Experimental Realisms
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“Don’t just peer: interfere.”
—Ian Hacking, Representing and Intervening

“The point is to change it.”
—Karl Marx, “Theses on Feuerbach”

Gertrude Stein, now widely canonized as an “experimental” writer, called her story “Melanctha” (1909) “the first definite step away from the nineteenth century and into the twentieth century in literature.”¹ Her erstwhile mentor, the philosopher and experimental psychologist William James, wrote of it: “this is a fine new kind of realism.”² Experimental? Realist? Nineteenth-century, or a step into the twentieth?

The nineteenth century is widely regarded as the high period of realism in US and European literature, not only on its own terms but in relation to the growth of social institutions such as prisons, hospitals, and schools, and what Michel Foucault influentially argued were the power-knowledge relations that they produced through the observation, study, and administration of human bodies and minds at the individual and population levels.³ In the later nineteenth century, academic disciplines consolidated to produce a range of medico-social knowledge, from
anthropometry, sexology, and experimental psychology to sociology and economics, helping to inaugurate what Sarah Igo has called “the movement of social data into everyday life.” Literary realism participated to varying degrees in this impulse toward social knowledge, whether it was imagined as merely consonant with the accurate observation of social life or as actively drawing on it to produce social reform. “Go out into the street and stand where the ways cross and hear the machinery of life work clashing in its grooves,” exhorted the naturalist novelist Frank Norris. “Or look from your window. A whole Literature goes marching by.” Moreover, these new and newly professionalizing fields of knowledge did not stand apart from their fields of application in institutions, philanthropy, and reformist activism. On the contrary, as Craig Calhoun argues of sociology in particular, they were “from the outset marked by both an engagement with projects of social reform and an understanding of society as quasi-natural, even organic—and by the tension between the two.” Texts of indeterminate genre—fiction, creative nonfiction, journalism, ethnography, and life writing—as well as texts that are now enshrined as exemplars of “realist,” “naturalist,” “regionalist,” and “experimental” modes all negotiated this tension between the quasi-passive enterprise of observing natural and social “laws” and the quasi-active enterprise of intervening in them. As Laura Fisher argues, in this context, “‘literature’ constitutes not only a body of texts but also a set of historically contingent practices and collective values” that were often directly addressed to questions of social
reform. Consequently, much literature in this period also participated in the biopolitical project of the administration of life.

This essay aims to clarify why being “realist” or “experimental” were at issue at the turn of the twentieth century in both social and literary contexts, and how best to triangulate these concepts against the further meanings that they have accreted since that period. Both terms have privileged historical moments—the nineteenth century and the early twentieth century, respectively—and both are also widely used as transhistorical generic designations. For this reason, there are some benefits and limitations to thinking about certain works that are difficult to classify as strictly realist, naturalist, or regionalist as instances of experimental realism. We might be tempted to think of “experimental realism” as something both historically and generically “in between” realism and modernism, with realism mutating as if teleologically in the late nineteenth century toward its ultimate, safely experimental and non-realistic, modernist goal. And certainly, plenty of texts of this period—by Stephen Crane, Kate Chopin, Charlotte Perkins Gilman, Charles W. Chesnutt, Henry James, Edith Wharton, the early Gertrude Stein—have been treated as “proto-modernist.” But modernism is neither an explanation nor the necessary endpoint for these texts; consequently, for the purposes of this essay, I will set “modernism” (itself a contentious and complex concept) aside. Instead, I wish to outline some of the uses and limits of understanding some works of the late nineteenth century,
including works by some of the authors just mentioned, as “experimental realism”—why it fits, and what’s wrong with the fact that it fits.

To explain “experimental realism,” I will attend first to some basic questions. What is an experiment? What is the relationship between an experiment and being “experimental”? And what is at stake in attributing an “experimental” quality to a literary text? Experimental realism, I will argue, is a provisional but useful frame for understanding literary engagements with the moment of the professionalizing social sciences and their knowledge-making practices. Yet I will also argue that attachment to the “experimental” depends on an analytic distinction between representing and intervening (or, alternatively, discourse and action), with intervening standing as the privileged term, a distinction that erodes under scrutiny and must be held lightly if at all. What experimental realisms reveal above all are the multiple ways that representations of social knowledge can be valorized as “active” and “experimental”—or not—depending on its interarticulation with other codes of power.

1. What is an experiment?

It is tempting to suppose that “an experiment” is a stable, bounded phenomenon locatable in the sciences, and indeed, this is sometimes how it is treated in literary studies. In this view, the experiment aspires to the status of a formal procedure for eliciting what we might call an utterance from the otherwise silent material world—material reality asserting itself
(and then returning to silence). Yet this temptation overlooks the complex historicity of scientific practice—in part because programmatic declarations of theory and method in and around the sciences have aimed, with great success, to subordinate the historicity and contingency of scientific knowledge. This brief detour into the study of experiment aims to reopen its historical dimensions, with a view to suggesting how much it is that we lose when we allow the concept of “experiment” to ossify into an abstracted form or procedure, and to bring into relief the consequences of such an ossification. As Friedrich Steinle has put it, “Gaining empirical results by means of experiment has turned out to be a much more complex process than envisaged in any of the empirical proposals of the seventeenth through nineteenth centuries. Experiments aren't simply found; they are made.” My point, here, is an extremely simple one: the “experiment” in scientific practice is not at all straightforward, and literary appeals to “scientific experiment” (by authors and critics alike) are consequently frequently more ideological than not. Yet the multiplicity of historical experimental practices and theories of experiment also constitute a rich opportunity to unfold the meanings of such an appeal.

The study of scientific experiment underwent a renaissance in the 1980s, a decade in which the idea of “experimentalism” also gained significant currency in poetics and anthropology. Robert Ackermann, writing in a philosophy of science context, identified this emerging scholarship as a “new experimentalism.” If the physicist and philosopher of science Allan Franklin could complain of a “neglect of experiment” as
late as 1986, Ian Hacking, in a 1988 address to the Philosophy of Science Association, could rejoin with a long list of important studies of experimental practice, exemplars of what Peter Heering has called the “practical turn” in history of science. Especially notable examples from the 1980s include Hacking’s own *Representing and Intervening* (1983), Peter Galison’s *How Experiments End* (1987), and work from the University of Edinburgh Science Studies Unit, including Steven Shapin and Simon Schaffer’s creative and influential 1985 study *Leviathan and the Air-Pump*, which analyzed both Robert Boyle’s “experimental” and Thomas Hobbes’s “natural philosophy” approaches to knowledge across political and epistemological registers. The work of the 1980s discloses the early modern period, especially British empiricism, as a privileged though not exclusive area of focus, owing in large part to the narratives of epistemological modernity that attach to experiment. The 1980s also saw significant disciplinary contestation over the distinctions between “STS” (indicating either “science and technology studies” or “science, technology, and society”), “SSK” (sociology of scientific knowledge), history of science, and philosophy of science, areas of emphasis that have continued to be contested.

Importantly, accounts of experiment do not arrange themselves tidily along methodological or subdisciplinary lines. Rather, despite differences in commitments, methods, and institutional forms, all of these attempts to account for scientific knowledge have in various ways absorbed the lesson that, in Peter Dear and Sheila Jasanoff’s words, “to
study how something works is to study what it is.”\textsuperscript{13} Bruno Latour and Steven Woolgar’s landmark 1979 ethnography of the Salk Institute, \textit{Laboratory Life}, is just one instance of the ways that the study of scientific knowledge was transformed by attention to the material practices, apparatuses, and institutions that have been the sites of its making.\textsuperscript{14} Since then, the nature of experiment from the seventeenth century to the present has been a core area of research in STS and history of science. This body of work shows that, as Hacking puts it, “theory is not one thing but many, and experiment not one thing but many.”\textsuperscript{15} Points of investigation have included the distinctions between hypothesis- or theory-driven and exploratory experiments, the role of often anonymous lab technicians and servants in experiment, the role of nonhuman apparatuses (from air-pump to particle accelerator) in experiment, and the kinds of discretion and tacit knowledge that go into structuring experiments, executing them, and interpreting and communicating their results.

Without pretending to account in any comprehensive way for the literature on scientific experiment, I wish to draw out three antinomies that lend some clarity and specificity to the ways that “experiment” comes to be invoked in literary studies: formal/historical, punctual/durational, and rigorous/wacky.

\textit{Formal/historical or procedure-bound/contingent}. As the historian of pedagogy John Rudolph has outlined, the notion of a single, portable, abstract “scientific method” was popularized by John Dewey at the
beginning of the twentieth century, primarily in a pedagogical context.\textsuperscript{16} The idea that experiment is above all a form or set of procedures not contingent on specific historical circumstances is legible in midcentury procedural literature, for example, and animates much of the popular understanding of “experiment.” The more formal and abstract we understand experiment to be, the less responsive it is to local contingencies, which may be a virtue or a vice depending on the situation. Much of experiment’s epistemological authority depends on understanding it as defined by form: insofar as this is understood to be the case, its results can be understood as independent of historical contingencies, replicable, and true. Yet as historians of science have pointed out, an experiment’s execution may depend crucially on specific personnel and their skills, equipment, space, local weather conditions, and the like, all of which may complicate the possibility of replication.\textsuperscript{17} The 2016 retirement of Rick Gerhart, the longtime resident scientific glassblower at California Institute of Technology, highlighted the rare specialized skills necessary to “go from a couple scratches on a piece of paper, to something you actually go use in a lab that you trust and is not going to blow acid in your face,” as Gerhart’s colleague, the chemist Bob Grubbs, put it.\textsuperscript{18} Writing of the search for experimentally observable quarks in the 1970s, the historian of science Andrew Pickering has described the distinction between experiments that are understood to be relatively bound by form and those that are not as a distinction between “closed” and “open” experimental systems, with “closed” system corresponding to a high degree of
explicability. While there is no such thing as a fully closed experimental system, Pickering argues, experimenters can be seen to seek “relative closure.”

Punctual/durational. Experiments are often discussed as discrete, temporally bounded acts conducing to clear results. The early modern Royal Society demonstration is a canonical example, and this version of the “experiment” is reproduced as pedagogy in thousands of science classrooms in which carefully prepared labs reproduce the experiment as demonstration. Consequently, experiments are often described as if they were instantaneous scenes of revelation or “Eureka moments,” in ways that are congruent with an early modern representation of the experiment as nature’s active unveiling, to be contrasted with a premodern theological scholasticism that engages in endless textual commentary. Needless to say, experimental practice varies much more than this stereotype suggests. Gertrude Stein and Leon Solomons’s 1896 joint psychology paper on automatic writing, now much discussed in literary criticism, for example, covers a series of related experiments that were not always clearly disarticulated. Writing about postwar physics, Peter Galison has shown how “For any experimentalist, much is invested in the decision to terminate an experimental study, and the choice to end a project will always carry a risk.” That risk lies in the authority that a sense of closure confers, as Galison explains: “Experimentalists’ demonstrations of the reality—or artificiality—of an effect or particle will never have the closed form of a deductive argument”; in other words, the purported temporal
closure of “an experiment” aims to reproduce the finality that is philosophically forfeited by the turn to induction; “the end of an experimental demonstration is not, and cannot be, based purely on a closed set of procedures.”

Rigorous/wacky or, alternatively, tidy/messy; regimented/creative.

History of science accounts of experiments often describe the ways that contingent, complex experimental processes gain an appearance of authority, simplicity, stability, and rigor through rhetoric, norms of demonstration, institutions, and other social factors. Generally speaking, historians of science and STS scholars are not attempting to debunk the authority of science but rather explain it. Thus the story of an experiment is often a story of the making of rigor; to put it another way, it is the story of how human actions come to appear as the voice of nature itself. Yet from a literary perspective, it is in our interest to recognize the residue of wildness, undiscipline, and indeed, at times, unrigor that also attaches to the word “experimental,” recognizable in many uses of experimental schooling, experimental art, experimental writing, experimental therapy, etc. These are scenarios in which the processual, unknown, and in-progress elements of experiment, which challenge rather than consolidate epistemic stability, are emphasized and are not contained. It is worth noting how often this version of the “experimental” attaches to what we might call “nonscientific experimentalisms” (“experimental” plus a noun that is not a science); the version of “experimental” that means wacky, woo, or undisciplined often routes such practices away from our
conception of “science” as an authoritative knowledge-practice. Yet such practices often do have historical roots in the sciences, and, having been sheared off from the authoritative and often teleological narrative of what counts as “science,” have nonetheless retained or gained the tag “experimental.”

There is a great deal of ideological energy bound up in protecting the epistemic purity of the idea of “science,” such that scientific investigations that are later shown to be incongruent with empirical findings, unintegratable with other theories, or are for other reasons deemed incorrect are often reclassified, not as erroneous, dead-end, unproductive, or failed science, but rather as not science or as “pseudoscience.”25 But there is nothing unscientific about the contingent, processual element of experiments, as studies of highly canonical experiments (e.g. Robert Boyle’s air pressure experiments) show; indeed, those elements are highly valued and have long contributed to the aura of Romantic genius attached to the experimenter in popular culture.26 As Steinle emphasizes, “exploratory” experiments are a crucial component of scientific practice, especially when encountering phenomena for which no well-developed theory yet exists.27 Exploratory experiments disclose the dialectical relationship between theory and experiment. The nineteenth-century physiologist Claude Bernard characterized this kind of work as “expériences de tâtonnement,” which might be translated roughly as “messing around.”28 As numerous scholars have noted, this is often the
only way to arrive at a robustly testable theory in the first place, even as it can also lead to what retrospectively appear to be dead ends.

The turn of the twentieth century is rich in practices whose experimentalism would come to be understood as non-scientific; experimental schools, for example, are rooted in experimental pedagogy and experimental psychology (whether of the Child Study Movement or the Montessori method) that took their own scientific character extremely seriously. In the case of experimental schooling, translation to an ongoing, applied practice made this work lose its status as a site of knowledge-production. Mesmerism, the study of telepathy, and Fletcherism are among the areas of investigation that might have been understood as “experimental” in the sense of rigorous during the Gilded Age which would more likely be classed as the “wacky” version of “experimental” now.

The three antinomies I have named above may be understood as different aspects of a single antinomy: it might be said, for example, that the idea of the experiment as punctual, or at least naturally and distinctly bounded in time (we didn’t know, we did the experiment, now we know) is a version of proposing the experiment as formal and epistemologically independent of accidents of time and place. Similarly, understanding experiments as defined by forms and procedures is often treated as equivalent to affirming their epistemic stability. Needless to say, these antinomies are infused with cultural meaning and are frequently used in invidious, value-laden ways. Yet the values embedded in these antinomies
can easily flip, as the third antinomy makes clear: the true experiment, it is sometimes affirmed, is a site of play, surprise, even joy, against which any protocol that smacks of rigidity must be rejected as puritanical and wrong. Rebecca Onion offers an illuminating exploration of the expectation—or demand—that scientific experiment offer transgressive jouissance through her investigation of the child-as-scientist figure in the early twentieth century. As Onion points out, this demand often refuses the aspects of scientific research that are repetitive, boring, or exacting. The experimental poet Lyn Hejinian’s classic essay on “The Rejection of Closure,” for example, valorizes the epistemically uncertain moment in experiment against its consolidation as stable knowledge or or natural fact; her “open” and “closed” texts remarkably echo the open and closed experimental systems that Pickering describes. The experiment is typically imagined as the juncture at which the natural world asserts its reality and truth, for example in “book of nature” discourses. The Royal Society’s motto Nullius in verba (take no one’s word for it) echoes through more contemporary praise for “actual experiments” (as opposed, we can presume, to not-actual, ersatz, or false scholasticism) in the early modern period. Yet the forms and protocols of experiment themselves can come to suggest too much of the social world, of expectation and moral propriety, against which the experiment, if it is to remain “experimental” in the sense of allowing nature to assert its truth over a corrupt and fallen culture, is of necessity an anarchic irruption. The hierarchies outlined here are not proof against their own reversal. Thus the “experimental” ideally
contains both “open” and “closed” moments, a trajectory through which material reality or nature can transgressively assert its truth, upsetting all social presupposition, and then settle into “proven” and socially usable fact.\textsuperscript{34} In other words, notwithstanding its often counterfactual nature, a version of the ahistorical narrative of scientific experiment that I cautioned against at the beginning of this section persists in popular and heuristic accounts of experiment in ways that exceed its accuracy. As Naomi Oreskes’s account of heroism as a scientific value in self-experiments—whose epistemological value is preliminary at best—suggests, the transgressive quality of the experiment’s putative ability to make material reality speak is often more highly valued than its ability to render up stable knowledge.\textsuperscript{35} What the idea of “experimentalism” has inherited from the turn of the twentieth century is the valorization of this microplot of transgression—above, and even at times at the expense of, any specific scientific or knowledge-making practice.

2. From experiments to experimentalism

When we speak of “experimental realisms,” then, we are not speaking of scientific experiments, nor do scientific experiments offer a single, portable model through which, by analogy, literary texts can be identified as either experimental or not. Yet the end of the nineteenth century in the US remains a rich site for thinking about experimentalism,
due to the rise and consolidation of the social sciences in this period. The social sciences sharply challenged the boundaries of experiment and, at the same time, engaged closely with popular forms such as journalism, popular entertainment (e.g. “lights and shadows” literature), and philanthropy. \textsuperscript{36} While the antinomies outlined above—formal/historical, punctual/durational, rigorous/wacky—remained lively, in many ways the social sciences put pressure on classic models of “the experiment” and shifted emphasis toward being experimental, or otherwise reinterpreting scientific values for the new fields. \textsuperscript{37} Literary (and, for that matter, “nonliterary”) texts were part of a wider field of contention around the production of social knowledge.

Many of the classic studies of experiment focus on the physical sciences (\textit{Leviathan and the Air-Pump, How Experiments End}), and with that focus has come the privileging of periods in which the physical sciences were sites of particular contest, especially the early modern period. With their often living and conscious objects of study, the biological and social sciences—many of whose key moments of emergence occurred over the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries—present further complexities in experimental practice. \textsuperscript{38} Discussing the supposed gold standard of the doubly anonymized randomized trial, for example, Hacking observes that “[m]any treatments are not a matter of giving tablets. In comparing two kinds of surgery for breast cancer no one can be blind, and we have ethical problems about assigning one of the two modes of surgery to a patient ‘at random.’ At the very least, she should have some choice in the

matter herself.” This does not exactly come as a surprise, but Hacking’s example points up the tacit assumption built into western knowledge practices that the objects of experiment are just that—objects. This was a classic site of intervention for feminist and, later, antiracist STS scholars, such as Evelyn Fox Keller’s influential, though now dated, psychoanalytic critique of Baconian induction in “Gender and Science.” Donna Haraway’s pressure on the figure of the “modest witness”—Shapin and Schaffer’s portrait of the ideal knower constructed by Robert Boyle’s early modern experimental discourse—critiques 1980s accounts of experiment for doing as much to reinstate as to demystify an image of passive nature waiting to be heroically conquered, if not by the scientist then by the heroically interpreting historian of science. To put it another way, the “new experimentalism” or “practical turn” may be said to repeat the authorizing gesture of early modern empiricism, declaring that while earlier historians and philosophers of science have only looked at the books of men (so to speak), the practical turn looks in the book of nature by examining what scientists do. Yet practical constraints in the biological and social sciences in particular already introduce numerous obstacles to even the rhetorical (much less literal) production of tidy scenes of material reality speaking for itself, an issue of particular concern at the end of the nineteenth century. We may understand the canonicity of early modern physical science experiments in the “practical turn” in history and philosophy of science to derive precisely from their seeming stability and closure. There is a case to
be made that the most “successful,” authoritative experiments have the most to teach us about the pathway from non-knowledge to knowledge; additionally, they offer the most surprises (and scholarly cachet) when that pathway proves to involve ripples and detours that belie the experiments’ aura of clarity and stability. In contrast, the biological and especially social sciences are already perceived as less stable, less rigorous, less authoritative, and less easily rendered experimental. It stands to reason that they, and the period of their rise, the nineteenth century, are less canonical sites for the history of experiment. Yet this inherent marginality is also instructive, offering examples of ways that obstacles to eliciting material reality’s truth were met and managed.

While it has been well established how biopower and its forms of population knowledge already operate in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries—particularly notably in settler colonialism, the trade in enslaved people, and the production of racial regimes around them—it is in the nineteenth century that these modes of knowledge came to be codified and professionalized as sciences. In his *Cours de philosophie positive* (1830–42), the positivist philosopher Auguste Comte outlined a developmentalist hierarchy of thought, in which a primitive “theological” mode must necessarily give way to a more advanced “metaphysical” mode, to be in its turn superseded by the genuine contact with material reality afforded by the “positive” mode. Thus “All competent thinkers agree with Bacon,” he asserted, “that there can be no real knowledge except that which rests on observed facts.” Such a statement is no less a truism
today. For Comte, then, only a “social physics” remained lacking in the conversion of all knowledge from theological to positive thought: “The formation of social physics at last completes the system of natural sciences.”

The French novelist Émile Zola, in his polemical declaration of the “experimental novel,” extended this sequence one step further: “We have experimental chemistry and physics; we will have [Claude Bernard’s] experimental physiology; still further on, we will have the experimental novel.”

The authority of experiment to make material reality speak on its own behalf paradoxically also became the occasion for stretching its purview to domains that did not involve doing experiments in any direct sense, including the novel. As Nancy Bentley has argued, art in the US at the turn of the twentieth century took on an “analytical” quality, even as it was instrumentalized for social uplift.

In the United States, academic social sciences consolidated in the 1890s with the establishment of the first departments of sociology and anthropology at the University of Chicago, Columbia University, and others. Yet disciplinary lines were blurry—statistics was not necessarily understood as a separate discipline from sociology, for example—and professional norms were highly contested. Lester Ward, who served as the first president of the American Sociological Association, wrote in 1895 that “It seems to be pretty generally agreed that Comte’s word ‘sociology’ is the best name for the science as a whole; but how the science shall be subdivided and what names shall be given to the subdivisions, are questions by no means settled. The real cause of this unsettled
terminology is a lack not only of uniformity but of clearness in the views of different writers upon, and teachers of, the subject.”  

For Ward, the identification of systematic natural laws is the sine qua non of scientificity. Thus he dismisses “descriptive sociology” as “only the work of the collector” and, drawing on Comte, sets aside the observational/experimental distinction that so preoccupied Bernard and Zola in favor of a distinction between static and dynamic branches of “scientific” sociology—the former, analogous to anatomy and physiology in biology, addressing stable functions such as social institutions, and the latter, analogous to evolutionary biology, addressing qualitative social change.

Static and dynamic do not mean the same things as observational and experimental, yet experimental hierarchies animate his classification; the descriptive and observational is relegated to a pre-scientific, hobbyist “collector” status, while the inductive study of the “static” and “dynamic” are represented as properly scientific, with the dynamic more advanced still than the static. The University of Chicago sociologist Albion Small countered by defending the importance of descriptive sociology and attacking the stability of the static/dynamic distinction, not to undo Ward’s implicit hierarchies but to shore up an appropriate scientific modesty. “We have done a lot of more or less brilliant guessing about statics and dynamics,” Small wrote, “but the work which gives the most promise of being permanent is, from the sociologist's point of view, practically all descriptive. In the interest of careful, methodical, responsible science this condition ought to be advertised both
to young students and to the oldest investigators.” The term “experimental” appears nowhere in this exchange; rather, the privileged term is “inductive,” describing the reasoning process associated with empiricism. Yet like Bernard and Zola, even Small saw inductive work as a higher and securer form of science, one to which sociology would eventually accede: “We are still in the describing stage”—but not, it is to be hoped, for long. The values of experiment and experimentalism at the turn of the twentieth century remained potent, albeit in sublimated and remediated forms.

3. Biopolitical aesthetics

Let me illustrate one such form, which does not exhaust the possibilities of experimental realism but which demonstrates one way that epistemological effects are aesthetically produced in realism. I will suggest that such aesthetic strategies rely on nonverisimilar effects of exemplarity, or what I will term “flash,” to represent otherwise sublime and difficult-to-represent biopolitical registers of “population” and “species,” thus rendering individual narratives relevant to the biopolitical administration of life. Here I draw on Michel Foucault’s influential concept of biopolitics as a modern domain of power exercising “control over relations between the human race, or human beings insofar as they are a species, insofar as they are living beings, and their environment, the milieu in which they
Contrary to common uses of the term “population” that imagine populations as fixed or homogeneous, biopolitics draws on biological and social-scientific conceptions that focus on populations’ diversity and variability. Biopolitics seeks not only to manage but to take advantage of and use that variability for the “optimal” distribution of life chances, a process for which racism is the primary instrument. As Robert Mitchell puts it, biopolitics presumes that “people naturally differ from one another in some key respects, and that one must leverage, rather than seek to legislate against, those differences.” The knowledge-making practices that institutionalized at the end of the nineteenth century to make knowable “the population as...a problem that is at once scientific and political,” of which literary media were a part, used aesthetic strategies for representing human variability in relation to populations and environments. Biopolitical aesthetics allow the realist particular—the detail, the face, even the character—to stand as a specimen, not necessarily typical, but rather, in its idiosyncrasy, metonymic of a whole species life. Flashes, as a form, self-evidently suggest scenes of revelation, of course. It is insofar as they do so in ways that invoke species-life, however, that they activate the experimental plot trajectory from a status quo ante to material reality’s transgressive self-assertion to closure, and thus allow the representation of social life to function as not only a representation of “culture” but also of “nature.”

For Stephen Crane, a flash is revelatory. Consider the crucial fight in “The Blue Hotel,” whose meaning, it later emerges, determines whether
we ought to see the death of the generically-named Swede as the deterministic (let us say naturalist) playing out of his own character, or as the hotel guests’ collective failure to respond ethically to the injustices before them (what we might call the realist version of events). The fight is all blurred confusion, an “encounter in the darkness” that presents “such a perplexity of flying arms that it presented no more detail than would a swiftly-revolving wheel.” Despite the confusion, however, there are moments of visibility: “Occasionally a face, as if illumined by a flash of light, would shine out, ghastly and marked with pink spots.”

There is no light to speak of in the scene, yet the faces “shine,” their visibility serving the same function as a flash of light. Indeed, the faces seem to self-illuminate, being both the things made visible by illumination and the only elements of that “encounter in the darkness” that seem to “shine.”

Crane’s writing often gestures toward the sociological, especially in Bowery fictions such as *Maggie: A Girl of the Streets* and the sketches “An Experiment in Misery” and “An Experiment in Luxury.” Yet what appears “experimental” about his writing is less the narration of experimental plots of epistemic opening and closure—as in the two “experiment” sketches—than their aesthetic evocation via transgressive eruptions of material reality in an epiphanic flash, what I have called above the impression of material reality speaking on its own behalf. As Mark McGurl has argued, Crane’s engagement with sociological, documentary, and reformist discourses in ways that are “visible, in some cases, at the level of the single sentence” allows him to “stake a powerful claim to ‘truth,’” against
a “merely ‘clever’ or trivial” aestheticism, while at the same time acceding to an avant-gardist prestige.\textsuperscript{60} Crane is indeed widely read as performing a radical fidelity to the real (“realist,” “naturalist”) and as a radical stylist (“impressionist,” “symbolist,” “modernist”) at the same time, and often for the same reasons.\textsuperscript{61} Crane’s writing thus represents knowledge that is authoritative to the degree that it is nonverisimilar, non-obvious, even impenetrable. Crane’s clarity seems to come bound up in his obscurity—a clarity in obscurity that is literalized in flashes in the dark.\textsuperscript{62}

As I have argued elsewhere, the writing of flashes belongs to a broader epistemological phenomenon, a “flash” pattern of thought and representation that signals just the kind of abstracted clarity that I locate in Crane.\textsuperscript{63} Here, however, I wish simply to note how Crane’s writing formally encodes an “experimental realism” on the terms that I have outlined above. Things that “flash out” in Crane condense and metonymize something bigger and more complex that in some sense fundamentally cannot be known. They are not experiments, yet they aesthetically evoke a compressed version of the plot trajectory from epistemic challenge to stability that is so often valorized in the idea of experiment.\textsuperscript{64}

To briefly illustrate what I mean, let us revisit for a moment the flashes of light in “The Blue Hotel”:

For a time the encounter in the darkness was such a perplexity of flying arms that it presented no more detail than would a swiftly-
revolving wheel. Occasionally a face, as if illumined by a flash of light, would shine out, ghastly and marked with pink spots.65

In this moment the contest between Johnnie and the Swede emerges as pure entertainment.66 Rendered in this way, the fight is less a struggle between two men than a miniaturized animation inside a zoetrope, the nineteenth-century optical toy that allowed a viewer to see a strip of figures through slits in a revolving metal cylinder, each frame made briefly visible through the slits as if illumined by a flash of light.67 Johnnie and the Swede’s moving bodies are rendered as inert matter, given the appearance of life only through an optical illusion. It is a representation of movement that wears its artifice on its sleeve. Is this an instance of Crane’s “realism” or of his “impressionism”? The view provided of the combatants is very much partial; as in the zoetrope, however, it is that very partialness that conveys the sensation of movement, for the blur of the “swiftly-revolving wheel,” much like the blur conventionally used to represent fights in later animations of the twentieth century, is itself an indicator of the detail that this non-detailed view encodes but does not display.

Yet the flash of light, partial though it is, can be counted on to illuminate the important part and stand as sufficient. For whereas the “flying arms” are a “perplexity,” what shines as if illumined by a flash of light is the face, the physiognomy that has its own history of being understood as a flash, encoding the whole body, personality, and even—as
in Bertillonage, physiognomy, and other anthropometric practices—family history in its features. Nineteenth-century sciences had by this time invested facial features with a range of characterological, hereditary, racial, and criminological significances, each nose or eyelid a potential affinity with whole taxonomies of behavior. The knowledge offered by the flash is instantaneous; it is condensed and contained; it is produced (not attenuated) through illusionism and chiaroscuro. At the same time, these miniaturized flashing images never lose sight of the broader questions of population, lineage, and determinism being wrestled out in the fight. The flash signifies an elusive yet crucial social meaning—in this case, the interchangeability of the moody, subjectivity-infused (let us say realist) Johnnie and the inexplicable, death-driven (let us say naturalist) Swede (generically so-named—but “[h]e ain’t no Swede,” the cowboy opines; “he’s some kind of a Dutchman”) 69. In the midst of the fight, each man becomes an avatar of himself, not a person but a face, a flash, a figure. Throughout “The Blue Hotel,” Johnnie’s motivations are made legible, the emotions that he “evidently felt” scrupulously narrated; the Swede (but “[h]e ain’t no Swede”) is, in contrast, conspicuously inscrutable, down even to the coarsest stereotyping (“he’s some kind of a Dutchman”) 70. And in that sense, too, each face hints at a whole population logic—a self-possessed realist sociality, on one hand, and a naturalist species population, on the other.

Yet the faces that flash out are not identificatory; rather, they reveal both fighters as interchangeable masks that herald the story’s final
reversal. The Swede wins the fight, to general disapproval, and heads out into the storm, focalized for the first and only time just long enough for him to revel at the wind and snow beating his face, nature’s pummeling echoing Johnnie’s.\textsuperscript{71} We are made to believe, as the cowboy later articulates it, that the pathological, idiosyncratic, and “crazy” Swede in a sense killed himself by accusing Johnnie, thereby ensnaring himself in the naturalist spiral that ends him.\textsuperscript{72} The Swede is all too impressionable—his behavior is caused not by imperviousness to social cues but by taking them too thoroughly to heart—and yet each change in his behavior, each overcorrection, appears at first to lead to the same end. Yet the Easterner later reveals that Johnnie was, inexplicably, cheating in a card game played “only for fun,” and the Swede’s doom-laden rage, which instigates the fight, is motivated after all.\textsuperscript{73} Meanwhile, it is Johnnie whose actions prove superfluous and unreasoned, Johnnie who proves the outlier. Each is but “a face” affixed to movements that correlate to both individual and population logics—yet indeterminately.

The guests at the Blue Hotel are guilty of a grave misreading, then, which the Easterner acknowledges when he regretfully says of the gambler who eventually kills the Swede, “This poor gambler isn’t even a noun. He is kind of an adverb.”\textsuperscript{74} As delightful as this much-quoted line is, to my mind the Easterner’s more pertinent revision is to the figure—the number, that is. Against the singular cause that the naturalist reader, the cowboy, posits, the Easterner offers a realist world of contingency: “a thousand things might have happened.”\textsuperscript{75} And against the single pathological figure

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of the Swede that the cowboy posits, the Easterner proposes a different figure, a host of failed ethical choices, or at least five of them: “Every sin is the result of a collaboration. We, five of us, have collaborated in the murder of this Swede.” This new reckoning echoes another reckoning, corrected, in the final instance, in a flash: Johnny’s father, the hotelier, repeatedly answers the Swede’s offended “how much do I owe you?” with “You don’t owe me anything.” But when the Swede lies dead, his unseeing eyes rest on the cash register’s message: “This registers the amount of your purchase.” If the set-piece of the fight operates as some proving ground of truth, its interchangeably flashing faces reveal what its outcome in Johnnie’s brutal defeat does not: that the distance between realist individuals with interiority and naturalist types of embodied pathology may be but a trick of the light—with consequences for how individual and collective agency is reckoned. The flash is both an epistemological guarantor and an aesthetic one; in “The Blue Hotel,” social knowledge and figuration are the same problem.

The problem of figuring social knowledge—sometimes through quantification, sometimes through snapshots and flash photographs, sometimes through physiognomies—is a problem of figuring population, and in this sense, Crane’s flashes belong to a biopolitical aesthetics. Michelle Murphy, examining the process of “experimentalizing population” over the course of the twentieth century, points out a version of such flashes in what she calls “phantasmagrams,” “quantitative practices that are enriched with affect, propagate imaginaries, lure feeling, and hence
have supernatural effects in surplus of their rational precepts”—a correlate to what McGurl calls “the uncanny effects produced by Crane’s impressionist prose.” In this regard, Mark Seltzer’s reading of Crane’s fiction remains one of the most compelling, and if McGurl notes a uterine quality in Crane’s descriptions of New York tenements, Seltzer earlier and more pointedly makes the biopolitical connection to population concerns: “the slums are embodied in the body of a monstrously productive mother.” Moreover, as Murphy points out, phantasmagrams “posit a fulsome beyond of immaterial forces that they explicate.” Flashes, whether quantitative or visual—and in much Gilded Age cultural production they are above all convertible from quantitative to visual registers and back—both claim to fully and accurately represent an infinitely complex sublime and, at the same time, advertise themselves as partial, always preserving the sublime quality of what is represented—here, population. The encapsulation and disclosure of the sublime whole in flashes does not exhaust so much as reinforce the unknowability of the whole. It will not have been missed that, in other words, flashes such as those in Crane reenact the structure of open secrets. Open secrets are what “everyone knows,” yet which cannot not be stated explicitly due to taboos that are, as Michael Taussig has argued, backed by power, and often by the threat of violence (the classic example, from Foucault, is the closet, the “secret of sex” that is continually reinstated as “the secret” precisely in the guise of breaking taboos).
What is experimental about this “uncanny” experimental prose that encodes populations in flashes? What makes it not only convey a biopolitical concern with the management of populations, but also feel experimental? It is not, I would argue, a generalized association with the scientific, the biopolitical, or the quantitative, but rather the ways that flashes formally encode the experimental microplot of material reality speaking for itself. Flashes figure a population sublime as temporally and spatially bounded, and crystallize historical processes as forms. They preserve the transgressive, “open” moment of the experiment in the spectacularity of the flash, while also bounding it and rendering it as decisive. The experimental microplot in which the sublime reality of social life breaks through the layers of staid conventional knowledge to assert itself derives its transgressive value from what Taussig calls “[t]he mystery-model of the real” embodied by the open secret. Yet, like the open secret, this structure of eruption and closure does nothing to evacuate material reality of its sublime unknowability or its putative power to transgress. After all, we never learn the final “amount of your purchase” registered on the cash machine. On the contrary, “[u]nmasking...consecrates that which it so spectacularly destroys.”

Experimental realism is most identifiable not when narrating experiments or quasi-experiments, as in “An Experiment in Misery” and “An Experiment in Luxury,” but when it performs privileged elements of what experiments are believed to be.
4. Knowledge in action

Realism is often the backdrop against which experimentalisms make their claims. Yet realism is, as Fredric Jameson has influentially argued, a dynamic mode that disguises an epistemological stance as an aesthetic one. The same description could easily be applied to experimentalism; as I have argued elsewhere, literature that is described as “experimental” is inevitably so called on a tacitly or explicitly epistemological basis. In the twentieth century, the rhetoric of experimentalism came to indicate an epistemological strategy embedded in form, not “just” a thematic approach. The experimental literary text does not “just” represent, it does something. To put it another way: I will leave aside, for the moment, the invidious and problematic supposition that representing is somehow a baseline literary activity that is something less than doing. Rather, I wish to note the difficulties posed in recognizing an “experimental” form of the Gilded Age, especially when it may also, to our own eyes, look like an obsolete one. Numerous scholars have pointed out the scientific concerns embedded in forms that do not look or feel “experimental” today: evolution in Victorian plot, vivisection in Victorian fiction, neo-Lamarckian biopolitics in the “excessive” forms of sentimental fiction, temporal instantaneity in Victorian realism, disciplinary or biopolitical fiction, nineteenth-century African-American “fugitive science,” the sociological novel, and vitalism in Romanticism, to name a few.
Furthermore, these are not studies that concern themselves with theme alone; they do not necessarily content themselves with representing, but often seek, rather, to intervene. In *The Biopolitics of Feeling*, for example, Kyla Schuller shows how a neo-Lamarckian model of sensibility was met by texts that aimed to literally pluck at the heart-strings through the formal production of sensation, situating sentimental fiction in a wider field of body genres. Writing of French and British fiction, Robert Alter likewise identifies an “experiential realism” that centers “sensory, visceral, and mental” experience as a “response to the new felt reality of the European city.” What this tells us is not that these nineteenth-century texts are “really” experimental (and therefore particularly virtuous, or “modern”) but rather that the twentieth-century concept of experimental writing does work other than simply indicating a text’s investment—even its formal investment—in the natural or social sciences. Something is also at stake in reducing the Victorian realist plot, the naturalist thought-experiment, the sentimental tear-jerker, and the regionalist micro-ethnography to an epistemological degree zero, to make forms as obviously active as the sentimental novel out to be (merely) “representing.” Something is very much at stake in refusing these forms’ claims on scientific modernity.

Rather than attempt to simply re-stake that claim, I would suggest that what we might retrospectively or provisionally call “experimental realisms” (acknowledging that neither the authors themselves—apart from, in France, Zola—nor later twentieth-century champions of “experimental writing” would apply the term) helped to create the conditions for their own
later reduction to “mere” representing. For while I have attempted to outline how an experimental realism becomes visible, what is evident in experimental realism is less any particular formal pattern or aesthetic tendency than an investment in just this hierarchy of intervening over representing. Experimental realisms repeat the early modern empiricist gesture of reconciling a vita contemplativa with a vita activa by producing scenes of knowledge in action, representations that intervene. However durational, contingent, and painstaking real experiments may be, their idealization as actively eliciting material reality’s punctual, transgressive self-assertion suggests a mimesis that is something “more than” transcription, more active and more modern, a speech act performed by reality itself. If, as Jameson proposes, realism is always understood in opposition to something else—realism vs. romance, realism vs. modernism—and that, moreover, “these binary pairs...arouse a passionate taking of sides, in which realism is either denounced or elevated to the status of an ideal,” it is often the case that this taking of sides occurs on the basis of which term is perceived to be more “modern.”94 Experimental realisms enact a supersession to which they are also subject.

Lest this appear benign, moreover, I would observe that the experimental production of material reality’s self-assertion is only legible as such in certain contexts. As Mark Sussman points out, technologies of mimesis that appear “realist” in writers such as Crane or William Dean Howells have often been received as mere transcription in others. Sussman notes, for example, that Charles W. Chesnutt’s The Conjure
Woman is often excluded as an example of realism for the very thing that allies it to mimesis, the dialect writing. Crane’s use of dialect speech has no such effect. Sussman argues persuasively that Chesnutt’s realism works to expose the racialization of the hierarchy that counterposes a modern, unsentimental realist craft against stenographic transcription.

5. Efficacies

Versions of the opposition between representing and intervening run all through novel theory, and are especially evident in discussions of late nineteenth-century genre. In György Lukács’s 1936 essay “Narrate or Describe?,” (realist) narration is dynamic, integrated, and responsive to chance, whereas (naturalist) description is static, moribund, and enclosed, the “caput mortuum of a social process.” Lukács parses these compositional tendencies in the terms of “the opposition between experiencing and observing,” calling on “science,” among other things, to aver that “truth is revealed only in practice, in deeds and actions.” Indeed, in assessing the legacy of Lukács’s opposition between narration and description, Dora Zhang notes that when description is recuperated from its subordinate status, it is normally on the terms of rehabilitating it as a version of narration, and thus as active after all. Jameson, for one, rewrites Lukács’s opposition as narration and affect (with Zola’s naturalism a key example for Jameson as for Lukács), valorizing the
dialectical relation of these two impulses within realism. Jennifer Fleissner, again responding to Lukács, affirms the “stuckness” of naturalism, but interprets it as the dynamic and complex stuckness of compulsion, and thus also an engagement with the problems of modernity (not just its acceptance, as Lukács charges). It is worth noting the reversibility of this polarity: what Lukács understands as dead description is also interpretable, as Fleissner points out, as active and intervening, when viewed as performing modern compulsion. Jameson and Fleissner thus take up the ways that experimental realisms overcome the representing/intervening hierarchy by affirming it, producing forms that in various ways emulate the experiment’s ability to stand as both knowledge and action.

The problem remains, of course, of what to do about the genres that unite knowledge with action in ways that are typically not admitted to the category of “experimental realism”: the reformist, the sentimental, the melodramatic, the gothic, the pornographic (none of which are cleanly separable from realism). In her work on the slasher film, Carol Clover shows how film vocabulary itself maps a hierarchy of genres from most to least “sublimated” or “civilized,” with “low” forms like horror and pornography at the bottom. The more directly the film is thought to work on the body, the lower it appears in the hierarchy. While Clover’s examples come from a much different context, they also—as Clover’s term, “civilized,” suggests—point up a gendered and racialized tension already present in turn-of-the-century experimental realisms. For Lukács, the
realisms of Flaubert and Zola are less art than technique, and Zola, for one, likely would not demur; indeed, that his work is all technique is his explicit claim: “just now we are rotten with lyricism...great style is made of logic and clarity.”\(^\text{103}\)

The scandal of experimental realism is that it stakes a claim to being more real than realism through an appeal to material reality. Yet the same gestures that make it appear experimental—bounded in space and time and marked by the transgressive flare of material reality’s self-manifestation—is allied with melodrama, romance, and what Jameson idiosyncratically but productively calls affect.\(^\text{104}\) The aesthetic production of “experimental” form is what produces the impression of an active, intervening realism that Frank Norris describes as “twisted from the ordinary”—and as romance.\(^\text{105}\) It is, in other words, the well-known scandal of an already self-divided realism—and, too, an already self-divided experimentalism, in which the forms and boundaries that guarantee rigor are only desirable up to a point, exceeding which they threatens to overwhelm the potential for material reality’s transgressive self-assertion that is notionally the experiment’s ultimate warrant. Yet if the kinds of immediacy engendered by experimental realism appear as flares of material reality asserting itself, they are not—as Sussman shows—so easily delimited from the “stenographic” or minor realism to which Chesnutt was so often consigned. For Zola, being all technique makes way for material reality to assert itself, but as STS work on lab technicians, women computers, and servants in the “house of experiment” attests, such a
claim can lead not to epistemological security but to relegation to “low”
genres. Genre texts that are efficacious or which “Don’t just peer: interfere” and are construed as “all technique”—melodrama, horror, sentimental, gothic, pornographic—often appear not as experimental but as (merely) manipulative.106 These are distinctions rooted in the institutions of literary and cultural production, and which subtend the multiplying genres of reform and uplift literature, sentimentalism, sensationalism, stunt journalism, newspaper fiction, melodrama, and outright hoax that flourished in close proximity to Gilded Age experimental realisms. My point is not that there is no difference between the works received as experimental and those received as sensational; rather, my point is that there is no disarticulating those differences from social and institutional confounding variables.

The limitation on experimental realism as a category, then, is its indebtedness to hierarchies of value that are intertwined with hierarchies of epistemological strength. As I mentioned briefly above, the realism of flashes in Crane, insofar as its revelations preserve rather than exhaust the sublimity of their object, enacts the structure of the open secret. The desire for an experimental realism is underwritten by an attachment to the fictive structure of the open secret—knowledge as revelation, performing the “labor of the negative.”107 The great theorists of the open secret—Foucault, Taussig, D. A. Miller—are not, as they are so often caricatured, deluded believers in this structure of revelation, but rather explicators of how it works and why it remains socially powerful.108 The open secret
holds out the possibility of a knowledge that is efficacious—a logos—in which knowledge can be substituted for political struggle, even as its revelations always reinforce their own secrecy. The chiaroscuro vocabulary of Gilded Age social science, journalism, and reform draws on this structure and exemplifies its power. The frame of “experimental realism” acknowledges the power of the open secret for this moment in realism. It also, however, risks reaffirming it, and with it the hierarchies of value that are already embedded in the concept of experiment. ◆

I am grateful to Lindsay V. Reckson, Pam Thurschwell, and Jim Endersby for comments on earlier drafts of this essay.


2 William James, “To Gertrude Stein,” Autograph letter, May 25, 1910, YCAL MSS 76 Box 112 Folder 2294, Beinecke Library.


I would suggest that this was less a matter of mutual influence than a result of more a more general privileging of action over discourse, as I discuss below. See Paul Stephens, “What Do We Mean by ‘Literary Experimentalism’?: Notes Toward a History of the Term,” *Arizona Quarterly: A Journal of American Literature, Culture, and Theory* 68, no. 1 (2012):


15 Hacking, “Philosophers of Experiment,” 148.


21 Galison, How Experiments End, 2.

22 Galison, 3.


25 For an overview of some of these issues, see, for example, Thomas F. Gieryn, “Boundary-Work and the Demarcation of Science from Non-Science: Strains and Interests in Professional Ideologies of Scientists,” American Sociological Review 48, no. 6 (1983): 781–95,


Something like this trajectory appears in Claude Bernard’s description of experimental medicine, but rendered in the terms of the experimenter’s selfhood: starting from a moment of creativity in initiating the experiment, the experimenter must then “disappear,” self-effacing and becoming an observer ready to receive nature’s utterance “sans aucune idée préconçue.” Thus the experimenter goes from closed, unified subject to passive, “open” observer just as the experiment moves from open to closed. Bernard, *Introduction à l’étude de la médecine expérimentale*, 41.


On experiment in biological and social sciences, see, for example,

Donna Jeanne Haraway,

*Modest_Witness@Second_Millennium.FemaleMan_Meets_OncoMouse: Feminism and Technoscience* (New York: Routledge, 1997); Atia Sattar,


Hacking, “Telepathy,” 428. Following the recommendation of disability studies scholars, I have used “doubly anonymized” as a more neutral alternative to the ableist term of art “double blind,” to which Hacking is referring in his own terminology. Thanks to Eugenia Zuroski for drawing my attention to this terminology.


Haraway,


44 Comte, 12–14.


46 Nancy Bentley, *Frantic Panoramas: American Literature and Mass Culture, 1870-1920* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2009), 10, https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt3fhzjc. It is worth noting that Bentley is more concerned to maintain a separation between “high” and “mass” culture than I am; as Lawrence Levine has influentially argued, the Gilded Age inaugurated this distinction as an important cultural force. Bentley, 10, 5; Lawrence W. Levine, *Highbrow/Lowbrow: The Emergence*


49 Ward, 206.

50 Ward, 205, 207–12.


54 Foucault, 255.


56 Foucault, *Society Must Be Defended*, 245.


64 The ethnographic vignette and the new historicist anecdote may be said to play a similar role. See Stephen Greenblatt, “The Touch of the Real,” *Representations*, no. 59 (July 1, 1997): 14–29.

65 Crane, “The Blue Hotel,” 817.


68 Michael Fried supplies a long list of instances of self-illuminating faces in Crane in *Realism, Writing, Disfiguration*.


70 Crane, 803.

71 Crane, 822.

72 Crane, 827.

73 Crane, 827.

74 Crane, 827.

75 Crane, 827.

76 Crane, 827.

77 “Anythin’” is replaced by “nothin’” in the second instance. Crane, 807, 821.


79 In this sense, the flash of faces instantiates what Robert Mitchell has identified as the use of population as a media phenomenon Mitchell, “Biopolitics and Population Aesthetics,” 377–79.


82 Murphy, *The Economization of Life*, 24.

As D. A. Miller puts it in relation to Victorian realism, “the phenomenon of the ‘open secret’ does not, as one might think, bring about the collapse of these binarisms and their ideological effects, but rather attests to their fantasmatic recovery.” That Victorian realism, the fictional mode most likely to be caricatured as the basic mimesis against which experimentalism comes into relief, is the locus of Miller’s analysis is to the point: after all, notwithstanding its later caricature, “perhaps no openly fictional form has ever sought to ‘make a difference’ in the world more than the Victorian novel.” D. A. Miller, The Novel and the Police, reprinted edition (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992), 207, x.


Taussig, Defacement, 8.

Taussig, 147.

This is strikingly the case in Patrick Whiteley’s Knowledge and Experimental Realism in Conrad, Lawrence, and Woolf: realism is doubly
theorized as an epistemological problem (of literary representation, on one hand, and of philosophical realism, on the other). Experimentalism, in contrast, is not theorized at all, and certainly not in relation to scientific experiment. Conrad, Lawrence, and Woolf are situated within a trajectory that will later include Pynchon; the animating qualities of experimentalism are left tacit. Yet Whiteley’s appeal to “innovations” suggests that this tacit category nonetheless rests on broad assumptions about experiments in general. Patrick J. Whiteley, Knowledge and Experimental Realism in Conrad, Lawrence and Woolf (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State UP, 1987), 224.


Cambridge Studies in Nineteenth-Century Literature and Culture 77


93 Robert Alter, Imagined Cities: Urban Experience and the Language of the Novel (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010), x–xi. “Experience” in French can mean both “experience” and “experiment.”

94 Jameson, The Antinomies of Realism, 2. This is not to discount the multiplicity of temporalities that scholars have identified in the disunified concept of “modernity”; rather, experimental realism works to produce

95 Mark Sussman, “Charles W. Chesnutt’s Stenographic Realism,” *MELUS: Multi-Ethnic Literature of the U.S.* 40, no. 4 (2015): 58–59. We can put some pressure on this reading—after all, *The Conjure Woman* does not just use dialect but also participate in the genre of the dialect tale in ways that route it away from realism. Sussman’s argument does not rest on dialect alone, however.


98 Lukács, 116, 123.


103 Lukács, “Narrate or Describe?,” 118–19; Zola, *Le Roman Expérimental*, 84.

104 Jameson reads “affect” in Zola not in flashes but in the durational tableaux produced by Zola’s long descriptions, often of catalogues of commodities, which detach from any one character or narrator’s investment to constitute an unnameable ambient desire. See Jameson, *The Antinomies of Realism*, 45–77. As Eugenie Brinkema argues, “affect” in the last few decades has often been invoked as an unanalyzable, embodied remainder, “an empty heralding of the great unsaid.” Brinkema is critical of this tendency, helpfully observing how “[t]he myth of asignifying affective immediacy offers the fantasy of superficial flashes of brilliance and insight”: because supposedly rooted in precognitive embodiment, affect can play the role of the experimental eruption of material reality’s self-assertion. Eugenie Brinkema, *The Forms of the Affects* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2014), 271n1, 37.


106 Hacking, *Representing and Intervening*, 189.

107 Taussig, *Defacement*, 1.

108 Anne-Lise François, whose contribution to the study of open secrets is invaluable, is rarely caricatured as a believer in the thing she describes, perhaps because of her emphasis on lightness and non-efficacious open secrets. Anne-Lise François, *Open Secrets: The Literature of Uncounted