

From the Personal to the Proprietary: Conceptual Writing's Critique of Metadata

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Abstract

The past decade has seen a remarkable proliferation of new works of constrained and appropriated writing that prominently incorporate, and in turn investigate, metadata schemes. I argue that these works ought to be of considerable interest not only to critics of contemporary avant-garde writing — but also to media theorists, librarians and textual scholars. By emphasizing classification protocols, conceptual writing makes an implicit case for the interrelationship of these fields. Each of the four main books under discussion here — Tan Lin's *Seven Controlled Vocabularies*, Craig Dworkin's *Perverse Library*, M. Nourbese Philip's *Zong!* and Simon Morris' *Getting Inside Jack Kerouac's Head* — draws upon pre-existing textual archives. In doing so, these books suggest that processes of data storage, classification and transmission are key to how poetry is created, recognized and disseminated. Conceptual writing's attention to information classification protocols offers not only a critique of contemporary models of authorship, but also of contemporary frameworks of personal agency and intellectual property.

In the past one hundred years, people in all lines of work have jointly constructed an incredible, interlocking set of categories, standards, and means for interoperating infrastructural technologies. We hardly know what we have built. No one is in control of infrastructure; no one has the power centrally to change it. To the extent that we live in, on, and around this new infrastructure, it helps form the shape of our moral, scientific, and esthetic choices. Infrastructure is now the great inner space. [Bowker and Star 1999, 319]

The estrangement of schemata and classifications from the data subsumed beneath them, indeed the sheer quantity of the material processed...has become quite incommensurable with the horizons of individual experience. [Adorno 1974, 140]

We are, it could be said, in the midst of a metadata revolution. By the term *metadata revolution*, I mean to describe the extraordinary proliferation of powerful online catalogues and finding tools. The most obvious player in the metadata revolution would be Google, but in a larger sense most current media distribution platforms — Amazon, eBay, Facebook, iTunes, Mediafire, Pirate Bay, Youtube, library.nu — operate as gigantic catalogs. We have entered into a new age of cataloging and data aggregation at every level of society: governments, corporations, universities and individuals have access to unprecedented quantities of data, and they require metadata to access, classify, and prioritize that data. The effects of the metadata revolution are too complex to detail here; without doing full justice to the

concept of a metadata revolution, this paper examines recent works of conceptual writing which foreground questions of classification. In what follows I hope to show that conceptual writing ought to be of interest to media theorists, librarians and textual scholars — as well as to critics of contemporary avant-garde writing. By emphasizing classification protocols, conceptual writing makes an implicit case for the interrelationship of these fields. Each of the four main books under discussion here — Tan Lin's *Seven Controlled Vocabularies*, Craig Dworkin's *Perverse Library*, M. Nourbese Philip's *Zong!* and Simon Morris' *Getting Inside Jack Kerouac's Head* — draws upon pre-existing textual archives. In doing so, these books suggest that processes of data storage, classification and transmission are key to how poetry is created, recognized and disseminated. This essay argues that conceptual writing's attention to information classification protocols offers not only a critique of contemporary models of authorship, but also of contemporary frameworks of personal agency and intellectual property.

The past decade has seen a remarkable proliferation of new works of constrained and appropriated writing that prominently incorporate, and in turn investigate, metadata schemes.^[1] Many (if not most) of these works depend on internet sources for their content — even if the works themselves for the most part have culminated in print rather than digital works. Marjorie Perloff (who in other contexts has been supportive of digital poetries) has recently written:

E-poetry never quite got off the ground, the compositional process of an e-poem (however much animation might be used) not being essentially different from that of a “normal” print poem.

The revolution that soon occurred was not in writing for the computer screen but writing in an environment of hyperinformation, an environment, moreover, where we were all authors. [Perloff 2010, xi]

Notwithstanding her abrupt dismissal of e-poetry, Perloff makes an important observation about what she calls “poetry by other means in the new century.” This new poetry takes much of its content, as well as many of its constraints, from the “environment of hyperinformation.” Even if it does not take the end form of *e-poetry* (the designation is problematically general and already sounds obsolete), conceptual poetry relies heavily on recent technologies such as email, blogs, Facebook, search engines, Twitter, iPad apps and data visualization programs.^[2] Much of this writing is profoundly self-conscious of processes of remediation and transcoding. Collectively these works demonstrate a distinct fascination among poets with the “organization of knowledge.”

The most widely cited definition of metadata — “data about data” — is clearly inadequate: information could be said to be data about data.^[3] In information theoretical terms, data is the most basic form of signification — thus any organized data could be construed as metadata. If we qualify our definition, as the *OED* does, by requiring that metadata be “a set of data that describes and gives information about other data,” then we come closer to a useful definition. In the collection *Introduction to Metadata*, Anna Gilliland suggests that a “useful, ‘big picture’ way of thinking about metadata is as the sum total of what one can say about an information object at any level of aggregation,” and she defines “an information object” as “anything that can be addressed and manipulated as a discrete entity by a human being or an information system” [Gilliland 2008, 2]. According to the recent volume *Metadata and Semantics*, “Metadata can be defined as structure data about an object that supports some function(s) related to that object described, achieving a degree of uniformity in description by means of schemas. Metadata schemas are structured representations of information for a given use or domain....” [Lytras and Sicilia 2009, v]. Although metadata is typically associated with digital artifacts, the term need not be restricted to digital contexts. According to Stephen Ramsay,

[T]he seeds of the modern computerized database [are] fully evident in the many text-based taxonomies and indexing systems which have been developed since the Middle Ages. Whenever humanists have amassed enough information to make retrieval (or comprehensive understanding) cumbersome, technologists of whatever epoch have sought to put forth ideas about how to represent that information in some more tractable form. [Ramsay 2004]

As tractable as those forms may be, they are never value-free. Johanna Drucker has recently written that “metadata schemes must be read as models of knowledge, as discursive instruments that bring the object of their inquiry into

being, shaping the fields in which they operate by defining quite explicitly what can and cannot be said about the objects of a particular collection or online environment” [Drucker 2010, 11].

Analogues to a number of claims made in this paper can be found in recent writing on data visualization, and in particular within Lev Manovich’s influential notion of *the database logic* of new media [Manovich 2001].^[4] Expanding upon Manovich’s account, Mitchell Whitelaw’s essay “Art Against Information: Case Studies in Data Practice” argues:

Manovich suggests that one of the roles of data art is to reflect on data subjectivity; I would go further and say that data art is involved in the construction of that subjectivity.... It pulls us away from information, from the well-formed messages that dominate our experience of digital media. [Whitelaw 2008]

Conceptual writing similarly asks us to reflect upon, as well as reconstruct, patterns of “data subjectivity.” Poetry, as the literary genre linked most closely to expressions of direct, “authentic” subjectivity, presents a particularly rich forum for exploring the construction of personhood. Metadata has an important role to play in Whitelaw’s account of the potential of data art to reconfigure notions of subjectivity:

By directing us instead towards data, [data art] opens spaces for potential, for the distributed reconstruction of information. Yet in the process it invariably encodes its own metadata — data about data — that can be read out through the artists’ processes, as this paper has demonstrated. This metadata must in turn inform us as data subjects, if we are to move past immersion and navigation to a more critical, and active, agency. [Whitelaw 2008]

Whitelaw offers an optimistic appraisal of data art, and I believe much the same could be said of conceptual writing. All of the works surveyed in this essay thematize in some manner the relation of the writer to a data set, and these works raise important questions concerning privacy, authenticity and identity. These works are not necessarily, for the most part, directly prescriptive of social change. They could even be said to take the form of parodic compendia — substituting reclassification and remediation for direct expression.

The title of Kenneth Goldsmith and Craig Dworkin’s *Against Expression* [Dworkin and Goldsmith 2011] suggests an outright rejection of traditional notions of poetic sincerity and lyric confession — or what is often described as the individual poetic “voice.” This rejection of expression is clearly aimed at the creative writing establishment — as an overarching rubric, however, it is somewhat misleading. The writings of Goldsmith and Dworkin themselves (as I have argued elsewhere) are often surprisingly personal.^[5] Perloff suggests that “Paradoxically, this new citational and often constraint bound poetry — a poetry as visually and sonically formalized as it is semantically charged — is more accessible, and in a sense, ‘personal’ than was the Language poetry of twenty years earlier” [Perloff 2010, xi]. Conceptual writing acknowledges its debt to Language poetry, and, like Language poetry, attempts a critique of a naturalized poetic voice. But the critique is not so much of expression *per se*, as it is of either the *naturalization* or the *industrialization* of expression. Language poets of the 1970s challenged direct poetic expression at the level of syntax, arguing that even poetic language was inherently ideological.^[6] Conceptual writing continues that critique of poetry as direct expression, but it does so with a new awareness of the extraordinary changes brought about by digital technologies in the past two decades.

Many of the practices explored in this essay have their origins in 1960s conceptual art.^[7] Dan Graham’s 1966 “Poem-Schema,” its creator claimed, “defines itself in place only as information” [Graham 2009]. The writings of Vito Acconci, Lawrence Weiner, Lucy Lippard, Sol Lewitt and others could be cited as exemplifying conceptual art’s interest in information technologies and the representation of “raw” data. What is different about conceptual writing of the past ten years — according to proponents including Perloff, Goldsmith, Dworkin, Fitterman and Place — is (in Goldsmith’s words), “the sheer quantity of language” [Dworkin and Goldsmith 2011, xviii] made available by the emergence of the Internet. “Digital media,” according to Goldsmith, “has set the stage for a literary revolution” [Dworkin and Goldsmith 2011, xvii]. Whether or not Goldsmith’s rhetoric is hyperbolic, conceptual writing exists in a kind of dialectical tension with recent developments in information technology — depending on improvements in information storage and

dissemination for much of its content, and yet at the same time remaining attached to the print book as its dominant vehicle.

Against the Proprietary

Poetry, like the affective system, is a medium punctuated by couplings and a few meta data tags.
[Lin 2010d]

Tan Lin's clumsily titled book *Seven Controlled Vocabularies and Obituary 2004. The Joy of Cooking* [Lin 2010c] features the term metadata twice on its cover, as well as all of its cataloguing data including its call number (Figure 1). Of particular interest is the book's Library of Congress Cataloguing-in-Publication Data, which offers fourteen possible subject headings. Lin's headings force us to ask questions of categorization related to nationality, genre and language before we have encountered a single image or blurb. As he describes the cover in an interview,

it has metadata layers for bibliographic control. The LCSH is an old-fashioned thesaurus, and 7CV references dictionaries and other classification/reading systems. Subject headings are conflict prone near ethnicity/identity issues, and I tried to highlight that with *China-Poetry* as a disappearing first term. [Lin 2010a]

The overall effect of the cover is that the clichés of the poetry book and of the poetic persona are subverted in advance of our encountering any of Lin's poetry, much of which consists of appropriated texts and images.

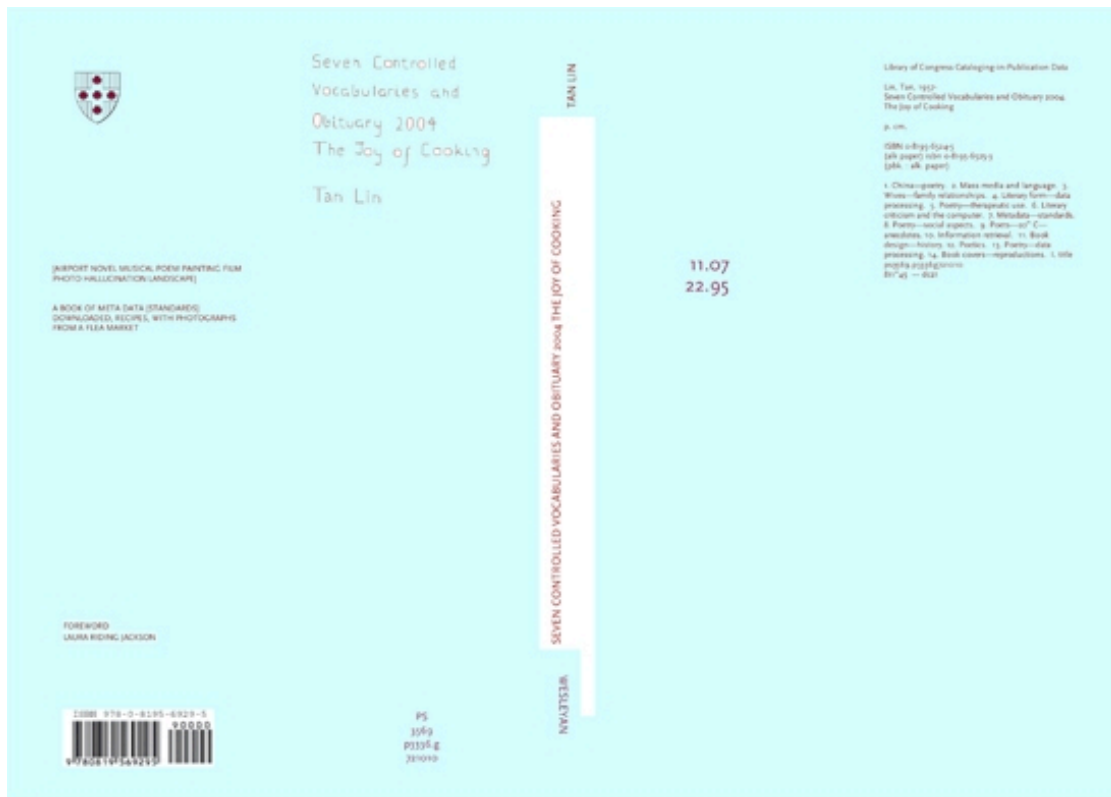


Figure 1. Front and back covers, [Lin 2010c]

Lin describes his work as an “ambient poetics,” about which he writes “[Today] a work architecture [or film] or [poem] or [novel] should have as fluid and standardized an ID [OBJECT ID™ SYSTEM] as possible and function like a waiting

area, time slot, universal market/currency or metadata standard" [Lin 2010c, 131]. Lin is clearly mocking the rhetoric of genre hybridity, but he is also pointing out that in an era of media convergence, poetry, while it may evade a specific use value, is still implicated with homogenizing systems of distribution and classification. Lin's ambient poetics acknowledges its place with a hypermediated society, and yet attempts to resist being instrumentalized in the interests of any single cause or subject matter. For Lin, "A book should be the weakest information pattern that is visible to the eye. Only in that way can it outlive its data" [Lin 2010c, 130]. A book is, of course, in many ways one of the strongest information patterns with which we are familiar — compared to electronic documents, the book is a relatively stable artifact. By emphasizing the metadata protocols of the book as physical object, Lin subverts the unit of the poetry book, and by extension places poetry within a far wider discursive field. That field also extends beyond American Written English, as well as beyond categories such as Asian American and Chinese American. Lin has even made a Google translation of *Seven Controlled Vocabularies* available on lulu.com. No pretense is made of it being an authoritative cross-cultural document. Lin's output over the past several years has been prodigious: there are a number of companion volumes to *Seven Controlled Vocabularies*: an entire *Appendix* volume, a critical reader, a book of blurbs, a book of mini-essays, and even a handmade book. Lin has made collaboration a key feature of his work — in the "EDIT: Processing Network Publishing" event at Penn in which Lin participated last year, for instance, different media technologies were employed to produce work on site. One product (or byproduct perhaps) of the event was the volume (available as a pdf and as a Lulu print-on-demand book) *Selected Essays About a Bibliography* edited by Danny Snelson. The book features mini-essays by nearly fifty contributors; among the contributions are two essays titled "Metadata." One essay, credited to Kareem Estefan, simply reprints the definition provided by the National Information Standards Organization. The other essay, by Dan Visel, explores paratexts, such as book covers, as forms of metadata. According to Visel, "A book is not a text. It's more than a text. It's a text and a collection of information around that text, some of which we consciously recognize and some of which we don't" [Snelson 2010]. This description captures well the radically open-ended nature of Lin's project.

Lin's 2007 book *Heath: plagiarism/outsource, Notes Towards the Definition of Culture, Untitled[sic] Heath Ledger Project, a history of the search engine, disco OS* is a particularly rich text in terms of exploring issues of intellectual property within a global marketplace for ideas. From Dada to Situationism to conceptual writing, appropriation practices have long presented an overt critique of intellectual property.^[8] Appropriation reconfigures source material and yet typically a residue (or metadata layer) of the source remains.^[9] Though many of Lin's practices have a long lineage, they are also very much enmeshed in the present. His appropriations tend not to be nostalgic or historical, and they tend to be extraordinarily self-reflexive with regard to remediation. As a whole, they go far to enact Marcus Boon's recent advocacy of copying as an ethical practice. For Boon,

What the internet offers is not so much new forms of economy, production, and exchange, (although the open source movement has certainly made efforts in those directions), but the opportunity to render visible once more the instability of all the terms and structures which hold together existing intellectual property regimes, and to point to the madness of modern, capitalist framings of property. [Boon 2010, 245]

In a sign of the times, Boon's book is being given away as a free pdf on the Harvard University Press website. Like much of Lin's work, Boon enacts, as well as theorizes, a critique of an intellectual property system replete with contradictions.^[10]

Possessive Cases: The Metadata Protocols of *The Perverse Library* and *Zong!*

Craig Dworkin's *The Perverse Library* purports to list the contents of Dworkin's library, as well as to list books he wishes were in his library [Dworkin 2010]. The book comprises a bibliography of 2,247 works, as well as a remarkable forty-page introduction entitled "Pinacographic Space." Pinacography, or the compiling of lists, derives from the *Pinakes*, or tables of learning, compiled by Callimachus at the library of Alexandria. According to Alex Wright, in his *Glut: Mastering Information Through the Ages*, "this elementary bibliographic constituted the first systematic abstraction of metadata"

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[Wright 2007, 73]. Dworkin offers an exhaustive description of his library, but at the same time his entire project recognizes the difficulties of classifying and describing a physical library. The book includes two bibliographies, “A Perverse Library” and “The Perverse Library” — the difference between the definite and indefinite article presumably denoting books the author would like to own as opposed to those the author actually does own. Dworkin’s fundamental classificatory choice is to group his books by publisher. He acknowledges that he has not provided a complete bibliography of his library — many titles, particularly those of mainstream publishers, are excluded. The effect of this is to present the reader with an extraordinary cornucopia of recent avant-garde writing.

There is something of a voyeuristic show-and-tell feel to a personal pinacography — perhaps that is part of what Dworkin means by the perversity of the project. On the one hand, many of the likely readers of this book will look for books they own or have written. On the other hand, this book has induced me to buy a number of books I otherwise would not have, and in this sense the book could be said to have a strikingly direct effect on its readers. Dworkin hardly mentions electronic publication in his introduction, but it is clearly a specter haunting the book. Dworkin is no technophobe, and has made much of his library available online at his Eclipse website. He has even extensively theorized his own practices as an online archivist.^[11] In some sense, *The Perverse Library* shows that no amount of metadata can stand in for the sensory data of physical books. The book could almost be taken as a refutation of Goldsmith’s “If it isn’t on the internet, it doesn’t exist” — except that ironically the maxim almost holds true in that almost all of these books are online, in the sense that it is possible to find instantaneous metadata, including prices and library access information, about nearly all of these titles. [Goldsmith 2005]

Dworkin both celebrates and laments the physical space taken up by the library. He insists his project is an architectural one, a documentation not simply of the library’s textual contents, but also an account of its materiality. In his introduction, Dworkin engages in an extended excursus on the olfactory aspects of his library — a form of sense data seldom recorded bibliographically. The catalog presents us with a paradox — it makes information accessible, but it also deforms it through reducing it to fixed categories. Dworkin’s book could be the most compelling single volume account of small-press Anglo-American poetry publishing over the past few decades, and yet it does not contain a single image. Despite its seeming copiousness, it is a radically reduced representation of these objects and those persons and institutions that produced them. The title suggests a sexualized relation of the bibliophile to his books, but etymologically the word “perverse” — in the sense of *through verse* — could also be considered entirely appropriate to a poetry library.

M. Nourbese Philip’s *Zong!* [Philip 2008] takes on a more serious topic than either *The Perverse Library* or *Seven Controlled Vocabularies*. *Zong!* retells — or refuses to retell — the story of the *Zong*, a slave ship from which 150 slaves were thrown overboard in 1781 so that its owners could collect insurance money. A lawyer by training, Philip derives much of the nearly 200-page book from the two page text of the *Gregson v. Gilbert* decision. Derive may be too strong a verb, however, since *Zong!* is more of a *dérive* than a derivation, which its author describes as a kind of “recombinant antinarrative” [Philip 2008, 204]. Philip describes locking herself “into this particular discursive landscape in the belief that...the story that can only be told by not telling, is locked in this text” [Philip 2008, 191]. In effect, Philip rewrites the *Zong!* narrative by reordering the categories upon which the case was based. “The law,” she writes, “uses language as a tool for ordering... I want poetry to disassemble the ordered, to create disorder and mayhem so as to release the story” [Philip 2008, 199].

Zong! is a fantastically complex multi-generic work that I can only begin to describe in this essay — what I want to note are the book’s formal features and how they relate to questions of metadata and classification. The first *Zong!* (Figure 2) is one of 26 in the first chapter, suggesting an alphabetic microcosm of fragmentation and erasure.

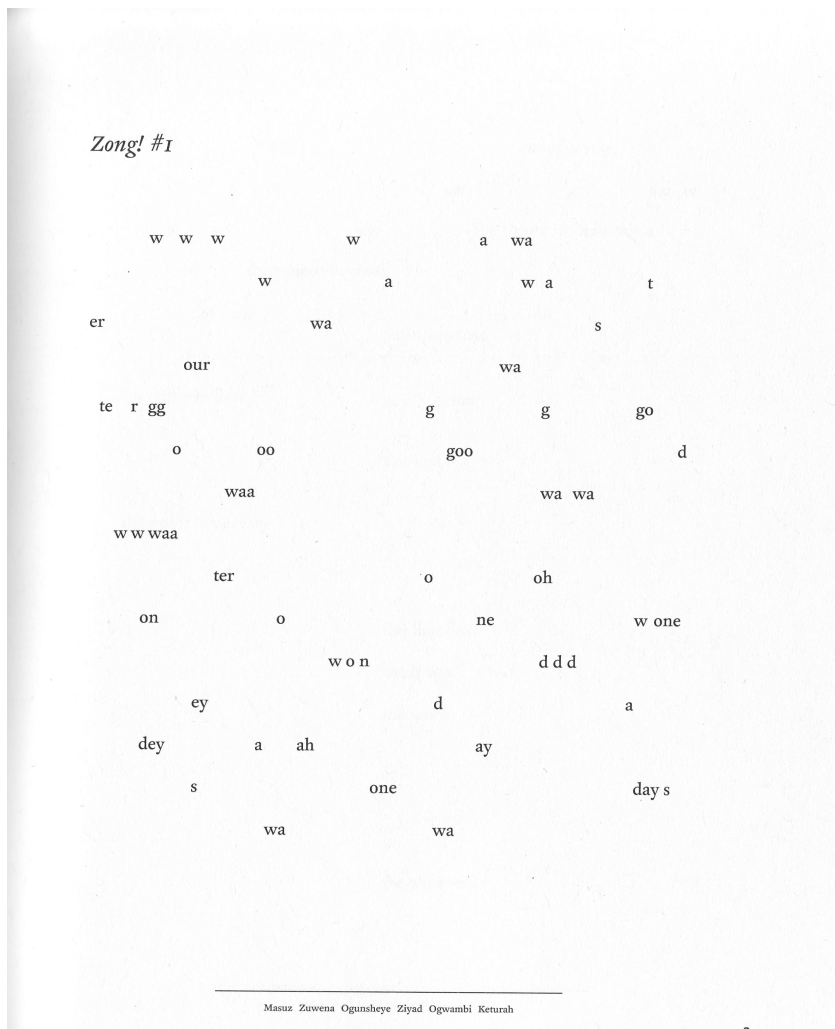


Figure 2. *Zong!* page 3

At the bottom of the page, significantly, are names of the victims chosen by Philip; none of the slaves' actual names were ever recorded. As if to undermine any notion of a possible point of origin for the story, the first three letters of the poem are *www*, suggesting world wide web, and yet these three *w*'s remain in a kind of proto-semantic state, not syntactically subordinated, referring to no one or no thing directly. The words that do rise off the page are monosyllabic, often are fillers or homonymic, signs perhaps of dysfluency or of being heard by a non-English speaker or even perhaps of being heard from below deck or from below the sea: "our/go/goo/oh/one/won/dey/ah/ay/day s."

Philip describes the composition of *Zong!* as the product of a number of serendipitous events, among which she lists her "laser printer for no apparent reason print[ing] the first two or three pages [of one section] superimposed on each other — crumped, so to speak — so that the page becomes a dense landscape of text" [Philip 2008, 206]. Philip claims that the laser printer did this to the "beginning of each movement of the second part of the book...the same thing happens" [Philip 2008, 206]. So far as I can tell, however, only in the *Ebora* chapter (Figure 3) does the malfunctioning laser printer produce a palimpsestic overwritten text.

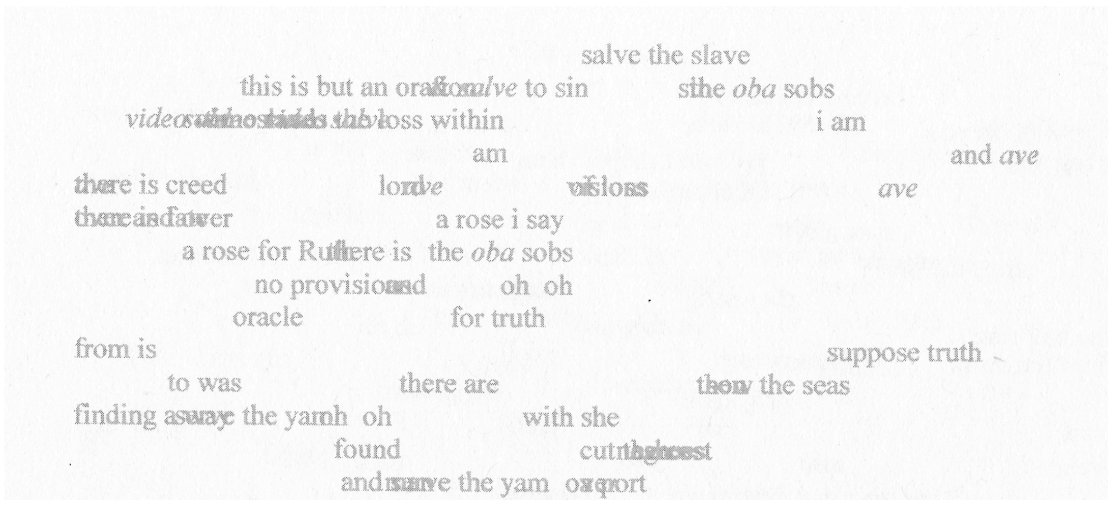


Figure 3. *Zong!* from page 177 [light grey font in original]

Many of *Zong!*'s sections demonstrate an extraordinary care and precision in terms of typography and layout. The book uses multiple fonts, for instance, including a cursive script. It would seem that Philip exaggerates the effects of her printer's presumed malfunction. Philip's printer introduces what Benzon calls "the standardization of error" into the text of *Zong!*. The malfunctioning printer resists the protocols of a clean, direct presentation of text. Writing of Andy Warhol's *Aa: A Novel*, Benzon suggests that "At both the microscopic and the macroscopic levels, the systematization of textual production that inhered in the typewriter and elsewhere in the office influenced writing and reversed its effects" [Benzon 2010, 96]. It is perhaps more difficult to introduce serendipitous errors into computer texts than typescripts, and it would seem even more difficult to encounter such errors in works which are extensively copyedited for publication. According to Benzon, "Each typed document, each piece in the massive archive of postwar corporate discourse, is a unique record of an individual sequence of body-machine interfaces and technological inscriptions" [Benzon 2010, 96]. Philip's printer performs a kind of violence upon the page, crumpling it — but it also leaves a trace of the author's engagement with technologies of textual production. It is worth noting that *The Perverse Library* also thematizes the role of error in its introduction, and that *Getting Inside Jack Kerouac's Head*, while it does not explicitly thematize error, seems to go to great lengths to eliminate errors.

Zong! ends with a glossary and imagined ship's manifest. As opposed to the constrained English vocabulary of the court decision, Philip offers a cosmopolitan list of words from other languages likely to have been used onboard. She also provides a manifest which lists eleven African "Groups and Languages," a list of animals, a list of body parts, crew members, and food and drink. The least likely categories on the manifest are "nature" and "women who wait." These lists undermine the well-known opposition suggested by Manovich between database and narrative, in that the lists tell a story of horrific absurdity and mistaken classification [Manovich 2001]. *Zong!* also could be said to resist the general current of recent scholarship on lists — found in books such as Umberto Eco's *Infinity of Lists* [Eco 2009] or Robert Belknap's *The List: The Uses and Pleasures of Cataloguing* [Belknap 2004] — which tends to celebrate the plenitude of objects recorded in lists, and which tends to skirt difficult questions of property and identity.

Zong! and *The Perverse Library* both prominently feature what might be called *negative listing* — that is to say that their lists are as much about loss and misclassification as they are about possession and appropriation. *Zong!* re-enacts wrongful classification at the same time that it reconstructs the languages, names, and possessions of those whose history has otherwise been erased. *The Perverse Library* repeatedly invokes the burning (or purported burning) of the Library of Alexandria.^[12] The list becomes a metadata substitute for unobtainable objects and for information that cannot be processed. Italo Calvino remarks of Georges Perec — perhaps the most famous compiler of avant-garde literary lists — that for him "Terminological exactitude was his way of possessing things. Perec collected and gave a name to whatever comprises the uniqueness of every event, person, or thing" [Calvino 1988, 122–123]. The reverse process may also be possible, however. Clark Coolidge writes in his aggregative prose poem *Mine*: "it's this insane listing that keeps you from ever possessing anything" [Coolidge 1982, 29]. Lists can mark absences also, as for

instance in Maya Lin's 1981 Vietnam Memorial, which arranges the names of the dead not alphabetically but chronologically by date of death. According to Belknap, "In the inventory, words representing names or things are collected by a conceptual principle" [Belknap 2004, 3]. The formal organization of lists and inventories suggests order and coherency, but that organization can also display the injustices of classifications based on flawed conceptual principles.

Please Enter Your Personal Data

Simon Morris' *Getting Inside Kerouac's Head* presents an exemplary instance of a conceptual work that operates by means of remediation and reclassification. The work began as a blog (Figure 4) in which Morris retyped the entirety of *On the Road* in 298 days [Morris 2009]. It was then published in book form by Information as Material (Figure 5) [Morris 2010]. Pictured on the cover in the roles of Neal Cassady and Kerouac are Morris and his comrade-in-arms Nicholas Thurston. The cover would seem to emphasize the enduring power of male friendship.^[13] The cover invites a simple transposition from Jack and Neal (or Ray and Cody) to Nick and Simon. Thurston is listed as the book's editor, but it remains unclear what this entails, given that the project would seem not to require editing (although as I suggest below, it likely did require extensive proofing). While *Getting Inside Jack Kerouac's Head* may seem like a relatively simple appropriation project of minor interest to literary scholars, the book raises a number of important issues related to the production and reception of contemporary texts. Morris does not purport to have written anything personal or expressive, and yet the variables chosen for his project speak volumes about his intent.

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Figure 4.

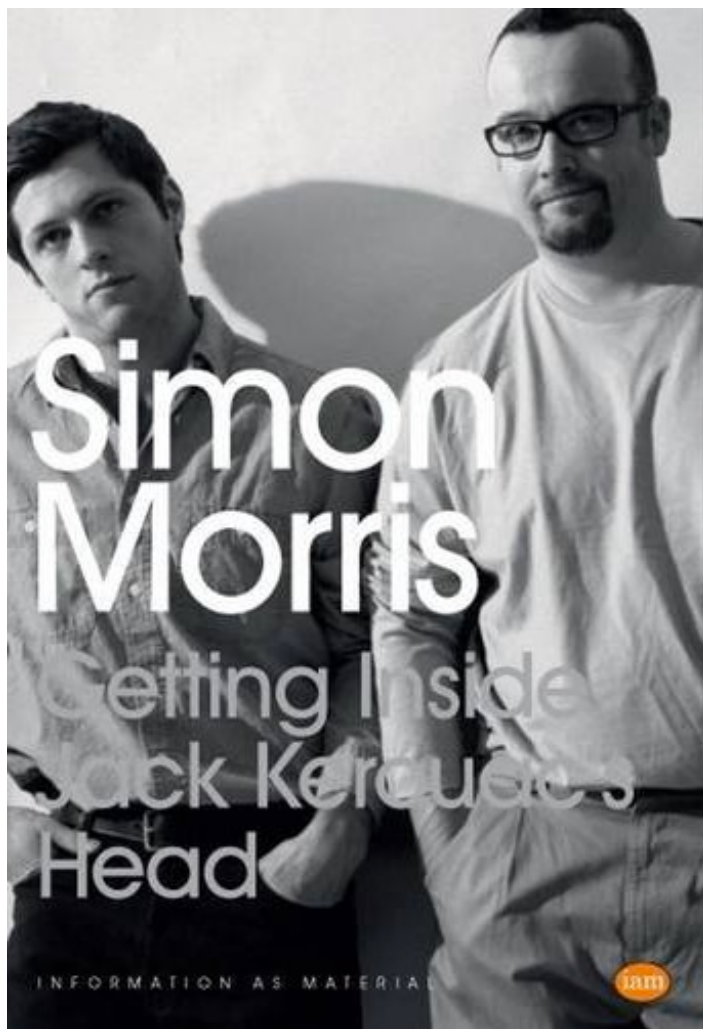


Figure 5. Information as Material

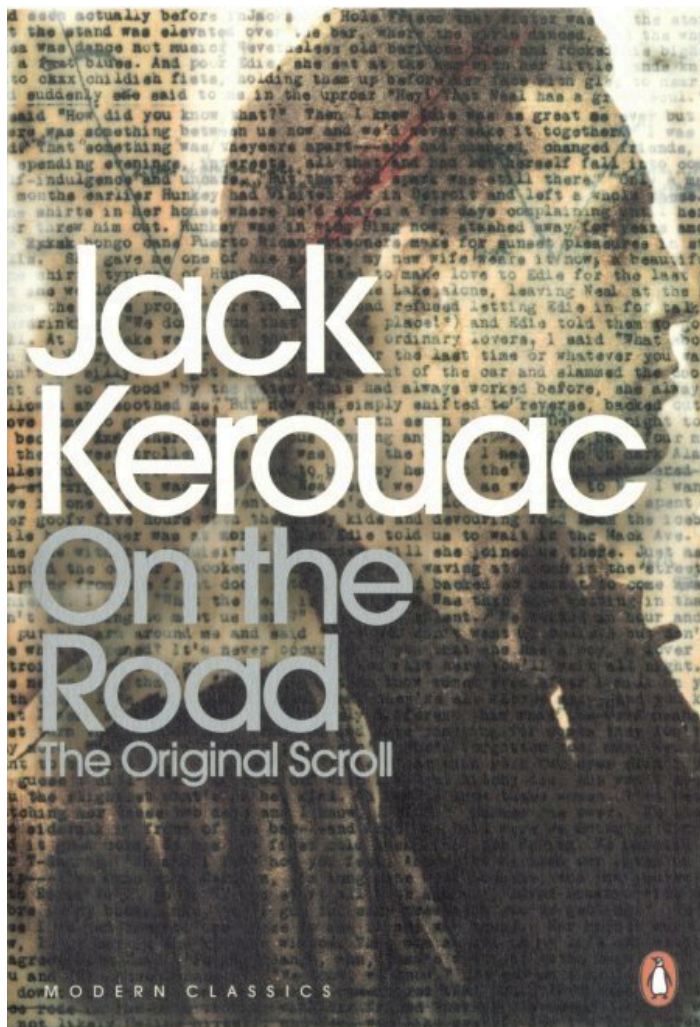


Figure 6. 2010 Penguin (UK edition)

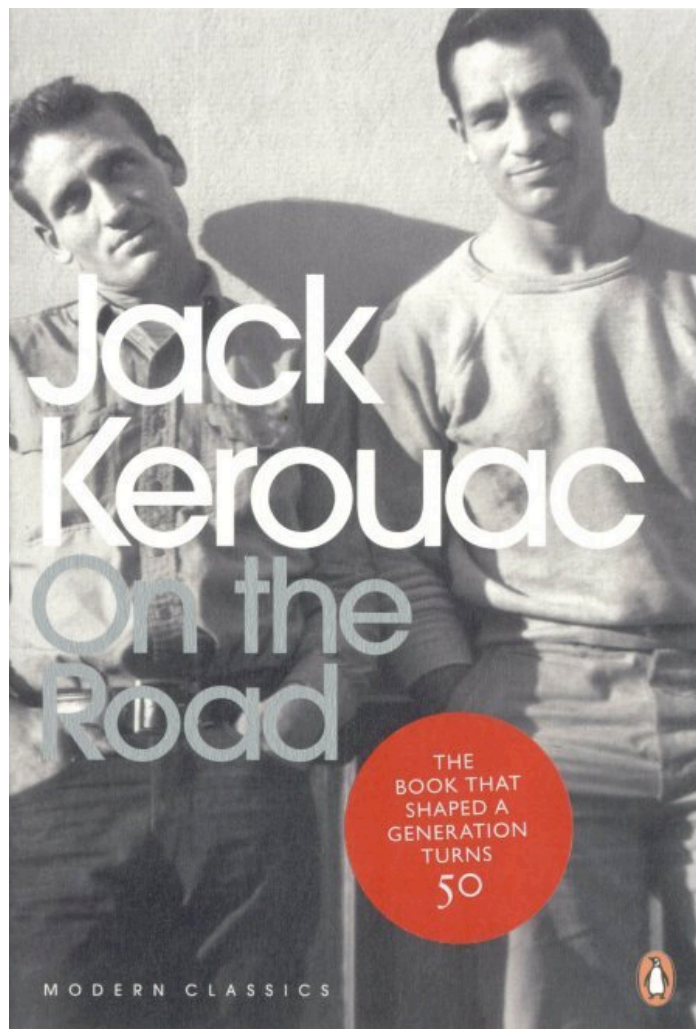


Figure 7. Penguin (UK edition), 2000

The scene of *On the Road*'s composition is perhaps the most mythologized of any postwar American book. Significantly, Morris chooses to retype (or reprint) the 2008 text of the (so-called) *Original Scroll* [Kerouac 2007]. In effect, then, Morris is returning *On the Road* from codex form to scroll form. He does not, however, adopt the formatting or the cover design of the *Original Scroll* edition (Figure 6), instead opting for the design of the 2007 Penguin UK edition (Figure 7), the text of which is based on the 1957 Viking edition (Figure 8). *On the Road* has been printed in hundreds — if not thousands — of editions worldwide since its first appearance. It may be one of the world's most frequently shoplifted books; it may also be among the most frequently bootlegged in unauthorized foreign editions. One website alone features over 300 *On the Road* covers (see below) from around the world.^[14] Many of those covers emphasize an aspect of the novel — the road, alcohol, alluring women, Americana, male friendship, etc. The various designs of *On the Road*, in other words, are a goldmine of data about the book's reception and dissemination. Kerouac himself even designed a cover (Figure 14), which features a solitary figure and a description of the book as “a modern prose novel.”

a novel
by Jack Kerouac



ON THE ROAD

Figure 8. First US Edition, Viking 1957

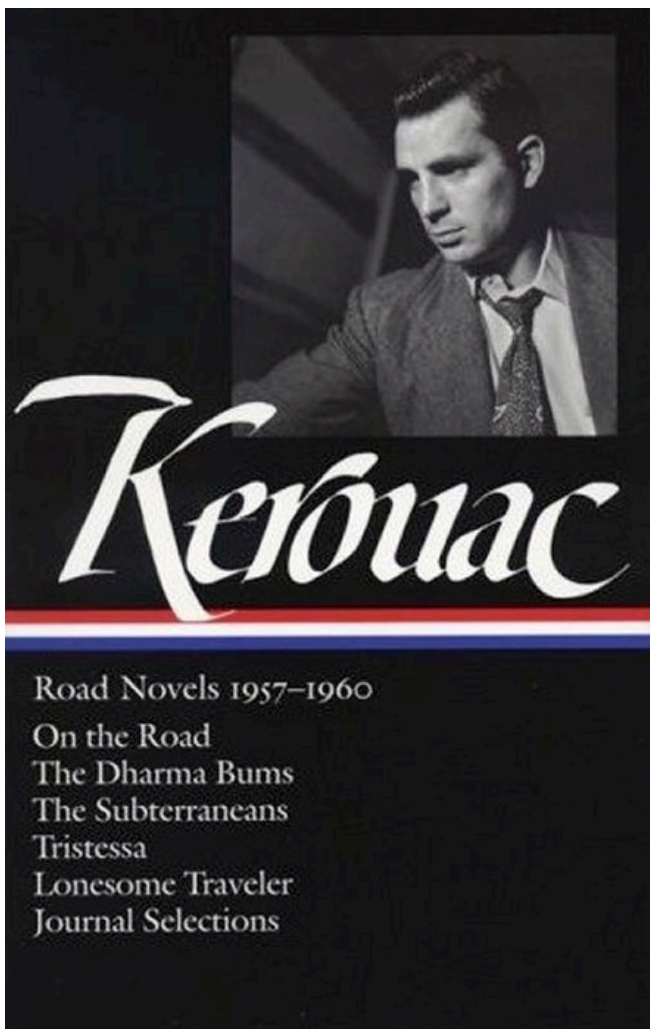


Figure 9. Library of America, 2007

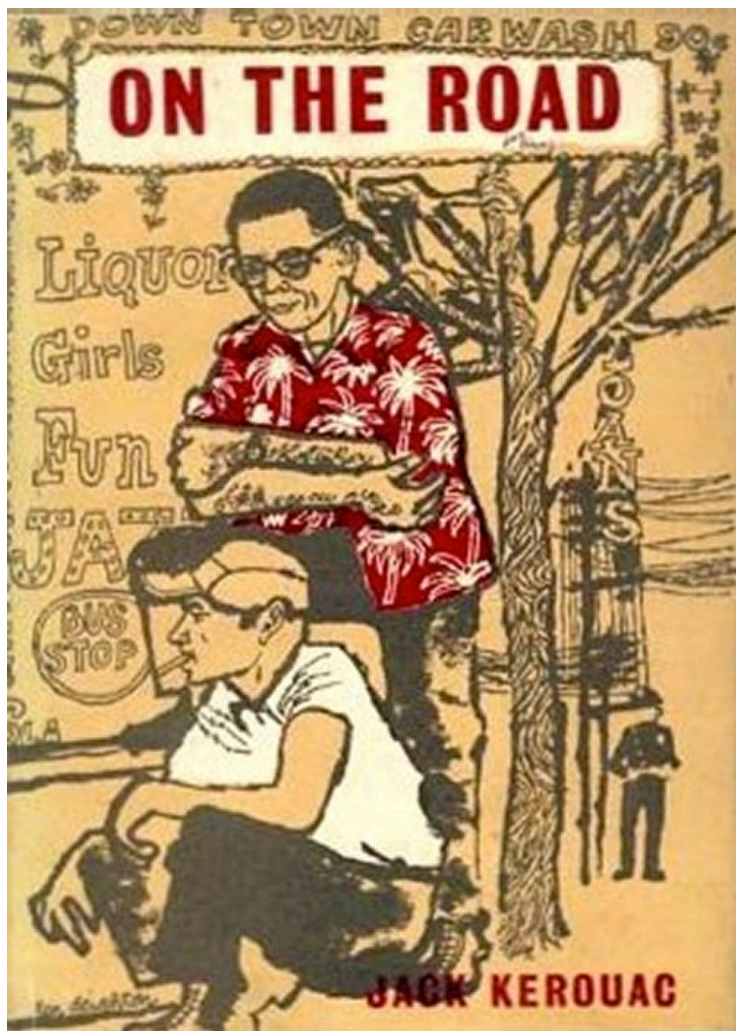


Figure 10. First UK edition (Deutsch), 1958



Figure 11. China, 1998



Figure 12. Ukraine, 1995

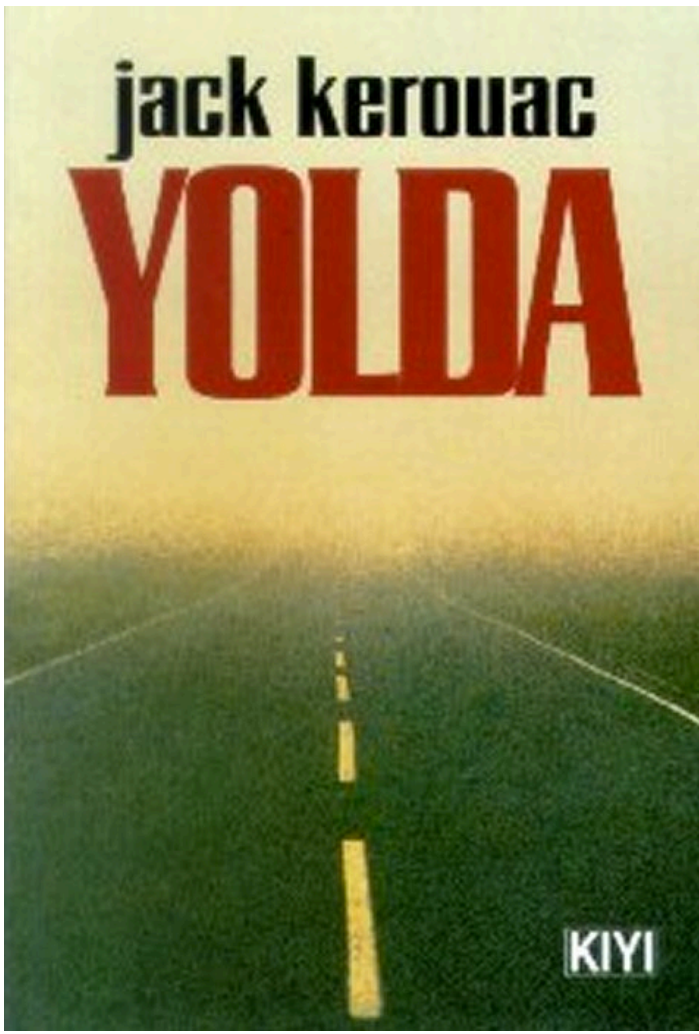


Figure 13. Turkey, 1993

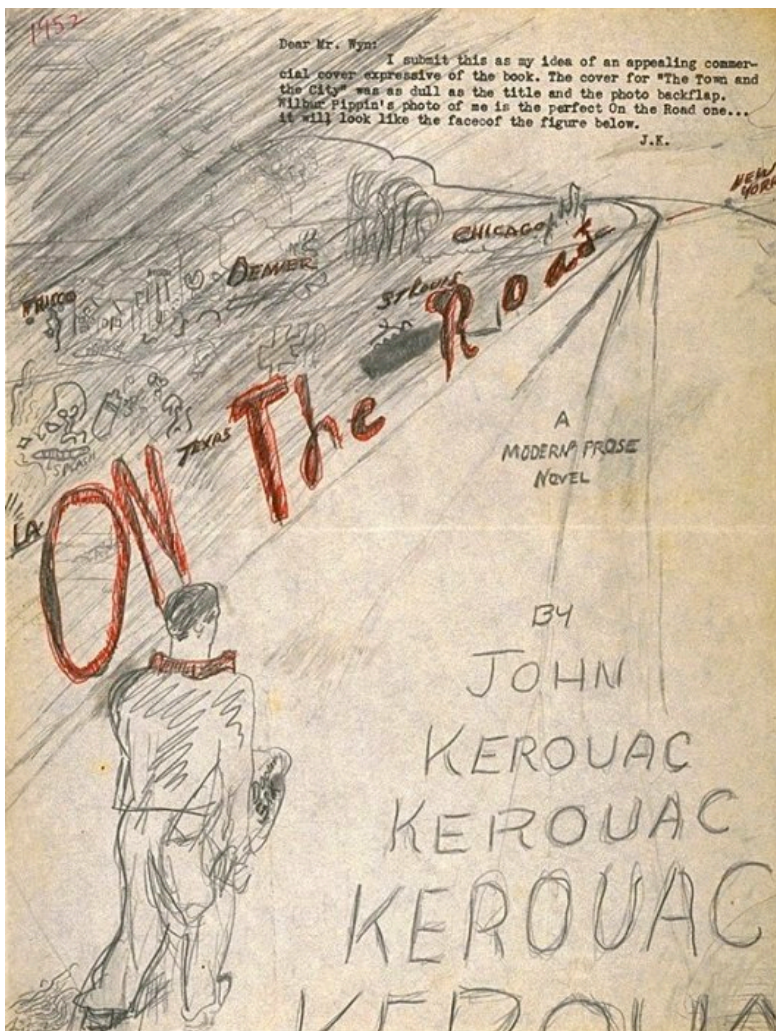


Figure 14. Kerouac's own cover design, 1952

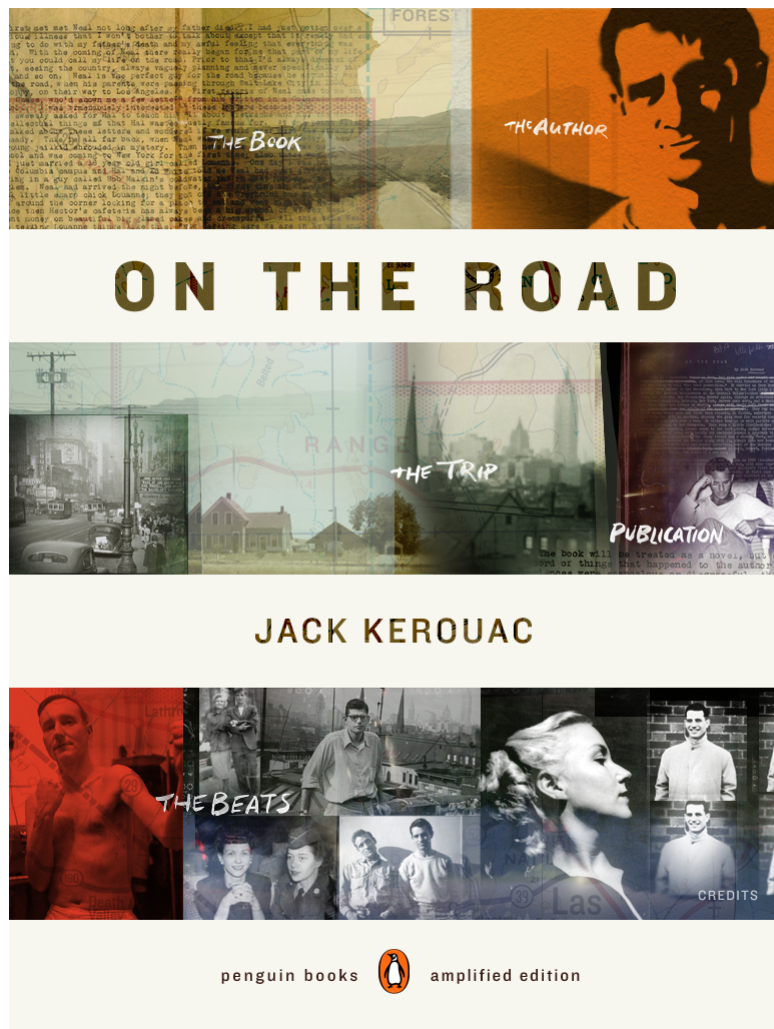


Figure 15. iPad, "Amplified Edition," 2011

Morris' choice of cover designs could hardly have been accidental. But what does he mean by the book's title? It could be interpreted as an ironic critique of what Daniel Belgrad calls the mid-century "culture of spontaneity" [Belgrad 1998]; it could also be taken as suggesting that the process of recopying is a more active form of reading, allowing greater insight into the mindset of an author. But given the hypermediated nature of the *On the Road* text(s), as well as of Kerouac's persona, how can an act of remediation get Morris (or Morris' readers) into Kerouac's head? Importantly, *Getting Inside Kerouac's Head* involves at least two remediations — from printed book to blog, and from blog to détourned book. The book reprints (nearly) the exact pages of the *Original Scroll* book, only in reverse order. Thus it is possible to read the entire text of the *On the Road* scroll (book), word for word, simply by turning the book's pages to the right rather than to the left. Although the book and the blog may contain exactly the same (or nearly the same) words, they are very different works. Morris, it should be noted, reproduces the lineation and exact formatting of the original scroll book — although occasionally slight variations in lineation can be noted. He also reproduces Kerouac's errors exactly, as for instance "jaloppy" on the first page [Kerouac 2007, 109].

After considerable, but not exhaustive, examination, I have found only a few minor errata in Morris' "transcription", but those errata demonstrate that retyping the book was a labor of love, rather than simply a scanned version of the original (which to the casual observer would appear identical). The most conspicuous erratum is in the book's first sentence. Howard Cunnell, the editor of the *Original Scroll*, has preserved a double met in the famous first sentence of the book: "I first met met Neal not long after my father died. . ." [Kerouac 2007, 109]. Morris does not preserve the double met. According to Cunnell, the double met was "preserved because it so beautifully suggests the sound of a car misfiring before starting up a long journey" [Kerouac 2007, 101]. Whether or not this is the case, it is unlikely that Kerouac would have preserved such an error. Morris may have inadvertently corrected the redundancy. Aside from several other errata

(a reversed quotation mark on page 291, which can also be found in the blog's November 29, 2008 entry; a missing sentence on page 269; some missing text on page 275), Morris (and Thurston as editor) appear to have carried out an extraordinarily careful transcription — contrary to what one might expect from a blog as a casual form of instantaneous publication.

The original *GIJKH* blog features a two-paragraph project proposal, appropriated entirely from a pre-existing blog posting by Kenneth Goldsmith. The book features an expanded introduction by Goldsmith. The introduction is worth quoting at length, since it bears on the book's genesis, as well as its meaning:

29

A few years ago I was lecturing to a class at Princeton. After the class, a small group of students came up to me to tell me about a workshop that they were taking with one of the most well-known fiction writers in America. They were complaining about her lack of imagination. For example, she had them pick their favorite writer and come in next week with an "original" work in the style of that author. I asked one of the students which author they chose. She answered Jack Kerouac. She then added that the assignment felt meaningless to her because the night before she tried to "get into Kerouac's head" and scribbled a piece in "his style" to fulfill the assignment. It occurred to me that for this student to actually write in the style of Kerouac, she would have been better off taking a road trip across the country in a '48 Buick with the convertible roof down, gulping Benzedrine by the fistful, washing 'em down with bourbon, all the while typing furiously away on a manual typewriter, going 85 miles per hour down a ribbon of desert highway. And even then, it would've been a completely different experience, not to mention a very different piece of writing, than Kerouac's. [Goldsmith 2008, 142–143] [Morris 2010, vii]

Morris' appropriation of this paragraph provides an ingenious "unoriginal" point of origin for his project. As a repudiation of creative writing pedagogy, Goldsmith's provocation is rather standard fare. More interestingly, Goldsmith is proposing a radically mimetic way of producing (or reproducing) a literary text — requiring not merely the rewriting and rereading of the text, but the attempted reconstruction (or imitation) of the author's total writing experience. Setting aside for a moment the playfulness (and impossibility) of Goldsmith's Borgesian pedagogical strategy, he makes an important point about how "very different" the student's piece of writing would be from Kerouac's. Although Goldsmith trots out familiar clichés of *On the Road*'s composition, as anyone who has read the *Original Scroll* edition knows, many of those clichés are false. Kerouac claimed not to have used Benzedrine while working on the scroll. Kerouac made no secret of his dissatisfaction with the 1957 version of *On the Road*, but he did not claim the scroll was the text to be preferred. He worked on editing the book for six years after producing the scroll, and there are two extent subsequent typescripts by his hand that incorporate substantial changes. Not only are there divergences between the scroll and the 1957 text, there are also letters and journals Kerouac used in composing the book. In effect, to choose a text of *On the Road* is a matter of choosing at what point in time one wants to get inside of Kerouac's head. One commentator [Hunt 2009] has even suggested that *On the Road* should be considered primarily an oral text, a form of "typetalking." Goldsmith's snapshot account elides much of this process — his syntax suggests that Kerouac was typing while driving (and drinking!). Goldsmith emphasizes the bohemian dimension of the book, rather than the three weeks in which Kerouac composed the scroll in his mother's apartment, or the complex collective editorial process that led to the 1957 text.

30

One effect of the scroll text is that it de-novelizes *On the Road*.^[15] By using real names, the book becomes a more direct record of Kerouac's experiences. The scroll text is more homoerotic and more misogynistic; it is, in the words of its editor, Howard Cunnell, "a markedly darker, edgier, and uninhibited text than the published text" [Kerouac 2007, 31]. Perhaps the scroll text does allow readers to get further into Kerouac's head, but the many layers of mediation and irony in the presentation of Morris' project would seem to suggest the difficulty of undertaking such a telepathic procedure by textual means. Consider for instance this exchange (Figure 16) between Morris and a fan of his blog, Jannie Sue "Funster" (a real person so far as I can ascertain):

31

2 COMMENTS:



Jannie Sue "Funster" said...

I had a sister Louanne, exact spelling too, who was hit by a car and killed when she was 6 and I 12. She'd be 38 now. Strange.

Now... I'm going to take this Kerouac ride with you from beginnning to end because it's an adequately weird idea. This beginning hits me like "everybody's got this broken feeling, like their father or their dog just died..."

23 JUNE 2008 21:13



information as material said...

Jannie Sue,

I'm very sorry to hear of your personal loss.

< I'm going to take this Kerouac ride with you from beginnning to end>

Sure hop on, 's'room for everybody.
Re-typing one page a day and really chewing on Kerouac's words is the most thrilling read/ride of my life.

A sunny smile from large white cornfed teeth...

Simon

27 JUNE 2008 06:14

Figure 16.

There is a healthy dose of English sarcasm in Morris' grin, but there is also politeness and empathy. Jannie Sue's identification with the project is seemingly at odds with the heroic masculinity typically associated with the book. In fact, Kerouac misspelled LuAnne Henderson's (Neal Cassady's first wife's) name throughout the scroll (in the 1957 Viking edition she is known as Mary Lou). Jannie's identification is predicated on a mistaken homology, and yet her tragic reading of the novel is to my mind oddly more accurate than the conventional pop cultural reading of the novel as a celebration of bohemian escapism. Why shouldn't Morris share Jannie Sue and Kerouac's sense that "everybody's got this broken feeling"? Perhaps that is just as authentic a response to the book.

32

Is Morris being sincere when he suggests that "chewing on Kerouac's words is the most thrilling read/ride of my life"? Retyping one page per day of someone else's novel into a blog would hardly seem thrilling — in a sense it is the inverse of Goldsmith's notion of vicariously retracing Kerouac's journey. Morris seemingly goes nowhere beyond his keyboard. He makes no direct comment on the textual and cultural morass that is *On the Road* — rather he unimagines (and perhaps even re-personalizes) what by now can only be read as a collective text, a product of millions of readings. The blog — the most democratic and derided of publishing formats, as well as perhaps the easiest means by which to violate copyright online — is a fitting venue. Kerouac's legendary typing skills are returned to the bureaucratic regimens from which they emerged. To add another ironic dimension to Morris' project, the Kerouac estate has for decades been extremely protective of Kerouac's letters and unpublished manuscripts. Morris has thus republished a document that for over fifty years was unavailable to readers. *On the Road* provides ample proof of Jerome McGann's claim that "Every document, every moment in every document conceals (or reveals) an indeterminate set of interfaces that open into alternate spaces and temporal relations" [McGann 2001, 181]. Whereas *On the Road*'s marketing has largely sold readers on the prospect of getting inside Kerouac's head, Morris' project rejects an unmediated entry into the psyche.

33

Though Kerouac's writing process was often frenzied and sporadic, *On the Road* took nearly ten years of sustained effort to reach print. Morris' rewriting, by contrast, takes the form of a daily ritual practice. Every post indicates the date and time of its posting. For some twenty minutes each day, Morris could be said to conduct a devotional exercise within the highly regimented chronological format of the blog.

Morris' book *Re-Writing Freud* (Figure 17) adapts and repurposes another iconic text, Freud's *Interpretation of Dreams* [Morris 2005]; he has recently released a further remediation of that project, an iPad app (Figure 18) which scrambles, resizes, and overlays words drawn from Freud's translated text — culminating in a "mystic writing pad."

34

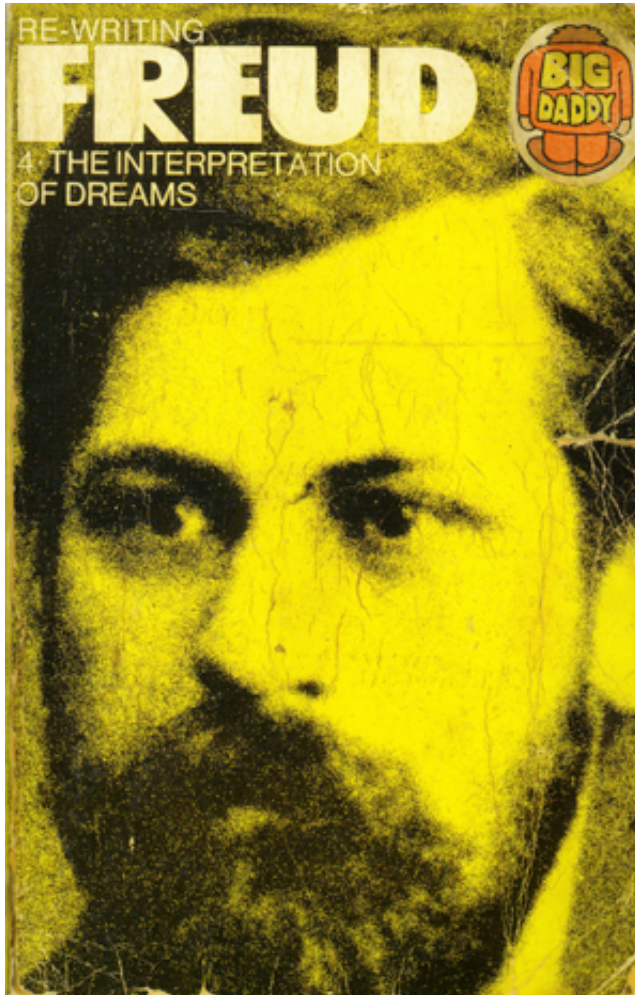


Figure 17. *Re-Writing Freud*, 2005

the United States until the year 2052 (95 years from the date of its first publication). *The Original Scroll* edition will be copyright until 2102. Nonetheless, it remains uncertain who in fact owns the copyright: control over the estate continues to be under litigation.

From the Prison House of Language to the Prison House (or Probation) of Metadata

The readings of Lin, Dworkin, Philip and Morris that I have suggested here could be extended to encompass a broader range of recent writing; I would mention in particular the writing of Robert Fitterman, Monica de la Torre, Kenneth Goldsmith, Vanessa Place, Kim Rosenfield, Caroline Bergvall, Nicholas Thurston, Matthew Timmons, Derek Beaulieu and Ara Shirinyan — although this list (or meta-list) is far from complete. Recent avant-garde writing from the US, UK, and Canada has a near obsession with classification. The Listmania found in this writing challenges a passive acquiescence to the cataloguing procedures we experience every day. Perhaps avant-garde poetry has transferred itself from the prison house of language of the 70s and 80s to the prison house of classification in the Internet era. In saying this, I recognize that I am awkwardly assigning agency to a number of overlapping historical categories. The writers under discussion in this paper are careful not to assume simplistic correlations between metadata schemes and ideology (or politics). Though these works suggest that we are captives of classification, they do not necessarily claim that we are deterministically imprisoned by our classifications. To adapt the prison house metaphor, perhaps the door of the Bastille has been open for a while. Contrary to enduring myth, only seven prisoners were freed in the storming of the Bastille. This makes it no less important as an event, or rather no less important as a shifting series of events, images, descriptions and (re)categorizations.

37

In the words of Perec, “Taxonomy can make your head spin” [Perec 1997].

38

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Notes

[1] [Boyne 2006] offers a useful overview of classification protocols in relation to contemporary combinatorial literature, in particular emphasizing the writing of Georges Perec.

[2] For a selected bibliography of recent conceptual writing, see the appendix to [Fitterman and Place 2009]. See also *Against Expression* [Dworkin and Goldsmith 2011] as well as *Poetry Magazine*’s “Flarf and Conceptual Writing” special feature [Goldsmith 2009]. As selected examples of the remediation phenomena I am describing, Noah Eli Gordon’s *Inbox* is composed entirely of emails [Gordon 2006]; Mathew Timmons’ *The New Poetics* and Fitterman’s *Now We Are Friends* both draw on Facebook [Timmons 2010] [Fitterman 2001]; *Now We Are Friends* also features sampled tweets; Derek Beaulieu’s *Flatland: A Romance of Many Dimensions* reduces Edmund Abbott’s novel of the same name to a series of vectors on the page [Beaulieu 2007].

[3] The term metadata is used vaguely in a range of new media contexts. Mark Amerika’s collection *META/DATA: A Digital Poetics*, for instance, makes no attempt to define the term, nor does it make reference to “poetics” in relation to poetry or poetic language [Amerika 2007].

[4] Manovich’s model of the *database logic* of new media claim has elicited considerable critical commentary. See, for instance, Victoria Vesna’s collection *Database Aesthetics* [Vesna 2007], and in particular Weinbren’s essay “Ocean, Database, Recut” [Weinbren 2007, 61–85].

[5] See Stephens, “Self-Portrait in a Context Mirror” [Stephens 2009].

[6] See for instance *The L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E Book* [Andrews and Bernstein 1984] or Ron Silliman’s *The New Sentence* [Silliman 1987].

[7] For overviews of 1960s conceptual art’s relationship to information technology, see [Meltzer 2006] and [Shanken 2004].

[8] Textual appropriation strategies have received enormous critical attention in recent years. See in particular Bourriard, Fitterman, Goldsmith

and Perloff, as well as the recent collection *Appropriation* [Evans 2010]. Copyright's influence on twentieth- and twenty-first century literary production has also received considerable attention: see Boon, Lessig and Saint-Amour in particular.

[9] For more on the complexities of metadata in relation to computer files and data storage, see [Kirschenbaum 2008, 25–72].

[10] As a number of commentators have noted, many iconic works of twentieth-century literature (such as *Ulysses*, *The Cantos* and *The Waste Land*) would be difficult, if not impossible, to publish under current copyright laws. See in particular Saint-Amour 2011 and McLeod and Kuenzli 2011. Literary genre, it should be noted *in passim*, plays a key role in determining copyright protection: thus to the courts it makes a significant difference how one classifies a literary work, as poetry or prose, as parody, etc.

[11] See [Dworkin 2009]

[12] See [Heller-Roazen 2002], whose essay on the destruction of the Library of Alexandria provides a central touchstone for *The Perverse Library's* introduction.

[13] For more on masculinity and male friendship in mid-century American literature, see Davidson's *Guys Like Us* [Davidson 2004], which incidentally also features a photo of Neal Cassady and Jack Kerouac together on its cover.

[14] See [Moore n.d.].

[15] For a concise overview of the importance of the original scroll text, see [Sante 2007]. Sante argues that “the scroll is the living version [of *On the Road*] for our time.”

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