

# The Detail, Revisited: Editorial Introduction

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**D**etails have long been defined by their triviality and inconsequentiality in Western aesthetics and also often maligned for their capacity to disrupt narrative development and poetic form.<sup>1</sup> Yet they are everywhere in our literature: after all, what novel or poem is not constituted by details? This special issue, the first of its kind, offers a literary-historical analysis of the detail in Anglophone literature and its shifting value across literary periods and aesthetic modes. Precisely because the borders of detail are so murky and difficult to delineate, the essays collected here contend that the detail makes for a compelling object of analysis. What exactly counts as a detail, and what does not? What is the scale of the detail, and how does the detail change shape across historical periods and genres? If we understand the detail as relational, as a small part of some larger whole, what is the relationship between a detail and the world it purports to represent?

With the resurgence of interest in literary formalism and in different scales of reading, our present moment offers an opportunity to reevaluate the centrality of detail to these critical conversations. Literary studies scholars have been preoccupied with the scale of the literary object and the scope of literary analysis: distant versus close reading; the sociological turn in literary studies; the macro categories of the planetary, the Anthropocene, and “species thinking” in ecocriticism. Moreover, in modernist studies there has been increasing interest

<sup>1</sup> In her pivotal study *Reading in Detail*, Naomi Schor (2006: 4–5) traces the long-standing denigration of detail as feminine ornamentation or mundane triviality in neoclassical aesthetics and classical academic discourse.

in “modest” and “weak” approaches to texts, as opposed to the meta-narratives and “strong theories” that have traditionally governed literary criticism (see Saint-Amour 2018). This special issue asks: Might we align this interest in “modest” and “weak” approaches, in “near phenomena” and in the minor, with a renewed attention to detail? How does a reassessment of the detail help us rethink the scale of literary criticism and complicate discussions of the hermeneutics of close, distant, surface, and sociological readings?

Our special issue revisits the foundational studies of detail in feminist and poststructuralist criticism and encompasses scholarship in critical race and ethnic studies, postcolonial theory, and queer studies. What is more, the issue seeks to unmoor detail from the exclusive preserve of nineteenth-century fiction and the realist novel and instead establish the centrality of detail in modern and contemporary writing where it has been less emphasized. Details are often thought to thicken description and offer texture and specificity; however, these essays reveal how details can also mislead, suggest an illusory authenticity, or emphasize the contingency of truth. Several contributors also revise Georg Lukács’s (1970) famous understanding of details as static and reifying; they trace instead how details are dynamic and transforming, shifting scale and function across literary periods and genres and under the scrutiny of different methodologies. What remains central to the discourse of the detail is an anxiety about the inadequacy of detail: its impediment to movement from concrete particularity to abstraction and generalization; its production of narrative digression and fragmentation; its inability to yield meaningful knowledge; its invitation to get lost in the weeds.

### **History of the Detail**

Previous studies have emphasized detail’s association with the ordinary and the ornamental. Cynthia Wall (2006: 27) argues that early eighteenth-century novels are marked by a paucity of detail, a holdover from classical and Renaissance rhetoric that regarded detail as mere “surplusage.” But the eighteenth-century novel’s sparse details eventually give way to the plush, upholstered interiors and richly descriptive landscapes of the Victorian novel—to the red damask curtains and massive mahogany furniture in *Jane Eyre* and the wild, windy moors of

*Wuthering Heights*. Details begin to texture the thick descriptions that make up what Amy M. King (2009: 465) calls the “dilatatory middles” of nineteenth-century realist novels.<sup>2</sup> The detailed descriptions in realist fiction illustrate the genre’s development alongside new techniques and technologies of seeing, specifically what Nancy Armstrong (2002: 5) calls the “mutually authorizing relationship between fiction and photography.” Armstrong argues that details, visual description, perspective, and spectacle were all part of the expanding referential world that helped Victorian readers imagine their relationship to the real. Just as photography promised “unmediated mediation,” narrative details seemed to offer sensory evidence that brought readers closer to the real world of objects and people. Like the photograph, detail came to be associated with a documentary impulse to archive information about the world and to construct a seemingly more authentic representation of it. Connected to new visual technologies and modes of perception, the detail became crucial to the epistemological and formal priorities of narrative realism.

Yet a surfeit of details also contributed to the “loose baggy monsters” that Henry James (1908: x) famously derided.<sup>3</sup> The nineteenth-century novel’s absorption of the ordinary detail into its descriptive apparatus became the grounds for the critique of detail by figures like Georg Lukács, who condemned it as digressive and distracting. Lukács (1970) argues that naturalist fiction is inundated with descriptive details that threaten to atomize narrative into independent moments and thus obscure the vision of social totality to which the realist novel aspires. The Victorian literary critic George Henry Lewes (1898: 81) coined the pejorative term *detailism* to describe realism marred by the accretion of excess details. Decades later poststructuralist scholars revived interest in the detail and began to challenge the long history of its degradation. For Roland Barthes (1989), the seemingly insignificant detail appears at first superfluous, unassimilable to the structure of narrative. But the inconsequential detail is in fact crucial to the “reality effect” of the story and sets the standard for realist representation.

<sup>2</sup> King (2009: 461) argues that the nineteenth-century novel emphasized the “dilation of detail,” or long, detailed descriptions. For King, this dilation generates pleasure that is not simply based in the propulsion of plot.

<sup>3</sup> The famous quotation reads in full: “But what do such large loose baggy monsters, with their queer elements of the accidental and the arbitrary, artistically mean?”

In recent years scholars have extended Barthes's concept of the reality effect and explored how the detail helps us construct mental models of worlds that, while fictional, promote an implied ontological extension beyond the book. As Elaine Auyoung (2015: 582–83) argues, details can function as “suggestive cues” that “create the impression of a world that exists beyond the pages of the text.” Elaine Freedgood (2006: 21) poses a similar argument when she describes the “metonymic labor” intrinsic to reading “things” in the novel: “We ‘follow’ novelistic things out of novels; we wander along the contiguous connections that are available to us given the states of our knowledge, our unconscious, our memories, the archives that remain available and valuable to us.” Details, then, offer connection between the world in the pages of the novel and the world beyond them. They serve in the construction of aesthetic illusion, giving ontological solidity and a sense of specificity to an implied world. In this way, and as Barthes suggests, the detail is seemingly indistinguishable from the representational practices of realism: if realism attempts to simulate reality, it is a simulation that relies on the proliferation of details. Details flesh out atmosphere and character, elaborate the richness of circumstance, enhance “local color” by establishing the features of place, and delineate the speech patterns and vernaculars of particular persons and communities. From the phenomenological perspective of reading, details intensify a more concrete or sensory experience of a subject, so that readers imagine themselves as part of a scene. Details allow us to pause, to slow down, and to observe closely; detailed description feels immersive because it requires our fine-tuned attention. Indeed, it is hard not to equate detail with the signature methodology of literary studies—close reading—that trains us to read at the granular level of the text. In other words, the detail is at the heart of how we orient ourselves, both to the *word* and to the *world*.

### **Detail-Oriented: The Racializing, Gendering, Queering of Detail**

As we argue in this introduction, the detail in twentieth- and twenty-first-century literature begins to lose its empirical and evidentiary status as authors become more self-conscious of the contingency of truth and the capacities for disciplinary violence latent in the detail. Several authors whom our contributors investigate subvert the detail as the locus of the real or manipulate the detail's ability to both lie and tell the truth.

Because of its close relationship to realism, the detail has often been viewed as indexical: we expect details to make the constructed world of the novel or poem feel real. But what happens when details produce not verisimilitude but the opposite? This special issue pays particular attention to writers who interrogate and undermine the epistemological authority of the detail. For instance, in her essay Shirley Lau Wong analyzes the many richly detailed descriptions of New York in Teju Cole's novel *Open City* (2011). Rather than make the constructed world of the novel feel authentic or "real," the topographical details in *Open City* produce a flattened urbanscape, strangely devoid of people or meaningful interactions between the narrator and the city's other residents. Wong argues that the book highlights "the power and insidiousness of detail: its ability to assign value and withdraw it. . . . The writer . . . can use differing volumes of details to push something to the novel's foreground . . . but at the expense of something else fading into the background (or, worse yet, becoming background)." Which raises a question: Is the detail always invested in producing a more knowable or empirically reliable world?

Audre Lorde's poem "Afterimages" (1992) offers a metapoetic commentary on the detail's dual capacity to point to and obscure the truth, which, as the poem suggests, has violent consequences for the representation of Black subjects. The poem recounts the aftermath of the lynching of Emmett Till in Mississippi in 1955, when the trial and acquittal of his murderers dominated national headlines. Till's mother, Mamie Till-Mobley, insisted that her son's body be transported to their home in Chicago for an open-casket and public funeral viewing: "They had to see what I had seen. The whole nation had to bear witness to this" (Till-Mobley and Benson 2003: 139). At first, images of Till's mutilated body were published exclusively in Black magazines and newspapers such as *Jet* and the *Chicago Defender*. But Lorde's speaker recalls the experience of encountering images of Till's violated body everywhere as they were reproduced in a wider circuit of media, from pulp magazines such as *Real Police Story* to the gossip tabloids *Confidential* and *True*:

His broken body is the afterimage of my 21st year  
 when I walked through a northern summer  
 my eyes averted  
 from each corner's photographs  
 newspapers protest posters magazines

Police Story, Confidential, True  
*the avid insistence of detail*  
*pretending insight or information*  
 the length of gash across the dead boy's loins  
 his grieving mother's lamentation  
 the severed lips, how many burns  
 his gouged out eyes  
 sewed shut upon the screaming covers  
 louder than life  
 all over  
 the veiled warning, the secret relish  
 of a black child's mutilated body  
 fingered by street-corner eyes  
 bruise upon livid bruise . . .  
 (Lorde 1992: 188; emphasis ours)

The detail here is both sexualized and racialized, as photographs of Till's violated body are splashed across the sensationalizing covers of newspapers and magazines so they can be "fingered by street-corner eyes." Lorde creates a twisted version of the blazon poem by rendering in graphic detail a litany of brutality, using line breaks to dismember Till's body into a series of parts ("the dead boy's loins," "the severed lips," "his gouged out eyes," "bruise upon livid bruise").<sup>4</sup> The details of Black suffering either are savored with "secret relish" or traumatize Black viewers, who cannot avert their eyes from such images. But what is apparent in Lorde's poem is both the agency and the pretense of detail, which avidly insists but only actually "pretend[s] insight and information." While detail is often wielded as forensic and evidentiary—in this case, as proof of a brutal crime—Lorde suggests that here it only points to reality in an excessive, "louder than life" way. For Lorde, detail is salacious, both quenching and fueling our desire for knowledge. What is more, detail is malicious, purposefully misleading the viewer by pretending some semblance of truth.

The poem dramatizes what Saidiya V. Hartman (1997: 4, 18) sees as the thirst for detail that is central to "the uncertain line between witness and spectator" in representations of Black suffering in slave narratives, minstrel shows, and other scenes of nineteenth-century American culture. While abolitionists often relied on depicting "the minutest detail

<sup>4</sup> We thank Gabriel Bloomfield for pointing out that Lorde reworks the blazon in "Afterimages."

of macabre acts of violence” to disrupt the comfortable remove of the spectator and incite the spectator’s sympathy, they also took great pleasure in detailing such grotesquery. Hartman asks: “Are we witnesses who confirm the truth of what happened in the face of the world-destroying capacities of pain, the distortions of torture, the sheer unrepresentability of terror, and the repression of the dominant accounts? Or are we voyeurs fascinated with and repelled by exhibitions of terror and suffering?” (3). As Hartman and Lorde both demonstrate, acts of witnessing and voyeurism violently commingle in the details of Black suffering.

Our special issue traces the deep history of the violence of detail, in particular how details have been weaponized by Western aesthetics and Western disciplines to construe “truths” about the identities, cultures, worldviews, and geographies of marginalized subjects and communities. Indeed, Edward Said (1978: 709–10) argues that Orientalism was above all a “discipline of detail”: “The disciplines that arose in the nineteenth century were specialized ones in which the human subject was first collapsed into swarming detail, then accumulated and assimilated by sciences designed to make the detail functional as well as docile.” For Said, detail is part of the archive fever of empire—the attempt to document, catalog, and classify all that was knowable about the Orient:

Indeed [it is] a theory of Oriental detail by which every minute aspect of Oriental life testified to an Oriental essence which it expressed, that Orientalism had the eminence, the power, and the affirmative authority over the Orient that it had. In Orientalism the accumulation of texts, by which enormous caches of Oriental manuscripts were transported westwards to be made the subject of remarkably detailed study, and more and more during the nineteenth century the accumulation of human bodies, by which the Oriental races and their territories were acquired: these two went hand in hand, as did the discipline of their management. (712–13)

In his description of “the accumulation of texts” and the circulation of “enormous caches of Oriental manuscripts,” Said replicates the language of plenitude and excess that has long characterized critical discussions of detail. Details serve as a crucial instrument of Orientalism: “Along with the use of discipline to employ masses of detail (and of human beings), discipline was also used to administer, study, and reconstruct—then subsequently to occupy, rule, and exploit—almost the whole of the non-European world” (711). In other words, details serve as the colonial foot soldiers of Orientalism.

In describing detail as part of a swarm that must be tamed into civilized docility, Said suggests the racialized aspects of the detail. Our special issue emphasizes not only the gendered discourse on detail, which Naomi Schor famously articulates, but also the racial and queer dimensions of detail. In so doing, the issue sketches a genealogy that runs alongside and sometimes athwart the one that Schor delineates. At times her writing intimates an implicit awareness of the racialization of detail. For instance, Schor (2006: 15, 17) describes Charles Baudelaire's anxiety over what he calls the "riot of details," which he believes will overwhelm the painter's desire for harmony on the canvas: "Baudelaire's troping of the detail as revolutionary mob overtly politicizes the aesthetic; the peril posed by succumbing to the invasion of the barbaric or feminine upstart detail—the crowd and the female are on the same continuum in the nineteenth-century male imaginary—is nothing less than the end of civilization itself." Schor incisively traces the gendering of the riotous detail, but her own description of the invading hordes of "barbaric," uncivilized detail betrays the racialized discourses of invasion and barbarism that were hallmarks of the nineteenth-century imperial imaginary.

Anne Anlin Cheng, who builds on Schor's work, analyzes how detail has been pivotal to the racialization of Asiatic femininity, a process of racial embodiment in Euro-American visual and literary culture that she terms "ornamentalism." In ornamentalism, Cheng (2018: 427) argues, the extravagant details of Orientalist aesthetics not only fetishize and objectify the Asian female body as a thing to be possessed but also blur the boundaries between the human and the nonhuman: "The fastidiousness of extreme aestheticism; the completeness of severe, scrupulous details; the sensorium of textiles and materials; the seductive dynamism of vivacious inanimateness and synthetic pleasures—all work to facilitate that slide between things and persons." Several contributors to our special issue also analyze how detail has been yoked to racial and Orientalizing projects. For example, Wendy Allison Lee points out that Asian American literature is often read as ethnographic, as a native informant's guide for the white reader. In such readings, the so-called ethnic detail (i.e., the translation of Chinese phrases or the explanation of cultural customs) objectifies the Asian American subject. The ethnic detail thus fulfills Lukács's warning about how naturalism renders narration inert, transforming characters into static tableaux.



Our issue, then, exposes a dialectical tension within the detail: its capacity to, on the one hand, disrupt the coherence and harmony of the work of art and, on the other, function as an exemplary part of the whole. In her essay Dora Zhang analyzes what she calls “unmarked fictions,” works of literature that suppress all markers of gender or race in their protagonists. What happens, Zhang asks, when details—which often typify, mark something or someone as belonging to a larger group—are removed altogether in unmarked fictions such as Anne F. Garréta’s *Sphinx* (1986, translated 2015) and Toni Morrison’s short story “Recitatif” (1983)? Zhang argues that Garréta’s and Morrison’s works short-circuit our desires to read details as clues that position individual characters within social matrices of gender, sexuality, race, and class. In so doing, these works rekindle “a central problem animating the detail” that realism poses: “how [the detail] mediates between part and whole, individual and type, particular and universal.” Tyler Bradway, in his contribution, also emphasizes how the typifying function of the detail implies higher stakes in works that foreground marginalized subjects. Bradway pushes back against a tradition of queer theory that looks askance at queer characters. For these theorists, queer characters are nothing more than extraneous and mystifying details that reproduce ideologies of heteronormativity in contemporary queer fiction. But in an analysis of A. K. Summers’s graphic memoir *Pregnant Butch* (2014) and Carmen Maria Machado’s story “Inventory” (2017), Bradway reminds us that characters “jump out of the diegesis,” unleashing details within and beyond a text, and stresses that “character-details” can be recirculated into new scenes, contexts, and genres that work against abstract and reductive types.

Our special issue thus extends a longer literary history of detail into the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, tracing how writers experiment with detail in modern and contemporary literature. While details are integral to certain subgenres of the novel—realist, maximalist, encyclopedic—the limits of their epistemological and representational power are always tested.<sup>5</sup> Details favor a certain epistemological authority, an impression of exhaustiveness and comprehensiveness; for this reason, they become closely allied with Orientalist and racist projects. At

<sup>5</sup> For more on the detail in maximalist and encyclopedic novels, see Levey 2017.

the same time, details offer to restore complexity, subtlety, and specificity to cultures and communities subject to the dehumanizing tropes and reifying abstractions of racism, imperialism, and heteronormativity.

### **The Devil in the Details**

The essays in this special issue all highlight the contradictions embedded in the detail. Details are viewed as something we are habituated to overlook, something afforded only diminished attention. But our common expressions warn against such neglect. For instance, the cliché that “the devil is in the details” insists that the detail captures something truthful that the whole obscures. It implies that our initial impressions can be delusory and that we must return to the object with greater attentiveness, lest we overlook its complexity. On the other hand, the inability to “see the forest for the trees” bespeaks the tendency to get lost in the details and fail to take in the bigger picture. Both idioms suggest an anxiety about the detail and its capacity to be either overlooked or overvalued. Details are both truth bearing and deceptive, obscuring and revealing, extraneous and necessary, static and dynamic. Since Lukács’s “Narrate or Describe?,” literary scholars have often stressed the detail’s static nature, the way it halts the propulsion of narrative by turning it into visual tableaux. But in her essay Jennifer Spitzer argues that the details in Virginia Woolf’s fiction are anything but static; they are in fact always in motion, oscillating between the small and easily overlooked and the large and abstract. In Spitzer’s words, the Woolfian detail becomes “a representation of how the mind works digressively and associatively, adjusting to different scales of concern.”

The paradoxical nature of the detail explains why it is foundational to nearly every methodology of literary study. As Caroline Levine points out, close reading, deconstruction, historicism, critical race theory—seemingly the whole range of literary scholars—have “advocated quite fiercely for the value of the detail.” Literary studies has long valued detail’s capacity to destabilize our settled practices of thought and habits of reading. But Levine also reminds us that in all matters of scale, the small can emerge only in relation to the large and vice versa; the significant detail cannot be read as such unless it is read against larger structures. Levine argues not only for attending to the luminous

detail but for tracking patterns as part of “close and contextual reading” and for the importance of structuralism as a methodology that can bridge the gap between the fine-grained analyses of the humanities and the larger and more abstract concerns of the STEM fields. Spitzer makes a related argument when she observes how the meaning of *detail* changes when used as a noun or as a verb: “In Woolf’s fiction, details act like both parts of speech, something minor and easily overlooked that also sharpens our attention to the bigger picture, by acting as a trigger to consciousness.” Both Spitzer and Levine suggest that the detail is never static but always in motion, dynamic, and relational.

And so, far from fixed objects—a barometer in a drawing room, as Barthes would have it, or a footprint at a Sherlock Holmes crime scene—details turn out to be the products of reading practices and modes of attention, which have shifted over the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Our habits of attention have not only evolved in the realm of professional literary criticism but been profoundly transformed in our everyday lives, shaped by the growth of information economies, in which digital technologies compete for ever-dwindling attention spans, and by the development of mass media into twenty-four-hour news cycles that ceaselessly document instances of police brutality in the United States and publish daily counts of COVID cases and deaths. As our reading practices and habits of attention (and inattention) have altered, so has our relationship to the detail. But across periods and contexts, the detail always poses a set of questions about what matters: What is minor and small as opposed to essential and grand? What is particular rather than universal, an aside rather than a plotted necessity? Which modes of attention will move us to important conclusions or destinations, and which will lose us in the trees, unable to see the forest? The answer, this special issue argues, can emerge only from a deliberate engagement with the detail as a literary and methodological problem.

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