

The Luster of Studying Contemporary Publishing

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In *Luster* (2020), a novel published shortly before the special issue in which these articles appear but after they were written, Raven Leilani depicts a scene from a New York publishing company:

In the lobby, there is a Diversity Giveaway. I go up to the table and scan the books, and there are a few new ones: a slave narrative about a mixed-race house girl fighting for a piece of her father's estate; a slave narrative about a runaway's friendship with the white schoolteacher who selflessly teaches her how to read; a slave narrative about a tragic mulatto who raises the dead with her magic chitlin pies; a domestic drama about a black maid who, like Schrödinger's cat, is both alive and dead, an unseen, nurturing presence who exists only within the bounds of her employer's four walls; an "urban" romance where everybody dies by gang violence; and a book about a Cantonese restaurant, which may or may not have been written by a white woman from Utah, whose descriptions of her characters rely primarily on rice-based foods. I take the book by the white woman and head outside. (78–79)

The fictional publisher's attempts to represent the multiracial demographics and histories of US life are seen through the satirical eyes of the African American protagonist Edie, who has just been fired from her junior role at the company because of perceptions of her promiscuity. Her derisive choice from the "Diversity Giveaway" is the book by the "white woman from Utah." This made-up title, with

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its uncertain, possibly deceptive authorial provenance, recalls the real-life publishing history of Jeanine Cummins's *American Dirt* (2020), discussed by Ignacio M. Sánchez Prado in this special issue of *American Literary History* focusing on recent and contemporary American literature and publishing.

In his article on the “cultural politics” of this “manufactured bestseller,” Sánchez Prado explicitly positions himself:

I was a participant in the controversy, through my Twitter account and media interventions, and my analysis . . . reflects some of those invested views. This perspective, as a Mexican reader and Mexicanist scholar, helps me to see the myriad failures of *American Dirt* with special clarity. These many failures, in turn, highlight the vexed position of US multinational corporate publishers in their bid to diversify their domestic readership and reach new, international markets. This bid, I demonstrate, has opened up the US literary field to new voices and new texts, but it also has warmly welcomed, and in the case of *American Dirt* facilitated, racist and xenophobic fantasies that pass themselves off as authentic. In critiquing *American Dirt*, I therefore also make the case that sociological literary criticism benefits from—or arguably even requires—invested or affective responses to literary texts. (372)

This critique, derived from a subject positioning, is enabled both via analysis of institutional and sociological appropriations, but also through a textual turn: Sánchez Prado's knowledge of the modes of representation of Mexican literature brings a transnational and translinguistic perspective, as well as a corrective to the seeming diversification of content and readerships exploited by mainstream publishing. The cynical diversifications are in contradistinction to the activist efforts of translators and independent publishers, Sánchez Prado discusses, “to imagine the Spanish-language and anglophone Latinx markets as spaces that stake a claim on the community's market in a moment of demographic growth and increased cultural influence” (391). Such efforts, he continues, face a “towering challenge” in the face of “the logic of bestsellerdom.”

Back at the “Diversity Giveaway,” *Luster* knowingly references US publishing's whiteness, and the industry's often clichéd approach to address the deficit in which it is complicit.¹ The list of made-up titles, beginning with its thrice-repeated “slave narrative,” invokes an industry which perpetuates a focus on Black trauma and white guilt, using historical fiction to reside safely—if uneasily—in the past, rather than giving space to the current status of Black life

in contemporary US society. Yet in addition to the slave narratives, *Luster*'s heroine also rejects the "'urban' romance" on the table, and thus any casually stereotyped assumption of her own background, tastes, or character.

The "logic of bestsellerdom" identified by Sánchez Prado induces understandable cynicism at the acts and effects of mainstream publishing. Indeed, Leilani, who worked within the gig economy while funding her MFA at NYU, draws on firsthand experience of working in publishing, thereby contributing to the novel's interrogations of race, gender, and capitalism. However, Leilani's own work—while itself satirizing the logic of bestsellerdom—might before too long provide a potentially counteractive case study, as might an analysis of the marketplace success of Angie Thomas's bestselling young adult novel *The Hate U Give* (2017).

As Lee Konstantinou and Dan Sinykin remark in their introduction, "exposing the mechanisms of publishing is among the most generic or recognized gestures of contemporary American literature," and contemporary authors taking such an approach are "indirectly writing the literary criticism and institutional histories that scholars of post-1945 US literature have been slow to write" (226). This latter, then, is the stated purpose of this special issue with, moreover, the intent to "build[] a research program within US literary studies for the future study of publishing. . . . such study can help scholars address longstanding challenges in the field: challenges about how to periodize recent US literary history, what the mediation between culture and capital looks like under neoliberalism, and what such mediation means for aesthetics" (227). In chronological terms, the issue ranges from the mid twentieth century to studies of the most immediately recent acts of publishing in 2020; from Jacqueline Goldsby's archival investigation of editorial correspondence between Gwendolyn Brooks and her editor at Harper's to Mark McGurl's forays into self-publishing on Amazon and Sánchez Prado's exploration of the publication of *American Dirt* just last year. In between, there are foci on Stephen King (Angela S. Allan), African American literature in the market (Kinohi Nishikawa), literary agents (Laura McGrath), and the "vexed" routes to marketplace success by Black poets (Claire Grossman, Juliana Spahr, and Stephanie Young), as well as Konstantinou and Sinykin's substantial, scene-setting introduction. Assembled, these eight articles cannot claim to be comprehensive in animating literature and publishing from 1945 to 2020 in the US, but they nonetheless provide an overview of key themes and trends of the period (or *periods*, as Konstantinou and Sinykin assert), offer detailed and insightful analyses of specific instances, as well as indicating various

conceptual and methodological pathways to this “research program . . . for the future study of publishing.”

In referring to the clamor of writers to write about publishing, thereby providing an “indirect” form of both “literary criticism and institutional histories,” Konstantinou and Sinykin situate their claim that scholars have been slow to undertake such work. Such positioning within the field (in the Bourdieuan sense) or even—if the claim is that such work is only just starting to be made—*scoping* of the field is a fairly typical discursive trope for scholars of recent and contemporary publishing. John B. Thompson, whose work is referred to in several of the articles in this volume, made similar claims in *Merchants of Culture: The Publishing Business in the Twenty-First Century* (2010), opening with the comment that “[i]t is a matter of some puzzlement that the one sector of the creative industries about which we know very little is the sector that has been with us for the longest time—the book publishing industry” (vi). The “lacuna in our understanding” is then one that that book, and this special issue, seek to fill; McGrath’s opening sally that “[n]o figure is more influential—and less studied by scholars—than the literary agent” stakes similar ground (350). Indeed, such pronouncements of a research gap, a slowness, an uncovered, colonizable territory is an almost constant refrain in the recent study of the contemporary book.² Similar statements abound; in 2013, Robert Eaglestone commented in “Contemporary Fiction in the Academy: Towards a Manifesto” that “one issue in contemporary fiction is what we might call the ‘contemporary history of the book’: the ways in which the business of publishing helps to shape and control contemporary fiction. There seems to be a dearth of research into this aspect of the field” (1096). I have made such remarks myself; in 2007, I commented in *Marketing Literature: The Making of Contemporary Writing in Britain* that “there is a disappointingly low number of studies of the material conditions of contemporary writing. . . . The paucity of academic study of the period means there is much room for original research to be undertaken” (7).

Yet from the vantage point of 2021, I would contend (to reappropriate Thompson’s words) that it is a matter of some puzzlement that this repeated articulation of a lacuna only briefly refers to, or sometimes even ignores, the scholarly work that has come before. In the US context, the culminating fifth volume of *A History of the Book in America (The Enduring Book: Print Culture in Postwar America)*, edited by David Paul Nord, Joan Shelley Rubin, and Michael Schudson, appeared over a decade ago, in 2009. A doorstopper of a book—more than 600 pages—it has bibliographical heft, deriving from the (now long-emergent) tradition of the history of the book, but moving on from the material text itself to examine

the broader literary sociologies of production and consumption, including analyses of institutional contexts, literary cultures, and patterns of readership. Yet the volume is not referenced in any of the articles in this special issue. One of the aspects that subsequent scholarship—and particularly this issue—has been able to add, of course, is what came after: a notable “after,” given the rapidity of technological and hence market change; the dawn of the “Amazonian” age, as Konstantinou and Sinykin term it, picking up on McGurl (238). But alongside previous scholarly work, in addition to the *History of the Book in America* volume, substantial monographs addressing aspects of the institutionalization of literary cultures have been produced: examples include Janice Radway’s *A Feeling for Books: The Book-of-the-Month Club, Literary Taste, and Middle-Class Desire* (1997), James F. English’s *The Economy of Prestige: Prizes, Awards, and the Circulation of Cultural Value* (2005; examining cultural awards more generally but with a focus on literary prizes), McGurl’s *The Program Era: Postwar Fiction and the Rise of Creative Writing* (2009), Amy Hungerford’s *Making Literature Now* (2016), and Sarah Brouillette’s *UNESCO and the Fate of the Literary* (2019), as well as titles focusing on reading cultures, Elizabeth Long’s *Book Clubs: Women and the Uses of Reading in Everyday Life* (2003), Cecilia Konchar Farr’s *Reading Oprah: How Oprah’s Book Club Changed the Way America Reads* (2004) and her edited volume with Jaime Harker, *The Oprah Affect: Critical Essays on Oprah’s Book Club* (2008), and, with a transnational perspective, Danielle Fuller and DeNel Rehberg Sedo’s *Reading Beyond the Book: The Social Practices of Contemporary Literary Culture* (2013). Such longform studies are supplemented by a host of journal articles and edited collections.³

My aim in highlighting this summoning of a scholarly gap—repeated in this special issue—is not so much to take to task any particular author, or indeed the claim of this collection as a whole. As academics we are, after all, taught to point to the novelty of our research in order to indicate its importance, to gain grants, promotion, tenure; there is an intriguing parallel here to the contemporary world of trade publishing, which emphasizes newness in order to create marketplace buzz.⁴ Perhaps more interesting to consider are the disciplinary variations (both conceptual and methodological) that may lead to such statements, how such disciplinary perspectives relate to a periodizing approach, and—occasionally—the geographically and linguistically delimited versions of those approaches. (Sánchez Prado’s account of the translation into Spanish of *American Dirt*, and the broader reference to developing scholarship of Hispanophone publishing and translation in the US, fruitfully

expands out the largely anglophone monopoly of the special issue.) This question is the one that animates this commentary.

Periodization is a key concern of the special issue's introductory essay. Konstantinou and Sinykin comment that part of the work of the issue is in relation to one of the "longstanding challenges": "how to periodize recent US literary history." The detailed, insightful response given by the editors is in the delineation of microperiods from 1945 onward; a process which amplifies and extends an understanding of "neoliberalism" in relation to literary markets. As such, Konstantinou and Sinykin identify, there are four "moments" post-1945: corporate, conglomerate, independent, and Amazonian (five, if the immediate postwar "cottage industry" period is included).

This microperiodization is a particularly useful animation of the broader period and the articles within this volume, even as it also hints at two other tendencies in studying the contemporary and the recent past: the sense—perhaps objective—that change is happening more quickly than previously; and that to live and study within these periods is thus to make efforts to understand the rapidity of change, while also attempting to gain some vestiges of (scholarly) control through identifying and naming. In a recent article focusing on the study of contemporary book cultures, Beth Driscoll and I assessed the urge toward periodization, particularly within the study of the contemporary. "Contemporaneity," we argued,

complicates the object of research. We are studying the now. The *what*, exactly? Periodisation is always fraught: naming and defining periods is a power move, an act that colonises time. There is scholarly capital in being able to identify, articulate and neologise a cultural period; such capital accumulates through a cycle of recognition, acceptance and challenge. (140)

We went on to identify some of these pushes for scholarly capital through periodization in the twenty-first century, variously characterized as "the 'late age of print,' and subsequently 'algorithmic culture' (Striphas, *Late Age* and 'Algorithmic Culture') and 'the age of Amazon' (McGurl)," alongside "the 'digital literary sphere' (Murray, *Digital Literary Sphere*)." As we continued:

The mode of these claims is that of the overview, but local detail (or, in scholarly language, the case study and the empirical example), can disrupt these overviews, thereby calling for revisions, or renamings. Producing overviews from *within* the historical moment itself has the challenge of trying to incorporate (or even predict) ongoing changes. (140)

This current set of essays, particularly when framed through Konstantinou and Sinykin's introductory remarks, fits squarely into this mode of offering overview *and* local exemplars from a elucidatory set of perspectives, perspectives which I examine in more detail shortly. Moreover, my argument is not to argue against the tendency toward periodization, particularly given my own scholarly practice and perspective of writing from within the moment of the object of study. Rather, it is to interrogate its powerplay, its positionality, and what it consequently produces.

As indicated earlier, part of this positionality is to do with disciplinarity. As Konstantinou and Sinykin remark, "When post-1945 publishing has been studied, it is most often through the lenses of sociology or book history" (227). My own analysis would tend to agree with this perspective, not least in the caveat that its preceding sentences provide in terms of the disciplinary base: that it is "[w]e *literary* scholars" who "have perhaps been slow to write this criticism and history" (my italics). What many of the accounts in this issue therefore take care to do is to bring textual readings to contextual ones; to encompass a "horizon of interpretation" as well as the significance of literary interpretation or—as Konstantinou and Sinykin term it—an examination of the "sites where neoliberalism and literary history do lunch" (227, 230). Publishing company offices, meetings, the processes of conglomeration, outsourcing of labor, the global supply chain: all these then come under the purview of literary study, as the sites where literary judgments are made, solidified, replicated, and—sometimes—contested and held accountable.⁵ Notably, this literary studies approach leads to multiple perspectives on the formation of "corporate taste" and the "anticorporate logic of literary value" (McGrath and Goldsby's terms, respectively [262]). These formulations bring together aesthetics and the particular socioeconomic conditions of the temporal period and geographical location under study. This "interpenetration of capitalism and aesthetics," then, as Konstantinou and Sinykin further explicate it (233), is scrutinized throughout the special issue, with the sociologically fashioned optics of demographics, identity, and individual authorial histories also brought into the mix.

What, then, does the special issue bring to us, and to the study of post-1945 US literary history—as well as post-1945 book history? If the response is divided into methodological approaches (which often indicate disciplinary and conceptual differences), the first clear area of focus is on the metatextual reading of writings by writers about writing (and publishing); the exposure of "the mechanisms of publishing," as Konstantinou and Sinykin put it (226). The contributors thereby mine texts for their analogies of the writing life or *as* unintentional analogies for the market, particularly in the articles by

Allan on King, Nishikawa on post-urban fiction and African American literature, and McGurl on Amazon self-published subgenres.

As Allan argues, “King’s oeuvre obsesses over the problem of his own authorial autonomy, chiefly thanks to his symbolic status as a publishing profit-machine” under the financial pressures of corporate publishing, particularly with regards to genre publishing (273). Allan’s reading of the exceptional case of King (the biggest writers always offering—I would argue—exceptional rather than paradigmatic perspectives) yields subtle thinking on genre as “institutional space, capable of its own ideological function and critique” or “as a kind of corporation itself” (290, 273). Such a textual reading might usefully be supplemented with emerging scholarship on genre fiction and its generation of and by “genre worlds,” an adaptation of Howard Becker’s “art worlds” by Lisa Fletcher, Driscoll, and Kim Wilkins, which bring together the “industrial, social, and textual” “operations of genre” (1013).⁶

In Nishikawa’s examination of African American literature after urban fiction (another connection to *Luster’s* “Diversity Giveaway”), a range of methodological modes, including the literary critical, are summoned. Within the examination of Omar Tyree’s metafictional foray in *The Last Street Novel* (2007), Nishikawa examines the “fractur[ing]” of readerships along “class, and taste lines” (333). Nishikawa’s unfolding of the implications of Tyree’s writing and (self-)publishing career is effectively done, incorporating subtle understandings of sociodemographic differentiations and marketplace implications, of self-published production and the supply chain (including an account of the sales outlets—beauty salons, expos—of self-published African American titles) combined with aesthetic and paratextual readings. The narrative he provides of the pricing and rejacketing of Tyree’s first, formerly self-published novel *Flyy Girl* (1993) adduces a bibliographic approach to this methodological mix, as do his readings of other street lit authors, and of the impact of book classification systems on race and genre. The well-rounded methodological mix, merging literary scholarship with broader ideological and industry-oriented readings, enables Nishikawa to interrogate “the publishing industry’s incorporation of Blackness” in a way which is evidenced, material, and critical—a strong model for the intervention of literary scholarship in the reading of publishing markets.

Both Allan and Nishikawa offer readings of texts which themselves purposively set out to interrogate the place of authorship in the literary marketplace. In his contribution, McGurl sets out to do something slightly different: to offer a textual reading of a particular self-published erotica subgenre as a metaphor for Amazon’s

relationship with its customers, as “the quintessential Amazonian genre of literature” (394). Metaphors frequently abound in analyses of Amazon and its marketplace powers; the repeated use of the word *behemoth* by commentators is one such example (sidestepped by McGurl). Here McGurl extends his existing analysis of the “Age of Amazon” in a direction presaged by his previous article—and periodization—but perhaps not entirely anticipated. For “Unspeakable Conventionality: The Perversity of the Kindle” examines the relationship between Amazon and customer in pseudo-psychoanalytic terms; market power is configured as “bondage” and “hypermateralization” (395, 394). McGurl articulates “perversity” in terms of “specific fetish” and the way in which contemporary classificatory systems divide “contemporary literature into *several thousand* genre categories, each with its own bestseller list[;] Amazon is the host of a genre *system* conceived as an engine of infinitely infoliating permutations of objects of narrative desire” (398). Metaphorically, this is intriguing, but a more clearly material examination of Amazon’s technological, classificatory, and algorithmic infrastructures combined with an appreciation of the broader industrial landscape of other, substantial self-publishing platforms (for example, Wattpad) with different customer relationships and affordances might cement the scholarship.⁷ “The rise of the micro-genre,” as Driscoll explains about book metadata (Book Industry Standards and Communications [BISAC] codes as well as Amazon’s own proprietary classificatory systems), is central to an understanding of twenty-first-century publishing cultures. Classificatory and algorithmic cultures have in-built prejudices, as Nishikawa indicates in his study of African American fiction and is surveyed on a broader cultural level by Safiya Umoja Noble in *Algorithms of Oppression* (2018).

McGurl argues for “the genericity of the genre system in general” (403), and the study of romance as a genre is well established in terms both of production and consumption, as well as textual scholarship (McGurl’s frame of reference includes foundational work by Radway, alongside more recent studies from scholars including Pamela Regis and Brouillette, although a frame of reference beyond North America might also include Eva Hemmungs Wirtén’s *Global Infatuation: Explorations in Transnational Publishing and Texts: The Case of Harlequin and Enterprises and Sweden* [1998]).⁸ The argument made that “the domain of consumer culture as a whole is by now a largely *perverse* one, in the psychoanalytical sense” (404) flags the focus on consumer relationships with big tech, but at the same time misses the busy and communicative sociologies of romance authorship, and its worlds of writers conventions, of sometimes tempestuous associations troubled by racist and

exclusionary practices, of collaborative authorship, of authors who are very well versed, and operate within, the Amazonian—and other—technological infrastructures.^{9,10}

Another methodological mode that the special issue offers is archival. Goldsby's carefully plotted article on the relationship between Brooks and her long-time Harper's editor nuances and in some places countermands existing narratives about Brooks. The letters between Brooks and Elizabeth Lawrence reveal a relationship of "remarkable personal intimacy," as Goldsby puts it (245), which "negotiated the industry's rules of racist engagement"—as well as its patriarchal lines (252). Goldsby also argues for this cross-racial relationship, as revealed through the record of their letters, to demonstrate an "aesthetic sociality" in contradiction both to the corporate logics of the company and to Brooks's later disavowals of Lawrence *and* of mainstream publishing, in her shift to publishing with the Black Arts press. That these two visions of Brooks and her interactions with Lawrence do not reconcile begs a broader question: When personal (if nonetheless professional) correspondence and archival record do not correspond with public statements, how is the scholar to integrate these varying visions?

McGrath's investigations of "Literary Agency" bring a triangulation of methods to the mix: interviews with agents, participant observation (of office and other spaces), and the agent's (author) list as a unit of aesthetic and sociological study. While the mix is perhaps less ambitious than McGrath claims (on the much grander scale afforded by the monograph, for example, Radway brought personal memoir, ethnography and autoethnography, participant observation, archival study, and textual readings to her examination of the Book-of-the-Month Club), in so doing, McGrath nonetheless builds a telling narrative of "corporate taste" and how it is developed via the series of publishing intermediaries. The analysis of interviewing (and its associated ethnographic vignettes such as an agent picking up a published book from their shelves, or a galley from their desk, to demonstrate their "taste") is particularly revealing: the "self-conscious[ness]" of agents when talking in "clichés" and their seeming incapacity to talk about taste in aesthetic terms (352). "Taste," comments McGrath, is rather "entirely habituated: agents describe taste as a matter of instinct rather than a principle of aesthetic judgment. They would tell me about the experience of reading a book they *just had* to represent in visceral terms—hair standing on end or a punch to the gut" (355). Such analysis aligns with some of my own work speaking to publisher's editors and their configuration of taste within company contexts and market environments.¹¹ McGrath articulates such self-fashionings and industry representations as "instances of an agent's self-contradiction . . . moments of productive dissonance.

It is less meaningful, in other words, to ask, ‘Is this true?’ than ‘What logic or aspiration motivates this description?’” (353)

The challenge McGrath is presented with is what happens when the “logic or aspiration” is pressured. A substantial part of her analysis of the agent’s list focuses on Nicole Aragi and her high-literary “Team A” of writers of color. It is perplexing that the analysis of Team A makes no reference to the sexual abuse allegations made of Junot Díaz, Aragi’s defense of him, and the ensuing narrative about the case.¹² How did these transgressions sit alongside the seemingly harmonious, mutualistic operations of Team A? Perhaps it is inevitable that agents will support their clients, but for Aragi—as for the rest of Team A—it would surely have presented intersectional challenges in the #MeToo era. Alongside personal, aesthetic, and corporate taste, there are more political readings that could—I would argue, *should*—be made. Such readings, however, require critical distance from interviewees and research objects, whereas sometimes immersion or embeddedness within a field can disable critique.

This is not to argue against the benefits of immersion in the field—far from it. Sánchez Prado’s article, as discussed previously, demonstrates what a critically, and ideologically, engaged scholarship can (and must) offer to the study of contemporary publishing. Like Sánchez Prado, in “Literature’s Vexed Democratization,” Grossman, Spahr, and Young also write from a version of the “inside,” as scholar-poet-publisher-practitioners. Their multiple and overlapping perspectives combine: “our world is defined by the conversations writers have among themselves, which are often different than scholarly debates. We could not understand the changing contours of literary production without the doubled perspective of what we have gleaned on the ground paired with a wider critical angle” (299). The authors thus bring their collective experience of writing, editing, publishing, and reading from within “our small poetry subculture” (301). In so doing, they discuss their initial belief in the democratization of the literary marketplace through the early days of desktop publishing: “We often pointed out that anyone who wanted to be an editor could be an editor. Anyone who wanted to publish a book could publish a book. Anyone could distribute a book on any number of websites” (301). This emancipatory narrative is troubled, however, by an investigation of overlapping networks: “educational institutions (student-teacher relationships and classroom-based peer relationships), . . . cocktail parties and writers’ retreats, . . . places of publication (magazines and publishing houses), . . . political tendencies, and . . . aesthetic conventions” (306). Their tracking of an overtly racist hold on these literary networks in the mid twentieth century and the consequent “dynamics of

prize-giving” leads to data-driven analysis of a subsequent “massive increase in production that remains mostly white and a limited, curated version of diversity that uses a rhetoric of openness” (312). The contemporary poetry canon, they discern, is thus “racially diverse but paradoxically narrowing, with unevenly applied standards for entry” (316). This “narrowing” derives from a literary prize consecration concentration among critically successful poets of colour who attended Ivy League universities, frequently MFA programs.

Sánchez Prado as well as Grossman, Spahr, and Young thus bring an insider-outsider, autoethnographic perspective to bear on their studies. So their scholarship—although with foci on different geographical and literary sectors—has affinity with the conceptual school I have developed with Driscoll, Ullapoolism. Ullapoolism takes an autoethnographic, arts-informed and activist approach to contemporary book cultures, one sometimes forged in the “overlapping circle [of] cocktail parties,” as Grossman, Spahr, and Young put it. A quintessential example is our paired projects *The Frankfurt Book Fair and Bestseller Business* (2020), a short monograph examining the Frankfurter Buchmesse, the key global event in the contemporary publishing calendar, and *The Frankfurt Kabuff* (2019), a self-published comic erotic thriller set at the fair under the pseudonymous Blaire Squiscoll, which we initially published on Wattpad. Our multiple methods—including the invention of a “Sleaze-O-Meter,” an old-fashioned tally counter to record incidences of sleaze and sexual harassment, along with adventures in self-publishing—indicate how immersion within publishing events and practices can reveal otherwise inaccessible perspectives, but also enable scholarly direct action.¹³ Like many of the articles in this special issue, Ullapoolism also calls particular attention to power and positioning, and a focus on the contemporary. Further to our discussion on periodization, we use the articulations of Rachel Carroll to demonstrate the activist potential of our epistemology, the possibility that our scholarship can influence the object of our study, the “richness” which derives from the contemporary’s “status as crucible of the near but as yet unfixed future; in its analysis we can see the forces at work in the making of possible future histories, including forces implicated in inequalities of power” (Driscoll and Squires 140).

The conceptualization of the “as yet unfixed future” is an imperative one for contemporary historians of the book, in order both to understand but also to intervene in the processes of contemporary publishing. What is our stance on “Diversity Giveaways”? How do such problematic industrial formations manifest themselves across the globe, and how might it be useful to take a comparative approach?¹⁴ And while it might be contrarian to point out the focus on

What is our stance on “Diversity Giveaways”? How do such problematic industrial formations manifest themselves across the globe, and how might it be useful to take a comparative approach?

American publishing (notwithstanding the translinguistic, border-crossing perspectives brought to the study of *American Dirt*) within the pages of *American Literary History*, I would nonetheless urge for the broadening of conceptual frames of reference within *any* national study of literature and publishing to include scholarly work from elsewhere: both other anglophone contexts and further translinguistic ones. As this collection of essays emphatically shows, publishing in the US is so rich (in both economic and cultural terms) and so vital to a transnational understanding of the functioning of the global literary marketplace. My contention is that, in addition to interdisciplinary approaches and methodologies so productively accomplished in this set of essays, what happens within US publishing borders needs to come into scholarly conversation with academic work from around the rest of the world in order to expand such understandings yet further.

Endnotes

1. For the most recent, and data-driven, scholarship on US publishing's whiteness, see Richard Jean So's *Redlining Culture: A Data History of Racial Inequality and Postwar Fiction* (2021), a chapter of which previously appeared in these pages: see So, Dan Sinykin, and Jessica Young, "Economics, Race, and the Postwar US Novel: A Quantitative History," *American Literary History*, vol. 31, no. 4, 2019, pp. 775–804.
2. Thompson's envisioning of himself in the mode of "an anthropologist [who] would study the practices of a tribe inhabiting some remote island in the South Pacific, only in this case the tribe lives and works, for the most part, in a small section of an island squeezed between the Hudson and East rivers in New York and on the banks of the Thames in London" is the arch example of such colonizing tendencies (vii).
3. Work on the contemporary history of the book and publishing appears across a range of cross-disciplinary journals, including those focusing on cultural/media studies and the creative industries, but for more specifically publishing studies and contemporary history of the book approaches, see New York-based *Publishing Research Quarterly* and Quebec's *Mémoires du livre Studies in Book Culture*, which also offer transnational and translinguistic frames.
4. In *The Frankfurt Book Fair and Bestseller Business* (2020), Beth Driscoll and I analyze the generation of book buzz through the Frankfurt Book Fair.
5. In terms of the supply chain, Matthew Kirschenbaum's formulation of "bibliologistics" is relevant to interdisciplinary readings. See his "Bibliologistics: The Nature of Books Now, or A Memorable Fancy," *Post45*, 8 Apr. 2020, web, and the associated *Books.Files: Preservation of Digital Assets in the Contemporary Publishing Industry* (2020).

6. The article, the authors detail, is a “pilot study” and “proof of concept,” which is extended at greater length in their forthcoming monograph: *Genre Worlds: Popular Fiction and Twenty-First-Century Book Culture* (2022). An additional study of genre in sociological contexts is Jeremy Rosen’s *Minor Characters Have Their Day: Genre and the Contemporary Literary Marketplace* (2016).
7. Recent scholarship on Wattpad includes Melanie Ramdarshan Bold, “The Return of the Social Author: Negotiating Authority and Influence on Wattpad,” 2016, *Convergence*, vol. 24, no. 2, 2018, pp. 117–36, and Claire Parnell, “Mapping the Entertainment Ecosystem of Wattpad: Platforms, Publishing and Adaptation,” *Convergence*, 10 Nov. 2020, web. The latter argues in cross-disciplinary terms for the integration of platform studies and a media ecology framework (via José van Dijck’s *The Culture of Connectivity: A Critical History of Social Media* [2013]) to the study of contemporary publishing.
8. The *Journal of Popular Romance Studies* provides further, multiple transnational examples of scholarship focusing on the institutional logics of romance publishing.
9. On the worlds of romance authorship, an example focusing on the Philippines is to be found in Jodi McAlister, Parnell, and Andrea Anne Trinidad’s “#RomanceClass: Genre World, Intimate Public, Found Family,” *Publishing Research Quarterly*, vol. 36, 2020, pp. 403–17. On racist and exclusionary practices, see Lois Beckett’s “Fifty Shades of White: The Long Fight against Racism in Romance Novels,” *The Guardian*, 4 Apr. 2019, web.
10. Forthcoming scholarship on the first 10 years of the Kindle from Simon Rowberry (*Four Shades of Gray: The Rise and Plateau of the Kindle* [2022]) will further understanding of Amazon’s technical infrastructures and their affordances.
11. See Squires, “Taste and/or Big Data?: Postdigital Editorial Selection,” *Critical Quarterly*, vol. 59, no. 3, 2017, pp. 24–38, and “Sensing the Novel/Seeing the Book/Selling the Goods,” *The Novel as Network* (2020), edited by Tim Lanzendörfer and Corinna Norrick-Rühl, pp. 251–70.
12. For reporting on the Díaz case (including his statement issued via Aragi) see Alexandra Alter, Jonah Engel Bromwich, and Damien Cave, “The Writer Zinzi Clemmons Accuses Junot Díaz of Forcibly Kissing Her,” *The New York Times*, 4 May 2018, web.
13. See Squires and Driscoll, “The Sleaze-O-Meter: Sexual Harassment in the Publishing Industry,” *Interscript*, 8 Mar. 2018, web.
14. From a UK perspective, recent work on race and ethnicity in publishing includes Ramdarshan Bold’s *Inclusive Young Adult Fiction: Authors of Colour in the United Kingdom* (2019); Anamik Saha and Sandra van Lente’s “Re : Thinking ‘Diversity’ in Publishing,” University of London, 2020, web PDF; and my own “Publishing’s Diversity Deficit,” *CAMEo Cuts*, 2017, web.

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