likes”, replies, and “retweets”.³⁰ Through these likes, replies, and retweets, Twitter makes potentially (and to a limited extent) possible the impossibility of the present dialogue between writer and the addressee of the epistolary form referred to by Altman. Although many users liking, replying, or retweeting will respond within seconds, minutes, hours, or even days after the tweet has been published on the platform, Twitter potentially allows a networked audience to perform these functions almost as soon as the tweet appears in streams and on profile pages. Twitter transforms the epistolary form in its retrieval, extending monologues into dialogues by providing all users with the means to comment on and engage with tweets.

On a practical level, direct dialogue between the writer and addressee(s) is possible in the form of replies, and positive feedback via likes and retweets. On a functional level, however, this dialogue can never take place in “real time” due to the algorithmic and processual operativity of the platform as it assigns tweets a place in a global publishing queue. Even where the amount of time elapsing between tweets being published and users responding or between users responding and the original author being notified is microseconds, an unavoidable micro-temporal delay is generated, reaffirming the impossibility of a true-present, real-time dialogue between writer and addressee. Every response is an act at a remove, a disconnection from desire, even if an infinitesimally and imperceptibly small one, performed discretely, and displayed as a form of digital hesitancy. This functional impossibility, when presented as a form of hesitancy and a micro-temporal disconnection or micro-alienation from communicative intent symptomatic of digital devices and tools, reverses into subject and content for writers such as Lin concerned primarily with the existential experience of living in a technocultural context characterised by the proliferation of such digital devices and tools, as can be seen in Figures 6.4-5:

³⁰ Like Lin himself, alt-lit is notoriously difficult to define. It has been described as ‘a sprawling online community of writers, whose work takes every form from instant messenger and text message logs to essays, image macros, tweets and Tumblr blogs. Alt-lit has a vitality to it that is born of the internet itself’. (See: James Bridle, ‘Meet the “alt Lit” Writers Giving Literature a Boost’, *Guardian*, 2014 <<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2014/jun/29/meet-alt-lit-writers-giving-literature-boost>> [accessed 15 November 2016].) Noah Cicero refers to the importance of the internet: ‘We could see, that the Internet had possibilities, that there were no rules on the Internet. A person could get a blog for free and write exactly what they wanted. And that was going to be the future.’ He also states: ‘[w]hat I think is most important, essential to all this, is the idea of the return of the literary life. [...] The literary life is about “living”, [...] traveling, doing drugs, partying, standing on street corners in cities and thinking crazy thoughts, taking shits in gas stations in Nebraska at 4 in the morning, going to Asia to teach English, flying over from New Zealand or England just to get drunk with people who’ve met online. Staying up till 5 in the morning talking about philosophy and politics. Making a ten-minute long YouTube video about something you can’t get off your mind.’ (See: Josh Spiker, ‘Lexicon Devils: What Exactly Is Alt Lit? A Conversation With Frank Hinton, Noah Cicero and Stephen Tully Dierks’, *Vol. 1 Brooklyn*, 2012 <<http://www.vol1brooklyn.com/2012/06/20/lexicon-devils-what-exactly-is-alt-lit-a-conversation-with-frank-hinton-noah-cicero-and-stephen-tully-dierks/>> [accessed 15 November 2016].)



Figure 6.4 An existential tweet from @sosadtoday



Figure 6.5 An existential tweet from @333333333433333

There is a thematic and grammatical affinity that exists across the Twitter work of alt-lit authors such as Melissa Broder (@sosadtoday), Darcie Wilder (@333333333433333), and Mira Gonzalez (@miragonz), which is particularly evident when they are writing about the same kind of bleak and humorous existential uncertainty, hesitancy, self-consciousness, solipsism, alienation, and ennui as Lin, in similarly grammatically spare, typically lower-case tweets, all shaped by and filtered through digital social media.³¹ Their writing is predicated on capturing these feelings in an authentic way, ‘creating a person, producing content, and strategically appealing to online fans’ by communicating personal information that often falls outside of the norms of typical social media usage and captures the *zeitgeist* in a way that their cohort and networked audience can relate to.³² It is the epistolary form’s authenticity to the lived experience of its (networked) audience, but with a highly personal bias, based on Twitter’s amplification of sharing, which begets a ‘closeness and accountability’ – or intimacy – that is informally judged in relation to the interactive and indirect self-policing of material.³³ Writers will like, retweet, or reply to each other’s tweets, providing the kind of intimate audience reception with which Lin states he is preoccupied, as seen below in Figure 6.6:

³¹ As with Lin, these are also only Melissa Broder and Darcie Wilder’s primary Twitter accounts: they each have numerous accounts.

³² Marwick, p.114.

³³ Marwick, p.118.



Figure 6.6 Reply thread between @tao_lin and @miragonz

Through their affirmation and ratifying of, responding to, and sharing of each other's tweets, they create a dispersed community predicated on authentic, shared emotional responses to living in the digital age and maintained through their constant connection as a networked audience for each other's output. The concept of authenticity critical to the alt-lit may appear inconsistent with Lin's practice, as indicated by this chapter's epigraph, where he states that he does not want to think about being authentic or not. As Stephen Tully Dierks states and Frank Hinton continues, 'A commonality among most or all writers associated with "alt lit" seems to be knowledge of, influence from, and/or association with Tao Lin', but 'That being said, Tao is not really alt lit. He is and isn't'.³⁴ As the genesis point of alt-lit and its totem, Lin's practice is what has driven the particular form of authenticity that has become central to alt-lit practice.

³⁴ Spiker.

It is an authenticity not predicated on originality, per se, or on being truly genuine in one's sentiments, but rather in capturing the *zeitgeist* as the uncharted territory of the digital age as an existential experience, especially for those whose lives are lived and consumed through and by digital social media. It is an authenticity that centres not so much on the individual, even if this is its origin and focus, but one that speaks of thoughts, feelings, events, and lives with which networked audiences can relate and, ultimately, ratify, as shown in Figure 6.7:

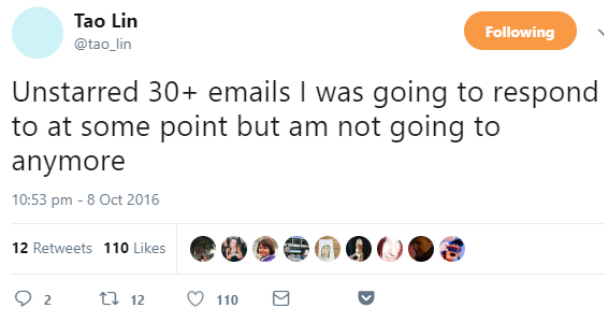


Figure 6.7 @tao_lin tweets about emails

In his Twitter stream, Lin captures what Sherry Turkle calls ‘the “boring bits” from which we flee’, whose value she argues we should reconsider.³⁵ It is with networked digital tools, like Twitter, with their capacity to reverse communication and connection into distraction from meaningful dialogue and from our “real” lives in general that Turkle asserts we ‘flee’, arguing that, if these moments are encountered or countenanced, they hold the potential to give birth to complex emotional responses that place the self in context and in connection to others. It is precisely these ‘boring bits’ that Lin often chronicles and explores in his Twitter writing. Thus, in one way, as per Turkle’s formulation, he flees; but in another way, he encounters and countenances these moments, using them as material to forge connections with his networked audience, as shown in Figure 6.8:



Figure 6.8 A boring tweet from @tao_lin

³⁵ Sherry Turkle, *Reclaiming Conversation: The Power of Talk in a Digital Age* (New York: Penguin, 2015), p.39.

The above tweet received sixty-four likes, twenty-nine retweets, and five replies. @GwendolynKansen writes, 'that's pretty much me all the time', @Absurd responds, 'Supine on a mattress similarly', while @ElephantTea states, 'It's called life'. @sweetrocketsky even exclaims, 'It's fucking amazing that seven fucking people fucking retweeted that you are fucking sitting on a fucking couch. Fuck's sake', underlining the banal nature of the tweet and the seemingly counterintuitive response to and engagement with it.³⁶ As Turkle later suggests, Lin uses Twitter to construct an avatar that allows him to express something that he would like to explore. Rather than presenting himself as a fully formed individual, his neutral-seeming, affectless avatar allows him to focus more clearly on exploring what he sees as the often restlessly boring nature of existence. It is by cataloguing these moments authentically, in a way that his networked audience recognise and can relate to, that Lin makes connections with his audience.

Once again, the connection between writer and addressee (or writer and responder) is subject to an unavoidable micro-temporal delay, reaffirming the impossibility of a true-present, real-time dialogue symptomatic of epistolary narratives. As with the epistolary form in its historical context, however, through the fineness of Twitter's temporal mesh, its exigent temporal dynamics, and functional norms, users engage with tweets as if they are always extant in an ever-roving, perpetual present, despite the present always already being undercut by its own impossibility. On the functional level, as suggested above, this appears as a form of digital hesitancy. At the level of content, this gives rise to a kind of disconnection from desire, manifest as a form of existential malaise.

It is the tweets with the most affectless tone, those that enunciate this palpable sense of ennui, arising from day-to-day existence and relating to that particular perceived quality of life in the digital age, shared almost absurdly via social media, that are the most liked and engaged with tweets on Lin's @tao_lin account, as seen in Figures 6.9-12:



Figure 6.9 Tweet from @tao_lin with 146 likes

³⁶ See: Tao Lin, '@tao_lin: Sitting on a sofa trying to determine what I feel & what to do', 2015 <https://twitter.com/tao_lin/status/667835109161222144> [accessed 31 January 2020].

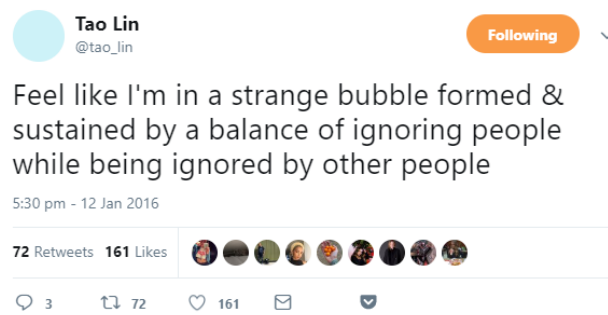


Figure 6.10 Tweet from @tao_lin with 161 likes



Figure 6.11 Tweet from @tao_lin with 175 likes



Figure 6.12 Tweet from @tao_lin with 182 likes

The four tweets above are Lin's four most liked tweets of January 2016. They all display an affectless quality, but one which comes from an authentic and intimate source that is enhanced by and ratified through the way Twitter retrieves an author or speaker's closeness to their audience, evidenced in the audience engagement with the tweets. In the first tweet, temporal uncertainty ('a long-seeming amount of time') and a state of mental inactivity ('not thinking anything') are explicitly linked to the isolated act of 'looking at the internet alone'. In the second tweet, isolation is symbolised by 'a strange bubble' sustained by isolation itself. 'Feel' is used almost ironically, given the neutral tone of the tweet. The third prescribes 'making and eating fermented vegetables' as a cure for depression or anxiety, where the networked audience's depression/anxiety, or experience thereof, is taken as a given. And the last tweet suggests Lin has

considered distilling his Twitter life-chronicling to the Boolean logic of ‘getting worse’ or ‘getting better’. These tweets describe a form of isolation and ennui that is neither desirable nor undesirable; it simply is. Conveyed via Twitter, Lin’s tweets show how the platform’s enhanced sense of connectedness, via networked audiences and its amplifying of constant connection, subject to its foundational, unresolvable temporal gap, potentially reverses into disconnection.

It is the often-paradoxical nature of digital social media and, more broadly, the existential experience of the digital age that Lin’s work most acutely and authentically articulates. This paradox of connection and disconnection is the central concern of Turkle’s work. As she states, ‘Our networked life allows us to hide from each other, even as we are tethered to each other.’³⁷ It is a connection that perpetuates disconnection. In exploring and operating within this dichotomy of digital social media through an authentic and intimate Twitter practice that on the surface appears devoid of emotive resonance yet is marked by hesitancy and self-consciousness, Lin’s work conveys a type of hidden intimacy not addressed in this formulation.

Turkle argues that, ‘Networked, we are together, but so lessened are our expectations of each other that we can feel utterly alone.’ These, she states, ‘are the unsettling isolations of the tethered self’.³⁸ But for Lin and his networked audience, the expectations of others as audience reception to disseminated work are more immediate and more direct than is the case for print publications. Lin is acutely aware of the responses to his tweets, via replies or how retweeted and favoured an individual tweet is. In cases where the tweet’s content consists of an intimate subject matter, Lin also withholds publication based on concerns regarding the audience reception to the material they contain. Through the accountability and perceived authenticity required, for writers operating on Twitter as a part of the alt-lit and where the alt-lit is (part of) the networked audience, the expectations of members are actively increased by the platform’s immediacy.

For authors that are part of the alt-lit, the way Twitter amplifies constant connection with one’s audience provides a recursive feedback loop of audience responses that set the expectations for and contextualise the work. The expectations of others, in Lin’s Twitter practice, function less as the genesis point for feelings of isolation and more as the impetus to explore and play with the isolations networked digital platforms engender, as authentically and intimately as possible. In other words, the isolation to which Turkle refers becomes the subject matter of the Lin’s work. In this way, Lin explores the limits of his own experience via Twitter – one of the central functions of the novel that Cole identifies in his keynote – with particular regard to the complex feelings of

³⁷ Sherry Turkle, *Alone Together: Why We Expect More from Technology and Less from Each Other* (New York: Basic Books, 2011), p.15.

³⁸ Turkle, *Alone Together: Why We Expect More from Technology and Less from Each Other*, p.133.

isolation, intimacy, and existential ennui engendered at least in part by the platform itself and his unique utility of it as both medium for and root of much of his literary work.

In *Alone Together*, Turkle asserts that ‘We’d rather text than talk’.³⁹ This assertion became the central focus of her more recent work, *Reclaiming Conversation*. She argues for the humanising value of face-to-face communication in the face of its perceived loss to digitally mediated forms of communication, which networked digital platforms like Twitter actively obsolesce. Again, Turkle suggests that ‘We hide from each other even as we’re constantly connected to each other’; again, a networked connection is a connection that perpetuates disconnection, as users ‘hide’ from one another.⁴⁰ As she states:

On our screens, we are tempted to present ourselves as we would like to be. Of course, performance is part of any meeting, anywhere, but online and at our leisure, it is easy to compose, edit, and improve as we revise.⁴¹

Turkle’s assertion assumes the veracity of real-time, face-to-face communication, which she partially qualifies by noting the performative nature of self-presentation in any form. Her argument hinges on the ease with which one can compose, edit, and revise an online identity. For Lin, the composing and editing process is not a means of hiding as much as it is a means of producing what he sees as a more veracious truth: a truth that sits closer to fiction than autobiography. Rather than be drawn by Twitter’s enhancing of constant communication and its exigent temporal dimensions, Lin composes, edits, and withholds tweets to ensure they communicate intimately and authentically with his networked audience.

Lin’s carefully considered tweets provide an intimate insight into his life, chronicling his most vulnerable moments, as can be seen in Figures 6.13-15:



Figure 6.13 A vulnerable tweet from @tao_lin

³⁹ Turkle, *Alone Together: Why We Expect More from Technology and Less from Each Other*, p.15.

⁴⁰ Turkle, *Reclaiming Conversation: The Power of Talk in a Digital Age*, p.4.

⁴¹ Turkle, *Reclaiming Conversation: The Power of Talk in a Digital Age*, p.4.

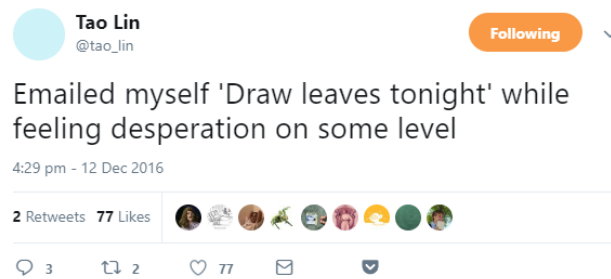


Figure 6.14 A vulnerable tweet from @tao_lin



Figure 6.15 A vulnerable tweet from @tao_lin

Lin's editing and self-censure do not filter the vulnerability from his stream of tweets. The process rather distils these vulnerable moments into something both acutely articulated and obtuse. His tweets are at once direct and elliptical. They refer to worries, bad dreams, desperation, and crying, while never precisely elucidating the root cause or full details of the emotions and events being described. Lin's tweets say more by saying less, being evasive and honest at the same time. Tonally, his tweets are flat and almost robotically remote, disconnected from Lin himself as he narrates (rather than simply shares) his thoughts and feelings. Note the way that he qualifies the severity of the 'worrie[s]' and 'desperation' he feels using 'Halfconsciously' and 'on some level'. There is a sense that, although Lin's tweets can be uncomfortably honest, there is always something being withheld. Twitter's enhancing of brevity undoubtedly lends Lin's tweets an elusive and epigrammatic quality, but in avoiding specific details his tweets are more universal and relatable to his networked audience. This allows them to fill in the blanks, connect Lin's tweets to their own experiences, or respond directly by engaging with the tweets.

Yet while his tweets are clearly directed to a networked audience, they also operate as a feedback loop for Lin. The first two tweets above explicitly refer to Lin as 'myself', meaning they have two distinct functions: as well as communicating with his networked audience, Lin's tweets function as a form of self-aware, self-reflection. They are a means of creating distance between himself and his life and thoughts, wherein his editing process and self-censure grant him a level of control not allowed in "real" life. In this way, he views Twitter as 'a place to explore the self', as Turkle maintains is true of all virtual spaces, once again exploring the limits of his experience in the sense Cole suggests, deconstructing and externalising his thoughts and feelings as the genesis

of his literary tweeting.⁴² Turkle argues face-to-face conversation ‘advances self-reflection’ and through which ‘we play with ideas’ and ‘allow ourselves to be fully present and vulnerable’.⁴³ But these are also precisely the aims and outcomes of Lin’s Twitter practice. Only the ability to be ‘fully present’ with his networked audience is complicated by the platform’s enhancing of a perpetual presence and constant communication through its cues and queues that is not borne out in its functional architecture. This complicated presence is, however, a key aspect of the epistolary format retrieved by Lin via Twitter, outlined by Altman as the ‘impossibilities of the epistolary present’: the impossibility of the narrative being simultaneous with the event being narrated; the impossibility of the present moment remaining valid; and the impossibility of the present dialogue between the writer and addressee. The platform, through its exigent temporal relations and near real-time operativity, permits a more microtemporal present portrayed in the ability of users to tweet and respond to each other at intervals of seconds. Yet the true present is always already undermined, bringing it in-line with the impossible nature of the epistolary present.

Lin has refuted Turkle’s sentiments, stating, ‘I think it’s an inaccurate assertion that speaking face-to-face is more intimate than typing at each other [...] So much of that interaction is superficial’.⁴⁴ To Lin and many of his alt-lit peers, ‘typing’, or networked communication, is more intimate than communicating in “real” life. For Lin, the typical separation of “real” versus digital life, as posited by Turkle, collapses in ways that either invert Turkle’s hypothesised dichotomy or erase it entirely. Lin’s Twitter practice represents a form of what Alice Marwick refers to as “lifestreaming”, or ‘the ongoing sharing of personal information to a networked audience, the creation of a digital portrait of one’s actions and thoughts [...] the “always-on” aspect of social media’, as shown in Figure 6.16:⁴⁵

⁴² Turkle, *Reclaiming Conversation: The Power of Talk in a Digital Age*, p.6.

⁴³ Turkle, *Reclaiming Conversation: The Power of Talk in a Digital Age*, pp.3-4.

⁴⁴ ‘Tao Lin’, *LitSeen*, 2013 <<https://litseen.org/2013/07/02/tao-lin/>> [accessed 3 January 2017].

⁴⁵ Marwick, p.208.



Figure 6.16 Lifestreaming tweets from @tao_lin

Twitter enhances sharing and, for Lin, the tracking and sharing of his personal information as a lifestream is always already tangled up with the digital tools he uses to access the platform and share data, where these tools are constituent part of the life being shared. He describes losing his phone, initially as a matter-of-fact statement, and then as a series of fluctuating emotional responses, catalogued and chronicled, as one might describe losing a pet. He offers a reward, seeks advice, and then oscillates from acceptance to unacceptance. As Turkle suggests, Lin has ‘become inseparable’ from his smartphone.⁴⁶ As he shares his lifestream, making his means of accessing the platform (and other digital tools) the content as well as medium of his work, his retrieval of the epistolary form becomes increasingly technologically reflexive.

Tracking one’s personal information is, of course, not a new concept. It is rooted in the practice of diary keeping and, principally for authors, the epistolary form. But the impulse to track one’s personal information has found a new dominant mode in the contemporary technocultural context through the rise of digital and social media platforms. As Marwick suggests, lifestreaming, as with minutely tracking one’s personal information in any shape or form, ‘if done “correctly”, requires frequent, ongoing mental labor’.⁴⁷ Via Twitter, though, the ‘ongoing mental labor’ required is further extended and amplified by the platform’s exigent temporality and encouraging of constant communication and perpetual updating.

As well as being a condition of its character constraints, Twitter’s stress on brevity is intrinsically linked to its enhancing of imperative time relations and its sense of “nowness”. Users publishing a tweet on the platform are always responding to its present tense prompt, ‘What’s happening?’⁴⁸ It is through this perpetually present tense prompt that the platform permits the

⁴⁶ Turkle, *Alone Together: Why We Expect More from Technology and Less from Each Other*, p.16.

⁴⁷ Marwick, p.211.

⁴⁸ See: Stone, ‘What’s Happening’.

epistolary present tense to be retrieved; it is the present tense prompt that functions, in Altman's terms, as a 'pivot for past and future' and by which the writer, Lin, is 'anchored in a present time from which he looks toward both past and future events'. Once published, every new tweet is instantly rendered (recently) past by the platform's timestamping and exigent temporal dimensions, creating an archive of formerly present moments. At the same time, the ever-present nature of Twitter's prompt makes it a present 'vibrant with future orientation', as Altman stated, always oriented toward what's happening next. It is a present as anticipation of the future, undermined by the ever-encroaching past. Twitter's affordances display the same kind of complex temporal affordances of the epistolary present. In the face of these affordances, Lin's sphere of authorial agency applies only to what he chooses to publish and when.

As Marwick argues, a lifestream 'becomes a portrayal of a formal, edited self. Even those who pride themselves on their risqué or boundary-pushing public life make careful choices about how much to reveal or conceal'.⁴⁹ To this, one might add 'and when'. Through his drafting and editing process, Lin's suspended tweeting practice cultivates a temporal hiatus between his desire to tweet and the tweeting itself. This hiatus captures the precision of his process as a practice, his self-editing, self-censure, and self-awareness, as well as the hesitancy and self-consciousness at its heart. Lin's Twitter work always operates on two levels: as praxis, at the level of his engagement with the platform; and as subject matter, at the level of content. At both of these levels, there are two further irresolvable temporalities simultaneously in operation. Regarding the former, there is the time of tweeting and the time of the tweet; regarding the latter, there is the time of the thought/event and the time of its telling (or tense).

In relation to the former, Twitter's cues and queues enhance its sense of nowness and suggest real-time publication. But there is always a momentary delay generated as the platform processes users' tweets, timestamps them accordingly, and assigns them a queued position in the stream in which they are eventually published. Despite Twitter's present tense prompt, tweets are always already in the past when they are published. As noted in Chapter 5 in relation to Mitchell's retrieval of the Victorian serial, no tweet appears with a timestamp stating, "now". Twitter represents the unattainability of the present moment, even at a digital speed measured in seconds, milliseconds, and microseconds. As stated, this processual inability to capture the present moment is, in praxis, a form of digital hesitancy. Through his hesitancy, through his desire to obliquely articulate the details of his life, thoughts, and memories in a precise manner, Lin's literary practice as a performative engagement with the platform expresses this digital hesitancy between the impulse to tweet and the tweet's publication.

⁴⁹ Marwick, p.243.

Irrespective of his editing and drafting process and the hiatus this creates between the impulse to tweet and publication on Twitter, Lin almost always writes in present tense, tweeting as if the activity, event, thought, or memory was in the process of occurring or arising, as shown below in Figures 6.17-18:



Figure 6.17 Present tense tweet from @tao_lin



Figure 6.18 Present tense tweet from @tao_lin

Reading through Lin’s @tao_lin Twitter account, the user repeatedly encounters verbs such as ‘writing’, ‘walking’, ‘eating’, ‘sleeping’, ‘reading’, ‘drawing’, ‘putting’, ‘enjoying’, all in a present continuous form. Of course, these activities, events, thoughts, and memories are not in the process of occurring/arising: the act of recording is in the process of occurring, and even then, this is taking place at a degree of temporal disjuncture from the moment itself. On occasion, the user finds verbs in the past simple form, such as ‘enjoyed’, ‘typed’, ‘emailed’, and ‘ate’. But these are comparatively rare. By writing in present continuous tense, Lin acts “as if” and affects writing in the moment. In doing so, he ratifies Twitter’s exigent time dynamics and its focus on what’s happening now in his writing and linguistic practices, if not in his actual tweeting practice. This type of practice gives rise to the platform’s sense of nowness. It is an aspect of its structural and often also linguistic biases, ratified by users through functional norms rather than a genuine, real-time functionality.

As is also discussed in more detail in Chapter 5, Twitter fabricates its imperative time relations. This is always at odds with its operational characteristics, which inexorably cause minute delays between the affirmative act of tweeting and the publication of the tweet itself. Due to the timestamping of every tweet published on the platform, this delay, however ostensibly minute, is always at least one second and is always visible to users as an innate part of each tweet.

Twitter operates in parallel, at these two unresolved temporalities – one generated by practical engagement and linguistically led, and one the result of operational limitations (or, at least, operational design); one that attempts to capture the present moment, and one that captures its inability to be captured by its always already existing in the (extremely recent) past – producing an irrevocable temporal gap that is shot through the platform’s functional and structural utility. Every tweet is an act performed at a remove: action is at a remove from outcome and promise from function. Once more, Twitter recalls the impossible epistolary present, specifically the impossibility of the narrative’s being simultaneous with the event and the impossibility of the written present’s remaining valid.

In attempting to resolve this gap and capture the present, users often use their own grammatical narrative cues to override the timestamp; for example, users may use present-oriented temporal adverbs such as ‘today’, ‘tonight’, ‘here’, and ‘now’ to anchor tweets in the present. Lin rarely uses temporal adverbs. In a sample set of over one thousand five hundred tweets from @tao_lin, dating back to the 1st of January 2014, Lin only used ‘today’ twenty times, ‘tonight’ twice, and ‘now’ twice. ‘Here’ did not appear once. Without temporal adverbs to tie the tweets to the present, Lin’s tweets rely solely on timestamping and tense to provide them with a chronological context. As Altman suggested, it is the use of present tense that anchors the epistolary writer in the present. But, in the case of Twitter, this is always at odds with the platform’s functionality. In their brief, spare, present tense form, marked immutably as past by their timestamp, Lin’s tweets display Twitter’s unresolvable temporal gap, appearing unmoored and floating in an ambiguous perpetual present that is innately incapable of being captured and is hence always already past. They portray the remove at which tweets always inevitably operate. This is, in many ways, the paradox of digital time, as it ostensibly offers a perpetual present, but a perpetual present always undercut by its own impossibility, always seemingly within reach but ultimately unable to be seized.

Lin’s literary practice involves a performative process of engagement with his chosen medium and the often-imperceptible media dynamics evident in the negotiation between medium and content from which his literary works materialise. On Twitter, Lin writes in present continuous tense, but the platform’s temporal dynamics render all communications past as it persistently pushes toward a paradoxical, perpetual present, which is always already out of reach. Lin’s work on Twitter is hence both present and past at once and also neither, in the same way that the identity he presents is both fiction and truth, and neither. His work operates from within this irresolvable gap, between practice and medium, where narrative temporality and the temporal biases of the medium generate their oppositional friction. The same performative process of engagement can be seen in Lin’s print novel, *Taipei*, which generates the same effect – of digital time; of the paradoxical present; of the uncertainty, hesitancy, and self-consciousness of

living in the digital age dominated by social media – he creates and explores in his epistolary writing on the Twitter platform, but this time rendered in a print environment, as shown in Figure 6.19.



Figure 6.19 Tweet from @tao_lin re: *Taipei*

The above tweet is illuminating in relation to Lin’s literary practice in *Taipei* and his utilisation of the print format more generally, introducing two main aspects that are critical to understanding his literary *modus operandi* and the effect that he aims to create: the way the novel encourages readers to become ‘deeply engrossed rereading’ through his long, dense, multiclauser sentences, and how, for Lin, it provides a means for ‘remembering things [he’d] forgotten’ by recording the events of his life and creating a life-archive informed by an often constituted directly of his literary lifestreaming on the platform. It is by thinking about his retrieval of the epistolary form via Twitter, as unpacked and identified by the tetrad, in relation to his writing in the print format via *Taipei*, that Lin’s broader practice comes into focus, both in terms of the effect he seeks to create and his deployment and transformation of the epistolary form for the contemporary technocultural context. It is also here where McLuhan’s concept of “robotism” is illuminating when applied to Lin’s literary practice.

Lin’s Robotic Readjustment Across *Taipei* and @tao_lin

Where Twitter enhances brevity, conversely, the print environment of the novel allowed Lin an expansive canvas for his literary practice. Where individual tweets limited Lin to 140 or 280 characters, there are instances in the novel where single sentences stretch to over 100 words:

“We’re all just going to keep forgetting it,” said Paul “pessimistically,” he thought, and when he exited the taxi he walked into, instead of onto, the sidewalk and fell stumbling ahead in an uninhibited, loosely controlled, briefly uncontrolled manner reminiscent of childhood, when this partial to complete abandonment of body and/or limb (of rolling like a log on the carpet, falling face-first onto beds, being dragged by an arm or a both legs through houses or side yard, floating in swimming pools, lying upside down in headstands on sofas) was normal, allowing

his momentum to naturally expend, falling horizontally for an amusingly far length.⁵⁰

This passage is 105 words long. It is one complete sentence, containing multiple clauses. Compared to the grammatically minimalist tweets Lin constructs, it is jarring. In fact, it reads as if written by a different author (even if the ‘forgetting it’ part refers to a Twitter hashtag). This, as McLuhan suggested, is due to the inseparability of media dynamics and performance. In a media environment with fundamentally different characteristics, where the media dynamics that bring the medium and content into dialogue and from which literary works materialise are fundamentally different, the performative engagement with that media environment on the part of the author will also, necessarily, be fundamentally different. Lin’s writing in *Taipei* is markedly and stylistically distinct from that of his Twitter accounts. This is McLuhan’s robotism in action.

On Twitter, Lin’s practice, his performance, is tailored to the platform’s stressing of brevity and to (engaging with) its amplified imperative time relations in order to produce a temporal effect, specifically Twitter’s paradoxical and perpetual present. In order to create the same temporal effect in a print environment, his performance must be tailored to that environment accordingly. Where Twitter amplifies brevity, the novel allows long-form writing of a (potentially) unlimited length, whether in terms of word/sentence length, word count, and page numbers. As a novel, *Taipei* is not especially long in terms of word count or page numbers, coming in just under two hundred and fifty pages in the Canongate-published edition referenced here. Where it provides starkest contrast with Lin’s Twitter practice is grammatically, in sentence length and structure. Clauses and adverbs are piled upon adverbs and clauses, stretching sentences on and on and on.

In the above passage, Lin’s protagonist and avatar, Paul, tries to express the act and sensation of his falling over the kerb as he exits a taxi, preoccupied, as he is, with a Twitter hashtag with which he and his companions intended to “live tweet” a cinema trip. In doing so, Lin uses adverb after adverb as if grasping for the moment, for the most exacting description of the momentary experience: he thought ‘pessimistically’; he stumbled alternately in a ‘loosely’ controlled and ‘briefly’ uncontrolled manner; his momentum ‘naturally’ expended; and he fell ‘amusingly’ far. For a physical act that would have occurred in a brief few seconds, Lin extends the description far beyond the length of the act itself. The piling up of clauses and adverbs keeps the sentence going and going and going, holding the reader in the extended moment as they trace the digressions and additions of each clause and connect each adverb to its verb, adjective, or noun.

⁵⁰ Tao Lin, *Taipei* (Edinburgh: Canongate, 2013), pp.232-3.

His longer sentences, which appear regularly throughout the text, not only in relation to falling or flailing physicality, have a staccato quality and often require re-reading to form the appropriate grammatical and narrative connections. This produces a micro-recursive reading practice where the reader is always caught between narrative progression and momentary repetition, between reading the narrative as a future-oriented present and revisiting the narrative as an already-read, very-near narrative past. Here, once again, the reader encounters the impossibility of the narrative present. But the effect of Lin's lengthy and grammatically dense sentences is to temporarily hold the reader in an extended narrative present that is already in the past, having been written in past tense and describing the author's own past through the prism of Paul, and then having the reader re-read this "present" as past, in past tense and as already read, before progressing to the narrative future. This encourages the reader to engage with the (impossible) narrative present as an experiential phenomenon as they are held in the moment – being tangled up in Lin's layers of adverbs and clauses, and the micro-recursive re-reading act required to grammatically connect them – rather than moving forward with the future-oriented, ever-roving "now" of the narrative sequence, which relegates everything "before" to the past in the perpetual pursuit of what comes next or "after".

Lin disrupts the way in which the print novel enhances linear progression. The effect he creates is one in which the reader experiences narrative time as recursive, inconsistent, lacunal, yet still broadly linear, as an extended present tangled up with itself and its inherent impossibility. His complex clauses and his abundant adverbs enact a form of slow writing that is hard to skim or read at speed. But, through this disruptive and paradoxically slow writing, the reader experiences the ephemeral speed and micro-recursive nature of the digital time that defines Paul's existence. Despite its linear structure, its general lack of analepsis and prolepsis, the novel functions less as a narrative sequence, where the present is an ever-roving point that separates before from after in the perpetual pursuit of the narrative future, but rather as ever-renewing set of extended present moments. However, these narrative moments – as aspects of his life already lived and filtered through his avatar, Paul – are immutably past, as indicated by his use of past tense. Lin's writing in *Taipei*, in its past tense form read as an extended present, replicates the succession of moments, tensed as present but indelibly marked as past, represented by his tweets as they appear on his Twitter account. In both media, through his linguistic literary practice, Lin creates a temporal effect that synthesises the paradox of digital time through a combination of performance and media dynamics, capturing the experience of living in a perpetual present that feels exponentially ephemeral, undermined by its innate inability to be captured, especially by the digital technologies that ostensibly offer "real-time" operability.

It is in this way Lin's Diamedia Literary Practice effects the atomised mode of information dispersal and wider, pervasive influence of the proliferation of digital social media in the print-

published novel, perhaps in a similarly pervasive and more nuanced form than suggested by Cole's keynote. The naturalisation of Twitter's formal constraint need not mean, that to reflect the platform's characteristics, print-published texts need to be arbitrarily split into 280- or 140-character sections, as with the examples of *Epic Retold* and *Twitterature* referenced in Chapter 2. Instead, Lin interprets the sense of atomisation to which Cole refers as a kind of nebulosity, via the aforementioned notion of the problematic present, more closely capturing the feeling of Twitter in print than many other attempts.

On Twitter, the problematic present is established in the unresolvable temporalities of Lin's tweeting practice and the platform's operational dynamics, as expressed in his editing and publishing process, his use of present tense, and the platform's timestamping. In *Taipei*, the problematic present evident on a grammatical level is also manifest as a general sense of vagueness that pervades the text. Paul is repeatedly described as having 'vaguely imagined', 'vaguely realized', or being 'vaguely aware' of something, as if nothing can be clearly or definitively grasped, just as he was unable to grasp the moment or the definitive description of it as he stumbled out of the taxi.⁵¹ Time is expressly and repeatedly measured as 'a vague amount'.⁵² Chapters vary vastly in length, zoning inconsistently in and out of narration for minutes, days, and weeks at a time. Even the inclusion of clock time does little to dispel the sense of temporal uncertainty, which is explicitly linked to engagement with digital media:

At some point, maybe twenty minutes after he'd begun refreshing Twitter, Tumblr, Facebook, Gmail in a continuous cycle – with an ongoing, affectless, humorless realization that his day “was over” – [Paul] noticed with confusion, having thought it was a.m., that it was 4:46 p.m.⁵³

Each of the other media platforms mentioned – Tumblr, Facebook, Gmail – also operate with the same imperative time dynamic and sense of nowness as Twitter. They focus on what's happening now, on updates, new posts, and new communications. The effect of this perpetual sense of nowness, of trying to remain in a real-time, future-oriented, perpetual present temporal sphere by 'refreshing' multiple media platforms in 'a continuous cycle', is that, for Paul, clock-time is devoid of meaning. Time is a vague concept that, when pinned down to a precise time, only confuses him. At the infinite speed and micro-temporalities of digital technologies, here represented through Paul's refreshing of social media feeds and email, the present is atomised as a series of future moments being pursued with each individual refresh. Paul's existence is future-oriented, always focused on what comes next: what is new on his media feeds, and the new emails in his account. But as soon as any update or new communication is received, it is irrevocably

⁵¹ Lin, *Taipei*, p.16, p.92; p.166; p.57; p.61; p.99; p.114.

⁵² Lin, *Taipei*, p.17; p.44; p.45; p.48; p.141; p.156; p.237.

⁵³ Lin, *Taipei*, p.76.

marked as past and his cycle of 'refreshing' continues. The object is the refreshing itself rather than the updates, news, posts, communications, or connections they infer, meaning that Paul's existence is best expressed as an ongoing, repetitive process of future-oriented refreshing, defined by its repetitive and transitory nature.

This is also Lin's existence, where the object of refreshing is a means of exercising control on that which is fundamentally uncontrollable: the always insistent, always anticipated future. In an interview with *The Stranger*, Lin is found at Bobst Library in the New York University using one of the computers:

I observe Lin's style of navigating the internet to be vastly inefficient, centred around the nearly indiscriminate and seemingly purposeless refreshing of websites. When I tell him he is rapidly clicking things in an arbitrary manner, he says, 'I'm in control; I'm definitely in control, I think,' in a way that seems both machinelike and uncertain.⁵⁴

Lin's equation of refreshing and control, and especially in its hesitancy, betrays the insidious nature of the digital tools and their temporal dynamics as an aspect of his existential experience. Lin, like many other alt-lit authors, is caught up in the temporality of the tools with which his existence is shared and, ultimately, defined. In her collection of essays, *So Sad Today* – like Lin's work, based primarily on her @sosadtoday Twitter account – Melissa Broder similarly writes:

There is something about the Internet that, even when it sucks, holds infinite potential at all times. Like, I may know a site is going to suck, because it sucked just a second ago, but I keep hitting refresh. Eventually it changes. But life isn't like that. When I keep hitting refresh on the same thing in life I keep getting the same thing. Making the same mistakes + expecting different results = fuck.⁵⁵

This sense of computer-mediated and 'real life' existence becoming increasingly indistinguishable is part of the effect Lin's writing creates. Paul is caught in precisely these kind of real-life recursive loops throughout the text. He is repeatedly described as using his MacBook. He is repeatedly described as taking drugs. He goes on several book reading trips. He takes two trips to Taipei to see his parents. He begins and ends three relationships, beginning with his break-up with Michelle, moving on to his relationship and break-up with Laura, then, finally, his relationship, marriage, and break-up with Erin. If *Taipei* has an identifiable structure, it is in the repetitive (and, perhaps, doomed) nature of his relationships: as Paul states during his break-up with Michelle, 'I only go to things to find a girlfriend.'⁵⁶ Early in the text, he imagines 'moving alone to Taipei at an age like 51, when maybe he'd cycled through enough friendships and relationships to not want

⁵⁴ 'Great American Novelist'.

⁵⁵ Melissa Broder, *So Sad Today* (London: Scribe, 2016), p.84.

⁵⁶ Lin, *Taipei*, p.10.

more'.⁵⁷ The novel is, in effect, Paul's perpetual refreshing of his life cycle – online on his MacBook or on his iPhone, by taking drugs, going on book tours or to visit his parents, and through new relationships – vainly pursuing what comes next, but only finding further iterations of his existence ('= fuck'). The lack of narrative direction, the lack of plot, of anything actually seeming to occur of consequence, even as the novel progresses, is Paul's existential experience of being caught in an imperceptibly infinitesimal present that anticipates the future but becomes past at infinite speed. Paul is caught up in the micro-temporalities of the devices he uses, and this digital time has bled into all other aspects of his life.

This is what Paul means when he refers to 'his shrinking, increasingly vague context'.⁵⁸ It is what Currie refers to as 'accelerated recontextualisation', occurring at the 'infinite speed' of the contemporary technocultural context.⁵⁹ The process of 'accelerated recontextualisation' is the recycling of the increasingly recent past, as Currie points out, but, through and tangled up with the exigent temporalities and recursive nature of digital technologies, it is happening at a speed beyond human cognisance over and over and over again. Unable to grasp the present moment, Paul exists solely in the atomised interstices between future and past, disconnected from a definitive experience of time manifest as a pervasive vagueness. The text is littered with imprecise descriptions of Paul's context, whether perceptions, relationships, or objects, from the very first sentence.

The novel opens with the narrator describing 'a hazy, cloudless-seeming sky' under which Paul felt 'more like he was "moving through the universe" than "walking on a sidewalk"'.⁶⁰ The sky is not cloudless, but 'cloudless-seeming', as if its actual state could not be determined. Paul feels more like he is "moving through the universe" rather than "walking on a sidewalk", as if he is gravitationally adrift in the vastness of space and time as opposed to being pinned to his context on a Chelsea pavement. Lin's descriptions of Paul's vague context display the same unmoored quality of his tweets as they float in an ambiguous perpetual present that is innately incapable of being captured and is hence always already past. His prose portrays the same sense of remove at which tweets always inevitably operate between communication and context, where Twitter enhances an image of everyday life in constant flux.

Later in the text, as he tries to sleep, Paul has the feeling that:

The information of his existence, the etching of which into space-time was his experience of life, was being studied by millions of entities, billions of years from now, who knew him better than he would ever know himself. They know everything about him, even his current thoughts, in their exact vagueness, as he

⁵⁷ Lin, *Taipei*, p.15.

⁵⁸ Lin, *Taipei*, p.34.

⁵⁹ Currie, p.8.

⁶⁰ Lin, *Taipei*, p.3.

moved distractedly toward sleep, studying him in their equivalent of middle school “maybe,” thought some fleeting aspect of Paul’s consciousness, unaware what it was referencing.⁶¹

Paul thinks about his ‘experience of life’, where his thoughts have an ‘exact vagueness’, but is ‘unaware of what [his conscious] was referencing’. *Taipei* is exacting in its vagueness, because it is exactly this vague experience of existence in the digital age that it is articulating. In such a vague context of existence, where temporal experience is recursively and imperceptibly synchronic, characters’ perceptions and relationships, descriptions and objects, become disconnected from their referent, just as Paul’s conscious is ‘unaware of what it is referencing’. In such conditions, everything becomes non sequitur.

Throughout *Taipei*, Lin repeatedly uses the term, ‘non sequitur’, to describe the vague, atomised nature of Paul’s existence and his thought processes. Describing Paul waking from an afternoon nap, Lin writes:

Something staticky and paranormally ventilated about the air, which drifted through a half-open window, late one afternoon, caused a delicately waking Paul, clutching a pillow and drooling a little, to believe he was a small child in Florida, in a medium-sized house, on or near winter break. He felt dimly excited, anticipating a hyperactive movement of his body into a standing position, then was mostly unconscious for a vague amount of time until becoming aware of what seemed like a baffling non sequitur – and, briefly, in its mysterious approach from some eerie distance, like someone else’s consciousness – before resolving plainly as a memory, of having already left Florida, at some point, to attend New York University. [...] With a sensation of easily and entirely abandoning a prior content, of having no memory, he focused, as an intrigued observer, on this assembling and was surprised by an urge, which he immediately knew he hadn’t felt in months, or maybe years, to physically involve himself – by going outside and living each day patiently – in the ongoing, concrete occurrence of what he was passively, slowly remembering. But the emotion dispersed to a kind of nothingness – and its associated memories, like organs in a lifeless body, became rapidly indiscernible, dissembling by the metaphysical, if there was one, of entropy⁶²

This passage incorporates many of the hallmarks of Lin’s prose style seen throughout *Taipei*. There are the long, multi-clause sentences; there are the numerous adverbs (‘delicately’, ‘dimly’, ‘passively’, ‘slowly’); time is once more quantified as ‘a vague amount’. But it is the ‘baffling non sequitur’ which follows that most clearly articulates Paul’s existence as chronicled throughout the text. Caught up in the digital time of the devices he uses, which has bled into all other aspects of his life, Paul experiences life as a series of non sequiturs. One event leads somewhat haphazardly to another in a mostly coherent manner, but one that suggests little by way of narrative progress or connectivity.

⁶¹ Lin, *Taipei*, p.124.

⁶² Lin, *Taipei*, pp.17-18.

The balance between non sequitur and coherence is something Lin is acutely aware of in his literary practice. In a piece titled ‘Friday, 4:16PM, May 16, 2014...’, published in Lin’s half of his and Mira Gonzalez’s *Selected Tweets* collaborative collection, he states, ‘I just want to record my life as it happens as closely as it’s happening right now, but not so close that it becomes incoherent, or too incoherent, for readers.’⁶³ He notes, almost directly, Twitter’s present tense tweet prompt. But he also emphasises the purposeful gap between the platform’s pressing “now” and the temporality of his practice, as well as its narrative justification. It is about the balance between an authentic and intimate lifestream and retaining a form of narrative coherence that does not rely on linear logic. *Taipei*’s narrative is a series of atomised moments often occurring out of context and irreverent of linear temporality. This extends to Paul’s past, his memories, which ‘had increasingly occurred to him without context, outside of linear time, like single poems on sheets of computer paper, instead of pages from a book with the page number and the book title on the top’.⁶⁴ Placed in counterpoint to ‘pages from a book with the page number and the book title on top’, the ‘single poems on sheets of computer paper’ evoke the terse digital dispatches of Lin’s Twitter account.

All tweets on the Twitter platform not composed and published in reply to another tweet are non sequiturs. They materialise as if from nowhere and their context is entirely immanent to the tweet itself (user handle, avatar image, and timestamp) and derived from the platform’s paradoxical perpetual present. This is especially true of the stream of tweets viewed from a user’s home page, where every tweet by every other user the viewer follows flow together with other follower-based suggestions in a single, unique stream. The context for the tweet is the present tense prompt to tweet, ‘what’s happening?’, and the user performing the tweeting. A Twitter stream, and Lin’s Twitter stream in particular, reads as a series of discrete moments that, in the context of the platform’s pressing (non-)present, are rendered as non sequiturs, as can be seen in Figures 6.20-23:



Figure 6.20 Non sequitur tweets from @tao_lin

⁶³ Tao Lin, *Selected Tweets* (Ann Arbor: Short Flight / Long Drive, 2015), p.196.

⁶⁴ Lin, *Taipei*, p.228.



Figure 6.21 Non sequitur tweets from @tao_lin



Figure 6.22 Non sequitur tweets from @tao_lin



Figure 6.23 Non sequitur tweets from @tao_lin

Each tweet is in and of itself, only connected to preceding and following tweets by virtue of the username, handle, and avatar image that marks each as the work of an individual user. Like most of Lin's tweets, and aside from being part of his literary lifestream, these four consecutive tweets are not thematically linked. They are only grammatically linked, unified by Lin's use of present continuous tense ('experiencing', 'becoming', 'promoting', 'thinking'/'coughing'). Without a thematic thread running through the tweets, they are at best a staccato epistolary narrative constructed from non sequitur thoughts, feelings, memories, and events of Lin's life. But, given Lin's statement that serves as this chapter's epigraph, these tweets exist somewhere between fiction and autobiography. The Tao Lin to which they refer and upon whom they reflect is consequently spurious. They are obliquely recorded by a "Tao Lin", an avatar, which, like the hesitant, atomised, and ungraspable temporal and existential experience evident in @tao_lin and through Paul's *Taipei*, is defined by its obscure nature.

It is here Lin's work most directly addresses Cole's assertion that, in the contemporary technocultural context, the novelist is smaller than ever before. His most active Twitter profile, @tao_lin, the account addressed throughout this chapter, features a flat, ice-blue square rather than an image of the author as his avatar. It fills the profile image field but provides no other function. Typically, because Twitter applies a smaller version of a user's profile image to each of their communications on the platform, their profile image is usually the key narrative indicator for their tweets being their tweets. As a result, users' profile pages feature numerous iterations of their profile image. Lin's profile image is conspicuously forgettable, mortgaging its signifying potential as a key narrative indicator of its author. Likewise, where images of Lin periodically appear on the account within tweets, other than only-rarely retweeted profile articles and reviews, they are most typically of his hand, holding vegetables or bunches of herbs (unlike most food images that appear on social media, Lin's food photographs are never of cooking or finished meals). When his face does appear in frame, it is usually partially cropped or obscured by whatever object he is holding.⁶⁵ The result is that the text-based tweets are the central focus of Lin's profile, tied, as they are, to a purposely blank persona.

In *Taipei*, Paul is introduced, like all the novel's characters, as a name and age: "Paul, 26".⁶⁶ Definitive descriptions of his features or characteristics are conspicuous by their absence throughout the novel. He is at once the central focus and a *tabula rasa* around, rather than upon, which the novel occurs. He is more a vague observer around whom the novel is happening than its conscious protagonist. The 'shrinking, increasingly vague context', 'non sequitur'-like nature of Paul's existence, as described in the novel, betray his sense of blank detachment at the centre of the novel. Returning to the long quotation above from *Taipei* (fn. 64), which refers to these aspects of Paul's existence as he is caught somewhere between the memories of his childhood, his moving to New York as a student, and his present situation, waking from a nap, Lin writes that:

With a sensation of easily and entirely abandoning a prior content, of having no memory, [Paul] focused, as an intrigued observer, on this assembling [of thoughts and memories] [...] and was surprised by an urge, which he immediately knew he hadn't felt in months, or maybe years, to physically involve himself [...] in the ongoing, concrete occurrence of what he was passively, slowly remembering. But the emotion dispersed to a kind of nothingness⁶⁷

The passage could be a synopsis, describing Paul's position – in both figurative and literal senses – in the novel. He is more of the 'intrigued observer' than the protagonist in the novel or agential actor in his life, where an 'urge' to 'physically involve himself' in his life is unexpected, and where

⁶⁵ Tao Lin, '@tao_lin' <https://twitter.com/tao_lin>. See: August 27th, July 23rd, July 22nd, and May 22nd 2016, respectively.

⁶⁶ Lin, *Taipei*, p.3.

⁶⁷ Lin, *Taipei*, pp.17-18.

the combination of thoughts and memories occurring to him are collapsed into his present reality, before, latterly, he becomes aware of being a different person in a different place, by which time the urge to act has ‘dispersed to a kind of nothingness’, and he is, again, lying alone in his room. To fill this ‘nothingness’:

[Paul] opened his MacBook – sideways, like a hardcover book – and looked at the internet, lying on his side, with his right ear pressed into his pillow, as if, unable to return to sleep, at least in position to hear what, in his absence, might be happening there.⁶⁸

In this instance, ‘in his absence’ refers, for Paul, to ‘the internet’ and what ‘might be happening’ since he has been asleep. But it equally points to his position in the novel as an observer of events, rather than an actor, simultaneously being, occupying, and trying to fill a kind of nothingness. Once again, Lin’s practice articulates McLuhan’s concept of robotism:

all persons, whether or not they understand the processes of a computerized high-speed data transmission, will lose their old private identities. What knowledge there is will be available to all. So, in that sense, everybody will be nobody. Everybody will be involved in a robotic role-playing⁶⁹

Through his unique form of Diamedia Literary Practice, Lin is a ‘nobody’. But, at the same time, this makes him an “anybody”, able to prototypically, grammatically and linguistically attune his writing to the print or digital medium in which he is working, exploring its affordances in order to symbiotically leverage his signifying strategies as a product of both stylistics and materialist media operability. As the chapter’s epigraph suggests he mortgages a more definitive authorial avatar and presence in favour of the literary effect he aims to achieve, meaning that as a novelist, he is purposely smaller than ever before in the sense that Cole suggests, able to instantly adjust to disparate media environments and take on various roles within his literary practice. Furthermore, through his retrieval of the epistolary novel form for Twitter and his literary lifestreaming on the platform, Lin explores the limits of his own experience, externalising and analysing these in his editing and publishing process to ensure he captures his life, thoughts, and feelings as accurately as possible and in a way that speaks to his particular networked audience. And finally, through his unique engagement with the print-published novel form, Lin captures the atomised mode of informational dispersal as a recursive reading practice predicated on specific, dense linguistic constructions that address the problematic nature of present and which pervasively reflect the similarly pervasive effects of the digital social media that progressively define and document the contemporary technocultural context.

⁶⁸ Lin, *Taipei*, p.19.

⁶⁹ McLuhan and Powers, p.129.

Conclusion

Twitter as a Future of the Novel and the Resonance of Diamedia

This thesis began with Teju Cole's assertion that Twitter is one of the futures of the novel, with his literary practice on Twitter and in the novel form, and with the research questions regarding literary practice and media change extrapolated from both his speech and practice. In the chapters that preceded – by analysing and addressing authors who, like Cole, have worked concurrently on Twitter and the novel form; by formulating Diamedia Literary Practice; and by utilising Marshall McLuhan's tetradic laws of media as a theoretical framework – some answers and interpretations of Twitter as a future of the novel can be provided.

In terms of the novelist who takes advantage of the platform to further elongate the perspectives and experiences of their readers, with the *small fates* Cole himself showed how the platform's representation of everyday life rendered by its ongoing stream of undivided, undifferentiated cascade of thoughts can crowd out certain kinds of perspectives and certain kinds of narrative, such as those depicted by his strange stories of everyday life in Lagos. By threading his *small fates* through his followers' feeds and through the wider platform, Cole further elongated the perspectives and experiences of his readers by providing them with a more marginal perspective not always given the same space on the platform, either by virtue of the follower-based subscription model adopted by most users or the platform's algorithms, effectively retrieving the obsolesced *fait divers* (specifically à la Félix Fénéon) form for Twitter. For Tao Lin, however, this takes a far more self-aware and self-reflective form, where through his literary lifestreaming via @tao_lin, he demonstrates a willingness to address the more boring aspects of daily life, which are typically not the subject of literature or social media. In doing so, he shows a desire to understand and capture his own thoughts, feelings, and experiences in the most accurate manner possible through a carefully curated process of editing and publishing in order to speak intimately to a networked audience with shared perspectives of existential ennui, tangled up with the same digital social media through which their daily lives and experiences are progressively mediated and documented, retrieving the obsolesced epistolary novel form for Twitter in the process. Cole and Lin therefore affirm that Twitter can play a similar role to the novel in this regard, elongating the perspectives of human sensibility.

With regard to Cole's assertion that, in the contemporary technocultural context, the novelist is smaller than ever before, Lin again provides an answer as to what this means for the novelist who embraces this ostensibly smaller role via Twitter. Through his ability to adjust instantly to different media and to perform differently in different contexts, and through his refusal to commit to binary notions of autobiography and fiction in his self-focused, literary lifestreaming and in his self-centred novelistic practice, Lin is able to paradoxically commit to a

single, authorial identity, albeit a conspicuously nebulous one, leveraging this indistinct identity presentation in favour of achieving ideal literary performance in the form of an effect. David Mitchell, though, interprets the smaller role afforded to the author within Twitter in a more playful and eccentric manner, using the platform as a means of meta-textually engaging with both his fictive creation and audience in @I_Bombadil using his own, previously seldom-used Twitter account, adding another dimension to the narrative by replying to Bombadil's tweets and readers' responses, helping further embed the character in the user norms of the platform. By extension, and in relation to Cole's corollary contention, Mitchell illustrated that, represented in part by Twitter, the novel was getting bigger and bigger in a distinctly literal sense, using the platform as a means of directly extending *Slade House* prior to its publication and retrieving the Victorian serial for Twitter in the process. In this way, both Lin and Mitchell show how the smaller role the novelist is conferred in the contemporary technocultural context can be used to productive literary ends on the platform, while Mitchell also displayed how Twitter can be used in the expansion of print-published novelistic works.

In his keynote, Cole also stated that he felt that Twitter's specific formal constraint and atomised mode of information dispersal would begin to affect the novel in its persistent, print-published form. This notion is demonstrated most extensively by Lin's work in *Taipei* which shows that novelists need not interpret this in such a straightforward fashion, where – by exploring the problematic present of the epistolary form through overly long, incredibly dense, multi-clause sentences that provoke recursive reading patterns, vague contextualisation and non sequitur narratives – he captures the atomised experience of time native to the digital social media through which he and his narrator, Paul's, lives are progressively mediated and documented. In this, Lin simultaneously demonstrates the persistence and malleability of the print-published novel form in documenting changing technocultural contexts even while it is supposedly threatened by them, which also points to Cole's broader argument: that Twitter is one of the futures of the novel.

Being the question that prompted this thesis in terms of the authors and works it addresses, the concept of Diamedia Literary Practice it formulates, and the utility of McLuhan's media studies it demonstrates, this is a question that all the novelists analysed in the preceding case study chapters confront. For Cole, Twitter represents a future of the novel in the way that it allowed him to make use of material initially intended for inclusion in one novel (*Every Day is for the Thief*) and explore the same issues as in another novel (*Open City*) in another form and in order to perhaps reach a different audience. Though, unlike the other authors included in the case study chapters, Twitter did not allow him to retrieve an obsolesced, originally print-oriented literary form with roots in novelistic practice for the contemporary technocultural context. While the *fait divers* do have roots in Modernist literary practice, emphasising the platform's broader

literary potential, its retrieval did not indicate a more direct relationship to a Twitter-based future of novelistic practice and forms. For Jennifer Egan and Mitchell, though, Twitter represented a future of the novel in the far more straightforward sense that it permitted them to extend a character's arc from the pages of a print-published novel into the platforms digital environs, providing the character with a narrative future beyond the boundaries of the novel (in 'Black Box' for Egan) or provide more expansive orientation toward the character's narrative future in the yet to be published novel (via @I_Bombadil for Mitchell). In the process both authors also retrieved the Victorian serial form, which is closely linked to history of the novel itself, for the contemporary technocultural context and through Twitter, even if this was ultimately unsuccessful in Egan's case, showing how the platform can provide a future for previously obsolesced novelistic forms. Lin's retrieval of the epistolary novel form for Twitter similarly demonstrates the platform's utility as a means of updating and renovating obsolesced print-oriented forms for the contemporary technocultural context through his literary lifestreaming on the platform. However, he also shows how the type of epistolary life-archives produced through an ongoing engagement with social media (as by the far the most prolific Twitter user included among the authors profiled) can supply the material basis for autobiographical fiction, reminding novelists of events, thoughts, and feelings minutely documented on their profiles, meaning that, for self-focused authors like Lin, Twitter is also a future of the novel in the information and historical perspectives it records.

Part of the purpose in formulating Diamedia Literary Practice in response to Cole's, Egan's, Mitchell's, and Lin's literary practice across and through the novel form and Twitter platform – beyond the unsuitability of existing conception – was to demonstrate that the answers to the research questions derived from Cole's keynote are not straightforward or simple, because the relationship between literary practice and media change is not straightforward or simple: it is dynamic, dialogic, and multidirectional; it is resonant. Media, and specifically the Twitter platform and the print-published novel, do not develop in a vacuum. While they have many contrasting characteristics and clearly retain their own separate and distinct futures – and it seems likely, based on the research represented here and despite repeated predictions of their mutual demise, that they do have futures – this thesis has demonstrated that they also share several key characteristics in being similarly predicated upon the core concept of continuing innovation and through their close contact and concern with contemporary reality, one of their futures is as resonantly connected forms.¹ Through their focus on situations in progress, their

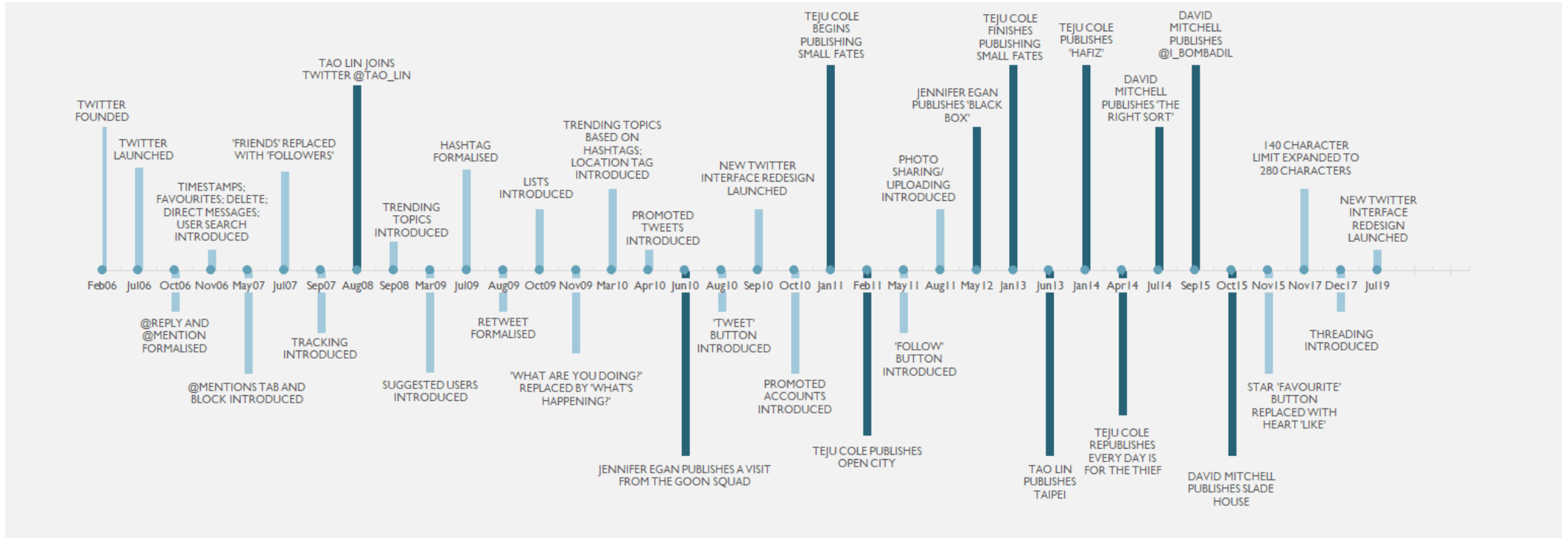
¹ For predictions of the print-published novel and Twitter's mutual demise, see for example: Sven Birkerts, *The Gutenberg Elegies: The Fate of Reading in an Electronic Age* (London: Faber and Faber, 1994); Joshua Toplosky, 'The End of Twitter', *New Yorker*, 2016 <<https://www.newyorker.com/tech/annals-of-technology/the-end-of-twitter>> [accessed 15 May 2021].

interpretation of media change as a dynamic, dialogic, and multidirectional process, and in their conceptualisation of this form of resonance as a mutually cultural and technological phenomena, McLuhan's media studies, and specifically in their distillation as the tetradic laws of media, provide a uniquely productive means of articulating and analysing the resonant connections that define Diamedia Literary Practice.

By utilising McLuhan's media studies in this way, by formulating Diamedia Literary Practice, and by analysing Cole's, Egan's, Mitchell's, and Lin's literary practice across and through print and digital media, across and through the novel form and the Twitter platform, and by answering the questions prompted by Cole's keynote, this thesis has shown the relevance of such a "diamedia" approach to literary and media studies in the contemporary technocultural context. Looking forward, it is hoped that the "diamedia" approach profiled here can be expanded by this and other researchers in order to further emphasise its productive utility and pertinence, and that this thesis has provided the basis for doing so.

Appendix

Appendix A: Twitter Development Timeline



Appendix B: Twitter Development Dates

Date	Development
Feb-06	Twitter founded
Jul-06	Twitter launched
Oct-06	@reply and @mention formalised
Nov-06	Timestamps; Favourites; Delete; Direct Messages; User Search introduced
May-07	@mentions Tab and Block introduced
Jul-07	'Friends' replaced with 'Followers'
Sep-07	Tracking introduced
Aug-08	Tao Lin joins Twitter @tao_lin
Sep-08	Trending Topics introduced
Mar-09	Suggested Users introduced
Jul-09	Hashtag formalised
Aug-09	Retweet formalised
Oct-09	Lists introduced
Nov-09	'What are you doing?' replaced by 'What's happening?'
Mar-10	Trending Topics based on hashtags; Location tag introduced
Apr-10	Promoted Tweets introduced
Jun-10	Jennifer Egan publishes <i>A Visit from the Goon Squad</i>
Aug-10	'Tweet' button introduced
Sep-10	New Twitter interface redesign launched
Oct-10	Promoted Accounts introduced

Jan-11	Teju Cole begins publishing <i>small fates</i>
Feb-11	Teju Cole publishes <i>Open City</i>
May-11	'Follow' button introduced
Aug-11	Photo sharing/ uploading introduced
May-12	Jennifer Egan publishes 'Black Box'
Jan-13	Teju Cole finishes publishing <i>small fates</i>
Jun-13	Tao Lin publishes <i>Taipei</i>
Jan-14	Teju Cole publishes 'Hafiz'
Apr-14	Teju Cole republishes <i>Every Day is for the Thief</i>
Jul-14	David Mitchell publishes 'The Right Sort'
Sep-15	David Mitchell publishes @I_Bombadil
Oct-15	David Mitchell publishes <i>Slade House</i>
Nov-15	Star 'Favourite' button replaced with Heart 'Like'
Nov-17	140 character limit expanded to 280 characters
Dec-17	Threading introduced
Jul-19	New Twitter interface redesign launched

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