7-5-2020

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Citation Details
Berens, Kathi Inman. ““Decolonize” E-Literature? On Weeding the E-lit Garden”, Electronic Book Review, July 5, 2020, https://doi.org/10.7273/svqq-ab68

“Decolonize” E-Literature? On Weeding the E-lit Garden

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07-05-2020

thread: electropoetics
https://doi.org/10.7273/svqq-ab68
This essay was peer-reviewed.
electropoetics

A riPOSTe to: Gardening E-literature (or, how to effectively plant the seeds for future investigations on electronic literature) Berens asks: Should the e-literature community include third-generation works in collections, syllabi, databases, prizes? A related question: do third-gen makers have a role in “decolonizing” e-literature? Who or what “colonizes” e-lit? E-literature, like earlier avant gardes, began as a coterie and has become a scholarly field. Using the comparison of a field versus a walled garden, the essay examines critiques of e-literature and variations on field definitions. It ends with two ideas about how to "decolonize" e-literature; about how equity and inclusion work in tandem with decolonization, but are not the same thing; and why decolonization efforts are urgent in the context of pandemic and protests supporting Black lives and racial justice.

Anna Nacher, commending Scott Rettberg’s *Electronic Literature* (Polity: 2018), uses metaphors of gardening and permaculture to discuss how the electronic literature community might “undertake a significant attempt to re-weave e-literature’s histories and genealogies, especially those pertaining to well-trodden paths of the avant-garde as framed within still dominant geographical and cultural perspectives.” “Permaculture” treats a garden as largely self-sustaining; when humans don’t tamper, flora and fauna find natural balance suited to the terrain and climate. Permaculture’s opposite is a gardener removing pests and weeds.

Nacher, herself a horticulturalist with a permaculture garden, weaves this useful metaphor into her meditations on Rettberg’s book (which I also reviewed here.) Nacher speculates that e-lit’s permaculture could be made more resilient through “decolonization”: shift orientation from North America and western Europe; welcome diverse perspectives from “Arabic and African countries…Central and Eastern European nations” and China. Technotexts, non-trivial effort, high modernism, and the aesthetic of difficulty: these are

mainstays of e-literature. Are they a walled garden? Do they restrict access to the "thousands or millions" of post-web makers in social media whom Leonardo Flores describes in his essay "Third Generation E-Literature"?

Should the e-literature community include third-generation works in collections, syllabi, databases, prizes? "Why should e-literature seek to go mainstream," ask Rui Torres and Eugenio Tisselli ("In Defense of the Difficult") "when the mainstream ... indoctrinates us ... into believing that there are no alternatives to infinite growth and cutthroat competition even when such principles are hidden behind a mask of openness and inclusion." A related question: do third-gen makers have a role in "decolonizing" e-literature? Who or what "colonizes" e-lit? Facebook, Apple, Google and Amazon [FAGA]? The high-culture heritage of modernism and programming skills? Surely decolonization would entail more than "invit[ing] newcomers and enjoy[ing] the work that unexpected allies want to do for us and the ecosystem - making it healthier, more resilient and more fun," as Nacher concludes her essay.

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Industry typically abbreviates the big five Silicon Valley media companies as FAANG [Facebook, Amazon, Apple, Netflix, Google (which does business as "Alphabet"). I omitted "N" because Netflix isn't relevant to e-lit designations in this article; and I moved the G to avoid writing a slur.

"Decolonizing" might mean evading FAGA, to whatever extent that's possible; or it might mean accepting those companies as crab grass in the garden: hard to eradicate, robustly rooted, "now found in virtually every crop or non-crop situation," as biologists at the University of Massachusetts Amherst explain crab grass. Think of the powerful memes circulating around and through the #BLM, #HandsUpDontShoot and #DefundthePolice movements. Unarguably, this is powerful electronic writing – but it is e-*literature*? Is there a literary aspect? In some of it, yes: irony is a literary trope. Or to use Serge Bouchardon's application of various "tensions" in digital literature: we can see "tension in the semiotic form" in some of those hashtagged artifacts. So much 3rd-gen work surfaces through recirculation. How important would it be to find the person who *made* the meme? For context, recall that every work in the *Electronic Literature Collections 1, 2* and *3* has identifiable author/s. Perhaps attribution is less relevant in today's discursive writing environments? E-literature doesn't need a discernable author, but the prestige economy of academia does--and academia pays for almost all costs associated with the growth of the field, from sponsoring the Electronic Literature Organization, to paying for server space, underwriting conferences, hosting and indexing scholarly journals, and so on.

Florian Cramer in "Post-Digital Writing," collected in the *Bloomsbury Handbook of Electronic Literature* (2017), makes the case that ELO's definition of the literary is restrictive, even "fundamentalist" (363) because it favors works where 1) author attribution is discernable; 2) fiction (and poetry) stand in for literature as a whole; 3) peer review validates publication. He argues that these practices are out of sync with digital writing today, a point made with different nuance by Leonardo Flores:

> Even when they are not self-consciously producing literature-- societal concepts of literature are still dominated by the genres and modes developed in the print world-- a huge amount of people have used these tools to produce writing that has stepped away from the page to cross over into electronic literature territory, and it's a crucial move. Whether they know it or not, they are producing third generation electronic literature.

Makers of first- and second-generation e-lit self-consciously engaged e-lit's aesthetic of difficulty and artisanal code (Berens, 2019a). Flores argues that authorial intention to make e-lit is not a precondition for a work to be defined as e-lit, which can be made by creators "whether they know [e-lit as a concept] or not." Reception, not creation, might be the crucial site of e-lit "making" in third-generation works. "We live in a post-Web world of networked information today," Nick Montfort observed in 2018. "The Web is now at most an option for digital communication of documents, literature, and art." Montfort's "Using Electricity" book series published by Counterpath Press books publishes mostly pre-Web and Web computer-generated works; only one, Ranjit Bhatnagar's *Encomials: Sonnets from Pentametron*, engages post-Web platforms. Alex Saum's definition of postweb (lower case, no hyphen) attends more to the social than technical aspect, calling postweb "a marker of our present era that has changed the way writers relate to the past, history, and their record. Jeneen Naji observes the "transformative anthropophagic processes and networks" at work in Instagram poetry's remix culture.

Cramer goes further than Flores. He calls for electronic literature to include pirated "underground download libraries like aaaaarg.org and Monoskop, and the recent hacker efforts to turn the Open Source e- book software Calibre into a peer-to-peer e- book sharing network" (363). Simon Rowberry, a platform studies scholar of Amazon e-readers, launches a different critique. Rather than expand what counts as digital "literature," he argues for a less strident demarcation between print and digital literature. "The common juxtaposition of electronic literature with print culture…ignores the full range of physical literature" that pre-dates e-lit (2). His essay historicizes e-literature "within the tradition of avant-garde [physical] literature that pre-empts [e-literature's] field development," speculating that the physical/digital literature continuum "is more useful than arguing for a clean break" between print and e-lit (2). All of these critics—Nacher, Cramer, Flores, Rowberry—describe the fence in e-lit's walled garden. Nacher urges e-lit practitioners to examine the power shift in opening the gate: "This might require taking a step back and giving up a bit on expectations as to how e-literature should develop or even what counts as such."

There's yet more at stake here. If, as Nacher asserts, "[g]ardening e-literature is not about policing, monitoring and banishing organisms which might come to our plot motivated by their own interests and decisions, but inspiring [us] instead to open up the space," then we should also acknowledge that "policing, monitoring and banishing" are actions that produce a scholarly "field." Some people win grants; others do not. Some work is selected

for collection, presentation or exhibition; some is not. Members of a coterie exchange work amongst themselves for pleasure and reputation. A "field," in Bordieu's sense, is an arena where agents engage with rules and compete for intrinsic and extrinsic rewards. Prestige is not just a reputation-enhancer, as it is in a coterie; reputation in a scholarly field earns financial and status rewards: speaking invitations, endowed professorships, research budgets, festschrifts.

E-literature began as a coterie. It has become a scholarly field.

In separate keynotes at the 2017 ELO conference, Matthew Kirschenbaum and Rita Raley noted e-literature's arrival as "discipline," a "field" of study fortified by scholarly apparati such as funded research enterprises like the ELMCIP Knowledge Base; a professional body; conferences, awards and prizes; college courses, syllabi, and designated hires; international and national grants; and reputable journals and scholarly publications. One might even say that, in its granular attention to genre ontologies, Scott Rettberg's *Electronic Literature* historicizes e-lit's development from coterie to field.

Scholarly fields make sharp distinctions about what is and isn't within field parameters; doing so is one way to measure how a field evolves. The question "what is e-lit" is at the heart of field scholarship because one field expectation is that a consistent definition should regularize scientific outputs across cultures. The orthodox definition of e-lit adopted by the ELO is N. Katherine Hayles' in *Electronic Literature: New Horizons of the Literary* (2008); there have been several others in English by the team of Alice Bell, Astrid Ensslin and Hans Rustad; Scott Rettberg; Roberto Simanowski; Serge Bouchardon; and most recently Leonardo Flores in his "Third Generation" essay. (There may well be other definitions in languages other than English.) Each time editors undertake a new volume of the *Electronic Literature Collection*, they must reach consensus on a definition of e-lit, a vital first step toward submission assessment and selection.

Some critics, including Simanowski, Rowberry, Bouchardon and Simone Murray, prefer the term "digital" literature. In her *Post45* article "10 Myths About Digital Literary Culture," Murray rejects "electronic" literature, declaring

> [t]he problem lies with the either/or, supercessionist logic of 1990s-style electronic literature proponents…. [B]y the time digital technologies and platforms began to make significant changes to the literary landscape by the turn of the millennium, there was scant mainstream academic interest in acknowledging them, and even less goodwill.

Strong language. Murray and Rowberry are digital book publishing scholars alienated by what they see as e-lit's media essentialism. When Murray attended the Digital Humanities Summer Institute e-literature workshop in 2016 and spent a week immersing herself in the field, she imbibed a sense that the e-literature community was unwilling to situate its practices in a broader digital literary sphere. "[A] further two decades have now passed,"

Murray continues. “Literary culture *is*, by the third decade of the twenty-first century, digital culture. The distinction between print and digital mediums that certain 1990s electronic literature enthusiasts sought to assert was always a false one.”

Murray’s assessment of community ethos tilts differently when it’s made by someone inside the community. “All of us already know that electronic literature is not a medium and not a genre,” Kirschenbaum said at the end of his 2017 keynote in Porto. “Electronic literature, like [the Electric Light Orchestra], is a livin’ thing.” More than a prog rock anthem by the Electric Light Orchestra, “a living thing” was Kirschenbaum’s way of acknowledging that e-lit’s permaculture is personal: in his keynote, he called out various people by name, an homage to coterie at the moment of declaring e-literature a “field.”

Perhaps that’s why the push to include Instapoetry, memes, and other populist forms can feel like an assault: third-gen e-lit abrades e-lit community values. In its vast facelessness—the opposite of an e-lit coterie—most Instapoetry feels like a brand. For two of the best-known Instapoets, the branding is quite literal: Atticus hawks “Lost Poet Red Blend” wine—the wine label simply says “POET”—and Rupi Kaur sells brass pens. The best-known Instapoetry is shot through with commercial values in the content and the data-hoarding platform itself whose code is uninspectable and whose parent company is being boycotted by more than one hundred companies withholding their Facebook ad spend during July 2020 to protest Facebook’s agentic role in attacking civic organizations and discourse.

What might “decolonization” look like? Cramer pointedly wonders whether we should “dispense with the notion of literary writing.” Art made from internet “plunderground” such as 4chan image macros, is authentic to democratized access but risks “remaining at a safe distance” that “doesn’t actually question the ontological status of ‘literature’” (366). Cramer is readier than I am to jettison “the literary” as a framework. Tropes, ambiguities, ironies, perspective: in electronic literature, these literary aspects can manifest in procedural rhetoric. Memes circulating through hashtags, such as #Karen’s critique of white fragility, uses the material conditions of populism to make an argument about structural racism and the racist double-standard of gun rights and police brutality.

Another decolonial technique is FAGA circumvention. My latest e-literature scholarship asks what happened to the artists and iOS e-literature apps circa 2012-2014. Some of those apps have been deleted without the authors’ permission. Several of those artists have made small-press, artisanal books part of their 2020 e-literature practice. Jörg Piringer (*Data Poetry*, 2020), Aaron Reed (*Subcutanean*, 2020), Erik Loyer (*Upgrade Soul*, 2018, with writer Ezra Claytan Daniels), and J.R. Carpenter (*This is a Picture of Wind*, 2020) have all published book outputs of their born-digital e-lit. (In the case of Loyer, iOS *Upgrade Soul* is the ur-text; Ezra Claytan Daniels published their webcomic in book form when completion of the app had been stalled for six years—more to come on that production history.) Jason Edward Lewis, the team of Aaron Reed and Jacob Garbe, and Stephanie Strickland all published books as companions/extensions of their literary apps. Bookish

materiality is one way to evade FAGA terms of service, and Apple's Draconian app deletion. Jason Edward Lewis didn't even know until I told him that the *P.o.E.M.M. cycle*, winner of the inaugural ELO Robert Coover Prize, had been removed from the App Store. In 2016 Aaron Reed was given thirty days to update his *Kirkus*-award winning app *18 Cadence.* Explaining to App Store reviewers that submitting an updated version of *18 Cadence* was both unnecessary and onerous to him as an independent artist had no effect; Apple deleted the app. "Go to hell, Apple," Reed wrote on Facebook. "Try going into a library and removing all the books that are more than 2 years old. Clearly nothing of value would be lost from a corporate perspective."

The inclusive ethos of the e-literature community—for those willing to accept its tenets, Murray reminds us—has persisted through e-literature's transformation from coterie to field. ELO is offering, as of 21 June 2020, two "Amplify Anti-Racism" fellowships, one creative and one scholarly, to "further strengthen its EDI (Equity, Diversity, Inclusion) framework." Diversity and inclusion are crucial. But they are not the same thing as decolonizing. EDI invites people into the existing structure. It does not interrogate whom that structure might exclude, and how structural mechanisms of unequal access operate. Decolonial work of activists and ordinary citizens, such as tearing down statues of slave owners and other white supremacists, assembling peacefully in the face of armed police in riot gear, and using social media to educate and fundraise for bail funds and Black causes, have been followed with legal changes: legislated bans on police use of choke holds, declaration of Juneteenth as a paid holiday, and removal of the Confederate symbol from the Mississippi state flag. Symbolic work is followed up with structural change.

The e-literature community has long been academic status-agnostic, well before such practices were common. Editors of the *Electronic Literature Collection Volume 3* sought and published work from artists outside academia, such as Twine makers anna anthropy and Porpentine, and in languages other than English, such as the Renderings project organized by Nick Montfort. As we attune ourselves more to "post-web," third-generation e-literature—particularly at a time of urgent, populist e-lit making—"weeds" might distinguish our garden of forking paths.

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Cite this Essay:

Berens, Kathi Inman. ““Decolonize” E-Literature? On Weeding the E-lit Garden”, Electronic Book Review, July 5, 2020, https://doi.org/10.7273/svqq-ab68.
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Soft Links of Innovative Narrative in North America