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Dealing with the Digital: Literary Media, Mediated Narratives, and Sketchy Politics

Amanda Leopold

Abstract: Digital texts and literary media saturate our daily lives as contemporary readers tech-savvy subjects. In the postprint era, how can reading practices and paradigms of the English discipline help us make sense of these new literary objects? To answer this question, I propose a theoretical framework that reorients the role of the literary critic towards interdisciplinary methods that will accommodate for the formal particularities of the digital text. I employ these theories by performing a close reading of mediated narratives across several contiguous sketches of *Saturday Night Live*'s programming between 2015 and 2016. The work that follows will demonstrate the potentials for the critical treatment of media-as-literature as a practice both grounded in and evolved from the traditional function of the literary critic.

Keywords: digital text, new media theory, bricolage, transmediation, digital humanities, liberalism, Saturday Night Live

Introduction

This project begins with a query central to the English discipline: what is literature, and what should we do with it? I've studied English in a moment of literary expansiveness. The eruption of online publications, and the accessibility of word-processing technologies are radically redefining the ways we think about authors, authorship, and the production of knowledge. Yet, for a chunk of my time as an undergraduate, I found myself in classrooms still operating under relatively narrow approaches to the literary. I wanted to pursue a project that could address a dissonance I felt between the academic treatment of the literary and my personal belief that literary practices need not be confined to the study of canonical Literature. In other words, if the popular contemporary text is marked by its web-based spreadability, then the methodologies of the practicing English scholar are due for a significant update.

I developed this project with the intention of exploring alternative modalities of reading and writing that might accommodate for textual digitization. To what extent can we employ a literary vocabulary as a means of navigating the proliferation of web-based texts and mediated narratives? What can we learn from the digital text through a close study of its literary qualities?

I was interested in exploring how the language and practices of literary studies can be used as a functional tool-kit for making sense of the digital texts that saturate our experiences as contemporary subjects. My work, then, is two-fold. First, I articulate a theoretical framework in order to address the formal particularities of the digital text, and propose a few critical methods we can employ within literary disciplines in order to make sense of these new literary object. From here, I perform a close reading of mediated narratives across several contiguous sketches

from *Saturday Night Live*'s programming between 2015 and 2016 in order to demonstrate the potentials for literary approaches to mediated narratives.

My methods are largely informed by Gerard Genette's "rule of bricolage" in "Structuralism and Literary Criticism." Genette sees literary criticism as an "extraction of various elements from various already-constituted wholes" for the sake of "a new whole in which none of the re-used elements will necessarily be used as originally intended" (63). I performed the role of critic-as-bricoleur in the process of cobbling together a range of related-but-disparate SNL sketches that work together as a composite political narrative. Insofar as my work serves a dual function—to propose and practice a literary approach to mediated narratives—I imagine this paper as an embodied practice of Genette's theories on the function of the critic: "to produce meaning with the work of others, but also to produce his own work out of this meaning" (64). An assemblage of digital sketches might appear, on its face, as an object misplaced in the literary disciplines; I've wondered, at times, whether this project would be legible only as a media studies project masquerading as an English paper. My commitment to literary theory confounds these doubts, in part by closing the imagined rift between the fields of new media and literary studies. While this piece can be regarded as a practice within the broader tradition of literary criticism, I hope my treatment of media as literature will gesture to the potentials for the role of the critic in the digital age.

Theoretical Framework: Recalibrating the Role of the Literary Critic in the Digital Age

The role of the literary critic is a locus for theorizing how the traditional functions of literary studies are subject to change under the conditions of mass textual digitization. In the

space that follows, I will synthesize new media theory and modern literary criticism in order to articulate the formal particularities of the digital text; from here, I will discuss the ways in which mediated narratives can be read literarily. By re-orienting the role of the critic relative to the mediatization of contemporary literature, I create a space for my literary engagements with textual media in the second part of this paper.

1. Text as Tech: Reading Benjamin in the Digital Age

When I first approached the task of articulating the new political, aesthetic, and formal functions of digital texts relative to their print counterparts, I turned to Walter Benjamin's *The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility*.

Benjamin argues that modern technological developments alter the intentionality behind artistic creation. Reflecting on the rise of film and photography, Benjamin recognizes the proliferation of "work designed for reproducibility," a sort of art that is created for the sake of its dissemination and popular consumption. Under the conditions of technological reproducibility, Benjamin claims, "the whole social function of art is revolutionized. Instead of being founded on ritual, it is based on a different practice: politics" (25).

I absorbed Benjamin's language in the most inchoate stages of this project. "Art will tackle the most difficult and most important tasks wherever it is able to mobilize the masses," Benjamin claims, and I took those words as prescient. In contrast to the exclusivity of authorship assumed under print hegemony, the accessibility of online platforms for writing, self-publication and the textual proliferation that follows, carves a potentially lawless space for contemporary reading and writing. Much as Benjamin observed in his own time, the rise of the digital text as a

technology of textual reproduction has seen to “the emancipation of specific artistic practices from the service ritual” (25).

As interlocutor between author and audience, language and listener, the contemporary literary critic must direct their attention to the formal, aesthetic, and political qualities of the digital text. The liberatory effects of contemporary textual digitization will become more pronounced when critics leverage their voices to communicate the political and aesthetic particularities of the digital text.

2. Literary Traditions and Digital Bricolage

While the study of digital texts and mediated narratives might be regarded (by some traditionalists) as a far cry from the purview of literary disciplines, I argue that my treatment of media-as-literature should be read as a recalibration of the traditional role of the critic under contemporary conditions of textual digitization.

In “The Function of Criticism at the Present Time,” Matthew Arnold describes the central task of criticism: “to see the object [literature] as it really is,” and “to make the best ideas prevail.” In the face of a vast and ever-growing body of literature, the critic’s job is to introduce new literature, to promote and make visible certain literary works in order to guide their potential audiences in their own literary engagement.

The Arnoldian objective is fleshed out in “Structuralism and Literary Criticism,” wherein Gerard Genette articulates three major functions of literary criticism: a critical function (“judging and appreciating recent works with a view to helping the public make up its mind”); a scientific function (“study... of the conditions of existence of literary works”); and a literary function, which defines criticism as a form of literature, and the critic as author. By articulating the literary

function of the critic as bricoleur, and of the “secondary character” of his work—criticism—as bricolage, Genette synthesizes the functions of literary criticism to posit the “dual function of the critic’s work, which is to produce meaning with the work of others, but also to produce his own work out of this meaning” (64).

Genette also considers the role of the critic as subject to change based on the ongoing formal evolution of contemporary literature:

The day when the Book ceases to be the principal vehicle of knowledge, will not literature have changed its meaning once again? Perhaps we are quite simply living through the last days of the Book. This continuing adventure ought to make us more attentive to certain episodes of the past: we cannot go on speaking of literature as if its existence were self-evident, as if its relation to the world and to men had never varied (76).

The critical study of digital texts is an acknowledgement of the fact that print no longer is that “principal vehicle of knowledge,” and a recognition of the fact that literature and literary studies need not be limited to the language of books.

Critical treatments of digital texts might also serve to address the particular historical context within which contemporary narratives are embedded. In “Against Tradition,” Marilyn Butler challenges her audience to treat the aesthetic and formal qualities of literature as “products of a particular history” (33). When literary criticism is “localized in respect to time and place, and directed to the understanding of specific works,” critics can interrogate literature as an artifact of its historical context, and help their audience “to understand how writing functions in its world” (44). A critical practice that engages with digital texts as literary objects will have the

potential to address the nature of contemporary reading and writing as products and experiences of this particular historical moment.

The question of context illuminates the political function of the literary critic. In *The Liberal Imagination*, Lionel Trilling considers the field of literature as an archive of sentiments and ideas inflected by dominant modes of political thought and ideology, thereby “assum[ing] the inevitable intimate, if not always obvious, connection between literature and politics” (xi-xii). The role of the critic, according to Trilling, is to guide his audience towards a reading practice that troubles the ways in which dominant political ideologies operate through language and literature.

The formal nature of the digital text intensifies the political function of the literary critic. Drawing from John Fiske’s media theories, we can regard popular digital texts and mediated narratives “site[s] of popular engagement and involvement” that reflect and inform dominant political discourse, perpetuating and reproducing existing power structures (8). In her narratological study of popular American reality television, Brenda Weber demonstrates the merits of treating mediated narratives as cultural texts as the basis for understanding the ways in which popular media plays a central role in constructing the “broader cultural imagination” of its national audience (7). Much as Trilling regarded modern literature as an archive of dominant social/political ideology, Weber’s work reveals the ways in which close readings of popular media as literary objects can “offer significant information about the particular historical moment and cultural circumstances out of which those narratives arise” (20).

In the preface to *New Media and American Literature*, Tara McPherson, Patrick Jagoda, and Wendy HK Chun engage with “the crisis of the novel”—or the vague anxiety felt among

literary traditionalists with regards to mass textual digitization—by focusing their energies towards updating paradigms for critical engagement with contemporary (and increasingly digital) literary scholarship. Though they acknowledge the traditional impulse to divorce the field of “New Media” from “American Literature,” the authors articulate the ways that digital texts defy this dichotomy. The study of contemporary literature and digital texts cannot be contained neatly in either formal disciplines of media or literature; as such, the authors posit a critical methodology that encourages readers to engage with literature as media, and media as literature.

As texts undergo a medial shift from print to screen, the role of literary scholar is central to the work involved in making sense of that shift; after all, “[i]t is not the job of the scholar to defend the literary from the technological but, rather, to attend with some care to the precise ways in which literature and technology constitute one another” (616). In a moment of literary proliferation due in large part to textual digitization, contemporary scholars must continue to perform their traditional tasks as interlocutor, but with an added impetus: as the formal function of texts becomes increasingly contingent on their digital mediums, “the job of the scholar is to understand how the medium affects and shapes knowledge” (616). The contemporary literary critic is responsible for the interdisciplinary work that will incorporate New Media into the field of American Literature by way of new pedagogies of reading and writing that will treat new media as a form of literature, and that will engage with literature through its various mediations.

3. Formal Functions of the Digital Text

Much of my desire to pursue readings of contemporary texts across multiple mediations and various digital platforms is informed by Sherry Turkle’s new media theories on the formal particularities of the digital text. In *Life on the Screen: Identity in the Age of the Internet*, Turkle

treats the digital text as an artifact of postmodernity—a textual embodiment of “the instability of meanings and the lack of universal and knowable truths” (18). The most apparent formal aspects of the digital text—namely, the user-friendly features embedded within screen-based mediations—encourage a more active mode of readership than its print counterparts. Turkle claims, “The tools of reading and writing on the screen serve as ‘objects to think with,’ resulting in ‘a body of work active not passive, a canon not frozen in perfection but volatile with contending human motive’” (18).

Writing in the ‘90s, Turkle recognizes some of the formal possibilities for reader-centric literary practices latent in texts mediated by screens and digital servers. This broad argument is applied to contemporary iterations of the digital text in Henry Jenkins, Mizuko Ito, and danah boyd’s collaborative work, *Participatory Culture in a Networked Era*. The authors claim that the formal and aesthetic functions of digital texts encourage not just active reader response but an ongoing community of participation and mutual learning. Like Turkle, the authors reference the formal functions latent in the digital text—its accessibility, its interactivity, its user-friendliness and enticements to play as a mode of critical engagement. Digital texts and their formal technologies of participatory culture create spaces for “imagining - and working to achieve - new ways of connecting, coordinating, collaborating, and creating” (184).

With regards to the formal function of digital texts, there exists a disparity between the temporally-specific contexts of their production and initial dissemination, on the one hand, and the proliferate contexts for their consumption and (re)production beyond that original context. The treatment of media-as-literature must deal with the ephemeral nature of the digital text. In “TXTual Practice,” Rita Raley recognizes “the task of the critic” in dealing with mediated

literature is “to understand its social uses and embeddedness in a particular historical moment” (8). She goes: “The cultural consciousness of text events far exceeds the actual participants, so it is possible to claim that they are commonly accessible even if they are not commonly (actually) experienced” (23).

4. Digital Humanities / Comparative Textual Media

A brief survey of pedagogical approaches in the emerging fields of Digital Humanities and Comparative Textual Media Studies will demonstrate the merits of incorporating new media into literary disciplines, as well as the extent to which this re-imagined role of the critic is already being practiced.

Digital Humanities is an emerging interdisciplinary field of scholarship devoted studying the ways in which media affects teaching, learning, research, and invention within the humanities. The methodologies particular to Digital Humanities scholars re-articulate the ways in which new media and literary disciplines are intuitively related. Media scholar Matthew Kirschenbaum illuminates the potential for projects in the Digital Humanities to address the materiality and mediality that drives the contemporary writing process. Similarly, with “the simultaneous explosion of interest in e-reading and e-book devices” and “the advent of large-scale text digitization projects,” Digital Humanities encourage new approaches to literary criticism to address the new aesthetic functions of mediated texts (6).

The critical practice of Comparative Textual Media provides another framework for the literary treatment of mediated texts. In their work, *Comparative Textual Media: Transforming the Humanities in the Postprint Era*, N. Katherine Hayles and Jessica Pressman illuminate the ways in which literature is always already mediated—regardless of whether its platform is a

printed page or a digital screen. Speaking as scholars who have adopted a Comparative Textual Media framework for studying contemporary literature, Hayles and Pressman acknowledge both the relevance of print text and the end of print hegemony, a discursive move that serves to historicize print media while creating space for critical engagement with forms of new media as cultural texts.

A CTM framework fits nicely within the broader scope of Digital Humanities as its methodologies prescribe interdisciplinary collaboration within the humanities, encouraging “cooperation between disciplines focusing on visual and aural forms” within “text-based disciplines such as literature and language departments.” This approach proves particularly important for contemporary art and expression, “when boundaries between textual, visual, and aural forms... are difficult or impossible to draw” (xiii). By adopting CTM methods in literary disciplines, critics can begin to account for the messiness of texts that are inflected by the always overlapping media/technoscapes that shape digital reading and writing experiences.

These approaches to the critical study of digital texts reveal the possibilities for future projects within the discipline of literary studies. My literary approach to the study of digital texts reveals the possibilities for future projects within the discipline of literary studies. The work that follows, then, is not just a critical practice, but an embodied argument for English Departments to expand their conceptions of literature in order to create discursive space for the critical study of media-as-literature.

Benjaminian Interlude

A project that strives to understand the relationships between language, literature, politics, and the digital is necessarily concerned with Trump's rise to power as a digital demagogue. As much as I regarded the proliferation of digital texts as something positive on the outset of my project, this vague optimism was tempered over time as I watched the election season unfold. The Trump campaign amplified its yawps by way of the same online platforms that simultaneously allow for the rise and spread of oppositional political discourse. I resisted engaging with that discord until I realized what a stupid waste of time this year-long thing would be if it couldn't serve as a space for wrestling with some of these most obvious symptoms of mass textual digitization.

I returned to *The Work of Art* in the those first days following Trump's election, recognizing that Benjamin got a lot right in his meditations on the political. Over the course of Trump's campaign, we observed a fascism that "seeks salvation in granting expression to the masses—but on no account granting them rights" (41). In the act of retracing the mediated events that contributed to Trump's success as a presidential candidate, we see a fascism that operates largely through "the aestheticizing of politics" (42).

In "The Ontology of the Photographic Image," Andre Bazin articulates the preeminence of the "psychology of the image": "In spite of any objections our critical spirit may offer, we are forced to accept as real the existence of the object reproduced" (8). These effects are intensified under the proliferation of the digital spectacle across global mediascapes. In the case of the election, then, Trump's body—his platform, his celebrity—occupied Bazin's theoretical space as that "object reproduced"; through the pornographic coverage of his campaign, Trump inserted himself into a national consciousness. "The photographic image is the object itself," Bazin notes,

“the object freed from the conditions of time and space that govern it.” The Trump spectacle became reality; his politic became *the* politic; and, despite our resistance to take Trump seriously, his platform “produce[d] an image that is a reality of nature, namely an hallucination that is also a fact” (9).

Returning to Benjamin’s theories alongside Bazin’s proved essential to my ability to articulate the objectives behind this project. The rise of a digital demagogue reveals what we’ve known for quite some time—that some of the most culturally-significant pieces of contemporary literature and popular media fall under the formal umbra of the digital text. Moreover, the full-blown mediatization of American politics reinforces the merits of engaging with the digital text as a literary artifact of its historical context. This revelation creates the space for new approaches to literary criticism that can enable us to engage with the literary qualities of digital texts and mediated narratives. The critical treatment of digital texts will illuminate the discursive functions and cultural saliency of mediated narratives, while simultaneously creating a space to engage with American politics by way of language and literature.

I rearticulated the objectives behind my project at the end of the first semester; when I returned to work after winter term, I was eager to start applying my theory to digital texts. The only problem was that I had no idea where to direct them. My primary text could be anything, I thought—political blogs, niche journalism, critical meme accounts. My initial survey of potential texts were frenetic—de-centered but all fraught with some desperate longing to re-center; I spread myself thin trying to wrangle with political discourse rendered hip and reputable. The disarray of that particular stage of my project is indicative of the central paradox of my endeavors as a critic: a commitment to deconstruction in theory, a deep longing for structure in

practice. (After all, I would not be where I am, finishing off a year-long thesis and research project if it weren't for my baggage—that my loose-cannon, anything-goes literary aesthetic thrives under academic paradigms.)

Not just the shock of Trump's election, but the coincidental passing of Leonard Cohen proved a bit too much for my normie Jewish family. In the wake of the double-blow, I received a message from my sister, which turned out to be a link to the Cold Open sketch from SNL's post-election episode, November 12, 2017. Decked out in full Clinton-drag, Kate McKinnon performs an affectively indulgent rendition of Cohen's "Hallelujah," a funeral dirge targeted to the central audience of the bewildered American liberal. A meditation in earnest, the sketch is three minutes long with no punch line; at the very end of her performance, McKinnon addresses the camera with tears in her eyes: "I'm not giving up, and neither should you." The crowd applauds, and McKinnon is lauded as icon, civil servant, and embodied locus of liberal hope.

McKinnon's Clinton/Cohen eulogy reads as a gesture to facilitate a broad, cultural grieving amongst a liberal American audience that felt Hillary's loss as somewhat of a tragedy. But what, then, can we make of the two years of programming that preceded this moment? Backtrack one month ago to SNL's October 1, 2016 Cold Open: McKinnon (as Clinton) is beside herself with glee, assuring her audience, with regards to the race, "it's just going so well... it's exactly how I'd always dreamed." Even more contemporarily, we see an eerily enthusiastic portrayal of Clinton in SNL's November 5, 2016 Cold Open: though her character emotes a healthy amount of incredulity ("What is happening?!" McKinnon exclaims, with

regards to Trump's popularity, "Is the whole world insane?") she remains staunch in her own self-confidence ("I'm not worried," she assures the audience).

I returned to the "Hallelujah" piece some months later on in my project, and began considering how that sketch could be read as digital text within a larger mediated narrative. I began retracing SNL's treatment of Hillary Clinton as a character over time—particularly as her character was initially molded in the fall of 2015, and then re-shaped over time, as SNL continued their ongoing coverage of the election season.

In *Media Matters*, John Fiske articulates the imperative for critical studies of popular media and mediated events: "We can no longer think of the media as providing secondary representations of reality; they affect and produce the reality that they mediate" (xv). While Fiske acknowledges the distinction between real events and their mediated representations, he eschews the notion that the "'real' is more important, significant, or even 'true' than the representation" (2). Far more complex than "a mere representation of what happened," Fiske claims, the media event "has its own reality, which gathers up into itself the reality of the event that may or may not have preceded it."

Fiske's media studies framework provides the impetus for my decision to apply my theoretical framework for the literary treatment of digital texts to a critical reading of SNL's election narrative. After surveying a range of SNL sketches from October 2015 through November 2016, I isolated several sketches from their original contexts (embedded within an episode), in effect curating a cohesive text from which we can read SNL's narratological treatment of the 2016 election season.

In order to read SNL's literary tactics of characterization and narrative development across time, space, and relevant news situation, these individual sketches must be read as connected texts within the same interstitial field of production and consumption. For this, the practice of literary criticism and the language of bricolage are essential to the task of making sense of SNL's narratological treatment of the 2016 presidential election. By treating this particular compilation of digital sketches as an aggregate mediated narrative, I will highlight the literary qualities of SNL's political narrative, and theorize on how their literary functions resonated with their central audience, a body of viewers I imagine as heavily populated by the moderate liberal American.

Sketchy Politics

I am reading SNL as a digital text in order to engage with the constructed figures of McKinnon-as-Clinton, David-as-Sanders, and Baldwin-as-Trump as characterological embodiments of popular liberal discourse targeted to popular national audience. While SNL can be broadly understood as a site of popular comedy, its contemporary iterations must be situated within the broader history of SNL as a producer of political commentary. Chevy Chase's brute, slapstick embodiments of Gerald Ford in SNL's inaugural season ignited a tradition of using the sketch as a textual site to comment on the state of national politics. To re-watch past articulations of this practice is to engage with a textual archive that reflects the broad attitudes and imaginaries of SNL's core audience.

SNL prides itself as a site of popular political humor; they are self-lauded as comedy with a positive political function. In an article published on nbcnews.com ("How 'Saturday Night

Live' Has Shaped American Politics" [09/16/2016]), the program is considered "an equal opportunity offender, mocking Democrats and Republicans mercilessly, and making judgement calls about their foibles that traditional media either couldn't or shouldn't." Looking back on the explosive popularity of SNL's takes on past elections, the piece makes several hefty claims. First, given its function as "equal opportunity offender," SNL "earned fans' trust in part by speaking truth to power." Next, given its accessibility and popularity, "the show can swiftly distill and cement public perceptions of current events." Finally, with regards to the then-impending 2017 presidential election, the piece claims, "the late-night comedy institution... will likely determine the winner once and for all."

There is a disparity between SNL's political function, in theory—"an equal opportunity offender," committed to a satire that "speak[s] truth to power"—and their engagement with politics, in practice. Over the course of the ten political sketches I analyze in my primary work, SNL's engagement with politics is rather shallow—cynical at times, but never particularly critical. Given the consistency to which their comedy fails to create space for social and cultural criticism, contemporary SNL should be regarded not as political media, but as a mediated representation of political aesthetics. SNL's treatment of Clinton, Sanders, and Trump operate under their producers' ongoing expectation of Hillary's nonnegotiable destiny—to cinch first democratic party nomination, and then, eventually, the presidency. While Clinton's character is caricatured and reproduced as a proverbial punching bag for liberal disappointment, her status as assumed president-elect is never seriously doubted, even and especially in moments when Sanders and Trump garnered more and more enthusiasm from their respective voting blocs.

SNL erred in their vested belief that their comedy would play a determining role in the election outcome. By engaging with the literary qualities of their sketches, I aim to grapple with the meaning of this particular series of sketches as a cultural text that reflects some of the ideological blind spots of moderate liberalism.

New media theories provide some of the logics for orienting this project within broader textual studies, as well as the vocabulary for articulating the mediated qualities of the central text I am examining. The formal nature of these sketches is in part defined by their original context—that is, live on NBC, airing sometime between 11:30PM-1AM, embedded within a larger episode of SNL, and thus beside other sketches, monologues, and commercial breaks.

My readings of these sketches occurred entirely outside their original contexts. I found the sketches through two SNL-affiliated web spaces--their YouTube channel (Saturday Night Live) and their central webpage (nbc.com/saturday-night-live). While the mediated situations of these texts are not entirely foreign from their initial premieres, my experience engaging with the sketches as online reproductions serves to highlight the ways in which various mediated platforms affect the ways we read digital texts.

Seeing as I am not a sociologist, I didn't "do" much with the data embedded within their web-based publications; I lack the tools for measuring virality within the context of this project. Still, the formal qualities of this text as a web-based archive are significant, especially as the user-friendly nature of SNL's webpages proved central to my process of cobbling together an aggregate text from many disparate parts. My ability to critically analyze SNL's political narrative as a cultural text would not be possible without their embeddedness within public digital archives.

The question of context re-emerges when we consider historical and material particularities of SNL's political narrative. If we engage with literature as an archive of the historical moment from which it is embedded, SNL becomes an artifact of cultural consciousness surrounding the events of the 2016 election season. Theories of transmediation provide a framework for understanding the formal functions of SNL's political narrative as a digital text. Jennifer Jones and Brenda Weber define transmediation as "the intensification of stories across diverse media platforms such as the internet, tabloids, and social media" (13). "Transmediated storytelling," then, refers to "the technique of creating a connected narrative experience across multiple platforms and formats"; despite this material confusion, the story maintains "an ontological and temporal coherence" in its reception, due in part to the conditions of "transmediated continuity," or "a perpetual now-ness, in which ideas circulated at one moment continue to have relevance in another, blending with new forms in new times to structure an eternal present" (13-14).

The language of transmediation helps ground the logics of reading many disparate sketches within the same interstitial field of reception. Despite the sprawling premiere dates of these individual pieces, the average SNL viewer understands sketches as logical parts of a coherent narrative under the conditions of transmediated continuity. My treatment of SNL sketches as an assemblage accounts for the ways in which contemporary audiences are accustomed to making narratological sense of pieces of media across time, space, and platform, as well as their capabilities for situating SNL's comedic narrative within broader transmediated narratives pertaining to the election.

Given their ongoing assumption of Hillary's destiny as 2017 president-elect, I imagine SNL's core audience to be a cross-section of liberal Americans with similarly moderate political convictions. For this, SNL's political sentiments reflect a strain "third way" liberalism that practices a "rejection of new left principles by moderate democrats as a means to power" (Surender, 15). Popularized under the Clinton Administration, third way politics are a mode of popular liberalism that re-calibrate agendas of the Left in order to counter radical Right rhetorics of neoconservatism. The resulting politic is necessarily moderate, center-Left, and SNL's commitment to a Clinton endorsement reproduces rhetorics of compromise under third-way logics. Especially with regards to their treatment of Sanders' character, SNL's consistent support of Clinton suggests the left must compromise in hopes of swaying voters from aligning themselves with neoconservative platforms.

So too can we read SNL's treatment of Clinton, Sanders, and Trump as it speaks to current state of the Democratic Party, which, as Thomas Frank argues in *Listen, Liberal*, has undergone a significant shift in political representation over the last fifty years--from a leftist party devoted working people and issues of inequality and comprehensive welfare reform, to a platform focused on the concerns of "high achieving affluent people," or, in other words, a "pop meritocracy" (30). Frank explains the central tenants of pop meritocratic ideologies:

Meritocracy is about winners, and ensuring that everyone has a chance to become one.

The areas in which the left has made the most significant progress... are the battles it has fought or is fighting in favor of making the meritocracy more meritocratic. It areas in which it has suffered its worst defeats—collective action to provide universal public

goods, mitigating rising income inequality—are those that fall outside the meritocracy’s purview (30).

Seeing as she was candidate with the highest qualifications for the presidency, Frank contends, the “party of professionals” was always positioned in support of Clinton, . This unequivocal support is reproduced throughout the series of SNL sketches; we see this in the construction of Clinton’s character as the most reasonable, respectable candidate, of Sanders’ character as laughably unfit for the status of Democratic party nominee, and of Trump’s character as automatically disqualified from the very potential of election due to his cartoonish lack of professional accolades. By engaging critically with the series of sketches within the same interstitial field of textual production, dissemination, and consumption, I will trace the ways in which SNL’s political narratives served to reproduce third way liberalism and Democratic party affiliation as pop meritocracy without critically engaging with their ideological baggage. In the process of catering to their central audience, SNL failed to perform their imagined function of “speaking truth to power,” and their texts were unable to do the critical work vested in comedic commentary.

Another way of getting at SNL’s political shortcomings is by articulating its limitations as a commercial text. All political conviction aside, SNL’s very viability as a text is contingent on its appeal to the “cult of the audience,” which, as Benjamin notes (albeit dramatically) in *The Work of Art*, serves to “reinforc[e] the corruption by which fascism is seeking to supplant the class consciousness of the masses” (33).

Despite their alleged commitment to “making judgement calls about [politicians’] foibles that traditional media either couldn’t or shouldn’t,” there are clear demarcations on the limits to

this function, especially given the complex relationship of SNL's producers-as-authors and their viewers-as-audience. As a site of commodified content, SNL is always produced under the objectives of audience appeal with clear commercial intent. SNL cannot do the work of critical comedic commentary, because such a critique would alienate its core audience--both from their moderate politics, and from their position as passive consumer. The dissonance between SNL's self-image as a positive site of critical commentary, and context of its commercial production explains the lack of substance in their political narratives. SNL's position within commercial structures impedes its ability to be political; the resulting content reproduces an aestheticized politic devoid of substance to serve the cult of the audience.

Textual Analysis

I. Hillary Clinton vs. Herself (October - December 2015)

“Hillary Clinton Bar Talk” (10/04/2015) delivers a peculiar scene: Kate McKinnon, decked out in full Clinton-drag, comes face-to-face with the real Hillary Clinton, who masquerades as an affable bartender named Val. SNL's construction of the Val character creates the space for Hillary Clinton to embody the role of the everyday, relatable American—or, in Val's self-identifying words, the “ordinary citizen who believes the Keystone Pipeline will destroy our environment.”

Clinton's on-screen doubling conveys a perverse kind of authenticity. Hillary Clinton's very presence and proximity to McKinnon codes McKinnon's performance as veritable; satirical, yes, but ultimately affirmed by that very person that SNL strives to (re)present. Within the world of the bar talk sketch, McKinnon's caricature makes as valid a claim to being “Hillary” as

Clinton's own fleshy form, and the Clinton-doubling creates a mutual space for pleasure and play. McKinnon-as-Clinton and Clinton-as-Val poke fun at Clinton's past fumbles as a politician, but these quips are made in good humor. For this, we can read the sketch as an insulated space for Hillary Clinton to recognize her past political errors as a mechanism for moving beyond them. This discursive strategy latent in the text is best captured in a moment of dialogue about gay marriage: "It really is great how long you've supported gay marriage," says Val of McKinnon-as-Clinton; "Yes," McKinnon agrees, but "I could've supported it sooner." After volleying back and forth on matter, the two move on to different subject matters; their performance of acknowledging, accepting, and moving past former foibles suggests their audience should do the same.

Such verbal negotiations between Clinton and her double perform didactically over the course of the sketch. While their dialogue gives verbal recognition to a liberal critique of Clinton as a presidential candidate, it also informs what to do with such a critique: to voice it politely—as the sensible liberal is wont to do—under the assumption that Clinton will receive such criticism in a civilized, productive manner. By the end of the sketch, McKinnon (as Clinton) suggests that she and Clinton (as Val) "bump hands in friendship." The two embrace and share a dance—a physical muddying of the leaky distinctions between McKinnon-as-Clinton and Clinton-as-Val. The role-play signifies the unification of Hillary Clinton's self as the appealing, charismatic citizen and the serious, and well-qualified candidate.

Hillary Clinton is re-doubled later in Season 41 in "A Hillary Christmas" (12/20/2015), a sketch where Kate McKinnon, playing the role of present-day Clinton, receives a visit from Amy Poehler, playing the role of Clinton from the past, circa 2008. Their conversation centers around

the state of the 2016 presidential election. McKinnon cannot conceal her excitement from her second self: “We’re going to be president!” Poehler greets McKinnon’s sheer optimism with a cautionary tale: “On Christmas Eve, 2007, I was cocky too... And then someone named Barack Obama stumbled out of a soup kitchen with a basketball and a cigarette and stole my life!”

“It’s different this time,” McKinnon claims: “I’m running against Bernie ‘Never Heard of Him’ Sanders [...] a Human Birkenstock [...] Mama’s got this presidency in the bag, so let’s, uh, pound to that.” When Poehler learns the republican front-runner is Donald Trump, she collapses in a paroxysm of delight: “Oh my god! We’re going to be president!”

Poehler and McKinnon’s side-by-side caricatures communicate the merits of Clinton as presidential candidate based on her characterological deservingness. The sketch promotes the logic that Clinton will become president because she is a hard worker, an experienced politician, and, perhaps most importantly underpop meritocratic rhetorics, because she believes in herself.

The language of SNL’s Clinton-on-Clinton dialogue functions to confirm and reveal the sentiments of the SNL audience. The moderate, well-humored liberal consumes Hillary’s various caricatures across time and space; the jokes operate under the assumption that, in spite of her cartoonish shortcomings, Hillary deserves to be president. McKinnon’s performance further grounds Hillary’s bid for office by communicating several other assumptions pertaining to her competition: that Bernie’s no-named-ness is grounds for his automatic disqualification, and that Trump’s superficial ridiculousness will see to his eventual elimination as well. These assumptions communicate a message for any liberals falling outside the Hillary camp as well: hop on board; there is no other “sensible” option. These initial treatments of Clinton foster an

imaginative textual space wherein the audience is encouraged to engage with Clinton's future presidency not as a likelihood, but as a truth latent in moderate liberal rationalities.

II. Dealing with Sanders

The character of Bernie Sanders, as contender for the democratic party nominee, makes his first debut in "Democratic Debate Cold Open" (10/17/15). Larry David's initial portrayals of Sanders maintain congruence with the liberal logics that regarded Sanders' character as less of a threat, and more of a foil, to Clinton's vie for the democratic party nomination.

In his first textual appearance in SNL's political narrative, David performs the curmudgeon-y jewish character trope with little regard to Bernie's platform besides his radical revelings. At one point, in reference to David's vague cries for revolution, McKinnon wonders aloud, to the audience: "Wait a minute, do you all like this? I'm not losing, am I?" This momentary lapse in Hillary's steadfast, future-president demeanor is the closest SNL will come to engaging seriously with Bernie Sanders as a politician or formidable opponent. Still, by the end of the sketch, order is restored to SNL's moderate liberal logics, as David asserts (from Sanders' hypothetical closing argument): "Come next November, I will be Hillary Clinton's vice president!"

SNL makes narratological sense out of Bernie's character in part by defining him as obviously inferior to, and less qualified than Clinton, thereby recapitulated under Hillary's destined path to presidency. David's embodiment of Sanders is blunt to a point of apoliticization; his performance, then, services SNL's broader rhetorical endorsement of Clinton for president.

This characterological paradigm is reinscribed in "Bern Your Enthusiasm," (2/6/2016), when Larry David's HBO persona is inscribed onto Sanders' body to the point of groans and

guffaws. We see this treatment yet again in the “Brooklyn Democratic Debate Cold Open” (4/16/2016), which concludes with Larry David stepping out of character in order to acknowledge how Bernie’s tax plans would likely hurt his personal wealth. Still in full Sanders-drag, David succumbs to a state of already-assumed defeat: “You should vote for her.”

III. Courting the Millennial Audience

By spring 2016, Bernie Sanders was beginning to win primary races, thus defining his candidacy as more formidable than the moderate liberal ever could have anticipated. SNL’s treatment of Bernie Sanders in the latter half of the primary season reveals the ways in which their mediated narratives cater to a sensible liberal imaginary while simultaneously striving to resonate with a younger audience, whose attention might theoretically affirm SNL’s commercial futurity.

“Hillary Campaign Ad” (03/13/2016) satirizes Clinton’s struggles to appeal to millennials amidst their growing passions for Bernie’s grassroots campaign. The sketch captures the fraught tactics with which Hillary strove to perform for the millennial gaze. McKinnon’s speech and embodied gestures parody the Clinton campaign’s tendency to parrot the sentiments of the Sanders Campaign sentiments in attempts to court the millennial vote. Clinton’s masquerade as Sanders escalades to the point of grotesqueness over the course of the sketch. “I’ve always said, we need a revolution in the streets,” she claims, touting faux-diatribes at the “millionaires and billionaires” who control “90% of the wealth in this country.” The language is funny for its stark contrast with McKinnon’s embodied blue-pants-suit performance; so too do these faux-Sanders sentiments directly oppose SNL’s aggregate construction of Clinton as the heir to moderate liberal hegemony.

The ad's final message—"Feel The Bern For Her"—is as informative as it is instructive. If this sketch satirizes the desperation with which Clinton strove to woo the millennial vote, it does so under the conditions of her assumed prevail—for, if this weren't the case, then SNL would engage Sanders' politic beyond its vexatious function as a roadblock impeding Clinton's ascent to the White House. The cult of Sanders supporters is addressed not critically, but as another space for understanding, re-articulating, and re-selling Clinton as a political candidate. McKinnon's performance begs a critique of Clinton's approach to wooing voters, to her general lack of millennial appeal, but it does not inspire viewers to turn their attention to Sanders' politic. If this sketch showcases millennial appeal of Sanders' platform, SNL's ongoing refusal to seriously engage with Sanders as a politician runs parallel to the futility of their efforts to court the millennial viewer. McKinnon's transparent attempts to replicate an appealing aesthetic is metonymic of SNL's efforts to attract the hip, millennial viewer without enacting any radical re-imagination of their production style. So too might we read this sketch as an artifact of SNL's consistent valuation of aesthetics over politics.

As the DNC edged closer, SNL aired a few sketches that performed didactic functions as texts that reiterated Clinton's deservingness of their audience's votes. In "Hillary Clinton Addresses Her Losing Streak" (04/10/2016) McKinnon's Clinton conveys a mode of liberal rationality that both reflects and informs her audience's ability to make sense of that particular moment of the election.

While McKinnon's Clinton acknowledges, "Bernie might be tempting some of you," the political appeal of his platform is never quite articulated beyond some vague references to an unimaginable alternative kind of politics. While the teaching message for SNL's pre-established

following is rather rudimentary (exemplified in McKinnon's rhetorical request for "all my supporters here in New York: please remember to get out there on Tuesday and cast your vote for me!"), the message intended for the millennial, pro-Bernie audience is blunt, and rather cynical: "To all of you young people in New York, let me say this: voting's for nerds—I mean, who cares, just sleep in..."

Sanders' political appeal is the specter lurking behind McKinnon's Clinton. Aired in a pivotal moment in the 2016 primary race, this sketch reifies SNL's steadfast message of liberal sensibility, perhaps exemplified when McKinnon concludes: "See, New Yorkers, I'm just like you—I never sleep, I'm in a hurry to get to work, and when I'm running, I really hate it when a slow old Jew gets in my way". True to his treatment throughout SNL's long-form political narrative, Sanders' character is reduced, again, to that of a roadblock that must be pushed past.

IV. Sanders' Conceit

On the eve of the DNC and Hillary's imminent nomination as Democratic Party candidate, SNL's bar-talk script re-emerges. "Hillary & Bernie Cold Open" (05/22/2016) is a text that strives to make narratological sense of Sanders' campaign under the conditions of his timely conceit. The caricatured figures of Sanders and Clinton can share a drink at the bar under the omniscient conditions that Hillary is the nominee, and that Sanders, now, will support her in the race against Trump. The fictional space of the bar-talk sketch ekes room for play between McKinnon-as-Clinton and David-as-Sanders. David's snide reference to Bernie's political relationship to Hillary—"I'm your worst nightmare"—is safe to admit under the certainty of Hillary's nomination. Sanders' formidability as a serious candidate is readily acknowledged, but only under the conditions of its embeddedness in the past, and its present indifference. Given

Hillary's prevail in the race for democratic candidate, Sanders is now re-imagined as a democratic ally in the upcoming race.

Communicating the Clinton-Sanders political union is the central objective of the sketch-as-text, and charismatic humor is the operative language through which this message is articulated. David's rendition of Sanders' "damn emails!" line creates a knowing space for the two characters to connect: "I do not like humor," McKinnon's Clinton claims, "but that was funny." The two bond over a "Cheers to Debbie!" proving capable of salvaging a connection despite a shared rocky path. The bond is sealed as the bar room turns into a confessional space: "Can I tell you a secret?" McKinnon starts, "You know the presidency? I really really want it... you know what else? I don't really like people, I only talk to them because I want to be the president so bad."

This last dialogic moment drives home the central thread of SNL's unwavering pro-Clinton endorsement. Hillary deserves to be president by the sheer force of her desire; her character is clunky, perhaps unappealing, but is ultimately well-intentioned, and will serve the people. The roleplay between David and McKinnon serves both to reflect the upcoming state of things (Bernie's imminent endorsement of Clinton), and to inform their audience's ability to reconcile the two once-opposing political camps: for has-been Bernie enthusiasts to rally behind Clinton, and for steadfast Clinton supporters to welcome the Bernie bros.

V. The Final Stretch

With Bernie out of the picture, SNL starts dealing more vigorously with Trump's character as final vexing obstacle between Clinton and the White House. In "Donald Trump vs. Hillary Clinton Cold Open" (10/01/2016), McKinnon-as-Clinton and Alec Baldwin-as-Trump

appear head to head in text that aptly reflects the popular liberal sentiment in the weeks preceding the election: while McKinnon's Clinton is guilty of a lack of charisma, Baldwin's Trump is fully insane. Of course, this text operates under pop meritocratic logics that cannot imagine the reality of a president as severely under-qualified as Trump. Again, we see SNL's characterization of Clinton, and now Trump, as a textual reassurance of Clinton's undebatable capability to clinch the election.

At one point, following Baldwin's impression of a Trump-esque rant, the moderator turns to McKinnon: "What do you think of all of this?" McKinnon responds, unable to contain her enthusiasm: "I think I'm going to be president!" Later still, McKinnon tears up during Trump's closing statements. "Secretary Clinton, why are you crying?" the moderator asks. "I'm sorry, it's just going so well...it's going exactly how I'd always dreamed." As is the case in many preceding sketches, its central pro-Hillary message lacks a sense of urgency, as McKinnon's Clinton continues to regard the 2016 election as though it were always already hers for the taking. For this, like many of the other preceding sketches, the actors perform a tacit Clinton endorsement for the service of the moderate liberal politic.

On Nov. 5, 2016, the final episode of SNL before the election, McKinnon and Baldwin re-appear side-by-side in "Hillary Clinton/Donald Trump Cold Open." McKinnon's Clinton speaks to a cross-section of confused sentiments, a mixture of incredulity ("What is happening?! Is the whole world insane!!") with steadfast self-belief ("I'm not worried"), all affirmed by applause of the studio audience. The sketch is constructed as a sense-making device: though Clinton writhes under the ceaseless fire of Comey questions, she manages still to maintain her

authority as candidate by leveraging a logic of ethics to illuminate Trump's un-fittingness for the presidency.

Still, Baldwin's performance of Trump's corruptness are more grotesque than critical: the image of Trump sharing smooches with the FBI, Putin, and the KKK are unfortunately absurd, in the sense that they create no space for responses aside from cynicism or repulsion. At the same time, McKinnon's Clinton can do no more than seethe and pray "for another Donald Trump audio leak right about now" under the pressure of the news host's email probes.

The didacticism of the final minutes of the sketch, with Baldwin and McKinnon addressing the audience directly, albeit still in political drag, reads as some desperate gesture to avoid political catastrophe. "Now it's time to get out there and vote," Baldwin cries. "None of this would have mattered if you don't vote!" Here, the sketch is self-aware of its purpose as a teaching device. McKinnon adds: "we can't tell you who to vote for but on tuesday we all get a chance to choose what kind of country we want to live in."

On the eve of the election, what is the purpose of such straightforward appeals to morality? To whom are these lessons addressed? We know the core SNL audience as consistent with the sensible liberal whose vote was always opposing Donald Trump. Is this note for millennials—the demographic informed just seven months ago to "just sleep in" on the eve of the primaries? The demographic informed to divorce their own political enthusiasm for a grassroots candidate for the sake of the greater, more sensible-liberal whole? Or is this an appeal to the Trump supporter? To the "other half," that was consistently painted as brainless racist fanatics?

The desperate tones within which these sentiments are conveyed reflect the precise state of the liberal American imaginary in the final days before Trump's victory. After an entire election season of shallowly, cynically mocking the spectacle of the Republican party, liberals began to engage with the very real possibility of a Trump presidency, only this realization came too late. McKinnon and Baldwin storm the streets of NYC in an attempt to collect some constituency for the sake of curtailing catastrophe.

Conclusion: Pleasures of the Text?

Throughout my process of reading SNL as mediated narrative, seldom have I meditated on the nature of their particular brand of comedy. But the role of humor underlies SNL's most obvious function as a site of pop media—to entertain—and the cult of the audience is enticed in part by the comedic contract: we make you laugh, and you come back for more. Coming away from a close reading of SNL's mediated narrative, I would describe SNL's humor as some negotiation between the comfortable and the edgy, the relatable and the self-effacing; their content suffices a narrow typology of comedy that is pleasurable for the moderate liberal. The cult of the audience is not interested in critical, aggressive comedy, the sort of comedy that is perversely pleasurable in its ability to disrupt and disturb its audience. While SNL is capable of exuding a momentary edginess—in its portrayal of Clinton performing gender-cos-play to masquerade as Bernie for the sake of the vote, for example—these instances are few and far between. To stroke a mainstream pleasure-center while sharply critiquing those same viewing communities is near impossible for the commercial comedy. SNL's commitment to pleasing

their audience prevents their comedy from committing any shade of transgression; the nature of their comedy seeks easy laughs over incisive dialogue.

SNL lacks the critical edge to be political beyond aesthetics. Perhaps this lack is most egregiously evident in the Cold Open of Season 41, Episode 4 (11/07/2015) where Donald Trump, invited as host, delivers a light-hearted monologue. Trump presents as a quirky character, cracking shallow jabs at himself and the SNL writers, and engaging with his crowd: “We’re going to have a lot of fun tonight!”

There is a single, contained moment of opposition in the monologue, when we see Larry David heckling Trump from just offstage.

David: Trump’s a racist!

Trump: Larry, what are you doing?

David (shrugging): I heard if I yelled that, they’d give me \$5,000.

Trump: As a businessman, I can fully respect that.

Even within this contained space for critique, SNL still portrays Trump as affable, reasonable; even if he is a racist, at least he is a rational, understanding racist. The moment deftly pleases the center-left anti-Trump crowd while still enabling a fascist’s infiltration of mainstream media.

This instance, among others in the broad political narrative of SNL programming between 2015-2016, begs a question of the ethical nature of SNL: perhaps, in all of their staunch center-leftedness, they fail to make it to that imagined “right side of history.”

Trump’s monologue aired within the same temporal space as the broader mediated narrative that I read as an aggregate, yet I decided against including this sketch in my assemblage due to issues of transmediated continuity. Trump’s appearance on the show is entirely

incongruent with SNL's broader narrative of sensible liberalism; the ontological clarity of their political narrative, which begins with a pro-Hillary message and ends with the "Hallelujah" funeral dirge in the wake of Clinton's election loss, does not account for this major spill—for the fact that SNL played a role in enabling Trump's airtime, and potential for popular influence, in an early moment in his rise to power. Popular narratives cannot reckon with such contradictory plot points; instead, SNL overwrites this fumble in every successive sketch-based performance that emotes support for Clinton, and disdain for Trump. Given their command of digital forms and transmedial conditions, media producers retain a great deal of control over how their sites are perceived. The reader or consumer of transmediated narratives, in their reception of such texts, are still subject to the ways in which popular media serves to reproduce and perpetuate dominant power structures.

When the critic is equipped to read and interpret digital texts and mediated narratives for their discursive functions and ideological inconsistencies, they have the potential to interrupt patterns of passive consumption practices—and, perhaps, passive production practices, as well. Returning momentarily to *Participatory Culture in a Networked Era*, Ito argues that the radical promises of participatory cultures will be realized when we recognize the ways in which we are personally implicated in cultural mediatization: "We need to be moving away from the frame of what 'they the media' are doing to us to what 'we the media' are responsible for" (104).

Perhaps critical scholarship should be considered a form of media; maybe, in the commingling of literary studies and new media theory, the function and products of criticism will be re-mediated towards more accessible forms, for the sake of communicating with a broader audience, one that need not be confined to academic institutions. I've argued that the

literary critic can best engage with the conditions of textual digitization by treating media as literature, and literature as media; it follows, under logics of bricolage, that we would treat criticism as a form of media as well. The conditions of disappearing jobs and fiscal austerity within higher learning institutions beg questions of academic futurity. By re-orienting the tradition of literary criticism towards the form and content of mediatization, we can imagine a scholarly practice that is temporally sustainable, formally engaging, and potentially radical.