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**A Brief History of
Citational Fiction
and the Literary**

Supercut Tom Comitta

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*A Brief History of Citational Fiction
and the Literary Supercut*

Tom Comitta

[spt editions]

Thank you to Corinne Segal and Emily Firetog at *Literary Hub*, where an abridged version of this essay first appeared. Thank you to Medaya Ocher for being my first reader and guide along the way.

We also, I say, ought to copy the bees, and sift whatever we have gathered from a varied course of reading, for such things are better preserved if they are kept separate; then, by applying the supervising care with which our nature has endowed us . . . we could so blend those several flavors into one delicious compound that, even though it betrays its origin, yet it nevertheless is clearly a different thing from whence it came.

— Seneca the Younger, *Epistulae morales*, 65 AD

A BRIEF HISTORY OF CITATIONAL FICTION AND THE LITERARY SUPERCUT

Melville stole parts of *Moby-Dick*. Throughout the novel he wove quotations from Nathaniel Hawthorne, William Prynne, and numerous books on whales and whaling. Sometimes he copied full sentences, sometimes entire paragraphs. Melville's most extensive use of quotations appears before the story even begins: in two sections, "Etymology" and "Extracts." These sections span 13 pages and include a total of 82 descriptions of whales gathered from a variety of sources, from dictionaries to The Bible to *Paradise Lost* to the works of Charles Darwin.

In 1892, four decades after *Moby-Dick* was first published, Mark Twain did something similar when he included found weather descriptions at the end of his novel, *The American Claimant*. Twain declared that because "nothing breaks up an author's progress like having to stop every few

pages to fuss-up the weather,” he would not include any weather in his book; if a reader prefers some weather, they can flip back to the Appendix from time to time. There they will find a found poem, full paragraphs from other novels, and one sentence from The Bible: “It rained for forty days and forty nights.”

What do we call this method of using quotations? Is there a term for what Melville and Twain were doing? They were employing found language, or words taken from one source and placed in a new context, to buttress original, fictional texts. They were accompanying their novels with thematic archives: in the case of *Moby-Dick*, Melville traces a 2,000-year history of how Western authors have written about whales; in *The American Claimant's Appendix*, Twain gathers a small sampling of the hyperbole common to weather descriptions. By creating these hybrid archive-narratives, both authors were moving the novel forward and anticipating a writing practice that is still used today.

In the poetry world, there is studied history of citational writing, or writing that incorporates found language. This history begins in the West with the millennia-old cento—a poem comprised entirely of found language—and in China during the Sung era (960-1279 AD) with the Four-Six style of *fu* poetry, or prose poems that often incorporated quotations; it continues

to this day, with recent works of conceptual poetry. After looking for a similar lineage in the fiction world, I found the history was there but that there was an insufficient critical apparatus and no cohesive way to talk about it. Some writers and scholars called these works “cut-ups,” “collage novels,” or “pseudo-centos.” Most scholars used no umbrella term at all, focusing on a text’s uses of “found language,” “quotations,” or “extracts.” This scattered vocabulary is likely one of the reasons that this history has been obscured. Even though these forms have existed for over a millennium, few connections have been made between the many novels and short stories that either contain a significant amount of quotations or are made up entirely of them.

Considering the wide reach of literary criticism, which probes even the most niche forms like “The New Weird” and “Splatterpunk,” it’s particularly surprising that we don’t have a detailed and complex understanding of this kind of fiction. In order to start building one, I’d like to detail some of the important works and trends and to offer a possible vocabulary with which to understand them. An introductory history and a clear vocabulary would begin to transform these works from disparate stars scattered in the immense, cluttered sky of literary history and into a constellation that we can all recognize, study, and know. Without this, our understanding of

fiction is fragmentary at best. These works and this lineage are uniquely capable of intervening in the ideologies and the literal material—the words, the pages, the bound commodities—of literature, the publishing world, and the culture at large. Citational fictions have the ability to crack such systems open, reveal them for what they are, and form wholly new stories and ideas in the process.

A Brief History

Originality is a flimsy concept. When fiction writers set out to write an “original” work, they are constantly borrowing ideas, styles, tropes, plot points, and other narrative aspects whether they are aware of it or not. And yet, this shoddy term, “original,” helps to better understand what we mean by found-language or citational fiction. For our purposes here, “original” connotes inventive writing that comes directly from the pen or keyboard of a single author. This process might be a free-flow of the mind or it might follow genre conventions, but the specific words themselves are not directly drawn from any source apart from the author’s creative faculties. Composing texts with found language is an uninventive process; the words do not come from the pen or keyboard of a single, inspired

author, but are borrowed from external sources like newspapers, historical texts, other novels, etc. They might be physically cut up, rearranged, and taped into new configurations; copied by hand from one book to another; or, with the help of a keyboard, copied and pasted from one computer document to another. In this way, found language fundamentally examines the products of others' original writing.

While literary borrowing can take many forms, the kind of borrowing that is most relevant to works like Melville's and Twain's is "direct quotation," or the precise copying of language from one text to another. This method is quite old, but not as old as its sibling, "approximate quotation," which is usually the result of oral retelling or a kind of whisper-down-the-lane of time; the original language is lost and re-written or there was never an original text to begin with. Approximate quotations show up in folk tales and religious texts. They also appear in some of the greatest works of classic literature: "Homer" is understood as essentially an alias for many different storytellers and poets, and *One Thousand and One Nights* is a composite of retellings and translations of translations gathered over centuries by many storytellers across the Middle East and South Asia.

Direct quotation dates back at least as far as "commonplace books," which organize quota-

tions into thematic categories such as “Love,” “Death,” “Nature,” etc. Commonplace books first appeared in ancient Rome, with philosophers and rhetoricians collecting both their own thoughts as well as other writers’ words into personal notebooks; these notebooks would then be used to support memorization and strategy before debates. Medieval theologians and preachers created their own versions of commonplace books, or what they called florilegia, or “books of flowers,” which organized quotations into encyclopedic volumes on morality, nature, arts, and history. From the Renaissance through the 18th century, commonplace books were used widely in European education. They were particularly popular in the 18th and 19th century in the form of private notebooks and trade publications from well-known authors like Ben Jonson and Gustave Flaubert. W. H. Auden published a commonplace book as recently as 1970.

In Chinese culture, the history of direct quotation is nearly as long as the commonplace book. The *Han shu*, written between 82 and 111 AD by Ban Biao and his children, Ban Gu and Ban Zhao, is a non-fiction text that documents the history and literature of the Han dynasty. According to *Ancient and Early Medieval Chinese Literature*, “much of it consists of quotations, some running many thousands of characters, from various types of writing, including imperial

edicts, petitions to the court, essays, fu, eulogies, and even poems.” Spanning 2,000 pages and containing, in the estimate of one scholar, 1,170 quoted works from Western Han literature, the *Han shu* seems to be the earliest work of large-scale citational writing in any culture. Given the authors’ inclusion of official documents and full poems, one might assume that their intention was not only to recount history, but to preserve these texts for posterity.

In view of these early appearances of direct quotation, it’s surprising that such borrowing did not appear in works of fiction until the 9th century AD, with the Arabic genre of *adab* literature. In contemporary Arabic, the term *adab* means “literature” in general, but the Medieval *adab* was a work of inventive prose that sought to both educate readers in etiquette and to entertain them. These *adab* were some of the earliest works of fiction in the Arabic-speaking world. Many of them also contained approximate and direct quotations scattered throughout. al-Jāhiz of Basra, the most celebrated practitioner of *adab*, was known to quote so excessively that some of his contemporaries publicly criticized him for it. Others such as Ibn Qutayba, al-Mas’ūdī, and al-Tha’alibī followed in his path, continuing to incorporate quotations throughout their fictional texts.

Direct citation became commonplace in certain

parts of the world during the Early Modern Period, with the poetry of Chaucer — according to John Gardner’s *The Poetry of Chaucer*, 90% of *Troilus and Criseyde* is found language — and the quotation-heavy plays of Shakespeare and post-1300 Japanese Nō theater, but few works of citational fiction apart from *adab* literature appear until the 1800s. One exception can be found in François Rabelais’s *La vie de Gargantua et de Pantagruel* (c. 1532-1564). Rabelais’s description of a fictional animal, a “tarande,” mashes up language from Pliny the Elder’s *Naturalis Historia* and C. Julius Solinus’s *Polyhistor*. Another exception is one of the great classics of Chinese literature, *The Plum in the Golden Vase*, published under the pseudonym Lanling Xiaoxiao Sheng, or “The Scoffing Scholar of Lanling.” This satirical-meets-erotic-meets-realist novel borrows heavily from other texts, and *The Cambridge History of Chinese Literature* offers a laundry list of *Plum*’s sources: “vernacular stories, works of pornography, histories, dramas, popular songs, jokes, and prosimetric narratives, and even texts far outside of the parameters of the literary, such as official gazettes, contracts, and menus.” *Plum* borrows so heavily that quoted material can be found on nearly every page of this five-volume novel, which spans 3,696 pages in the David Tod Roy translation. This scale of quotation and the author’s often ironic use of found language place

this work as an early precursor to postmodern fiction.

Another surprisingly postmodern-esque and early use of extensive quotation arrived in the 1850s but did not appear in print until 2002: Hannah Crafts's *The Bondwoman's Narrative*. After discovering the manuscript in an estate auction, Henry Louis Gates, Jr. realized Crafts's novel is likely "the first novel written by an African American woman and the only known novel written by a fugitive slave." Gates also discovered Crafts's extensive use of quotations, with full passages copied and lightly edited from Dickens's *Bleak House* and 14 other works from writers such as Shakespeare, Horace Walpole, Charlotte Brontë, Harriet Beecher Stowe, and Frederick Douglass. Crafts's copying goes beyond the level of sentences and paragraphs by also adapting structural elements from white European novels about poverty and subjugation, like *Bleak House* and *Jane Eyre*, into her pseudo-autobiographical slave narrative. Scholar Catherine Keyser notes that, in her treatment of *Jane Eyre*, Crafts transforms Brontë's metaphorical use of slavery into a "direct confrontation' with the history of American race relations"; Crafts literalizes Brontë's tropes of slavery and subjugation. As Hollis Robbins suggests in "Blackening *Bleak House*," Crafts's use of found language has material implications, as a fugitive slave (sup-

posed property) stealing and repurposing the language (intellectual property) of the masters. This relation is also literal: Crafts took language directly from books in her master's library.

Unaware of the above works, many have understood the 20th century as the dawn of found-language literature, with T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*, Walter Benjamin's *The Arcades Project*, and the work of the Dadaists. Tristan Tzara's manifesto, "How to Make a Dadaist Poem," instructs readers to cut up newspapers, toss the fragments into a bag, and pull them out at random, recollating them into a new poem. Like Crafts, Tzara's method and other Dada works manipulated found language for political purposes: to break the nationalist logic that created the atrocity of World War I. Dadaists attempted to do this through interventions into the German language (literally breaking words in half or creating new ones) and interventions into the most prevalent logic-producing machines of the day: newspapers. Newspapers were also used in collage art by Picasso, Braque, and Schwitters and appeared in one of the earliest citational fictions of the 20th century: John Dos Passos's *USA Trilogy* (1930-36). In the "Newsreel" sections of these novels, Dos Passos collaged text from newspaper copy, advertisements, and popular song lyrics. Each of these sections can be read as supercuts of the mass media of his time.

Outside of newspapers and song lyrics, authors used a wide range of materials to rethink culture during this era. Alfred Jarry's *Exploits and Opinions of Dr. Faustroll, Pataphysician* (1911) interweaves found language into his original writing, including 40 lines from Plato, broken quotations from a memoir by novelist Pierre Loti, and even smaller fragments from Rabelais. Flann O'Brien's *At Swim-Two-Birds* (1939) similarly collects quotations, from encyclopedias to dictionaries to commonplace books to the poetry of Catullus and Jem Casey. O'Brien's friend, Niall Sheridan, describes the novelist's collage process as free-form in its blending of citation and original writing:

As the book progressed, Brian gleefully borrowed any material that came to hand. One day, I showed him a sales letter from a Newmarket tipster and it turned up in toto in the next wad of typescript that he produced. About the same time, I had done some translations from Catullus and he asked me for a copy of one of these. Later, it came out . . . in *At Swim*.

This aleatory, associative approach to collecting found language is a staple of both modernist aesthetics and modernist citational fiction—and also plenty of postmodern fiction. It produced

works of high fragmentation and juxtaposition and, in a similar spirit to Dadaism, rebelled against pre-modern ideals and the dominant logics of the times. Fiction writers and critics hadn't started using the term yet, but these approaches to writing would later fall under the rubric of a genre called "the collage novel."

It's unclear if artist Max Ernst coined the term himself or if others first applied it to his work, but his picture books, beginning with *The Hundred-Headless Women* (1929), are seen as the first collage novels. Each of Ernst's books is comprised of found 19th-century illustrations rearranged into surreal juxtapositions, with a sentence or two of original language running below the collages on each page. While Ernst's work introduced the term, the fiction world later adopted and transformed it: Some "collage novels" like Jarry's *Faustroll* and O'Brien's *At Swim* are fragmentary or nonlinear works of literary fiction that blend original and found language. Some contain no found language at all but are simply disjunctive, nonlinear narratives. When it entered the fiction vocabulary, the term "collage novel" gave critics and writers a new tool to understand many of the works discussed in this essay, but it also came with confusion given its multiple, conflicting meanings. The new term gave these works a sense of novelty, and yet, as seen in the long history above, these "collage

novels” were not as new as 20th-century writers and critics might have wanted to think.

One truly new development did take place, however, halfway through the century: short stories and books made entirely out of quotations and with no original language from the authors. Prior to this time, novels and short stories that incorporated found language often did so at smaller scales; Melville’s and Twain’s quotation-archives were surely groundbreaking, but they were also brief moments appended to works comprised mostly of original writing. In the late 1950s almost simultaneously in London, Paris, and Vienna, four authors arrived at similar conclusions, extending these methods into full works of fiction. In London, J. G. Ballard created his “Project for a New Novel,” a collage physically cut and glued together from headlines and articles in *Chemical & Engineering News*. In Vienna, Konrad Bayer combined found writing on the life of Danish explorer Vitus Bering with, according to poet Gerhard Rühm, “ethnographic, shamanistic, historical, and technical texts” into *Head of Vitus Bering*. In Paris, Brion Gysin and William S. Burroughs cut up articles in *The Paris Herald Tribune*, *The London Observer*, *The London Daily Mail*, and *Life Magazine*, transforming them into new narratives and imagery that attempted to subvert their mass-media ideologies in a neo-Dadaist manner and that, ac-

According to Burroughs, could predict the future.

Gysin and Burroughs called their writing “cut-ups.” In their early experiments, they cut-up not only periodicals, but also science fiction and works by Shakespeare, F. Scott Fitzgerald, and Jack Kerouac. Gysin’s “Minutes to Go” (1960) argues that writers should cut up everything from the Bible and Confucius to business correspondence and advertisements. As for what a cut-up is, Burroughs describes it plainly in “The Cut-Up Method of Brion Gysin” (1960):

Take a page. Like this page. Now cut down the middle and across the middle. You have four sections: 1 2 3 4 . . . one two three four. Now rearrange the sections placing section four with section one and section two with section three. And you have a new page. Sometimes it says much the same thing. Sometimes something quite different...

Through interviews and manifestos, Gysin and Burroughs described their form as a way to challenge the private ownership of language and the conservatism of the dominant culture. Gysin famously argued that writing was 50 years behind painting and that adopting the cut-up method was one way writing could catch up.

It’s important to consider why after a millennium of authors borrowing words that Gysin and

Burroughs's work finally popularized the use of quotation in fiction. Their cut-up method was so widely known that it was eventually discussed in periodicals like *The New York Times* and *Harpers*; Burroughs even read from *Nova Express*, book three of his "Cut-Up Trilogy," on *Saturday Night Live* in 1981. This popularity ensured that, even though Gysin and Burroughs openly cited Eliot, Dadaism, and John Dos Passos's *U.S.A. Trilogy* as precedents, their cut-up method is often seen as foundational to this kind of fiction. Perhaps they were in the right place at the right time. Although they began their experiments in the late 50s, Gysin and Burroughs continued creating cut-ups and prosthetizing their method well into the 60s and 70s. These were the same years that other movements that reframed found material, like Pop and Conceptual Art, skyrocketed into the mainstream, creating wider audiences for such work. Whether consciously utilizing this cultural relevance or not, Gysin and Burroughs tirelessly theorized and promoted their cut-up method—something past writers of found-language fiction had failed to do. Despite Twain's tongue-in-cheek theoretical framework for his own use of quotations in the introduction to *The American Claimant*, he offered no cohesive or consistent ideas on what it meant for him to use the language of others in this way. Gysin and Burroughs on the other hand were so thorough

in their theorizing that their manifestos read like recipes for others to replicate.

A decade after the first cut-ups, Kathy Acker basically took these recipes and rewrote the whole cookbook, becoming a widely celebrated writer of found-language fiction. Almost all of her books contain some element of collage or paraphrase. Her best-known novel, *Blood and Guts in High School* (1984), borrows language from Jean Genet and paraphrases the entirety of Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*. Acker's *Great Expectations* (1983) begins with the first three sentences of Dickens' classic novel and later incorporates long passages from Pierre Guyotat's *eden eden eden* and Pauline Réage's *Story of O* and *Return to the Chateau*. These books made Acker the Penguin Classic she is today, but her novel *Don Quixote, which was a dream* (1986) was particularly groundbreaking in its musical use of quotations. At one point, Acker repeats multiple paragraphs from de Sade's *Juliette* two-to-four times over the course of six pages. The effect is a kind of hypnotic, erotic musicality that both emphasizes the artifice of the language and, as Chris Kraus points out in *After Kathy Acker*, channels the minimalist methods of Terry Riley and Steve Reich.

Even though Gysin, Burroughs, and Acker are now the poster children for the found-language fiction of their times, plenty of other fiction

writers produced citational texts in the latter part of the 20th century. Indeed, there was a proliferation of these works. Some took the form of “autobiographies,” with texts like George Perec’s *A Man Asleep* (1967) and Walter Abish’s “What Else,” from his short story collection *99: The New Meaning* (1990); both of which repurpose the writings of classic authors such as Melville, Kafka, Dante, Barthes, and Sartre while purporting to tell the story of one life. Other writers of the time adopted more free-form, associative methods for collecting and arranging quotations (a la “the collage novel”). Michel Butor’s *Mobile: Study for a Representation of the United States* (1962) takes the form of a hybrid travelogue and commonplace book, being comprised of found road signs and advertisements, fragments of newspaper articles and historical accounts gathered during a road trip across the United States. Ishmael Reed’s *Mumbo Jumbo* (1972) also collects language from newspapers and history books as well as found photographs, illustrations, and passages from a total of 104 books. Reed uses these quotations and images to add texture and disjunction to his narrative, but, as Henry Louis Gates, Jr. points out, also to create a polyphony of perspectives that directly challenges originality.

Mumbo Jumbo is central to another significant trend in the citational fiction of this era: the use of quotation to counter the master narratives

of Western history. Eduardo Galeano's three-volume, 1,128-page "Memoria del fuego" series (*Los nacimientos*, 1982; *Las caras y las máscaras*, 1984; *El siglo del viento*, 1986) stands with Reed's novel as one of the most important of these texts. Described by Galeano as a mosaic, "Memoria del fuego" is both an archive and history of Latin America composed of hundreds of found folktales, historical accounts, academic monographs, official government documents, and works of fiction. The trilogy also tests the limits of the encyclopedic novel, pushing the form's archival qualities to the extremes—Galeano provides no narrative or original language outside of the archive he collects. In the United States, several other authors took on Western culture and its master narratives, with a particular focus on North American colonialism and racism. Paul Metcalf's *Genoa* (1965) and Rosmarie Waldrop's *A Form/ of Taking/ It All* (1990) combine extensive quotations from historical accounts of American and European colonialism and classic works of literature into abstract narratives that confront these legacies. Metcalf's quoting contains a personal dimension as he borrows much of his language from the oeuvre of his great grandfather, Herman Melville. In *Annotations* (1995), John Keene blends autofiction with quotations from historical texts on Missouri, St. Louis, the South, and the legacy of slavery. Keene's quickly shifting

juxtapositions of original and found language create a text that speaks both the personal and the communal in the same breath.

The 90s saw the creation of the first publishing house committed to citational fiction. Founded in 1993 by Chicago-based artist and writer Sally Alatalo, Sara Ranchouse Books's pulp series exclusively published books that repurpose language and expose patterns, from the humorous to the troubling, in genre fiction—particularly romance, noir, and dime-store westerns. One of Alatalo's own novels in the series, *The Continental Caper*, exposes a sexist trope in detective novels in which female characters are described almost exclusively by their hair. Other titles in the Sara Ranchouse pulp series include Doug Huston's *Vast* (1994), a cowboy novel made entirely out of dozens of other westerns, and Kevin Riordan's *The Big Waste Land* (1993), a rewriting of Eliot's *The Waste Land* in the language of noir novels.

The digital age has been fertile ground for creating large-scale works like these. With increased access to personal computers and the Internet, writers have been able to easily download or copy and paste large amounts of text and even full databases. *The Best American Book of the 20th Century* (2014) by the Paris-based collaborative Société Réaliste's is exemplary in this practice. It draws from the findings of "The 20th-Century American Bestsellers Database," which

catalogues the 10 bestselling books of each year of the 20th century. Société Réaliste meticulously gathered and chronologized one sentence from each of the 1,000 books in this database and created a single novel from the fragments. This strict formal arrangement makes *The Best American Book* a true hybrid narrative-archive as well as a highly fragmentary reading experience.

A Vocabulary

It's now 2023, and there are more found-language fictions than there is room to discuss here. In spite of this, we still don't have a clear vocabulary for these works. While "centos," "commonplaces," and "cut-ups" have been with us for many years, the term most used by the fiction world today is "the collage novel." I have relied mostly on another term, "citational fiction," because of the confusion around "collage novel" in the publishing world. To give an example, two of the leading critical texts on "collage novels," Jonathan Lethem's "The Ecstasy of Influence" (Harpers, 2007) and David Shields's *Reality Hunger* (Random House, 2010), use the term in diametrically different ways.

Lethem takes a literal approach to "collage novel," using it to describe Eduardo Paolozzi's *Kex* (1966), a novel comprised entirely of found

language. In Lethem's words, Paolozzi's collage novel is "cobbled from crime novels and newspaper clippings." Paolozzi has taken found texts, cut them up, and arranged them in a new context and a new narrative—he has used no words of his own. In *Reality Hunger*, Shields uses the term in a more metaphorical way to talk about works which have less to do with found language and more to do with disjunctive, non-linear writing. For Shields, the collage novel is exemplified by Renata Adler's *Speedboat* (1976), which "captivates by its jagged and frenetic changes of pitch and tone and voice." Adler "confides, reflects, tells a story, aphorizes, undercuts the aphorism, then undercuts that . . . She changes subjects like a brilliant schizophrenic, making irrational sense." To Shields, Adler's *Speedboat* is a "collage novel," and yet it is an entirely original text; it does not incorporate any found language.

The confusion over "collage novel" doesn't end here; it's ubiquitous. Some scholars and writers understand collage à la Lethem, as the juxtaposition of found language. For instance, *The Rutledge Companion to Experimental Literature* defines the collage novel as a "text extracted from a source and given new meaning in a new context." However, most scholars and writers use the term metaphorically like Shields to describe works that are fragmentary and combine different media and different modes of original writing

— from photographs and drawings to poetry to prose to fake official documents and beyond. Google search results for “collage novel” mostly show works in this category (as well as Max Ernst’s “collage novels”), and most of the books that publishers market as “collage novels” employ fragmentation and nonlinear plots but no found language.

This confusion leaves nearly all of the works discussed in this essay without a real term to call their own. It’s not surprising then that this kind of writing has remained in obscurity. Without vocabulary, there can be no sustained dialogue; without dialogue there can be no community or tradition. In light of this lack, I want to suggest two alternative terms: citational fiction and literary supercuts.

“Citational fiction” encompasses all works of fiction that incorporate a significant amount of found language. This would include “cut-up” texts and essentially everything but the poetry and nonfiction mentioned above. A work of citational fiction might be made entirely of found language, or it might scatter quotations throughout an otherwise original-language text. It is an umbrella term that can be used to describe any form of fiction: novel, novella, short story, and beyond. Unlike “collage novels” citational fiction is agnostic as to whether the text itself is fragmentary or linear—if the work incorporates

more quotations than your common novel, then it's likely a citational fiction. A citational fiction could read as fractured as a work of modernism or as smooth as mass-market literary fiction. Every text mentioned above can be described as a citational fiction.

Citational fictions also include a subcategory: "the literary supercut." Literary supercuts are texts made entirely or almost entirely of found language. They are distinct from most citational fiction in the percentage of quotations that are used in a given work; while a work of citational fiction might include 10-70% found material, a literary supercut would contain 95-100%. A literary supercut might take the form of an entire novel or a short story; it might be a short text thrown into the middle of a "traditional" novel; it might come at the beginning or the end as in *Moby-Dick* and *The American Claimant*. Whatever form it takes, every literary supercut is made of an unbroken string of quotations, unless an author chooses to add conjunctions or other brief interventions to smooth out awkward transitions between fragments. (Though for me, personally, it seems the point of a supercut is to find and arrange patterns in such a way that no original language is necessary.)

Literary supercuts stand out in the genre of citational fiction because of their radical rejection of originality. A text that relies entirely on

found material inherently contains no original language; it instead examines the original language of others and even rethinks one of fiction's most fundamental principles: invention. In this way, literary supercuts turn writing into a kind of editorial or archival labor. They also challenge the hierarchical relationship between author and reader, transforming both into archivists studying the same material. The writer might have arranged the found language, but in many ways she is just as removed from it as the reader. Examples of particularly archival supercuts mentioned above include Konrad Bayer's *Der Kopf des Vitus Bering*, Eduardo Galeano's "Memoria del fuego" series, and Soci t  R aliste's *The Best American Book of the 20th Century*.

Literary supercuts are also unique in their reliance on patterns. In fact, in a supercut all you have is patterns. The accumulation of similarities across source materials or within a single source can reveal biases, leanings, and cliches in how we write, think, and exist in the world. Gathering patterns into narratives brings these patterns into sharper relief; materials that may otherwise appear dissimilar when placed in conjunction with one another reveal commonalities that might have remained invisible. Instead, a full story emerges, sometimes as short as a flash fiction or as long as a novel. Such narratives operate on two planes: there's the intratextual story on the page

and an extratextual story. If the source material is other fiction, this extratextual story might be about the history of literature and canonization. If a writer sources government documents, the extratextual story might comment on bureaucracy or the rules that govern everyday living.

I am not the originator of the term, “literary supercut.” To my knowledge, it was first coined by *Vulture* magazine in 2012 to describe a collection of the 87 times that someone says the full name “Christian Grey” in *Fifty Shades of Grey*. The term is itself borrowed from another genre—the YouTube “supercut,” in which a video artist collects patterns from movies and television and arranges them into a repetitive montage. The effect is often funny: Every moment Nicholas Cage freaks out on film or the many times Bill Gates says “uh” in interviews. Programs like *Last Week Tonight* and *The Daily Show* have used this method to criticize the hypocritical behavior and the mechanical talking points of politicians and the news media.

Texts can operate the same way, using repetition to reveal something surprising about their source material. George Saunders does this in *Lincoln in the Bardo* (2017) when he collects 37 conflicting descriptions of Abraham Lincoln:

His eyes dark grey, clear, very expressive, and varying with every mood.

In "The Life of Abraham Lincoln," by Isaac N. Arnold.

His eyes were bright, keen, and a luminous gray color.

In "Lincoln's Photographs: A Complete Album," by Lloyd Ostendorf, account of Martin P. S. Rindlaub.

Gray-brown eyes sunken under thick eyebrows, and as though encircled by deep and dark wrinkles.

In "Personal Recollections of Mr. Lincoln," by the Marquis de Chambrun.

His eyes were a bluish brown.

In "Harndon's Informants," edited by Douglas L. Wilson and Rodney O. Davis, account of Robert Wilson.

His eyes were blueish-gray in color—always deep in shadow, however, from the upper lids, which were unusually heavy.

In "Six Months in the White House: The Story of a Picture," by F. B. Carpenter.

Kind blue eyes, over which the lids half
dropped.

In “With Lincoln from Washington to
Richmond in 1865,” by John. S. Barnes.

Toward the end of Saunders’s five-page supercut, more than a dozen perspectives clash over Lincoln’s supposed ugliness or beauty. Saunders’s supercut comments both on the fragility of memory and the hyperbolic ways authors describe historical figures. In the end, we learn more about these authors themselves than we do about Lincoln.

While Saunders uses the supercut method sparingly—there are only a few instances in *Lincoln in the Bardo*—other literary supercuts span entire novels. For example, a number of Sara Ranchouse titles come to mind. Sally Alatalo’s *A Rearranged Affair* (1994) was composed by taking 188 different romance novels, physically pulling them apart, and recollating every page of every book into an edition of 188 new novels. Because of the romance genre’s strict conventions, Alatalo was able to maintain a fairly cohesive narrative throughout each of these inherently disjunctive books.

Apart from being brief or voluminous, critical or metafictional, literary supercuts are also edited together in drastically different ways. Some authors choose to sculpt easily readable narratives while others, like Alatalo, create texts that main-

tain all of the fragmentation that comes with a stricter, systematic form of composition. Angelo Suárez's *Philippine English: A Novel* (2015) and Jez Burrows's *Dictionary Stories* (2018) show the possibilities of these different approaches. Each use similar source material—dictionary example sentences—but to different ends. Burrows's book collects these fragments into smooth, finely edited short stories that reveal the humor and absurdity in them. The fact that he was able to create such cohesion is a testament to the omnipresence of common themes and patterns in the source material. In *Philippine English*, Suárez adopts a more systematic approach, retyping, in their original order, each example sentence from a dictionary used for compulsory English education classes in the Philippines. By publishing an unedited archive, Suárez asks the reader to join him as co-detective, scanning the text for found patterns that easily reveal the colonialist, U.S.-centric perspective behind this instructive language.

* * *

Vocabulary presents just one of the challenges to this kind of writing. It might even be the easiest to resolve. When I asked Jonathan Lethem why a decade after the publications of his “The Ecstasy of Influence” and Shields's *Reality Hunger* there

weren't more citational fictions being published, he answered with one word: "Capitalism." This makes sense given the publishing world's fixation on producing "original" intellectual property to sell for translation, film, and other adaptation rights; this is where the real money is, and few authors, agents, and publishers would want to move against the grain of this system that, if they are lucky, might reward them handsomely. As a writer of literary supercuts, I've been met with everything from rejections peppered with legalese ("...we don't reprint *anything*. First serial [rights] literally means 'first,' and we stick to that, always have. So this would be a non-starter with us...") to striking repudiations of the United States's Fair Use law, which protects citational works that transform and critique their source material. Many agents and editors won't touch a citational work.

And yet these works exist. They have been published by the smallest of small presses and, somehow, the biggest of the Big Five. They go back as far as the 9th century and have appeared as recently as Kathryn Scanlan's *Kick the Latch* and Ashton Politanoff's *You'll Like It Here*. They are an important part of literary history and our contemporary moment. They offer readers access to a wider range of reading experiences and ways of seeing the world. They directly repurpose, invert, contort, critique and intervene into prob-

lematic and even dangerous language. Citational fictions and literary supercuts are with us. They are modes as complex and significant as any in the writer's toolkit. And they will stay with us as long as there are readers to read, writers to write, and books to pull down from the shelf to start copying.

BIBLIOGRAPHY OF CITATIONAL FICTION AND THE LITERARY SUPERCUT

This bibliography attempts to detail the histories of “citational fiction” and “literary supercuts.” While citational writing and literary supercuts can be found in every writing discipline, I have focused on fiction here because, as a writer of fiction supercuts, I was interested in discovering similar works to my own and because, while there is a lot of documentation of citational writing in the poetry and nonfiction worlds (see texts on conceptual poetry and autotheory), there has not been much in the fiction world outside of the writings of Brion Gysin, William S. Burroughs, Jonathan Lethem, and David Shields. Because these other disciplines are important for understanding the histories of citational fiction—nothing exists in a vacuum cleaner—I have also included in-progress sections on non-fiction and related literature. You’ll also find

an in-progress section on relevant theory and criticism.

I want to extend many thanks to Jonathan Lethem and David Shields, whose previous critical work, bibliographic writing, and generous suggestions have helped me to build out this list.

Lastly, throughout this bibliography you will find asterisks before certain entries. These works are either supercuts themselves or include a short supercut alongside other forms of writing.

—TC

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