

March 2018

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Recommended Citation

Willging, Jennifer (2018) "Alternate Facts and Reality Effects in Antoine Bello's Roman américain," *Studies in 20th & 21st Century Literature*: Vol. 42: Iss. 2, Article 19. <https://doi.org/10.4148/2334-4415.1991>

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Alternate Facts and Reality Effects in Antoine Bello's *Roman américain*

Abstract

Like several of Antoine Bello's eight other novels to date, *Roman américain* contains a staggering array of minute details, which includes the names of dozens of fictional characters, businesses, associations, institutions, locations, and publications. These fictional proper nouns are intertwined throughout the novel with dozens of real ones, and this promiscuous intermixing contributes to the careful construction of a fictional world that rivals the real one in all its complexity. In this essay I examine Bello's masterful production in *Roman américain* of verisimilitude, which he creates largely but not exclusively through his exploitation of the documentary fiction genre. I then link the author's predilection for realist literary devices to his preoccupation with an ontological, epistemological, and ethical problem that would appear, given the recent coinage of the dubious expression "alternate facts," to be growing ever larger and more menacing in our digital era: the regular production by the media and any number of other "reliable" entities of new "truths." Bello constructs in *Roman américain* a hyper-realist world, but then, I argue, systematically deconstructs it by revealing to his readers, little by little, its fictionality. He does so not in the interest of postmodern play, but rather to entreat his readers to sharpen the critical reading skill they so desperately need to find their way through the moral morass that is the "information age."

Keywords

Antoine Bello, *Roman américain*, verisimilitude, reality effect, documentary fiction, French, literature, 21st century

Alternate Facts and Reality Effects in Antoine Bello's *Roman américain*

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The ostensible subject of Antoine Bello's 2014 novel *Roman américain* (*American Novel*), which takes place, not surprisingly, in the United States, is a relatively young investment industry called "life settlement." Life settlement is the purchase by private investors of life insurance policies from aging or ill individuals who wish to benefit from their cash value. The investors purchase each policy at a certain percentage of its face value, take over paying the premiums until the original policyholder dies (an event they eagerly await), and then collect the payout. *Roman américain* is striking in that it is replete with a dizzying array of precise details, although in this it is much like several of Bello's eight other novels. These details include, for example, the full names of dozens of fictional characters (policy holders, insurance salespeople, investors, fund managers, actuaries, physicians, politicians, academics, even Mafiosos), institutions (insurance providers, investment firms, law firms, professional associations, real estate developments), and publications (newspapers, trade journals, magazines, books, and so on). These fictional proper nouns are intertwined throughout the novel with dozens of real ones (Vladimir Nabokov, Bernie Madoff, Johns Hopkins University, Disney World, *The New York Times*, among many, many others), and all of these proper nouns together contribute to the careful construction of a fictional world that resembles and rivals the real one in all its clutteredness and complexity.

In this essay I will examine Bello's virtuoso creation of verisimilitude in *Roman américain* in particular and link the author's innovative deployment of a number of realist literary devices to his preoccupation with an ontological, epistemological, and ethical problem that would appear, given the recent coinage of the dubious expression "alternate facts," to be growing ever larger and more menacing in our digital age: the production of new "truths," by the media, the advertising industry, the healthcare industry, the government, and academia, among countless other entities. Bello gives this preoccupation thorough expression in his trilogy *Les falsificateurs* (*The Falsifiers*, 2007), *Les éclaireurs* (*The Pathfinders*, 2009), and *Les producteurs* (*The Showrunners*, 2015), which centers on a secret international organization that falsifies reality through the alteration or production of supposedly reliable electronic sources that support the stories the organization fabricates. Phillip Coquereau has produced an excellent analysis of *Les falsificateurs* in which he argues that in it Bello both deploys and theorizes narrative techniques that convince the receiver of the truth value of the story being told. Bello thus illustrates the dangers of the cooptation of the art of storytelling by the marketing and communications industries. *Roman américain* focuses on an

industry—life insurance in general and life settlement in particular—that is fertile ground for ethical abuses and outright fraud, and therefore the question of truth is front and center in this novel as well. This analysis will show that the constant blurring of the line between the real world and the fictional world that Bello’s multiple realist techniques create in *Roman américain* mirrors the novel’s principal theme, which is the increasing difficulty we face in the digital age of discerning between fact and falsehood. I will further argue, however, that in this novel Bello systematically unravels the realism he so painstakingly constructs there, not just through the thematization of the opposition between the real and the fictional, but also through formal techniques that undo the realist techniques he employs simultaneously. Through both the thematization and the enactment of representational slights of hand in this and a number of his other novels, Bello entreats the reader to submit all representations (including and particularly his own) to rigorous skepticism.

Roman américain also shares some important characteristics with another of Bello’s novels, *Eloge de la pièce manquante* (*The Missing Piece*, 1998), to which I will therefore make further reference in what follows. Most obviously, both novels take place in the United States. More interestingly, both dispense with a classic heterodiegetic, omniscient narrator, a patently artificial device nevertheless synonymous with nineteenth-century realism. Instead these texts are examples of what has been designated as “documentary fiction”: patchworks of several different kinds of documents, such as newspaper and magazine articles, meeting minutes, interview transcripts, scientific reports, and letters. These documents are fictional but are meant to appear to belong to the real world, that of the reader.¹ While *Eloge*, a curious kind of murder mystery set in the world of competitive jigsaw puzzle assembly (a world Bello largely fabricates), contains all of these kinds of documents and more, *Roman américain* is constructed principally of just three, woven together throughout the novel. One of these is a series of articles on the life settlement industry published in the fictional *Wall Street Tribune*. Each article appears on the pages of the novel in the same typeface and format as do real articles in the *Wall Street Journal*, complete with sketches rather than photos of the faces of some of the actors in the stories being told. A second kind of text is a series of barbing e-mails between two middle-aged friends, or really rivals, who had first met while undergraduates at Columbia, and one of whom, Vlad Eisinger, is the author of the *Tribune* articles. The third, in which are embedded a few other kinds of “sub-documents,” is a series of personal diary entries written by the other e-mail correspondent, Dan Sivers, a published but financially unsuccessful novelist.

By appearing to offer to the reader supposedly direct access to such documents “as they are,” seemingly without the mediation of a narrator or editor, documentary fiction like *Roman américain* and *Eloge* offers a striking and relatively new kind of verisimilitude. Michael Hinken argues that, while not an

entirely new genre (he cites Theodore Dreiser, Emile Zola, and John Dos Passos among others as earlier practitioners), documentary fiction appeals especially to the Information Age reader, who may be “more adept at accessing, synthesizing, and utilizing information than [readers] at any other point in history.” The genre is interactive, in a sense, because “the onus is on the reader to assemble meaning from the evidence provided. . . . The variety and number of documents amplify the effect in documentary fiction, in essence changing the role of the reader from passive observer to active participant” (Hinken). There is no one narrator to guide the reader’s judgment, although in the case of *Roman américain*, all of the “documents” are produced by two characters, Dan and Vlad. The reader nevertheless has more freedom of interpretation than the reader of a text with a single, overarching narrator, including the freedom to interpret the novel “incorrectly,” which, as I will show later in this analysis, Bello’s novel in fact encourages us to do. Suffice it to say for now that both *Roman américain* and *Eloge de la pièce manquante* look “authentic” to the contemporary reader, for whom copying, cutting, and pasting from and to a variety of documents are everyday activities.

Another way in which Bello enhances the verisimilitude of *Roman américain* and a number of his other novels is a particular narrative technique Roland Barthes identifies as producing what he calls *l’effet de réel* ‘the reality effect’ (88). This is the incorporation into a literary text of details that appear to have no significance in terms of the reader’s understanding of the story and no function in furthering the action, but whose seeming arbitrariness constitutes precisely, according to Barthes, their significance. For Barthes, their significance is that they serve as signs to the reader that, because they are “just” there, like so many things in real life, what he or she is reading must be real. Documentary fiction lends itself extremely well to the inclusion of apparently insignificant details, because the text is supposed to be an assemblage of unedited documents, all of whose details may or may not be relevant to the story. One particularly good example of Barthes’s reality effect in *Roman américain* is the faithful visual “re”-production on the novel’s pages of the e-mails exchanged between Dan and Vlad, which appear very much as they would on a computer screen. The e-mail headers appear on the page and provide such details as the name of the sender, that of the receiver, the subject of the e-mail, and the date on which it is sent. Some of these details could be considered significant or meaningful in that they could help the reader better understand the novel’s plot and/or characters. Other details, however, can reasonably be judged as insignificant, as seemingly gratuitous minutiae that have no other *raison d’être* than to imitate and therefore create an illusion of real life; that is, they create a reality effect. Arguably, such details include the addresses of the correspondents, the day of the week, and the exact time of day at which the e-mails are sent.

As which details in a text are “significant” and which are “insignificant” is always subject to interpretation, an objection to the argument above might be that the e-mail address a character chooses, or the times of day and the frequency with which he tends to send e-mails, are in fact meaningful, in that they could tell the reader something about his personality and lifestyle. In *Roman américain*, however, the e-mail addresses—danielgsivers@gmail.com and vlad.eisinger@wst.com—are so conventional, so denotative that they do not appear to teach us much about Dan and Vlad’s characters.² And even if one were to concede that the notation of the hour and minute could be significant in that it reveals, for example, how quickly each correspondent responds to the other, how late each one tends to stay up, or how early he rises, it would be difficult to argue that the notation of the second is significant. In Barthes’s theory, details such as these have a referent in reality (in this case, we see these black marks on the page not as nonsensical scribbles but understand them as e-mail addresses and times of day), but they appear to have no signifieds, and therefore no significance, within the story. Yet for Barthes, such details do have a signified, which is the message, “I am real, and therefore so must be this story” (Barthes 88).

A similar and more striking example of the production of Barthes’s reality effect can be found in *Eloge de la pièce manquante*. This is a series of footnotes that appear at the bottom of the pages of one of the many kinds of texts out of which the novel is constructed, an excerpt from a (fictional) doctoral thesis on the crime novel during the Great Depression. Some of these footnotes contain further reflections by the author of the thesis, but others are simply reference footnotes containing publication information for a number of puzzles and novels the author cites. The following is an example of the latter type, reproduced as closely as possible to the way it appears in the novel:

1. *Le tigre de papier*, Etablissement Samuel Leiser, Philadelphie, 1931. 38” X 38”, 441 cubes en mahogany. Boîte en bois laqué, 39” X 38”, contenant un livret de 152 pages signé Samuel Leiser. Les solutions ne figurent pas dans le livret. (*Eloge de la pièce manquante* 236)

“The Paper Tiger,” Samuel Leiser and Co., Philadelphia, 1931. 38” X 38”, 441 mahogany cubes. Lacquered wood box, 39” X 38”, 152-page booklet signed by Samuel Leiser included. Solutions not given in the booklet. (*The Missing Piece* loc. 3730)³

The precise details in this footnote add nothing to the reader’s understanding of the characters or plot, nor do they propel that story forward. Yet seen through the prism of Barthes’s theory, the footnote’s signified is: this thesis is real, because authors of academic theses must meticulously document their sources in such a way. The footnote’s apparently gratuitous presence on the page buttresses the reality effect that the style and format of the rest of the thesis, and the rest of the novel, had already established.

As alluded to in the introduction to this essay, yet another and perhaps even more powerful way in which Bello creates verisimilitude in *Roman américain* is well illustrated in the following, more or less typical passage from one of Vlad Eisinger's *Wall Street Tribune* articles:

Selon une étude de la Tuck School of Business de Dartmouth College, le phénomène du premium finance [a particularly shady kind of life settlement investment] a connu son apogée en 2006, où il aurait représenté près de \$12Md de couverture. Life Path et Fair Share figuraient parmi les principaux animateurs du marché, aux côtés de grands noms de Wall Street, comme Deutsche Bank ou Crédit Suisse.⁵ (*Roman américain* 100)

According to a study by the Tuck Business School of Dartmouth University, premium finance reached its apex in 2006, with new issues totaling about \$6bn in coverage. Life Path and Fair Share were among the most active firms in the market, along with prestigious Wall Street institutions, such as Deutsche Bank and Credit Suisse. (*American Novel* 57-58)

Because they are embedded in a multitude of proper nouns that designate real entities and accompanied by a precise year and number, Life Path and Fair Share appear to the reader to be just as real as these other proper nouns ("History of Life Settlements"). While a quick Google search turns up no evidence of their existence, their proximity to and indeed encirclement by real names and figures in the syntagma metonymically confer upon them their neighbors' realness. In both *Roman* and *Eloge* there are numerous passages like this one: in *Eloge*, fictional manufacturers of puzzles compete with real ones such as Parker Brothers and Milton Bradley (32), and in *Roman*, a fictional professor of law teaches at the University of Chicago, counsels President Obama, and is quoted in the *Wall Street Tribune* (200). This promiscuity between actors and institutions in the real world and those invented by Bello lends the latter a luster of authenticity they might otherwise lack.

The constant juxtaposition of the real world and the fictional world of the novel that Bello metonymically effects in *Roman américain* is mirrored in intriguing ways in the novel's content. Most obviously, there is the juxtaposition of, or indeed the opposition between, the two main protagonists, Vlad Eisinger and Dan Siver, for Vlad is a journalist, a writer of non-fiction, and Dan is a novelist, a writer of fiction. The difference in their professions is a source of tension between the two, as Dan accuses Vlad of having renounced his dream of writing "le grand roman américain" (81) 'the great American novel' (43) in the interest of the steady income of journalism. After reading the first in his series of articles on life settlement, Dan contacts Vlad after not having spoken to him for a number of years

and snidely asks, “Tu écris toujours? (je veux dire des vrais livres)?” (25) ‘Do you still write (real books I mean)?’ (10). In a second e-mail, after having read Vlad’s second article, Dan makes his distaste for Vlad’s career choice more explicit: “Vraiment, je ne te félicite pas pour tes articles. Le dernier est sec comme une plaque de four. Aucune chair, aucune touche personnelle” (79) ‘I hope you don’t expect me to praise you for your articles. The last one is dry as a bone. No flesh, no personal touch’ (42). Dan accuses Vlad, and all of his colleagues at the *Wall Street Tribune*, for being incapable of humanizing the subjects of their articles: “Vous n’êtes bons qu’à imprimer des 0 et des 1, et encore, vous consultez vos avocats avant” (79) ‘All you know how to do is to print 0’s and 1’s, and even then, you consult with your lawyers beforehand’ (42). For Dan, journalists are journeymen rather than artists, constantly constrained in their expression by the dual iron rule of the *AP Stylebook* and libel law.

In response, Vlad accuses Dan of always having privileged style over substance in his writing, veneer over veracity: “Quand comprendras-tu qu’un bon orateur n’a pas besoin d’effets de manche? Crois-moi, dans cette affaire [life settlement], la justice sera mieux servie par mes articles que par tes homélies. . . . J’ai appris ici que la recherche de l’effet comique ou d’une allitération heureuse ne doit jamais s’opérer au détriment de la vérité” (80) ‘When will you understand that a good orator has no need for cheap grandstanding? Believe me, in this business, justice will be better served by my articles than by your lectures. . . . I’ve learned at the *Tribune* that searching for comic effect or a convenient alliteration should never take precedence over truth’ (42-43). It is then no less than Justice and Truth that Vlad opposes to Dan’s penchant for lyricism and poetic license. Throughout the novel, Dan and Vlad continue their often heated debate over the relative merits of fiction versus non-fiction, literature versus journalism, until coming at the end of the novel, as we shall see, to a very interesting sort of truce.

The debate over the relative merits of fiction versus non-fiction foregrounded in Dan and Vlad’s exchange is transposed in much of the rest of the novel, as Vlad’s comment above illustrates, into a number of other, parallel oppositions: truth versus lies, sincerity versus hypocrisy, and virtue (a word that appears several times in the text) versus what is posed as its contrary, self-interest. The essence of the American psyche, Dan writes to Vlad in one of their discussions of the great American novel they had both planned to write, is “un mélange d’optimisme et de candeur, de cupidité et de vertueuse hypocrisie” (127) ‘an amalgam of optimism and candor, of cupidity and virtuous hypocrisy’ (74). One of the frequent objects of Dan’s reflections in his journal are the displays of such traits by his neighbors in Destin Terrace, a fictional residential development in the real city of Destin, Florida, a community on which Vlad shines his journalist’s spotlight because many of its residents are involved in one way or another in the life settlement business. We learn through Vlad’s articles that Florida is ground zero of

the life settlement industry because of its large population of wealthy retirees. Florida also happens to have been the second hardest hit state in the union during the 2008 real estate crash. Brought on by the legal but deceptive practices of sub-prime lending and mortgage bundling, the crash is mentioned in the novel and serves as yet another domain in which the murkiness of the opposition between truth and falsehood, and between what is lawful and what is ethical, is underscored (68).⁴

We learn through both Dan's journal and Vlad's articles that the majority of the residents of Destin Terrace tell lies at some point in the novel. Bruce Webb, for example, a neighbor of Dan's who was diagnosed as HIV-positive in 1986, sold his life insurance policy upon learning of his condition in order to raise the money needed to pay for his health care. He unabashedly admits to Vlad in his interview for the article that during the week preceding the medical examination he was required to undergo in order to sell his policy (so that his longevity and thus the value of his policy to the buyer could be assessed), he slept little, drank, smoked, and did drugs in order to appear much sicker than he really was. Thanks to the development of AZT in 1987, Webb is still alive in 2012 when the novel takes place. This "miraculous" survival means that the buyer of his policy, assured at the time that Webb would live only a short time and that he would therefore collect the payout after having paid only a few months' worth of premiums, lost his money on the investment (192). When Mark Hansen, another neighbor and a 35-year-old husband and father of two, dies unexpectedly in a car crash, his wife applies for the much-needed payout on his life insurance policy. The insurance company, however, discovers multiple photos on social media of Hansen with a cigarette in his mouth despite the fact that he had claimed on the application for insurance that he had never smoked. His widow's claim is denied because of his deception (and perhaps in some small measure because of his stupidity in allowing photos of himself smoking to circulate on Facebook) (310). A third neighbor, Chuck Patterson, a highly aggressive and hence highly successful insurance salesman, lies regularly to his clients, padding their policies with all types of insurance they will never need (245).

Perhaps one of the most blatant lies is told by the novelist, Dan Siver, through whose point of view the reader learns of most of what is going on in the novel and who is consistently critical of his neighbors' various forms of deceit and hypocrisy. While editing the style of a Wikipedia article on the (real) Viennese writer Hermann Broch (a pastime in which he indulges to avoid working on his latest novel), Dan decides to add to the article, without evidence, that Broch was a friend of the (also real) Viennese writer Leo Perutz, whom he speculates Broch must have known. Dan does take pause before crossing this Rubicon: "Je ne prenais pas . . . mon imposture à la légère. Corrompre le corpus de Wikipedia, c'est enfreindre le pacte fondamental, auquel adhèrent implicitement des centaines de

millions d'utilisateurs. Pourrais-je continuer à faire confiance à une encyclopédie dont les éditeurs seraient des rigolos dans mon genre?" (32) 'I wasn't taking my imposture lightly. Corrupting the corpus of Wikipedia means infringing upon the fundamental pact hundreds of millions of users implicitly adhere to. Could I keep trusting an encyclopedia whose editors might be pranksters like me?' (14).⁶ Yet such scruples do not stop him from altering the article, and in fact he later adds that the two were half brothers (89). He imagines a detailed and rather touching story of the moment when a shocked Perutz first learns from Broch that his father had had an illicit affair with Broch's mother. The reason no one, including Broch scholars, knows anything about this connection, Dan's story goes, is that Broch swears Perutz to secrecy so that his pious mother will never have to learn the truth of her husband's infidelity, and he renounces ever seeing Perutz again (88-91).

When an editor from Wikipedia asks Dan to cite his sources for this claim, instead of removing it, he ends up creating an entire cadre of international scholars to substantiate it. He is so proud of how realistic his fake scholars appear that he wishes he could show them off to a book reviewer at the *New York Times Book Review* who dared claim that one of Dan's novels was populated with "[des] personnages improbables, sans aucun ancrage dans la réalité" (218) 'improbable characters without any bearing in reality' (132). Like the "falsifiers" in Bello's novel by that name, Dan creates multiple sources of electronic evidence to support his claims. With the help of his college-aged and therefore tech-savvy niece Julia he creates a Facebook profile for each of his fabricated scholars, and in a moment of flagrant bad faith he marvels at the reputed tolerance and even predilection among millennials for ontological ambiguity:

Il est évident que, pour [Julia], et sans doute pour le reste de sa génération, la frontière entre réel et virtuel n'a absolument aucun sens. Paolita Dampieri [one of the scholars Dan has cooked up], qu'elle sait pourtant sortie de l'imagination de son oncle Dan, n'est pas moins vivante aux yeux de ma nièce qu'Elena Lombardi, cette Italienne de Boston dont elle suit depuis des mois le quotidien sur Facebook sans se rappeler exactement où, quand, et même si elle l'a rencontrée. (277)

Obviously, for [Julia], and most likely for the rest of her generation, the boundary between real and virtual doesn't exist. Paolita Dampieri, whom she knows sprang from her uncle Dan's imagination, is no less alive in her eyes than Elena Lombardi, an Italian from Boston whose daily Facebook feed she's been following for months, even though she can't exactly remember where, when, or even if she's met her. (171)

The double-edged power of such media platforms is thus demonstrated in the novel, in which Facebook can both reveal truths (such as that Mark Hansen lied on his life insurance application) and tell lies (such as that Dan's fake scholars are real people).⁷ While Dan, unlike Julia, may remain aware that Paolita is fictional, the half-brothers to whom he has given birth in Wikipedia have become for him very real: "La parenté entre Broch et Perutz ne fait plus de doute à mes yeux. Ma découverte résout trop de questions en suspens . . . pour que je la garde secrète" 'There isn't a shadow of a doubt in my mind as to the kinship between Broch and Perutz. My discovery solves too many unanswered questions . . . for me to keep it a secret.' "Le Monde" 'The world,' Dan continues in all earnestness, "doit connaître la vérité" (183) 'needs to know the truth' (110). Dan leaves it up to others, however, to find the evidence of this "truth": "[Q]ue les historiens et les familles mènent l'enquête! Qu'ils épluchent les correspondances de Perutz et de Broch, qu'ils scrutent à la loupe les portraits des deux hommes à la recherche d'un signe indiscutable . . . qu'ils s'égosillent en colloques, en tables rondes, en séminaires. Qu'ils prouvent que j'ai tort" (183-84) '[M]ay historians and relatives conduct a bit of detective work! May they comb through Perutz's and Broch's correspondence; examine portraits of both men under a microscope in search of an undeniable sign . . . shout themselves hoarse at colloquiums, round tables, and seminars. Let them prove me wrong' (111). A relentless critic of human duplicity, Dan convinces himself not only that his story is true but that it is his duty to publish it as fact, and then he excuses himself from carrying the burden of proof. The hypocrisy of Dan's critiques of his niece's generation and of his neighbors serves as a sort of mirror in the novel: in his journal Dan reflects on his neighbors' deceit and hypocrisy, but he also reflects it back to them by imitating it.

The presence in both its content and its form of the opposition between non-fiction and fiction, truth and falsehood, virtue and self-interest in fact creates in *Roman américain* quite an elaborate play of mirrors, a literary technique to which Bello is partial and which he uses liberally in *Eloge de la pièce manquante* as well. In that text, for example, the various documents that constitute the narrative appear, unlike in *Roman*, out of chronological order, as if the invisible hand that is presenting them to the reader had first dropped them then gathered them back up in no discernible order. It quickly becomes apparent to the reader that it is up to her to put the documents in their proper order and therefore to make sense of the story they tell, just as the competitors in the novel must assemble the jumbled pieces of their puzzles in order to reveal the image they constitute. In *Eloge*, then, form very explicitly reflects theme.

The reflection between form and content in *Roman américain* is amplified through a somewhat different kind of mirroring: literary self-reflexivity, a device that calls attention to the status of a literary text as text by making it, to one degree or another, about the writing of a text or texts. Most obviously, the main character

in *Roman* is a writer, Dan, who is (or is supposed to be) working on his latest novel: “Travaillé tout l’après-midi à mon bouquin” ‘Worked on my book all day,’ he notes in his journal, although the work consisted, he admits, “essentiellement à faire des recherches sur la Toile” (31) ‘mainly [of] doing research on the Web’ (13). And in their multiple and sometimes heated e-mail discussions about the relative capacities of journalism versus fiction to reveal truths about the human condition, Dan insists to Vlad that the great American novel “reste à écrire” (127) ‘remains to be written’ (74), implying that it is still his ambition to write it. Dan also frequently mentions the several novels he has already published, lamenting, for example, the fact that each sale of a paperback copy earns him only a pittance (36).

While we as readers of *Roman américain* have access only to the titles and not the content of Dan’s published novels, we are nevertheless exposed to a number of samples of his creative writing, which also self-reflexively underscore fiction writing as a theme in the novel. A few examples include the detailed and romantic tale, noted above, about Perutz’s discovery of his familial ties to Broch and their single, clandestine meeting (89-91); an e-mail to a real Broch scholar from one of Dan’s invented ones, a certain Thorsten Böhm, a thirty-five-year-old Anglophilic Dane of ambiguous sexual orientation (271-72); and a thirteen-page, romanticized account of a real-life sales pitch for premium financing at a golf club for retirees that Vlad mentions in one of his articles, which Dan pens and sends to Vlad in order to demonstrate to him the superiority of creative over expository writing (106-18).

I will return to this important question of literary self-reflexivity below but want first to point out other elements of both *Roman américain* and *Eloge de la pièce manquante* that thwart the realism Bello so carefully constructs in them. I have noted that one of the three principal kinds of documents that make up *Roman américain* is Dan’s journal, and that an objective of the device is normally to give the reader the sense that she has stumbled upon an authentic text not meant for public consumption and that is therefore neither edited nor censored. It would appear on first reading that Bello’s use of the journal is precisely to create such an effect, and in many ways it does. Yet in a certain number of Dan’s entries there appears on the page an ellipsis in parentheses (...). Ellipses of course generally indicate that a word or words originally present in the text have been elided. Yet if these were real journal entries not intended for any audience other than the writer himself, there would be no need for such ellipses. Has either Dan or someone else been editing this private journal, eliminating salacious, unflattering, or “insignificant” details for some audience? This last kind of detail is precisely that, as we have seen, whose inclusion in the story would only reinforce its reality effect. Yet whatever the nature of the “missing” journal passages and whoever elided them, the effect is the same: these ellipses signify mediation, which works against the realist aims of documentary fiction.

Still another way in which verisimilitude in Bello's work appears to be put under stress is best illustrated by a long passage from *Eloge de la pièce manquante*, although Bello uses the technique, more sparingly, in *Roman américain* as well. This passage at first appears to be a striking example of the use of "insignificant" detail to create Barthes's reality effect. In the novel, we learn through the minutes of a meeting of the "Société de Puzzlogie" 'Society of Puzzlogie,' whose objective is to theorize the jigsaw puzzle, that one of its members conceives of a curious experiment whereby two masons would work simultaneously on a brick wall, one adding bricks to one end while the other removes bricks from the opposite end. The project's author believes that through such an experiment, "une certaine configuration" 'a particular configuration' of the wall could be found, "un point d'équilibre" 'a point of equilibrium,' which "constituerait en quelque sorte la 'vérité' du mur" (*Eloge* 81) '[i]n a way . . . would represent the 'truth' of the wall' (*The Missing Piece* 781). She claims that this idea has a scientific basis in physics and tries to explain this basis in order to quell any suspicion among her colleagues that such a project can only be judged as absurd (which of course it is). The ultimate objective of her experiment is to reveal, by analogy, "la vérité du puzzle" 'the truth of the puzzle,' which can only reside in some kind of equilibrium point between the jumble of pieces in the box and the completed image: "entre les deux . . . il est un moment où le puzzle touche à la plénitude de sa fonction, où la fascination qu'il suscite a achevé son ascension mais n'a pas encore entamé son déclin" (83) 'between the two . . . there exists a moment when the puzzle expresses its function to the full, when the fascination it exerts reaches a high and has yet to begin its decline' (801-23).

Later in the novel, the reader is treated to the full thirteen-page report (with illustrations) describing in minute detail the protocol used and the results obtained from the (failed) experiment (*Eloge* 151-63). In terms of the narrative, in the end what is produced through this long, hyper-descriptive passage is not a reality effect but rather what Larry Shiner, in his analysis of James Agee's *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, calls a "fiction effect." Agee's book is a collection of text and photos that documents the lives of American tenant farmers during the Great Depression. In it, Shiner argues,

More and more non-signifying details are piled up until, as Barthes said, they constitute a general signifier ["we are real"]. But in this case, the effect is the opposite of the one Barthes describes; it is not one or two isolated, non-signifying lexis producing a "reality effect," it is an avalanche of details whose cumulative cadences attest to the power of writing. Absorbed into the world of the book, this manifold of referents is shaped, transformed, given a second life in what we might call a "fiction effect." (171)

That is, such an excess of details, such a “delirium of enumeration” appearing to serve no real purpose in the story inevitably strikes the reader as unnatural (for no one in real life would describe something so exhaustively) and so ends up calling attention to itself as contrived, as fictional (Shiner 171, 176). This “fiction effect,” Shiner writes, “may be intrinsic to excessively detailed descriptive writing, even when it takes on the real and the true, just as, conversely, descriptive writing which invents its objects or imaginatively transforms memories is able through certain devices to achieve a ‘reality effect’” (175-76). While Shiner demonstrates in his essay the production of the fiction effect in a non-fictional text, the fiction effect, he implies, can be created in a realistic fictional text as well, just as the reality effect can be (and usually is) created in a non-fictional text. After all, these two kinds of texts—fiction and non-fiction—have much more in common than we usually like to think. Neither is the thing it describes, whether that thing be real or made up, but only a verbal representation of it, just as Magritte’s painting *La trahison des images* (*The Treachery of Images*), on which an image of a smoking pipe is accompanied by the words “Ceci n’est pas une pipe” ‘This is not a pipe,’ is only a pictorial representation of a pipe. Both the reality and the fiction effect are just that: effects, and not realities, created entirely through language. To return to Bello’s novel, while the signified of the inclusion of the wall project in *Eloge* could be said to be “the members of this Société de Puzzlologie take their jigsaw puzzles much too seriously,” in Shiner’s theory, the signified of the nineteen pages of meticulous and exhaustive description can only be “this text is fiction.”

Although perhaps less striking than this one, examples of the fiction effect can be discerned in *Roman américain* as well, in particular in the three samples of Dan’s fiction writing noted above. For example, in his long literary account of a real-life sales pitch for premium financing at a retirement community, realism suffers under the weight of a proliferation of details, such as that one of the salesmen has five siblings, an excessive number of Italian suits, and a penchant for Asian prostitutes with tattoos (107); that one of the attendees resembles Barbara Cartland, an author whose writing Dan surely deplores but whose financial success he surely envies (116); or that, surprisingly, all the bulbs in the clubhouse chandelier were working that day (108). While many of these innumerable details do help to convey to the reader the tawdriness of the event, their proliferation might be considered to constitute overkill, especially by stern and disciplined writers like Vlad, for whom, as we have seen, good writing “n’a pas besoin d’effets de manche” (80) ‘has no need for cheap grandstanding’ (42). Vlad also finds that Dan’s prolix plunges into the depths of the psyches of characters like the two salesmen, or of the Broch and Perutz Dan invents, lessen rather than strengthen the credibility of the account. Such psychological portraits are passé, he insists: “Les tourments de l’âme ont par ailleurs depuis longtemps épuisé leur potentiel romanesque. Quoi de neuf en matière de neurasthénie depuis Schopenhauer et Baudelaire? Rien ou presque”

(125) ‘the torments of the soul have long exhausted their novelistic potential. What’s new on the subject of neurasthenia since Schopenhauer and Baudelaire? Nothing, or nearly nothing’ (73). For Vlad, Dan’s realism is old hat, his characters too well fleshed out, too perfectly circumscribed by a flurry of description either to be believable or to teach us anything new about humanity in the twenty-first century.

Thus admonished for his fictionalization of some of the “real” people quoted in Vlad’s articles, Dan makes a point of meeting another of Vlad’s interviewees to whom he feels Vlad devoted far too little space: Frances Gray, a resident of Destin Terrace and a mediator for Emerald Life Insurance (whose sales force includes the predatory Chuck Patterson) (102). Her job is to examine claims Emerald has denied but whose denials have been contested by the intended beneficiaries. In an e-mail to Vlad, Dan describes his encounter with Francis Gray in the following, rather romantic, way: “As-tu déjà été confronté à la grâce? C’est ce que j’ai ressenti en écoutant Frances Gray décrire son métier. Cette femme respire la vertu, pas ce prudhomisme rance et moralisateur qui est devenu la signature de nos leaders, non, une bonté authentique, enracinée dans une fortitude et une empathie quasi surnaturelles” (249-50) ‘Have you ever found yourself in the presence of grace? That’s how I felt as I listened to Frances Gray describe her profession. The woman oozes virtue from every pore—not that sickening and moralistic self-righteousness that has become the hallmark of our leaders, but rather a genuine goodness, rooted in virtually superhuman courage and empathy’ (155). To justify his rapturous assessment, Dan quotes “Mrs. Gray,” as he respectfully refers to her, directly in his e-mail, as Vlad did briefly in his article. Being able to consider several points of view one by one, she tells, Dan, “est à la portée de n’importe qui” (250) ‘is within anybody’s reach’ (155). However, she goes on, “La difficulté consiste à les embrasser simultanément. Quand j’y parviens enfin, la vérité du dossier m’apparaît dans un éblouissement et la décision s’impose à moi avec la force de l’évidence” (250) ‘The challenge lies in embracing them all at once. When I finally accomplish that, both the truth of the case and the appropriate decision become obvious’ (155). “La vérité” ‘The truth,’ Mrs. Gray continues, “se montre à qui veut vraiment la voir. Nous avons tous en nous une petite voix, presque inaudible, qui nous pousse à l’héroïsme. Malheureusement, nos intérêts crient si fort qu’elle est facile à ignorer” (252) ‘reveals itself to anyone who really wants to see it. All of us have a small, nearly inaudible, internal voice that drives us to heroism. Unfortunately, our interests scream so loud that our inner voice is easy to ignore’ (156).

In his response to Dan’s e-mail, Vlad generally agrees with his correspondent’s assessment of Frances Gray’s character: “Oui, c’est un de mes regrets de n’avoir pu donner davantage la parole à Mrs Gray” (255) ‘It was indeed one of my regrets not to have been able to feature Mrs. Gray in more of a spotlight’

(158). The reason for which he says he “couldn’t” give her more space, however, aligns perfectly with his stance in his debate with Dan over non-fiction versus fiction: “Peut-être [est-ce] parce qu’elle est, d’abord et avant tout, un personnage de roman” (255) ‘perhaps [it’s] because she’s first and foremost a fiction character’ (158). That is, perhaps she is too virtuous, too devoid of typical human foibles, to be a useful, or indeed a very interesting, source for investigative journalism. Though real, she is not realistic, even independent of Dan’s romantic portrait of her. Further elaboration of her character in his article would have risked adding, Vlad implies, an undesirable fiction effect to his non-fiction.

Having explored the various methods by which Bello unravels the reality effects he weaves into *Roman américain*, let us now return to the most salient of these: literary self-reflexivity. Near the end of the novel, Dan considers in an e-mail to Vlad how he himself would have written about the issue of life settlement. Naturally he would have done so “dans un roman” (296) ‘in a novel’ (185). He does admit, however, that because of the specialized nature of the subject, “J’imagine que j’aurais dû me livrer à de longues et barbantés digressions techniques, assommer mes lecteurs de chiffres et de pourcentages, convoquer des experts plus ou moins bidons” (296) ‘I imagine I would have had to call on questionable experts, indulge in long, technical digressions, and bore my readers stiff with numbers and percentages’ (185), underhandedly implying that this is what Vlad has done in his articles. “Peut-être sur un sujet comme celui-ci” ‘Perhaps with a topic such as this one,’ he concedes, “la forme journalistique est-elle la plus appropriée” (296) ‘the journalistic approach is indeed the most effective’ (185). It is nevertheless significant that he writes that it is the journalistic “form” or “approach,” and not journalism itself, that is perhaps the best genre in which to treat such a subject. Such a distinction implies that he has not forsaken the genre of the novel as an appropriate vehicle for the topic but rather that the novel must resemble or mimic journalism rather than be journalism. To the reader of *Roman américain*, Dan’s description here of the novel he “would” write about life settlement sounds strikingly familiar: could the novel Dan has been working on in *Roman américain* in fact be, in an ultimate mise en abyme, *Roman américain*?

The closer we get to the end of the novel, the more copious the evidence that the fictional and the real novel are one and the same becomes. In post-scripts to almost every e-mail they send to each other, Dan and Vlad practice a game they used to play when they were at school together: they offer a name, different each time, that is in fact an anagram of the name of a famous writer. Each expects the other to unscramble the anagram before writing back (some examples are Vivian Darkbloom for Vladimir Nabokov (25, 27), Norman Drachydle for Raymond Chandler (106, 126), and Pearl Rhee for Harper Lee (225, 253)). Significantly, in the post-script to his last e-mail to Vlad, which also serves as the last line of the

novel, Dan asks, “Tu as des nouvelles de Vlad Eisinger?” (325) ‘Have you had any news from Vlad Eisinger?’ (201). Why, the reader must wonder, is Dan asking Vlad if he has heard from himself lately? And yet, “Vlad Eisinger,” a rather odd Slavic-Germanic jumble of a name, does resemble many of the strange names Dan and Vlad include in their postscripts. “Vlad Eisinger,” it suddenly strikes the reader, must be yet another anagram. But what author’s name could it conceal? In the end it is Dan’s “insignificant” e-mail address, danielgsiver@gmail.com, that allows her to arrive at an answer: Vlad Eisinger is an anagram of Daniel G. Siver.

Is Vlad, then, just another of Dan’s fictional characters? The titles of several of Dan’s novels corroborate this hypothesis and even tell us on whom Dan has modeled his character. These titles are *Double jeu* ‘Double Play’ (185), *L’usurpateur* ‘The Usurper’ (167), and *Le sosie et son double* ‘The Doppelgänger and His Double’ (166), the last two of which display, according to a reviewer of Dan’s books, “l’obsession de l’auteur pour les personnages schizophréniques, qui se réfugient dans des mondes imaginaires pour fuir la tyrannie du quotidien” (166-67) ‘the author’s obsession with schizophrenic characters who take refuge in imaginary worlds in order to escape from the tyranny of daily life’ (101). If these titles are not sufficient proof that Dan and Vlad are themselves doubles there is also the title of Dan’s work in progress, *Arianne Cimmaron* (177), a name whose oddness can only suggest to the now enlightened reader that it is another anagram. In this repetition, however, there is a difference: because this name serves as a title, it stands to reason that it is an anagram of a title rather than of an author. And just like the names the other anagrams conceal, the title that *Ariane Cimmaron* hides must belong not to the world of the novel but to the real world, the reader’s world. And what real novel is foremost in the mind of *Roman américain*’s reader? Why, *Roman américain*.

No doubt can remain, then, that Vlad is Dan’s fictional alter ego and that the novel Dan is writing is the novel we are reading.⁸ In that last e-mail “exchange” with his double, Dan indeed makes the following proposal concerning the “great American novel” “they” had “both” dreamed of writing one day: “Et si on l’écrivait à deux, ce livre? A toi les articles de presse, à moi la description de leurs répercussions sur les habitants de Destin Terrace? Une radioscopie de l’âme américaine, solidement ancrée dans son époque” (324-25) ‘What if we wrote that book together? You, the press articles; Me, the description of their impact on Destin Terrace’s residents. A radioscopy of the American soul, firmly rooted in its epoch’ (200). Dan and Vlad’s contentious and protracted debate over whether fiction or non-fiction better helps us arrive at truths about the contemporary world is never resolved. That neither man’s arguments seem more or less convincing than the other’s makes sense especially if we consider that they are coming from two halves of the same whole. One last point to consider concerning the shared identity of the “two” writers is that if Vlad is Dan, then perhaps the “you” being apostrophized in

Dan's final postscript ("Have you had any news from Vlad Eisinger?") is not Vlad but the reader of Dan's novel. If this is the case, Dan is breaking here the novel's fourth wall and therefore undoing any remaining illusion the reader may take pleasure in maintaining that she is reading an authentic document, a real e-mail, not meant or prepared for a public audience. Dan has tricked us throughout the novel, but like most tricksters, he cannot resist his desire to reveal to his victims the genius of his deception.

The final effect of the last several textual elements I have described here (the over-abundance of detail, the mirroring of form and content, the ellipses, and the literary self-reflexivity) is therefore, in sum, to denaturalize the story being told, or more specifically, to expose the novel's various documents as fictional. Borrowing the term from Shiner but not attributing its production to just one narrative technique, we might call the result of all of these techniques the fiction effect. What is remarkable about the frequent emergence of the fiction effect in both *Roman américain* and *Eloge de la pièce manquante* is that it systematically erodes the realism so painstakingly constructed in them. Both novels thus mirror the Société de Puzzlogie's hypothetical wall in the latter text: they are built and dismantled simultaneously. This seemingly contradictory movement between construction and deconstruction should come as no surprise to *Roman américain*'s readers in particular, however. It is just one more reflection of the oppositions on which the novel centers—journalism versus literature, reality versus fiction, truth versus lies—and under whose tension both the characters in the novel and we, as their mirror images in real life, struggle. Yet while Bello's mirror play reveals resemblances between real readers and fictional characters, between real and fictional worlds, it does not posit an equivalence. When a character in a novel creates Facebook pages for fake people to substantiate a speculative and rather trifling claim he makes in Wikipedia, the effect is humorous. When, on the other hand, one nation creates Facebook pages of fake people to influence another nation's elections, the effects are not funny at all.⁹ While truth is certainly presented in *Roman américain* and a number of Bello's other novels as a moving target, it is never dismissed as an illusion or a reactionary notion. Fiction, as Dan argues, can indeed reveal truths. He often forgets, however, that fiction can also tell lies, especially when it is not recognized as fiction. The danger of "fake news" and "alternative facts" is that, while contradictions in terms, they try to pass themselves off as something other than fiction. Fortunately, as much of Bello's work insists, we are capable of detecting and rejecting such chicanery, provided we have the proper critical reading skills. By constructing uncannily lifelike textual worlds but then allowing, indeed forcing, us to notice the handicraft behind them, Bello's fiction helps sharpen in us the textual navigation skills we need to avoid the ontological abyss of the "information" age.

Notes

1. My thanks to Gerald Prince for calling my attention to the genre.
2. I must caution, however, that I will revise my own argument about the insignificance of one of these e-mail addresses later in the essay.
3. All translations of the French are taken from published English translations of Bello's novels. See Works Cited.
4. It is perhaps significant too that Florida is home to Disney World, on whose Main Street reigns Baudrillard's simulacrum, a copy of something that never existed in the first place. See Baudrillard's discussion of Disney World's older sister, California's Disneyland, in *Simulacres et simulation* (*Simulacra and Simulation*, 25-27).
5. Premium financing, as Vlad explains in one of his articles, is a loan made to an elderly person so that he can purchase a substantial life insurance policy, which he will then sell back to the investment fund as quickly as laws guarding against such schemes allow (often two years) for a pre-determined sum. Upon his death, the investors collect the payout, having only paid out, they hope, a few months' or years' worth of premiums and a relatively modest fee to the original purchaser (96-99).
6. Dan's appreciation of Wikipedia appears to be shared by his creator. In 2015 Bello donated a year's worth of his book royalties (\$50,000) to the Wikimedia Foundation in gratitude for the wealth of information he has gleaned from Wikipedia in the construction of his novels in particular. See Curiel.
7. Facebook is also used to create a fake profile by another, peripheral character in the novel, an employee of a life settlement management company whose job is to track down original policy owners who neglect to send in the required status updates. She creates a thirty-year-old bachelor, a Johnny Weissmuller of Tarzan fame look-alike who loves to party to attract HIV-positive men, many of whom have sold their policies. Once they friend her Tarzan, she will learn of their deaths "avant leur mère" (149) 'before their mothers' (90) do and inform the insurance providers so that the investors can collect their payout.
8. Yet more evidence that Dan and Vlad are doppelgängers is that the name of the apartment block where Vlad lives in Brooklyn is Asterid Center, an anagram of Destin Terrace (26).

9. For a thorough account of Russia's creation of at least hundreds of fake Facebook profiles to influence the 2016 U.S. presidential election, see Shane.

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