

Introduction:

Big Novel Ambition without Apology

JAMES ZEIGLER

Genre's two-part series "Big, Ambitious Novels by Twenty-First-Century Women" investigates feminist literary maximalism. Concentrating on novels published over the past twenty years, we aim to counter the boys' club quality of the genre described as encyclopedic (Mendelson 1976a), mega- (Karl 1985; Letzler 2017), systems (LeClair 1989), modern epic (Moretti 1996), or maximalist (Ercolino 2014; Levey 2017). In addition to acknowledging women's doorstep novels of this kind—books long and dense with history lessons, metafictional play, and displays of information that exceed narrative utility in regard to plot, characterization, setting, or even reality effects—our interest is to explore and explain the resourcefulness of the form for addressing feminist concerns. Rather than presume to encapsulate those concerns here, I'll suggest that the articles on offer in this series proceed with distinct accounts of how their select "BANs" formulate narratives that inquire into the conditions and effects of sexism as well as the prospects of feminist redress and aspirations that may, as yet, be novel. Needless to say, these considerations intersect with other social concerns; capacity to imbricate may be the form's signature affordance.

Our title cites critic James Wood's (2000a) influential, contrarian review of Zadie Smith's *White Teeth*. Placing Smith's debut novel in the illustrious company of works by Thomas Pynchon, Salman Rushdie, Don DeLillo, and David Foster

Much of the work for this series of special issues coincided with several months of the COVID-19 pandemic that began in 2020. For their forbearance and creativity as we have contended with unusual challenges, I would like to thank coeditor Courtney Jacobs, the authors, several anonymous reviewers, and our partners in the journals division of Duke University Press.

Wallace, Wood complains about a “hardening” genre. The “big, ambitious novel,” he alleges, evades real feeling and authentic human character as a result of the “perpetual-motion machine” representation of a “glamorous congestion” of stories, characters, events, locations, and whatever else, interconnected across time and space through enigmatic purpose or maybe just awesome coincidence (41). Dizzying linkages and the inscrutability of causality spur Wood’s impatience and incite his verdict: “Life is never experienced with such fervid intensity of connectedness” (42). Moreover, “there is something essentially paranoid about the belief that everything is connected to everything else” (42). His uncharitable but prolific summation for this form of novel is “hysterical realism.” He contributed to this label’s currency by publishing versions of his review in at least four separate venues over four years, including in the *Guardian* newspaper a month after the 9/11 terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon.¹ In the wake of that violence, he insisted it had become even more important to convey moral seriousness with novels “about human beings” and to give up books that “bounce around in the false zaniness of hysterical realism.”²

I have twice taught a course with the same title as this *Genre* series.³ Designed for advanced undergraduate majors in literary and cultural studies or related fields, the course began each time with *White Teeth*. The students were asked to read the original version of Wood’s review in the *New Republic* only after they finished the novel. A session was dedicated to Wood’s argument in connection with the novel’s frenetic final scene. Bringing together the full ensemble of characters for an incident of slapstick, long-odds coincidence, the novel’s con-

1. Between the original review (2000a) and the version in the *Guardian* (2001), he published “Hysterical Realism” in *Prospect* (2000b). The original version was then reprinted as a chapter in *The Irresponsible Self* (2004). The recent *Serious Noticing: Selected Essays 1997–2019* (2019) also includes the original. In a review of this latest collection, Francis Mulhern (2021: 131–33) criticizes Wood’s complaint about “hysterical realism” for its naïve pretense of protecting characters from their authors and for his inattention to “historical actuality and possibility” (133).

2. Lee Konstantinou (2015: 170–73) demonstrates that Wood fails to recognize that Smith is a “postironist” who distinguishes her work with sincerity in place of the persistent, distancing irony and paranoia of canonical postmodern metafiction (e.g., by Pynchon or DeLillo).

3. I taught the course in spring 2018 and fall 2020 for between twenty and thirty students, a majority women. Each semester, we worked through just five BANs. In 2018, the primary texts were *White Teeth*, Sandra Cisneros’s *Caramelo*, Donna Tartt’s *The Goldfinch*, Rachel Kushner’s *The Flamethrowers*, and Ruth Ozeki’s *A Tale for the Time Being*. The second time I taught the course was during the COVID-19 pandemic. *The Goldfinch* was replaced with a DIY final unit for which students read a fifth BAN of their own choosing and then prepared a curriculum proposal to be considered for the next time the course is taught in 2022. Proposals in contention for inclusion and acknowledgment in the next syllabus recommend Chimamanda Adichie’s *Half of a Yellow Son*, Bernardine Evaristo’s *Girl, Woman, Other*, Maaza Mangiste’s *The Shadow King*, and Hanya Yanagihara’s *A Little Life*.

clusion is tailor-made, it would seem, to offend Wood's sensibilities. With the first class of students, my carefully orchestrated lesson failed to go as planned. Small groups were given responsibility for discrete topics that we would then synthesize into a reasonably complete rhetorical analysis of Wood's argument. However, the students tasked with developing a charitable rehearsal of his stance were having none of it. Groups directed to challenge his positions were also quickly diverted from their tasks. En masse the class spontaneously neglected my instructions. They were intent on talking immediately about their exasperation with his keyword "hysterical"; they wanted to voice their incredulity that the author could be unaware of its implications.

I had intended, of course, for us to talk eventually about the unsubtle connotations of the term: its Freudian baggage and its durable utility for gaslighting. And we would surely have addressed in due time the significance of Wood's taking the debut novel of a twenty-four-year-old Black woman as an opportunity to impugn a genre that he otherwise defines with books written exclusively by men. To be clear, he does express optimism about Smith's potential to rein in the aesthetic excess of *White Teeth*, to turn away from the worsening examples of Rushdie or Pynchon, because she is "very talented and still very young." However, the review includes no hint of recognition that the added value of her identity for his argument is to ease a stigma of femininity onto a whole category of novels, as if that were a conscionable strategy for dictating taste. The students were wise to this dynamic too, and they wanted to talk about it unencumbered by group assignments that didn't invite all of them to go knives out at the review's sexism. The session resembled the scenario novelist Lyn Steger Strong (2017) imagines in a personal essay about the gendering of emotions in the business of publishing: "In his 2000 *New Republic* essay, 'Human, all too Inhuman,' James Wood took down Zadie Smith for what he coined *White Teeth*'s 'Hysterical Realism.' Please gather all the women ever in a room and ask them what the word 'hysterical' is meant to mean. Except, in Wood's estimation, this hysteria had to do with being too smart, too intellectual, too ideological—not felt enough." With pithy indignation, Strong explains the review's unusual rendition of the familiar complaint that a woman isn't doing her feelings right.

Lesson plan abandoned, we had a great session. By the end, we even distinguished between the opportunism of Wood's argument and his inoffensive preference for realism with moderate plotting and naturalistic characterization. No one acceded to his choice of "hysterical," but several students admitted in the

end that they shared his preferences and agreed *White Teeth* was too much for the suspension of their disbelief. These students really didn't like the ending; others did. So we rescued from the review a useful discrimination between kinds of novels, and by the session's end we understood better the ways that Smith's big book has other aims than the expectations Wood invokes to appraise it.

A further irony of Wood's effort to delegitimize BANs with insinuations of femininity is that the academic reception of the genre has marked it as emphatically masculine. Two articles by Edward Mendelson (1976a, 1976b) are usually credited with introducing the designation "encyclopedic."⁴ For Mendelson (1976a: 1267), the encyclopedic novel captures uniquely the "whole social and linguistic range" of a national culture. Admitting that the limits of his expertise may neglect texts deserving of inclusion from outside the United States and particular countries in Europe, he claims to "know of only seven: Dante's *Commedia*, Rabelais' five books of Gargantua and Pantagruel, Cervantes' *Don Quixote*, Goethe's *Faust*, Melville's *Moby-Dick*, Joyce's *Ulysses*, and now, I believe, Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow*."

Mendelson's classification hinges on his distinction between the epic and the encyclopedic. Although similar in scale, the latter deal with "the ordinary present-day world around them instead of the heroic past" (1268). Each of his selections must contend, he explains, with a base of relevant knowledge too extensive for any individual to command it or any single text to encompass it. The aspiration to collect it all is like a regulative ideal, and the inevitable failure recorded in the narratives remarks on the impossibility of that ambition. Promiscuous borrowing from other recognizable genres—Mendelson refers to a partial list of eleven (1270)—and frequent reliance on synecdoche are signature techniques for incorporating evidence of the exhaustive knowledge proper to a national culture. With *Gravity's Rainbow*, Pynchon comes in for extra credit as the first "encyclopedist" of a "newly forming international culture" (1271–72). Mendelson regards these "rare" texts with equal esteem, but taking their measure by looking back from Pynchon's example means that his literary history is a tale of advancing modernity, including whatever disorientation or hazard that progress may entail. And while he does not mention the fact that his authors are

4. Benjamin Bergholtz (2020: 80) documents that Mendelson was preceded a year earlier by Robert Swigger's "Fictional Encyclopedism and the Cognitive Value of Literature" and argues that Northrop Frye's *Anatomy of Criticism* (1957) could also be regarded as precedent.

all men, he does explain matter-of-factly that their narratives cannot integrate “their women characters at any level more quotidian or humane than the levels of archetype and myth” because “they assert the claims of a grander imperium than love or the family” (1272). Mendelson’s articles have remained influential for scholarship about large-scale novels of information, but at the time he was writing they were also unexceptional in regard to gender. More plainly, he conveyed that encyclopedic narratives are men’s business; *Middlemarch* or *The Making of Americans* need not apply.

With a precious few exceptions,⁵ scholarship that follows Mendelson has continued to focus either exclusively or predominantly on work by white men. This has remained the case even as the historical parameters of the topic have shifted mainly to the decades following the Second World War. In *The Art of Excess*, Tom LeClair (1989: 29–30) attempts a quasisociological explanation for why his selection of systems novels that demonstrate “mastery” includes only Ursula K. Le Guin’s *Always Coming Home* along with seven works by white men: “Are the criteria inherently prejudicial? Inasmuch as women and members of ethnic minorities have often been deprived of full participation in American life, the writers who have emerged from these groups have certainly not had the white male’s luxury of examining the whole of American or multinational culture from within, from the perspective of full membership.” Marginalization is grounds for further exclusion on the tendentious claim that advantages are enlightening.⁶

More recent monographs on the genre have remained surprisingly close to LeClair on this untenable point. Stefano Ercolino (2014: 9–10) cites the same passage and offers a resigned, “this can be debated of course, but it is probably true.” David Letzler (2017: 26) acknowledges that “as was LeClair in composing

5. Mark McGurl (2009: 297–305) presents Joyce Carol Oates as an exemplar of postwar literary maximalism, which he describes on the other side of a spectrum from the minimalist style of fiction that adheres more comfortably to the norms of craft at home in MFA programs. He also refers to the “interpretive perpetual motion machine” of Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* (346–47). Paul K. Saint-Amour (2015: 189) finds precedent in Virginia Woolf to inform his “dichotomous treatment” of epic and encyclopedic modernist writings of the twentieth century’s perpetual interwar conditions. He demonstrates that Mendelson, in spite of his intentions, ultimately conflates epic and encyclopedic, in part, by attributing “quasi-messianic status . . . to the (lone, male) encyclopedic author whom such a nation ‘produces’ at a certain point in its individuation” (205). Paul Crosthwaite (2019: 153) notes Leslie Marmon Silko, Karen Tei Yamashita, and Zadie Smith “have made important steps toward redrafting” the “admission criteria” for the “overwhelmingly male (more specifically white male . . .) grouping.”

6. For an illustration of the problem with this rationale, see Patricia Stuelke’s article in this issue for her discussion of the favorite novel of Amazon founding CEO Jeff Bezos.

his own guide to mega-novels, I have been asked several times about how gender relates to this genre.” He then wishes he had “something rigorous and interesting to say” on the lack of representation of works by women and concludes “the literary world would probably benefit from a few more excellent mega-novels by female authors.” Isolating these disclaimers does not represent adequately the substantive arguments of these articles and books, but this pattern of masculine bias is significant. I’ve presented it in distinction to Wood’s willful attempt to feminize the genre, which mentions none of this longstanding academic discussion. More significantly, the lineage of recognition for masculine encyclopedic narratives, like the star critic’s polemic against feminine hysterics, represents missed opportunities to acknowledge untold examples of BANs by women.

Published responses to Wood’s review usually do not address sexism. Strong’s blunt retort is an exception. One telling example of how the dissemination of “hysterical realism” was abetted by an absence of objections to sexism is an editorial from the journal *n+1*. The lead piece in its inaugural issue, “Designated Haters” (*n+1* 2004) targets the book review section of the *New Republic* for its “wholly negative” approach. The editors upbraid the taste-making establishment magazine for dedicating its reviews section to mean-spirited takedowns. Getting their own licks in, the editors refer to “Poor James Wood,” calling his tastes old-fashioned and conservative with this metaphor: “he seemed to want to be his own grandfather” (5). Having gone that far with an impression of masculine obsolescence, why not add that in one of his best-known essays Wood sought to close down a whole genre the first time he noticed a woman on the premises?⁷

Wood (2005b) gifted the then upstart *n+1* an essay in reply, which appeared in the third issue. He includes a note of welcome to the new journal, but his main points are that the editorial’s entirely negative complaint about his negativity failed to acknowledge his many positive reviews. And all his reviews, positive and negative, show books and authors the respect of taking them seriously. Unchallenged about sexism, Wood is able to present himself as a gentleman critic, gracious enough to answer *n+1* “despite the silliness of its words against me.” It’s

7. One of *n+1*’s founding editors, Mark Greif, later published an academic article in *boundary 2* connecting the history of the BAN form with a “death of the novel” discourse over the second half of the twentieth century. Bradley J. Fest notes in this issue that Greif (2009: 26) acknowledges that novels by women have been excluded from lists of representative texts but then only speculates if their omission results from fewer examples to consider or the failure to recognize work as contributions to the genre.

worth noting that his reply presents a brief on the “triple thinker” objectives of good criticism, which includes bending “this criticism back toward the academy in the hope of influencing the kind of writing that is done there.” His statement of purpose makes it harder to imagine that Wood did not realize his case against “hysterical realism” ignored the genre’s academic reputation for masculinity.

Published in the *Guardian* a week after Wood linked his complaints to the cultural postmortem taking place over the terrorism on 9/11, Zadie Smith’s (2001) brief personal essay in reply treats seriously and literally the question in his headline: “Tell me how does it feel?” Considering his charge that her novel and others like it fail at the plausible representation of human emotions, this question phrased as an imperative might be taken as rhetorical or accusatory. Did he—or a *Guardian* headline writer—mean to suggest that anticipation of a tragedy such as the 9/11 attack had motivated his original appeal for moral seriousness in novels? The subheading encourages the inference: “US novelists must now abandon social and theoretical glitter, says James Wood,” with the “must now” adding another command that implies he knew better already; immediate conversions to his insight, however necessary, will be belated.

For her part, Smith does not call out the told-you-so attitude of the headline, nor does she bother with instructions on avoiding sexist clichés. Starting with the direct and unadorned title, “This Is How It Feels to Me,” she delivers sincere and emotional testimony about loss, hurt, confusion, and writer’s block in the aftermath of all-too-real terrorist violence that a month on remained uneasy to imagine even as it looped endlessly on television. In other words, she characterizes herself with the kind of rounded introspection and identifiable real-world ambivalence that Wood finds so wanting in the characters of *White Teeth*.

Her essay has been treated too readily as a concession to his criticisms (Staiger 2008: 638). Smith (2001) does accept the “painful” accuracy of “hysterical realism” to describe her “manic prose,” and she acknowledges agreeing with Wood “several times before, in public and in private.” She is conciliatory about sharing his dedication to “not a division of head and heart, but the useful employment of both” in novels. And she pokes fun at the inclinations of her own fiction, offering the assurance that she is not plotting “a 700-page generational saga set on an incorporated McDonald’s island north of Tonga.” Despite this self-deprecating line, the essay rejects his discrimination between the unfeeling artifice of BANs and fictions populated by “fully human” characters (Wood 2000a: 43). Forecasting her argument on the topic of fiction and feelings, Smith

(2001) follows her agreement about her “hysterical” prose with a quick qualification: “these are hysterical times.” Much of the essay then reflects on the way her own bad feelings—“CNN-related fear and loathing mixed with eyeballing my own resolutely white screen,” she writes—have her doing a lot of reading and very little writing. Ranging through the authors, genres, and styles that appeal to her mixed-feelings and varying needs, she fills in her claim that “literature is—or should be—a broad church.” Expelling BANs would not be ecumenical, and she doubts that Wood would sincerely prefer a “literary landscape” without *Midnight’s Children* or *White Noise*.

Embedded in the first half of her brief essay is a lesson on BANs. Given the circumstances at the time, she understands “the last thing people want is the encyclopaedic.” Still, she recalls Pynchon’s influence:

I cannot be the only writer who took to heart Pynchon’s call to arms in *Gravity’s Rainbow*, many years ago now: “We have to look for power sources here, and distribution networks we were never taught, routes of power sources here, and were encouraged to avoid . . . We have to find meters whose scales are unknown in the world. Draw our own schematics, getting feedback, making connections, reducing the error, trying to learn the real function . . . zeroing in on what incalculable plot?”

Such compulsory investigation hazards the kind of paranoia that passes right by satisfactory explanations with unrelenting suspicion, but the project of causal analysis sketched here isn’t in itself “hysterical.”

Smith rehearses Pynchon’s injunction to investigate down to the roots as if she might be setting it aside. After all, the intricate, conspiratorial plots now seem to come down, she writes, to simple “things like faith. Revenge. Poverty. God. Hatred. So what now?” Before she answers, she poses more questions that revert to the kind of geopolitical complexity alluded to by Pynchon:

Does anyone want to know the networks behind those seeming simplicities, the paths that lead from September 11 back to Saudi Arabia and Palestine, and then back to Israel, back further to the second world war, back once more to the first? Does anyone care what writers think about that? Does it help? Or shall we sing of drawing rooms and earth and children and all that is small and furry and wounded? Must we produce what you want, anyway? I have absolutely no idea.

Something of the difference between Smith’s *White Teeth* and Pynchon’s *Gravity’s Rainbow* is available in the juxtaposition of these passages. The encyclopedic impulse is legible in both quotations. But Pynchon’s drive to “zero in” on an explanation of causality that may not be attainable is delivered in imperatives. His necessity is her possibility. Folded into multiple layers of uncertainty, Smith’s

succession of questions sketches a legible path of inquiry with all the makings of a big, thinky novel, if a writer were up for it. Her uncertainty does not undermine the validity of the questions; instead, she doubts their efficacy and appeal, and then she admits not knowing whether those doubts should even matter.

Posing good questions, she suggests that writing (or reading) another BAN could be a means to investigate and reckon with those questions, to come to knowledge of them that is distinct yet complementary to other modes of knowing.⁸ Making no promises about the forms her own writing will take, she pledges in this essay to carry on as she can. And however she decides to pursue “the future possibility of some words appearing on pages that will be equal to these times and to what I feel and what you feel and what James Wood feels,” she includes the prospect of the BAN for its capacity to record, teach, and reckon with ordinarily imperceptible or otherwise occluded conditions and networks that may be held responsible for circumstances that engender powerful feelings. This *Genre* series of special issues on BANs by women is in recognition of the impressive volume of work of that kind that has followed in the years since Smith refused the suggestion that she moderate such ambitions.

We did not set out for this series to address the ongoing debate over methods in literary studies. In recent years, a dispute has coalesced loosely into a conflict coordinated by the key terms: “posteritique” and “critique” (Anker and Felski 2017: 1–3). Our call for proposals included no mention of upbeat postcritical alternatives to the hermeneutics of suspicion. Nor did we appeal, on the other side, for our interest in an encyclopedic tendency in novels by women to be validated by symptomatic analyses that reveal the underlying political conditions that animate the genre. Methods of interpretation by whatever name went unmentioned. Our understatement was meant to convey an inviting critical pluralism, but it might have also implied that metacritical reflections on the discipline’s tenets and norms could simply wait for other occasions. With our topic, contributors were already going to have plenty to occupy their attention.

One of the pleasures of learning from the articles in this issue as they advanced from proposals to proofs was deciding that they do have a place in the current debate. These articles present *generous readings*, which Timothy

8. Presenting Smith’s (2008) later essay “Two Paths for the Novel” as an indirect but adamant rebuttal of Wood’s allegations about so-called hysterical realism, Christopher Holmes (2013: 145) develops a generous reading of *White Teeth* as a novel-to-think-with.

Bewes (2010) has formulated by reversing a trope that is a virtual (but vague) axiom in literary studies. Rather than aiming for the counterintuitive “against,” his “Reading with the Grain” proposes that suspicion be replaced by “a reading that suspends judgment, that commits itself, rather, to the *most generous reading possible*.” Rita Felski (2015: 172) cites this passage with approval, using it to indicate that a “number of critics are now casting around for alternatives to the fault-finding mentality of critique.” She’s right that his argument is premised on conceiving of interpretation—of a practice of “reading”—that does not presuppose the literary text to be a site of symptoms to diagnose. His essay opens with the objective of determining “what it might be to read literature” after the symptom is no longer a guiding figure of the discipline’s approach to interpretation. However, his stake in the reading debates is also to rejuvenate critique and to retain it as a core priority for literary studies. I won’t attempt to rehearse the elaborate path of his argument here, but as a prelude to the articles collected in this issue I’ll borrow his recommendation that a most generous reading seeks to acknowledge and to amplify in writing the ways in which a literary text is already an exercise of critique. The following, I hope, generous descriptions of this issue’s contents will help to illustrate my meaning.

Maaheen Ahmed and Shiamin Kwa’s “‘Kill the Monster!’: *My Favorite Thing Is Monsters* and the Big, Ambitious (Graphic) Novel” offers an admiring account of the first volume of Emil Ferris’s two-part comic book. At the center of the story is a girl-detective who is investigating the mysterious death of her neighbor. Growing up with her adult brother and single mother in a multiethnic working-class urban neighborhood of Chicago in the late 1960s, the girl, Karen Reyes, is queer, Latina, and a precocious illustrator. We follow the investigation as Karen draws it in a child’s lined composition notebook; she portrays herself as a girl werewolf. Ahmed and Kwa exhibit the ways the interplay of multiple genres in combination with interlinked visual elements arrayed across the text involve us in piecing together the circumstances of Karen’s emotional life. The narrative of her subjectivity is a vehicle for a critique of the complex of social norms and institutional settings that make it disproportionately difficult for someone like her to grow up safe and secure. When the investigation discovers the traumatic backstory of a pedophile ring protected by military officials in Nazi Germany, the threats to Karen in the present resonate with a fictional history lesson about the realities of rapacious white ethnic nationalism. Key to Ahmed and Kwa’s presentation throughout is their attention to the signature style with which Ferris

illustrates the notebook. With colored ballpoint pens, she emulates cover art for grotesque horror comics and replicates impressively several canonical paintings from the collection of the Art Institute of Chicago. Spectacular juxtapositions of popular and elite visual culture contribute to this graphic novel's advocacy for the capacity of its medium to go big with history and to draw connections in a book that, they conclude, "teems over with feeling."

Patricia Stuelke's "Writing Refugee Crisis in the Age of Amazon: *Lost Children Archive's* Reenactment Play" teaches how Valeria Luiselli's fourth novel reveals that the cruelty of the United States' border policy separating undocumented immigrant parents from their minor children is an extension of settler colonial ideologies that were tacitly endorsed in the traditional "American road novel" (e.g., Kerouac's *On the Road*). Breaking from that legacy, *Lost Children Archive* attempts to "imagine anti-imperialist solidarity aesthetics" that are contrary to the surveillance regime that dominates the US-Mexico border. These aesthetics also aim to be more searching than the overmatched organization of humanitarian relief that struggles against the Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) agency's efforts to avoid accountability for violating human rights. At the center of the narrative is a family of four US citizens—Ma, Papa, the boy, the girl—who travel to the border region from New York City to look for a friend's missing children and to conduct research. Respectively, a documentarian interested in Apache history and a documentarist concerned about border officials' treatment of children, the father and mother collect information and sound recordings as their children learn to playact their subject matter. Following Lauren Berlant's observations about how genres "flail" when their conventional features prove to be inadequate for the meaningful representation of emerging and overwhelming historical conditions, Stuelke explains that Luiselli works through this difficulty by crafting "a novel that explicitly styles itself as an archive, and exposes novel-writing as a curatorial practice of research and imagination." With her discussion of the archive novel's admittedly partial but specialized collection of information, Stuelke shows that Luiselli's concern for the misuse of data is especially discerning about Homeland Security's efforts, in partnership with Amazon, to build encyclopedic databases that facilitate the rapid criminalization of massive populations of undocumented immigrants and noncitizen residents.

Katarzyna Bartoszyńska's "Two Paths for the Big Book: Olga Tokarczuk's *Shifting Voice*" follows the Nobel prize-winning author's innovations with free indirect discourse through two novels devoted impressively to worldmaking: *Bie-*

guni (Flights) and *Księgi Jakubowe (Books of Jacob)*. Drawing on Susan Lanser's delineation of authorial, personal, and communal voice, Bartoszyńska shows that each novel addresses the epistemological challenge of representing a whole world in excess of the story's immediate settings but from multiple, differing perspectives. In these texts, balancing the authoritative coherence of the storyworld and a plurality of attitudes about the shape or character of that world is recognizably an ethical concern. The traveling narrator of *Bieguni (Flights)* is a collector of stories, hers and other people's. Bartoszyńska guides us through how the first-person narration established in the novel's initial episodes alternately retreats and returns over the course of the book to give voice to other characters' views and experiences through free indirect discourse in which the source of knowledge "hovers somewhere between narrator and character." Less frequently but significantly, the text attributes the perspective to "we" or "us." Bartoszyńska argues that the effort in *Bieguni (Flights)* to "transcend" a first-person "authorial" view in order to provide a more communal voice is taken up again with more daring and success in *Księgi Jakubowe (Books of Jacob)*. Taking place in the second half of the eighteenth century, this historical fiction recounts the rise of the "legendary Polish Jew" Jacob Frank, whose true story is a vehicle for Tokarczuk's portrayal, Bartoszyńska writes, of a "Poland that is multiethnic, multicultural, and fraught with interreligious conflict." Indicating that the novel may be read as a confrontation with the "myopic nationalism" resurgent in Poland's political culture, Bartoszyńska focuses on the formal complexity of Tokarczuk's unusual third person noncharacter narration. Too inconsistent to "suggest a single narrator figure," the narration voices a communal perspective not through a representative spokesperson, a royal "we," nor a succession of individuals narrating in turn. Instead, Tokarczuk's use of free indirect discourse affords us intimate knowledge of particular characters while also registering an ongoing commentary that emanates from indeterminate sources that are, at points, antithetical to each other but of a shared world.

Building on her recent *Story of "Me": Contemporary American Autofiction*, Marjorie Worthington's "'We'll Make Magic': Zen Writers and Autofictional Readers in *A Tale for the Time Being*" credits Ruth Ozeki with bringing the historiographic commitments and worldly span of a BAN together with autofiction's self-referential and introspective qualities. *Tale* is, she writes, "a unique example of autofiction, in which the author-character 'Ruth' is the secondary protagonist rendered in the third person in service of the first person of Nao." Nao is the teen-

age author of a diary that has washed ashore on an island near Vancouver, British Columbia, where a novelist, “Ruth,” lives with her husband, an artist named Oliver. The details of Ruth’s biography in the novel are virtually identical to those of Ozeki’s real life. Most of the novel alternates between chapters presented as excerpts from Nao’s first-person diary and chapters focused on Ruth’s experiences during the time she is reading the diary a single entry per day. Relative to typical autofictions, Worthington finds it unusual that the author-character is not the principal agent of the narrative. Nao’s command of the narrative as a first-person narrator shows through her engaging use of direct address, telling “you” how to read and who to be in order to match her expectations for her reader. As the novel progresses, Ruth becomes more invested in learning the identity of Nao and other members of her family, especially her suicidal father. She is intent on discovering whether Nao survived her own suicidal ideation. If so, did she then perish in the tsunami in 2011 that caused the meltdown of a nuclear reactor in Fukushima and may have propelled the diary and other items of Nao’s across the Pacific Ocean? This quality of concern across an impossible span of time—the diary was written at least ten years prior to Ruth’s reading it—is eventually amplified by magical happenings in the plot. Lending Nao imperceptible but vital assistance, Ruth’s supernatural participation in writing the conclusion of the diary is, in Worthington’s account, a model of self-effacing generosity animated by an openness to the kinds of global interconnection that are becoming all too obvious as a consequence of climate change.

Siân White’s “A ‘Hair-Trigger Society’ and the Woman Who Felt Something in Anna Burns’s *Milkman*” acknowledges that Burns’s novel achieves a BAN’s critical appraisal of complex, oversized social conditions through the atypical vehicle of a single character narrator. Although the narrative involves the history of the Troubles during the 1970s in Belfast, Northern Ireland, the narrator “middle sister” concentrates her storytelling on several weeks in which she was subjected to unwanted sexual advances and harassment by the violent paramilitary title character, “milkman.” Colonial history, internecine conflict, and political violence are significant but appear to be indirect influences in a narrative immersed in interpersonal dynamics between a limited cast of characters in the confines of a neighborhood. Important to White’s argument is the gap in time between the telling of the story and the events themselves, decades earlier. Overlooked in reviews that characterize middle sister incorrectly as still a teen, the discrepancy in time between the telling and the told is instrumental for a double significance

to be conveyed by the digressive quality of the narration. White explains, “Middle sister’s digressive narration both conveys her fear and bewilderment at the time and calls attention to the present act of telling.” In the present, middle sister communicates just enough distance from the time of milkman’s stalking her that her disorientation and helpless feelings at the time can be read as evidence of the sexist norms that discounted the seriousness of milkman’s predatory actions toward her. The novel’s digressiveness connects it with the epistemological concerns and aspirations of the encyclopedic novel. While the digressions capture fear in the past and signal the persistence of her trauma in the present, they also “signal the volume of underlying information and the pressure she feels to explain the context.” And they do so with content that exposes unconscionable violence but without the unnuanced “righteous certainty” of know-it-all masculinism that enjoys too often an exemption from criticism, especially in scenarios of reaction to violence with more violence.

Bradley Fest’s “‘Is an Archive Enough?’: Megatextual Debris in the Work of Rachel Blau DuPlessis” is a friendly amendment to this issue’s proposed readings of BANs. His topic is the poetry of Rachel Blau DuPlessis, especially the serial project *Drafts* which was published over twenty-six years in five volumes totaling more than one thousand pages. Recommending a comparative approach to multiple genres and media of “too big to read” *megatexts* that have been enabled in recent decades by digital technologies, Fest offers a particular reading of the way DuPlessis’s *Drafts* and related works are documentary “salvage” operations to contend against both the overwhelming presentation of information by electronic media as well as the trivialization of any data inaccessible to financialization. As other scholars have observed, DuPlessis’s collage poems reanimate cultural “debris” to recover and relate histories that have been neglected or erased from public recognition. Fest amplifies those responses but emphasizes his complementary interest in reading DuPlessis’s works for their ongoing engagement with contemporary events that are bound up in the “hyperarchivalism” of big data accumulation and the regulation of social life by algorithms. As she encounters such conditions with her own impressive volume of material, she arranges her selections to convey feminist resistance to the persistence of “patriarchal power” in “hyperarchival times.”

James Zeigler is general editor of *Genre* and associate professor of English at the University of Oklahoma. He is the author of *Red Scare Racism and Cold War Black Radicalism* (2015).

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