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Twitter Fiction: A Shift in Author Function

Hilary Hyman

Twitter fiction, an example of twenty-first century digital narrative, allows authors to experiment with literary form, production, and dissemination as they engage readers through a communal network. Twitter offers creative space for both professionals and amateurs to publish fiction digitally, enabling greater collaboration among authors and readers. Examining Jennifer Egan's "Black Box" and selected Twitter stories from Junot Diaz, Teju Cole, and Elliott Holt, this thesis establishes two distinct types of Twitter fiction—one produced *for* the medium and one produced *through* it—to consider how Twitter's present feed and character limit fosters a uniquely interactive reading experience. As the conversational medium calls for present engagement with the text and with the author, Twitter promotes newly elastic relationships between author and reader that renegotiate the former boundaries between professionals and amateurs. This thesis thus considers how works of Twitter fiction transform the traditional author function and pose new questions regarding digital narrative's modes of existence, circulation, and appropriation. As digital narrative makes its way onto democratic forums, a shifted author function leaves us wondering what it means to be an author in the digital age.



Twitter Fiction: A Shift in Author Function



Hilary Anne Hyman

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Hilary Anne Hyman

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Date

Program Director: Teresa Goddu

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For My Parents

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Introduction: The Rise of Twitter Fiction

Six years prior to becoming Twitter’s founder and CEO in 2006, Jack Dorsey wrote one word down on paper that would spark a social revolution: “status.” Dorsey envisioned a community of people buzzing short messages at each other in the same way taxi dispatchers and bike messengers did: Where are you? What’s up? What’s your status? (Taylor). Through these status updates, Dorsey wanted to give everyone—as stated in Twitter’s current mission statement— “the power to create and share ideas and information instantly without barriers.” Today, Twitter encourages its 320 million users worldwide to “tell your story here” on a presently streaming newsfeed in “tweets” of 140-characters or less. The Twitter feed functions precisely as a messenger of dispatches from people, places, and things, enabling users to immerse in local, national, and even global conversation through “hashtags,” “retweets,” “likes,” and comments. The social platform has changed what it means to broadcast online, because anyone and everyone can connect and share content at any given second. At its inception, Twitter offered people a vast audience at their fingertips, connecting hundreds of millions of users at a single point of broadcast (“Adventures in Twitter Fiction”).

A new method of storytelling, Twitter fiction, began to gain traction in 2010 with the creation of parody accounts and fan fiction. The parody account, a creative way to fictionalize Twitter’s user-base, manipulated the relationship between identity and user handle. When rumors surfaced that Rahm Emanuel would enter the 2010 Chicago mayoral election, writer Dan Sinker created one of the most successful parody accounts in Twitter history: @MayorEmanuel (not to be confused with Emanuel’s real Twitter handle @RahmEmanuel). As Sinker’s alias developed, the fake Rahm Emanuel ultimately turned into a sci-fi hero travelling through a fantastical city of

Chicago, attracting press attention and thousands of followers. A couple of years later, in 2012, an anonymous creative did something similar in experimenting with fictional politicians. This user created a parody account of the “invisible Barack Obama” that Clint Eastwood referenced in an empty chair at the 2012 Republican National Convention. @InvisibleObama, an internet sensation with thousands of followers, is still in operation today, continuing to humorously comment on politics and the current events of the world. As for fan fiction, Twitter users found ways to pay tribute to their favorite television shows and characters, reviving, for example, Aaron Sorkin’s *The West Wing* through fictional Twitter accounts for “Josiah Bartlett,” “Josh Lyman,” and “CJ Craig.” In the manner of their characters, each account offered their own political commentary on current issues, merging elements of fact and fiction (“Adventures in Twitter Fiction”). Parody and fan fiction accounts marked an important stage in Twitter fiction’s development, because they adapted the status update into a fictive form. These writers used Twitter beyond its intended scope, threading fiction into present reality.

Though writers experimented before and after, 2012 marked an important year for the legitimization of Twitter fiction as a distinctive method of literary production and form. Two Pulitzer Prize-winning authors, Jennifer Egan for *A Visit from the Goonsquad* and Junot Diaz for *The Brief and Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, approached Twitter fiction in distinct ways; Diaz experimented with production, whereas Egan experimented with form and dissemination. Egan’s “Black Box” did not engage Twitter in its plot or production, but simply utilized its data feed and vast user-base. Moreover, “Black Box” was the first work of Twitter fiction published in conjunction with a leading publication, *The New Yorker*, legitimizing it as a developing form with worthy potential. Junot Diaz took a collaborative approach, asking his followers to develop a story together, each tweeting a line under the hashtag #WLRNstory to develop his opening

line: “The dogs hadn’t barked all week.” This leveled the distance between author and reader, utilizing Twitter’s connectivity to develop fiction.

Also in 2012, Twitter’s Director of Curation Andrew Fitzgerald invited authors and ordinary Twitter users to submit their Twitter fiction ideas for a #TwitterFictionFestival, judged by a panel of publishing executives. For five days, writers submitted fictional works that took a variety of forms; writers posted images, utilized multiple account handles, and crowd-sourced their stories. So many users participated in the festival, that in 2014, The Association of American Publishers partnered with Penguin Random House to launch the second #TwitterFictionFestival and a third one in 2015. These two festivals showcased work of chosen authors for 24 hours a day, five days in a row. Authors spanning the industry premiered original fiction in the festival, catching the attention of tens of millions of tweeters worldwide (Twitter Fiction Festival). Another group of writers joined these authors, showcasing their pre-selected fictional creations. As in 2012, other tweeters were also encouraged to tell their own stories during these five days, using the #TwitterFictionFestival hashtag to participate. In all, the festival showcased 50 authors from 10 countries—bringing to light Twitter’s power to connect people all over the world, not only through news stories and personal status updates, but through creativity. The #TwitterFictionFestival not only offered Twitter Fiction fans and writers the opportunity to read new work from their favorite authors, but it introduced the genre to millions of tweeters. In its showcase of acclaimed authors, the festival legitimized Twitter Fiction—connecting Twitter fiction experimenters and fans, and, in its inception, defining the Twitter fiction literary canon.

During this time fans began to republish Twitter fiction on stylized blogs, specific Twitter accounts, under the #twitterfiction hashtag, or on “Twitterzines”—online magazines dedicated to archiving the short fiction form. The #TwitterFictionFestival offered their own archive of

submitted fiction from the 2014 and 2015 festivals, enabling people to search by year, genre, or author to find a piece they were looking for. In 2015 it offered a Twitter fiction “generator” that randomly created sentences for users to tweet as inspiration. Still accessible today, the generator begins with a generic framework, “The password for the complimentary Wi-Fi is ___ 1989,” and if users click “randomize,” unique or trending phrases will fill the blank. If they desire a new subject matter altogether, users can click “new idea,” and once satisfied, they can “tweet this,” directly to their account. Independently, “Twitterzine” *Nanoism* archived one-line (140 characters or less) Twitter stories, or micro-fiction. The site currently states, “We’re not just catering to the 21st-century attention span, we’re publishing flexible fiction: stories you can read on your computer or cell phone, stories that fit in the cracks of your day” (*NANOISM*). Twitter fiction fans find the short form to accentuate the media culture they live within, to give them the opportunity to read fiction in the digital realm. Traditional writers recognize this value. Outlets like the *The Huffington Post* have pages of articles, written as recently as January of 2016, dedicated to teaching people to write Twitter fiction, reviewing works, and discussing the new literary form in general. As Twitter aims to quickly replace old information with the new, writers and fans add longevity to the form by archiving it on other mediums.

In earlier years, authors developed their interest in Twitter fiction because the medium’s live reporting and massive network base allowed for real-time interaction with readers. Twitter offered an immediate audience—they could reach thousands of readers with a single tweet and receive feedback an instant later. In his TED Talk on the development of creative expression on Twitter, Andrew Fitzgerald states that the “tune-in” nature of Twitter as a news source breeds a type of “tune-in” literary fiction. On Twitter, fiction is published in the same way non-fiction news stories are—as a series of status updates—and is thus tweeted “live” to newsfeeds line-by-

line. Hundreds of millions of users need only to follow the publisher's account to access a story, enabling anyone to follow it in its development. Moreover, writers use these characteristics of Twitter to produce episodic works of literature for readers to experience in the exact moment of their publishing. The incremental or episodic nature of Twitter fiction promotes interactivity, and in turn, allows writers to expand their readerships, engage their fans directly, and even invite them to collaborate through hashtags and retweets. Twitter gives users the tools of its network to create new frames of mind through storytelling; to form settlements on what Fitzgerald calls the "wide open frontier for experimentation" ("Adventures in Twitter Fiction").

Twitter fiction takes the form of microblogging, creating a consolidated writing style that drives creativity. The act of tweeting these short bursts (writing or updating on Twitter) allows Twitter to flow continuously as each tweet replaces the one before it to ensure an always up-to-the-moment feed. Consolidating each tweet to 140 characters would seem to limit self-expression, but rather, the concision acts as the stoplight to keep Twitter traffic flowing (Taylor). Thus, the character limit inspires creativity because it forces people to craft poignant one-liners. As the feed continuously progresses, more people have the chance to contribute their thoughts, and if those thoughts are witty, even the average person can stand out and garner attention through retweets, likes, or comments. Chris Taylor of CNN speaks to this, arguing, "Art thrives on constriction. Screenwriters and poets have long known that if something is worth saying, it's worth saying as briefly as possible. With Twitter, the rest of the world is finding that out" (Taylor).

Twitter's short-form and updating feed allows ordinary people to collaborate and contribute to a greater conversation, and also fosters competition for the most creative blogger to flourish. As the traffic flows and the feed develops, Twitter's microblogging tools of "hashtags"

and “retweets” enable users to connect with one another under conversational themes, and moreover, allows ready access to new information pertaining to a subject of choice. This evens the playing field, giving every user the authority to post about any given topic. As Taylor states, Twitter is the democratization of writing: “Anyone can enter the elite Status City and gain thousands of followers, if they have the wit for it” (Taylor). Technological platforms inspire creativity through this type of competition as users have the autonomy to experiment with the platform beyond its intended use¹. In the case of Twitter, a platform designed for short-form updates, the medium’s parameters inspire users to go beyond the status. Through microblogging, tweeters learned to use Twitter creatively, telling personal stories and those of the world in 140 characters or less.

The “stories” told on Twitter, as early as 2010, were no longer solely status updates and bites of breaking news, but instead experimented with the platform and its built-in tweeting audience to create a new literary form. In its incremental posting and minimal character count, Twitter fiction works with Twitter’s social capacity and technical parameters to develop digital narrative. Twitter as a digital entity defines Twitter fiction’s form in a different way than the printed or electronic “page” ever has—each 140-character burst must both maintain a story’s cohesion in an inundated newsfeed while also furthering its plot. This differs from the traditional narrative which is published in totality rather than as sporadic lines competing with other intersecting information. As a cyber medium, Twitter fosters interactivity, maintains a present

¹ In his book *Connected*, published in 2003, Steven Shaviro uses Science Fiction as a theoretical framework to analyze what he calls our “network culture.” He argues that technological platforms influence creativity amongst their users at the outset because new inventions allow for “all kinds of crazy possibilities” to be explored early on (Shaviro 248).

temporality, and offers an expansive network of users. These characteristics thus affect how writers produce fiction on a platform it was originally unintended for.

As a presently updating feed, one in which people strive to report what is going on around them or in their own heads, Twitter as a virtual entity can readily mask itself as reality. As with @InvisibleObama or *The West Wing* revival characters, the “status update” can easily blur the lines between fact and fiction. Author Elliott Holt, in her 2012 #TwitterFictionFestival story “#Evidence,” articulated that the act of tweeting and the experience of being are two different things; her story commented on the unreliability of social media as evidence. While this may seem obvious, the up-to-date feed can be mystifying, as people “live” and maintain identities within the real and virtual simultaneously. Twitter then serves as the perfect platform for fiction as its virtual feed only offers a representation of present events. Twitter’s focus on immediate engagement gives every blasted tweet on the platform the impression of presence, and assuming that each dispatch is an up-to-the-moment portrayal of reality, tweeters unintentionally ignore the possibility of understanding tweets as recollections or mere representations of the world. “Present” experience on Twitter is not true experience—fiction does precisely this: it represents experiences. Hence, Twitter offers the perfect platform for writers to create, as storytelling is nothing more than a representation of people, places, and things. In a story, readers can be anyone, anywhere, or anything, and it can feel absolutely real.

This notion of presence convolutes how readers experience and perceive the present moment on the virtual platform. In its attempt to constantly update the actual within the virtual, Twitter disrupts perceptions of time, and this temporal limbo makes reality and the imagination

virtually indistinguishable². Though it doesn't appear so, time is flexible on Twitter, and things happen at different speeds³. As users contribute content at the same time, certain content inevitably finds its way to screens before other content does. This is the way of the internet; time is relative, and people experience it differently and often distractedly. Writers on Twitter can find an opportunity in the ultra-distracted Twitter audience. On the one hand, grabbing a distracted audience's attention in 140 characters is a curious feat, and writers must find a way to stand out using only one line of text. But on the other, as mentioned earlier, these parameters can foster creativity and inspire free-thought. This is a fun pastime for an award-winning author, for, as Chris Taylor of CNN states, "...the ability to chum out interesting tweets has become a much-admired skill—the ultimate 21st century status symbol" (Taylor). Winning one of the most prestigious authorial prizes in the world, these writers see a unique opportunity to test their skills and succeed in a new medium. At the same time, however, the Pulitzer Prize can limit an author's audience-base, for the common reader may assume the work is out of their league. Moreover, as audiences engage more and more online, there is a necessity to reach a cyber audience because people no longer engage other mediums—even their own realities—in the way that they once did. To a Pulitzer Prize-winning author, Twitter as a communal social entity

² On the Internet, Steven Shaviro argues that the former "directly lived" experience of reality becomes mere representation: "Images detached from every aspect of life merge into a common stream, and the former unity of life is lost forever.' In this detachment, the spectacle is false consciousness and particularly 'a false consciousness of time.' The unity of life directly lived is fiction" (Shaviro 70).

³ Shaviro depicts the flexibility of time on what he calls the "Net," or the larger entity of cyberspace. Using his 2003 social media equivalent, online chat-rooms, he depicts his own incessant distraction in relationship to the distracted science fiction world he analyzes in his selected texts. He writes, "Time is flexible on the Net as well; things happen at different speeds. Sometimes I must read and type extremely fast to keep up with rapid-fire chat room conversations...I can no longer concentrate on just one thing at a time" (Shaviro 7).

widens their audience base, and offers them a medium through which they can publish work that people of all ages and backgrounds can readily access.

The following two chapters consider how Twitter fiction renegotiates the author function on a more democratic medium. Outlining the author function in his lecture “What is an Author?”, Foucault describes a culture of fiction limited by the figure of the author; all interpretations, renegotiations, and analyses center around the author’s intentions, characteristics, and presence within the text (Foucault 222). When he gave this lecture in 1969, he argued that the author function reflected the industrial and bourgeois society of the era—one centered around individualism and private property. At the end of his lecture, Foucault envisioned a day in the future when fiction would exist without the influence of an author function and would instead be analyzed in relation to the discourse’s mode of existence, methods of circulation, and availability for appropriation. This would reflect a shift in culture entirely, a shift away from the individual, toward the collective. Twitter, as a democratic social platform, invites any user to become an author as they broadcast to the masses. This affordance renegotiates the author function, bringing us closer to Foucault’s idealized world as the relationship between author and reader and professional and amateur become more elastic online. I argue that Twitter fiction brings the elevated author closer to the level of the masses, and enables authors to experiment with modes of existence and circulation as Foucault so wished.

I further argue that there are two distinct types of Twitter fiction that differ from each other in style and production, and oppose each other in their respective shifts in author function. The first type is Twitter fiction designed *for* the medium of Twitter, specifically. This is the style Jennifer Egan adopted when she created “Black Box.” Because Egan created the piece outside of Twitter, calibrating it with an intended purpose and audience, “Black Box” exemplifies a type of

“Literature” published on Twitter, but not necessarily developed on Twitter. Egan’s “Black Box” attempted to maintain the author function as she joined forces with *The New Yorker*, tweeted on a pre-determined schedule, and did not engage Twitter itself in her plot. Egan used Twitter as a personal experiment with form, and in a way, tried to expand her author function as she worked within a new medium. Though she brought a story to the digital platform, it was too controlled for such a porous medium. Thus, Egan maintained a more traditional author function despite her experimentation.

Egan’s commitment to tradition coined “Black Box” as a transitional work of Twitter fiction. She joined readers on their platform, but developed the content to her standards. In doing so, Egan proved that authors could use many of the old literary tactics even on a new medium, tackling social media from the perspective of a traditional author. Though she avoided the explicit use of social media in her work, Egan used allegory to reflect on the culture of social media in general. She uniquely controlled her language to develop the 140-character parameter into a type of poetic meter. Whether or not the work read like social media, it was nevertheless beautiful, maintaining a level of artistry one rarely finds on social platforms. Even as she maintained a traditional author function, Egan pioneered in digital narrative.

Differently, authors like Junot Diaz, Dan Sinker, and Elliott Holt illuminate how works of Twitter fiction can develop *through* the medium. These authors allowed the interactivity of Twitter to influence how their work developed, and they used its social affordances to create personas and engage users in true *social media* fiction. Another author, Teju Cole, produced true *Twitter* fiction as he conducted a participatory retweeting fiction experiment called “Hafiz.” Cole selected tweeters to publish single lines of his story to their individual networks, and ultimately retweeted the story in full on his own account. Cole’s larger Twitter fiction project “Small Fates”

used Twitter as an information source to elevate overlooked news into creative, artful syllogisms. In these authors' cases, "*Twitter*" defines their fiction because the social platform produced it; they are each a work of social media. Writer Matthew Battles sums this idea up in two critical tweets. He writes,

"Fiction on Twitter needs to be porous; open to the stream in which it flows.
2:48 PM – 29 May 2012"

"That's where @dansinker's project was so brilliant. It gathered narrative force from within the stream; tweets work as tweets.
2:49 PM – 29 May 2012" (@matthewbattles)

Elliott Holt understood this porousness when she premiered "#Evidence" during the 2012 #TwitterFictionFestival. Holt's story chronicled a murder-mystery, using three fictional accounts to tell three different perspectives. Katy Waldman of Slate saw this tactic as an embracing "of Twitter for what it is, rather than trying to bend it into some tool that it isn't" (Waldman). The fluidity of Twitter as a medium necessitates the fluidity of the fiction produced on it. Holt's use of multiple accounts, hashtags, and even occasional spelling errors reflected this fluidity. Using the medium's characteristics, Diaz, Cole, Sinker, and Holt created fiction that engaged and operated within the Twitter network.

In its porous, participatory, and Twitter-infused manner, Twitter fiction developing *through* the medium creates a greater elasticity between author and reader, shifting the author function in a different way than "Black Box" did. Diaz, Cole, and Holt each utilized Twitter's inherent function and capacities to collaborate with readers, invite other tweeters to publish lines, and create plots centered around tweeting itself. They didn't merely bring literature to readers on a communal platform, they created literature through that communal platform, allowing it to influence its production, dissemination, and form.

But although Diaz and Cole offered participatory fiction, the authors maintained a level of authority over their works despite welcoming readers and writers to join them. Diaz's "collaborative work" was collaborative inasmuch as his readers could tweet their own lines to further his Twitter story, but Diaz and the WLRN radio station ultimately chose "winners." This denies the possibility for true collaboration, or in other words, for each collaborator to take equal credit. Teju Cole, in his retweeted "Hafiz" asked people to tweet out particular lines of his story, but he nevertheless wrote each line himself. Moreover, these "people" were not average tweeters in his user network, but handpicked writers and influencers. To this extent, the story was participatory, but did not deny Teju Cole from assuming ownership. Elliott Holt's multi-account story "#Evidence," utilized Twitter jargon and developed fluidly, but was nevertheless her own work. Twitter fiction produced on the medium certainly levels the distance between the author and reader, but does not do away with the author function entirely.

Enabling anyone and everyone to share ideas with few barriers but character count, Twitter may be creatively democratic but does not necessarily offer the same freedom of authorship. Despite their differences, both types of Twitter fiction negotiate the traditional role of the author, reflecting a shift away from the traditional narrative toward a twenty-first century digital one. What began as a platform for the personal status quickly transformed into a mecca of news stories, entertainment, and media content, offering the perfect platform for users to experiment with "live," "tune-in," episodic fiction. Only six years after Twitter's inception in 2006, Twitter users legitimized a genre of literature that grabbed the attention of award-winning authors, leading publishing houses, and worldwide press. In its many forms—parody account, fan fiction, and narrative—Twitter fiction inspires experimentation with form, dissemination,

and production. And most importantly, Twitter fiction sparks the question: what does it mean to be an author in the digital age?

Chapter I: Digital Experimentation in Jennifer Egan's "Black Box"

In collaboration with *The New Yorker* in 2012, Jennifer Egan became one of the first professional authors to publish fiction on Twitter. Stemming from a longtime interest in digital literature, a topic her Pulitzer Prize-winning novel, *A Visit from the Goonsquad*, had already explored, Egan approached *The New Yorker* with her idea to publish directly on a digital medium. For over a year, Egan edited a piece nearly twice as long into what became "Black Box," "controlling and calibrating" the material to operate within Twitter's parameters, creating a stream of digital narrative composed of poetic lines in 140 characters or less (*The New Yorker*). Over a series of ten days, *The New Yorker* blasted out successive tweets from their fiction handle for an hour each evening, growing Egan's digital readership as her story unfolded. Following the live tweeting, *The New Yorker* featured "Black Box" in its entirety in their June 2012 Science Fiction Issue, available in print and online. Importantly, the only practical way to reread "Black Box" after its initial publishing for those ten specific nights on Twitter was to access *The New Yorker's* website and read the story in full all at once. Naturally, the story functioned differently on Twitter with scheduled real-time blasts than it did on a single, scrollable page.

More than a Twitter experiment, "Black Box" was an experiment with form and with dissemination. Egan used Twitter's technological affordances to inspire a plot that mirrored its medium. Yet, even as she wanted to experiment with Twitter as form, she produced the text in advance and distributed it on a tightly controlled schedule. The work was not one of *social media* in that it lacked the spontaneity and interactivity that Twitter facilitates. Moreover, although Egan experimented with distribution for those ten days on Twitter, "Black Box's" afterlife would remain in a traditional form.

On the one hand, Egan’s eagerness to challenge herself—to author a legitimate work of literature within Twitter’s formal restrictions—limited “Black Box” as a fully realized social media experiment. Egan wanted readers to receive her story on a conversational platform, but did not engage Twitter in its production to truly cross over from fiction into *Twitter* fiction. But on the other, in bringing a more traditional short story to digital media, a narrative straddling the old and new worlds of fiction, she opened a new discursive setting for high literature. She thus represents the “uncommon” author Foucault describes:

[The] kind of author, whom one should confuse with neither the ‘great’ literary authors, nor the authors of religious texts, nor the founders of science. In a somewhat arbitrary way we shall call those who belong in this last group ‘founders of discursivity... They are unique in that they are not just the authors of their own works. They have produced something else: the possibilities and the rules for the formation of other texts. In this sense they are very different, for example, from a novelist, who is, in fact, nothing more than the author of his own text (Foucault 217).

Egan produced this “something else” in her creation of “Black Box.” Despite “Black Box’s” social limitations, she opened up new possibilities for how other authors could formulate their own works of Twitter fiction. “Black Box,” a pioneering text in digital narrative, relied on old tools to create within a new medium—it marked a shift away from the traditional print medium, traditional distributive tactics, and traditional formal conventions and moved toward a new digital fictive discourse. However, in upholding traditional models of authorship and production, Egan’s work never became a true piece of social media. “Black Box” is a transitional work; something in between traditional literature and Twitter fiction.

Sci-fi-spy-thriller “Black Box” unfolded in 47 segments—Twitter “chapters” of sorts—with 5-10 tweets in each. The story chronicles a female spy as she goes undercover on a lavish trip in the Mediterranean trying to gather information about her top suspect and travel companion, her “Designated Mate,” and his suspected illegal activity. The spy attempts to record and track the interactions and transactions of her “Mate” using in-body spy equipment—microphones in her ears, cameras in her eyes, and alert buttons on her legs. Ultimately, while accompanying him to a colleague’s secluded island after dinner, the protagonist claims to hear screaming, a ploy to mask the sound of her inner-ear recording device. But as her “Designated Mate” makes a dash to leave the island, she is blinded by the flash of her inner-eye camera and cannot navigate the rugged terrain to escape with him. Left behind, the protagonist remains in the dangerous island manor, and accordingly, attempts to attain as much digital information as she can without detection. Upon discovery, the spy engages in a climactic shootout and the story closes with her rescue from the middle of the Mediterranean Sea.

The story’s shape emerges from the lessons the protagonist learns from each of her actions, rather than from the depiction of each action itself. Hence, it is narrated in a series of indirect messages: “Throwing back your head and closing your eyes allows you to give the appearance of sexual readiness while concealing revulsion” (Egan 6). These lines were tweeted out one-by-one, enabling the reader to witness the protagonist’s outward actions and inner thoughts simultaneously, giving the effect of a distanced, surveilled play-by-play. Egan’s desire to compose a story for serialization on Twitter led to the plotline of these “mental dispatches,” snippets of data received from a distant, enigmatic source, because they mirror in many ways Twitter’s enigmatic quality as a mass data feed. Jennifer Egan used Twitter as “a delivery system for fiction,” writing a story that would formally adhere to Twitter’s parameters

and flourish through mass dissemination. Discussing her goal for the medium as a literary platform, Egan depicted this retrospective narrative style as an experiment with form, using it as a “bridge into a different world that can comfortably and naturally contain it.” She continues, “I kept thinking, what kind of story would need to be told that way? How can it not just feel like a conventional story broken down and delivered sequentially? The structural weirdness was the essential element, the way in” (*The New York Times*).

The location of this story is integral to the plot’s development and, on the whole, to the story existing as a product of its medium. The story takes place on an island in the Mediterranean, but a significant portion of the plot unfolds within the sea itself, as the protagonist travels between islands and is ultimately rescued from her getaway boat. The sea’s vastness and depth maintains an element of obscurity similar to the limitlessness of “cyber space,” for both, in their perceived infinity, allow the imagination to run free. As the plot develops through subsequent “instruction,” Egan purposefully mentions the enigmatic qualities of the sky and the sea—their size and complexity beyond total comprehension:

“A blue sky is as depthless as the sea.”

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

“Spurs and gashes of stone narrate a violence that the earth itself has long forgotten” (Egan 8).

Drawing the reader’s attention to this notion of depthlessness, Egan conjures the “depthlessness” of the Internet as an entity itself. Similarly, the story’s readers received messages “tweeted out,” into the vastness of their digital forums. Though people communicate online daily, few truly understand its immensity, just as few consider the vastness of natural entities like the sea and sky. In this way, the setting and the medium mirror one another in their size and obscurity.

The “waves” represent the inherent serialization of each published tweet on Twitter and the subsequent development of a digitally archived narrative. Digital narrative invites the reader to interact with literature differently, for it takes the form of data waves rather than pages, and forever exists within the vastness of the internet for future millennia to access. “Black Box” articulates this idea as Egan disseminated waves of successive tweets. Though each tweet arrived singularly, waves do not exist alone—the form relies on individual tweets comprising a whole. Digital narrative thus offers a new type of literature that calls the traditional “page” into question. To articulate this, Egan writes, the “spurs and gashes of stone *narrate* a violence that the earth itself has long forgotten.” Experimenting with Twitter and likening it to the sea, Egan encourages users to “hear the waves” in a new way, on a platform with depthless possibilities. This analogy is reiterated later on, as Egan describes the Mediterranean as “vast enough to have once seemed infinite” (Egan 21). Using a social medium like Twitter to disseminate literature, Egan highlights the infinite creative space with which she had to experiment.

As Egan created a story specifically for Twitter, she chose a setting that would necessarily place the reader in a similar position as the protagonist. In an inundated newsfeed, the reader must actively look for each dispatch of “Black Box” amongst an influx of other tweets; the spy, on a mission to collect specific data, must do the same as she embarks on a daunting mission. Moreover, the reader’s experience receiving Egan’s story in their Twitter feeds mirrors the spy’s retrieval of information, because she is a physical storer of data (recording devices are planted within her). As data or content arrives (she witnesses an important conversation or finds an enemy’s device) she physically records and saves the content in her body: “Feel the surge as the data flood your body” (Egan 35). To this degree, the reader’s newsfeed, as a digital medium that inherently serializes data, recorded this story within its

“digital body” as the protagonist does within her own physical body. This mirroring becomes clearer when the instructions state, “When your body is quiet, unplug the handset and return it to its original location” (Egan 35). This tweet, used to end Chapter 35, marks a pause in the story itself—a point in time when the reader’s newsfeed was “quiet”—at the same time the protagonist’s physical body of data was quiet. Both the story’s plot and the reading experience relies on the spy’s retrieval of information—when she finishes receiving and recording information, the readers do too.

Egan parallels the protagonist’s “digital body” with the digital body that is Twitter. The instructions within the story remind the reader that the protagonist’s physical body is not the important element at all, but instead the protector of the information within it: “Remember that, should you die, your body will yield a crucial trove of information” (Egan 43). On the one hand, the deployed spy is depository of data accessible to her superiors after her mission. But on the other, she is a powerless depository as she has limited access to the data she collects. Thus, the spy’s body exists as a black box of sorts—the entirety of its contents remain a mystery. The spy’s relationship to her body is analogous to the reader’s relationship with Twitter. Though users connect with one other and share information, they know very little of Twitter’s vast user-base and the information potentially inaccessible to them. In other words, as an information platform, Twitter is to a degree unknowable. It is, in a sense, the current digital Black Box.

Perhaps intrigued by this air of mystery, Egan used Twitter to propel the spy plot, crafting a story in which both the reader and protagonist are on quests for information. As each tweet offers a new instruction given to (or by) the protagonist in the story, the timed lines read in a more systematic manner than they would in print, with each reader reading at his/her own pace. As suspense builds with each subsequent tweet, the indirect instructions give the impression that

the reader is beside the spy, or perhaps on his/her own mission guided by the spy's instructions. The reader and protagonist embark together on a mission to crack the story's code: "There will be moments in your mission, perhaps very few, when you'll sense the imminence of important information" (Egan 25). This is an interesting piece of advice not only because it foreshadows the upcoming climax, but because this is precisely what social media users do. Within a digital medium like Twitter, new information arrives every minute. Users must determine what information they do or do not find important, or in the case of a story, which aspects are worth "recording."

The "imminence" of information Egan describes speaks to Twitter's presence, and her fragmented tweeting reflects the medium's unique temporality. Throughout the story, the reader is unsure whether the protagonist is presently receiving dispatches from a peripheral narrator or if the protagonist herself is offering retrospective advice following her mission. Because Twitter functions as a present stream, readers tuning-in on Twitter are forced to consider the story as a presently developing narrative. But, if one reads the story on *The New Yorker's* website, he/she would be inclined to interpret the story as a recollection, for its contents are available all at once as if it happened in the past. For example, Egan writes, "When you are in conversation with a beauty, it is essential that you be perceived as no more or less than she is" (Egan 8). When analyzing this particular line, the reader can easily assume this is retrospective advice to the reader from the protagonist—a second-person "you"—or that her superiors are giving her directives as she proceeds. In its confidence and affirmation, it could on the one hand seem to be advice from a peripheral narrator to the spy, because the reader is to assume the spy does not know what will happen next. But on the other, the confidence in this instruction could come from the protagonist directly—something she learned "the hard way."

The same ambiguity does not exist a few tweets later: “You will reflect on the fact that your husband, coming from a culture of tribal allegiance, understands and applauds your patriotism” (Egan 15). The specificity of this line almost entirely rules out the possibility of a peripheral narrator because the information is so personal. The dispatch speaks directly to reflection, implying the protagonist is currently reflecting to the reader, and the mentioning of her husband individualizes her experience on the mission. In this line’s case, the protagonist is not receiving directives, but giving them based on her own memories. Twitter forces the story to embody a particular present temporality, and as a result, different lines imply different messages when read presently. The digital medium gave Egan the opportunity to negotiate temporality through distribution; the print page does not allow for such variation.

Distributing her work on a modern platform enabled Jennifer Egan to immortalize her work within the twenty-first century’s data culture. In maintaining a distance from social media (producing it outside the medium) Egan was able to carefully craft a story that reflected the culture allegorically as it was simultaneously serialized within it. For example, in order to be rescued, the protagonist must reach a “Hotspot” in the middle of the Sea: “We can only reassure you that we have never yet failed to recover a citizen agent, dead or alive, who managed to reach a Hotspot” (Egan 43). In reality, a Hotspot defines an area of internet connection, one where people can reconnect with the digital world or “recover” their data. As a “Hotspot” denotes the protagonist’s refuge, Egan satirically implies that Wi-Fi controls, and saves, lives. This reading argues that people are dead without social media in the twenty-first century—that they exist almost entirely through their internet personas (an interesting thought as print media continues to decline). Jennifer Egan used “Black Box,” to join readers on the digital medium. On the one hand, if she did not create an online presence, she risked falling behind, but on the other, her

experimentation not only realized a long-time interest in digital narrative, but added to her literary repertoire. In a way, her engagement with digital media added dimension and longevity to her career—it “rescued” her from the confines of print.

Egan references her desire to escape such limitations as she compares the societal “need for personal glory” to a cigarette addiction a few lines later. She writes, “They liken the need for personal glory to a cigarette addiction: a habit that feels life-sustaining even as it kills you” (Egan 21). On the one hand, this notion of “personal glory” speaks to Egan’s interest in visibly experimenting on a new medium with the help of an influential institution. But on the other, the “cigarette addiction” speaks to her desire to escape her comfort zone of print and take a risk with Twitter. Egan’s success in print was certainly “life-sustaining,” but a failure to grow and develop could lead to demise. “Black Box’s” unique dissemination allowed her to further the *A Visit from the Goonsquad*’s formal experiment by bringing her work to a new medium.

Though “Black Box’s” initial publishing digitally experimented with distribution, it only did so for those ten specific days. Its republication in *The New Yorker*’s Science Fiction Issue and on *The New Yorker* website reflects a stark contrast between the two mediums, as the later versions strip the story of the interactivity Twitter fosters. Tuning in to the story on the platform made one not only a reader, but also a “user,” who needed to actively follow @NYerFiction to engage with the tweeting schedule. Reading “Black Box” as it was tweeted was not simply reading, it was presently engaging, following, and interacting with the story. For example, if reading this story all at once on the website, one could assume the events took place over the course of one day in sequence. But, if one engaged on Twitter each night for the ten days of publishing, the reader could understand the story to unfold over the course of ten days, during the present time of the evening on which each chapter of the story was published. Egan’s specific

narrative form and distribution tactics aimed to reflect Twitter's present temporality; the subsequent publishing of the story in full denies many readers the opportunity to engage with the work as one of Twitter.

Because Twitter operates as a feed, if one wanted to reread the story on Twitter, they would have to read it from the bottom up, or backwards, manipulating how Twitter is supposed to function as a present feed. This is interesting because the process almost turns back time; if the reader reads the story as they naturally would from the top-down, they would read from the future into the past. Reversely, if the reader reads the story the correct way but uses Twitter the wrong way, reading the story from the bottom-up, the reader does not engage with Twitter in the way it is supposed to function. Even though Egan wished to have her work serialized, its more traditional plot structure prevents readers from accessing it on the medium later on. As a result, Egan's digital dissemination experiment was short-lived. Disseminating a traditional short story on a presently updated medium convolutes it because the plot cannot be serialized in its intended manner. Hence, after its initial publishing, the story functions better on a traditional medium.

The protagonist's "dissociation technique" shows the medium operating on its own to portray the plot, and conversely reveals how the scene would lose its effect if accessed on Twitter later on. Twice in the story, when the spy wants to mentally detach from an unpleasant endeavor, the dispatches suggest counting backwards. Egan writes,

Close your eyes and slowly count backward from ten.

With each number, imagine yourself rising out of your body and moving one step further away from it.

By eight you should be hovering just outside your skin.

By five, you should be floating a foot or two above your body, feeling only vague anxiety over what is about to happen to it.

By three, you should feel fully detached from your physical self.

By two, your body should be able to act and react without your participation.

By one, your mind should drift free so that you lose track of what is happening below (Egan 8).

“Counting down” is a unique use of the medium as each number does actually disappear as it moves farther down the feed. In this way, if the protagonist wishes to “return back” to her body, and the reader wishes to return back to previous dimension of the story—the reader must read the tweets in reverse, or, in this case, read the numbers in order. In other words, the medium itself only operates in the present moment—its feed is constantly moving forward and replacing the “old,” as if the present moment is always at time “zero.” Egan, in this regard, had to create a plot that could function in this same way; the dispatches needed to replace themselves to propel the story forward, just as tweets do in a constantly evolving feed. This is reinforced when the spy encounters information about a newly emerged suspect and the instructions state, “Avoid indulging your own amazement; it wastes time” (Egan 34). This line indicates Twitter feed’s temporal component, because it reminds Twitter users and readers that they do not have time to indulge in the previous snippet of data before they will be inundated with new material. This is crucial to “Black Box,” for, just as the spy must be prepared for changing circumstances, the readers cannot dwell on previous messages at the risk of falling behind. The suspense and pace of each tweet propels the story forward; these qualities are inevitably lost when trying to read the story on Twitter backward, or by scrolling “up.” As a more traditional story, this effect is not entirely lost on the page. Though the page does not foster the same interactivity, it still reads linearly. But this is “Black Box’s” precise limitation: if it could only be properly serialized in a traditional form, it failed to remain true Twitter fiction after its 10-day publishing.

Aside from the technical limitations of “Black Box’s” serialization, Egan’s partnership with *The New Yorker* poses some limitations to its serialization as well, if “serialization” is to imply the ability to access and *reconstruct* the digitalized work in the future. Of course, “Black Box” was inherently serialized as a product of the internet—it was published online and thus digitally stored. But, as the *New Yorker* republished Egan’s story to their website and printed it in their Science Fiction Issue, there no longer remained the possibility of reconstructing or re-creating the digital information because both Egan and *The New Yorker* established their rights to it. Once Egan published her work through a larger institution, collective access to the serialized version was subsequently regulated, and reconstruction was denied. Foucault speaks to such regulation in his lecture: “[an author] is a certain functional principle by which, in our culture, one limits, excludes and chooses; in short, by which one impedes the free circulation, the free manipulation, the free composition, decomposition, and re-composition of fiction” (Foucault 221). While on the one hand “Black Box” went beyond the individualized reading experience in its publishing on a global forum, Egan’s partnership with *The New Yorker* maintained her individual rights to her work. The sponsorship cemented the institutionalized ownership of “Black Box,” much in line with the way traditional publishers produce works of print. Though Egan disseminated her work on a communal platform, *The New Yorker* was the storer, and owner, of the “Black Box” data.

Egan thus maintained a more traditional authorial control over “Black Box” as readers couldn’t tune-in spontaneously due to the pre-determined schedule. Because Egan’s work relies heavily on plot development, the story doesn’t reflect Twitter’s porousness because readers had to stay tuned at all times of publishing to effectively engage with it. This disconnect between “Black Box” and Twitter’s intended function maintained a distance between Egan and her

readers, despite joining them on a social platform. Foucault refers to this control as the first tenet of the author function, stating, “the author function is linked to the juridical and institutional system that encompasses, determines, and articulates the universe of discourses” (Foucault 216). In this regard, Egan and the larger institution of *The New Yorker* controlled the discourse and determined when and how readers were to interact with it. While the story fostered interactivity as people “tuned-in” to its present updates, Twitter users had to adhere to the established conditions of the story’s publishing to gain access to it, despite Twitter as a social platform dispelling such traditions. Maintaining this level of control prevented Egan’s work from truly using Twitter as social media; it did not truly reflect or engage with Twitter’s porousness.

Further, a lack of porousness limited readers’ *present interaction* with “Black Box” because “Black Box” wasn’t a present work at all, it was created in print and edited for over a year prior to its publication. As such, Egan attempted to create traditional literature *for* Twitter, but not use Twitter as a production method. Egan relied on Twitter as a creative restraint, to force her to integrate Twitter’s characteristics and parameters into her work. But as for *interaction*, “Black Box” readers had no role in the production process, they could not tweet back to Egan during the process, nor could they truly engage with it as social media because its plot was not social media—it was only disseminated through it. In its use of literary device, allegory, and poetic narration, Egan created an intriguing work of literature—but aside from posting it incrementally on the platform, it lacked all things Twitter: connectivity, hashtags, retweets, spontaneity. It lacked a “freeness” necessary on a social platform, reflecting the limitations of Egan’s authorship on the work’s social media success. “Black Box” did not offer readers the chance to compose, manipulate, or circulate the text; Jennifer Egan and *The New Yorker* assumed the right to do that for them.

Such restrictions make “Black Box” a transitional work, straddling the generic space between the traditional short story and Twitter fiction. Egan’s piece was too regulated and too rehearsed to maintain the porousness a social platform like Twitter necessitates; as a result, it failed to be true *Twitter* fiction or a work of *social* media. Moreover, Egan maintained great control over the story as she calibrated it for a year outside of Twitter, published it on a pre-determined schedule, and republished it in print through a publication. To this degree, Egan maintained a more traditional authorial role despite bringing her work to a democratic forum. But Egan took a risk in distributing literature on Twitter because she opened up space for other authors to experiment with the genre and examine the author-reader relationship to a greater degree. At the end of “What is an Author?”, Foucault states,

...since the eighteenth century, the author has played the role of the regulator of the fictive, a role quite characteristic of our era of industrial and bourgeois society, of individualism and private property, still given the historical modifications that are taking place, it does not seem necessary that the author function remain in constant form, complexity, and even existence (Foucault 222).

Egan’s transitional work coins her as a historical *modifier* as she set a precedent for other authors to investigate the modulating form, complexity, and existence of traditional literature and the traditional author function. Though she remained a “regulator of the fictive,” she engaged in the historical modifications taking place in twenty-first century digital culture.

Chapter II: Twitter Fiction Production and the Author Function

In 2008 and 2010, respectively, social media theorist Clay Shirky published two books on the social and economic effects of internet technologies on society. The first, *Here Comes Everybody: The Power of Organizing without Organizations*, discusses the way in which the internet as a social entity undermined the power of formerly prevailing institutions. In the past, group discussion and action could only be achieved with the help of overarching organizations, or, in other words, professionals. Now, the internet offers everyone the tools to participate in a greater conversation and to communicate reciprocally regardless of geography and infrastructure (Shirky, *Here Comes Everybody* 90). Shirky's second book, *Cognitive Surplus: Creativity and Generosity in a Connected Age* expands on this idea, arguing that social media's self-organizing qualities increase the amount of time individuals have to participate in collaborative activities within new media. Shirky titles this extra time, "Cognitive Surplus." Both works (*Cognitive Surplus* acting as an indirect sequel to *Here Comes Everybody*) characterize the internet as a social entity with the ability to unite individuals from all walks of life, dismantling the institutions that once separated them in the process of making new ones.

Shirky claims that the internet stands as the true democratic forum for individual organization. As such, the ease of assembly online fosters experimentation and collaboration: "Our social tools remove older obstacles to public expression, and thus remove the bottlenecks that characterized mass media. The result is the mass amateurization of efforts previously reserved for media professionals" (Shirky, *Here Comes Everybody* 55). While the internet and social media have without a doubt opened new spaces for individuals to connect with one another and experiment literarily and artistically, the collaborative environment Shirky

outlines—the “mass amateurization” of the internet in favor of individual publishing—reflects a utopian-like entity that falsely represents an institution-less digital sphere. In the case of the second form of Twitter Fiction that develops *through* Twitter by means of collaboration and real-time production, Shirky’s democratic utopia of literary production online does not hold entirely true as authors maintain varying degrees of control over their work. In the examination of Twitter fiction’s collaborative production methods, this chapter aligns with Shirky, arguing that Twitter shifts fiction-writing away from the single-author model and subverts our established ideas of what authorship looks like. But, different than Shirky’s idealized perspective, the social platform has not entirely done away with our understanding of authorial rights and intellectual property. As authors like Junot Diaz, Teju Cole, and Elliott Holt experiment with Twitter fiction in collaborative production and democratic dissemination, the boundaries between author and reader, professional and amateur, and producer and recipient have certainly shifted. While this chapter discusses the renegotiated distance between author and reader, it also considers the ways in which Twitter fiction fails to do away with authorial distinctions entirely.

In his analysis of the social effects of the internet on society in *Here Comes Everybody*, Shirky argues that social tools are not an improvement of the current ways of society, but rather a challenge to them: “New technology makes new things possible: put another way, when new technology appears, the previously impossible things start occurring. If enough of those impossible things are important and happen in a bundle, quickly, the change becomes a revolution” (Shirky, *Here Comes Everybody* 107). This argument holds true when we consider that social platforms like Twitter enable users to produce content at their own will; the medium requires users to publish in order for it to exist as a newsfeed at all. The internet allows people to subvert traditional meanings associated with the professional and the amateur, and to reinvent

institutions—like the media—that formerly prevented amateur production and group collaboration. This revolution does not only speak to the newfound ease of assembly or immediate publishing, but also to the newfound space for innovative uses of these social tools (Shirky, *Here Comes Everybody* 77). Social media revolutionized society because the users controlled how the technology operated; on Twitter, for example, the ease of publishing and the built-in audience promotes user experimentation that exceeds the simple status update (Shirky, *Here Comes Everybody* 300-301).

Twitter Fiction manifests this revolutionary experimentation as it allows both professionals and amateurs to broadcast fiction—a literary form formerly limited to professionals—on the democratic platform. As users interact with Twitter’s characteristics, the platform encourages a new type of literary fiction that not only uses the medium for dissemination, as discussed in Chapter I, but also as a production method—writers create literature *through* their many uses of Twitter. For Junot Diaz, this is engaging with his followers to create crowd-sourced fiction; for Teju Cole, this is recreating history as if it were published on Twitter, or utilizing “retweets” to create a web-like story; and for Elliott Holt, this is utilizing Twitter’s real-time publishing and unique jargon of hashtags, account handles, and occasional misspellings. This type of fiction not only interacts with the medium directly in its production method or its plot, but also welcomes a wider audience than subscription-based publications (*The New Yorker* or *The New York Times*) ever could. As millions of people gain access to other people’s work, amateur or professional, Twitter Fiction in many ways “evens the playing field,” and “removes obstacles to public expression” (Shirky *Here Comes Everybody* 55). But, as professional authors experiment with what seems to be a more democratic medium, to what extent is collaborative fiction practical? And moreover, to what extent are the professionals

willing to fully relinquish control of their ideas and share the intellectual property with their amateur collaborators? The answer lies in Twitter fiction's deviation from the traditional institution of the author, or, a shift in the author function. For Diaz, Cole, and Holt, the degrees to which they uphold or renegotiate their roles as authors and the importance associated with that role vary, and require examination.

In partnership with the Miami Book Fair in 2012, Miami Radio Station WLRN invited Pulitzer Prize-winner Junot Diaz to collaborate with his fans in a uniquely crowd-sourced story, capitalizing on Twitter's free-reign publishing. Beginning with the line "The dogs hadn't barked all week," followers had 24 hours to submit follow-up tweets to the story using the common hashtag #WLRNStory. This tactic reveals the informality of Twitter and its connective abilities. Within the medium, people are able to engage one another as they never could before; amateurs are encouraged to engage with professionals, blurring the lines of the story's authorship. Shirky describes this ease of assembly, stating, "we can have groups that operate with a birthday party's informality and a multinational scope" (Shirky, *Here Comes Everybody* 48).

While on the one hand, Twitter offers a seemingly democratic production of fiction that dismantles the traditional boundaries of broadcasters and recipients, the story wasn't truly a democratic work in the end. While tweeters were encouraged to submit their posts, WLRN and Diaz selected the "best" tweets, 19 in total, and compiled them into a somewhat cohesive story—collaborators offered the raw material, WLRN and Diaz determined the story's shape. In any case, the institution (WLRN Radio) and the professional (Diaz) let Twitter develop the story by its basic means of functioning: tweeters tweeted ideas, and neither WLRN nor Diaz had insight as to where the story would go. In this regard, Twitter's uniquely participatory and up-to-the-moment publishing sets a foundation for fiction to flourish. But, in considering Twitter's

collaborative capacity, there remains a level of ownership and institutionalization in the story's actual formation due to the final selection of tweets. Even though amateurs had the opportunity to participate in the story's development, the professionals maintained their role as the story's "organizers," undermining Shirky's argument that social tools like Twitter subvert these institutions. Moreover, while a Pulitzer Prize-winning author like Junot Diaz agreed to experiment with collaborative storytelling, the story did not gain much traction as legitimate literature. In fact, one journalist called the work "predictably silly—like a game one plays after a boozy dinner" (Smith). Though people enjoyed the experiment—that same journalist calling it "remarkably, not terrible"—Diaz's collaborative Twitter fiction failed to uphold to Shirky's standards of total democracy on the web. Despite Diaz welcoming untraditional collaboration, journalistic institutions still determined whether or not the work gained critical attention. This is to say, if the story was truly collaborative, which the ultimate selection of "winning" tweets denies, the experiment failed to produce a work in line with the professional's standards, because it did not gain the same traction Junot Diaz experienced with print. But, despite its shortcomings, this type of collaborative experimentation could not have occurred without a social platform like Twitter, a fact Shirky outlines in both works.

More legitimately, author Teju Cole, an avid tweeter before experimenting with Twitter fiction, reveals how professional writers willingly decenter themselves on the medium like they never had before. Differently than Diaz, and perhaps more like Jennifer Egan, Cole wrote a short story called "Hafiz" before experimenting with its publication on the social platform. But, despite the pre-production of "Hafiz," the work stands as a piece of Twitter fiction developed through the medium because the publication process relied heavily on user collaboration and participation. Splitting the story into 31 tweets, Teju Cole direct-messaged fellow writers and

friends on Twitter to individually tweet particular lines of the story, all of which Cole later retweeted on his own page. Relying on his network of tweeters for assisted publishing, Cole engaged with Twitter directly as a medium, relying on its web-like network: “I’m fascinated by this thing that happens on Twitter: A friend of yours in Singapore tweets something and then someone in San Francisco tweets something, and they’re not tweeting at each other—actually, you’re the only person who sees those two tweets together because that’s your timeline” (qtd. in Rathbone). While Egan utilized Twitter as a networked entity to disseminate her story and inspire its plot, “Hafiz” engaged the unique interactivity of Twitter, calling on other users to participate in his storytelling the way they could not in print. It inspired conversation in many different feeds and networks of users, widening Cole’s audience interactively. Shirky discusses this in *Cognitive Surplus* as he writes,

Equally surprising is the fact that the medium mixes broadcast and conversational patterns so thoroughly that there is no obvious gulf between them. The bundle of concepts tied to the word *media* is unraveling. We need a new conception for the word, one that dispenses with the connotations of ‘something produced by professionals for consumption by amateurs.’ Here’s mine: **media is the connective tissue of society** [emphasis added] (Shirky, *Cognitive Surplus* 54).

Cole’s “Hafiz” capitalized on the conversational nature of Twitter as a connective social tool, and used this to experiment with distributed storytelling. In the way that different users interact with different networks of people on the web, with likely overlap, Cole created fiction that developed through Twitter’s connective tissue. While individual lines of “Hafiz” appeared fragmented in his participators’ feeds, Cole published the story in its entirety on his own feed. He

relied on two of Twitter's mechanisms simultaneously: individual participants engaging their own individual networks and Cole engaging an aggregate of those networks through retweeting.

Despite pre-writing the story and therefore establishing it as intellectual property, Cole used Twitter as a conversational, connective platform to reach a bigger audience and distribute his literature more democratically than he could have in print. Reflecting on his decision to publish "Hafiz" as a retweeting process rather than a print short story, Cole argues that certain types of writing require casual forums to produce work that reaches a new audience. He told NPR, "A lot of the people I want to be read by, a lot of the people I want to speak to, are not people who have subscriptions to *The New Yorker* or *The New York Times*, so it's important for me to speak to them in this way also" ("Teju Cole Writes a Story a Tweet at a Time"). Using a social platform to distribute fiction gives critically-acclaimed authors the opportunity to reach groups of people who may never have the chance, or may never believe they were equipped, to read their work elsewhere.

The freedom of Twitter, in its vast network of broadcasters and lack of cost, puts professionals and amateurs on an even playing field if the author is publishing from his/her own account on his/her own accord. Egan stands as a counterpoint to this because *The New Yorker* published her work in the magazine. But Cole, writing for the sake of writing and reaching new readers, values this democratic quality of Twitter, stating, "Sometimes it's just really important to be in a place together and do something, and that brings its own rewards in a way...if you think about your work only in terms of what is generating income for you, I think that work would probably die on the vine" ("Teju Cole Writes a Story a Tweet at a Time"). Cole suggests that the mass-amateurization of Twitter, as Shirky calls it, fosters creativity because there is no incentive—only the organic desire to create something new and intriguing through storytelling.

Twitter in this way offers a platform for boundless experimentation despite titles or incomes, and “free” content is shareable. As Shirky notes in *Here Comes Everybody*, “sharing creates the fewest demands on the participants.” Many sharing platforms operate largely in a “take-it-or-leave-it fashion,” allowing for individual freedom to participate (Shirky, *Here Comes Everybody* 49).

Though Teju Cole welcomed participatory fiction, relying on Twitter’s “retweeting” capability to formulate “Hafiz,” it falls short of true collaboration in two ways. Firstly, though Cole’s work was distributed by participating tweeters, he ultimately decided who tweeted what line and when, and specifically selected other writers and influencers. In defense of his work against fans who critiqued its lack of spontaneity, Cole states that the “magic” of his distributed tweeting and subsequent retweeting was that the story would unfold in his newsfeed in real-time—only after a participant tweeted and he retweeted, did he decide who to ask to tweet next (qtd. in Rathbone). This maintains some sense of spontaneous collaboration, but, not enough to argue Twitter is a truly democratic means of fiction production. The very notion that “Hafiz” would fail to read as a coherent story at all unless Cole retweeted its individual lines directly opposes Shirky’s explanation of truly collaborative production:

Collaborative production is a more involved form of cooperation, as it increases the tension between individual and group goals. The litmus test for collaborative production is simple: **no one person can take credit for what gets created**, and the project could not come into being without the participation of many. Structurally, the biggest difference between information sharing and collaborative production is that in collaborative production at least

some **collective decisions** [emphasis added] have to be made (Shirky, *Here Comes Everybody* 50).

In the case of “Hafiz,” Cole takes full credit for the story’s creation and receives the praise for its unique production method. This is not to say that the story did not experiment with distributed, participatory fiction, only made available by Twitter, but it does illuminate that while authors are taking steps in the collaborative direction, there remains an assertion of authority over creative work.

This speaks directly to the second reason why Cole fails to be entirely successful in his democratic publishing: if Twitter as a democratic medium does away with the institutional boundaries of professional publishing versus amateur publishing, the critical acclaim Cole receives for his work undermines Cole’s democratic intentions. Catching the attention of *The New York Times*, NPR, and other respected literary institutions, Cole’s goal to escape this realm of institutionalized literature is not entirely successful. This is not to say that his work did not reach a wider audience than it would have had he published solely in these publications, but it does draw attention to the fact that the work professional authors are experimenting with on Twitter, collaborative in their development or not, are associated solely with their individual careers, not those of the participants who joined them.

The limitations present in Cole’s “Hafiz” are dismantled in his other work of Twitter fiction, “Seven Short Stories about Drones.” Cole references seven prevailing literary classics—Virginia Woolf’s *Mrs. Dalloway*, Hermann Melville’s *Moby Dick*, James Joyce’s *Ulysses*, Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man*, Franz Kafka’s *The Trial*, Chinua Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart*, and Albert Camus’s *The Stranger*—in seven tweets. In mentioning seven of the most well-known

novels across the globe, Cole juxtapose the immortal characters with the immense mortality of drone warfare:

Seven short stories about drones.

11:02 AM – 14 Jan 2013

1. Mrs. Dalloway said she would buy the flowers herself. Pity. A signature strike leveled the florist's.

11:04 AM – 14 Jan 2013

2. Call me Ishmael. I was a young man of military age. I was immolated at my wedding. My parents are inconsolable.

11:06 AM – 14 Jan 2013

3. Stately, plump Buck Mulligan came from the stairhead, bearing a bowl of lather. A bomb whistled in. Blood on the walls. Fire from heaven.

11:08 AM – 14 Jan 2013

4. I am an invisible man. My name is unknown. My loves are a mystery. But an unmanned aerial vehicle from a secret location has come for me.

11:11 AM – 14 Jan 2013

5. Someone must have slandered Josef K., for one morning, without having done anything truly wrong, he was killed by a Predator drone.

11:13 AM – 14 Jan 2013

6. Okonkwo was well known throughout the nine villages and beyond. His torso was found, not his head.

11:15 AM – 14 Jan 2013

7. Mother died today. The program saves American lives.

11:16 AM – 14 Jan 2013 (@tejucole).

In his article reviewing Cole's work, "Tweeting Life and Death—Teju Cole's seven short stories for our times," Ken Butigan discusses Cole's use of fiction to "close the empathy gap," typically devoting hundreds of pages to connecting readers with the richness, peculiarities, and complexities of the characters (Butigan). In the case of mass-annihilation, Cole's short Twitter stories juxtapose the highly complex literary figures with the dehumanized victims of drone-striking. Producing this type of work on Twitter not only disseminates this commentary to a

larger audience, but utilizes Twitter as a news outlet in a way traditional news institutions fail. Cole's "Seven Short Stories about Drones" illuminates the dismantling of the institutionalized message that Clay Shirky discusses in *Here Comes Everybody* as he addresses the unspoken realities of warfare: a life is over before one can even read these 140-character "stories" (Butigan).

"Seven Short Stories about Drones" relied on the author function present in his chosen works to make a poignant argument about drone warfare. If readers failed to grasp the literary reference, they failed to grasp Cole's statement. Because the author function was readily available in each text, Cole used it to make a connection between the high world of Literature and the low world of senseless death. For example, the "I" of "Ishmael" reflects an elevated literary classic, *Moby Dick*, that readers are expected to recognize. But as the next sentences read, "I was a many of young military age" and "I was immolated at my wedding," the representative "I" of "Ishmael" disintegrates into the general and anonymous "I." Cole's invocation of the author function elevated a story about the anonymous into something more specific, more resonant. Traditionally, an author's name indicates a status of discourse within society that determines how a text should be read and how relevant the work remains overtime (Foucault 211). Cole recognized this, and in selecting these high-status works, he legitimizes the stories of the many anonymous victims of drone warfare.

As he did so, Cole appropriated these well-known characters for his own use. Despite his initial reliance on the author function, he manipulated these authors' stories to tell his own. For example, in Kafka's *The Trial*, Josef K. is arrested and awaits a trial for a crime he does not know he committed (or whether or not he committed one at all). The story negotiates human notions of morality, and how it relates to crime and subsequent punishment. After his arrest,

Josef K. falls into a labyrinth of legal formalities, unable to escape his own unexplained condemnation. In changing the ending, killing him by a Predator drone, Cole not only places the story within a current political context, but he positions Josef K. under the inescapable, unfair doom of the innocent people killed by drones. He repurposes the story's moral to tell a story he finds important; in using the author function to elevate the effects of drone warfare, he appropriates the story for himself. Choosing these stories distanced Cole from the piece as they referenced other authors' work, but his appropriation of these works simultaneously distanced the original author as he assumed the story as his own to manipulate.

Moreover, in the mere act of tweeting, Cole serialized these stories, giving a life-cycle to the thousands of innocent people robbed of one. This tactic speaks to Shirky's belief in the internet's collaborative potential—what he calls “Cognitive Surplus.” He writes,

The cognitive surplus, newly forged from previously disconnected islands of time and talent, is just raw material. To get value out of it, **we have to make it mean or do things**. We, collectively, aren't just the source of the surplus; we are also the people designing its use, by our participation and by the things we expect of one another as we wrestle together with our new connectedness
[emphasis added] (Shirky, *Cognitive Surplus* 29).

In the same way the Literature immortalized these literary figures, Twitter immortalized the stories of those killed by drones. Cole produced fiction on Twitter that not only interacted with its characteristics to make a comment on an overlooked reality (using 140-characters to represent a millisecond death), but also “closed the empathy gap” through a social tool meant in its inception to foster connectivity (Butigan).

Cole's eight-tweet story developed out of a larger Twitter project called "Small Fates," in which Cole actively uses Twitter as a news institution to fictionally tweet historical events of the past, most commonly those found in Lagos newspapers. These pieces were written in the form of *fait divers*, an old French tradition of elevating uncredited, often overlooked news stories into works of art using irony and dark humor ("Simple Tweets of Fate"). Twitter's character limitations forced Cole to suppress details, omit secondary characters, and sometimes sidestep the more crucial aspects of the story in order to highlight more poignant details (Cole). "Seven Short Stories about Drones" used the tactic of *fait divers* as Cole referenced celebrated, multi-dimensional stories and characters in a concise 140 characters. Cole used Twitter as a flirtation with reportage to tell stories in a new way. One example of this reads, "*Knowledge is power. He graduated in business administration in Calabar, and Charles Okon has since committed sixteen armed robberies*" (Cole). These "Small Fates" are performative; they evoke irony, humor, and minimalism with a goal similar to Twitter's—giving people a voice and a forum to share their stories.

Cole uses Twitter to give life to overlooked people living experiences oversimplified; like "Seven Short Stories about Drones," "Small Fates" elevates the average into the artistic. He does this by bringing people from all over the world closer to one another:

The idea is not to show that Lagos, or Abuja, or Owerri, are worse than New York, or worse than Paris. Rather it's a modest goal: to show that what happens in the rest of the world happens in Nigeria too, with a little craziness all our own mixed in. In this odd sort of way, bad news is good news because these instances of bad news reveal a whole world of ongoing human experience that is often ignored or oversimplified (Cole).

Cole's "Small Fates," though not entirely fictional, reveal the way he uses Twitter as a production method to tell other people's stories. Like he did in "Seven Short Stories about Drones," Cole invoked the author function to elevate the "average man's" story into something special. In doing so, he on the one hand utilized the democratic social forum to give the overlooked a voice, but on the other hand, he maintained authorial control because he assumed the responsibility of telling people's stories for them. Though Cole relied on the author function to elevate the unknown, he nevertheless appropriated those stories in the process. By the end, the artistic "Small Fates" were not the stories of people he talks about, but his own.

Author Elliott Holt had a similar fascination with the news, finding inspiration for her Twitter fiction experiment, "#Evidence," from investigations of "Occupy Wall Street." When asked to contribute to the 2012 Twitter Fiction Festival, Holt loosely designed a story that would emulate, and subsequently critique, the use of social media activity as proper legal evidence. Like Egan and Cole, Holt had a preconceived idea of plot points and characters, but unlike Egan's strategic publication of "Black Box," Holt's "#Evidence" unfolded organically, using three separate Twitter accounts that she repeatedly logged into as she developed each line directly on her phone. "#Evidence" chronicles three characters attending the same party—the first, "@MargotBurnham," is a PR executive hosting the party for a top chef, "@SimonSmithMilla" is a British socialite attendee, and "@ElsaJohanssen" is "Swedish" fashion designer, hailing from San Francisco, and the girlfriend of the celebrated chef. Showcasing the perspectives of three individuals at the party, the story acts as fictional evidence for police officers to hypothetically reference in a later investigation of an attendee's fatal fall from the building's rooftop. As such, the work acts as a piece of social media. The story not only chronicles characters tweeting, but the tweets themselves are meant to serve as fictional social

media evidence later on, drawing the reader’s attention to the misleading impression of certainty the internet portrays. This is important to understanding “#Evidence” as a work of Twitter fiction that develops *through* the medium because Holt’s story utilized Twitter vernacular and played on Twitter stereotypes to ensure this story could be told nowhere else but the platform itself.

Back in 2012, Holt describes Twitter as having a more ephemeral quality in its constant up-to-the-moment feed, allowing her to experiment with the timing of each character’s posting. The “beats” of the lines, as she calls them, portray a more realistic stream-of-consciousness on Twitter. This technique engages directly with the integrity of Twitter as a social forum; Holt’s characters mirror typical Twitter behavior, encouraging her readers to connect with them on some notion of familiarity or believability. For example, PR executive Margot and socialite Paul are in different locations than one another when tweeting about the party early on in the story. The times of their tweets vary, as they post a single thought in one moment or a stream of them a bit later—the strategy mimics the way people use Twitter in reality:

Margot Burnham
@MargotBurnham
Taste test: the chef’s special cocktail is divine.
6:39 PM—28 Nov 2012

Margot Burnham
@MargotBurnham
But where is the chef? #fashionablylate
6:40 PM—28 Nov 2012

Simon Smith-Millar
@SimonSmithMilla
Sasha is late, of course. Whenever I’m in New York, I’m waiting for her.
6:41 PM—28 Nov 2012

Simon Smith-Millar

@SimonSmithMilla

New York rooftop in November: not the most practical place to throw a party. I'm told they'll be heat lamps.

6:43 PM—28 Nov 2012 (@elliottholt).

In regards to timing, the duplicate tweeting on the part of both “Margot” and “Simon” reflect an inner narrative stream. The culture of Twitter inspires people to broadcast their every thought as it comes to mind in this stream-of-consciousness manner, rather than using Twitter as a method of informing others of important happenings. “#Evidence” works not only to mirror this culture, but also to integrate it into the story’s plot, because each character illuminates Holt’s innate understanding of the way Twitter works. The unique timing of the characters’ tweeting also references the social network of Twitter, revealing how people’s social media usage can perhaps mislead others into believing they are at a certain place at a certain time. Elliott Holt discusses this in her critique of social media’s unreliability; just because people say they are in one place at a particular time, doesn’t mean they in fact are. Holt’s understanding of how people use the social platform in a stream-of-conscious manner, as a way to share content, opinions, and thoughts with a massive audience of “people like them,” equipped her with the ability to create a work of fiction that worked directly with Twitter, and could further develop through it. Katy Waldman of Slate critiques Jennifer Egan for failing to understand these nuances, writing, “Egan, who doesn’t operate a Twitter account, knew none of the handshakes or shortcuts” (Waldman).

In the case of this passage, these “handshakes and shortcuts” reflect the stereotype associated with certain hashtags and particular uses of grammar. Holt wanted to create fiction that people using Twitter could relate to and readily understand. To do so, she uses a hashtag like “#fashionablylate” to reference certain trends on the medium as she simultaneously paints her

character of “Margot” as the stereotypical frenzied publicist, posting several times in a row to reveal her stress. “Simon Smith-Millar” embodies a stereotype as well—the posh, elite, London socialite—in his critique of the event and strict punctuation overall. On Twitter, personality shines through each 140-character tweet. Simon would reveal a different personality altogether if he posted “obviously Sasha is late,” in a freer form without punctuation, instead of his rigid phrase “Sasha is late, of course. Whenever I’m in New York, I’m waiting for her.” In a quick 140-characters, readers understand Simon’s rigidity and elite persona in his implied punctuality and overt irritation. In a way, Twitter necessitates the stereotype, for Holt only had 140-characters to establish an adequate characterization. But at the same time, people use Twitter to do just this in reality—to reveal their personality in a stream-of-consciousness manner—and the most interesting, stand out. Holt wanted to use Twitter to tell a *Twitter* story. She used the hallmarks of Twitter—the way it unfolds in real time, the performative nature of tweets, the hashtags and irony, and even the typos to access Twitter’s spontaneity and authenticity (qtd. in Fitzgerald) As the specificity of the characters seem to reveal a strict authorial agenda, Holt desired to immerse herself within the medium for this experiment. Accordingly, many of the tweets present in “#Evidence” were improvised to maintain an essence of porousness. Though the story emulates Twitter culture, and offers a subsequent critique of its often exaggerated culture, it nevertheless engages directly with it as a work of social media.

But if Holt was critiquing the culture of Twitter, believing its users tell different versions of reality on the platform, she argues by this logic that Twitter is always fiction—anyone posting on the medium can be an author. Holt connected with Twitter users on the level of the individual broadcaster, and in doing so, revealed the way the traditional distance between storyteller and reader is becoming more elastic—or perhaps nonexistent. In *Cognitive Surplus*, Clay Shirky

argues that the internet breeds dual production and consumption, a sense of elasticity between the institution and the individual that failed to exist before: "...media is actually like a triathlon, with three different events: people like to consume, but they also like to produce, and to share. We've always enjoyed all three of those activities, but until recently, broadcast media rewarded only one of them" (Shirky, *Cognitive Surplus* 22). The distance between author and reader is shortened on social media platforms because they offer broadcasters and readers immediate access to new material and subsequent feedback. This results in greater access to the writer's process as readers can see the development of their work in a way they couldn't before. The delivery system reminds readers that each line they receive is typed and published at that very moment by a real human being—this humanizes a distant author as it brings them closer to their readerships and creates literature dependent on that readership presently consuming the material.

This was the reason Holt believed Twitter to be a conducive platform for suspense and mystery in the first place; people witness the story live as tweets unfold one-by-one—there is a visual expectation involved. The twenty-first century digital narrative is increasingly visual (as, for example, tweets arrive in a newsfeed one by one), and requires a level of performance that the traditional novel did not necessitate. In a way, Twitter fiction is like the original story around the campfire—the storyteller is aware of the audience, the audience is aware of the storyteller, and the audience can react directly to the story told. As the distance between the storyteller and the recipients (the institution and the individual) shortens, social media paves the way for increased interaction and collaboration. At the end of her two-hour tweeting of “#Evidence,” Holt asked readers to tweet their reactions: was it #murder, #suicide, or an #accident? Twitter gives readers the opportunity to directly address the author and play an integral role in the storytelling process. In the case of “#Evidence,” Holt relied on reader reaction to determine if her

story was a successful mystery—a genre she had a feeling worked well on Twitter due to the investigative practices of real police, but nevertheless viewed as an experiment. This idea holds true for every author producing work *through* the medium. Junot Diaz’s collaborative piece, Teju Cole’s participatory “Hafiz” and intimate “Small Fates, and Elliott Holt’s real-time tweeters brought readers closer to their storytellers. In each case, Twitter as a democratic social network enabled readers to understand and interact with each author’s work spontaneously.

As Diaz, Cole, and Holt created fiction that developed through Twitter and engaged with its user network and technical affordances, they each found a way to bring their readers closer to them—for, as Clay Shirky puts it, “. . .personal communication and publishing, previously separate functions, now shade into one another” (Shirky, *Here Comes Everybody* 81). This undoubtedly offers a unique experience for readers, and perhaps a fun experiment for authors, as the distance between professional and amateur becomes more elastic. But as Twitter shifts the established ideas of what authorship looks like—giving amateurs the opportunity to broadcast, consume, and share, and authors the opportunity to reach larger audiences—we have not entirely abandoned the expectation of authorial rights and intellectual property. As Twitter fiction develops through the medium, capitalizing on the newsfeed, fellow tweeters, and the spontaneity associated with real-time publishing, the result is literature representative of our current media moment. Authors use the democratic platform to bring formerly inaccessible stories of literature or news to the masses, to invite their readers to join them in impromptu fiction-writing, or to use the conversational thread to interact directly with a larger audience. This type of Twitter fiction is not democratic in its relinquishing of authorial rights, but it is collaborative and participatory as the stories develop within the Twitter feed itself.

In his lecture “What is an Author?” Michel Foucault states that traditionally, an author is a “functional principle” in relation to his/her own work, one that “impedes the free circulation, the free manipulation, the free composition, decomposition, and re-composition of fiction” (Foucault 221). But, when authors create fiction as works of social media that develop through and with Twitter, these opportunities open back up. First, free circulation is a given on a free, user-based social platform like Twitter, and accordingly enabled the aforementioned authors to broaden their readerships. As each tweeter is his own broadcaster, composition is also free, and further, those tweeters involved in Junot Diaz’s crowd-sourced story and Teju Cole’s retweeted “Hafiz,” had the chance to compose alongside the authors that originally hindered this type of collaboration. Moreover, Teju Cole’s “Hafiz” and Elliott Holt’s “#Evidence” serve as examples of decomposable fiction; Cole’s retweeted story can be dismantled into the individual tweets in the various networks of his collaborators, while Holt intended for her work to replicate the way investigators dismantle social media feeds to use individual posts as evidence. In regards to free manipulation, Cole’s “Seven Short Stories about Drones” used other authors’ popular works of fiction to create a new type of story on Twitter, without giving credit where it once was due. This in a way also reflects the re-composition of fiction possible on a democratic platform, as Cole repurposed these works to make a new point in a different era. His “Small Fates” project as a whole went even further, accomplishing nearly all of these formerly unachievable tasks. Cole circulated to thousands of followers the manipulated and recomposed stories of people in the news—narrating their stories in his voice—and ultimately composing a story entirely his own.

Foucault urges his audience not to consider works only in terms of expressive value or form, but rather in their modes of existence. He believes that cultural discourses could be more readily understood by assessing the activity, or modification of, the traditional author function.

(Foucault 220). Twitter modifies the traditional author function inasmuch as it enables freedom of circulation and composition, creating a more elastic and balanced relationship between author and reader. Clay Shirky's *Here Comes Everyone* argues that the internet's connective qualities subvert the professional's control over the amateur; in the case of Twitter fiction, everyone is a broadcaster and can create whatever they want. For this more collaborative type of Twitter fiction displayed by Diaz, Cole, and Holt, the mode of circulation, manipulation, and composition become the topics of importance to understand twenty-first century literary production in relation to digital discourse. This is not to say these authors do not maintain a certain level of authority over their works, or that Twitter has completely erased the boundaries between professional and amateur fiction. But, as authors use Twitter as a production method, they illuminate a shift in focus away from form and expressive value, toward modification in the author function as a representation of cultural and literary dialogue.

As Clay Shirky adamantly argues, social media platforms sparked immense cultural change as it modified the power of institutions to be the sole distributors of information and the only organizations capable of assembling large groups of people. Foucault, in his 1969 lecture, predicts that “as our society changes, at the very moment when it is in the process of changing, the author function will disappear” and that texts will not function according to the constraint of an author, but by a mode that will have to be “determined, or, perhaps, experienced” (Foucault 222). In a presently updating newsfeed like Twitter—the pioneer in social broadcasting and connectivity—fiction is something to be experienced and interacted with. Twitter restores the opportunity for collaboration and conversation amongst authors and readers, as the separation between them narrows and the differentiation between them becomes less important. As a result, the author function has necessarily shifted, for if anyone can be a publisher on the platform—and

as Elliott Holt argues, a publisher of fiction—then the function does not hold the same weight it once did.

Foucault ends his lecture wishing for a day when the author as a figure will no longer limit fiction: “It would be pure romanticism, however, to imagine a culture in which the fictive would operate in an absolutely free state, in which fiction would be put at the disposal of everyone and would develop without passing through something like a necessary constraining figure” (Foucault 222). Clay Shirky perhaps believes Foucault’s dream has been realized—social platforms have fostered connectivity and freedom in a different way than any technological or societal development has before, dismantling traditional institutions in the process. But, as Diaz, Cole, and Holt all maintain a degree of ownership over their fiction, it seems Twitter fiction does not try to do away with the author function, but renegotiate it. In the process, Foucault offers new questions to ask:

...there would be other questions, like these: ‘What are the modes of existence of this discourse? Where has it been used, how can it circulate, and who can appropriate it for himself? What are the places in it with room for possible subjects? Who can assume these various subject functions? And behind all these questions, we would hear hardly anything but the stirring of an indifference: What difference does it make who is speaking?’ (Foucault 222).

While Twitter begins to create a more participatory medium for fiction to thrive, it does still in fact matter who is speaking—it seems there is no great benefit to doing away with the author function entirely. But Twitter does offer all 305 million monthly users the chance to publish and interact with literature; not Foucault’s “everyone,” but something close to it. Twitter fiction has not entirely done away with the author function as Foucault may have hoped, but it has paved the

way for the new questions he suggested. In considering how Twitter fiction is produced, circulated, and appropriated, we have shifted our discussion of the author function.

Conclusion: The Future of Twitter Fiction

Since its completion in 2015, the #TwitterFictionFestival has yet to announce plans for 2016—it appears, though no one can say for sure, that the romance with Twitter fiction has fizzled. There are many potential reasons for this decline. For one, dominant social media platforms now focus heavily on the photo narrative—the same people who were once obsessed with Twitter in its early years have grown increasingly enthused with Instagram and Snapchat. Moreover, given the medium’s presentism, the way it unfolds in real time, its longevity is inherently doomed. Parody accounts like @MayorEmanuel or @InvisibleObama could only continue for so long; either the election will inevitably end (and Emanuel will be arrested) or the fiction continues and the joke becomes outdated (@InvisibleObama). For Jennifer Egan, people tuned-in to “Black Box” for those ten specific nights, but the story’s afterlife remained in print. For Elliott Holt, the #TwitterFictionFestival ended.

Twitter fiction’s ambiguous future is most likely tied to Twitter’s struggle to stay competitive. In the last seven years, Twitter has welcomed three different CEOs and overhauled its executive board. In the last few months, four of Twitter’s vice presidents have left the company (Oremus). Economically, Twitter growth reached a near halt in its fourth-quarter performance report released in February of 2016, and shares subsequently fell 4 percent. The medium’s tumultuousness seems to stem from Twitter’s inability to legitimately compete with Facebook, who has 1.59 billion users (five times that of Twitter), or photo streaming platforms like Instagram which recently eclipsed Twitter’s 305 million users with 400 million users and a faster growth rate. Jessica Guynn of *USA Today* sees the problem as one of confusion: “many people do not understand how or why they should use the service” (Guynn).

Authors appear to be in the same boat, not understanding what value Twitter offers them in the long run. In her discussion of the #TwitterFictionFestival, Holt states that it was a fun experiment, but not practical for writers already struggling to earn money pursuing their literary passions. Teju Cole took several hiatuses from Twitter, perhaps for some privacy or to find inspiration elsewhere, but came back because he wanted to bring his work “where the readers are” (Fitzgerald). But Twitter’s quarterly results reveal few new readers are coming to Twitter. If authors enjoy writing Twitter fiction because of its formal constraints, Twitter’s renegotiation of character limit and inclusion of live-streaming to stay competitive will lead to different formal considerations. These additions fundamentally change Twitter as a social platform, abandoning the status update for long-form narrative. The changes strip Twitter of the very qualities Twitter fiction authors sought to engage. Without them, a future of poetic 140-character Twitter fiction seems grim.

Twitter fiction serves as only one *example* of the twenty-first century digital narrative, proving that modern media opens up creative space for new types of literary experimentation—despite its potentially short lifespan. Twitter fiction paves the way for other methods of literary experimentation on digital media, and could perhaps turn up on visual platforms like Instagram or Snapchat in the near future. Regardless of platform, this era’s literary narrative is increasingly digital, and calls for authors and readers to renegotiate how they produce, receive, and interact with text. The future trajectory of Twitter fiction may be ambiguous, but Twitter fiction reveals that digital narrative itself must be porous and complex—and still somewhat ambiguous—to flourish within a conversational medium. Digital narrative must be malleable to survive.

The authors, too, must be flexible as digital narrative calls for a renegotiation of the traditional author function. Developing within a conversational platform, Twitter fiction calls for

a certain amount of spontaneity and sociality for it to succeed as a true work of social media. “Renegotiation” is a key term in studying Twitter fiction because social media is constantly shifting and developing—it is clear from Twitter’s recent difficulty that no platform can remain one way for long. In this regard, Twitter fiction does not aim to do away with the author function completely as Michel Foucault imagines, but instead to renegotiate its role in digital narrative. Foucault urges his audience to question a discourse’s modes of existence, circulation, and appropriation; Twitter fiction’s unique form, dissemination, and production address these topics as they differ from print. The benefit, as exemplified by both types of Twitter fiction, is a shift in emphasis, considering not only the author function when analyzing a work, but these other questions of discourse as well.

In its initial form, Twitter offered each person the opportunity to broadcast freely, to gather and distribute information outside the realm of traditional institutions. Twitter as a social platform did away with the “institutionalized message” and the traditional boundaries between professional and amateur as it gave people a forum to publish on their own with few limitations but character count. In the process, Twitter unexpectedly gave authors the opportunity to experiment with literary form, distribution, and production as they joined their readers on a more accessible platform than ever before. Twitter may have temporarily dismantled the traditional institutions of the professional author and print literature, but in doing so, creates new ones that will prevail in the digital age. Twitter fiction pioneered twenty-first century digital narrative. It stands as the building blocks of a new genre—one that renegotiates traditional form, distribution, production, and most importantly, the author function.

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