Title	Social media poetics: The technological forms of alt lit poetry
Author(s)	Tonra, Justin
Publication Date	2022-09
Publication Information	Tonra, Justin. (2022). Social Media Poetics: The Technological Forms of Alt Lit Poetry. ASAP/Journal 7(3), 597-623. doi:10.1353/asa.2022.0035.
Publisher	John Hopkins University Press
Link to publisher's version	https://doi.org/10.1353/asa.2022.0035
Item record	http://hdl.handle.net/10379/17681
DOI	http://dx.doi.org/10.1353/asa.2022.0035

Social Media Poetics: The Technological Forms of Alt Lit Poetry

"140+140!" was the tweet that heralded a defining change to Twitter. On 7 November 2017, Twitter founder Jack Dorsey announced that the maximum length of a tweet, previously set at 140 characters, would be increased to 280 characters. The change was intended to remove a constraint that was perceived to hinder expression, leading to abandoned tweets among English language users.[1] For a business model based on the aggregation of data for the purposes of advertising and data licensing, abandoned tweets represented unrealized commercial potential. However, for poets who had used Twitter's 140-character constraint to draft and publish lines of verse, the change was not so profitable.

In the last decade, social media has proved an unexpectedly rich breeding ground for certain poets to publish and promote their poetry. Rupi Kaur has primarily used Instagram to share her poetry, selling more than eight million copies of her books since her self-published debut, *milk and honey* (2014). With other poets achieving fame and commercial success on other platforms,[2] the phenomenon of social media poetry has resulted in a dizzying blend of egalitarian publishing opportunity, canny marketing,[3] and an assemblage of "scammers and opportunists and ironists."[4] However, a number of writers from the Alt Lit movement have also used social media platforms as catalysts for creative inspiration and formal experiment. This movement, whose heyday was the first half of the 2010s, was characterized by online- and self-publication and by its authors' relentless social media activity. Primarily an online community, its leading contributors made successful transitions to print with major publishers. Alt Lit authors mined their personal data archives for their printed works, charging their writing with a distinctive aesthetic whose trace is preserved in the process of

their works' remediation from digital media to print. Creating their work in the course of this platform hopping, these writers take a unique poetic measure of our social media landscape.

A social media poetics has emerged in Alt Lit, found at the intersection of three important aspects of the movement: an examination of its contemporary relevance; an analysis of the lyricization process that takes place when social media posts are remediated for the printed page; and a delineation of Alt Lit's poetic genealogy, which encompasses Charles Olson and the Beats, their relationships with technology, and the formal influence of subsequent developments in the history of communication technologies. Section 1 provides a brief history of Alt Lit's rise and fall, highlighting features of the movement which illustrate its contemporary relevance and recommend it for analysis and critique in the current moment. Two longer sections augment these claims for significance with arguments which situate Alt Lit within the context of past and present poetic theories and practices. Section 2 combines close readings with the framework of lyric reading to reveal shifts that occur when text that originates on social media is reworked for poetry's printed page. During this process, a solitary speaking voice which invites a lyric reading is foregrounded. At the same time, however, the verse line preserves an essential formal relationship with the social media post which is concealed by the logic of lyric reading. Finally, Section 3 positions Alt Lit writers as successors to a developing tradition, articulated by Charles Olson and consolidated by the Beats, which linked the verse line with the poet's breath. Similar principles to those which informed Olson's theory featured prominently in the development of the mobile communications technologies, so that a distinct line connects these poetic theories and practices, and their engagements with technology, to Alt Lit. Together, these three sections identify and analyze the contemporary and historic underpinnings of the social media poetics which characterize Alt Lit.

1 Alt Lit Today

During its peak in the 2010s, Alt Lit (sometimes hyphenated) attracted equal measures of acclaim and disdain. While detractors characterized the movement as the work of "boring, infantile narcissists,"[5] other critics celebrated its tonal and stylistic emulation of social media by "the first group of young writers grappling with the constant presence of the Internet."[6] Though the movement was relatively short-lived, many of its notable features testify to its relevance for the present. Rethinking Alt Lit today reveals many kernels of Internet culture which have intensified in the intervening years. Its authors adopted a now-familiar Internet vernacular where writing is shaped by the parameters of the social media post, typos are abundant, and the division between irony and sincerity is inscrutable and context-specific. The meme is an archetypal model for Alt Lit, with image macros initially forming one of the movement's most popular modes of expression and anticipating the sharp ascent of Instapoetry and its integration of text and image.

What initially made Alt Lit alternative was a commitment to Internet culture and online publication which positioned itself in opposition to mainstream literary circles. The movement organized itself around an online community with work circulating, at first, in Internet publications like Alt Lit Gossip and HTMLGIANT and later in dedicated presses such as Muumuu House and Sorry House.[7] Like Kaur, Alt Lit's Tao Lin made the transition from self-publishing to mainstream literary distinction, a trajectory that raises important questions about opportunities for authors of colour and about diversity and gatekeeping in publishing.[8] The nomenclature of "Alt" is particularly appropriate for an online literary community, as the word's use as a combining form can be traced to the early Internet, where alt.* was the conventional syntax for Usenet newsgroups that were created as alternatives to mainstream Usenet hierarchies (such as comp.*, news.* and sci.*).[9] The term's dual

signification of resistance and belonging captures Alt Lit's motivations, while the edginess and experimentation of alterity are evident in the movement's attitudes and aesthetics.

Certain aspects of social media use in Alt Lit distinguish it from related online literary movements such as Twitter fiction and Flarf. One of the primary features was the movement's use of social media as a compositional and archival resource for creating literature. For poets, the cellphone became an "alternative composition tool," as Chad Bennett writes, and was also used to build community and "talk out the poem to themselves."[10] Twitter fiction, by contrast, generally appeared on the platform fully formed. From ludic exploitations of Twitter conventions in Teju Cole's *Hafiz* (2014) to stylistic and generic experiments with the medium's constraints in Jennifer Egan's *Black Box* (2012), fiction writers often used the platform for publication in a way that was rare for Alt Lit. Instead, social media often functioned as a documentary record of the lives and interactions of Alt Lit writers and their community, to be plumbed, later, for literary creation. Just as Bennett characterizes Frank O'Hara's sociable documentary method, the Alt Lit social media archive suggests that "any moment could be revealed to belong to some poem."[11] The movement shares the community aspect and spirit of another online poetry, Flarf, but their similarities are largely superficial. Technology, appropriation, and constraint play in role in both, but for different purposes. The computer plays a more active procedural role in shaping Flarfist language; it appropriates from the web's broad storehouse of language rather than from personal archives; and Flarf constraints are often self-selected, in the manner of Oulipo, as opposed to Alt Lit's use of constraints that are determined by the features and parameters of social media platforms.[12]

The semantic sense of "Alt" has gained specific ideological associations in the years since "alt-right" was coined in 2008. With movements using that label characterized as hate groups, "Alt" has increasingly become associated with revivals of outdated bigotry and

prejudice, often packaged within the plausible deniability of Internet culture and convention. As in the case of other Internet cultures, prominent members of Alt Lit were publicly exposed for using the mechanisms of social media and digital communication to exert power and inflict abuse, and the movement effectively collapsed amid such controversy. In October 2014, three years before the #MeToo movement gained traction on social media, a number of writers made public allegations of coercion and sexual abuse by gatekeepers of the movement, including Stephen Tully Dierks, Steven Trull, and Tao Lin. Writers rapidly fled the scene and online publication channels closed, as Alt Lit was exposed as another literary community whose unequal power dynamics seemed "to incubate a culture of misogyny and predation."[13]

Viewed from the perspective of the present, many aspects of Alt Lit's brief and contentious lifespan lay claims for critical attention. The movement provides a case study of how self-publishing can be used as a stepping-stone to mainstream literary recognition. It offers a snapshot from the last decade's moral impoverishment of the idea of "Alt" and important lessons about the abusive potential of online literary communities. It connects and distinguishes itself from other literary engagements with social and communications technology, forming part of a broader contemporary history of the intersections of literature and technology. Increasingly, critics and scholars have examined Alt Lit for evidence of the literary effects of writers' deep immersion in the internet and internet culture.[14] As a distinct historical phenomenon, Alt Lit offers rich scope for critique and analysis.

2 The Lyric Moment of Alt Lit Poetry

Since authors began to use Twitter as a catalyst and medium for creative self-expression, the platform's influence has bled onto the page, shaping the style and form of

literature. Reviewing Megan Boyle's Alt Lit novel, *Liveblog* (2018), David Wallace linked the egocentric expression of social media to the concurrent rise of autofiction. In an interview with autofiction author Sheila Heti, Mira Gonzalez considered the different modes of expression enabled by Twitter, compared to print. "Twitter is a place where I don't feel ashamed to say my most shameful thoughts," she declared, explaining the themes of abjection that filter from her social media into her poetry. However, she continued, "the content that I post on Twitter tends to be different from the things I would write in a poem. That's not to say one is better or more important or 'less poetic' than the other." [15] Gonzalez is astute about the different elements of social and printed media that influence their respective expressive modes, but she fails to recognize the poetic change that occurs when she remediates a tweet for the printed page. The process is common in her work and that of other Alt Lit writers: she often transposes her tweets in verbatim or edited form into her printed poetry, as Lin does in his poetry and fiction. In these transitional moments, Gonzalez and Lin invoke a lyric presence for their fragmented texts, charging their poetic import and drawing them into the realm of lyric reading. Despite Gonzalez's protests, the texts become more poetic in the course of their remediation. The particular effects of this process of lyricization are an important feature of Alt Lit and its social media poetics.

Lyric reading refers to a conventional reading practice which decontextualizes a poem's social and historical character by assigning it the immutable feature of the dominant understanding of lyric poetry: the figure of the solitary speaking voice.[16] That voice is present in much of the poetry of Gonzalez, Lin, and other Alt Lit writers, so a lyric reading of that work seems sustainable or even necessary. However, such a reading fails to account for the formal influence of social media on poetic structure—particularly of the tweet on the verse line—that is crucial to understanding Alt Lit poetry. "mortal kombat," the opening poem of

Gonzalez's collection, *i will never be beautiful enough to make us beautiful together* (2013), provides evidence of this specific influence at work:

> I am thinking about those tiny clams that bury themselves under wet
>
> sand at the beach
>
> I identify with the tiny clams
>
> I want to bury myself under wet sand
>
> my cat is giving me a disapproving look
>
> I pick up my cat and forcibly hug her
>
> my cat meows loudly and jump-kicks me as she runs away
>
> I think I would like to be a cat
>
> I think I want someone to forcibly hug me
>
> I want to jump-kick them and run away
>
> I begin to count how many people I have had sex with in my life
>
> I say out loud:
>
> 'I don't care about the people I've had sex with. I like being alone.
>
> being with other people is tiring'
>
> I am talking to myself
>
> 'mira is talking to herself'
>
> I want to take a bath with all the lights off
>
> the couple that lives next door are yelling at each other again
>
> I feel happy that my neighbors have a relationship that is important
>
> enough to yell about

The poem begins with a line transposed from a tweet posted by Gonzalez on 2 January 2012: "I strongly identify with those tiny clams that dig themselves under wet sand on the beach. I feel like a 'tiny clam.'"[17] Within the poem, Gonzalez divides this identification into the

separate actions of thought and affinity: "I am thinking about those tiny clams that bury themselves under wet sand at the beach / I identify with the tiny clams."[18] Combined with a third line, the poem takes the initial components of the tweet and reorders them into a more logical sequence of thought, beginning with mental perception of the image of the reticent shellfish. Two notable shifts occur during the appropriation of the tweet. First, Gonzalez's subtle reorientation of the form of address summons the solitary, self-conscious speaker of the lyric mode: "I am thinking…". The tweet is addressed more directly to its readymade online audience and was issued unambiguously from Gonzalez, the public figure, on her social media account. Yet on the printed page, the indeterminate solitary speaker creates the conditions that invite the poem to be read as lyric. Unusually, though, this transition from social space of Twitter to the reduced visibility of the printed page inverts the definition of lyric poetry as "privacy gone public."[19] The second shift is formal, establishing a connection between the form and mode of the tweet and the verse line. In the absence of strict patterns of rhyme and meter in this poem, the reader's attention is drawn to the self-enclosed line as one of the more prominent formal devices. The equivalence of the line and the poem's syntactical units provides a pause in which the reader is invited to consider the informational weight of the lines and their relationship to one another. In addition, it emphasizes the fragmentary nature of the poem's component parts.

The pattern established by remediating a tweet into the opening three lines continues as "mortal kombat" progresses. Two further images are expressed in groups of three syntactically-complete lines, each portraying instances of troubled physical and emotional intimacy that form the poem's thematic core. Next, the speaker's enumeration of sexual partners announces a turn in the poem, with a formal breach disturbing the regular pattern of thought which characterized the poem to this point. True to its primary formal mode, the rupture emerges from the line and its relation to syntax where the speaker is directly quoted:

"I say out loud: / 'I don't care about the people I've had sex with. I like being alone. / being with other people is tiring.'" The second of these three lines is the only occasion of linear and syntactical disunity in the poem: instead of one sentence, it contains two.[20] Thought, previously represented in an unbroken equivalence of line and syntax, gives way to speech, where that established correspondence is undermined. The poem's loss of equilibrium continues: though two of its shortest lines restore order in their syntactic completeness, they reinforce the conflict between thought and speech formally introduced in the preceding lines: "I am talking to myself / 'mira is talking to herself.'" These lines query the truth of their declarations as they distinguish claims seemingly made in the voices of the speaker and the poet, attesting to an identity crisis precipitated by the movement from communication on social media to poetic soliloquy. Moreover, they illustrate the shortcomings of a lyric reading of the poem by drawing attention to its different modes of expression and their origins: the conventional lyric voice and the voice of social media, lyricized. "All poetry is of the nature of soliloquy," wrote John Stuart Mill in "What is Poetry?" (1833)—an important historical reference point for lyric reading—but he makes a crucial distinction between eloquence, which is *heard*, and poetry, which is *overheard*.[21] By this logic, which Gonzalez dramatizes at the poem's turn, Twitter is the locus of eloquence: of humorous, aphoristic, but prosaic writing which receives the applause of likes and retweets when successful.[22] For the tweet's incorporation into poetry, it must undergo the shift seen in the opening lines of "mortal kombat," to become the possession of the lyric voice: the "natural fruit of solitude and meditation"[23] ready to be overheard by the reader. The self-consciousness of that remediation, and of the soliloquizing "'mira is talking to herself,'" testify to the unique features which arise from Alt Lit's poetic mode of remediation. Mill insists that "no trace of consciousness that any eyes are upon us must be visible in the work itself,"[24] but traces of

social media scrutiny—the metrics of views, engagements, likes—are preserved in these textual fragments, even as they undergo their transition to poetic verses.

The fragmentary nature of Alt Lit poetry reflects its compositional origins in social media. Evidence of the formal consequences of these origins is abundant. The insistent paratactic effect of the end-stopped lines in "mortal kombat" obscures the progress of thought portrayed in the poem, and the reader's interpretation of that progress.[25] The absence of enjambment places a semantic burden on the verse line, which becomes a formal yet fragmentary building block. Moreover, the anaphoric repetition of "I" at the beginning of thirteen of the eighteen lines heightens the stasis in the poem and further emphasizes the discrete status of the verse lines. This egocentric fragmentation is a formal constant in social media poetics, but also a consequence of viewing and communicating the world in the minimal, constrained units which social media technology has determined. The speaker's soliloquy at the poem's turn is a momentary breach which resists Alt Lit's characteristic "animated stasis,"[26] an effect arising from its writers' solitary, web-based production and accumulation of tweets and texts: fragments which comprise a datafied self.[27] These features combine in "mortal kombat" to create the jagged and fragmented style that is native to the internet and its vernacular. The style, common to Alt Lit poetry, is found in its most heightened state in Gonzalez's collaboration with Lin, *Selected Tweets* (2015). In this book, groupings of tweets harvested from both authors' Twitter accounts exhibit similar characteristics to those seen in "mortal kombat." One such example from Gonzalez's portion of the volume presents a short sequence of tweets connecting themes of binge-eating and dejection:

Portrait of the artist as a young binge eater

Ate ~14 tater tots using nothing but my elbows

I don't have enough arm strength to move my Macbook from my bed to my bedside table

Became infertile while thinking about 'Doritos Locos Taco' from Taco Bell

The unbearable bleakness of being

I recommend eating until you cry[28]

Lin has described the book as "a poetry collection," alluding to its affinities with "a certain kind of poetry where each line is a low-level non sequitur to the next line."[29] This claim highlights Alt Lit's inheritance of ideas about verse lines and their arrangement from Charles Olson and the Beats, as I discuss below, but the reciprocal lyrical effects that arise when social media timelines meet the page are also notable in this context. For the self-publishing poet, the lyricization of their work is a route to commercial success which must be achieved through the printed page, since its significations activate "protocols of interpretation" common to both mainstream publication and lyric reading.[30] However, an implicit lyric potential in social media attracts Alt Lit writers to use such platforms as composition tools. That potential resides in the particular constraints of social media which engender the expressive features often associated with the contemporary lyric. In her critique of the form's "extraordinary uniformity," Marjorie Perloff enumerates these features as: irregular lines of free verse; prose syntax with graphic imagery or extravagant metaphor; and, most amenably for social media, "the expression of a profound thought or small epiphany."[31] Though Perloff disdains the perceived formula for these "well-crafted" contemporary lyrics, social media provides the structures for Alt Lit to pursue this poetic method.

The linear influence that Twitter's constraints exert on Gonzalez's published poetry is a component of Alt Lit's social media poetics, but a similar effect is evident in Lin's early poetry which predates Twitter and the social media of the public web. His use of the trope indicates a broad interest in the creative potential of information and communications technology and further highlights the poetic effects of different modes of social media. Instant messaging content feeds explicitly into poems from Lin's 2006 collection, *you are a little bit happier than i am*, and for diverse purposes. "some of my happiest moments in life occur on AOL instant messenger" is the ironic title for a poem which juxtaposes online and real-life communication. The solitary speaker describes an online relationship which sours when its participants meet in real life, using an anaphoric list to recount the stages of its dissolution:

> i will create a new category
>
> on my instant messenger buddy list
>
>
> i will call it
>
> 'people i like who don't like me back'
>
>
> and i will move your screen name into that group
>
> and i will invite you to my house and show you
>
> and you will say, 'if i didn't like you why did i come over'
>
> and you will look at my face
>
> and i will have an honest answer for your question
>
> i will tell you that you came over to be polite

Elsewhere, Lin uses the format of an online dialogue for the purposes of dramatic confrontation in "an instant messenger conversation we had about how my dad was in jail." Here, he remediates the conversational format of messages prefaced by screen names for the lyric poem, as alternate lines begin with "i said" and "you said." Lin exploits the affordances and features of this communication medium—intimate yet remote, and subject to the ambiguities of text-only conversation—to dramatize the collision of different voices and viewpoints. Though the social media Lin uses are more private than Twitter, their remediation for the page results in the same formal features which produce the characteristic effects of "mortal kombat": anaphora, parataxis, fragmentation, and an equivalence of self-enclosed line and communication media unit.

If we view Alt Lit poetry through a lyric reading framework—one that recognizes that poems are read as lyric and that such reading effaces important material, cultural, and historical contexts for those poems—we see the work's formal features arise in the process of remediation from social media platforms and the shortcomings of reading the poetry without reference to its compositional origins on social media. Only with full knowledge of the latter context can the reader observe the practices of the Alt Lit movement as an example of platform capitalism's effects on literature.[32] Social media's inducements to inscription are a means of extracting data from its user's thoughts (Facebook: "What's on your mind?") and activities (Twitter: "What's happening?"). As Alt Lit writers draft and publish their works on these platforms, they perpetuate the platforms' commercial ends, while their writing expresses various formal manifestations of their datafied selves. As Alt Lit poetics is subsumed under the media hegemony of platform capitalism, its writers and their voices are subject to a similar homogenization as the network generates multiple versions of its datafied subjects. This accounts for the characteristically neutral and fragmented tone of Alt Lit writing that I discuss at the end of the next section. The speakers that give voice to this tone

are avatars of the web, "the self-recursive consuming subject in capitalist realism," according to Alden Sajor Marte-Wood, and as subjects, they remain "fractured, disseminated, reproduced, and mediated by social networks."[33] Even as these posts undergo lyricization in their movement from social media to the printed page, they preserve traces of the platform's expressive parameters in writers' fragmented, paratactic articulations of their datafied selves. These traces signal the digital in a profound way for readers, with Gonzalez's work having been described as the "quietly defining texts of the digital era."[34] When subjected to lyric reading in these interpretive contexts, the verses' origins on social media are hidden. However, the poems' ineffable effects, their definition of the digital age, cannot be fully grasped without an understanding of the texts' origins and the context of their remediation.

The self that is relentlessly foregrounded in Alt Lit writing is consistently fragmentary, owing to the use of anaphora and self-enclosed lines and the consequent challenge to creating continuity between the lines of the poem.[35] If the voice is fragmented at the level of sense and syntax, greater formal unity and cohesion is present in these lines' expressive fidelity to the constraints of social media and the inducements of platform capitalism. However, in order to avoid what Marjorie Perloff called the "linear fallacy," free verse must exhibit some formal justification to distinguish itself from "chopped up prose."[36] Containing few of the traditional metrical features of aural prosody, the poetry of Gonzalez, Lin, and other Alt Lit writers relies instead on a variant of the aural line most commonly associated with Charles Olson and the Beats: the notion of the line as defined by the poet's breath. However, this organic poetics is rerouted into a mechanic poetics through the mediation of the computer and information technology. The next section historicizes this link in order to demonstrate how the datafied self that we encounter in Alt Lit results from the deliberate quantification and encoding of human expression within the constraints that shape

these technologies: these histories and their consequences are crucial to our understanding of social media poetics.

3 Alt Lit's Poetic & Technological Genealogies

Alt Lit poets engage with certain Romantic ideals of poetry, though their use of social media affords them more plausible claims to spontaneity than the comparatively delayed and multiply mediated publication processes to which the Romantics were subject. However, the remediation of tweets as verse lines reveals a similar rhetorical contingency that applies to social media's apparent spontaneity. If the tweet is lyricized in the process of its remediation for the printed page, it suffers a corresponding decrease in its claims to spontaneity. Indeed, twentieth-century poetics of spontaneity which influence Alt Lit also demonstrate a debt to technology to achieve their desired effects.[37] However, when Alt Lit poets couple rhetorical spontaneity with technological constraint, we find echoes of the Romantics' liberationist dissolution of established prosody and consequent definition of new formal modes. In their constructive engagements with technology and adoption of a formal poetic mode predicated on the measurement of human communication, Alt Lit poets have a notable precursor in twentieth-century neoromantic, Charles Olson.

Olson's "Projective Verse" (1950) argued for a return to fundamental principles of poetry and for the essential value of the verse line. His theory rests on a central distinction between a "closed" poetry shaped by traditional page-based forms, and an "open" or "projective" poetry shaped by the poet's breath and physiology. Beginning from a basic assertion that "FORM IS NEVER MORE THAN AN EXTENSION OF CONTENT," Olson posits an intrinsic link—a "LAW OF THE LINE"—between the verse line and the poet's breath:

> And the line comes (I swear it) from the breath, from the breathing of the man who writes, at
>
> the moment that he writes, and thus is, it is here that, the daily work, the WORK, gets in, for
>
> only he, the man who writes, can declare, at every moment, the line its metric and its ending -
>
> where its breathing, shall come to, termination.[38]

Olson's proprioceptive poetry has distinct echoes of bardic and oral modes, but the modernity of its formulation may be read as a deliberate opposition to a specific post-war moment in which scientific theory had begun to argue for the disembodied status of information. As the contemporaneous Macy Conferences (1946-53) aimed to advance unity in the sciences and cybernetics viewed information as a ubiquitous tool for communication and control,[39] Olson's poetic theory and practice are a response to a "context in which scientific knowledge seemed to have overwhelmed the possibility of its being humanely controlled."[40] Embodiment is the basis of projective verse's formal poetics, so the human being, and particularly the poet, can preserve their central role in the processing of information.

As in the case of Alt Lit poets, Olson's poetics is focused not on meter and rhyme, but on the line as a meaningful formal and expressive unit. The rhetoric Olson uses to propose this theory echoes the Romantics' combination of formalism and anti-formalism: the theory presents itself as distinct from traditional prosody in its pursuit of an organic formal basis which liberates language, rather than the rational and logical constraints of traditional poetic forms which have hitherto inhibited expression. While Olson shares the Socratic view of language as a necessarily false and reductive means of conveying experience, his decision to place it within a proprioceptive frame grants language an embodied constraint opposed to cybernetic disembodiment.

Despite his aversion to mediation, Olson acknowledges and celebrates one positive affordance that technology and its constraints offer to projective verse: "It is the advantage of

the typewriter that, due to *its rigidity and its space precisions*, it can, for a poet, indicate exactly the breath, the pauses, the suspensions even of syllables, the juxtapositions even of phrases, which he intends."[41] With this statement, Olson implies that more nebulous features of human physiology—breath, thought, vocalization—can be accurately measured in the same way as a heartbeat. Moreover, the means are apparently available, with the aid of a constrained piece of technology such as the typewriter, to reproduce and inscribe that breath externally. On closer examination, the reasons for Olson's embrace of this particular technology are clear: the typewriter facilitates the open formal desires of projective verse by providing a fixed means of measure "without the convention of rime and meter" which characterized closed, traditional verse forms.[42] While the structural apparatus of prosody is an artificial inhibitor for projective verse, poetic machines of composition and inscription may be deployed in its service. The value of technology for composing this kind of spontaneous, open writing is also evident in the ideas and practices of the Beats, who extend Olson's poetics and provide a further link to Alt Lit.

The principal elements which link the Beats' and Olson's ideas about the relationship between inspiration, technology, and the line are evident in the former's advocacy of "spontaneous bop prosody."[43] The phrase captures the Beats' commitment to compositional methods which prioritize spontaneity: a commitment also found in Allen Ginsberg's "first thought, best thought," a meditation maxim adapted to poetic principle.[44] Ginsberg proposes a bodily, breath-based poetry, whose spontaneous practice he opposes to the more tentative methods of conventional poetic composition. The raw materials for this poetry arise from spontaneous fragments of consciousness: "the first thought you had on your mind, the first thought you thought before you thought, yes, you'd have a better thought, before you thought you should have a more formal thought."[45] Ginsberg used notebooks to record and document these thoughts, later subjecting them to revision and refinement—"imposing names and

forms and all that"[46]—but saw the initial process as a fundamental principle, a "basis of honesty" for poetic composition.[47] What results, when these tweet-like fragments of consciousness are combined in Ginsberg's work, are formal features such as anaphora and self-enclosed lines which also characterize the social media poetics of Alt Lit.[48] Ginsberg's "America" (1956) illustrates a predigital confluence of these features within a poem addressing the themes of media saturation and information overload:

> I'm addressing you.
>
> Are you going to let your emotional life be run by Time Magazine?
>
> I'm obsessed by Time Magazine.
>
> I read it every week.
>
> Its cover stares at me every time I slink past the corner candystore.
>
> I read it in the basement of the Berkeley Public Library.
>
> It's always telling me about responsibility. Businessmen are serious. Movie producers are
> serious. Everybody's serious but me.
>
> It occurs to me that I am America.
>
> I am talking to myself again.

Aside from the echo of the last two lines with Gonzalez's "I am talking to myself / 'mira is talking to herself,'" "America" shares the shifting modes of address of "mortal kombat" as well as tensions between thought and expression, and an ultimately egocentric fragmentation. While the section above makes explicit reference to *Time* magazine, Ginsberg's poem is inundated by images of Cold War media. The psychological and emotional freight of this media barrage has its formal representation in the anaphoric, paratactic, self-enclosed lines, just as Lin and Gonzalez use similar effects to portray consciousness under the sway of social media and its egocentric distillation of the datafied self.

The associative organization of the fragments in "America" anticipates the remediation and arrangement of archived tweets found in "mortal kombat." This process is the very principle by which the "open" poetry proposed by Olson establishes is own form: "ONE PERCEPTION MUST IMMEDIATELY AND DIRECTLY LEAD TO A FURTHER PERCEPTION."[49] As Ginsberg mined his notebooks' archives of spontaneous consciousness, he described how the fragments were reassembled for the page, echoing the loose associative logic at work in the writings of Gonzalez and Lin: "If they were related, I'd put them one, two, three, four."[50] In technological terms, Ginsberg's notebooks are a rudimentary recording device, but they highlight the process of documentation that is crucial to accurately representing the spontaneous aesthetic of the Beats. Jack Kerouac appealed more directly to technology for this documentary necessity, firstly and famously in his rapid composition of *On the Road* (1957) on a typewriter and 120-foot scroll of paper. The spontaneous verisimilitude Kerouac found in composing on the typewriter is what also attracted Olson to the machine, which he described as "the personal and instantaneous recorder of the poet's work."[51] Kerouac later took this documentary logic to a more advanced technological conclusion by using audio tape to record five consecutive days of conversation whose transcript formed the basis of *Visions of Cody* (1972). The transcript gave the novel its feeling of unmediated authenticity, capturing the voices and spontaneous utterances of the author's community of friends in San Francisco. Kerouac "envisaged the tape recorder as an extension of his writing body," argues John Shapcott, "enabling him to capture a spontaneous world which he could reinterpret in literary form at leisure."[52] Features of social media poetics which animate Alt Lit poetry are a continuation of principles which are fundamental to the poetics of Olson and movements, like the Beats, that took inspiration from projective verse. In each, spontaneous utterance is linked to formal expression via the intervention of technologies of recording and inscription. Alt

Lit's specific extension of these ideas arises from inherent constraints in the communication technologies that underpin social media.

In forging a relationship between social media and the verse line, the constraints and conventions of the communication technologies used by Gonzalez and Lin—SMS, instant message, tweet—are key creative elements. Constraint is a common feature of poetry, and poets are accustomed to heeding and transgressing a range of constraints for creative purposes: poetic form, grammar, syntax. A significant feature of contemporary poetries such as Flarf and Conceptualism, constraint is not solely restricted to the avant-garde and its influence is evident in the contemporary sonnet and other traditional forms. Since the term began to bear particular procedural associations after the Oulipo movement of the mid-twentieth century, however, poetic constraint has assumed specific meanings beyond the adoption of traditional prosodic forms. Constraints largely fall into one of two categories: the anachronistic revival of long-abandoned prosodic forms, or the neologistic invention of new forms.[53] The locus of a constraint can be found in any formal or semantic aspect of a poem, or, more broadly, of the given literary form to which the constraint is applied.

The influence of the tweet on the verse line shapes not only the formal integrity of the linear unit, but also the relationship of those units to one another. In a broader sense, this constraint also gives the poetry a formal correlate for social media's subsumption of the datafied subject under platform capitalism. Olson's "LAW OF THE LINE" corresponded with the exhaustion of the poet's breath and required a line which was end-stopped, evoking closure and constraint, in contrast to the liberty and transgression of enjambment. Prior to 7 November 2017, the length of a tweet was constrained to a maximum of 140 characters. The viability and success of expression in each constrained mode—line and tweet—is subject to the creative negotiation of these formal limits.

Understanding the role of constrained expression in the development of communications technologies helps to clarify further how Alt Lit inherits the influence of Olson and the Beats and their use of analogue media. Developers of the Global System for Mobile Communication (GSM) in the early 1980s faced the challenge of fitting text messages into existing signaling formats.[54] The official length of the SMS was set at 140 bytes, or 160 7-bit characters, with one of its developers, Friedhelm Hillebrand, concluding this was "sufficiently long for most personal and professional purposes," an adequate means of capturing a basic unit of human communication and expression.[55] Having paved the way for the "birth of the text-messaging culture,"[56] SMS's somewhat arbitrary quantification of human communication became a key influence on Twitter's initial character limit of 140.[57] Discussing the origins of the platform, Dorsey cited SMS as a direct inspiration for the length of a tweet: "But SMS allowed this other constraint, where most basic phones are limited to 160 characters … So we took 20 characters for the user name, and left 140 for the content. That's where it all came from."[58] At the heart of fundamental decisions about how to structure platforms which have shaped communication in the digital age are technosolutionist conclusions about the informational space required to contain human expression. In turn, users of these technologies have adapted their view of the world and their language to fit within that space, foregrounding the linguistic and semantic effects of the constraint.[59]

A central part of social media poetics and its influence on poetry must be the nature and extent of the constraint adopted. Instinctively, Twitter's 140-character limit seems formally undemanding: based on length rather than the strictures of prosody. This formal constraint gives social media poetry a distinctive quality and enables it to avoid both the linear fallacy and the prosaic pitfalls of free verse. It differs from the procedural constraints of Flarf and Conceptualism, which, for example, set parameters for the textual transcription or search engine use that generates the work's content.[60] In a sense, the constraint is more

substantive: dictating that the profound thoughts or small epiphanies of poetry take place

within the boundaries of 140 characters. However, the conception of Twitter as an ideal

platform for spontaneous expression is complicated when it is reformulated as a poetic

constraint. Arguably, the tweet's constraint is obscured when it moves from Twitter to print

and the capacious boundaries of the page. However, unmoored from the paratexts of

Twitter—its avatars, timestamps, retweets, and replies—the lines of a poem like "mortal

kombat" bear a striking poetic syntax and the ghostly but unmistakable trace of the Twitter

timeline.

While technologies such as Twitter provide a formal basis for Alt Lit's social media

poetics, the Internet culture that it reflects also echoes through the movement's writing and its

themes. Many writers who use Twitter have commented on the specific effect that the

platform has had on their writing and some point explicitly to the medium's constraints as an

influential factor in a move towards stylistic minimalism.[61] The resulting view of language is

utilitarian and transactional: when Lin describes his style as concerned with removing

redundancy and embellishment, he implicitly reduces language's function to the conveyance

of information. A machine logic is at work here, where the author is required to use language

in its most concise and economical form to express the required information. By contrast,

Olson's poetics devised formal features to reject the disembodiment of information found in

the reductive assumptions of such technologies: the development of technological "solutions"

which instrumentalise human expression and communications and reduce it to the utilitarian

transmission of information. The Beats adopted Olson's formal innovations and moulded

them in the service of spontaneous expression, but, as Kerouac demonstrates, they embraced

technology's documentary power to capture and archive impromptu utterance so it might be

remediated, with the guise of authenticity, for the printed page. Lin's comments show how

technology has developed from the tape recorder's more objective documentation to social

media's active and influential role in determining the shape and form of expression. In Alt Lit, the motives for authors' adoption and application of technosolutionist logic to literary expression are often uncertain. Some revel in its effects on language and in its capacity to estrange and defamiliarize expression, while others are more circumspect, using the limited expressive palette of constrained language to present an ironic portrait of the correspondingly diminished experience of the subject under the dominion of platform capitalism.

We can observe the twin effects of this reduction, concentration, and datafication on the content of these poets' works as it inflects the way they view and describe the world. This most obviously manifests in the signature flat and neutral tone of Lin's *Taipei* (2013), which popularized the aesthetic of Alt Lit. The same quality is also prominent in the affectless imagery of Gonzalez's poetry, where she deploys a consistently neutral and objective tone to describe physical and sexual contact, and conventionally emotional interactions. The resulting effect is an uncanniness in descriptions of apparently romantic encounters: "would you please push your head against my head / until we can mutually confirm our place in the universe"; "you were lying on top of him / touching his mouth with your mouth sometimes."[62] Even the clichéd image of the lover's garment and its sensual associations is rendered eerie by a diction which has filtered its intense and pervasive embodiment through a datafied lens, removing all affect and emotion: "and when I wear your misshapen cashmere sweater tonight / it will feel like I'm putting my face on you again."[63] Describing Gonzalez's style as "depthless psychology," Hannah Manshel identifies the flatness of the poetic language as a defense mechanism which "masks but does not eradicate emotion."[64] In Manshel's reading, Gonzalez's attested aim of neutrality exposes uncertainty about the potential values and dangers yielded by emotional expression: "and I promise that from now on I will only have emotions that can be perceived as neutral."[65] But, as Marte-Wood argues, such affectless writing is a key characteristic of Alt Lit's relationship with technological

platforms, where "animated stasis" is the dominant mood and "the perils of self-recursive signification [produce] multiple 'versions' of the commodified self."[66] However, in the fashion of an inscrutable text message, the best of Alt Lit writing exploits the equivocal import of its language by refusing to yield to unambiguous interpretation. Where the datafied self is revealed in the formal and tonal expression of Alt Lit writing, its ambiguous presence invites different readings: as either a manifestation or a critique of technosolutionism's reductive logic.

Conclusion

As 2020 ended and the world prepared to enter the second year of a global pandemic, social media provided a brief moment of respite in the form of TikTok Sea Shanties.[67] One viral video brought together the vocals of five young men, each recorded in isolation, to create a stirringly harmonized rendition of "The Wellerman," a whaling song from mid-nineteenth-century New Zealand.[68] Aside from its tonic properties, the trend illustrated social media's habit of breathing fresh life into different cultural forms. As one viral phenomenon quickly succeeds another, we are rarely afforded the time to pause and consider the source of their vitality. Alt Lit's prime lasted for about half a decade: long in viral terms, but short for a literary movement. Its peaks and troughs anticipated cultural phenomena that would become more familiar in its wake, as the margins of Internet culture and mainstream culture blurred. As developments in social media increasingly prioritize the visual, the movement offers a snapshot of the effects of cross-platform textual exchange. The impact of Alt Lit poetry is inseparable from the technological conditions of its creation, especially as its text moves from social media to print. The lyric effect created in that moment is key to appraisals of Alt Lit that emphasize the movement's successful distillation of the digital age. While that essence is

often fleeting and elusive for the authors of these accounts, its source is located beyond the ambit of lyric reading, in the formal traces that are preserved in a text's movement from tweet to verse. The productive constraints that social media offers to Alt Lit originate in the history of mobile technologies and their quantified solutions for human communication. The same concerns were previously found in poetic theories of the mid-twentieth century whose encounters with the dawning technological and informational age manifest in a verse line which resists and engages, by turns, instrumentalist perspectives on human communication. The continuation of these legacies and their remodeling for the Internet age is Alt Lit's accomplishment and one of its notable claims for attention.

Acknowledgements

---

[1] Aliza Rosen and Ikuhiro Ihara, "Giving You More Characters to Express Yourself," *Twitter Blog*, September 26, 2017, https://blog.twitter.com/official/en_us/topics/product/2017/Giving-you-more-characters-to-express-yourself.html.

[2] See, for example, Brian Bilston (@brian_bilston) on Twitter and Alt Lit's Steve Roggenbuck (@steveroggenbuck) on YouTube. Instapoetry, in particular, is gaining both commercial traction and scholarly attention, with numerous academic articles on the topic in the last three years.

[3] Bronwen Thomas, *Literature and Social Media* (London: Routledge, 2020), 98-119.

[4] Claire Fallon, "Instagram Poetry Is a Huckster's Paradise," *Huffington Post*, October 3, 2018, https://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/instagram-poetry-atticus-duncan-penn_us_5bb2df2de4b0ba8bb2104b1b.

[5] Josh Baines, "Alt-Lit Is for Boring, Infantile Narcissists," *Vice*, January 16, 2013, https://www.vice.com/sv/article/vdn9dy/alt-lit-is-the-worst-thing-to-happen-to-literature.

[6] David Wallace, "Megan Boyle's 'Liveblog' and the Limits of Autofiction," *New Yorker*, November 29, 2018, https://www.newyorker.com/books/under-review/liveblog-and-the-limits-of-autofiction. This designation would likely be disputed by scholars and practitioners of electronic literature.

[7] HTMLGIANT (https://htmlgiant.com/) remains active, while Alt Lit Gossip (https://altlitgossip.tumblr.com/) is now defunct.

[8] Little critical work has addressed this topic, but Melanie Ramdarshan Bold draws notable conclusions, especially in chapter 3, about diversity in British publishing in *Inclusive Young Adult Fiction: Authors of Colour in the United Kingdom* (Cham: Springer, 2019).

[9] "The History of 'Alt-,'" Merriam-Webster, *Words We're Watching* (blog), October 4, 2016, https://www.merriam-webster.com/words-at-play/history-of-alt-combining-form-prefix.

[10] Chad Bennett, *Word of Mouth: Gossip and American Poetry* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 2018), 241.

[11] Ibid., 136.

[12] For an introduction to Flarf, see Rick Snyder, "The New Pandemonium: A Brief Overview of Flarf," *Jacket 2*, no. 31 (2006), http://jacketmagazine.com/31/snyder-flarf.html.

[13] Andrew Peart et al., "Sexism and Sexual Assault in Literary Communities," *Chicago Review* 59, no. 1/2 (2014): 191–235. The scandals unfolded online and across social media channels in the same fashion as the movement's characteristic modes of publication, eventually garnering the attention of more mainstream publication outlets. For further accounts of the controversy, see Emilie Friedlander, "Making Sense of the Alt Lit Sexual Misconduct Scandal," *The FADER*, October 9, 2014, https://www.thefader.com/2014/10/09/social-anxiety-alt-lit-rape-abuse-tao-lin-stephen-tully-dierks; Allie Jones, "Alt-Lit Icon Accused of Statutory Rape as Hipster Scene Falls Apart," *Gawker*, October 2, 2014, http://gawker.com/alt-lit-icon-accused-of-rape-and-abuse-as-hipster-scene-1641591034; Dianna Dragonetti, "Alt-Lit Is Not so 'Alt': How the Alternative Literature Community Failed Women," *Salon*, October 7, 2014, https://www.salon.com/2014/10/06/alt_lit_is_not_so_alt_how_the_alternative_literature_community_failed_women/; and, on Lin's 2018 "comeback," Jakob Maier, "What Are We to Make of Tao Lin's Comeback?," *BuzzFeed News*, June 27, 2018, https://www.buzzfeednews.com/article/jakobmaier/what-are-we-to-make-of-tao-lins-comeback.

[14] Tao Lin has been the subject of scholarly writing examining his style: as "autistic *jouissance*" (Stephanie Hsu, "Tao Lin's Taipei as an Aesthetic Experiment in Autistic Jouissance," *Lit: Literature Interpretation Theory* 27, no. 3 (July 2, 2016): 191–212), as digital subjectivity (Chingshun J. Sheu, "What We Talk about When We Talk about New Media: Digital Subjectivity and Tao Lin's Taipei," *Textual Practice* 34, no. 8 (August 2, 2020): 1269–84), as "post-postmodern" (Aislinn Clare McDougall, "What Is Cyber-Consciousness?: The Digital Mediation of Sincerity and Parody in Tao Lin's Taipei," *C21 Literature: Journal of 21st-Century Writings* 7, no. 1 (January 28, 2019), https://doi.org/10.16995/c21.555.), or "post-literary" (Paul Ardoin, "The Doomed, the Post-, and the Exact Curve of the Thing: Tao Lin in the After," *CounterText* 1, no. 3 (December 1, 2015): 332–47). Other scholars have examined specific intersections of Alt Lit and social media: Lin's use of Twitter to enact his authorial identity (Justin Russell Greene, "Tweeting the Author: Tao Lin's Performance of Authorial Identity on Twitter," *Authorship* 7, no. 1 (2018)), the trope of oversharing in Mira Gonzalez's use of Twitter (Sara Eriksson, "Social Media Life Writing and the Crisis of the Public Sphere: Mira Gonzalez and the Trope of Oversharing," in *Literature and Crises: Conceptual Explorations and Literary Negotiations*, ed. Elizabeth Kovach, Ansgar Nunning, and Imke Pollard (Trier: Wissenschaftlicher Verlag Trier, 2017)), and Steven Roggenbuck's use of "digital realism" (Prathna Lor, "Everybody's Poetry," *The Minnesota Review* 2015, no. 85 (November 1, 2015): 153–61) and his status as a problematic exemplar of third-generation electronic literature (Leah Henrickson, "'AN INTERNET BARD AT LAST!!!': The Precarious Power of Alt-Lit Poet Steve Roggenbuck," *Electronic Book Review*, February 6, 2022).

[15] Sheila Heti, "What Would Twitter Do? (Mira Gonzalez)," *The Believer Logger*, February 7, 2014, https://believermag.com/logger/2014-07-02-what-would-twitter-do-9/.

[16] Virginia Jackson's *Dickinson's Misery: A Theory of Lyric Reading* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 2005) is one of the most prominent articulations of the theory of lyric reading, while a section of articles on "The New Lyric Studies" in *PMLA* 123, no. 1 (2008) is another important resource.

[17] Mira Gonzalez, "I Strongly Identify with Those Tiny Clams That Dig Themselves under Wet Sand on the Beach. I Feel like a 'Tiny Clam,'" Tweet, @*miragonz*, January 2, 2012, https://twitter.com/miragonz/status/153814393862365185.

[18] Two points—procedural and conceptual—are pertinent here. First, my reading of the poem views the opening and concluding verse lines as occupying two typographic lines. Whether this was Gonzalez's intention is uncertain because, although both lines reach the right margin of the page and continue on the next typographic line, the latter is not indented in the conventional manner. I draw particular attention to this because of the importance of linear and syntactical unity in my argument. Second, my formal reading of this poem sits uncomfortably with its casual and ironic tone and content. However, this asymmetric reading is required to excavate the formal consonance of Alt Lit poetry and social media that may not be apparent on first glance.

[19] Jackson, *Dickinson's Misery*, 127.

[20] Owing to the poem's failure to indent verse lines that occupy more than one typographic line, it is unclear whether "[']being with other people is tiring'" is a separate verse line or a continuation of the previous typographic line.

[21] John Stuart Mill, "What Is Poetry?" *Monthly Repository* 7 (1833): 64-65.

[22] Allen Ginsberg, whose similar compositional methods are discussed below, describes the tonal effects of his spontaneous method: "there's also that element of invention and comedy and friendliness that issues forth" ("'First Thought, Best Thought,'" in *Composed on the Tongue: Literary Conversations, 1967-1977*, ed. Donald Allen (San Francisco: Grey Wolf P, 1994), 115).

[23] Mill, "What Is Poetry?" 65.

[24] Ibid.

[25] The absence of line-end punctuation in much of Gonzalez's work complicates the definitive designation of end-stopped lines. That said, the three punctuation marks in "mortal kombat" are, notably, found in the section described above.

[26] Brian Droitcour, "Brian Droitcour on the Best of the Web in 2012," *Artforum*, December 9, 2012, https://www.artforum.com/slant/brian-droitcour-on-the-best-of-the-web-in-2012-37709.

[27] Distinct from the quantified self's user-directed technological self-tracking, the "datafied self" more commonly indicates the resulting data manifestation of a person's engagements with technology: a digital double or data doppelgänger.

[28] Mira Gonzalez and Tao Lin, *Selected Tweets* (Ann Arbor: Short Flight/Long Drive Books, 2015), 27.

[29] Juliet Escoria, "Mira Gonzalez and Tao Lin's Selected Tweets Is Deeper than It Seems," *The FADER*, June 8, 2015, http://www.thefader.com/2015/06/08/mira-gonzalez-tao-lin-twitter-interview-with-juliet-escoria.

[30] Jackson, *Dickinson's Misery*, 125. For Kaur's comments about self-publishing and commercial success, see the "About Me" page of her website, https://rupikaur.com/.

[31] Marjorie Perloff, "Poetry on the Brink," *Boston Review* 37, no. 3 (2012): 60.

[32] Platform capitalism refers to the economic model dominated by major technology companies which provide the hardware and software foundations upon which others operate. "Platforms, in sum, are a new type of firm; they are characterized by providing the infrastructure between different user groups, by displaying monopoly tendencies driven by network effects, by employing cross-subsidisation to draw in different user groups, and by having a core architecture that governs the interaction possibilities." Nick Srnicek, *Platform Capitalism* (Cambridge: Polity, 2017), 48. Together, these features enable platforms' continuous extraction and monetisation of data.

[33] Alden Sajor Marte-Wood, "Consumption: Cultures of Crisis, Overproduction, and Twenty-First-Century Literature," in *The Routledge Companion to Literature and Economics*, ed. Matt Seybold and Michelle Chihara (London: Routledge, 2018), 205.

[34] Emma-Lee Moss, "Mira Gonzalez's Poems Are Quietly Defining Texts of the Digital Era," *The Guardian*, September 3, 2015, http://www.theguardian.com/books/booksblog/2015/sep/03/mira-gonzalez-poems-digital-era-lily-allen.

[35] The "self-recursive" effects of anaphora may be read as an instance of the "iterative turn" that Jacob Edmond attributes to poetry in the age of global media: "[p]oetry's turn to repetition, in other words, represented not just a shift in rhetorical form but also an ethical and political response to the crisis in authority engendered by new media technologies and globalization." Jacob Edmond, *Make It the Same: Poetry in the Age of Global Media* (New York: Columbia UP, 2019), 7.

[36] Marjorie Perloff, "The Linear Fallacy," *The Georgia Review* 35, no. 4 (1981): 858.

[37] For a history of the theme of spontaneity in the period I discuss in this section, see Daniel Belgrad, *The Culture of Spontaneity: Improvisation and the Arts in Postwar America* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 2007).

[38] Charles Olson, "Projective Verse," in *Poetry in Theory: An Anthology, 1900-2000*, ed. Jonathan Cook (Malden: Blackwell Publishing, 2008), 291-2.

[39] An important landmark in the history of science, the Macy Conferences brought together interdisciplinary researchers who worked to develop the new field of cybernetics and promote communication between scientific disciplines. See Claus Pias, ed., *Cybernetics: The Macy Conferences 1946-1953. The Complete Transactions* (Zurich: Diaphanes, 2016).

[40] Paul Stephens, *Poetics of Information Overload: From Gertrude Stein to Conceptual Writing* (Minneapolis: U Minnesota P, 2015), 90. A similar predicament is evident, though profitably monetized, in the platform capitalism that influences the poetics of Alt Lit. Eschewing concern with knowledge (information about *why* something happened), "twenty-first century advanced capitalism came to be centred upon extracting and using a particular kind of raw material: data" (Srnicek, *Platform*, 39)—or information, merely, *that* something happened.

[41] Olson, "Projective Verse," 293; emphasis added.

[42] Ibid.

[43] Allen Ginsberg, *Howl and Other Poems* (San Francisco: City Lights, 1956), 3.

[44] Ginsberg, "'First Thought," 117. The phrase is adapted from the advice of Ginsberg's meditation teacher, Chögyam Trumpa.

[45] Ibid.

[46] Ibid.

[47] Ibid., 113.

[48] For comparisons between Alt Lit and the Beats, see Josh Spilker, "Lexicon Devils: What Exactly Is Alt Lit? A Conversation with Frank Hinton, Noah Cicero and Stephen Tully Dierks," *Vol.1 Brooklyn*, June 20, 2012, https://vol1brooklyn.com/2012/06/20/lexicon-devils-what-exactly-is-alt-lit-a-conversation-with-frank-hinton-noah-cicero-and-stephen-tully-dierks/ and David S. Wills, "Alt-Lit as the Next Beat Generation: An Interview with Noah Cicero," *The Nervous Breakdown*, October 9, 2013, http://thenervousbreakdown.com/dswills/2013/10/alt-lit-as-the-next-beat-generation-an-interview-with-noah-cicero/.

[49] Olson, "Projective Verse," 289.

[50] Ginsberg, "First Thought," 115.

[51] Olson, "Projective Verse," 294.

[52] John Shapcott, "'I Didn't Punctuate It': Locating the Tape and Text of Jack Kerouac's 'Visions of Cody' and 'Doctor Sax' in a Culture of Spontaneous Improvisation," *Journal of American Studies* 36, no. 2 (2002): 231–48. 232.

[53] Jan Baetens, "Constraint," in *The Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics*, ed. Roland Greene et al. (Princeton: Princeton UP, 2012), 300.

[54] Colston Sanger, Alex Taylor, and Jane Vincent, "An SMS History," in *Mobile World: Past, Present and Future*, ed. Colston Sanger et al. (London: Springer London, 2005), 77.

[55] Friedhelm Hillebrand, *Short Message Service (SMS): The Creation of Personal Global Text Messaging* (Hoboken: John Wiley & Sons, 2010), 19. For some formal contributions of the SMS to contemporary poetry, see Paul Muldoon's *Sixty Instant Messages to Tom Moore* (Lincoln: Modern Haiku Press, 2005) and Jordan Davis's "Text Messages," in *Gulf Coast* 21, no. 1 (2009).

[56] Eija-Lissa Kasesniemi, *Mobile Messages: Young People and a New Communication Culture* (Tampere: Tampere UP, 2003), 94.

[57] Hillebrand based an argument for the length of the SMS on three observations: that postcards were very popular; that Telex was the most widely used professional text-messaging service; and, crucially, that the majority of messages sent via both formats contained fewer than 160 characters. *Short Message* Service, 2-4, 17-19.

[58] David Sarno, "Twitter Creator Jack Dorsey Illuminates the Site's Founding Document. Part I," *LA Times Blogs - Technology*, February 18, 2009, http://latimesblogs.latimes.com/technology/2009/02/twitter-creator.html.

[59] The development of textspeak is the most recognisable example of this effect, though many more instances of how the digital age is transforming language are available. See Gretchen McCulloch, *Because Internet: Understanding How Language Is Changing* (London: Vintage, 2019).

[60] Flarf poet Ara Shirinyan gives a detailed outline of the procedural steps he took to collect and arrange the search engine results that comprise the poems in *Your Country Is Great: Afghanistan - Guyana* (New York: Futurepoem Books, 2008).

[61] Lin observes the manner in which Twitter's constraint promotes a minimal writing style: "I usually try to edit [a tweet] to be as short as it can be to mean the same thing. That's how I edit my other writing, by cutting it down." Melissa Kravitz, "Tao Lin Talks Tweets, Twitter and His Upcoming Book," *am New York*, May 19, 2015, https://web.archive.org/web/20170315121102/http://www.amny.com/lifestyle/tao-lin-talks-tweets-twitter-and-his-upcoming-book-1.10447275.

[62] Gonzalez, *I Will*, 18, 23.

[63] Ibid., 16. Frank Guan refers, in the same vein, to Lin's typical "concrete/literal" style, "in which physical objects and activities take almost total precedence over thoughts." "Nobody's Protest Novel," *N+1*, 2014, https://nplusonemag.com/issue-20/reviews/nobodys-protest-novel/.

[64] Hannah Manshel, "Depthless Psychology," *The New Inquiry*, July 7, 2014, https://thenewinquiry.com/depthless-psychology/.

[65] Gonzalez, *I Will*, 9.

[66] Marte-Wood, "Consumption," 205.

[67] Amanda Petrusich, "The Delights of Sea-Chantey TikTok," *New Yorker*, January 14, 2021, https://www.newyorker.com/culture/cultural-comment/the-delights-of-sea-chantey-tiktok.

[68] Jonny Stewart, *#duet with @the.Bobbybass SHANTY TIME Once Again! Adding a Lower Middle Harmony :) @nthnevnss @_luke.the.Voice_ @apsloan01 #shantytok #wellerman*, https://www.tiktok.com/@jonnystewartbass/video/6913909783548431618.