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Spring 2015

## Live/Archive: Occupy MLA

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### Citation Details

Berens, Kathi Inman. "Live/Archive: Occupy MLA." *Hyperrhiz: New Media Cultures* no. 11, 2015.

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# Live/Archive: *Occupy MLA*

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**Citation:** Berens, Kathi Inman. "Live/Archive: *Occupy MLA*." *Hyperrhiz: New Media Cultures* no. 11, 2015. doi:10.20415/hyp/011.e03

**Abstract:** More than other netprov, *Occupy MLA* [OMLA] lays bare the ethical and performative capacities of the genre. Both a live performance and an enduring if volatile media artifact, *OMLA* leaves "data contrails": digital traces of real-time reader participation that slowly decay and become less coherent over time. This decay creates an enduring performance record that distorts the live experience of it. In this essay, the shareable, spreadable and appropriative aspects of netprov as a "born digital" live reading/writing interface are considered. The sheer volume of *OMLA*'s tweets and its installation as time-based art create a primary text whose "primacy" is functionally impossible. Part one of the essay examines how and why *OMLA*'s 3000-tweet archive, #OMLA hashtag, and abundant paraphrastic materials actually take readers further from the live experience rather than closer in. Part two delves into two specific instances of *OMLA*'s signature gesture: its ability to "pivot" or change narrative course in real time, a key aspect of the genre that is neither fully visible nor recoverable in the enduring records of the art.

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*But it is surely an inevitable feature of memorials – and this is true not only of war memorials, but of all commemorative artifacts – that they permit only certain things to be remembered, and by exclusion cause others to be forgotten.*  
Adrian Forty, *The Art of Forgetting* <sup>[1]</sup>

*Occupy MLA* launched 8 November 2011, one week before Wall Street's Zuccotti Park was forcibly cleared of Occupy Wall Street protestors. As local police and other municipal forces coordinated evacuation efforts in cities across the U.S., people waited for retribution from Anonymous, the international hacktivist collective known for its Distributed Denial of Service [DDos] attacks. It was in this environment of anticipated insurgency that Occupy MLA [hereafter, OMLA] staked a tent in the #MLA12 Twitter hashtag, which was lively with preparations for the annual Modern Language Association convention to be held in Seattle, Washington the first week of January 2012.

We are the text. We are the text. @mlaconvention is the endnotes!  
Don't have any interviews at the MLA Convention in Seattle? Join us.  
Your panel proposal rejected at MLA Convention? Join us.  
Not sure why MLA is spending more energy on Twitter than on promoting your essays?  
Rejected from PMLA? Join us!  
You shouldn't have to be ashamed to be an English Major. Join us!  
Your thoughts are more erudite than the venti latte you just served! Join us!

The voice was striking. Sarcastic political humor spoke to a target audience already nervous about the increasing number of tenure lines replaced by non-tenure track and part time labor. Occupy Wall Street's "We are the 99%!" became Occupy MLA's "We are the 999 lines! Only the Oxford comma divides us." Jokes made "occupying" MLA more attractive and spreadable <sup>[2]</sup>. The possibility that OMLA might have capacity to hack MLA into DDoS was an implied threat that burnished its potency. But in practice MLA was never the target of OccupyMLA. Like Zuccotti, #MLA12 was the (virtual) park where everybody gathered.

The fourteen-month netprov ("networked improvised narrative") installed in Twitter November 8, 2011-January 5, 2013 is documented in an official @OccupyMLA archive of approximately 3000 tweets openly available online and helpfully cataloged into specific narrative episodes <sup>[3]</sup>. It is also documented in the #OMLA hashtag, though today, two years after the project ended, its traces there have atrophied. The distinction between the two archives, the static @OccupyMLA archived on Marino's site and the dynamic #OMLA is an important distinction. The @OccupyMLA archive on Marino's site gathers only tweets that were touched by @OccupyMLA: either authored, favorited, or retweeted by @OccupyMLA. Tweets directed to @OccupyMLA but which were not retweeted or favorited by @OccupyMLA were part of the live experience, but would not be permanently recorded in the @OccupyMLA archive. Press coverage of Occupy MLA was ample and contentious but not overwhelming, and authors Mark C. Marino and Rob Wittig even made a video overview explaining the project <sup>[4]</sup>.

Pivot is the signal gesture of a netprov: the moment when it changes narrative course in response to audience inputs. More than other netprovs, Occupy MLA lays bare the ethical and performative capacities of the genre <sup>[5]</sup>. In the quick shifts between reading and writing, a netprov is open to anyone who jumps into the hashtag: indeed, authors cannot remove participants from the netprov but can only pivot around whatever the newcomers present. Both a live performance and an enduring if volatile media artifact, OMLA leaves "data contrails": digital traces of real-time reader participation that slowly decay and become less coherent over time. This decay creates an enduring performance record that distorts the live experience of it. A netprov's unique susceptibility to coöptation, misreading and remix is a byproduct of its use of social media authoring systems. Unlike most artworks, a netprov can be adapted *in medias res*, and response to the adaptation can become part of the primary work. This is evident in two incidents: @ShadowMLA, an account that appropriated and mocked some of OMLA's voice and techniques with the intention of siphoning its popularity; and "The Battle of Alt-Ac" (as it's called in the OMLA spreadsheet archive), a pointed disagreement with Alt-Ac readers over whether or not Alt-Ac jobs are a legitimate outcome of the English literature Ph.D. In the immediate aftermath of Mark C. Marino's revelation that OMLA was a "fiction," a netprov designed and orchestrated by him and Rob Wittig, OMLA's moral credibility splintered. Work that had presented itself as an authentic political movement was characterized by some critics as "a cruel hoax," a "pathetic stunt," "performance art" at the expense of "99% of real adjuncts" who would never behave or talk in the manner of OMLA's three main fictional characters <sup>[6]</sup>.

This essay contextualizes the shareable, spreadable and appropriative aspects of netprov as a "born digital" live reading/writing interface <sup>[7]</sup>. As critical readers habituated to print-specific "symptomatic" reading, we read closely and seek telling details that speak for the text <sup>[8]</sup>. But the sheer volume of OMLA's tweets and its installation as time-based art create a primary text whose "primacy" is functionally impossible. Absent a printed or otherwise static text, it's not possible to stabilize the reception of a netprov given that the material conditions of each reader's reception are unique or, at least, ungeneralizable. How to account for the participatory role of OMLA readers who lurked, leaving no trace visible to OMLA and who thus evade being documented in both archives? My tally of OMLA's dozens of authors does not count, of course, the

incalculable number of lurkers who read OMLA voyeuristically, leaving no visible digital traces in either of the OMLA archives. Henry Jenkins, Sam Ford and Josh Green have argued that lurkers are far from "passive," because they are in some ways networked performance's ideal audience: the unseen readers who silently "participate" in the conversation <sup>[9]</sup>. There are no technical barriers preventing lurkers from recirculating messages in social media, by copying and pasting a message into a new tweet rather than hitting "retweet," which would leave a visible trace. Thus the reach of OMLA cannot be gauged either during its fourteen-month performance or in the two years hence, since it has been shared across many platforms, in the new media press (*Boing Boing*) and in legacy press (*New York Times*, *Chronicle of Higher Education*) and discussed at an academic conference on the "Literary Twitter" panel at MLA 15 in Vancouver, B.C.

In total, the Marino-and-Wittig-authored parts of OMLA consisted of four Twitter accounts: the main @ OccupyMLA and three fictional characters Charles, Hazel and John. All of them were actively applying for academic jobs or consciously giving up on the "dream." @ChangerCharles, the "senior member" of OMLA, was a frustrated medievalist teaching comp. @CompHaze was a part-time teacher of composition. @Juanahang was a part-timer who leaves teaching to become a restaurant chef. And then there are the dozens of participants who tweeted from their personally-identifiable handles and engaged OMLA on terms I'll call "autobiographical" and "nonfictional" because they engaged with OMLA as if it were a political movement run by real-life adjuncts. These tweeters were all "characters" whose statements in this setting call into question the nature of selfhood online, and the extent to which the médiatique versions of self we construct are blends of fiction and reality intended to be read as "text." <sup>[10]</sup> Participants who hashtagged their tweets #OMLA but didn't specifically name @ OccupyMLA would have been immediately visible to anyone reading #OMLA at the time; but that tweet would not have been piped into the Twitter archiving apparatus for @ OccupyMLA. Today, that same tweet would be unrecoverable, burrowed deeply beneath the surface of the Twitter #OMLA user interface. Thus the OMLA "archive" hides many of the participants from algorithmic search and makes the OMLA live experience seem much more author-centered than it was in live performance. It also suggests that the OMLA "archive" is the only voice that matters <sup>[11]</sup>.

More immediately than in other authoring systems including books and static websites, Twitter creates "perpetual transactions with the subjectivity of others" (Bourriaud, 20). Its dynamism is textual, social and aesthetic. Relational aesthetics is a useful frame to exfoliate the layers of participation in OMLA <sup>[12]</sup>. As literary critics, we are accustomed to a stable source text whose meaning shifts over time as culture assimilates and naturalizes strong interpretations that redescribe its significance for specific cultural moments: what *The Great Gatsby* meant culturally in 1950, for example, is very different from what it means in 2014. Such is the value proposition of a canon, to create continuity with the past through a stable source texts that through reinterpretation are made relevant to the present moment. Networked writing/reading presents a significant challenge to literary critical practice since the precondition of ascribing cultural value rests in a stable source text. In OMLA and other netprov, the primary text itself is constantly moving both in live performance and in the dynamic #OMLA archive. Such an unstable text cannot even be said to produce a "primary record" via @ OccupyMLA because to do so would be to de-authorize the dozens of co-authors who contributed to #OMLA and the untraceably bigger OMLA.

Part one of this essay examines how and why OMLA's 3000-tweet archive, #OMLA hashtag, and abundant paraphrastic materials actually take us further from live installation rather than closer in. An archive implies a beginning, middle and end to a project. In creating chronologic categories, an archive distorts a netprov's open-ended, non-deterministic relationship to time during live installation. Even OMLA's contentious reception, I argue, is volatile because new imitations, homages and appropriations surface every

few months. Part two delves into two specific instances of "pivot," neither of which are fully traceable in either the official OMLA archive or the #OMLA hashtag. I compare print-style, monographic authorship of a female character (OMLA's Hazel, @CompHaze) to the responsive, networked authorship of real-life female Alt-Acs [alternative academics] redressing what they perceived to be a mischaracterization of their work <sup>[13]</sup>. @OccupyMLA's archive "The Battle of Alt-Ac" and Melonie Fullick's Storify "@OccupyMLA v. #AltAc" represent the same live exchange, but only Fullick's Storify supplies the full range of tweets <sup>[14]</sup>.

OMLA is tactical media, which means it is a "performance for which a consumable product is not the primary endgame; it foregrounds the experiential over the physical" <sup>[15]</sup>. OMLA was not strategic, though people during the reception retrospectively read intention and design into OMLA's representation of adjuncts. People deriding OMLA faulted its authors for failing to engage in "real" activism, which we can read as code for a "consumable product," a material instantiation such as New Faculty Majority's Maria Maisto's testimony before Congress which resulted in the first congressional inquiry into exploitative labor practices in higher education. OMLA was never designed to motivate legal redress. It is closer to poetry "where executives would never want to tamper," as Auden says in his elegy of W. B. Yeats. Just because OMLA did not prompt immediate structural transformation in higher ed doesn't mean, however, that it did no work. Speaking truth to power in the guise of fiction; making access to such speech open, participatory, collective and persistently visible: this is important cultural work. The tangle of liveness and digital presence, of trust and hoax, of allegiance and betrayal: these are the messy conditions of a netprov.

Netprov is a new condition of literary reading/writing where reading/writing and authorship/reception are not discrete activities in social media authoring systems. Instead they are interactive in the sense of a feedback loop, a mixed reality blending liveness and textuality such that neither can be stabilized as ontologically discrete. OMLA as avant-garde netprov took risks with reputation, people's feelings, political integrity, and long form narrative in a medium of partial attention. It succeeded in fashioning a new mode of storytelling so compelling that it continues to influence political movements in and around the Modern Language Association such as @MLAlienation and MLADemocracy. Even MLA itself – which had been working on contingent labor issues for four years prior to OMLA – was tipped into more visible support for adjuncts as suggested by its 2013 theme "Vulnerable Times." OMLA tapped feelings and thoughts about adjunctification that a committee or report can't muster with the same sympathetic immediacy. Can activist art play "nice"? <sup>[16]</sup>

"Their anger and frustration were palpable, their situations so familiar," Lee Skallerup Bessette wrote about OMLA a year after the installation ended.

[This] is perhaps why so many people, myself included, believed it to be real. Or maybe I just wanted it to be real. How easy it was to RT their more incendiary statements, hiding behind their handle, rather than have the words appear by my face, by our faces. I was personally devastated to learn that it was, in the end, a hoax.

A little more than twelve hours after Marino revealed OMLA to be a "fiction," Bessette – who was 300% more active than the next-most active OMLA participant – gave a paper about Lodyans, the Haitian short tale genre in which "mentir pour dire plus vrai que vrai" [lying reveals a more real truth] <sup>[17]</sup>.

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If, as Lauren F. Klein has argued, digital humanities allows alternative understandings of the archive to unfold, it's because an archive's occlusions (what Stephen Best and Sharon Marcus have called its "ghosts") are not endpoints to inquiry but edges that limn the specific knowledge the archive's metadata permits. Such a process is rendered less navigable with when metadata is architected and owned by a third-party platform like Twitter. Klein quoting Best and Marcus observes

"The figure of the ghost [in the archive, the unrecoverable traces of presence] suggests something perceptible but not easily understood." This method from Best and Marcus works by illumination rather than demystification ... The critic's involvement in the design and implementation – or at least, the selection and application – of digital tools demands an acknowledgement of his or her critical agency ... not only *what* but *how* we as critics come to know" (668).

The "hidden" OMLA archive as I call it resides neither in my recollection of live speech during installation, nor in the archival spreadsheet accessible on Marino's website, nor in the tweets surfaced in the #OMLA hashtag. It is none of these things singly but a messy amalgam. Ephemeral networked text art leaves confusing inscribed conversations in the "cloud" that are erratically visible after the echo of live speech has quieted. My object is not to identify and recover OMLA's archival silences but, pace Alan Liu and Tara McPherson, to reinscribe cultural criticism at the center of such recovery work: to assert that the relational aesthetics of this netprov subtend the specific material instantiations expressed in its competing (or complementary) archives. The ability to reconstruct a repeatable sequential reading of the fourteen-month OMLA installation is frustrated by the project's two irreconcilable archives: the static OMLA archive, a spreadsheet published on Mark C. Marino's website, records tweets authored, retweeted and favorited by Marino and Wittig. The dynamic and polyvocal hashtag #OMLA was active during installation but has decayed in the two years since the installation ended. It houses the most recent tweets hashtagged #OMLA, which at time of writing surfaces tweets about Oregon Minority Lawyers Association, Occupy MLA, yoga, book lovers, and bratwurst. The moment when #OMLA was exclusively a polyvocal archive of Occupy MLA has passed. One archive is monologic; the other is decaying.

An archive "is guided by principles of preserving history and an assumption that a complete collection will reveal not only that moment, but also its beginning, middle, ending and connection to other moments," asserts Katherine D. Harris in *The Johns Hopkins Guide to Digital Media*.

In the digital archive, an object continues to acquire meaning based on users' organization of the material (beyond editorial control of the primary architect), based on the continued re-mixing, re-using, and re-presentation of the object.

Though the ample OMLA paraphrastic materials ground a curious reader in Occupy MLA as a phenomenon, the spread and reach of its full archive are functionally untraceable and unrecoverable, eroded in the 400 billion tweets rushing through Twitter in the two years since OMLA at the rate of 6000 per second <sup>[18]</sup>.

An archive of Occupy MLA may well represent a compendium that bears little relationship to what most readers and participants actually read during installation. Twitter is a medium of partial attention. Those readers, unlike readers of printed books or ebooks, would each have a unique experience of the "primary text" as it was collectively authored in real time. From its first Tweet a netprov is "published." Far from

stabilizing the material conditions of reception, as publication does in print culture where a book's beginning, middle and end fixed in those positions, a netprov in social media publication radicalizes its fragmentation and spreadability. A netprov can be co-opted, championed, appropriated, repurposed or otherwise remixed; it leaves data like confetti that can be picked up again by anybody and tossed back into the Twitterstream. "There was a group of readers combing thru every Tweet & others who commented but didn't do the reading, but such is Twitter," Mark Marino noted recently via Twitter. "Of course that also meant some misreading, but cld we even call it that? People made #omla what they wanted & sometimes needed it 2b." [19] In a narrative where the "primary text" is not primary but multiply instantiated in ways that can't be regularized or even detected, it is not just possible that the project will spawn "misreadings." It is likely. Misunderstanding in netprov is not a bug, it's a feature.

In a special issue of *Performance Research* journal Writing and Digital Media editor Jerome Fletcher makes the case for "performance" as an integrated experience. "Rather than seeing [digital text] as the end point, the outcome of the digital device or apparatus, we can consider the question of how writing performs throughout the entire apparatus/device" which includes "hardware, software, code, writing, performance, usage, texts, ideology and so forth" (1). Are tweets "primary records" only in the moment of live performance? What is their ontological status when they become a relic of a performance that's long past and when so much of its meaning is relational at the moment of publication? Historicizing "interstices," Bourriaud notes that term originates in trading communities that elude the capitalist economic context by being removed from the law of profit. Instead "interstices" become transactional: "Art is the space that produces a specific sociability" (16).

Linda Hutcheon provides a *Theory of Adaptation* that accounts for how completed works are adapted medium to medium, but a netprov is susceptible to adaptation or coöptation *in medias res*, as its being performed. Such was the case when @ShadowMLA, an account putatively created by three adjuncts, coöpted OMLA's hashtag, approach, technique for offline participation and signature exhortation to "join us": "If you're tired of shitting in the adjunct litterbox, join us! #omla." Over the space of four days (December 7-11, 2011), it seemed @ShadowMLA was "shadowing" Occupy MLA, mocking "hug an adjunct" day with a proposed "cuddle party" in somebody's MLA convention hotel room. On 11 December, @ShadowMLA addressed OMLA directly, wanting to "have a dialog about accountability. We. Us and YOU. (Yes, you.) #omla." @ShadowMLA's tweets about OMLA became increasingly solicitous and strident after publication of a *Chronicle of Higher Education* article "Will Non-Tenure Track Faculty Occupy the MLA Convention?" and solicited *CHE* to write an article about @ShadowMLA: "We're starting a movement, @chronicle. Write about us? Give us some pettins and lovins? Maybe some treats...? TENURE TRACK NOW!" [20] @ShadowMLA's reaction to OMLA was motivated at least in part by what it called "personal" "rage": "@occupymla And on a very personal level, you enrage me because you come across as privileged, entitled people I don't want to work with." [21] A different appropriation followed two years later. @MLAalienation surfaced in fall 2013, a year after OMLA's conclusion, and published the salaries of all MLA executives, calling for salary caps to supplement adjunct pay and opportunity. One year after that, in fall 2014, @MLAdemocracy's tag line for their pro-adjunct movement for "activist governance" was "Occupy the Profession."

These appropriations are acts of reception. In a way, OMLA's disjointed narrative created a vacuum that was filled by an immediate reception that operated like gossip. "Gossip binds communities together in a system of mild surveillance and control," observe Casey Finch and Peter Bowen, writing about how news circulates quickly in Highbury, the country village in *Emma*. "Gossip travels fast because in a sense it is always already known; it is not news at all but part of a social agency already recognized by the community and already

unconsciously internalized" (1). Similarly, impressions of OMLA were circulated by people who may or may not have read the work. A *Chronicle of Higher Education* article "Occupying MLA" authored by Marino and Wittig days after MLA13 elicited strong opinions. The eighteen comments largely reacted to this tone set in the second comment by outgoing MLA president Michael Bérubé: "I think it's really regrettable that anyone would try to advance the cause of NTT faculty by making adjuncts appear so – what is the word? – 'cartoonish'." [22] Katina Rogers, the third commenter, decried the authors' presumption in "speaking for the most vulnerable members of the academy." [23] These moral judgments wrangled the polyphonic netprov into a simple, coherent story that was easy to spread. Rogers' comment refers specifically to the three fictional characters Charles, John and Hazel which Marino and Wittig invented as an aesthetic workaround when they alienated prominent Alt-Acs, an episode I discuss at length in part two. Charles, John and Hazel were written to be broadly comic but fell flat with the target audience. As Brian Croxall put it, their actions seemed "the flailing of individuals who were not properly socialized into academia, that didn't know how to go about getting things done effectively." [24]

Over time, OMLA's reception distilled further still into what amounts to what Finch and Bowen (pace Austen) called "the tittle-tattle of Highbury." Wariness of what counted as "real" activism was policed by an essentialist identity approach to authenticity. This exchange between Gerry Canavan and Mark Marino a year later after installation discloses the extent to which the identity politics authenticated (or didn't) the legitimacy of speech [25]. The conversational lag you'll note near the beginning of this exchange is due to the time it takes for Marino's correction to surface in Canavan's feed.

GC: @MLAlienation I was talking about the parody account @OccupyMLA, which was similarly disruptive to real conversations about organizing.

GC: @occupymla was some tenured (or TT, I forget) profs mocking adjuncts, not actual adjuncts. It was a huge bummer.

MM: FWIW @netprov\_RobWit & I are NTT & were adjuncts for yrs before that. @occupymla was born of r xperience

GC: Oh god, I didn't want to start a fight with you guys too! I'm supposed to be writing!

MM: maybe just check your facts b4 u Tweet.

GC: Well, I don't think my facts were wrong; you have good jobs now and @occupymla was a huge bummer.

GC: I understand that you think it was honoring adjuncts, but I absolutely disagree.

GC: I owe you guys an apology. I'd gotten the impression you were T/TT professors.

GC: I still think @occupymla was a huge bummer, but feel differently about your participation knowing that.

GC: Sorry about it.

MM You were part of an interesting group that wanted @occupymla to b something different from what it was, than it was going to b

GC: Yeah, it's true. I suppose I've always felt that it sucked the air out of what could have been an actual "Occupy MLA."

GC: The MLA Subconference seems to have taken that spirit and run with it.

MM: yeah, sucked the air out of it, inspired it, coincidental with it. Hard to say. These are vulnerable times. #omla

MM: Still from the appearance of @occupymla, MLA began to go out of its way to prove it supported reform and adjunct rights.

MM: But I'm just a storyteller, writing about imperfect characters who are in intractable situations

MM: Some people were upset that the characters in @occupymla were imperfect. I wonder if they always demand that of their fiction

MM: Still I'm not sure 1/2 the people (not you) who talk abt @occupymla have ever read the tweets. @netprov\_RobWit & I posted them

GC: I think most are upset b/c what they thought was a conversation with real people turned out to be someone else's art project.

GC: I don't think there's much hope of escaping that criticism.

MM: Really? Did you actually think they were real people?

GC: I didn't think they were real, and especially not in the second year. But I know other people did.

MM: the people who believed in @occupymla needed it to be the real deal so badly that they were/became the real deal.

MM: but the @occupymla members are characters with their own stories. When people read them, they see what they will.

Some of Canavan's assumptions about authorship are medium-specific to print: that Marino and Wittig exercised control over netprov participants as if they were characters, not people choosing or refusing to participate; the underlying belief that identity claims online are self-evident and true; the materialist notion

of "real activism" as distinct from "someone's art project"; the notion that OMLA's "conversation with real people" was nullified when it was revealed to be a netprov because fiction is categorically discrete from nonfiction.

"Fiction" as a conceptual frame caused many more people than just Gerry Canavan to overestimate the control netprov "authors" exercise over their audience. Authorship in a networked setting is not fixed: participants are not inscribed into being like characters in a book but agents choosing or refusing to participate in a networked conversation. Refusal is actually also a form of self-authorship and agency: "I stopped following @OccupyMLA out of irritation," Alexis Lothian tweeted 30 November 2011, "but keep having to click over to see what people are responding to." As we'll see below in "Battle of Alt-Ac," netprov participants are at liberty to exercise their agency without censorship: they have direct access to the same audience as the main designers. In practice this means a netprov's participants can contest a representation, inflect a conversation, or – if they dislike the tenor of talk – simply click away. "The spectator is far from powerless," observe electronic literature artists Young-hae Chang and Mark Voge.

She is still the one who decides whether or not she will watch the piece, or having clicked on it, whether she will click away from it. That's the same power that she has when she considers any other art and literature. Clicking away is one of the essences of the Internet. It's no different from deleting. It's rejection, it's saying "no." That's the ultimate power <sup>[26]</sup>.

None of this agency is reflected in Canavan's essentialist notion of authorship. He censures Marino and Wittig when he suspects them of being "tenured (or TT, I forget) profs mocking adjuncts," and exonerates them when he learns they are non-tenure track with experience adjuncting. "I owe you guys an apology," Canavan says. "I'd gotten the impression you were T/TT professors."

But even if they had been tenured, Marino and Wittig didn't speak for anybody nor did they compel people to speak. Anybody in Twitter can type a "dot" before the account handle as in ".@occupymla" and gain access to all of that account holder's followers. Anyone wishing to reach the full OMLA audience would do that and also tag it #omla, and their access to self-advocacy or redress would be total. Marino and Wittig created a context that dozens of people filled of their own accord on their own time with their own ideas and responses. Readers of print based works are accustomed to skipping passages or otherwise asserting agency with regard to the author's design, but the design itself is fixed. A netprov is not. It's highly responsive and improvised. There is no preconceived "shape" that the story must take. Narratively there was no significance to OMLA's end date, for example; the story stopped because the authors wanted to end it live at a MLA convention and they wound it up with a few tweets about who got jobs (Charles, John) and who didn't (Hazel).

During the installation, women were more likely than men to engage @OccupyMLA; after the netprov was over, women and men criticized OMLA, but women were more likely express vulnerability and discomfort about the project. "I, like Katina [Rogers], feel uncomfortable with this project," Liana Silva-Ford commented on the *Chronicle's* "Occupying MLA."

Several of the commenters before me articulated my concerns, but one thing I still don't understand: if Occupy MLA was to be located in the "in the liminal zone of naturalistic parody and mockumentary," who was the object of the mockumentary? The MLA? Adjuncts? The members of the alt-ac panel who Occupy MLA touted as the "official" Occupy MLA panel (and I will admit that I was a member of said panel)? [27]

Ford isn't sure who was the target of OMLA's satire, a confusion and skepticism echoed by several other commenters. A sustained reading of the netprov shows that OMLA advocated for adjuncts though the gender politics of that advocacy were felt by some readers to be simplistic, even misogynistic. But absent the focus and concentration afforded by a static story – that is, by a *printable* version – those characters seem less "cartoonish" than they do when one reads the entire work continuously as one reads a novel. The characters have clear motivations and problems they need to overcome. Their situations are intractable, and bitter humor propels them through plot. Read continuously in the static spreadsheet, Charles, Hazel and Johns' character arcs hang together. But that's not the way anybody read the work during installation. The Twitter platform is fragmented and hyperattentive; Brian Croxall and Roger Whitson both questioned the suitability of the platform to long form storytelling in the specific context of OMLA. Several observers of OMLA wondered whether, as Brian Croxall did, "the 'literariness' of OMLA perhaps required too much effort and therefore the thrust of the thing was not able to be felt or read." [28] Roger Whitson notes that "[t]he key to [a netprov] is that there is larger narrative beyond interactions. Not sure u can claim that w/ Twitter." [29] Although the hashtags #mla12 or #mla13 were the ideal virtual street corner on which to meet OMLA's target audience, it turns out to be too interruptive a setting to assemble coherent impressions of character. OMLA was a participatory conceptual art piece that became more coherent and apprehensible after the fact.

The OMLA archive is a technology for forgetting. It overwrites the live experience in a way that distorts what the live netprov experience was, sort of how photographs meant to spur memories gradually supplant them. There were good reasons for Marino and Wittig to frame their activism as "fiction." All academics are vulnerable to retribution for free speech, as most recently the Salaita case makes clear [30]. For every Salaita getting the full-throated advocacy of the American Historical Association and a raft of distinguished professors demanding that the University of Illinois reinstate its job offer, there is an immeasurable (not as in "large" but literally "cannot be counted") number of adjuncts, non-tenure track faculty, pre-tenure faculty, alternative academics and university staff who know that bold political speech might cost them their jobs and potentially render them unemployable. Such people may have shared their impressions of OMLA in their own networks without leaving a digital trace tethered to @OccupyMLA. One might assume that many more people at the 2013 MLA convention in Boston were talking about OMLA than those who posted and tagged their reactions in Twitter the morning after Marino's January 4th revelation. Why was Occupy MLA a "fiction"? Plausible deniability wedges a little space between "inappropriate" speech acts and the agents who perform them. Marino and Wittig framed a gigantic and radically participatory political movement against the systemic exploitation of humanities Ph.D.s as "fiction" not because it's fake but because it's the only marginally safe way to critique the system that employs you if you lack permanent job protection.

II.

If *OMLA* failed to win the hearts of its target audience, that's probably the key to its success as a lasting piece of art. It's hard now to remember the time before Dada and the surrealists were canonized, when they pissed people off. There's a fine revolutionary tradition of not being liked. Being liked happens later, if you're

lucky enough that people remember your art after its danger has been metabolized, its menace pumiced away by time.

Marino and Wittig built a structure in which the literary academic Twitterati at all career stages and levels could tell their own stories about employment. But like Caliban seeing his face in the mirror, there is a powerful recoil from what OMLA showed us. To be sure, Marino and Wittig's netprov was not neutral, not simply a mirror; but it yielded what Rita Raley calls a "provisionally stable descriptive category" <sup>[31]</sup> of the profession's loss of tenure lines. "Occupying" MLA made certain aspects of adjunct life visible, not just the melodrama of Charles, Hazel and John, but the subtler and for the most part autobiographical or nonfictional storylines that sustained the conversation over fourteen months. The degrading conditions in which the three fictional adjuncts find themselves are only slight exaggerations. OMLA's target audience is ashamed to think of this, just as it's shameful to know that some people who teach at universities get their health care in emergency rooms. The particular vulnerability of Hazel to #profdarcy, whose power to offer or withhold a job is matched by his power to flirt with her and then leave her, evoked passionate sympathy from real-life academic women. Some of those women told me they direct messaged Hazel to console her when she spent too much money having an interview suit tailored, and again when she lost her MLA interview as a result of Charles exposing her leadership running @OccupyMLA. These "fictional" plot points tell true stories about how sexual and professional humiliation impact those with the least power. OMLA depicts this by rendering Hazel's relationship with "Darcy" entirely through her own voice. One of tenured #profdarcy's privileges is silence. He never speaks directly in OMLA. He leaves no trace. He is algorithmically invisible. Marino and Wittig intensify Hazel's vulnerability by sexualizing it. Her terse refusals go ignored. She conflates her failure on the job market with sexual humiliation and ends the story cheerlessly "settling for HS." "Its been a long string of people & profs leading me on & i nevr once had a moment where I cld be happy where i was," she writes.

One evening's heated exchange three weeks into the installation (Nov. 30-Dec. 1, 2011) between prominent members of the Alt-Ac community and @OccupyMLA shows that in networked fiction, women have capacity to redress misapprehension immediately. When feminists speak for themselves in OMLA, as did Miriam Posner and Sarah Werner among others, their tweets are a rejoinder to the conditions that silence and nullify Marino and Wittig's Hazel. Hazel ends OMLA miserably. But Miriam Posner and Sarah Werner fight back when they perceive OMLA disrespecting Alt-Ac's legitimacy as a career path. Here's the exchange that ignited "Battle of Alt-Ac," as it's labeled in the official OMLA archive, or "@OccupyMLA v. #Alt-Ac" as named by Melonie Fullick, who gathered all the Tweets into a Storify.

OccupyMLA: We didnt write a dissertation, suffer comprehensive & qualifying exams, endure nights in the stacks or in footnotes to get an alt-ac job

Werner: Seriously, @OccupyMLA? Well I did write/suffer/endure and you'd be a damn sight lucky to get my awesome #alt-ac job.

Posner RT +1

Posner: Moreover, you couldn't \*do\* my awesome alt-ac job. @OccupyMLA

Werner: Totally true. It's hard. And Miriam's really good at it. RT @miriamkp Moreover, you couldn't \*do\* my awesome alt-ac job. @OccupyMLA.

@OccupyMLA's refusal to acknowledge Alt-Ac jobs as sufficient reward for earning a Ph.D. (Bartleby-like, @OccupyMLA said they "would prefer not to") was perceived by some Alt-Acs as snobbish and "entitled," the "throwing of toasted oats by a whiny child." [32] Word traveled fast. Bethany Nowviskie, prominent Alt-Ac and leader in digital humanities, posted a response to OMLA on Google Plus that was widely shared within the digital humanities community within 24 hours of the "Battle." [33] Marino and Wittig retrenched. @OccupyMLA apologized profusely ("We're big fans of u, Miriam!") [34]. The kerfuffle was naturalized and imparted a reality effect, but the sourness that had been widely retweeted never cleared the air. Charges of "entitlement" and elitism came back in full force when Marino and Wittig were perceived to be coöpting others' participation for their "art project."

OMLA created a fluid, improvised structure through which to re-imagine and perform power redistribution. OccupyMLA spilled out from its #OMLA hashtag into the convention itself. Supporters dropped pennies into their badges as a sign of solidarity and attended OMLA-endorsed panels; they "hugged an adjunct" or at least thought about why they should when OMLA exhorted them to. Some tenured faculty even donated to the Adjunct Fund in OMLA's name to demonstrate that redistribution of money and privilege would require a solidarity that isn't endemic to the tenure system. Well beyond its #OMLA hashtag, then, OMLA sent tendrils of influence out into the broader communities of digital humanists, adjunct activist and Alt-Acs.

"We have a clear vested interest in monumentality (archives, canons, durable inscriptions)," notes Rita Raley in a recent essay about the "TXTual Condition,"

but we have a less recognized interest in maintaining a continuous connection to ephemeral production – in recognizing that which would otherwise disappear. ... Counterpublics, idle talk, background noise: these are fields of energy the transformative potential of which remains to be exploited [35].

OMLA's incomplete archives show that though a netprov archive cannot be representative, it lays bare the structural logics that must be reckoned with before a "transformative" reading can be realized. A netprov's generic qualities permit the human frailties of networked art. Misunderstandings between people test a netprov's poetics of engagement. Unlike a protest bot, which can only perform itself over and over, a netprov listens and talks with its audience/co-authors [36]. It pivots when the audience demands it.

The violation some OMLA participants felt is real and not trivial. Marino and Wittig misled them. But "does it matter if @occupymla hoax?" VCVaile tweeted six weeks into the installation, 20 December 2011. Vaile continues: "#omla asked Qs, commented on imperial [culture] & opened up conversation. Now follow through." How would a "real" Occupy MLA movement have operated any differently than the netprov OccupyMLA? The Modern Language Association is not a network of colluding international bankers responsible for the Great Recession of 2008-10; it is an advocacy group trying, among other things, to stop the hemorrhage of tenure lines from the professoriate. To "Occupy" MLA was not to implicate MLA; rather, this "occupation" gathered the attention and hive mind of the humanist digerati to think and feel the quotidian and macroscopic effects of adjunctification.

The rate of adjunctification appears not to be slowing. If anything, the increasing market share of textbook companies in selling ready-made, start-to-finish, interactive course modules may create a growing demand for adjunct labor and a reduced need for course design authored and implemented by professors.

There are reasons to be nervous, to look for culprits.

But these artists are not the droids you're looking for.

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## NOTES

1. Forty and Kuchler, 11.
2. Spreadable media, Jenkins, Ford and Green argue in their book of the same name, is "an emerging hybrid model of circulation, where a mix of top-down and bottom-up forces determine how material is shared across and among cultures in far more participatory (and messier) ways [than previously in broadcast culture]" (1).
3. Marino and Wittig, "Netprov: Elements of an Emerging Form." They define netprov as "an emerging art form that creates written stories that are networked, collaborative and improvised in real time."
4. See these articles of OMLA coverage: *Inside Higher Education* [here](#) and [here](#); *The Chronicle of Higher Education* [here](#) and [here](#) and [here](#); *New York Times* and, a year after the installation ended, [Boing Boing](#).
5. Mark C. Marino's *The Ballad of Workstudy Seth* (March 2009) is the first instance of netprov, the generic criteria of which would later be defined by Rob Wittig in his [master's thesis](#) (2011). Dene Grigar

does not classify her "*24-Hour Micro-Elit Project*" (August 2009) as a netprov on the project website, but it too meets the generic criteria. Subsequent netprovs include works created by Rob Wittig (*Grace, Wit and Charm* (2012) and *Chicago Soul Exchange* (2013); by Mark C. Marino as part of the authorial collective LAINundación (*L.A. Flood*, October 2011 and May 2012), and Marino & Wittig (*OccupyMLA, Tempspence* (2013), *Speidishow* (2013) *Center for the Twitzease Control* (2013); *Mem-Eraze* (2014); *The Mission [Statement]* (2014) and *#1wknotech*. N. Katherine Hayles, Patrick Jagoda and Stephanie Boluk (*Speculation*, 2012), Ariana Gass, Reed Gaines et al. (*Sootfall*, 2013) and Stacey Smith and her students (*CASplit*, 2014) have also made works in this emerging genre.

6. MLA Executive Director Rosemary Feal called it a "cruel hoax"
  - «<https://twitter.com/rgfeal/status/287534139685621760>»; M.I.T. romanticist and active OMLA participant Noel Jackson replied, "Let's distinguish bw #omla & @occupymla – the latter a pathetic stunt of @markcmarino et al.; former a movement that surpassed him" <https://twitter.com/noeljackson/status/287534495681363968>. Roopika Risam responded, "Well put - it's not like performance art is the only way to raise concern about contingent fac" «<https://twitter.com/roopikarisam/status/287540595751268352>».
7. Lori Emerson's *Reading Writing Interfaces: From the Digital to the Bookbound* is particularly canny about "readingwriting," a neologism she invented to represent graphically "the practice of writing through the network" that both reads our writing and responds to its commands, and shapes the scope of that which we can think to desire. See her "postscript" to the book, "The Googlization of Literature."
8. "Symptomatic" reading is Best and Marcus's term for close reading, which they juxtapose against their proposed new (in 2009) method, "surface" reading. Stephen Best and Sharon Marcus's concept of "surface reading" is meant to expand the range of critical stances a critical can take toward a text. Rather than the close, "symptomatic" reading that reads material synecdochically, Best and Marcus's "surface" reading attends to the materiality of text itself and the structure of its speech events. Best and Marcus adapt Foucault's "surface of things" to the practice of reading. N. Katherine Hayles has expanded the critical range of reading practices further to account for "machine" reading and "hyper" reading. See Hayles' "How We Read: Close, Hyper, Machine" which she developed into the third chapter of *How We Think*.
9. Henry Jenkins, Sam Ford and Joshua Green reframe lurkers' activities not as passive "consumption," a corporate term tied to "user-generated content," but as "legitimate peripheral participation." A lurker "provides value to people sharing commentary or producing multimedia content by expanding the audience and potentially motivating their work" (157). See pp. 154-57 of *Spreadable Media*; they cite Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger's *Situated Learning: Legitimate Peripheral Participation* (1991).
10. Jill Walker Rettberg's excellent chapter "Written, Visual and Quantitative Self-Representations" historicizes self-presentation that takes on various cadences depending on whether one is authoring or reading, and depending on the constraints of the platform. The italicized emphasis on *text* as distinct from non-textual moments of selfhood are hers: "As readers, we encounter others in social media as *texts*" (12) ... Some social media sites and apps make it hard directly to communicate with each other, foregrounding the *text* rather than the conversation or the speakers." By contrast, early networked communication MUDs, MOOs and IRCs "positioned all participants as peers." Twitter, Rettberg notes, is "in-between" because while "every user's posts are presented in exactly the same manner ... every tweet is stored ... and you can go back and read a participants tweets as though they were *text*" (13, 14).
11. That the official @OccupyMLA archive distorts the live eventfulness of the installation is unfortunate, but keeping it accessible might serve the purpose of defending Marino and Wittig against charges of elitism and mockery of adjuncts, since the 3000 tweets make plain their advocacy. It's quite possible

the OMLA archive was an afterthought not originally designed as part of the netprov experience, since the authors are likely to have found a more inclusive way to archive the complete range of tweets if archiving hadn't been a *post-hoc* endeavor.

12. For "relational aesthetics, see Nicolas Bourriard: "Art is the space that produces a specific sociability" (16) and "Relational aesthetics does not represent a theory of art, this would imply the statement of an origin and a destination, but a theory of form" (19).
13. Alt-Acs [Alternative Academics] are defined as professionals with Ph.D.s often deeply immersed in their own scholarly research projects who work in "libraries, museums, archives, higher education and humanities administration, publishing, research and technology, and more." The work split Jen Guiliano describes in this post about [why she left her alt-ac job](#) for a position in the history department at the Indiana University Purdue University Indianapolis set the ratio at 80/20: eighty percent time administering the work of the DH center, 20 percent time working on one's own research.
14. Bethany Nowviskie's corrective, authored 1 December 2011 and shared widely in the digital humanities community, identifies the political and communal stakes of @OccupyMLA's rhetoric in that exchange. <<<https://plus.google.com/+BethanyNowviskie/posts/aqWxa587Hq8>>>.
15. Rita Raley's *Tactical Media* (2009) is the definitive book on the subject, developing work begun in 1997 by Geert Lovink "[The ABCs of Tactical Media](#)" and drawing upon DeCerteau's distinction between tactics and strategies in *The Practice of Everyday Life*. "One of the premises of my study," Raley declares, "is that this articulation of dynamic, decentralized, and bottom-up resilience has become paradigmatic for netwar, activist movements, and the academy. ... Tactical media is performance for which a consumable product is not the primary endgame; it foregrounds the experiential over the physical" (11).
16. In his blog post "Why Digital Humanities Is Nice" (reprinted in Matthew Gold's printed collection *Debates in the Digital Humanities*) Tom Scheinfeldt observes, "If anyone takes an argument too far afield, the community of practitioners can always put the argument to rest by asking to see some working code, a useable standard, or some other tangible result." DH is "nice" because focus on method untangles disputes theory can cause and because practitioners making collaborative projects rely on each other.
17. Bessette's 144 tweets almost triple those of the next most-engaged OMLA participant, Noel Jackson (50). At the time of the OMLA installation, Bessette had more than 5000 followers (she now has over 6500), which means that OMLA benefited from exposure in her large professional network. Bessette, a blogger for *Inside Higher Education*, also mentioned OMLA in two of her posts for *IHE*. After Bessette and Jackson, of the fifteen most involved participants ten were women and five were men. That Marino and Wittig chose not to disclose their role in OMLA to Bessette remains an ethical concern of mine about which I haven't found resolution.
18. "Every second, on average, 6000 tweets are posted," according to Live Internet Stats. <<<http://www.internetlivestats.com/twitter-statistics/>>>.
19. Marino's tweets 1 December 2014: <<<https://twitter.com/markcmarino/status/539469389733826560>>> and <<<https://twitter.com/markcmarino/status/539473392060346368>>>.
20. <<<https://twitter.com/ShadowMLA/status/148805241012371456>>>.
21. <<<https://twitter.com/ShadowMLA/status/145659294187143168>>>.
22. <<<http://chronicle.com/blogs/profhacker/occupying-mla#comment-767391314>>>.
23. <<<http://chronicle.com/blogs/profhacker/occupying-mla#comment-767458217>>>.
24. <<<http://chronicle.com/blogs/profhacker/occupying-mla#comment-771502342>>>.
25. Philip Auslander's study of the ideology of rock music's authenticity (in contradistinction to pop music's artifice) emphasizes the target audience's perception of sincerity as performed in "live"

- settings. A rock concert in the 1980s, he notes, was a space in which the legitimate rock act had to display its virtuosity, original songwriting, social criticism and stance of anger/alienation. Marino and Wittig were similarly obliged to "walk the walk" – authenticate their marginalization as NTT and former adjuncts. See Auslander's chapter "Tryin' To Make It Real," specifically 77-85.
26. Chang and Voge quoted in Emerson 41. See Hyun-Joo Yoo, "Intercultural Medium Literature Digital: Interview with Young-Hae Chang Heavy Industries," *dichtung digital* 2 (2005).
  27. Liana Silva-Ford, comment on "Occupying," «<http://chronicle.com/blogs/profhacker/occupying-mla/45357#comment-767694514>». Accessed 2 September 2014.
  28. Croxall comment on "Occupying MLA": «<http://chronicle.com/blogs/profhacker/occupying-mla/45357#comment-771502342>».
  29. Whitson, quoted in a Storify I made of our conversation called "@ OccupyMLA: Can a Twitterfic be activist?": «<https://storify.com/kathiiberens/occupymla-can-a-twitterfic-be-activist>».
  30. Prof. Steven Salaita's offer to join the American Indian studies program as a tenured member of the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign was revoked when the UIUC board of trustees voted to rescind its offer. "Any lawsuit by Mr. Salaita probably would hinge on the question of whether he was entitled to the academic-freedom and free-speech protections of the university's faculty members," observes *Chronicle of Higher Education* reporter Peter Schmidt. "The answer to that probably will come down to contract law and whether he had gained any employee protections by virtue of being offered a job." The eroding protection of academic free speech is evident in this and other cases, such as the Kansas Board of Regents' policy that makes "improper use of social media" grounds for discipline up to and including termination.
  31. Raley, *Tactical Media*, 14.
  32. "Whiny" = @sherah1918 [Sheila Brennan]; "entitled/McMansions" = @atrubek [Anne Trubek.]
  33. Bethany Nowviskie's response, authored 1 December 2011 and shared widely in the digital humanities community, identifies the political and communal stakes of @OccupyMLA's rhetoric in that exchange. «<https://plus.google.com/+BethanyNowviskie/posts/aqWxa587Hq8>».
  34. "We didnt [*sic*] all agree with how the @occupymla account was being used last night. Esp. regarding @miriamkp who we think is great #MLA12 #omla"; "@nowviskie we are sorry you think were so ick. Were [*sic*] reading up on your work. Its great #MLA12 #omla" [12/1/2011 21:58]. The authors accepted "proper discipline" [12/2/2011 13:30].
  35. Raley, "TXTual Practice," 27; 26.
  36. For more information on bots as tactical media, see the Bot Summit convened 9 November 2014 and recorded by Darius Kazemi at «<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4CsYtensv94>». See specifically Zach Whalen's ten-minute talk "Protest Bots" at 45:34-56:36. Mark Sample has written eloquently about what motivated him to create @NRA\_Tally, a protest bot that recombines data points from actual U.S. mass murders and fourteen stock NRA responses to them in a relentless series of "fictional" tweets.

## BIO

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