Popular Genres and Interiority

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Abstract
This essay argues that twenty-first-century novelists have turned to popular genre models for, among other things, alternatives to twentieth-century literary realism’s dominant concern with characters’ interiority. Beginning with the anticipation of this development in Toni Morrison’s 1987 novel Beloved and focusing on two more recent works of fiction—Helen Oyeyemi’s 2009 White Is for Witching and James Hannaham’s 2015 Delicious Foods—the essay addresses the particular strategy whereby novelists attribute interiority to nonhuman objects in order to explore new strategies for addressing the social and economic concerns that were once central to realist fiction.

As Anna Kornbluh argues in her essay “We Have Never Been Critical: Toward the Novel as Critique,” the school of postcritique associated with Rita Felski and Bruno Latour makes the same mistake as the suspicious criticism that it purports to replace, treating literature “as an object of knowledge” rather than a source of knowledge (399; emphasis in original). Literature, Kornbluh powerfully asserts, must be understood not as an object of critique but as critique itself, insofar as

[i]n departing from the merely made world and proposing other worlds, literature operates both the negative and affirmative poles of critique, positing imaginative, alluring alternatives to our raging, dystopian hellscape of capitalist contradiction, climate catastrophe, and insurgent global fascism. (398-99)

Acknowledging that even the best Marxist critics, such as Fredric Jameson, frequently fall back to a default position in which “[n]ovels fail but criticism succeeds” (404), Kornbluh nonetheless suggests that “we might come to think of Marxism less as a possible theory of the novel than as a sister to the novel,” to the extent that both are engaged in the “elementary production of a world other than what already exists” (401). Kornbluh concludes her essay with a brief reading of Colson Whitehead’s 2016 novel The Underground Railroad, arguing that Whitehead’s alternative history of U.S. slavery exemplifies the novel’s imaginative productivity by depicting “not just the ongoingsness of racial oppression but also the grace of striving” (406).

In turning to Whitehead’s book, Kornbluh draws upon Jameson’s assertion that science fiction (of which the alternate history is a well-
known sub-genre) is particularly suited to utopian pursuits in its commitment to imagined worlds (405). In what follows, however, I am interested in the broader potential of the turn to popular genres—science fiction, crime, and horror, to name just a few—that characterizes not only Whitehead’s work, but twenty-first-century fiction more generally (see Hoberek). In a recent review of Marlon James’s 2019 fantasy novel Black Leopard, Red Wolf, for instance, Benjamin J. Robertson argues that despite fantasy’s reputation as science fiction’s regressive cousin—“a genre, so the story goes, enjoyed by readers with an atavistic desire to escape from the modern world and its proper representation”—James’s book highlights the way in which fantasy narratives “exist only by way of story and […] therefore cannot assume a history or even a nature that might condition them independently of that history or nature being told” (Robertson).

“In Black Leopard, Red Wolf,” Robertson contends, “a story’s truth is not measured by how accurately it strives toward representing an objective reality.” He draws a somewhat dispiriting (and ironically literary) conclusion: that for James, “truth manifests in a story’s failure: as part of a world, made up of nothing but stories, that is bound to the imperfection of story” (Robertson). Just before the release of his novel, however, James himself suggested something different, telling Jia Tolentino that one corollary of the turn to genre is the de-realization of literary realism, its unmasking as a genre. Seen from this perspective, James declares, realism is, “as fantastical as sword and sorcery”: “We’ve given social realism this pride of place as the thing with the most verisimilitude, but there’s more verisimilitude in Aesop’s fables” (Tolentino).

But what if we accept neither of these options—fantasy as limit case of the inevitable failure of fiction to accurately represent the world; fantasy as a higher form of representational accuracy—and instead follow Kornbluh in reading fantasy and genre fiction more generally, as an effort to produce “a world other than what already exists”? We might begin by rejecting the dichotomy between realism and fantasy and place a different emphasis on James’s account of realism as “fantastical.” This would be, for Kornbluh, a mark not of realism’s failure but its success, its ability to transcend the merely given. Yet James is correct to suggest that sometimes literature’s productive capacity calcifies, leading to the production not of new worlds but—to invoke a key term of suspicious reading—of ideology: to a supposed realism in which, as James says, “[t]he world […] is super white, super middle-class, women only appear in a certain way” (Tolentino). From this perspective, the tools of genre might serve as a way of re-dissolving, as it were, the ideological components of fiction, and returning it to its more properly utopian vocation.

Here I focus my inquiry on one particular element that has come to characterize and perhaps even exemplify literary fiction: the production of interiority. Kornbluh, again following Jameson, contends that “any theory of the novel as critique” must foreground “the novel’s formal
spatiality,” that is, its “immanently critical projection of social space” and its concern with “utopia” as “a space adequate for human beings” (404). But we can be more granular in our account of “the novel” and note that one problem for this project has been that, beginning in the late nineteenth century and with steadily increasing intensity over the course of the twentieth, the novel has dedicated itself to the production of a somewhat different space: that of the individual perceiving, thinking, and feeling mind. No one who has read Fyodor Dostoevsky or Henry James, Marcel Proust or Virginia Woolf, William Faulkner or Vladimir Nabokov, Toni Morrison or Teju Cole would say that the projection of interiority in any way precludes the projection of social space. However, the concern with interiority led, over time, to a certain emphasis that, at its worst, projects a form of atomized individualism and, at best, makes other aspects of the historical mission of the novel harder to discern. Indeed, we might say that within this framework, the development by historically and politically motivated critics of a suspicious hermeneutical practice “of interrogating, demystifying, and defamiliarizing” (Anker and Felski 1) has been, at least in part, an effort to keep in touch with aspects of the novel that were more central prior to the advent of modernism.

Of course, the representation of interiority did not dominate all of twentieth-century fiction—or even all of modernism, as the examples of Wyndham Lewis and Djuna Barnes, among others, readily demonstrate. But the greatest outlier from this project was, unsurprisingly, the popular genre fiction that formed the degraded other against which modernism—and, eventually, literary fiction as such—defined itself. Where the putative main line of twentieth-century fiction committed itself to the development of what E. M. Forster famously dubbed “round” characters—characters “capable of surprising in a convincing way,” characters “with the incalculability of life about” them (118)—popular genre fiction remained the preserve of the “flat” character. Over time this verdict came to function purely as a dismissal, although it is worth noting that Forster himself prominently associates flat characters with Charles Dickens. “Good but imperfect novelists” like Dickens, Forster suggests, “are very clever at transmitting force. The part of their novel that is alive galvanizes the part that is not, and causes the characters to jump about and speak in a convincing way” (110). Forster does not specify what exactly is alive in Dickens, although we might guess from his description of the first chapter of *Bleak House*: “Chapter I […] is omniscient. Dickens takes us into the Court of Chancery and rapidly explains all the people there” (119-20). Here “omniscient” marks not the third person as such but the third person as it appeared in the nineteenth-century novel, before the development of the limited third person and the first person as literary technologies primarily concerned with elaborating interiority. And what this God’s eye point of view describes is, first, institutions, and, second, the relationships among the people within them: that is to say, Korn-
bluh’s social space. Forster also counts H. G. Wells among the novelists with convincing flat characters—albeit Wells the realist and not Wells the scientific romancer. But this is a reminder of the way that popular genres remained committed to projects other than elaborating interiority, from the long tradition of the detective novel representing (mostly urban) social space to the investment in the non-human world found in weird fiction. In this way, the very othering of genre fiction by twentieth-century literature allowed it to remain a preserve for the novelistic representation of things other than interiority, in effect creating an archive for contemporary writers interested in re-energizing fiction’s commitment to the material and social world outside of characters’ heads.

This othering was, to be sure, a rhetorical move rather than an objective fact, and a thorough history of the imbrication of twentieth-century literature with popular genres would have to begin quite early on, taking account, for instance, of Faulkner’s engagement with noir detective fiction, to say nothing of the high postmodernist fascination with and incorporation of the materials of mass culture. Nor was all popular genre fiction uninterested in interiority: the mid-twentieth-century detective novels of Chester Himes, Patricia Highsmith, and Jim Thompson, to pick just one cluster of examples, all arguably offer quirkier and more revealing versions of human psychology than much of the literary fiction of the same period.

But genre fiction nonetheless remained a preserve of novelistic preoccupations beyond character, as Richard Powers’s 2018 _The Overstory_—a novel as concerned with trees as it is with human beings—pointedly suggests in a few passages about the coder Neelay Mehta’s high school reading habits. “At night,” Powers writes, Mehta “pores over mind-bending epics that reveal the true scandals of time and matter. Sweeping tales of generational spaceship arks. Domed cities like giant terrariums. Histories that split and bifurcate into countless parallel quantum worlds” (97). Science fiction, Powers suggests, does not just preserve erstwhile novelistic commitments to society and diachronic history but reaches beyond these commitments to the non-social world and a non-teleological vision of multiple histories. Powers makes the distinction between science fiction and the literary clear in an encounter between Mehta and a high school teacher who wants him to read John Steinbeck’s 1947 novel _The Pearl_: “He feels sorry for her. If she only knew what reading could be. The Galactic Empire and its enemies are sweeping across the entire spiral of the Milky Way, waging wars that last for hundreds of thousands of years, and she’s worried about those three poor Mexicans” (Powers 100). If literature at its most stereotyped and middlebrow relentlessly narrows the focus to individuals and, at best, to families or other small groups, science fiction offers complex experiments with the possibilities of plot.

But to conclude that literary interiority can only be atomizing may overstate the case, as I suggest in what follows. I begin with a moment in the 1980s when Toni Morrison turned to horror, and in particular its
pencil for giving agency to both non-human entities (ghosts) and material objects (houses), as a way to suture the effects of history to individual human subjects. While Morrison remained committed, then as later, to both the literary in general and the representation of characters’ interiority in particular, her work anticipates the much more radical versions of non-human interiority explored by recent novelists engaged with the genre turn.

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Morrison’s 1987 novel *Beloved* begins with what is by now one of the most famous opening lines in American literature: “124 was spiteful” (Morrison 3). This sentence marks the novel from the outset as participating in a body of popular horror stories specific to the Reagan era. Like Stephen Spielberg’s 1982 movie *Poltergeist*, *Beloved* tells the story of a family living in a house haunted by one of the United States’ founding crimes. And if Stephen King’s *It*, published the year before *Beloved*, expands the locus of haunting outward from a house to a whole Maine town, it also climaxes in a scene where a group of people come together to cast out the invading spirit. There are, of course, very real differences between these three works, but it is also worth noting the generic grammar common to all three.

That said, *Beloved*’s first sentence also exemplifies Morrison’s characteristic strategy for distancing her work from popular genres: a lyricism that inheres at the level of the sentence. We can see this even more clearly by considering a larger portion of the opening:

124 was spiteful. Full of a baby’s venom. The women in the house knew it and so did the children. For years each put up with the spite in his own way, but by 1873 Sethe and her daughter Denver were its only victims. The grandmother, Baby Suggs, was dead, and the sons, Howard and Buglar, had run away by the time they were thirteen years old—as soon as merely looking in a mirror shattered it (that was the signal for Buglar); as soon as two tiny hand prints appeared in the cake (that was it for Howard). (3)

Upon second and subsequent readings of the novel, it is easy to see how much information these sentences contain, about the plot (the ghostly return of the infant Sethe murdered), about its historical specificity (it is set around the year 1873), about its non-realist genre elements (the instances of haunting that would not be out of place in either Spielberg or King). And yet especially during the first reading this information comes at the reader not in the form of linear plot but of resonant fragments: a first sentence in which the subject is a number, followed by a literal sentence fragment, both of which might easily be set off as lines of poetry; a series of unfamiliar names associated with diverse fates (victimization, death, flight); a shattered mirror and a marred cake that read, in this context, not as supernatural but as symbolic. This is in marked contrast to King’s utilitarian prose. The opening sentence of
It, for instance, is about as fancy and oblique as King gets: “The terror, which would not end for another twenty-eight years—if it ever did end—began, so far as I know or can tell, with a boat made from a sheet of newspaper floating down a gutter swollen with rain” (3). And this resonant image quickly comes to ground in narrative: the boat, as readers of the novel know, is an actual one that sets into motion the horrific set piece that itself initiates the plot linking a group of children in the late 1950s with their adult selves, thirty years later.

The opening of Beloved thus rehearses a relationship between “literature” and popular genres like horror that distinguishes Morrison’s writing from that of contemporary writers of literary fiction who are more interested in inhabiting than in transcending these genres. But here I am interested in a more specific point about this opening: the way it briefly flirts with treating Sethe’s Cincinnati home not as a setting but as a narrated subject. This lasts only for the first sentence, before the novel reverts to a conventional understanding of the house as a setting for rather than a bearer of subjectivity. But the possibility briefly flickers in other moments before again being shut down syntactically: “124 was so full of strong feeling perhaps [Sethe] was oblivious to the loss of anything at all” (Morrison 47). Of course, Beloved offers a much more extended experiment in unconventional interiority when, after first-person chapters narrated by Sethe and Denver, it offers one narrating the dead Beloved’s experiences in an afterlife that is also a slave ship. Not surprisingly, this section of the novel is the most lyrical and fragmentary, as if the book must marshal extra resources to handle the departure from realism: “I am Beloved and she is mine. […] All of it is now it is always now there will never be a time when I am not crouching and watching others who are crouching too I am always crouching the man on my face is dead his face is not mine” (248).

At the same time that Morrison works to distance her writing from popular genre fiction, however, her experiments with interiority also mark a continuity with more recent works of genre-friendly fiction. It is not too much of a stretch to see in the chapter narrated by Beloved a precursor of the narrating spirits in George Saunders’s 2017 novel Lincoln in the Bardo. Indeed, this influence is suggested at the level of typography in the fragments narrated by another dead child, the titular Willie Lincoln: “Bevins’ had several sets of eyes All darting to and fro Several noses All sniffing” (Saunders 27; sic). More radically, Helen Oyeyemi’s 2009 novel White Is for Witching offers whole sections narrated by another haunted house, located not at 124 Bluestone Road in Cincinnati, the United States, but at 29 Barton Road in Dover, England. In Oyeyemi’s novel the house—located in a city that is, the novel makes clear, at once the symbolic center of White English identity and an entrepôt for refugees from around the world—is a character, not just the site but the instigator of an exclusionary curse based on the words of a woman grieving a husband killed by foreigners in World War II: “We are on the in-
side, and we have to stay together, and we absolutely cannot have anyone else” (137). As this brief passage makes clear, 29 Barton Road, unlike 124 Bluestone Road, is both the inside and on the inside. Or to put it another way, in White Is for Witching, interiors have interiority.

But the interior is, more importantly, not really an interior. After a prologue featuring a series of impressionistic, first-person passages featuring various characters, including 29 Barton Road, responding to section-heading questions—“Where Is Miranda?” (1); “Is Miranda Alive?” (4); “What Happened to Lily Silver?” (5)—Part One of the novel opens with a section titled “Luc Dufresne” that seems to be a third-person account of the courtship between Miranda Dufresne’s parents, Luc and Lily: “He met Lily at a magazine Christmas party; a room set up like a chessboard, at its centre a fir tree gravely decorated with white ribbons and jet globes” (13). Eight paragraphs later, we discover that this section is actually being narrated in the first person by 29 Barton Road: “I find Luc interesting. He really has no idea what to do now, and because he is not mine I don’t care about him” (15). Licensed in this way to take subsequent passages that seem to be narrated in the third person as the house’s narration, we understand this narration to mediate between the story of the mental illness to which Miranda succumbed upon the death of her mother—which frequently appears in more difficult, lyrical prose—and the more straightforward description of the novel’s setting, primarily Dover and Cambridge, where Miranda goes to university. The latter thread almost always focuses, as I have suggested, on the distinctly global England of the 1990s:

Sade [the family’s Nigerian housekeeper, who has replaced an earlier family of Azeri immigrants] turned up the volume on the kitchen radio. Up at the port, fifty-eight people had been found dead in the back of a truck. Chinese. They had suffocated. Miranda was a heartbeat away from putting her hand over her ears. What is wrong with Dover, she thought. (125)

As if in answer to Miranda’s unspoken question, Sade asks, “[d]idn’t they call Dover the key to England?” (125). Here she refers to the city’s status, crucial during the two world wars, as the port closest to the French coast by boat, but her question inevitably invokes its status within the novel as an entry point for refugees. Moreover, the metaphor in Sade’s question presents England itself as a house that is dedicated, like 29 Barton Road, to policing who can and cannot gain entry. In this respect, 29 Barton Road’s narration reproduces, at the level of form, the way the inside is always already the outside. This is also true for Miranda’s trauma—a privileged marker of interiority in the previous generation of fiction. One of Miranda’s symptoms is that she continually wears a watch set to the time in Haiti, where her photojournalist mother died during a riot. The nature of Miranda’s trauma, that is, is to be always somewhere else. Here we might recall (and take in the full spatial force of) the novel’s opening words: “Where Is Miranda?”
Oyeyemi uses experiments in point of view and narrative voice not just to push deeper into human characters’ heads but to locate these characters in a world shaped by complicated forces and agencies. In a 2016 interview, Oyeyemi discusses her story “Is Your Blood as Red as This?,” from her 2017 collection *What Is Not Yours Is Not Yours*, which is narrated in part by a puppet, noting that

> writing about keys led me to puppets—trying to write from the perspective of something that is inanimate unless moved. It makes you start to think about the life of objects. Whether they can be alive even though they never exhibit any signs of life, and what they witness, and how they come to reflect the personality of the person who spends time around them. The puppet Geppetta’s was probably the most simultaneously thrilling and scary perspective I wrote from in the book. (“Bookforum”)

This statement makes Oyeyemi sound like she is interested in something like Object-Oriented Ontology—which, while attending to objects’ existence apart from humans, remains, from a Marxist perspective, as atomizing as pure individualism, to the extent that it, too, disregards the larger forces shaping a world inhabited by both humans and objects. But in practice, as *White Is for Witching* makes clear, Oyeyemi is committed to a larger—and, in Kornbluh’s terms, indistinguishably Marxist or novelistic—picture of such forces. It is not, to be sure, a picture that one arrives at in any easy or programmatic way. But it grows out of the more or less straightforward experiment in literary form that is narrated from the point of view of non-human objects.

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A more recent and perhaps more well-known version of this experiment occurs in James Hannaham’s 2015 novel *Delicious Foods*. Hannaham’s book draws upon the tropes of the crime thriller and horror as well as on those of realism to tell the story of a group of crack addicts who are picked up in Houston and taken to a Louisiana farm to work as debt slaves. One of the narrators is crack itself, using the name Scotty, which—as Hannaham has noted in interviews—is a vernacular name for the drug that references the *Star Trek* line “Beam me up, Scotty” (“It’s Not Even Past”). Teleportation is the point here: as Scotty says of the addict Darlene, whose son Eddie also ends up on the farm after searching for her when she disappears from Houston, “[h]er idea of heaven was that the two of us could kick it together […] Without none of the issues you get from having a body. Ya’ll think a body be who you is, but it ain’t nothing but a motherfucking sack of meat” (Hannaham, *Delicious Foods* 31).

This description suggests the transindividual way that Scotty’s narration works. As Hannaham told the writer John Bowe, he originally thought of Scotty’s voice—“trashy, profane, and heavy in vernacular”—as that of his female protagonist Darlene but then decided it did not
fit that character—a college graduate who falls into addiction after her husband is killed for being too politically outspoken by White men in the small Louisiana town where the couple lives. Scotty still “narrates Darlene’s story,” however, albeit in a more “lucid” manner than Darlene herself might, because it “has a critical distance from the addiction” (“It’s Not Even Past”). From the very first words it speaks in the book, Scotty’s voice combines an exuberant first-person style with close third-person insight into Darlene: “Lazy? That fool done zipped off in his black sedan and the taillights getting all mixed up with the traffic signs, and Darlene thought hard ’bout that word. Out of all the stuff a motherfucker could say, not realizing he had spoke to somebody who gone to college” (Hannaham, Delicious Foods 23; emphasis in original). Scotty’s narration opens with details from a recent event (Darlene’s assault at the hands of a man who solicits her for sex with his son) and a longer history (her college career) that will only subsequently unfold, carrying the reader along at this point almost entirely on the strength of its bravura first-person style. Note here that while Scotty’s introduction emphasizes the same stylistic adventurousness and confusing positioning in medias res as Morrison’s writing in Beloved, here those qualities come not from the register of the literary but that of popular genre: a vernacular voice is speaking, about a mystery to be solved.

Yet from one perspective, Scotty’s role as narrator serves to enhance a depiction of individual interiority not far removed from that which concerns Morrison. After 350 pages alternating between conventional, close third-person narration (including Eddie’s perspective on his mother) and Scotty’s chapters, the book’s penultimate chapter, narrated by Darlene herself in the first person, reveals her character as much in its style as it does in the mundane details it offers of her post-Delicious Foods, post-addiction life:

In Shreveport, not many folks have the stamina to go running in the midafternoon even during the spring and fall, and very few—only the extreme types—can tolerate running in the triple-digit heat of midsummer, which could leave the most seasoned athlete dried out like a worm at the side of the road. But it’s possible to get in a few sweaty miles during the early-morning and late-evening hours. Once I finally got sober, I instituted a regular exercise routine for myself, one of many good habits I established in the first six months after I left Scotty behind. (351-52)

Scotty’s depiction of Darlene as a creature primarily of appetite thus serves as a kind of feint that sets the reader up for the full impact of Darlene’s own (somewhat boring and conventional) recitation of her post-Delicious routine, and the heart attack that reunites her with her son.

But this is not the only thing Scotty’s chapters do, as we see if we return to them with the teleportation motif in mind. Here it is important to note that Delicious’s workers are kept in place not only by the obligation of debt and the threat of force, but also by the fact that none of them, brought to the farm at night and given crack for the drive,
know exactly where they are. The workers engage in a recurring debate about “whether the farm be in Louisiana at all, or if they maybe driven everybody far as Florida in that van” (136). And when a worker named Michelle tries to hatch an escape plan, Darlene reminds her that “[w]e don’t have a compass or anything. We could run all day and night and maybe we’d run in circles, or run the wrong way and end up deeper inside the farm than before. What then?” (218).

Hannaham registers the need for a larger perspective in the character of Sirius B, a rapper and amateur astronomer who has a relationship with Darlene before escaping from the farm through a drainage pipe. To Darlene, left behind when Sirius departs, his escape is explicitly a form of teleportation: as Scotty notes, “sometime, specially when me and her was hanging out, she be wondering if Sirius had did some crazy physics magic and teleported to New York City through that bitch” (263). In the final chapter of the book, Darlene and Eddie trade stories about Sirius. She tells her son about the time Sirius told her about the eventual destruction of the solar system when the sun goes nova—a story in which Darlene “could find no hope […] whatsoever” (365). And Eddie tells her about meeting Sirius at the trial of Delicious’s owners, and listening to him respond to questions about his escape. In that conversation Sirius offers a similarly existentialist message, telling his listeners that he gave up hope in God, in his family’s concern for him, and in leaving a musical legacy and finally escaped by “turn[ing …] back into an animal.” In the novel’s final words, “[h]e had to survive. He had to live. He was free” (367).

Crucially, though, Sirius’s existentialism springs not just from the exigencies of survival but from some sense that stories work to obscure rather than reveal a true picture of the world:

“[I]f anything, most often people who have power turn their story into a brick wall keeping out somebody else’s truth so that they can continue the life they believe themselves to be leading, trying somehow to preserve the idea that they’re good people in their small lives, despite their involvement, however indirect, with bigger evils.” (367)

To illustrate this point, Sirius notes that while he “often thought about the people who were going to eat the strawberries and lemons and watermelons he picked for Delicious,” he believes that “they never thought about me […] not from behind that brick wall” (367). The realist penchant for individualization, this passage suggests, serves a malign political project, hiding the nature of the structure—capitalism, not to put too fine a point on it—that shapes the world. Delicious Foods thus ends, as many good novels do, with a moment of literary criticism. It is important to note that the object of this criticism is not just the failure of literature to tell “somebody else’s truth.” The chapter narrated by Darlene does just that, but Hannaham follows it with another chapter as if to suggest that this goal, while important, is not sufficient—all, it is just liberal sentimentalism, the extension of the novelistic model of interiority to a different kind of subject.
But what if we leave the conclusion of Delicious Foods, and ourselves teleport back to the middle of the novel? There, Scotty is not only inside Darlene’s head (the contents of which it simultaneously obscures and reveals) but, in a very real way, is everywhere in the world. In particular, Scotty thinks as a commodity, and offers something like a capitalist sublime that bridges the walls separating Delicious’s workers and the consumers of its products:

Sometime Darlene took of one her gloves and put her fingers up on the sticky watermelon skins. She deliberately leaving fingerprints, hoping somebody gonna dust that damn melon for evidence and let her son know where she at. Way far away, folks from America and Canada and even farther be dropping them Sugar Babies and Golden Crowns on they Italian marble counters; blond children be biting down on that juicy red flesh, letting the sweetness ooze and dribble over they tongue and out the corner of they mouth. They wasn’t looking for no fingerprints on no damn melon. They just a-laughing and chasing each other cross a hundred acres of fresh green motherfucking garden full of yellow roses, flashing they bright brown and blue and green eyes, tryna spit seeds into each other hair. Them ginormous melons, the Parkers and the Sangrias, the Sunny’s Prides and the Crimson Sweets, they found homes too. The superiors said that some them Delicious watermelons made it all the way to Japan. (166-67)

This fantasia, in which products have names and find homes, might remind us of the famous passage in Capital in which Karl Marx says that capitalism causes people to misperceive “the definite social relation between men themselves” in “the fantastic form of a relation between things” (Marx 165). I am not suggesting that Hannaham had that passage in mind or even that he has read it, but in making crack one of his narrators, he has given interiority not just to an object but to a commodity. And treated as a kind of naïve narrator, that commodity can illuminate the world in ways that the more atomizing form of literary interiority cannot.

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In their 2009 essay “Surface Reading: An Introduction,” which anticipates many of the concerns of postcritique, Stephen Best and Sharon Marcus take issue with the model of surface and depth that structures what they call “symptomatic reading.” In this worldview, they write, “what is deep is fully present and thus theoretically visible, but is positioned so far down, in, or back relative to a viewer, or is so completely covered by an opaque surface, that it can only be detected by an extreme degree of penetration or insight” (Best and Marcus 4). In retrospect, what is problematic here is not so much the critique of this spatial dynamic as the notion that it stands in any sort of opposition to literature. In fact, the same nineteenth-century worldview modeled by Marx, and especially Freud, to which Best and Marcus attribute symptomatic reading (4-5), also shapes, for better or worse, the novel, lyric poetry, and the
memoir. Over the course of the twentieth century all of these forms of literature concerned themselves, for better or worse, with developing strategies for better representing human interiority. As I have shown, the great twenty-first-century challenge to the novelistic version of this practice comes not so much from descriptive formalism or the computational humanities as it does from novelists themselves. In turning to popular genres, which have always been understood to be bad at representing characters’ interiority, these novelists have found important ways to represent everything else in the world.

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