The Canon in Circulation: Tracking the Reception of *Norton Anthology* Authors in Library Checkout Data

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Abstract

Which canonical American authors are the public reading, and why? We explore this question by analyzing nearly two decades of book circulation data from the Seattle Public Library (SPL), one of the only public libraries in the United States to make anonymized checkout data publicly available. Focusing on the 93 authors included in the post-1945 volume of *The Norton Anthology of American Literature* (*NAAL*), we examine 1.6k unique works and almost one million checkouts to better understand contemporary literary reception beyond the classroom. We present a novel dataset that can support future reception research and serve as a benchmark for future *Work*-level clustering approaches. Our findings suggest that the few genre fiction authors in the *NAAL*—particularly writers of science fiction—dominate the checkouts, and that circulation spikes are often triggered by high-profile media adaptations, the death of an author, and potentially even scandal. We share an open-source, interactive tool that allows users to explore checkout trends for any post-1945 *NAAL* author or work over the last 20 years.

Keywords: readers, reception, circulation, literature, metadata, bibliographic data

1 Introduction

Which canonical American authors are the public actually reading? What motivates readers to reach for particular literary works at particular times? These are difficult questions to answer, partly because reading and reception data is hard to come by. Today, scholars interested in large-scale reception evidence are mostly limited to sources like bestseller lists, which only a small fraction of authors ever appear on, and online book review data. In this paper, we seek to answer these questions by turning to a new book reception data resource from the Seattle Public Library (SPL).

The SPL is one of the few libraries in the United States to make anonymized book checkout data publicly available at a granular level—by minute for physical checkouts, and by month and medium for physical and digital checkouts [8]. We use the total checkouts dataset to analyze library checkout trends for works by every author included in Volume E (1945-) of the most recent 10th edition of *The Norton Anthology of American Literature (NAAL)*, a resource that actively shapes the literary canon and curricula across the country [7]. We seek to understand how and why contemporary American readers and library users are engaging with canonical American authors.

Scholars have shown that cross-media adaptations can reignite interest in literary source material [13; 16]; that an author's biography—especially their death and posthumous attention—can

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reshape the interpretation and popularity of their works [11]; and that publicity can amplify cultural attention, even if that publicity is negative [3].

Building on these perspectives, we seek to answer the following questions:

1. What are the most popular post-1945 books and authors from the *Norton Anthology* based on Seattle library checkouts?

2. How do film and television adaptations affect circulation of adapted literary works?

3. How do moments in an author's life, like scandal and death, shape readership patterns?

In addition to our findings, we also address a significant metadata challenge that arises when using bibliographic data for reception-related research: different editions and variations of the same work can have different titles. Author names can vary, too. It is very difficult to cluster variations of the same work and author at scale (even persistent identifiers like ISBNs cannot resolve these issues). With our mid-size dataset, we take a combined computational and manual clustering approach, and we share our data with the research community as a benchmark for larger-scale, automated methods.

Our overall contributions include:

1. Findings on the most checked out *NAAL* authors and works in Seattle over the past 20 years, which highlight the popularity of science fiction, and the impact of events like cross-media adaptation, authors' deaths, and public scandal on library circulation.

2. A dataset of library circulation data clustered at the *Work*-level (as opposed to edition- or format-level) for every author in Volume E of *NAAL*. This dataset can support research on the reception of canonical post-1945 literature and serve as a benchmark for future *Work*-level clustering methods.

3. An open-source, interactive visualization tool that allows users to explore the checkouts for any *NAAL* author or work over the last 20 years: `https://melaniewalsh.github.io/whats-seattle-reading/posts/norton-anthology-american/`.

2 Methods

To identify library checkout records associated with each author, we query the Seattle Public Library (SPL) endpoint of the Socrata Open Data API provided by the City of Seattle. Specifically, we search the "Creator" field using multiple known variants of each author's name. Author name representation in SPL data varies by medium (e.g., print book, ebook) and sometimes by edition or metadata formatting (see Table 1). We manually review and supplement name variants to capture as many relevant records as possible. Some works may still be missing if the author's name is not included in the checkout record, but we believe such omissions are minimal.

Author Variants for Toni Morrison
Toni Morrison
Morrison, Toni
Morrison, Toni, 1931–2019,
Morrison, Toni, 1931–2019

Table 1: Variants of the author name Toni Morrison in SPL catalog data.

To identify and group all existing works by each *NAAL* author, we next cluster associated titles. Work titles often show even greater variation than author names (see Table 2). Although SPL data now includes ISBNs, these identifiers correspond to specific editions rather than conceptual *Works*, making them insufficient for *Work*-level analysis [19; 21].

Title Variants of *Beloved* Data
Beloved
Beloved (Unabridged)
Beloved (unabridged)
Beloved: (unabridged)
Beloved / a novel by Toni Morrison ; [with a new foreword by the author].
Beloved / a novel by Toni Morrison.
Billŏbidŭ : T'oni Morisŭn changp'yŏn sosŏl = Beloved / Kim Sŏn-hyŏng omgim.
Beloved : a novel / by Toni Morrison.

Table 2: Variants of the title *Beloved* in SPL catalog data.

We use a hybrid computational and manual approach to cluster title variants. Computationally, we strip subtitles and parenthetical information (e.g., transforming "Beloved: (unabridged)" and "Beloved / a novel by Toni Morrison ; [with a new foreword by the author]" to simply "Beloved"), normalize punctuation, and standardize certain characters (e.g., replacing "&" with "and"). We then manually identify and group translated editions and additional title variants. We finally filter the data to include only checkouts of print books, ebooks, and audiobooks, excluding other media such as DVDs and large print editions.

To answer our research questions about how and why readers seek out literary fiction, we conduct exploratory data analysis on time series of selected authors and works, aligning spikes and periods of elevated interest with external events. We focus on notable media adaptations, author deaths, and public allegations of criminality or impropriety. The set of stimuli we identify is not exhaustive but rather a small sample of the types of external events that can drive coverage of, and interest in literary fiction.

3 Data

The dataset used in this study links authors from Volume E of the 10th edition of the *NAAL* with SPL checkout records from April 2005-June 2025. We share this data with the research community.[1] The dataset contains 93 unique authors and 1,603 unique works, with nearly one million total checkouts (Table 3).

Category	#
Unique Authors	93
Unique Works	1,603
Total Checkouts	980,620
Total Checkouts per Author (Mean)	10,544
Total Checkouts per Work (Mean)	612

Table 3: Summary Statistics of SPL Checkout Data Since 2005 with authors from the NAAL.

[1] `https://seattle-library-checkout-data.s3.us-west-2.amazonaws.com/norton-anthology_spl-checkouts_2005-2025.csv`

To address inconsistencies in catalog records, we include *Normalized.Creator* and *Normalized.Title* fields, which represent our reconciliations of author and title variants across the SPL data. The dataset also includes a *Works.In.Norton* field to identify works explicitly named in the most recent edition of the *NAAL*. This list may change across editions, as editors often replace one work by an author with another by the same author [7].

4 Findings

4.1 Most Popular Books and Authors

We identify the most-checked out *NAAL* authors at the Seattle Public Library (Table 4.1). The list is dominated by genre fiction writers—particularly those working in science fiction—including Ursula K. Le Guin, Octavia Butler, N.K. Jemisin, and Kurt Vonnegut.

Author	Total Checkouts
Ursula K. Le Guin	73,224
Octavia E. Butler	65,386
Louise Erdrich	60,846
N. K. Jemisin	59,859
Toni Morrison	47,501
Kurt Vonnegut	41,462
George Saunders	38,838
Philip K. Dick	38,230
Sherman Alexie	37,477
James Baldwin	32,463

Table 4: Total checkouts by author in the *NAAL* dataset. Genre fiction authors are the most checked out subset of the *NAAL* .

Title	Author	Checkouts
Parable Of The Sower	Octavia E. Butler	21,652
Lincoln In The Bardo	George Saunders	17,356
The Fifth Season	N. K. Jemisin	17,223
The Sympathizer	Viet Thanh Nguyen	12,792
Kindred	Octavia E. Butler	12,591
Beloved	Toni Morrison	12,330
The Left Hand Of Darkness	Ursula K. Le Guin	12,148
The Absolutely True Diary Of A Part-Time Indian	Sherman Alexie	12,043
The Year Of Magical Thinking	Joan Didion	10,907
The Sentence	Louise Erdrich	10,658

Table 5: Most frequently checked-out *NAAL* titles. Speculative fiction titles are extremely popular compared to most other works by *NAAL* authors.

We also present the most checked-out titles (Table 5). We again find the outsized popularity of genre fiction, as top borrowed works include Butler's *Kindred* (1979) and Jemisin's *The Fifth Season* (2015). Butler's novel *Parable of the Sower* (1993) was the most popular title across this

20-year period, and received a surge of checkouts in 2024 (Figure 1), the same year that the futuristic novel begins and the same year that the SPL selected the novel for its city-wide reading initiative, “Seattle Reads”. The sharp spike in checkouts of *Parable of the Sower* coinciding with the Seattle Reads campaign supports research showing that city-wide reading initiatives can significantly boost circulation [17].

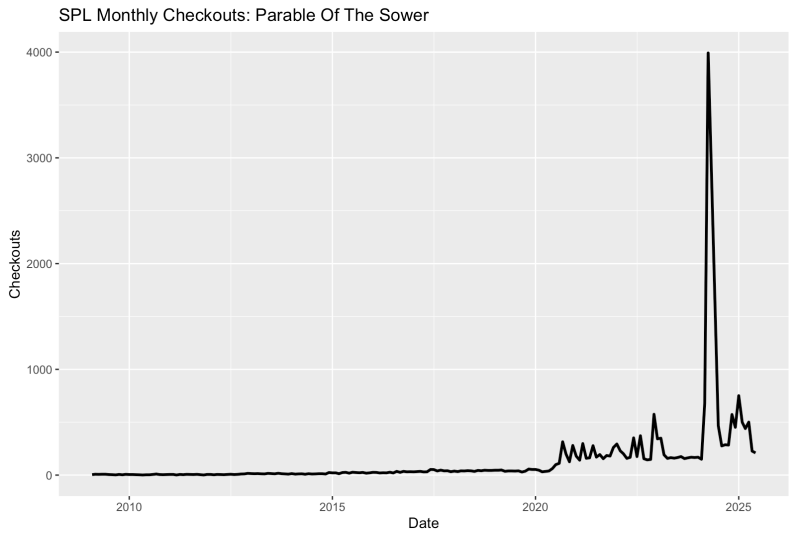

Figure 1: Timeseries of Octavia E. Butler’s *Parable of the Sower* checkouts in the SPL. *Parable of the Sower* was widely read in the SPL in 2024 because of the Seattle Reads program.

4.2 TV and Film Adaptation Influence

Prior work suggests that TV adaptations are often associated with higher readership and engagement for adapted books relative to peer titles [13], and that movies can encourage habitual non-readers to purchase the source book [16]. We investigate whether those findings are supported by the SPL checkout data.

We identify six major films and three major TV show adaptions based on works by *NAAL* authors, and visualize the adaption dates alongside the source material’s checkout trends (Figures 2 and 3). The adaptations we identify are not exhaustive, but rather salient, high-profile examples.

For book-to-movie adaptations, a dashed line indicates when the movie adaptation was released to theaters, and a dotted line indicates the release on streaming services. For book-to-TV adaptations, a dotted line represents when the first and last episodes aired; the shaded region indicates general runtime.

We observe prominent spikes in checkouts around the time of release date for all book-to-movie adaptations. Notably, James Baldwin’s *If Beale Street Could Talk* (1974), which had previously been checked out at a rate of 5 checkouts a month, rose to 88 checkouts in January 2019, and continued to rise until it reached a peak in April, a month after it was released to streaming services (Figure 2). Don DeLillo’s novel *White Noise* (1985) exhibited a similar stark spike. Upon the theater release of its film adaptation in November 2022, checkouts in December rose to 88. After the film’s release to streaming at the end of the same month, the book reached its peak of 156 checkouts in January (the next month), despite the book having steady low checkouts counts of only 11 books only a month prior. (Figure 2).

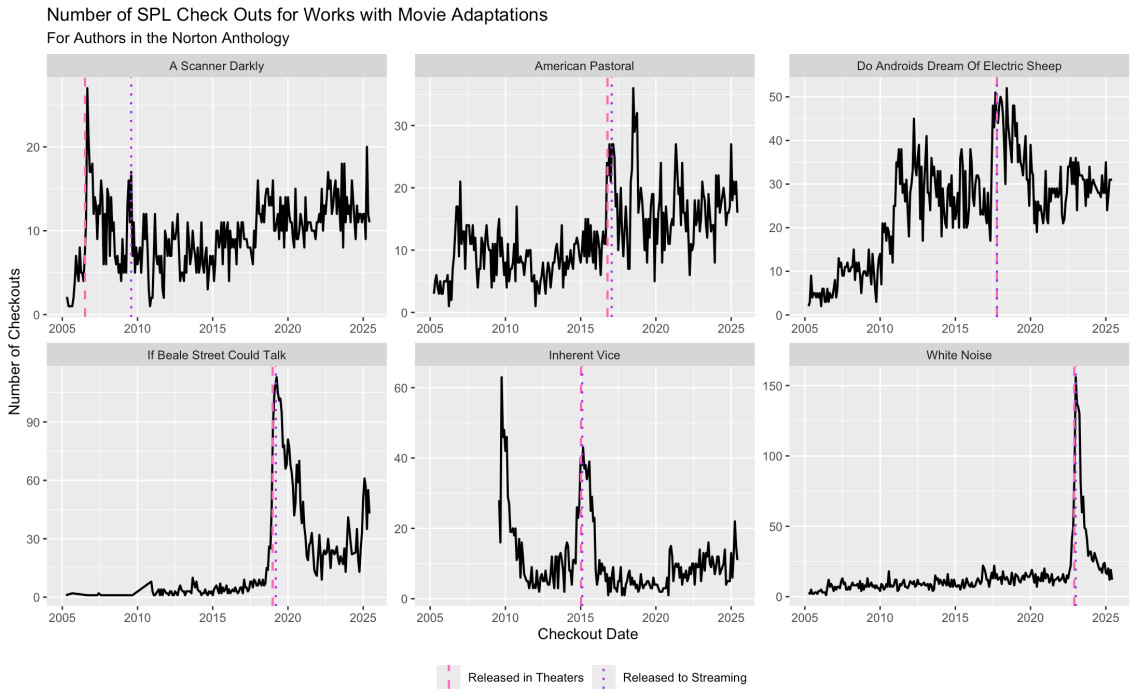

Figure 2: SPL checkouts of *NAAL* source texts with prominent movie adaptations. Movie adaptations are associated with spikes in reader interest of source material.

TV adaptations show similar trends. While checkouts for Octavia Butler's *Kindred* (1979) were already on a steady rise, the show's premiere in December 2022 brought with it a new high of 368 checkouts in a single month. *Man in the High Castle* (1962) by Philip K. Dick was also checked out significantly more frequently throughout its TV adaptation runtime between 2015 and 2019.

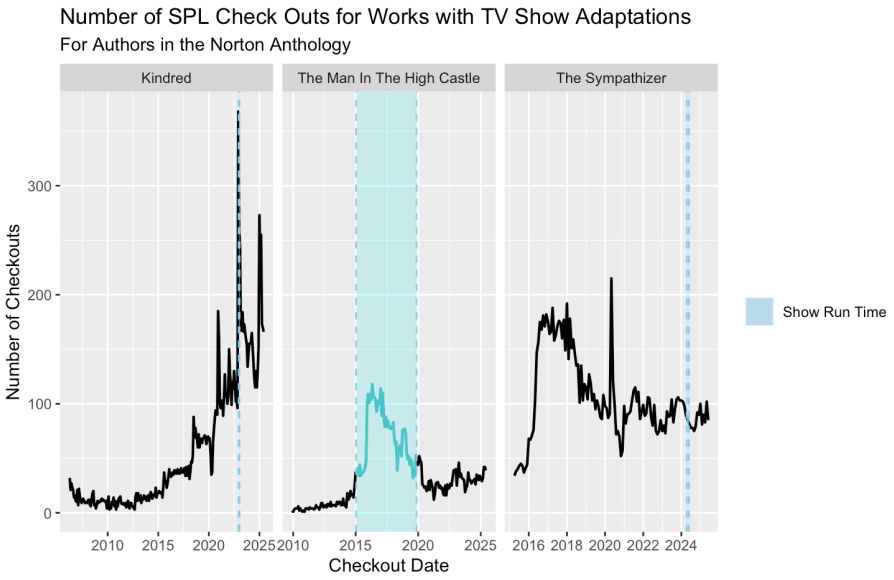

Figure 3: SPL checkouts of *NAAL* source texts with prominent TV adaptations. TV adaptations are sometimes associated with elevated readership of source material during runtime.

The clear exception to the adaptation-driven circulation boost is Viet Thanh Nguyen's *The*

Sympathizer (2015). Already a widely recognized and celebrated title—having won the Pulitzer Prize in 2016 and having appeared on several "Best of the Decade" lists in 2019 and 2020 [6; 9]—*The Sympathizer* saw elevated checkouts well before the announcement or release of its TV adaptation. Unlike other cases, the HBO adaptation failed to generate renewed interest in the source text in the circulation data.

4.3 The Death of the Author

Literary scholars have long examined the relationship between authors and their works. Famously, Roland Barthes argues that the act of meaning-making lies with the reader, marking a "death of the author" [2]. Yet in terms of circulation and popularity, literary works are not easily separated from the lives of their creators. The case of *NAAL* author David Foster Wallace is striking and well-documented: his death by suicide defined and propelled his literary and cultural legacy [11]. Likewise in the checkout data, Wallace's works experienced a step change in readership after his death, rising from roughly 20 checkouts per month to an average of more than 130. How about for other authors in the *NAAL*? Did authors who died within the same time period also experience a boost in engagement with their works?

To explore this phenomenon, we focus on authors from the *NAAL* who died after 2005, when the SPL began collecting checkout data. We exclude authors with consistently low circulation (e.g., Lucille Clifton, who averaged fewer than ten checkouts per month), in order to prioritize cases with sufficient data density. This filtering left us with eight authors: David Foster Wallace, Joan Didion, John Updike, Mary Oliver, N. Scott Momaday, Philip Roth, Toni Morrison, and Ursula K. Le Guin. We visualize each author's monthly checkout trends, annotated with the date of their death (Figure 4).

Across all eights authors, we observe a pronounced and immediate increase in checkouts in the month following their death. Mary Oliver, for instance, had 138 checkouts in December 2018—the month before she died—and 545 in February 2019, the month afterward. Unlike David Foster Wallace, her checkouts then declined in subsequent months, as is the case for authors like Philip Roth and John Updike.

4.4 Is All Publicity Good Publicity?

Prior work suggests that bad publicity can sometimes boost book sales by increasing product awareness [3]. The *NAAL* authors however already are high-profile figures, and their works already have widespread recognition. In this context, we examine how public scandal—specifically sexual assault allegations during the MeToo era—shapes checkout trends for authors accused of sexual misconduct or harassment. We specifically examine the borrowing patterns for Junot Díaz and Sherman Alexie (Figure 6).

In 2018, a series of writers and graduate students, including *NAAL* author Carmen Maria Machado, raised allegations against Díaz, which included claims of misogynistic behavior and inappropriate advances [1]. Since then, Díaz has largely retained his professional roles. He still contributes to the *New York Times* and remains a faculty member at MIT. However, while he is included in the *NAAL* and even highlighted in the introduction, he was recently dropped from the most recent edition of the *Norton Anthology of World Literature*, an act that Rafael Walker attributes to his "cancellation" [22]. His status within the literary world and popularity with the public remains unclear.

Around the slew of accusations against Díaz in 2018, checkouts of his work jumped from 75 to 175 in a month, before slowly decaying over the next two years. However, these accusations also line up almost precisely with the release of Díaz's children's novel *Islandborn* (2018), which

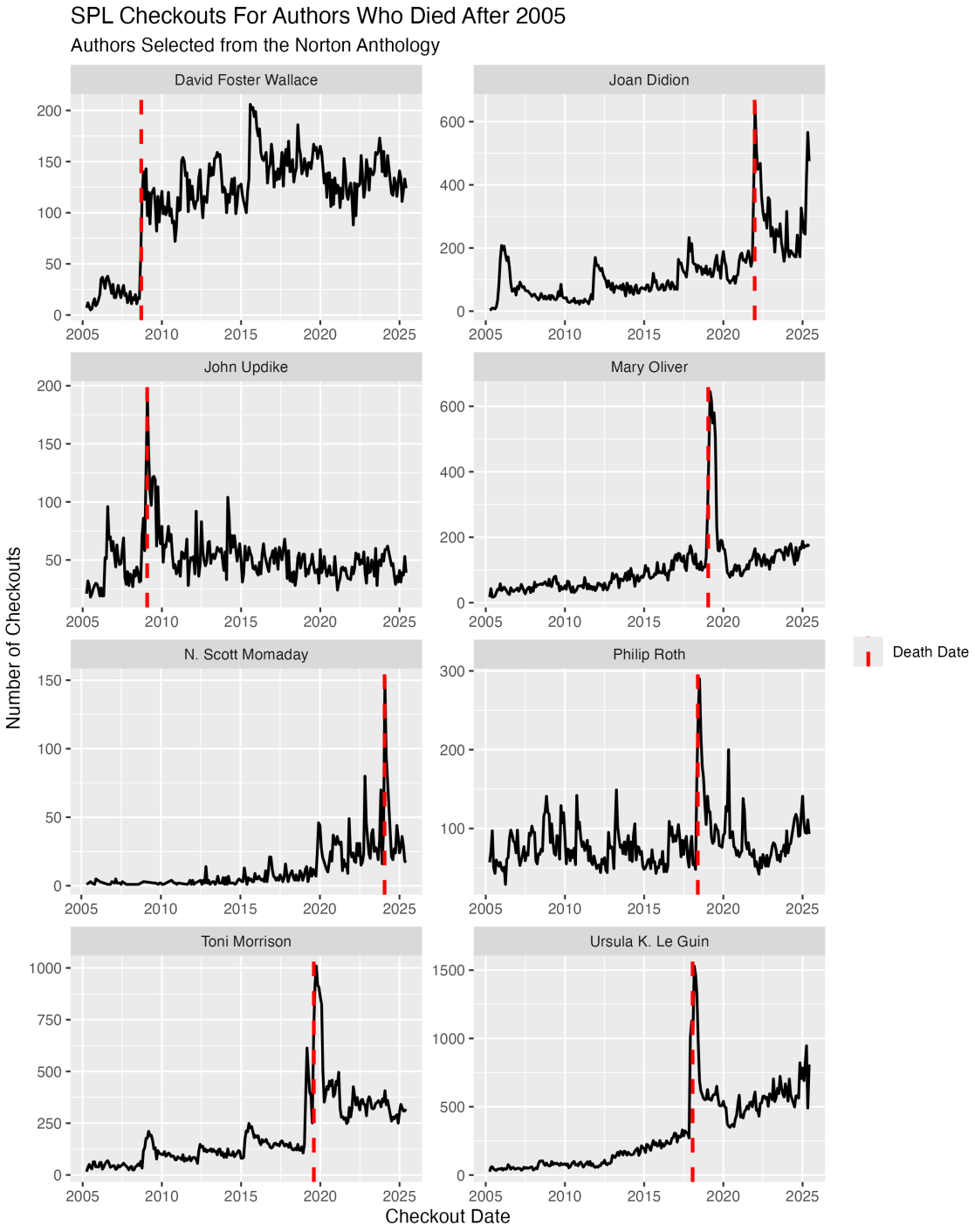

Figure 4: SPL checkouts of *NAAL* authors with deaths in the SPL timeframe. Authorial death is consistently associated with checkout spikes in the author's work.

makes it difficult to say whether this increased popularity stems from scandal or the debut of a new novel.

Similarly, when Sherman Alexie was accused of sexual assault in early 2018 [15], Alexie's professional career suffered. The Institute of American Indian Arts renamed the Sherman Alexie Scholarship to the MFA Alumni Scholarship, and the American Indian Library Association voided the Best Young Adult Book Award that Alexie had won in 2008. In July 2017, checkouts of

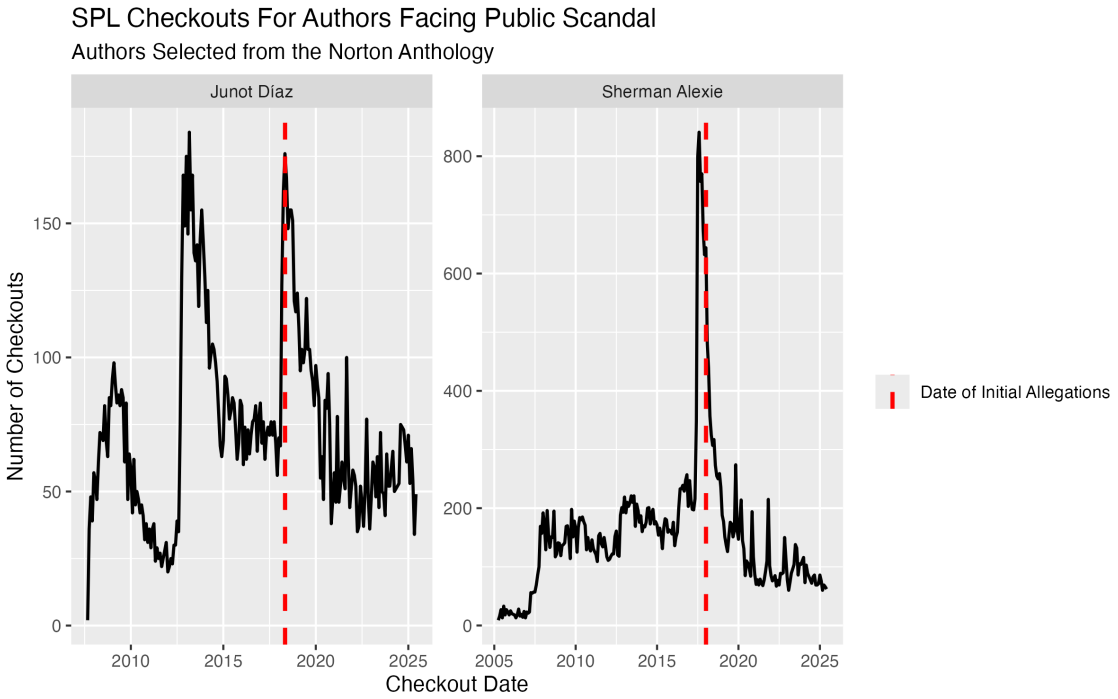

Figure 5: SPL checkouts of *NAAL* authors with allegations of impropriety in the SPL timeframe. Major public scandals for *NAAL* authors line up with surges of interest in their work in the checkout data, but similarly timed book releases confound causal claims.

Alexie's work spiked from around 250 checkouts a month to a peak of over 800, before decaying over the next year. However, the spike predates the first accusation against Alexie in January 2018. Instead, the increased borrowing is more obviously aligned with the June release of his award-winning memoir, *You Don't Have to Say You Love Me: A Memoir* (2018).

In Figure 6, we plot checkouts for both authors excluding their newly released books, in an attempt to isolate the effects of "cancellation" or scandal. While both figures more clearly show distinct spikes around the dates when accusations first surfaced, disentangling the impact of scandal from potential synergistic effects—such as renewed interest in an author's backlist triggered by a new release [4]—is beyond the scope of our methods.

5 SPL Checkout Data Viewer and Explorer

We present an interactive tool that allows users to explore checkout trends for any *NAAL* author or work in the last 20 years: `https://melaniewalsh.github.io/whats-seattle-reading/posts/norton-anthology-american/`.

This resource enables users to examine specific trends discussed in this paper as well as other phenomena.

6 Discussion

It is difficult—if not impossible—to determine with certainty why readers flock to certain authors at certain moments, or why they turn away from them. Yet by combining large-scale library checkout data with interpretive case studies, we are able to surface meaningful patterns and propose hypotheses about the social and cultural dynamics that shape literary circulation.

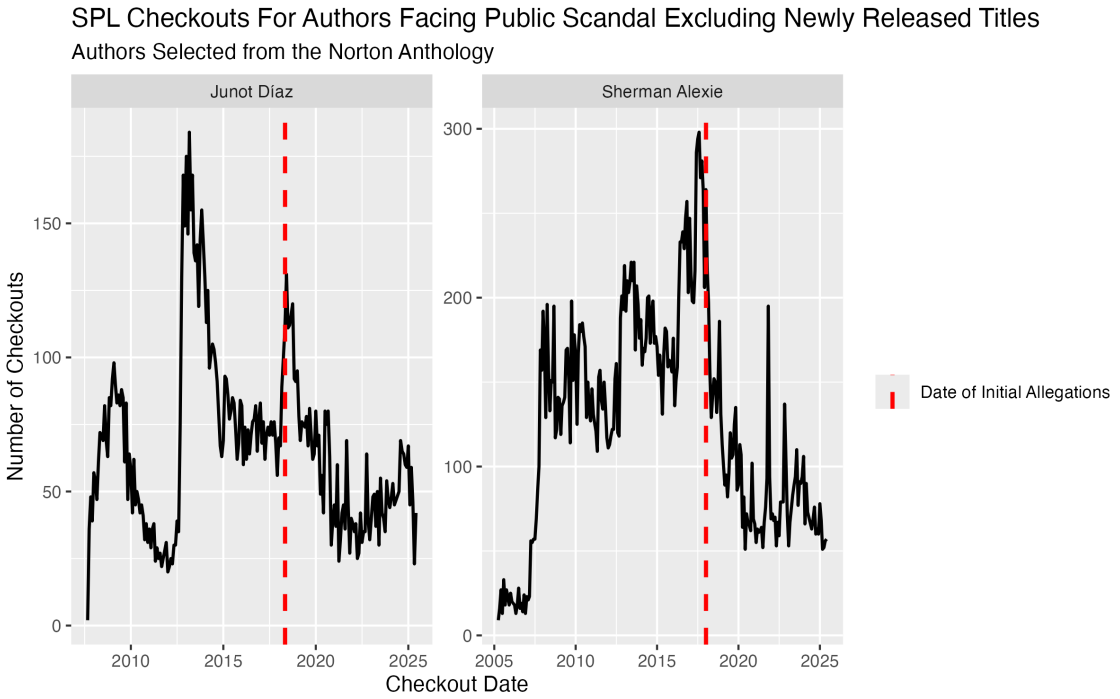

Figure 6: SPL checkouts of *NAAL* authors with allegations of impropriety in the SPL timeframe without newly released titles. Excluding newly released books from both author's checkouts suggests that Junot Díaz may have gained a short-term boost in readership around his public controversy.

Our findings suggest that literary popularity is not static and inevitable, but dynamic and socially mediated. Of course, works do not rise to prominence solely because of their aesthetic merit or inclusion in a syllabus. Rather, they are activated by external events and shifting cultural contexts.

Our analysis further suggests that authors' biographies—particularly moments of personal crisis or public visibility—continue to shape their readership. We observe repeated and significant increases in borrowing following an author's death, underscoring how literary texts remain entangled with narratives about their creators. Similarly, media adaptations are consistently associated with spikes in checkout activity, demonstrating the role of cross-platform exposure in renewing interest in specific books and authors. These events may drive circulation simply because of increased media coverage, which may explain why a previously ubiquitously discussed novel like *The Sympathizer* failed to receive a boost in circulation following its adaptation.

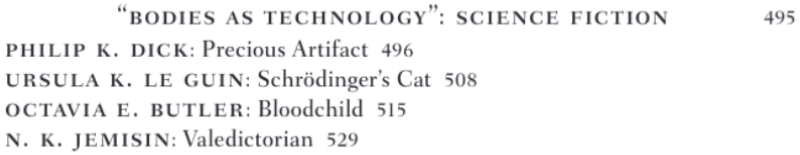
"BODIES AS TECHNOLOGY": SCIENCE FICTION 495
PHILIP K. DICK: Precious Artifact 496
URSULA K. LE GUIN: Schrödinger's Cat 508
OCTAVIA E. BUTLER: Bloodchild 515
N. K. JEMISIN: Valedictorian 529

Figure 7: Table of Contents of *Norton Anthology* Volume E

We also find that science fiction writers outperform the more typical literary fiction from the *NAAL* in the SPL checkout data. In the introduction to Volume E of the *NAAL*, the editors ask,

"Do readers have to choose between the academic and the popular, between 'serious' and 'entertaining'?" [12]. The editors' inclusion of four speculative fiction authors in a special section titled "Bodies as Technology: Science Fiction" represents a meaningful effort to bridge that divide, while also demonstrating the privileged position of science fiction relative to its generic peers as an increasingly canonized and studied literary genre [5; 10; 14]. These authors—three women and two people of color—constitute just over 4% of the authors in our dataset, yet account for approximately 25% of all checkouts. This sharp disparity highlights the tension between what readers seek out and what the *NAAL* has historically prioritized. A small topical subsection of the anthology commands an outsized share of actual reader attention.

For computational researchers, this study underscores the value—and limits—of data-driven cultural analysis. Computational work modeling book sales has helped reveal aggregate trends in sales after release and quantify the impact of variables like presence on bestseller lists and genre identification on commercial success [18; 23; 24]. However, such large-scale approaches can struggle to account for the impact of book-specific contextual events that resist clean, scalable data streams.

Our approach in contrast is not predictive and is unable to quantify the causal impact of external stimuli, nor model circulation patterns at scale. Rather, it models how large-scale data, humanistic reasoning, and exploratory data analysis [20] can illuminate patterns of cultural attention and value that would otherwise remain hidden.

7 Conclusion

We present a novel dataset of clustered Seattle Public Library checkout data from the 10th edition of the *Norton Anthology of American Literature* (1945-) as both an avenue for future scholarship on the reception of canonical texts and authors and as an evaluation dataset for future book and *Work*-clustering tools. Alongside the dataset we provide a tool for other scholars to explore and visualize checkout trends by author and title: `https://melaniewalsh.github.io/whats-seattle-reading/posts/norton-anthology-american/`.

We find strong evidence of elevated readership of the few genre fiction authors from the anthology, all within the space of speculative or science fiction, a popular genre that has gained traction and prestige in literary scholarship. We also find compelling evidence around external events that impact book readership and drive popularity around titles in the SPL data, namely from SPL programming and marketing, large-scale adaptation on both the big and small screens, and authors' literal deaths. Controversy and scandal around authors may also drive short-term interest in their work, but more research is needed to isolate out confounding factors like concurrent book releases.

Future work should explore the range of additional variables that influence a book's readership over time, such as marketing materials, critical attention, political or cultural events, and prominent releases of complementary books. Timeseries readership data is difficult to find, but resources like the Seattle Public Library checkout data can provide powerful evidence for understanding how literary texts function in market environments, as cultural objects and commodities that ebb and flow in response to the world around them.

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