NINETEENTH CENTURY GENDER STUDIES

Issue 17.1 (Spring 2021)

Transgressive Seriality: Netflix, the Victorian Novel, and Student Novellas in the 2020 Classroom

By Christie Harner, Dartmouth College

including the student-authored novella

"Self Checkout"

Written by Rachel Quist, Grace Scott, Ryan McCann, and Arjun Srinivasan
Edited by Vanessa Mauricio, Jacob Philhower, and Tara Krumenacker

<1>In a four-part novella, mailed by post to some readers, picked up by others, a daughter struggles against what is understood as a uniquely contemporary disease. Morally fraught at times, the story nonetheless presents a striking blow to conservative beliefs and argues for inclusivity and social (re)incorporation. These sentences describe Elizabeth Gaskell's *Lizzie Leigh* (1850), the first nineteenth-century text read by students in my course "Netflix and the Victorian Serial Novel." Gaskell's novella tells the story of a young "fallen" woman allowed to survive and reunite with her loving mother. The first chapter of *Lizzie Leigh* was published in the first issue of *Household Words*, immediately after Charles Dickens's "Preliminary Word," and demonstrates the potential for serial fiction to tell radically new types of stories.(1) The opening two sentences of this pedagogy short also characterize one of the serial novellas written by undergraduate students in my Summer 2020 class. In "Self Checkout," written and edited by a group of seven students, the protagonist Georgia schemes illegally to obtain a COVID-19 vaccine for her mother and sister after the former loses her academic position in a series of university closures (see Fig. 1). Printed on campus but mailed in installments, alongside four other student-written novellas mailed at the same time, to students across the country during the virtual Summer of 2020, "Self Checkout," too, embodies the potential of narrative transgression.

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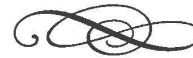
Self Checkout

WRITTEN BY

Rachel Quist
Grace Scott
Ryan McCann
Arjun Srinivasan

EDITED BY

Vanessa Mauricio
Jacob Philhower
Tara Krumenacker



PUBLISHED BY

NETFLIX & THE SERIAL NOVEL

LIBRARY BOOK ARTS WORKSHOP
Dartmouth College: Hanover, New Hampshire
2020

Fig. 1. Letter-pressed title page of “Self Checkout.”

The Setup

<2>For almost a decade, across several institutions, I have continued to rethink what it means to teach Victorian serial fiction. First, my learning outcomes bridged book history and digital humanities: in an earlier class, students read *Vanity Fair* (1847–48) by installments and blogged about essays and advertisements they found in journals from corresponding months of the 1840s. As scholars suggest, this strategy can be successful: the syncopated beat of the syllabus, which pauses between installments, attunes readers to “lapses in time—over a day, over a week, over a month . . . where meaning resides” (Turner 194). The juxtaposition of fiction and journalism leads readers to “draw fascinating conclusions about . . . audience, editorial biases, assumptions, and so on,” and the blog turns students into twenty-first century content-makers of not dissimilar decisions (Tange 337). Unfortunately, I found students too invested in content and not enough in form. They focused, understandably, on retaining details between reading assignments and finding (usually forced) links between W. M. Thackeray’s storyline and 1840s print media.

<3>In the second iteration of the class, then, and influenced by Caroline Levine’s new formalism,(2) I focused lesson plans on structure. Reading Dickens’s *Dombey and Son* (1846–48), I posed questions targeted at parts: How does each installment begin and end, does

geographic/temporal movement occur within or between parts, do any parts move at a different pace from the whole, etc.? These discussions were challenging and constructive in that they centered on forms of "publication and pause, simultaneity, synchronicity, and diachrony" embedded in or contingent on serialization (Bernstein and Derose 48). The students recognized when forms interacted—as when, for example, Florence's pairing with four female doubles across eight installments helps us to rethink female stereotypes—but struggled to think conceptually beyond specific instances. In both contexts, the students and I failed to evade what the V21 Collective and others refer to as "positivist historicism," a fetishizing of Victorian serialization as unique (when it is not) and a distancing of *past* forms and content from *contemporary* examples (V21 Collective).

<4>Having learned difficult lessons in teaching nineteenth-century serialization, I set out to design "Netflix and the Victorian Serial Novel" with two clear objectives in mind: (1) for students to perceive how formal innovations (e.g., weekly or monthly serialization, a thirteen-episode season, streaming) went alongside experiments in content, and (2) for students to think critically across historical frames. Emergent narrative forms, I tell them repeatedly, carry profound potential to tell new stories—regardless of the period in which they are produced. The syllabus opens with two weeks that establish the specifics of serialization in the Victorian era and the turn of the twenty-first century—periods each defined by transformations in "producers and consumers, form and content, market innovations and artistic originality" (Levine, "Introduction"). It then pairs Victorian novels with Netflix series to set out arguments about narrative theory and the transgressive aptitudes of serial form. We read Thomas Hardy's *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* (1891) and discuss the association of serialized fiction with "dialogism, national identity, [and] class politics": the broadening of a literate public and the development of genres to include content formerly excluded (Hughes and Lund 153). *Orange Is the New Black* (2013–19) and *Dear White People* (2017–21) allow students to continue analyzing the intersection of physical and social geographies alongside LGBTQ+ positivity and US race relations. The class studies H. G. Wells's *The Time Machine* (1895) and *Stranger Things* (2016–) to discuss linear and circular form, the rise of science fiction, and the potentialities of narrative to give shape to nascent science such as evolution and string theory. We conclude with Dickens's *The Mystery of Edwin Drood* (1870) and *Black Mirror: Bandersnatch* (2018): studies in narrative desire and complex negotiations of creative and audience agency. My intention, as Carolyn Betensky phrases it so beautifully, is not to "cast aside historical specificity," but to "reframe our relationship to it" (738). *Tess* is transgressive in its depiction of female sexuality, *OITNB* in its representations of issues such as body positivity, queer subjectivity, and racial anxiety. To critically unpack these texts is not to draw a straight line between them but to understand how formal innovation can and does reshape the tales being told. As a 2018 student put it straightforwardly in a course survey: "Overall, I think I've learned that the structure of the narrative is just as important as the plot, and it might actually influence the plot, just as the plot may influence the structure."

<5>I taught this class in Spring 2018 and Spring 2019; Summer 2020 felt crucially different, both because of the move to virtual learning and because of the maelstrom outside the classroom. If I am completely honest, I was less concerned with the logistics of distance learning. Unlike colleagues who made the switch in the Spring, I had plenty of time to prepare, and I encouraged students to read digital editions and make use of Netflix trial subscriptions. I did want to foster

community and find a way to invoke the tactile, hands-on experience students would otherwise gain from handling unbound parts of *Little Dorrit* and issues of *All the Year Round* in Special Collections. Most vitally, though, I wanted students to see the formal innovations and social debates of the Victorian period, in Christina Sharpe's words, as a "past that is not past" (9). I could test the students on narratological concepts and pre-record Zoom lectures on 1840s publishing, but I wanted to emphasize the situatedness of our class community: our own capacity to experiment with language, not in an abstract way but as a concrete mode of transgression. In the end, the assignment I designed was less about making Victorian literature relevant than about perpetuating the dynamic potential of serialization.

The Assignment

<6>The assignment, at its broadest, tasked student groups with writing, editing, and illustrating (if they so desired) a four-part serial novella (see Appendix 1). The genre, temporal and geographic setting, and form were entirely up to the students. They could choose to write any type of story with any variety of characters and/or themes. The one constraint was logistical, imposed for printing purposes: that students make a page spread in Word and email that file to me and Sarah Smith,(3) the Program Manager of Dartmouth's Book Arts Workshop (see Appendix 2). In a class of twenty-nine students, split into five groups of five to seven peers, students had to decide how they would organize their own roles as writers, editors, and illustrators. In Weeks Two and Three of our quarter, I introduced the project and tasked them with creating a project plan that set out a division of work and a basic strategy for writing in four serial installments. In Weeks Four to Seven, students produced the novella in parts, emailing their file by Thursday each week. Sarah printed and mailed the installments weekly to each student. She mailed the final installments with tools for binding the novellas (a glue stick, bone folder, six sheets of colored cardstock for the covers, blank page spreads, a 30/60 triangle) and a set of letterpress printed title pages. In Week Nine, once students had received all materials, Sarah ran Zoom sessions from the Book Arts studio to introduce students to letterpress technology, show them how she had printed the title pages, and provide instructions for binding their set of novellas. In class, we had watched a video from our Special Collections library explaining how Victorian readers might have chosen to bind a novel's parts after the completion of its serial run—and how Dickens's novels published in parts only included the title page with the last installment. This final step ensured that students, like those Victorian readers, could rethink each novella as a "whole," having bound together its parts.

The Results

<7>The five completed novellas are at once thoroughly different from one another and similar in spirit. Three of them are set on the Dartmouth campus: one in 1969, with the matriculation of a Native American student; one in the familiarity of our pre-COVID recent past; and one in a projected "fall term under quarantine." Perhaps similarly, in a measure of how lived experience shapes narrative, three are set in a COVID-inflected present or near future. None tackle themes unrelated to either Dartmouth or the pandemic. One, titled "Battle of the Houses," directly addresses COVID-19 restrictions on campus. In genre, they range from satire to dystopian thriller to historical fiction. They take on the trappings of seriality discussed in class—chapter breaks, multiple narrators, "cliffhangers," illustrations—even as they also experiment with

emergent narrative forms. One novella in particular is told entirely through text messages (identifiably iOS and Android), Instagram posts and comments, and 4chan boards. What they share, without ever being asked to do so, is a core commitment to rethinking social hierarchies: of gender, race, and sexuality; access to higher education; the language we use to talk to one another; and what it means to deserve and demand equal respect. I could have never made the point so well in lecture as the students do in their own writing: to innovate in form is to do so in content, and to create new literary forms is to tell new varieties of tales.

<8>To be clear, I am not suggesting that my students invented new narrative forms, storylines, or character subjectivities. Nor did Hardy in *Tess*, Gaskell in *Lizzie Leigh*, or David Chase in *The Sopranos*—as much as they are all, at times, given credit for doing so.(4) Instead, like their recent and not-so-recent predecessors, the students demonstrated how rethinking (rather than reinventing) narrative form can spark unexpected and surprising insights. As happened in the nineteenth century with multiple means of serial publishing and in the early twenty-first with the rise of Netflix and other streaming platforms and content producers, several phenomena occurred: new technologies intersected with existing media and modes of distribution; audiences renegotiated their relationship to narrative temporality and to the time between installments; and creators rethought the shape(s) of their audience and the types of stories that could or should be told. Together, these phenomena fashioned the transgressive capacities I described above.

<9>By necessity and design, the assignment bridged messaging apps (GroupMe and Slack), Zoom, Word, letterpress machines, and the US Postal Service. My goals for the multi-technological process were straightforward: to be logistically feasible; to expose the class to nineteenth-century printing; and to have students inhabit varied subject positions, as author, editor, reader, and binder. In the end, the process impacted us all in ways I did not fully anticipate (see Appendix 3). As a student noted, "While reading itself was a largely solitary process, we all read the installments, so coming together to bind our books developed the community aspect of the project."(5) Another student pronounced the final step "cathartic." The binding underscored the size of the group involved in producing a serialized narrative and so amplified the weight of the stories told—these tales that passed through so many hands and forms of mediation. The juncture of old and new technologies also fostered a complex negotiation between contiguity—the sense that students were participating in a longer literary lineage—and rupture. Students fought, via smartphones and laptops, to ensure that the serial form analyzed in class could also be, in their words, "authentic," "realistic," and focused on "a current topic that we felt strongly about." My choice of technologies ensured that the project was accessible to students, but it also facilitated a conceptual inclusivity: a recognition of community involvement, shared experiences, and broadened effect.

<10>The binding also concluded the temporal rhythm previously provided by serial installments. As with any serialized narrative, whether the monthly Dickens part or the binged Netflix season, the weekly installments of the students' novellas overlaid an alternative structure onto our experiences of time. In this instance, the intersection of temporalities was especially jarring and productive. It is now commonplace to say that time became elastic in 2020, and yet the project imposed an iterative schedule that recalled for students our discussions of narrative structure: of breaks between parts, beginnings and endings, the *bildungsroman*, and teleological progress. Like many nineteenth-century novelists (and Netflix showrunners), students knew from the start

how many installments they had. They could plan, as did Dickens in the working notes we studied, the sequence and ending of each tale. Yet, written in the temporally amorphous summer of 2020, three of the five novellas have ambiguous endings. The other two conclude at what can be seen as arbitrary finish lines. Reading them, you feel the tension between expectations of resolution and the formlessness of time in this strangest of years. Sometimes, they transgress intentionally and refuse to give the reader any feeling of resolution. In the context of an unresolved pandemic and equally unresolved US race relations, the authors and editors of "Self Checkout" "chose specifically to not have a definitive ending" (see Appendix 4-4.5). In other cases, the boundaries between diegetic and non-diegetic time seem to slip, to evidence the omnipresent, always contingent potential for new forms and stories to emerge from specific historical conditions.

The Conclusion

<11>I conclude with a question about the specificity of 2020. I have only assigned this precise task once, in Summer 2020, and I cannot know if the outcomes will be similar in a different (hopefully not virtual) term. Students this summer thought deeply about an appropriate correlation between, as one phrased it, Victorian "realism and its associated exploration of social politics" and "contemporary and general social issues." They wrote about mask-wearing, the politicization of coronavirus precautions, campus quarantine rules, social inequity, gender bias, and representation in university admissions. One group used a name generator intentionally so as to name their protagonist in a racially ambiguous way, to prompt reflection rather than assumptions. Of course, students in a different term will write about different topics. I would, once again, leave the choice to them. Yet I want to believe that the structures of the class and the assignment will continue to stimulate analogous forms of narrative resistance and contravention.

<12>The pairing of texts and series on the syllabus is one means by which to "explode the field's [Victorian studies'] limited temporal imaginaries," to think more agilely across narrative forms, to recognize and analyze not only variations in seriality but also "the endurance of conflict and strife" from a chronological past that is not past (Chatterjee, Christoff, and Wong). This assignment, which asks students to rethink the definitions of seriality they have learned, is another strategy for encouraging students and professors alike to reflect on what it means to innovate in form and content. We begin the term with Gaskell's *Lizzie Leigh* because I want students to understand the risks that embryonic narrative forms can take—risks that are not always successful, that may falter and get reworked again. *Lizzie Leigh* becomes one small part of a lineage that students then join. As I wrote in a different context, "Let us actually be Victorianists," but only if that means using past narrative models to transgress in new ways—to understand literary form so as to do crucial work as writers and as readers (Harner et al. 256).

Notes

(1)The first chapter of *Lizzie Leigh* is immediately followed by an article on the penny post, titled "Valentine's Day at the Post-Office." As Richard Menke notes in his description of the text, "the postal subject of this inaugural essay hardly seems arbitrary," since "it details the mechanics by which *Household Words* itself would often be 'conducted' by its itinerant editor and would reach many of its readers" (50).(^)

(2)See Levine, *Forms*.(^)

(3)See "Dartmouth Library" for Sarah Smith's profile.(^)

(4)The syllabus includes Episodes 1 and 5 from Season One of *The Sopranos* (1999). As the only non-Netflix series, it provides historical context for discussions of prestige television, the thirteen-episode season, and the origins of Netflix as a DVD distributor. See Sean O'Sullivan for an excellent discussion of seriality and literary form in *The Sopranos*.(^)

(5)All quotations from Summer 2020 students come from reflective essays that they wrote at the end of term. Students gave me permission to share their words in this essay.(^)

Appendix 1: Book Arts Creative Writing Project Prompt

PDF | DOC

To cite this material, please use:

Harner, Christie. "Appendix 1: Book Arts Creative Writing Project Prompt." *"Teaching to Transgress" in the Emergency Remote Classroom*, special issue of *Nineteenth-Century Gender Studies*, edited by Kimberly Cox, Shannon Draucker, and Doreen Thierauf, vol. 17, no. 1, 2021. Accessed [date here]. Adapted [date here].(^)

Appendix 2: Book Arts Creative Writing Project Layout Instructions

PDF | DOC

To cite this material, please use:

Harner, Christie. "Appendix 2: Book Arts Creative Writing Project Layout Instructions." *"Teaching to Transgress" in the Emergency Remote Classroom*, special issue of *Nineteenth-Century Gender Studies*, edited by Kimberly Cox, Shannon Draucker, and Doreen Thierauf, vol. 17, no. 1, 2021. Accessed [date here]. Adapted [date here].(^)

Appendix 3: Book Arts Creative Writing Project Statement

PDF | DOC

To cite this material, please use:

Harner, Christie. "Appendix 3: Book Arts Creative Writing Project Statement." *"Teaching to Transgress" in the Emergency Remote Classroom*, special issue of *Nineteenth-Century Gender

Studies, edited by Kimberly Cox, Shannon Draucker, and Doreen Thierauf, vol. 17, no. 1, 2021. Accessed [date here]. Adapted [date here].(^)

Appendix 4: “Self Checkout”

The student-authored novella, “Self Checkout,” appears in its serial form below and is then followed by a file with the completed novella. Each group determined the division of labor amongst their group members. Four students in this group—Rachel Quist, Grace Scott, Ryan McCann, and Arjun Srinivasan—individually authored one part each of the novella, and three students—Vanessa Mauricio, Jacob Philhower, and Tara Krumenacker—acted as editors of the full novella.

“Self Checkout,” Part 1 **PDF**

“Self Checkout,” Part 2 **PDF**

“Self Checkout,” Part 3 **PDF**

“Self Checkout,” Part 4 **PDF**

Preferred citation for referencing an individual part:

Student last name, first name. “Self Checkout, Part #.” “Netflix and the Serial Novel,” Library Book Arts Workshop. Edited by Vanessa Mauricio, Jacob Philhower, and Tara Krumenacker. Dartmouth College, 2020.

“Self Checkout,” complete novella **PDF**

Preferred citation for referencing full novella:

Quist, Rachel, Grace Scott, Ryan McCann, and Arjun Srinivasan. “Self Checkout.” “Netflix and the Serial Novel,” Library Book Arts Workshop. Edited by Vanessa Mauricio, Jacob Philhower, and Tara Krumenacker. Dartmouth College, 2020.(^)

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