

Experimental Realisms

Natalia Cecire

BrANCA, 14 May 2022

Thank you for having me on this roundtable, and thanks especially to Lindsay for curating such an exciting volume. I'm really looking forward to reading the whole volume.

My contribution to this volume, "Experimental Realisms," tries to accomplish two main things. First, I want to explain what is at stake in the idea of an "experimental realism" and why it may be a useful heuristic for thinking about how some writing in this period operates, especially insofar as it can draw out some of our epistemological, historical, and aesthetic assumptions and force us to make them concrete. I do this in two parts, first giving some context for why we might want to think about experimentalism in this period across a variety of discourses, and then offering a schematic framework for understanding the tensions embedded in narratives of experimentalism. In the essay I also aim to offer an entry point into some of the classic history of science literature on experiment for students who may not have encountered it before.

The essay's final aim is to point out some of the ways that experimental realism is an incoherent concept, not because of literature's epistemological limitations but because of the value hierarchies already built into the project of codifying some knowledge as "experimental." The concept of "experimental realism" is useful not because it points to some stable, coherent epistemological framework underlying a well defined genre, but rather because it activates a range of key assumptions and contestations with profound historical resonance at the turn of the twentieth century.

1. Why experimental realism?

The post-Reconstruction period is a period of institutionalization and professionalization, especially around the codification of knowledge. Schools, prisons, hospitals, and asylums came under the purview of both state and private reform efforts that exercised what Michel Foucault influentially called power/knowledge through the observation, study, and administration of human bodies and minds at the individual and population levels.¹ In the later nineteenth century, academic disciplines consolidated to produce a range of medico-social knowledge, from anthropometry, sexology, and experimental psychology to sociology and economics, helping to inaugurate what Sarah Igo has called, quote, “the movement of social data into everyday life.”²

What does this have to do with literary realism? A lot. Literary realism participated to varying degrees in this impulse toward social knowledge, whether it was imagined as merely consonant with the accurate observation of social life or as actively drawing on it to produce social reform. Literary realism existed within a range of textual genres and modes that sought to produce or render available social knowledge. Texts of indeterminate genre—fiction, creative nonfiction, journalism, ethnography, and life writing—as well as texts that are now enshrined as exemplars of “realist,” “naturalist,” “regionalist,” and “experimental” modes all negotiated this tension between the quasi-passive enterprise of observing natural and social “laws” and the quasi-active enterprise of intervening in them. As Laura Fisher argues, in this context, “‘literature’ constitutes not only a body of texts but also a set of historically contingent practices and collective values” that were often directly addressed to questions of social

¹ Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, 2nd Vintage Books ed (New York: Vintage, 1995), 27–30; Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality: An Introduction*, trans. Robert Hurley, Vintage Books ed, vol. 1 (New York: Vintage Books, 1988), 139–41.

² Sarah Elizabeth Igo, *The Averaged American: Surveys, Citizens, and the Making of a Mass Public* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 2007), 13. While Igo focuses on the survey as the vector of social data’s ubiquity, the novel is another. See e.g. Mark Seltzer, *Bodies and Machines* (New York: Routledge, 1992).

reform.³ Consequently, much literature in this period also participated in the biopolitical project of the administration of life.

In the essay, I start out by asking what experimental realism looks like in the post-Reconstruction period. What, after all, is an experiment, especially in the newly self-codifying and very volatile social, biological, and medical domains in which the protocols of control and replication that we may have been taught in school, usually on the tacit assumption that the physical sciences are the true sciences, are sometimes impossible? It's very important to debunk the idea that there is some concrete, stable thing in the sciences called "experiment" that has been with us unchanged since Francis Bacon of which anything else called experimental is some kind of derivative or analogue of this stable ideal. Experiment is historical in the sciences as well, notwithstanding a very effective nineteenth-century propaganda campaign to the contrary. The post-Reconstruction period is a moment in which a wide variety of possibilities for experimental knowledge production were being attempted, and literary efforts were a part of this.

The bare minimum definition of experiment that we encounter over and over again in the writing of nineteenth-century scientists, and indeed in most casual discourses of experimentalism today, is that experiment is *active*, not only representing but intervening, or as the philosopher of science Ian Hacking cutely puts it, quote, "Don't just peer: interfere."⁴ That "only" and "just" are important: Hacking's phrase summarizes the dominant ideology of experiment that is still often taken for granted, notwithstanding all the ways that, in practice, it has trouble holding up. Experiment is typically set up as the active term *in opposition to* a passive or merely transcriptive observation, an opposition that is, needless to say, gendered, racialized, and classed. Thus comparative anatomists distinguished their professional work from the amateurism of the hobbyist bird-watchers who often identified new species, and sociologists

³ Laura R. Fisher, *Reading for Reform: The Social Work of Literature in the Progressive Era* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2019), 21.

⁴ Ian Hacking, *Representing and Intervening: Introductory Topics in The Philosophy of Natural Science* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 189.

emphasized the “dynamic” quality of their new work even when it really was mainly collecting data, in order to distinguish themselves from early phases of the new science. Establishing a contrast with a less active, less professional mode of knowledge-production was key. This may remind us of Fredric Jameson’s observations about realism itself: that it exists through antinomies rather than on its own terms.⁵ Once we understand the active/passive binary that animates so much experimental discourse, we can also see why it is at once apropos for thinking about post-Reconstruction realism’s ambitions for literary efficacy in the social sphere and in many ways deeply limiting.

Taking Jameson’s cue, my essay briefly discusses three antinomies within the idea of experiment itself. Struggles over these antinomies, I argue, constitute the imagined form of experiments, what we might call an experimental *plot* comprising an instigating experimental intervention, reality’s pure irruption into human perception, and finally the closure of the experiment into a stable, newly formed truth. Yet the antinomies at work in constituting this plot are deeply unstable, and their hierarchies can reverse. I want to really insist that this is not just something we see in literary experimentalism, but in the very idea of what can be classified as experimental.

I illustrate the experimental microplot through a reading of Stephen Crane’s “The Blue Hotel,” which does not narrate “an experiment” in the way that some of Crane’s Bowery fictions do, but rather plays out the production of social knowledge through the irruption of violence. In “The Blue Hotel,” the contest between the psychologized, let us say “realist” Johnnie and the opaque, ethnically typed, let us say “naturalist” “Swede”—offers its truths, in the end, not through the Easterner’s postmortem reasoning out of what actually happened, but in the spectacularity of the fight in which both Johnnie and the Swede are revealed as interchangeable revolving body parts flashing in the partial light, their physical bodies asserting what psychologized representation fails to register.

⁵ Fredric Jameson, *The Antinomies of Realism* (London: Verso, 2013).

2. Why not experimental realism?

I've tried to outline and give some texture to why the rubrics of experimentalism might be helpful for thinking about post-Reconstruction realism and its interfaces with the biopolitical production of social knowledge, and in particular how these rubrics activate hierarchies of value in knowledge-production and representation. I've been adamant that these hierarchies of value are embedded in the discourse of experiment writ large, not just in literary versions thereof. And so I want to close by drawing attention to the impasse generated by the discourse of experimental realism and its valorization of active intervention over putatively passive observation. First, many texts of this period that we might identify as experimental on the terms I have outlined above are not readily recognizable as "experimental" after modernism. And second, as many of my co-panelists have written about, the post-Reconstruction period also sees the flourishing of a wide range of genres that absolutely seek to intervene, yet are often not closely associated with experimentalism, or even with realism: sentimentalism, sensationalism, melodrama, pornography. Something is at stake in reducing the naturalist thought-experiment, the sentimental tear-jerker, and the regionalist micro-ethnography to an epistemological degree zero, to make forms as obviously *active* as the sentimental novel out to be (merely) "representing." Something is very much at stake in refusing these forms' claims on scientific modernity.

Rather than attempt to simply re-stake that claim, I would suggest that what we might retrospectively or provisionally call "experimental realisms" helped to create the conditions for their own later reduction to "mere" representing. For while I have attempted to outline how an experimental realism becomes visible, what is evident in experimental realism is less any particular formal pattern or aesthetic tendency than an investment in just this hierarchy of intervening over representing.

//

Bibliography

- Fisher, Laura R. *Reading for Reform: The Social Work of Literature in the Progressive Era*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2019.
- Foucault, Michel. *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*. 2nd Vintage Books ed. New York: Vintage, 1995.
- . *The History of Sexuality: An Introduction*. Translated by Robert Hurley. Vintage Books ed. Vol. 1. 3 vols. New York: Vintage Books, 1988.
- Hacking, Ian. *Representing and Intervening: Introductory Topics in The Philosophy of Natural Science*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983.
- Igo, Sarah Elizabeth. *The Averaged American: Surveys, Citizens, and the Making of a Mass Public*. Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 2007.
- Jameson, Fredric. *The Antinomies of Realism*. London: Verso, 2013.
- Seltzer, Mark. *Bodies and Machines*. New York: Routledge, 1992.