

A Threat To The Known: The Unknown Descendants Of Print Culture

Hypertext fiction, a popular form of electronic literature, embraces the margins which experimental authors have explored in fresh and avant garde forms. There is no fixed center or boundaries in hypertext fiction. Readers are empowered through the choice of clicking various links on a page, organizing their own version of the plot as they continue to click forward or backward. Many works of electronic literature not only deny closure, but actively embrace the lack of it in their work. Hypertext fiction raises many questions about literature that can be examined more carefully through a reader's discourse with the genre. An important distinction between print and electronic literature is that electronic literature, the larger genre which encompasses hypertext fiction, is 'digital born' and "usually meant to be read on a computer" unlike print literature that has been adapted to the computer such as the Project Gutenberg website (Hayles 3). Therefore, the annotated edition of Mary Rowlandson's *The Sovereignty & Goodness Of God* which Dr. Deborah Gussman's Literary Research class created in the fall of 2005 is not a piece of electronic literature. For this discussion, the most suitable definition comes from Matthew Kirschenbaum, an associate professor at the University of Maryland and associate director of the Maryland Institute For Technology In The Humanities, who defines electronic literature as "Poetry, fiction, or other literary work that depends on the distinctive behavioral, visual, or material properties of computers, computer networks, and code for its composition, execution, and reception" (What is Electronic Literature?).

Hypertext fiction raises many questions about literature that can be examined more carefully through a reader's discourse with the genre. Reading hypertext fiction improved by readings of previously read authors like William Faulkner, Virginia Woolf, and David Foster

Wallace by opening up my mind to different ways in which to engage with complicated works of literature. In modern classrooms, there is often little time for non-conventional texts. However, I think the time spent with electronic literature in general is well spent. With that in mind, in regards to literary studies, electronic literature can greatly aid classroom discussion of both canonical and theoretical concerns. Hypertext fiction emphasizes the borders and layers of a text which can bring about new approaches and methods for close reading. The genre also aids in discussion of contemporary literary theory such as semiotics and feminist concerns. The experience itself of reading and interacting with hypertext fiction is worth it just for the changes it can bring about to how a reader reads.

In the preface to the second edition of Terry Eagleton's *Literary Theory: An Introduction*, he announces that his book wants to make “modern literary theory intelligible and attractive to as wide a readership as possible.” (vii) Theorists like George Landow and authors like The Unknown Collective, according to Nikolaj Fournaise Jensen, have tried to make hypertext fiction accessible to both the expert and layman. Jensen argues in his own work that a goal for electronic literature should be to design their work so that it can be accessible and alluring for a more mainstream audience. Eagleton notes the very complex changes that have occurred in how literature is defined in the last half century. New criticism, structuralism, post structuralism, deconstruction, and other theories have come along to keep literature's definition in a state of constant fluidity. The examination of electronic literature further continues this discourse through its association by Landow and others, whether deserved or not, with deconstruction and theorists like Roland Barthes, Michel Foucault, and Jacques Derrida. I find myself in agreement with most of what Eagleton defines as literature and believe hypertext fiction also fulfills these

qualities. Hypertext fiction uses language in very “peculiar ways” and moves away from common language through hyperlinked lexias and other electronic mediums that take language into a new space for examination and exploration (2). However, it also fulfills his concept of “literariness” through use of common language and metaphor in those specialized fields. The two primary works of hypertext fiction I will be focusing on certainly fulfill Eagleton's concept. The Unknown Collective's *The Unknown* uses the trope of a fictional book tour to explore both fictional and theoretical issues. Caitlin Fisher's *These Waves Of Girls* explores feminist and queer concerns by using a fictional memoir of the protagonist's sexual coming of age for readers to read and click through.

While other works of hypertext fiction have been criticized by Jensen and other critics for their high brow, theory laden abrasiveness, both *The Unknown* and *These Waves Of Girls* are straight forward enough to be appreciated as works of advanced critical engagement and as interesting works of fiction in and of themselves. The works that Jensen criticizes are similar to what Eagleton refers to in his discussion of reading George Orwell's essays more for their style than content; a lot of early hypertext fiction, particularly before the World Wide Web, is known for taking “the medium is the message” quite literally. They are theoretically pregnant and have been argued by many to have little to no plot or structure.

The idea of hypertext goes back a few generations into the middle part of the previous century. In 1965, Ted Nelson coined the term “hypertext.” By the term hypertext, he is referring to nonlinear writing which gives agency to readers. This text should be viewed on a screen in small blocks of words that offer readers multiple directions in which to move along the work. This is what Barthes refers to as a lexia in his essay *S/Z*. According to Barthes, a lexia “will

include sometimes a few words, sometimes several sentences” (13). Hypertext denotes texts composed of blocks of text and the electronic links that join them.

*Dracula*, by Bram Stoker, defies the conventional approach which many of his contemporaries took by emphasizing the points of view of several protagonists, creating a more fluid, nonlinear, world. *Dracula* switches between letters, journals, and other forms of communication. Point of view also switches between the protagonists in a variety of settings. The protagonists of *Dracula* are almost defeated by their adversary in part due to their lack of access to their companion's correspondence at all times, such as Mina's lack of access to all of the information she needs to put together what is happening in the novel.

A popular example of hypertext fiction is The Unknown Collective's, a group of hypertext authors and theorists, *The Unknown*. *The Unknown* is a networked hypertext fiction written collaboratively over a number of years. During the time the authors, three primaries plus a number of guests, wrote pages and pages of lexias filled with links to both more lexias and audio recordings. This hypertext fiction changed and grew, over the years as the authors and their friends added to the narrative until its completion in 2001. Due to their visibility on the World Wide Web, readers were able to read along and follow any changes to lexias. This avant garde fluidity is one of the most distinguishable characteristics of hypertext fiction on the World Wide Web.<sup>1</sup>

*These Waves Of Girls*, by Canadian academic Caitlin Fisher, is an excellent template for looking at how portions of the text can be emphasized with hypertext fiction. The already fluid

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<sup>1</sup>Dr. Scott Rettberg, a member of The Unknown Collective, writes extensively about the relation between electronic literature and the avant garde, specifically the Dada movement, in *Dada Redux: Elements Of Dadaist Practice In Contemporary Electronic Literature*.

and disorderly world of *Dracula* can be further examined by looking at Fisher's memoir of lesbian coming of age and sexual evolution, which is told in multiple time periods using a stream of consciousness approach. The set up of *These Waves Of Girls* will serve as a way to closely examine the ways in which hypertext can enrich the novel. In hypertext fiction, the reader has privileged access to the entirety of the work within a few clicks. The lack of coordinated real time knowledge in the novel also impedes readers of Stoker from creating a more fully realized, layered, narrative world. By documenting how *Dracula* is similar to hypertext, using *These Waves Of Girls* as a model, the partiality of representation which any novel offers can be furthered emphasized, tearing down more of the curtain standing in front of linear worlds.

Depending on how the reader engaging with a work of hypertext fiction, each visit births a new version of the text. This disruption to typical reading habits can be extremely jarring at first. *Dracula* itself is already an unruly, nonlinear, novel whose attributes can only be emphasized by hypertext. When I began reading hypertext fiction about five years ago, I found myself drawn to details I would not have followed or noticed previously in my close readings of novels. Not only did this greatly accelerate my learning curve when engaging with electronic literature, but the way I read novels in print also evolved. The reader, by personalizing how the text is “written” as they click on various links of their own agency, decides on their own focus.

Hypertext fiction is simply another, newer, technology for reading and writing. Neither print nor electronic literature is better or worse or weirder. Each is unique, wonderful, and engaging. Hypertext breathes new life into print literature, becoming an interactive environment where reader agency, not just passive holding of a book, is emphasized. Many critics involved with semiotics, critical theory, and new media studies are already arguing that texts are unruly

and very disobedient to constraints. Linearity need not be staked by some sort of Codex Slayer, but just made into another potential option for literature. The discourse about past print literature can only be enriched by looking at it through electronic literature's lenses.

Bram Stoker's recently canonical Victorian novel *Dracula*, shares with other Victorian novels an explication through a variety of documents. Stoker's novel is presented to the reader via character diaries, telegrams and letters between various protagonists, and newspaper clippings and other forms of contemporary media like journal entries. Instead of approaching the epistolary novel as his contemporaries often did, Stoker changes the narrative form, creating a more fluid, nonlinear, world.

*Dracula* offers an interesting narrative premise: there are several first person perspectives and no central narrator. As soon as the reader is comfortable with one perspective, the narrative shifts to another narrator and, often, time or form. This switch can be rather jarring as the novel moves between journals, letters, and telegraphs and moves backwards and forwards through a given set of months. The switching between perspectives also allows for different versions of the same events to rise to the surface of the narrative world. Readers are not stuck with one version of an event because they are seeing in real time what the characters do not. Their lack of access of everyone else's journals and letters does not allow them to come to conclusions about the horrors which they face until much after the reader most likely has done.

Many of *Dracula's* protagonists also eagerly embrace technology to record their writing. Dr. Seward uses a phonograph to record his journal entries from the insane asylum. Mina Murray (Harker)'s journal entries and letters to her friend Lucy, and others, are created on a typewriter. So that she can be more "useful" to her fiancé, Jonathan Harker, Mina learns how to

use a typewriter and decipher and write shorthand (53). Jonathan writes in shorthand for Mina to translate when she receives his notes and journals. Her own journal is a document of her times with Lucy before their marriages and a chronicle of concerns about her fiancé's travels.

The shifting forms also change how the novel can be interpreted as readers traverse it. Examining chapters four, five, and six, a bit closer will show how the form of the novel affects how readers interpret it as they try to create a more coherent narrative world in their minds. In these chapters, readers are given a number of different forms. Chapter four chronicles the finale of Jonathan Harker's journals from his time as a guest of Count Dracula. Chapter five involves the private letters between Lucy and Mina, where readers discover that something is beginning to change in Lucy. Chapter six returns to the journal form, this time involving Mina instead of her fiancé and Dr. Seward from the insane asylum, who offers similar rationalizations for what he is encountering with Renfield.

Harker's journals of his time in *Dracula's* castle offer a real time document of his time there. He is recording his experiences to organize his thoughts as he confronts what he is realizing is a prison with no escape. Jonathan's evidence about his situation attempts to counter the strangeness he keeps encountering, as his secular, modern, mind cannot fully fathom *Dracula*. The castle is a frightening relic of the old world. Jonathan describes it as a "veritable prison" in his journal and, in a rather paranoid tone, comments on the mass of locked and bolted doors which surround him in all parts of the castle (27).

At the beginning of chapter four, after surviving an attack by the Brides Of Dracula, he tries to resolve in his own mind what had happened the night before:

I awoke in my own bed. If it be that I had not dreamt, the Count must have carried

me here. I tried to satisfy myself on the subject, but could not arrive at any unquestionable result. To be sure, there were certain small evidences, such as that my clothes were folded and laid by in a manner which was not my habit. (40)

Here, he gives specific details about his situation. If he did not dream, *Dracula* must have brought him there. He tries to prove this by citing the manner in which his clothes are laid out. Still, he can come to no “unquestionable” conclusion about what had happened the night before (40). A few entries later, Jonathan continues to give little details which contemporary readers, a hundred years past this novel's publication, will pick up on that he is slow to piece together. He describes the Count:

There lay the Count, but looking as if his youth had been half restored. For the white hair and moustache were changed to dark iron-grey. The cheeks were fuller, and the white skin seemed ruby-red underneath. The mouth was redder than ever, for on the lips were goutts of fresh blood, which trickled from the corners of the mouth and ran down over the chin and neck. (50)

These crumbs of detail are given to set up later portions of the novel. They also serve to show how the characters look to logic and secular explanations foremost to explain any their concerns. Later in the novel Mina is also guilty of this when she first sees *Dracula's* eyes, thinking they are an optical illusion. All of this is delayed until later, but readers should be able to piece together this nightmarish puzzle pretty quickly.

At this early point in the novel, however, readers may be just as puzzled as the protagonists. Chapter four ends with Jonathan determined that he is about to die at the hands of *Dracula*. Before readers can see this, in a very cinematic twist, the journal cuts off and

suspensefully ends. This leads to chapter five, which chronicles a series of letters between Mina and Lucy. This chapter is a rather sharp contrast to the one before it. Their letters focus on domestic and feminine concerns such as their impending marriages and Lucy's gradual change from chaste Victorian girl to a much more highly sexualized creature, foreshadowing later events in the novel.

Another change between the forms of journal and letter is the sort of communication which takes place. Jonathan is documenting his experiences for his own need to rationalize what is taking place in the castle. While he may address the journal to Mina, as he does on May 3<sup>rd</sup> in a memo to his fiancé asking her to research a recipe, or when he is determined that he is about to die at the end of chapter four, a series of letters are real communication between two people. It is a conversation, presumably, between only Mina and Lucy that is not intended for public consumption. These journals and letters offer a view of the private worlds in which the protagonists live in the novel. Readers are given privileged access to these private worlds to further discover clues to what is happening.

The character's analysis is always a step behind the narrative, struggling to keep up with the real time progression which the story's arc takes. It isn't until Van Helsing appears to offer answers, which readers have likely concluded long beforehand, that the characters catch up with the narrative's progression. Mina seals Jonathan's journals, "an outward and visible sign" of their trust in each other, which perhaps contain many of the answers they seek and does not open them until much later (103). Her faith in her husband deters her from opening the journals and finding out the truth. She puts her knowledge of shorthand, "which would puzzle the count," to use and deciphers and transcribes his writing, giving the journals to Van Helsing to verify their

contents (33). Until their knowledge catches up to the narrative, the protagonists of *Dracula* will not be able to defeat him. Despite their access to modern technology like phonographs, telegrams, and trains, none of the characters have the foresight to foresee events like Lucy's vampirism before it is much too late. Their lack of superstition and general impulse towards modernity cause them to not see the truth which is right in front of their eyes.

Chapter five chronicles a short series of letters between Mina and Lucy. These letters show the private thoughts of two Victorian young ladies who discuss domestic and feminine concerns with each other. The delays in information reception continue in this chapter as Mina is slow to write to Lucy, who writes another letter back to Mina in the meantime. In fact, in her May 9<sup>th</sup> letter, Mina apologizes for the delay in her correspondence. In her letter, Mina writes about herself. She comments again about being useful to Jonathan by learning shorthand. At another point in the letter, she declares that her own journal will be a personal journal that is useful as an “exercise” in tempering her writing skills (53). Her letter reads like a journal entry, commenting on her own experiences, actions, and motives. It isn't until the endnote where she finally asks about how Lucy is doing, hoping for a reply with the details of her current life.

In the meantime, Lucy writes a letter to Mina where she chides her friend for being a slow correspondent. While Mina writes as an “exercise” to better herself for her husband, Lucy uses these private confessionals to discuss relationships and her own sexuality in a frank manner. She mentions Dr. Seward from the insane asylum, who she is confident would make a good husband for Mina if Jonathan wasn't available. Suddenly, she changes direction and brings up, Arthur, her current love interest. She confesses her love to Mina:

There, it is all out, Mina, we have told all our secrets to each other since we were

children. We have slept together and eaten together, and laughed and cried together, and now, though I have spoken, I would like to speak more. Oh, Mina, couldn't you guess? I love him. I am blushing as I write, for although I think he loves me, he has not told me so in words. But, oh, Mina, I love him. I love him!

(54)

Lucy does not stop there, however. She admits to an arguably homosexual interest in “sitting by the fire undressing” with Mina (54). Her words keep coming, she wants to tear up her confession, but she also “do(es) want to tell” Mina everything (55). In the postscript to the letter, she makes sure to remind Mina that this is a *secret*. Again, readers have privileged information which other characters in the novel do not.

As Lucy begins to become more sexualized, Mina’s letter arrives. She writes another letter to her friend, thanking her for finally corresponding. There is still no interaction; even the reader does not see how Mina reacts to Lucy’s increased sexuality at this point in the novel. Lucy is changing, confessing to having received three marriage proposals in the same day, the final of which comes from Arthur, which she accepts. Curiously, she commands Mina to keep the amorous approaches of these men from everyone except for Jonathan:

You will tell him, because I would, if I were in your place, certainly tell Arthur. A woman ought to tell her husband everything. Don't you think so, dear? And I must be fair. Men like women, certainly their wives, to be quite as fair as they are. And women, I am afraid, are not always quite as fair as they should be. (55)

Lucy is practically begging Mina to inform her fiancé about how she is changing. By now, careful readers should be concerned about what is going on here. What is wrong with Lucy?

The line “women, I am afraid, are not always quite as fair as they should be,” reads like a red alarm warning that something is awry (55). Why is she telling Mina to keep things a secret in one letter, but then pleading almost for her to inform Jonathan in another? Her next confession to Mina, that women should be able to marry as many men as she desires, foreshadows her role as a hypersexualized vampire later in the novel. She stands in sharp contrast to Mina, a more plain and pure young woman whose lack or desire of access to all the information she requires continues to keep in the dark about what is really happening in the novel.

Chapter six begins with the first excerpts from Mina Murray’s journal. Whereas Jonathan’s journal is more concerned with empirical “facts” and documentation of his time in *Dracula*’s castle, his fiancé’s journals are significantly different. Mina’s journal shows a young woman who is independent, a hard worker, but also eager to learn new things like shorthand and typewriting to aid her future husband. However, she is also very chaste and innocent, as seen by her lack of understanding as to the real reason for Lucy’s vampirism until it is much too late.

Her journal is as serious as she previously stated it would be in her May 9<sup>th</sup> letter to Lucy. In the same letter, she decides that the contents won’t be that interesting to anyone else, “but it is not intended for them.” (53) At the beginning of the journal there is another time shift, this time to the end of July. Readers will be wondering what has happened since May 25<sup>th</sup> and are left in suspense as Mina casually documents her reunion with Lucy in Whitby. Like her fiancé, Mina is interested in documenting her experiences. On August 1<sup>st</sup> after Lucy charms her father, she notes her desire to document the “sort of sermon” he goes off about (63). Again, with both readers and Mina herself left out of the loop as to Jonathan’s fate, she comments in the same entry that there is still no letter from him.

The narrative then briefly switches to Dr. Seward's diary from the insane asylum. In it he chronicles the case of a man named Renfield, who is growing stranger by the day. Seward's diary takes place a month before, in June, and documents experiences in a similar manner to Jonathan's journals. On July 19<sup>th</sup>, he documents Renfield's sparrows, flies, and spiders that he has been collecting. The next morning, his journal takes on a similar approach to Jonathan's as he tries to rationalize away the disappearance of the birds, noting the remaining feathers and drops of blood on the man's pillow.

The placement of Dr. Seward's diary here is an example of Dracula's protagonists not having complete access to all of the information which would assist them in putting together what is happening in the novel. Renfield consumes living creatures and behaves in a rather strange manner. If Mina had access to both Dr. Seward's diary and her own accounts of Lucy's odd behavior she may have deciphered that something was wrong earlier than she does later in the novel. Readers of Dracula are given privileged access to this information well before the protagonists do, which gives them more crumbs of details that continue to set up later portions of the novel.

After Renfield's journal catches up to Mina's, the narrative returns to her on July 26<sup>th</sup> where she is happy to report a letter from Count *Dracula*, but deeply concerned that it is not written in his style. She is beginning to be more troubled and, conveniently, also mentions that Lucy is now taking up an old habit: sleep walking. This continues on and off, recorded again on August 6<sup>th</sup>. Mina is left in suspense, although getting more curious about the situation, in suspense. The reader, with more knowledge, continues to be a step ahead of the protagonists. She is behind because she does not have the complete access to all of the empirical data readers

have been given so far in the novel.

Careful readers will have figured out a lot of what is going on in the novel, especially one hundred years hence, but even the best close reader cannot create a fully realized, coherent, narrative world to emerge from their reading. The restrictions of print restrict readers to a self contained reading which cannot encompass the entire world. Unless a reader is willing to plot out the narrative in both chronological order and empirical information, a print copy of *Dracula* cannot suffice. These gaps do create suspense for readers, but as the characters in the novel are held back by their lack of coordinated real time information, this version of it also restricts readers.

The shifts in form in chapters four, five, and six of *Dracula* affect how readers will create a coherent narrative world in their minds. Each chapter offers different forms with which readers can engage. Whether personal journals, private letters, or Mina's letters to Jonathan each form offers a glimpse into the world of *Dracula*. This view is, however, brief and incomplete no matter how tempered a reader's skills. The protagonists of the novel do not have the privileged access which contemporary readers have to the private words which hold clues to what is happening around them.

In hypertext fiction, all of this privileged information is only a few clicks away. In a hypertext adaptation of *Dracula*, readers curious about Jonathan, after reading Mina's letters, could return to his portions of the text with a few clicks of the mouse. After engaging with that section to their own satisfaction, a number of options would arise leading them back to Mina or perhaps to another part of the novel. The layers of the text are further peeled away to eradicate the facade of fully realized worlds. A text, any text, can always be explored further in more

detail.

A very valid question probably asked most often by readers not familiar with electronic literature involves the role of linear reading. How can a reader of *The Unknown* know when they are “finished” with the work? A version of this question is also asked to educators in pedagogical situations as well. How does a professor teach *These Waves Of Girls* if they cannot be certain every student read the same material for homework the previous evening? Wouldn't there be chaos as students attempt to engage in discourse about a lexia others may or may not have read?

The nonlinear shifts of voice in *Dracula* are a good reminder of the partiality of representation stories offer, no matter the character or novel. The illusion of coherency is, in actuality, only a glimpse at the layers of a narrative world. With this line of thinking in mind, readers should carefully reconsider how they interpret and imagine characters and world in their own minds in a more fluid, reconfigurable, manner. The fragmentation of hypertext, defamiliarizing the linear reading methods we are accustomed to, offers further opportunity for tearing down the curtain standing before coherent, linear, worlds. Private journals and confessional letters give readers the same glimpse inside what is really happening in a narrative.

A text like *Dracula* is ripe for exploring these concerns and would allow readers to address these concerns with a novel they are probably familiar with in some form. Canadian author Caitlin Fisher's *These Waves Of Girls* serves as an excellent with which to compare *Dracula*. *These Waves Of Girls* is a work of lesbian fiction which chronicles the sexual evolution of, Tracey, the narrator. It is written as a memoir, taking place in multiple time periods as her sexual evolution takes place. Unlike *Dracula*, with its precise letters and journal entries,

Fisher's hypertext novel is a stream of conscious confessional. Despite these differences, formally I see similarities in how the works of Stoker and Fisher have been created that can be used to emphasize the already fluid, disorderly, nature of *Dracula*.

After a graphical splash screen, *These Waves Of Girls* opens on the screen in a table of contents filled with boxed phrases wove together. The clickable phrases “kissing girls,” “school tales,” “I want her,” “city,” “country,” “she was warned,” “dare,” and “her collections,” open brief excerpts from the opening of that portion of *These Waves Of Girls* when toggled over with the cursor. For example, “I want her” reads:

I'm in bed with Jennie Winchester and I realize she wants me to undo her pants. She needs to be home by 11 O'clock and needs to leave my place by 10:45. I'm kissing her but opening my eyes at intervals to catch the clock. At exactly 10:43 I unbutton her Levis and shove my hand inside, barely undoing the zipper.

(navigate.html)

*Dracula* can similarly be broken down into sections like this. This list would include the various forms included in the novel: journals, letters, diaries, and other miscellaneous forms that don't fall under those headings. Further, the contents of the novel could be broken down by character. From here, the form of the novel launches it in a number of directions. The narrative begins with Jonathan's journal entries from his time in Dracula's castle. This cuts off at a very dramatic position and then moves to Mina and Lucy's letters, which leads to Mina's journal and so on through the novel. Each of these different forms leads readers to a significantly different portion of the narrative.

In *These Waves Of Girls*, a variety of splintering hyper links open up at the beginning, as

discussed above. All of these different paths are offered to readers from the beginning. Much as these numerous choices are given to readers, *Dracula* would be even more accessible to open to deeper engagement with Stoker's fluid novel if readers could organize by journal, or letter, or specific character specifically. Due to how Stoker plotted out his novel, readers can already do this if they decide to engage only with Mina's journals or Jonathan's letters. Conveniently, most of a specific form are placed closed to each other. In hypertext fiction, however, hyper linking between different lexias can be done in a number of interesting ways, but using the organization of these links to engage with the fluidity of Stoker's already nonlinear novel. The way in which a novel can be a partial representation of a larger world, with separate links to different versions or time frames of a specific event, can bring the discontinuity of the novel to the surface for further examination by a reader or classroom.

One of the most interesting aspects of Stoker's novel is how it reaches backwards and forwards in a nonlinear manner through the narrative. In Mina Murray's journal, the entry for August 6<sup>th</sup> begins:

Another three days and no news. This suspense is getting dreadful. If I only knew where to write to or where to go to, I should feel easier; but no one has heard a word of Jonathan since that last letter, I must only pray to God for patience. Lucy is more excitable than ever, but is otherwise well. (71)

The phrase “heard a word” refers back to the letter only three days, but some twenty pages, later from Sister Agatha to Mina updating her on his condition (97). The words “last letter” link back to Jonathan's previous letter from Transylvania. Steering the reader in a different direction, “Lucy is more excitable” foreshadows readers a little further in Mina's journal to her entry from

August 11<sup>th</sup>, where she documents Lucy's night walking and fits (89).

These divergences, when highlighted, make the reader's agency more foregrounded in how they approach close reading. In hypertext fiction, readers choose which information to engage with on their own terms. Their personal vision of what the coherent world of the narrative takes on becomes their own via the choices they make when clicking on links. In a classroom setting, multiple close readings coming from multiple paths can easily coexist because no reading exists without the potential for the others to exist. The coherent narrative world of a novel like *Dracula* is already fluid and, unless the reader is willing to flip back and forth or somehow document the time changes on their own, more readable when the reader is permitted to make their own choices and forge their own path through the text.

In *Dracula*, ultimately, despite the interesting choice of structure and form which Stoker uses, as a reader I find the novel very disappointing because the ordering and form does not assist me in envisioning the narrative. If anything, it deters me. However, when I consider the agency given to readers of hypertext fiction, a coherent world forms as I click and choose which lexia to proceed to next in my mind's eye. In *These Waves Of Girls*, after clicking on a link in the table of contents, the reader is brought to a multiframe page with text, links, and a sidebar of links to other parts of the work. Readers clicking on "I want her" readers are given the previously cited paragraph plus one more, with hyperlinks sending them in other directions entirely. On the sidebar, a number of links are included: "Butterfly," "tell," "watching," "camp," "Barbie," and Vanessa," which direct the reader to lexias with similar topical writing about the narrator's attraction to a number of different females during her sexual development (want.htm). Clicking on "Barbie" leads to another lexia which reads, in part:

My Barbies were hedonists. Possessors of vast wardrobes, they preferred to live naked. Together. In a big Barbie townhouse, along with the naked Planet of the Apes dolls. The Barbies were non-monogamous, sexually adventurous, gymnastic and supple. (barbie.htm)

Clicking on the hyperlinked “Barbie was a bad girl, but she wasn't punished unless she wanted to be” further down the screen leads back to “school,” which includes some of the links from the table of contents, and a number of links built into the sidebar within that frame, including some of those from the previous sidebar (school.htm). By linking within a frame to another sidebar filled with links from another frame, Fisher is giving her readers the agency needed to engage with *These Waves Of Girls* in order to form a coherent world in their minds.

This is the kind of close reading which can be done with electronic literature. Readers are given more agency to interact with a narrative world which is never the same for any two readers. The idea that the words in a bounded novel form some sort of coherent world is a hindering facade that disallows the evolution of reader responses to literature. The deterrence I feel, as a reader, from the structure of *Dracula* goes away when I envision it as I would a work of hypertext fiction.

So that the questions which hypertext fiction ask about print literature can have a larger audience, the works new readers engage with need to be ones that will not scare them off or hinder their entrance into the electronic literature world. Recall the preface to *Literary Theory* where Eagleton desires literary theory to be as “intelligible and attractive” to a larger audience (vii). On both the theoretical and literary sides, work has been done to have hypertext fiction perform a similar function for the contemporary reader. Theorists like Landow, whose work will

be discussed in more detail later, are working hard to connect electronic literature to contemporary critical theory in ways that are engaging for the veteran but also easy to comprehend and assimilate for the newcomer. The design of a work like *The Unknown* greatly aids readers easing their way into the waters of hypertext fiction by offering easy to follow links, organizational maps laying out portions of the narrative world, and other media which aids in accessibility such as sound files and links to criticism and publicity about the work.

*The Unknown* is accessible to all levels of reader but also challenging for experts and those looking to dive into theoretical concerns. Like Stoker's *Dracula*, it has various forms and takes place in a number of places. Links in most lexias will take readers to a number of different portions of the work, whether nearby or far apart to send them in an entirely different direction. Readers wishing to track a specific portion of the novel, as someone would view only entries involving Mina in *Dracula*, can do so via the hyperlinked or other subjective maps.

The Unknown Collective's award winning 2001 hypertext novel *The Unknown*, like most created in the past decade, during the so-called silver age of hypertext fiction, is based on the World Wide Web. *The Unknown* is primarily link based, presenting the story of a fictional book tour to the reader. A number of literary and theoretical concerns are addressed throughout as readers engage with the fluid, nonlinear, world with which they are immersed. *The Unknown* is a networked hypertext fiction written collaboratively over a number of years. During the time the authors, three primaries plus a number of guests, wrote pages and pages of lexias filled with links to both more lexias and audio recordings. This hypertext fiction changed and grew, over the years as the authors and their friends added to the narrative until its completion in 2001. Due to their visibility on the World Wide Web, readers were able to read along and follow any

changes to lexias. The plot is based around a fictional book tour the members of the Unknown Collective go on, mostly in America but with stops in Canada and Europe as well, to promote their book *The Anthology of The Unknown*. Quickly the tour deteriorates into plot deviations involving drug use, meeting various famous postmodern authors, physic cult leaders, and resurrection via alien technology. A fictional feminist critic Cynthia Nitz describes their book:

It's about messianic proclamations, assassinations, sex, drugs, literary theory, sex, life's boundless angst, drugs, name-dropping, intertextuality, meta-writing, sex, art, art imitating life, life imitating art, drugs, and sex. Perhaps I'm overemphasizing art. But, in keeping with the tone of some of *The Unknown*, seriously folks, I jest. (/femcritique.htm)

Due to the lighter plot line and the way in which it is mapped and framed I would strongly suggest this text for newcomers to hypertext fiction. Readers not quite ready for a text with no ends or boundaries will appreciate the static ending which can be discovered while exploring *The Unknown*. This work of hypertext fiction is highly intelligible and sophisticated in both writing style. The content will be found eloquent but also easy to follow and explore by both seasoned veterans and new readers of hypertext fiction.

This avant garde fluidity is one of the most distinguishable characteristics of hypertext fiction on the World Wide Web. The silver age of hypertext at the turn of the century saw an already shifting literary canvas, from print to CD-Rom based fiction like Shelley Jackson's adaptation of *Frankenstein*, *Patchwork Girl*, and Michael Joyce's *afternoon, a story* shift yet again to the World Wide Web. *The Unknown* offers readers numerous paths from which to engage with the text. From the opening screen a number of links are available to advance the

narrative (/unknown.htm). The introductory quote from Thomas Pynchon has two links which readers can click on to continue:

Everybody gets told to write about what they know. The trouble with many of us is that at the earlier stages of life we think we know everything—or to put it more usefully, we are often unaware of the scope and structure of our ignorance.

Ignorance is not just a blank space on a person’s mental map. It has contours and coherence, and for all I know rules of operation as well.—Thomas Pynchon

(/unknown.htm)

There are multiple alternatives present for readers to click on. If a reader clicks on the “Thomas Pynchon” link they are led to a longer piece about The Unknown Collective attending a barbecue in Connecticut with Pynchon and Don DeLillo (/east.htm). From there a number of lexias on the screen offer different paths to proliferate and fork through the rest of the novel. With numerous alternatives in front of her, the reader might perhaps come back around to, “mental map,” the other link in the Pynchon quote or never encounter it at all until another session where they, instead of choosing the Pynchon link, decide to engage with “mental map” instead.

*Dracula's* lack of a united, linear, perspective for readers, due to the multiple narrators and forms of writing, disallows a singular interpretation or analysis of the horrors the protagonists face. In *The Unknown*, the use of multiple authors, also portrayed as characters in the novel, allows already complex issues in post structuralism and electronic literature to become even clearer. Multiple authors remove a clear and consistent voice in the text. The general vagueness as to whose “voice” is speaking in any given lexia is very hard to determine and decreases authorial authority even more due to its inconsistency. For example, Rettberg cites in

his dissertation, *Destination Unknown: Experiments in the Network Novel*, a lexia from *The Unknown* where the character of “Scott” tries to determine what postmodernism *was* while doing heroin and drinking a latte:

Postmodernism, of all the fucking things, why did he need to worry about that now, when he almost had everything he wanted.

“Postmodernism”

He thought.

I are media.

We is media. (/seattle2.htm)

As Rettberg documents, this scene was written collaboratively by Gillespie and himself. They deliberately switched and confused singular and plural nouns in this scene. The “he,” Rettberg continues, is not “Scott” but “a linguistic construct” created by Rettberg and Gillespie to make a point about the non-corporeal nature of the character (77). The voice used in this lexia is created through these different identities which are created by multiple authors. By deliberately confusing pronouns the authors use this medium to comment and play with different forms of identity creation.

While *These Waves Of Girls* does not have multiple authors, the protagonist of the work does change as various representations of her evolve during her teen and adult years. These representations become multiple versions of Tracey as she forms her own sexual identity. Tracey recalls a girl named Vivian, “Mini kilt and cowgirl boots, smelling like Love's Baby Soft... but with a hint of Eau de Rochas which she steals from her grandmother.” (/school2.htm) After quickly dismissing her interest in Vivian, who she returns to later, when she announces her

intention to date a girl named Lisa Simms' brother, her attention turns to Lisa herself, who is only “ok,” she decides (/school2.htm). She realizes that while the other girls in her class are obsessed with boys, which doesn't “make sense” to her, that her desires are towards females:

During these anxious minutes, I realize I'd be happy to kiss almost every teacher in the school: Mlle. Summers, Mrs. Olivette, even the kindergarten teacher with adult braces and the librarian who also works at Dairy Queen, in addition to Madame Turcotte. They're all girls. (/tell10.htm)

Later, as hinted above, she returns to Vivian and other sexual conquests named Bonnie and Vanessa. Tracey's commentary about her conquests becomes more and more casual. With Vanessa, she seems more interested in recalling the girl's mother Evelyn, constantly alluding to the woman sleeping in another part of the house while their sexual adventures continue. Finally, as she accepts her lesbian identity she also becomes bored with it, which culminates with her “watching *Young & The Restless*” instead of focusing while Jennie Winchester is intimate with her (/jennie\_levis.htm).

In *These Waves Of Girls*, readers are given privileged access not to the private thoughts of multiple protagonists like in *Dracula*, but to Tracey's thoughts during various stages of her sexual development. This private glimpse culminates with her admitting to fantasizing about a man, her science teacher Mr. Anderson. Mr. Anderson is an overweight man who speaks with a lisp. He is not well liked by students or his colleagues. Her friends, including Vivian, mock him but she finds him oddly compelling. Over the next few years they become friendly and Tracey takes a number of courses with him throughout high school. Tracey, who “only care(s) about women's lives” admits to her curiosity about him:

I like his writing, and his hands. I like the way looking at him sends me into making up his whole life... I imagine him at ten, at twelve at fifteen, at thirty. Wonder why of all places he's decided to come back to this theater of high cruelty. I wonder what he does on days off. I find myself speculating – does he live alone? Does he date? Who does he sleep with? (/school2.htm)

At the end of this very long lexia, she describes a fantasy she has about Mr. Anderson that is sexual but more about mutual desires and hoping he would find pleasure in her. Tracey's reasoning behind this curious attraction comes as she confesses to a desire for stronger companionship, something that "liking only grade 12 girls who look like boys and middle aged mean men with lisps" didn't seem to be giving her as seen by earlier examples of her growing disinterest (/school2.htm). Her attraction to him is about, as she graduates and becomes a young adult, finding a more adult, deeper, relationship than the ones she had experienced during her sexual awakening. These different clues from different time periods all add up to help readers to envision Tracey in their minds.

In *Dracula*, modern readers surely will be able to piece together what is happening much quicker than the protagonists, who do not have the same privileged access to what is happening to the others. In a work like *The Unknown*, new readers of electronic literature may have problems engaging with the decidedly nonlinear structure of modern hypertexts. Problems with navigation can become accelerated by the pseudo crippling of previous rules and borders. Some, such as Jensen, argue that readers already participate in texts nonlinearly, what Barthes refers to as "tmesis," by skipping around.<sup>2</sup> The menu structure of *These Waves Of Girls* allows readers to

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<sup>2</sup>Jensen's *Internet Hyperfictions Can It Ever Become A Popular Art Form That Is Also Innovative?* offers a detailed look at many aspects of *The Unknown* which I will not be covering. Although I don't agree with some of Jensen's

interrogate the text vertically, downward through the often extensive and spiraling lexias, or horizontally, through the sidebar menus which take readers further and further into the text and then back around towards the beginning.

While finding a precise passage in a piece of hypertext fiction may be more difficult on the surface, *The Unknown* offers lexias with mapped links for all the links in their work. To defy the lack of random access, each lexia has a hyperlink to a large map of the United States where readers can access different portions of the novel (</maps.htm>). For example, readers who were curious about The Unknown Collective's adventures in the northeast, after reading about the barbecue with Pynchon, could click on hyperlinks for New York, Maine, or Boston to further engage with the region. Clicking on the hyperlink that hovers over New York leads the reader to a lexia where The Unknown Collective documents their first trip to New York City. After chronicling impromptu readings at a variety of famous book stores and their first meeting with Marla, their publicist, they sum it up:

Aside from the generous and warm reception we received at the 92nd St. Y and the fact that Marla, in person, turned out to be drop-dead gorgeous and well let's face it attracted to Scott, the trip was pretty much a professional bust. So we decided to meet some of the ordinary, everyday type people that are, in essence, what *The Unknown* is all about. (</newyork1.htm>)

Readers who want to continue to follow their adventures in the Big Apple can “turn the page” by clicking “next,” which discusses hipsters and offers a redirection to the Midwest portion of the novel if the reader so wishes (</newyork2.htm>). By clicking “next” for a number of lexias, the

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conclusions in regards to how electronic literature can become more popular, I would highly recommend readers engage with it if they wish to continue this discourse.

reader can access all of the hyperlinks under that heading. In a well plotted hypertext novel the reader can access almost any portion of the text they are curious about with a few clicks.

The new reader of hypertext fiction will struggle as the protagonists of *Dracula* do to keep up with what is happening as they click around the work. They are much like a character in a novel like *Dracula* when they first begin clicking and reading, trying to keep up with the text without all of the knowledge they will need. However, like the answers Van Helsing gives when he appears, the map allows this new reader a chance to catch up to the events of the story by their own prerogative. This will defeat the lack of real time knowledge of other events in the story by allowing the reader to try to find other portions of the text they are interested in or need for their own understanding. I found this to be extremely useful when I was first experimenting with reading hypertext fiction. On the front page of *The Unknown*, clicking on the link “America” leads to a long lexia about The Unknown Collective's stop in Seattle (/trip.htm). From the contents of it, the reader can deduce that The Unknown Collective are in Seattle, on a book tour, and are in the middle of writing another book:

So now it was the three of us driving to Seattle. Our book tour. We had seen an opportunity and we had made it ours. We had built a literature, crammed it into a van, and we were heading for the Rockies. Laptop in lap, writing our third Unknown anthology—our anthology of travel memoirs, written on the tour of the first two books: The Unknown anthology, and Criticism of The Unknown, a book of essays written by us about our first book. (/trip.htm)

Clicking on “anthology” describes the content and layout of their third book, eerily reminiscent, minus the William S. Burroughs blurb from beyond the grave, of the actual print edition of *The*

*Unknown* (/anthology.htm). Clicking on “the tour” leads back to the previous page where readers can decide which link to click on next. While the story is not complete, “the map of the story” can become concise from these lexias (174). The Unknown Collective is on a book tour. They are writing more books, including one that is similar to their real one.

A careful reader can discover quickly that they can move backwards in the text by clicking on the right link. Pretty quickly, in such an expansive work like *The Unknown*, a map can form in the reader's mind. According to Janet Murray in *Hamlet On The Holodeck: The Future Of Narrative In Cyberspace*, “closure occurs” when a reader understands a work of hypertext fiction's structure, not necessarily the plot (174). New readers of hypertext may find this less pleasurable than their experiences with print culture. The answer to an aspect of the narrative posed in one lexia might not be answered until the reader has clicked on many others. The lack of climax, once they have internally mapped the story, may lead them to click on another link to try to find that answer.

Hypertext novels like *The Unknown* expand the horizons of close reading to encompass the entire world. The vast layers of the subtle, fully rendered narrative world emerge when engaging with hypertext fiction in ways that print restricts. The world in which *The Unknown* takes place is immersive and very personalized as the reader clicks their way through, changing directions via the map or by clicking on links which take them to another portion of the work.

New readers of hypertext fiction often ask how someone will know if they are “finished” reading. As previously noted, this is an important question in both pedagogical and casual environments. The nonlinear shifts in *The Unknown* are a good reminder of the agency hypertext fiction gives readers in order to further investigate the text. Nevertheless, *The*

*Unknown* employs a clearly laid out ending which can be found by careful readers (/theend.htm). In this lexia, the fates of the Unknown Collective are chronicled in comical detail such as Rettberg never telling his children he writes hypertext for fear of its poor influence on them. A link at the bottom of the page leads to a search engine where readers can search this rather expansive piece of hypertext for the search term or subject of their choice (/search.htm).

Like *Dracula*, this ending takes on the form of a supplemental note. Upon arriving at this lexia, readers find the announcement that “you have reached the last page of *The Unknown*. You can breathe a sigh of relief. You’ve completed the entire novel. Please stop reading now, and I’ll tell you what happened.” (/theend.htm) While *Dracula* clearly states that the events of the novel take place “seven years ago,” the ending of *The Unknown* takes place in an undetermined future time after all of the characters have died (364). Jonathan notes that he and Mina have had a son named after Quincy and that Seward is also married now. *The Unknown* tells of Rettberg's writing career, the dissolution of Dirk's cult and the hilarious chronicles of how each member of the collective eventually dies.

The lack of links in the final page of *The Unknown* allows readers to complete the work but then return to another portion via the search engine at the bottom of the page. Due to the influence of Dr. Rettberg on my own work, my readings of *The Unknown* always seem to steer towards his parts of the narrative. This time I might want to engage more with Dirk's cult or Maria their New York publisher. By typing in “Dirk” into the search engine, pages of lexias will come up that can be clicked on and interacted with by the reader. In *Dracula*, I feel the same way about Seward. My readings always steer towards a focus on Mina Murray's portions of the novel. Next time, I'd like to focus more thoroughly on Seward. In a well crafted hypertext novel

like *The Unknown*, this is only a bullion search away from the reader's fingers. The ending of *Dracula*, with its traditional Victorian wrapping up of most loose ends, and marriages, because of the fragmented shifts in voice, is still only a portion of what could be represented by a more expansive world.

While *The Unknown* does have a proper ending, many works of hypertext fiction do not. This does not mean that a reader cannot find a sense of closure in their reading. According to Murray, “closure occurs” when a reader understands a work of hypertext fiction's structure, not necessarily the plot (174). *These Waves Of Girls* is not quite as expansive as *The Unknown* and therefore most of the lexias can be read in one or two sittings presumably if a reader works at it. Eventually, the story will stop progressing and readers will end up back at the beginning. After cycling through the story a few times, the map of the story in their minds eye should become clear. Readers may decide to continue or stop at their own leisure.

In a lexia about the print adaptation of *The Unknown*, readers are not only given numerous (five) links to choose from but also plenty of information to inform their agency:

Three hundred pages of stuff we had written. Fiction, Drama, Poetry, Essays. The majority of it good. William had provided an oil painting for the cover. The copyright page was hysterical. Frankly, *The Unknown* had a lot going for it before we began the tour. We had finally persuaded Krass-Mueller to give us a blurb and that blurb graced our back cover. And we had to consider the William S.

Burroughs blurb an even greater coup, given the fact that he was dead at the time he wrote it. Have I mentioned our psychic? (/anthology.htm)

As I proposed, for example, “last letter” to return to Jonathan's previous letter from

Transylvania, and “Lucy is more excitable,” to link to Mina's documentation of her friend's sleepwalking a week later, so that the reader can decide what information is important to their personal understanding of the novel, this lexia can be given a similar approach. The link for “the tour” leads the reader to Seattle, where The Unknown Collective's book tour is underway and an unknown member dreams of their forth book, *The Unknown Cookbook* (/trip.htm). Readers clicking on Krass-Mueller are sent to the first lexia in the Midwest portion, which can be accessed on the map via a link right under the one for Chicago, where dinner is served at postmodern author Curtis White's house and the folks from Dalkey Press show up to sell their edition of the Oulipo book (/midwest.htm). The link for William S. Burroughs leads to a quote from *Dead City Radio* and further links to other portions of *The Unknown*.

Hypertext fiction is democratized through multiple reading paths. The point at which the reader begins is the beginning for each reader. The text which is created through these paths is significantly less independent of commentary. The modern sriptor has their birth at the same time the text does. In electronic literature, the reader's engagement with the text births a new version of it depending on how they engage with the interface. The text is reborn each time. The reader, the modern sriptor, holds electronic literature together.

In the classroom, the coexistence of any number of combinations of clicks from just a single lexia easily coexists because there is a potential for all of the others. This fluidity allows each student to close read in the manner of their choosing. The crossover between their choices creates a larger narrative world in the collective mind's eye of the classroom. *Dracula's* constrained form disallows the individualized engagement that lets hypertext fiction thrive for readers. This facade hinders reader agency and the further evolution of how they respond to

literature. Hypertext fiction tears apart print facades and reconstructs writing in a manner where it can truly thrive.

For new readers of hypertext fiction, the disruption to their reading experience can be quite jarring. Reading hypertext fiction in the beginning was confusing and hard to do, but also thrilling and all encompassing. I found myself drawn to details I would not have followed or noticed in a bound text. To paraphrase Derrida in *Dissemination*, tampering with my previous programmed reading experience and mannerisms “disturb(ed) everything else” about how I read both in print and electronically (3). I now actively looked for intertextual citations, whether to classical texts like in Virginia Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway* or via geography in Arnold Bennett's *Anna Of The Five Towns*. Issues of time and space, like those seen in many of Calvino and Jorge Luis Borges' stories, became an obsession of my reading time.

Clicking around a series of hyperlinked lexias allows a plot to unfold in numerous ways according to how the reader progresses. This personalized “writing” of the text defies and transgresses the author's intentions, perhaps, or their rules for the work. It can also cause difficulty for the reader. Jill Walker-Rettberg notes her early experiences with hypertext, in *Piecing Together and Tearing Apart: Finding The Story In Afternoon*, with Joyce's hypertext novel, left her “click(ing) (her) mouse haphazardly on any old word” before giving up on the text for a number of months (1). She quickly discovered that there was a “default” path which could be followed if the reader pressed enter after reading each lexia instead of clicking on a specifically linked word. Joyce built a default path into *Afternoon* which can be useful for helping readers to familiarize themselves with the structure and workings of hypertext fiction. This worked exceptionally for Walker-Rettberg:

This default sequence eases the new reader into reading *Afternoon*. Reading this sequence gave me enough background information to start enjoying the leaps between story lines, and to understand connections where I'd earlier only been confused. (2)

From here, she was able to quickly pick up on the plot, which involves a man who is trying to find out if his ex wife and son have been in a serious car accident he drove by earlier in the day.

Due to the jarring nature of the initial step into electronic literature for many readers, the popularity of hypertext fictions like *The Unknown* can be extremely useful for bringing in that layman in a manner that they will find comfortable. While, upon my introduction, I celebrated the “overweight of experimental and avant-garde works,” in electronic literature, Jensen wondered why that was the case (2). Jensen noted cases of students having difficulty navigating the more avant-garde and experimental works of electronic literature. *The Unknown* is cited by Jensen as an example of a hypertext fiction which is not buried in theoretical pretension and, while highly experimental, also appeals to the more common reader as well.

Hypertext fiction expands how reading can be done as the writerly text continues to evolve to become more personalized and democratic. Nelson's original conceptualization of hypertext, according to Rettberg in *All Together Now: Collective Knowledge, Collective Narratives, & Architectures Of Participation*, back in the sixties involved what he referred to as a “literature,” a "system of interconnected writing persistent but open to constant expansion.” (All Together Now 2) Nelson's system, however, was limited due to the centralized nature of the technology which he had envisioned. Hypertext and the World Wide Web are more successful because of their ability to constantly evolve and adapt in a fluid manner. Hypertext is constantly

morphing and growing as technology changes alongside of it.

Something that sets print apart from hypertext, which is severely under discussed in higher learning, is the fact that it has had a lot more time to evolve as a technology. That is what print is: a piece of technology that has evolved and been refined over hundreds of years. Like pens, pencils, and printing presses it is not a so called "natural" or "normal" form for reading. The common reader assumes that pencils, printing presses, and paper are natural forms. Murray writes in *Hamlet* about her experiences using hypertext fiction and computers in general in education. The reactions she faced when discussing a CD-Rom edition of Shakespeare are both hilarious and scary; one scholar warned Murray she would “throw you out the window” if she gave a talk which spoke ill of novels of print culture (7-8). There are no owner's manuals for books and analysis of their innovations over the past hundreds of years is rarely touched on anywhere in academia.

New technology, Murray continues, is often portrayed in the media as dangerous and subversive. Sometimes, one could argue, it is dangerous and subversive. She cites an episode of the rather mundane *Star Trek: Voyager* to show mainstream media's view that new technology, in this case Captain Janeway's adventure in a Brontesque holodeck program she has difficulty escaping, is dehumanizing and addictive (24). To understand the future, Landow argues in *Hypertext 2.0: The Convergence Of Contemporary Critical Theory & Technology*, we must not look at previous technologies of “language, rhetoric, writing, and printing” as not being technological (Landow 26). Recent scholars like Rettberg are looking to that supposedly non-technological past to find that electronic literature “owes a great deal technically, aesthetically, and ideologically” to avant garde like the 1920's Dada movement (Dada Redux 1).

Others have examined literary groups like the Oulipo and how their work expanded beyond print culture.

Hypertext is simply another form of technology for reading. According to Joseph Tabbi:

Electronic Literature is not just a "thing" or a "medium" or even a body of "works" in various "genres." It is not poetry, fiction, hypertext, gaming, codework, or some new admixture of all these practices. E-Literature is, arguably, an emerging cultural form, as much a collective creation of new terms and keywords as it is the production of new literary objects. (2)

Neither type of text, whether bound or linked is better or worse or weirder. Each has their own unique and wonderful constraints and capacities for use. The technology which allows hypertext fiction to exist allows it to dig deeper into the word.

The point at which the reader begins is the beginning for each reader. In electronic literature, the reader's engagement with the text births a new version of it each depending on how they engage with the interface. The text is reborn each time. Barthes writes in *From Work To Text* the text can only be “experienced only in an activity of production.” (157) It is not “a co-existence but a passage, an overcrossing.” (159) Espen Aarseth argues, at the end of the day, the relationship between authors and readers, readers and texts, is not about choosing between different standards of linearity or whether a text is on a screen or acid based paper. What is important is whether or not a reader “has the ability to transform the text into something that the instigator of the text could not foresee.” (Cybertext 164) This has to be left in the hands of the reader.

Walker-Rettberg points out in *Feral Hypertext: When Hypertext Literature Escapes*

*Control* that literary hypertext that has gone, in her words, “feral” demands of the readers “to accept structures that are neither predefined nor clearly boundaried.” (2) After making sure to note that Landow and others have pointed out the differences between critical and hypertext theory while also pointing out their similarities, Walker-Rettberg expresses the idea that theorists involved with critical theory and semiotics are already arguing that texts are unruly and extremely disobedient. Collaboratively written hypertext fiction like *The Unknown* defies the boundaries of print. An interactive hypertext memoir like *These Waves Of Girls* is an unruly and rather untamed account of growing up told with audio and visual links.

Hypertext that is feral is has the potential to be an interactive expression of the writing and discourse on authorship and intertextuality of theorists like Foucault, Derrida, and Barthes. This doesn't mean, obviously, that hypertext is exactly what those theorists were looking for in their discourses. Barthes' ideas about the text are rooted in how it differs from books and print culture, not how it finds similarity with electronic literature. Jensen notes that theorists, who are skeptical of hypertext fiction's relation to post structuralism, like David Miall, and Aarseth as well to some extent, argue that Landow and others move far too swiftly to connect Derrida and others to hypertext fiction in an “artificial” way (6). Jensen uses an example from *The Unknown* to show that The Unknown Collective seems to be concerned with this in a lexia where William Gillespie is addressing a classroom of students:

I hate how Dirk is always complaining about how every hypertext he reads is so concerned with itself, always theorizing about its genre, etc.—and then, when he gets a chance to write hypertext all he does is dive full-bodied and nude into that very arena! Goddammit, Dirk, quit using my persona to further your despicable

navel-gazing obsessions! Let the hypertext blossom for once! (/willteach.htm)

While I don't necessarily agree with Aarseth's objections, I do understand where he is coming from in *Cybertext*. He writes that while the combination of critical theory and hypertext is helpful for establishing a place for and legitimizing the genre, it does not “analyze the aesthetics of hypertext” itself (76). *The Unknown*, which uses the category “metafictional bullshit” for theoretical discussions in lexias, allows readers to explore and discover the aesthetic Aarseth is looking for in hypertext fiction (/purpleline.htm). Instead of being filled with theory on every clickable lexia, *The Unknown* is filled with not only theory but “an all encompassing world of all kinds of information, true or not” that creates a readable plot which can be engaged with easily by readers (50). This allows a work of hypertext fiction like *The Unknown* to be explored by the reader without getting a theoretical migraine.

While I disagree with Aarseth's conclusions, I do appreciate the healthy debate his writing has and will continue to cause. Murray's aesthetic vision for hypertext is, however, much more in line with my own thinking. She connects hypertext with Deleuze's “rhizome” from *One Thousand Plateaus*. The rhizome involves a system in which “any point may be connected to another point” in the system of thought it is concerned with (60). This is similar to Barthes' proclamation in *S/Z* that texts are an “entrance into a network with a thousand entrances.” (12) While it is very rare that hypertext is totally random in the Deleuzian regard, it still rejects the closure sought for plots since Aristotle.

The transition to acceptance of hypertext and electronic literature has not and still will not happen overnight. Linear texts have beginnings, middles, and ends. This established culture normality will not go away overnight. The history of print culture suggests a lesson for the

transition to electronic texts and acceptance of hypertext: it is going to take a long time. Print technology didn't change Europe from oral to print countries until around 1700.

One of the primary problems facing electronic literature in general is the rapidly changing technology of modern western society. Text adventures are now played in emulators. If hypertext markup language is not updated or comes from closed source software like Adobe Flash, older hypertext fiction will not work anymore. Hypertext fiction requires precise code for the reader to even access the work. As Hayles notes, books printed hundreds of years ago “can endure for centuries” while older works of electronic literature are becoming more difficult to play “after a decade or even less.” (39).<sup>3</sup> Electronic literature is still a developing field where many aspects continue to evolve or are yet to be fully determined. This change in print has been examined by scholars like Michael Warner, Cathy Davidson, and David Hall. These scholars have examined in great detail the historical evolution and academic study of texts. Ian Watt devotes an entire chapter in *The Rise Of The Novel* to how changes in reading, printing, and distribution have directly affected the author. Kirschenbaum's definition of electronic literature may be extremely off putting and downright scary at first glance for some readers, but this is just another evolutionary step for the expansion of literature and literary study.

The resistance some academics and many readers have towards hypertext fiction and electronic literature in general should not be surprising given the slow reception of previously

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<sup>3</sup>The Electronic Literature Organization is working on the ground level to deal with this growing concern. In *Acid-Free Bits: Recommendations For Long-Lasting Electronic Literature* and *Born-Again Bits: A Framework For Migrating Electronic Literature*, Montfort, Noah Wardrip-Fruin and others tackle this issue and offer a variety of solutions for keeping usable but also adaptable for future technology. Among their recommendations include creating work using open source programs and software, for multi platforms, and supplying comments for code.

uncanonized literature like many of the novels written by women in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, which were not included in academic study until the 1970's. As Landow writes in the 1992 version of *Hypertext*, whenever new technology comes along they “only oppose the newest machines, not machines in general” since theirs have already been accepted and canonized (168). Jackson comments to Rettberg in an interview, in regards to her own multidisciplinary, cross cultural, work that print culture “is no less ignorant of that tradition, and dismisses canon-breaking work as either pretentious esoterica or as falling outside the category of literature all together.” (2) However, the work of theorists like Jane Tompkins and Susan K. Harris have shown that resistance to new ideas and critical consideration of new fields of literature can and will be vanquished in due time.

For people like me who feel that this process is moving too slowly, it is important to take a step back and think about the pragmatic concerns involved with the humanities. A collapsing economy, decreased budgets for literature programs, and the insecurity of the tenure process are likely factors for electronic literature not finding its way into mainstream thought any time soon. The government will not be coming along to bail out literature departments to help them add classes to their schedules. The off putting nature of electronic literature will scare away many scholars, already up to their ceilings in books and articles trying to keep up with their own fields, from experimenting with a new and potentially classified as “radical” field of study.

Much as scholars once thought the writing of women was not worth their time, hopefully they will come around to electronic literature one day as well. Landow smartly argues in *Hypertext 2.0* that it is difficult and very tiresome for many who were once considered radical or on the cutting edge to keep up with “changes they have themselves advocated” for in the past

(61). Nevertheless, literature departments need to decide if they are only for print literature or if they are an encompassing, fluid, field that embraces all literature whether on a screen or in a book.

What is the solution? Besides the practical usefulness of *The Unknown* being not as theoretically heavy handed, its presence both on the Internet and as a printed book could be useful for teachers trying to explore the difference between print and hypertext with their students. Rettberg's active documentation of the role collaboration between himself, Gillespie, Stratton, and others members of the Unknown Collective, particularly in his readily available dissertation and *All Together Now*, could aid a discussion of authorial based issues. A work like *These Waves Of Girls* could also be used for classroom discourse on feminist concerns about the body and how femininity is created.

Nevertheless, while praising *The Unknown* for its lack of reliance on theory, Jensen comments that the reliance on theory strongly impedes hypertext fiction and electronic literature in general, from becoming popular. I believe there is a place in the classroom for both theory heavy works of hypertext fiction and more “friendly” ones like *The Unknown*. Later, Jensen comments that readers need to engage themselves with multiple works to become more accustomed to them. I agree that works with “no plot, humor, suspense, familiarity, or intimacy” are not going to hook readers (37). Why would a professor use those very scary ones to introduce the beginner anyway?

I also agree with prominent electronic literature theorist N. Katherine Hayles' controversial statement in *Electronic Literature: New Horizons For The Literary* that, in the twenty first century, electronic literature “will be a significant component” of the literary canon

(159). Her argument for this relies on the fact that almost all literature today is digital.<sup>4</sup> If you will remember back to Kirschenbaum's definition of electronic literature, however, the fact that digital files are involved with the creation of most literature does not make it electronic literature. She further points out that digital literature can also provide room for innovation in book design and typography.

Whether this will help electronic literature climb into the Canon remains to be seen. In *Hypertext 2.0*, Landow discusses John Henry Cardinal Newman's *Idea Of A University*. Newman wrote that for a long time only the negative effects of technology have been perceived by those writing about culture and education. He shared with Socrates a fear of unsupervised reading without “proper guidance” that would come from easily accessible, democratized, texts. Some people are just not ready for another form of reading that is just as unnatural as print. With all that is similar in hypertext with, for example, Barthes' writerly text and Derrida's emphasis on decentering and openness, one would have to believe even the most frightened scholar of that “non trivial” effort needed to navigate hypertext might at least be willing to try it in their classrooms at least once. Linearity need not be staked by a Codex Slayer, but made into another potential option for literature. Nevertheless, I have to wonder, beyond the understandable pragmatic concerns, why electronic literature has not been embraced more. According to Landow, that threat is natural:

One *should* feel threatened by hypertext, just as writers of romances and epics should have felt threatened by the novel and Venetian writers of Latin tragedy should have felt threatened by the Divine Comedy and its Italian text.

Descendants after all, offer continuity with the past, but only at the cost of

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<sup>4</sup>There are still writers, including science fiction author Neil Gaiman, who write in longhand.

replacing it. (183)

By evolving from it, electronic literature is the descendant of print culture. It is a threat to the known. However, there is also the continuity Landow describes with the past, as seen in his emphasis on connecting with Derrida, Barthes, and other likeminded theorists. Rettberg's examination of the relationship with Dada and the Avant Garde looks backwards while looking forward.

Nonetheless, I do not feel that electronic literature's role as a descendant of print culture requires it to replace it completely. I will be clear: in no way or shape do I believe print culture is a relic that needs to be destroyed. I have a strong eagerness for a multidisciplinary environment where scholars of both hypertext and print can work together for the betterment of each of their specializations. As scholars enter this brave, unknown, new world I can only approximate in a predictive manner what the future will bring. I am sure those who stood with Gutenberg did not know what the next evolution would bring either.

Whether adherents to print culture take seriously or believe in the tenants of electronic literature, they must make space for it. As Joseph Raben writes in *Tenure, Promotion, and Digital Publication*, Google's plan to scan the archives of major universities will leave “very few reasons” for print journals to be considered superior to an online database like JSTOR or the one Google is creating. The growth of scholarly journals like *Digital Humanities Quarterly* and *Journal Of Digital Information* are also making it harder for electronically housed information to be further ignored or discredited.<sup>5</sup> The problem is, as Raben argues, mainstream academia might not be eager to change a system that has worked decently so far. That is understandable,

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<sup>5</sup>Digital Humanities Quarterly: <http://www.digitalhumanities.org/dhq/> Journal Of Digital Information:

<http://journals.tdl.org/jodi>

especially since the acceptance of not only electronic literature but digitally based scholarship has been slow so far. Raben points to a recent MLA newsletter, which reported that approximately forty percent of schools that offered doctoral programs had zero experience evaluating articles electronically (2).

Catherine Belsey notes in *Critical Practice*, a new, so-called dangerous form of literature or criticism is always in danger of “simply creat(ing) a new canon of acceptable texts.” (103). As much as I want to see electronic literature embraced and brought into the classroom I also believe that, perhaps, electronic literature should not be in the canon for the very reason Belsey gives. I would rather be involved with a genre that continues to evolve, expand, and call into question the fundamental issues involving reading, writing, and pedagogy than have the honor of being in the canon. The continued openness and pleasures of discovering and exploring new forms of electronic literature would be curtailed by the stricter rules canonization seems to require. Electronic literature is not another set of so-called identity politics which conservative naysayers can dismiss as concession to a fad. Like the print culture that rose out of Gutenberg, electronic literature is not going anywhere.

In *Electronic Literature Without A Map*, Markku Eskelinen wonders what “forms and themes” in the genre are more sufficient to address literary issues than its mothers and cousins in print (6). Perhaps, as Eskelinen continues, it is to reworking through hypertext fiction classic works like Moulthrop does for Borges, or perhaps to annotate them like Gussman's class did for Rowlandson, or to rewrite and “remix” old stories as authors like Kathy Acker have done? The literary tricks of those Oulipo and other postmodern writers can also be further examined through electronic literature's conventions.

It would be great to see the work of authors like Fisher and The Unknown Collective not only get into digital humanities and new media classes, tracks, and programs, but also into theory and literature survey courses. If I was teaching an introductory course on hypertext, *The Unknown* would be the first text I had students engage in the classroom. Once they were more accustomed to navigating their way through the text I would move to the more theoretically heavy *Patchwork Girl* before moving to other genres of electronic literature. In my own classroom, I would emphasize the differences, and similarities, between electronic literature and print traditions. Aesthetic and theoretical evaluation would be based on theory and forms using print authors like Aristotle, Borges, Calvino, Nabokov, and Pavic. Students would be assigned electronic literature, whether hypertext fiction or other forms, to read at home in thirty, instead of page, minute increments to give them time to close read and examine the assigned work.

While I am not convinced that hypertext fiction, and electronic literature in general, should be canonized I am certain it does belong in those classrooms. Limiting the discussion of literature to the canonized gods of print culture is both defeating and increasingly naive in an evermore digital world. Eskelinen and I agree that electronic literature, “provide(s) fresh theoretical challenges” to current ideas and scholarship in literature (12). I don't believe, like Jensen, that electronic literature has to placate to the masses to find acceptance. A middle ground may be an interdisciplinary approach that takes into consideration a number of approaches, whether literary, aesthetic, or philosophical.

Electronic literature is still an extremely young field in comparison to print culture. Perhaps it is just too soon to attempt a diagnosis for what direction the field will go or whether it belongs in the canon. As Landow points out, the title page took over a hundred years to be

created (265). Determining what direction electronic literature should go proves especially difficult given the new directions, new potentials, of the genre that grow and evolve everyday. The intellectual promiscuity of electronic literature makes it very hard to nail down and categorize. The questions and theories I have posed hopefully have compelled the reader to question how they come to understand what is and is not literature. The fear of losing the stability of print based literature can cause an ontological crisis that brings into question everything around the reader. I know it did for me. As electronic literature expands and grows, this debate is nowhere near its extinction. This is not the end, it is only the beginning.

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