

Toward a Theory of Canadian Digital Poetics

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BY DIGITAL POETICS in this essay, I refer to those works of literature that are either *transmedial* or *born-digital*. The tried-and-true definition on the website of the Electronic Literature Organization (ELO) stresses that electronic literature, of which digital poetics is only a part, is any piece of literary or word-based art with **“important literary aspects that take[s] advantage of the capabilities and contexts provided by the stand-alone or networked computer.”** Expanding on this earlier definition in “How E-Literary Is My E-Literature?” at the 2016 ELO conference, Leonardo Flores presented the definition of electronic literature as a sliding scale rather than a binary. He provided six primary categories by which we can determine if a work is “e-lit” and how sophisticated its use of networked technology is. His criteria are as follows:

- (1) language (no use of language → functional use → artistic use);
- (2) digital media (static → time based → including user input);
- (3) user interaction (trivial → meaningful → including data from input devices);
- (4) computation (none → in creative process → in reception);
- (5) network (none/offline → used in the process → vital to the reception); and
- (6) culture (oral/print culture → interrogating digital media → engaging with digital cultural traditions).

His reinterpretation of the ELO’s definition as a sliding scale is useful not only because it recognizes the variety of forms that digital poetics engages in but also because it lets us look at how the genres of electronic literature differ in different communities; what is e-lit to gamers might be radically different from what is e-lit to scholars of the print-based avant-garde. For my purposes, also significant about the criteria presented by Flores is how much his formulation prioritizes user/reader engagement.¹

His re-evaluation of the ELO's definition of electronic literature coincides with the larger movement in digital humanities (DH) from the second wave to the third wave. If the first wave of DH was "quantitative, mobilizing the search and retrieval powers of the database, automating corpus linguistics, stacking hypercards into critical arrays," and the second wave was "qualitative, interpretive, experiential, emotive, generative in character" (UCLA Humanities Department), the third wave is a necessary merger of the two former waves. This frequently discussed move to third-wave DH offers us the opportunity to return to some of the more useful elements of print-based criticism with new eyes and a plethora of resources presented in the early, quantitative days of DH but without neglecting the importance of experiential and affective analysis. One of these more useful elements might be the role of a national literature in the context of electronic literatures and new media studies.

The role of a "national literature" in an era of globalization has been significantly critiqued by critics of print-based literature. Adam Carter's chapter on "National Literature, Canadian Criticism, and National Character" outlines these critiques in a Canadian context. Building on Frank Davey's work in *Post-National Arguments: The Politics of the Anglophone-Canadian Novel since 1967*, Carter recognizes the critical value of a national literature that moves beyond the "drably uniform" national characters (44) that have to be abandoned and instead looks to a national literature that embraces historicity, hybridity, and heterogeneity. The issue of a national literature has been addressed in the context of electronic literature by Luciana Gattass in "Digital Humanities in Praxis: Contextualizing the Brazilian Electronic Literature Collection," in which she uses her project of creating a Brazilian e-lit collection for the Electronic Literature as a Model of Creativity and Innovation in Practice database to look at how such practices can help to "discuss and problematize quantifying trends in humanistic scholarship." I am interested in theorizing a "Canadian e-literature" in which the national qualifier refers, in the words of Gattass, both to the "incommensurable notion of a 'national literature' and to a mere geo-tag" simultaneously. This issue has also been addressed to some extent in the context of Canadian electronic literature by Kate Eichhorn in her chapter on "The Digital Turn in Canadian and Québécois Literature" in *The Oxford Handbook of Canadian Literature*. Eichhorn brings up the question of a

national literature in an e-lit context by pointing out that texts are typically attributed to a national literature by the citizenship or residence of the author, the geographical location of the writing, or the fact that a work is published in the country. But, in electronic literatures, Eichhorn notes, these factors are frequently complicated. For example, many of the individuals involved in the production of e-lit identify themselves not as authors but as artists, graphic designers, engineers, programmers, project directors, librarians and archivists, and so on. The production of e-lit frequently involves collaboration with nonhuman entities such as programs, search engines, text generators, or source code. E-lit is also often made from human collaboration, especially internationally, and frequently results in self-publication online or in online journals.

Canadian digital poetics has tended toward the poststructural skepticism of authorship by producing e-lit largely concerned with generative work, source or seed texts, remixes, cut-ups, and plagiaristic borrowings. In many ways, this works to create a tightly knit community of Canadian poets who pay homage to their influences and recognize the constructedness of single authorship, but it has also resulted in a tendency not to credit adequately the authors of their source texts. I worry about this practice. It is especially problematic on two fronts: first, the often free or open-source distribution of remixed work becomes a real problem for Canadian writers who are not affiliated with postsecondary institutions or who depend on their writing sales for their livings; second, as the Canadian avant-garde has been for so long, this practice is typically dominated by white men affiliated with universities who have significantly less to lose through the compromise of authorship. This essay argues that, while Canadian digital poetics historically has been more interested in deconstructing authorship and embracing noise poetics, what is more interesting is the radical potential of digital and transmedial works to engage with *readers* rather than to dwell on the complications of *authors*.

Historically, Canadian electronic literature and digital poetics have been dismissed or sidelined in literary scholarship for two primary reasons: first, because there is a pervasive cult of print that dismisses new media works as illegitimate since networked media lack, in some ways, the accredited gatekeepers that dominate print publishing (though Hal Niedzviecki's *Write* editorial on "Winning the Appropriation Prize" showed us exactly how exclusionary that practice can be); second,

because much of the electronic literary work coming out of Canada right now is highly affective and emotional, these works are frequently disregarded by avant-garde circles as “popular,” “unliterary,” or “kitsch.” What is more, these affective personal narratives are often written by women, trans* and queer writers, and writers of colour, and they are typically about the very identity politics that the predominantly white, cis-gendered, heterosexual, male avant-garde so fears. One might expect that experimental literary circles would be interested in how new media writing probes issues of formalism, medium, authorial power, reader engagement, and other literary complexities touted as central by writers, readers, and scholars of experimentalism. But the truth is that the Canadian literary community mainly continues to prioritize print-based work. I argue in this article, by presenting a number of examples of Canadian literature after the “digital turn,” that the communal and ergodic (i.e., reader-engaging) elements of digital literary projects allow for a more inclusive and autonomous community of readers and writers. Digital publishing complicates the authoritative pedestal previously assigned to writers, editors, and publishers of print-based works, gradually affording more authority and power to its readers by way of engagement, connection, and privileging of the affective nature of addressing and attending to the needs of readers.

Eichhorn’s argument for a “digital turn” in Canadian literature is useful in that it encourages a conversation about Canadian electronic literature that incorporates the usefulness of national literatures while allowing for the complication and line-blurring offered by digital media. In 2017, with many decades of transmedial and digital poetics behind us, we must now work to define a Canadian literature that has *already turned* digital. This essay presents a Canadian digital poetics that, with some notable exceptions, has had its eye keenly on the past, and on print, rather than on the future and the engaging and radical potential of networked connectivity. This is evident, first, from the volume of transmedial work produced by Canadian writers and, second, from the persistent influence of the print-based avant-garde and sound poetry traditions on digital work (transmedial and born-digital). But there is also, as the end of this article demonstrates, a rich tradition of Canadian writers (particularly women) working to use the digital potential of electronic literature to push the boundaries of the book form and to explore the radical potential of e-lit to engage meaningfully with its readers.

Transmediality

Contemporary visual art has long been concerned with connecting analog technology with digital technology. Consider, for example, the work of an artist such as Michelle Gay, who hand-stitches computer error code, or Libs Elliott, who uses computer code to generate patterns for physical quilts. In language-based arts, transmedial projects tend to fit into three primary categories: print books that use digital technology as integral to their production (i.e., rather than simply as a word processor), print books that have a supplemental born-digital element, and language-based performance that relies heavily on digital elements.

The first category of digitally produced print books tends to be the most popular in terms of both readership and scholarship. Canadian poetry in particular has a rich history of print-based books produced using unique digitized methods. For example, Erin Mouré's work in *Pillage Laud: Cauterizations, Vocabularies, Cantigas, Topiary, Prose* (1999) uses Charles O. Hartman's MacProse program and a lexicon that Mouré adapted in order to produce a book of "lesbian sex poems," as the book's back cover describes them. Her work here follows in a tradition of computer-run generative and indeterminate work that stems from writers such as John Cage and Jackson Mac Low. Similarly, the collaboratively produced *Apostrophe* (2006) by Darren Wershler and Bill Kennedy boasts an influence from this tradition of computer generation. Their book compiles the slightly edited results of a search engine's list of phrases or sentences found on the Internet that begin with "you are." Following in this Canadian transmedial tradition, Jordan Abel's work in *Un/Inhabited* (2015) and *Injun* (2016) demonstrates the political efficacy of turning old texts into source texts in order to rewrite the representation of indigeneity in Western novels. Similarly, Rachel Zolf in *Janey's Arcadia* (2014) turns the documentation of settler culture in Canada into cut-up-style remixes. Abel's and Zolf's works, while wildly popular in Canadian literary scholarship, demonstrate the recent tendency of transmedial work to trend toward print-based methodologies rather than digital potentials.

The second category, print books that have digital counterparts, is a decidedly more niche market but continues in the Canadian transmedial avant-garde. The genre is probably best demonstrated by *NICHOLODEONLINE* (1998), the electronic manifestation of Wershler's first print book of poetry, *NICHOLODEON*. Most of the

poems and supplemental materials on *NICHOLODEONLINE* are simply digital reproductions of the print book organized in a unique (and often difficult to navigate) web design. Some digital kinetic pieces, such as “Grain: A Prairie Poem,” share a good deal with the early kinetic and Java experiments of electronic literature internationally but with a clearly Canadian bent in both content and form. The poem’s interest in using letters to represent the flat land and horizon of the Prairies as well as the growth of one of Canada’s major exports, wheat, demonstrates the influence of other Canadian poets (bpNichol and Steve McCaffery looming in the background, along with Dennis Cooley, a pioneer of the genre that we now call the “long prairie poem”). Compared with the lengths of other kinetic poems, we might even say that “Grain” is relatively “long” and that its inclusion in the mass of poems hosted on *NICHOLODEONLINE* makes it part of a larger serial poetic project. “Grain,” like many of the poems on *NICHOLODEONLINE*, is clearly indebted to how the concretists and early typewriter poets use and play with the grid, but it also shows how the animation of a digital, kinetic poem is freed from some of these limitations.

Another similar project, Damian Lopes’s *Sensory Deprivation/Dream Poetics* (1998), follows in the same vein. It is the digital version of a print-based book, and, like Wershler’s site, the most that a reader can do to engage with the visual poems therein is to navigate an unmarked and maze-like website. But Lopes approaches this issue in a different way that forces readers to evaluate not just how they approach and engage with poetry but also how they engage with digital texts and websites in general. After readers are instructed to “watch where you point that thing,” they at first unknowingly and then with some difficulty navigate by hovering their cursors over selections of the images, challenging their usual point-and-click way of navigating webpages (an issue cleverly taken up by *DontClick.it*). Because the hover points in these poems are unclear and the pages change quickly, engaging with *Sensory Deprivation* can create the illusion that readers have no control over or understanding of how the pages move/turn even though their cursors create this movement. The poems in *Sensory Deprivation*, for the most part, are fairly typical visual/concrete poems (including a map of Canada filled with the phrase “our stolen native land”), but what is really fascinating and important about *Sensory Deprivation* is how it reconsiders reader engagement with the digital text. By defamiliarizing

and rendering the act of browsing a webpage even more passive (i.e., without even clicking selections), Lopes allows readers to recognize their daily passive consumption of digital texts.

The third category is more difficult to define and is somewhat outside the scope of this essay, but it is worth mentioning that language-based artists have turned to installation, performance work, and sound poetics that embrace the potential of the digital. These works include Abel's performances, installations by web artists such as J.R. Carpenter (whom I will discuss in greater detail later), and sound performances by artists such as Kaie Kellough, Jason Sharpe, Eric Schmaltz, and others. This third category is rapidly growing as equipment becomes accessible, as training in new technologically advanced fields develops, and as the lines between genres of artistic and literary production continue to blur.

Source Codes and Codework

Alongside the popularity of these transmedial print books and performance pieces, Canadian poetry has a long history of born-digital work. Nichol's *First Screening: Computer Poems* (1984), a small collection of a dozen kinetic visual poems, is widely considered to be a foundational text of digital poetry. In *First Screening*, Nichol extends the well-established concerns of his concrete and typewriter poetics. In this prototypical work, he has the computer screen function not only as the page does in print-based poetics but also as the screen does in film. Because so much of the scholarship on Nichol has looked to his biography to contextualize his poetry, a lot is known about how he came to work in the digital medium so late in his life. As Davey details in his critical biography, *Aka bpNichol*, Nichol purchased an Apple IIe in 1983 and began learning BASIC programming language. By 1984, he had completed the "manuscript" diskettes (5.25" floppies) of what would become *First Screening* and sent them to Underwhich Editions, which would produce a small run of a hundred numbered copies (245-46). Later in the year, he revised these disks and sent them to Red Deer College Press for wider publication (280). Programmed on the Apple IIe, the poems were already trending toward obsolescence. Red Deer did not publish them until 1993 when a graduate student at the University of Calgary translated the code to Macintosh HyperText (319n1); the "translation" was written on HyperCard and itself became obsolete about ten years later.

Nichol's work in *First Screening* is an extension of his print-based work. As Katherine Wooler argues, the poems serve as "remediation" (70), a term that she takes from a long history of digital humanists and electronic literature scholars. Jussi Parikka recycles the term from media archaeologists Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin, who argue that all new media remediate old media. For Wooler, "The concept of remediation encourages the examination of media history from the perspective of any particular media development and is another reason that media should not be studied in a strictly linear way" (63). Lori Emerson, too, identifies the intermediary position of *First Screening* in her entry on it for the *Electronic Literature Directory*, noting that, "Because the twelve poems in *First Screening* move soundlessly across a black computer screen, the work positions itself halfway between film and sound/concrete poetry and self-consciously (mis-)uses the filmic medium to create poetry." In other words, *First Screening* remediates a number of media, some "appropriate" for poetry, others "not." This remediation minimizes the role of the author and allows for greater room for the reader.

One example of this is the poem "Off-Screen Romance," which hides like an Easter egg in the original Apple IIe version. In the Apple IIe emulator hosted on the *Vispo* site of Jim Andrews, entering the "LIST" command for line 110 provides the reader with the following prompt: "REM FOR THE CURIOUS VIEWER/READER THERE'S AN 'OFF-SCREEN ROMANCE' AT 1748. YOU JUST HAVE TO TUNE IN TO THE PROGRAMME." While acknowledging the filmic elements of the text — the "viewer" can "tune in" — Nichol also encourages the "reader" to intervene in the text if "curious" enough to do so. Entering the "RUN" or "GOSUB" command at this point starts a "hidden" kinetic poem, "Off-Screen Romance," dedicated to Nichol's wife, Ellie. Although the poem is personal via its dedication and the intimacy implied by its being "hidden," its content is not about Nichol and Ellie, save perhaps in a more intimate, metaphorical sense. The poem depicts the names "FRED" and "GINGER" dancing across the screen, an obvious reference to dancing film stars Ginger Rogers and Fred Astaire, who enjoyed many on-screen romances but were never officially partners off-screen (despite many rumours to the contrary). The reader can pause or play the dancing at any time by pressing CTRL-S, and any key to restart the sequence, but such engagement is not explicitly encouraged.


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]
]LIST 3900,4000

39000000 REM ARK
39000000 REM BOAT
39001000 REM AIN
39001500 REM RAIN RAIN RAIN RAIN RA
IN RAIN RAIN RAIN RAIN RAIN RAIN RAIN RAI
N RAIN RAIN RAIN RAIN RAIN RAIN RAIN RAI
AIN RAIN RAIN RAIN RAIN RAIN RAIN RAIN RAI
IN RAIN RAIN RAIN RAIN RAIN RAIN RAIN RAI
RAIN RAIN RAIN RAIN RAIN RAIN RAIN RAIN
39002000 REM BOAT
39002000 REM ARK
39002000 REM BOW
39002000 REM ARC
40000000 END
]

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Figure 1: Screenshot of *First Screening*.

In this way, the poem is intensely personal, echoing the argument of Gregory Betts that Nichol cannot seem to help but write himself into his work (154). But, in the sparse presentation and the length of the movement of the dancing names, the work also invites the intervention of the reader who is, no doubt, curious.

Looking behind the scenes at the text file of Nichol's code reveals even more potential for engagement with the reader. As Wooler notes, the text file on *Vispo* of Nichol's original BASIC programming language "reveals that Nichol imbedded a bonus poem. . . . This poem cannot be run as a subroutine using the correct GOSUB command but can only be viewed as part of the code" (66). The bonus poem written in the code is perhaps the first documented codework. Line 116 of the code reads thus: "116 REM FOR FURTHER RE-MARKS LIST 3900,4000." Entering the "LIST" command for lines 3,900-4,000 results in Figure 1. Playing off the REM command as phoneme, the poem depicts the biblical story of Noah's ark and the flood using the format of the BASIC command language as its form.

In his own digital poetic work, Andrews is clearly influenced by Nichol in print and in *First Screening*. For example, in the poem "Seattle Drift," Andrews extends the use of language as visual medium seen in Nichol and in other print-based concrete poetry by using the potential

of digital technology to make the words literally move across the screen. “Seattle Drift” moves at the (partial) behest of its readers, who start and stop the movement on the screen. Although the poem is hosted and still accessible on *Vispo*, it was originally distributed through the now foundational journal of web art and digital writing, *Cauldron and Net*, in its first volume in 1997. Andrews wrote the code in Javascript, updating the code with Marko Niemi in 2004 to make it work on PCs and Macs and again in 2015 to adapt it for mobile users. When readers visit “Seattle Drift” in either location, they encounter a simple page layout: the poem, white sans-serif font on a black screen, looks like a short, simple, and fairly traditional poem:

I am a bad text.
 I used to be a poem
 but drifted from the scene.
 Do me.
 I just want you to do me.

The last line might provoke other “curious readers” to look at the hyperlinks above the poem at their leisure: if they choose, they can “Do the text,” which results in the randomized and slightly erratic movement of the words to the right and bottom of the screen until no words are visible; at any time during that movement, readers can “Stop the text,” leaving the words and punctuation marks wherever they ended up; at this point, users have the option to “Discipline” the very bad text, returning the words to their “rightful” order.

Andrews, a renowned digital poet and web artist, includes jokes, directives, and secret poems hidden in the source codes of noncodework pieces as well, a clear homage to Nichol. Readers are encouraged to look behind the scenes of “Seattle Drift” and to engage with his source code, which includes intimate notes such as “This is the first DHTML piece I did” at its start and a beautiful dedication — “Seattle Drift was also inspired by Seattle’s own California girl Anne, who knows who she is” — in an aside that appears after the body code. The code also contains humorous, explanatory notes but refuses to direct interpretation. Andrews explains, for example, “the div tags” that govern the movement of the poem, writing that “Each of the div tags holds one word of the poem” and then conceding “OK it’s a poem.” His reluctant “OK” suggests a concession to an external voice who insists “Yes, this

IS a poem despite its first two lines.” The author revealed in this code space is tentative rather than looming; in fact, the voice does not even know what to call the space from which it speaks: “And this neath text, what is it?” Although the poem is about Seattle and was written when Andrews was living in the United States, it also expresses an awareness of the transnational communication and collaboration that happen across the Canada-US border, namely between Seattle and Vancouver, where Andrews lived before his time in Seattle and where he eventually returned.

Aural Elements

Part of the reason why the line between concrete poetry and “Seattle Drift” is so easily and frequently drawn by critics is that because it is a kinetic poem — what Andrews terms an “animism” — it can take the implicit movement of a static, print-based work and make that kinesis literal. “Seattle Drift” is concerned with making that move explicit, and as such it does not have any aural properties like those that we see frequently in other (especially earlier) works of digital poetics. In W. Mark Sutherland’s *Code X* (2002), a born-digital sound poetry machine that allows users to create their own sound poetry performances, a similar line is drawn between the work and a history of sound poetry, performance art, and concrete poetics. Although at its heart *Code X* is a fairly simplistic digital game, it marks a point of convergence between many art forms and poses the question of how the digital medium allows for greater audience intervention. As Paul Dutton, a central figure in Canadian sound poetry, says of *Code X* in a brochure for Sutherland’s *Scratch* exhibit at the Koffler Gallery in 2002 (archived on Sutherland’s webpage), the work “fuses poetry, music, and visual art” to reveal the tenuous boundaries between these art forms.

Code X served as a part of *Scratch*, in which the program was installed on a computer and projected onto a wall of the gallery. Viewers of the exhibit were encouraged to interact with the program, choosing letters or writing words that caused them to appear on the projection in seemingly random spaces. Pressing a letter also started a ten-second recording of Sutherland’s sound poetry pertaining to that letter, which played on a loop as long as the letter continued to be pressed. In addition to this appearance, *Code X* was produced as a CD-ROM by Toronto’s Coach House Press. As Eichhorn writes, *Code X* appeared

at a time when Coach House was working toward adapting its largely print-based publication history to an increasingly digital audience, a part of an initiative led by Lopes to archive and digitize Coach House's front line. Unsurprisingly, the CD-ROM of *Code X* has long gone out of print; when contacted, Coach House did not think that there was a copy in its offices for me to view. As the compact disc became an increasingly impractical, unreliable, and uncommon way to disseminate digital works, Sutherland and Coach House "launched [*Code X*] as an interactive website in 2009 (accessible through the Coach House Books Online Archives)" (Eichhorn 520). This archived access to *Code X* online is now a dead link, and the only way to use it is to download the program or play it through a browser on Sutherland's webpage.

Despite some obvious differences in how the work is received, the version of *Code X* designed for personal and private use functions just as its installation counterpart does. *Code X* turns its "readers" into collaborators on a transmedial sound poem and concrete poem by turning their computer keyboards into sound poetry-producing machines. Each key places a collection of letters on the screen while starting an audio track of Sutherland's vocal performance of the letter. The visual appearance of the work, a black screen with white-and-red Courier-typefaced text, bears no small resemblance to "Seattle Drift" and similar pieces. It also demonstrates a clear link to the features of early concrete and typewriter poetics of writers such as Nichol and, perhaps more so, McCaffery. This indebtedness to highly visual forms of poetry gets matched, in *Code X*, with the common vernaculars of sound poetry's major players, such as Kurt Schwitters and the Four Horsemen. As the literary influences of *Code X* demonstrate, the work is part of a larger and distinctly Canadian tradition of literary and aural avant-garde practices.

For Sutherland, electronic literature is necessarily a practice of blurring: of national borders, of print-book borders, of the codex, of genre, and of literature itself. In an interview that I conducted with him, Sutherland reflected on Brion Gysin's now frequently quoted statement that "writing is fifty years behind painting": "Where does that statement place the poetry community? For me, all disciplinary borders are blurring, if not actually collapsing. I believe that digital platforms have altered language, and in turn, the relationship between literacy and orality — text versus speech, sight over sound, sound over sight, and the bipolarity of the ear/eye" (3). Despite its clear homage to the print-

based avant-garde and to the canon of pre-digital sound poetry, *Code X* marks a significant movement in Canadian born-digital projects. It not only works to collapse those borders but also does so by turning to reader engagement. This is not a turn exclusive to born-digital work, but reader engagement is made more powerful by the connective, collaborative, and communal potential of digital formats.

Locative and Spatial Media

It would misrepresent Canadian electronic literature to suggest that the genre did not have some important born-digital work not only emerging now but also included in the history of electronic literature more generally. Kate Pullinger's wildly popular series of hypertext episodes, *Inanimate Alice* (2005-16), for example, is a mainstay on syllabi for electronic literature or new media studies courses, and many of the episodes have been included in the three volumes of the ELO's *Electronic Literature Collection*. *Inanimate Alice* works within the fairly traditional generic conventions of hypertext and thus serves as an excellent pedagogical tool, but in terms of literary production Pullinger has been lauded much more for her print-based work, winning the 2009 Governor General's Literary Award for Fiction for her novel *The Mistress of Nothing*. Moreover, *Inanimate Alice* is an uneasy fit in the genre of Canadian electronic literature. The work is clearly "e-lit" according to the terms of Flores, incorporating elements of gaming, traditional literary narrative, illustration, and design. Pullinger, born in Canada, now resides and teaches in the United Kingdom, and most of the episodes take place in other countries (Russia, China, Italy, or England), making the national designation a bit more complicated than most.

J.R. Carpenter, another Canadian expat in the United Kingdom, is also included in the *Electronic Literature Collection* a number of times. Probably her most popular work, *In Absentia* (2008) appropriates the now ubiquitous format of Google maps — using both the mapping and the "street view" features — to examine how Montreal's Mile End neighbourhood has experienced a gentrification that limits and inhibits emotional and feminized means of moving throughout and living within this area of the city. By using bilingual French and English writing (with no useful translation) and a relatively limited set of instructions, Carpenter recreates feelings of limitation and isolation within the city. The subheadings that alter the map — "À louer," "À vendre," "Perdu,"

“Trouvé,” and “Vide” — tell the story of the place that formerly was home to young families, artists, animals, and relationships burgeoning with passion and health. As these buildings are sold and rent prices skyrocket, *In Absentia* works to record what is lost when businesses and corporations usurp the city.

Through its interactive nature, *In Absentia* places the reader/player (electronic literary study is still grappling with what to call us) in the streets following a graphic “détour” and the shadows of former pets as they clutter the map and dislocate former residents. In this way, *In Absentia* is an extremely affective text in which residents of other Canadian cities cannot help but feel their lives and experiences echoed in the text bubbles that emerge. The reading process here echoes the communal nature of *In Absentia*’s production, as the site’s somewhat ironically named “home” page states: “*in absentia* launched on June 24, 2008, with a dance party in the *parc sans nom*, between Saint-Laurent and Clark, under the Van Horne viaduct. New stories were added over the summer, in English and French.” The relationship to place and to mapping has been a concern of feminist poetics for a long time, especially in Canadian poetry. Poets as diverse as Daphne Marlatt and Dionne Brand, Margaret Atwood and Lisa Robertson, have all used personal, affective, and experimental mapping to revise their understandings of place and to suit a feminist poetics. We could also say that some of the better parts of Canadian experimental poetics (male dominated as they have been) are preoccupied with the same resistant mapping processes. Although clearly and specifically located in Montreal, the narratives and brief personal anecdotes that Carpenter includes in *In Absentia* might be the experiences of any of us who have been poor graduate students, contingent faculty members, or artists renting inadequate apartments in any Canadian city. The cartographic project — so often impersonal and at the expense of Indigenous personhood — becomes a search for home and for the personal instead of the traversing of new and external spaces.

Carpenter maps a real place, the Mile End neighbourhood, in order to bring the reader into new and unique forms of engagement. On the level of navigation, the reader gets to make some agential choices, becoming, however distantly, a part of the Mile End artistic group and feeling its dissolution. *In Absentia* thus merges the personal and the impersonal projects of mapping and geotagging. The convergence of personal and impersonal data-gathering technology is a hallmark

of electronic literature and has been used extensively, especially as a feminist project, in Canadian electronic literature. *In Absentia* is a disorganized and idiosyncratic collection of maps, narratives, images, and texts (some from Carpenter, some from other voices) that presents readers with some agential choices about how they receive, interpret, and navigate its pages, calling into question how we navigate maps and other impersonal datasets digitally and how this practice informs the ways in which we navigate space (both literal and virtual). Although Carpenter was an early practitioner, her mapping work in *In Absentia* and other similar projects are indicative of a larger trend in Canadian digital work. Other examples, such as Carleton University Hyperlab's mapping of Lansdowne Park or Stan Douglas's *Circa 1948*, interrogate the impersonality of mapping in a similar fashion.

It is also worth noting that, in addition to the many problems of generic and national affiliation described above, the inclusion of Carpenter's work in a study of Canadian electronic literature has another issue: Carpenter is a vocal critic of the term "electronic literature," identifying more comfortably with the designation "web artist" but frequently being referred to by scholars (like me) as a writer of electronic literature. Even her website, LuckySoap.com, cannot seem to decide on an appropriate designation for her work. The link in the header for "Electronic Literature" brings one to a page with the title "Digital Literature" and the URL [webprojects.html](#). When Carpenter was asked in an interview why she thought that her work was being categorized and interpreted as e-lit, she lamented that,

once you're categorized, it's hard to change the way your work is read. The Electronic Literature Organization website has a definition of [e-lit] that I don't fully identify with. It doesn't quite cover certain aspects of my work. Most Electronic Literature scholarship still orients itself in relation to literary tradition and the book; I do a lot of work in relation to the book, but I also do a lot in relation to landscape, visual art, collage, assemblage, performance, and so on. . . . Sometimes writing about my work in terms of only literature excludes those reference points.

To be fair, even though we experience, traverse, and ultimately "read" *In Absentia* from the comfort of our own computers, Carpenter's work has more to do with locative media projects, performance pieces, or installations than it does concrete, typewriter, or earlier generative poetry,

which, as I have demonstrated, are the more obvious predecessors of works that fit into the “electronic literature” or “digital poetics” category.

Moreover, Carpenter makes it clear in interviews that she really considers new media art to be an international phenomenon and herself to be an international poet and artist. As she wrote to me, “not long after I wrote that lecture/article [“Mapping a Web of Words”], I was evicted from my apartment and so in effect from my neighbourhood. I moved to the UK in 2009 and have lived here since. I am not sure I would have known what to say about a Canadian elit, even if I’d stayed. I still have a lot of connections . . . in Montreal, but it’s always been a very international community for me.” What is more, Carpenter is not utopian about the radical potential of the digital project; rather, she argues that digital poetics merely exacerbates the difficulties of identification and categorization that already exist. As the tongue-in-cheek disclaimer that precedes her introduction on the Brick Books blog “A Few Digital Poets Presented by Jhave” notes, her work demonstrates that “The difficulties of belonging are compounded by internet-based spatial or locative digital projects.” Similarly, many other language-based digital works, such as Caitlin Fisher’s work in the Augmented Reality Lab at York University, the Murmur project, and the Portage project at the Ontario College of Art and Design, demonstrate a tendency toward locative media, virtual and augmented reality, and the continual generic blur between literature and visual art, design, performance, urban planning, and so on. There is a real sense that, if Canadian electronic literature had had its eye on the past, it continues looking forward and relishing the radical potential for engagement made possible by digital media and networked technology.

Final Thoughts: Beyond Metadata

Looking to national literatures of digital poetics moves what is often discussed as the intangibility or ephemera of digital poetics into a distinctly materialist sphere. After all, though his seminal book *Digital Poetics: The Making of E-Poetries* (2002) is now thirteen years old, Loss Pequeño Glazier’s analysis of digital poetics encourages critics and readers not to rethink modes of production and dissemination but merely to become more aware of these conditions. Glazier argues that

we have not arrived at a place but at an awareness of the conditions of texts. Such an arrival includes recognizing that the conditions that have characterized the making of innovative poetry in the twentieth century have a powerful relevance to such works in twenty-first-century media. That is, poets are making poetry with the same focus on method, visual dynamics, and materiality; what has expanded are the materials with which one can work. (1)

Moreover, Glazier published this book in the midst of the publication of the many works discussed throughout this article, making his analysis of their “conditions” all the more pertinent. But, if we think back to Nichol’s earlier work in concrete and typewriter poetics, as well as his consistent support for small presses, independent presses, and chapbooks, it is clear that his work in poetry was always tied to its modes of production and dissemination; Toronto’s prestigious poetry chapbook award is named after Nichol, and his legacy in considering the material conditions of writing, publishing, and reading is clear in Canadian poetry. Yet outlining a genre such as “electronic literature” or “digital poetics” in a national tradition of poetry that has always been concerned with its material production is not so easy as chronology might seem to make it.

Rather than relying on such a chronology, seeing the kinetic movement, the reader engagement, and the connectivity of electronic literature as the necessary result of a print culture that becomes relegated to a “precursor,” I suggest that we begin to theorize the genre of Canadian electronic literature, porous as it is, as taking the place of the politically irresponsible and by now tired forms of (especially print-based) conceptual poetics that have dominated experimental literary circles. The primary difference between conceptual (largely print-based works) and algorithmic or generative works of Canadian electronic literature (e.g., “Seattle Drift”) is that these e-literary practices still care for, and even invite, reader engagement beyond passive consumption. Digital technologies have the capacity to re-envision and reinvigorate some conceptual practices, taking the generative or algorithmic work out of authors’ hands and placing it into the hands of readers, users, and players. And though some poets of Canadian digital poetics, particularly Wershler, have clear ties to the conceptualist avant-garde, his work in digital as well as print media (see, e.g., my work on *The Tapeworm Foundry in Anarchists in the Academy*) has always tended toward engaging a reader

more thoroughly than other generative print-based conceptual poetics ever did. This reader engagement is not only a political decision but also the key element of why we must continue to consider the role of the nation in building a community not just of authors (which eventually amounts to a canon) but also of readers who become, through the digital technology, more interconnected than ever.

I want to end this essay by arguing that Canadian electronic literature does not simply shirk the interesting or valuable elements of textual study (e.g., national genres) that can contribute insights beyond metadata, beyond geo-tags that speak only to a time and a place of textual production. The national literary history and cultural, social, and geographical elements of a “Canadian e-lit” contribute much to the study of the works discussed in this essay. Indeed, reading these texts as parts of a larger national e-literature just now taking shape points to those elements of the genre on which we need to focus. To continue a politically responsible Canadian experimentalism, we have to move past “digital turns” and author-rejecting conceptualism and use the possibilities of digital poetics to engage more fully with readers, to view networked technology as more than telecommunication, and to see it as a way for all of us (as readers, writers, and critics) to make significant agential and interventionary entrances into texts that we have too often viewed from a distance.

NOTES

¹ For the purposes of this essay, I have opted to use the term “reader” primarily to describe the audience of the work in question. Obviously, electronic literary reader engagement complicates the typically passive connotations of the term “reader,” and other scholars opt for the term “user” instead of the clunky “reader/user.” For my purposes, I situate electronic literary and digital poetic practice in terms of a literary tradition and poetic community, so the term “reader” makes most clear the relationship between audience and text as well as the shift in interactivity and engagement.

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