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Amateur Creativity: Contemporary Literature and the Digital Publishing Scene

Aarthi Vadde

EVERYBODY'S A CRITIC. So goes the old adage that anyone given the opportunity to judge another's performance will do so. It is a phrase often uttered in exasperation and with the implication that "everybody" lacks expertise and authority, if not circumspection. This "everybody," in other words, is an amateur. He has access to the means of production (in the case of criticism, a voice), if not necessarily the education or training to form a sophisticated opinion. It is now routine to observe that the Internet has turned everybody into a critic and much more. Social media platforms and software packages have turned amateurs into photographers, graphic designers, journalists, and authors with followings that rival professionals in these fields. The ease and ubiquity of digital publishing have enabled the "mass amateurization" of the critical, creative, and communicative arts, allowing amateurs to bypass the gatekeeping practices of specific institutions (e.g. the gallery, the newspaper, the publishing house), and to perform acts of photography, journalism, or authorship without necessarily identifying with a specialized guild or benefitting from its resources.¹ Whether a cause of chagrin or excitement, the digital domain of publishing culture is definitively changing the ways in which contemporary writers, artists, and audiences conceive of their creative works and creative selves. The task of this essay is to examine the organizational, collaborative, and economic practices that are blurring the lines between amateur identity and professional activity, as well as between professional identity and amateur activity. As this chiasmus suggests, the crossing of amateur and professional practices defines the digital publishing scene of online writing communities, for-profit social networks, and for-love fandoms. In these spaces, amateurs share what they love while being exploited for their data; they climb the career ladder while also learning to game the system. Most of all, they partake in communal processes of reading and writing that exert transformative pressure on august institutions of literature, from the publishing house to professional authorship to reviewing culture.

The mass amateurization of digital publishing has been less the focus of literary study than literacy and legal study. Leading scholars of composition and rhetoric argue that writing is eclipsing reading as the “literate skill of consequence”—one reason, perhaps, that creative writing courses enjoy ever-healthier enrollments while literature classes are struggling to fill seats.² This turn away from critical reading to creative writing pains many literary scholars, yet the digital publishing scene reveals how inadequate that divide is to explaining contemporary engagements with literature. Amateur creative writing can embed or elicit critique as well as other styles of close inspection in the form of appreciation, speculation, and collaborative extension of a story. The online communities forged around a shared practice or object of affection develop self-knowledge collectively through public displays of reflexivity and attention. As amateurs explore, account for, and defend their pleasures before others, pleasure becomes an experience enhanced by dialogue.³ It also finds expression in such popular artifacts as the blog, fan fiction, poetry, tribute videos, or sampled musical compositions.

Legal scholar and Creative Commons founder Lawrence Lessig subsumes these artifacts under the category of “amateur creativity.”⁴ Such creativity is the foundation of “Read-Write” or “remix” culture, an alternative culture of creativity to what Lessig calls the “Read-Only” style of professionalized and copyright-protected pop culture. Remix is a particularly active form of reception that incorporates alteration and participation into audience engagement. It compels scholars to stop viewing audiences as internalizing an aesthetic or cultural experience and to start viewing them as amateur purveyors of such experience. Lessig advocates for a looser copyright regime in which the circulation of “free culture” amongst amateurs will democratize the monopoly of culture by professionals.⁵ Such a defense of free culture works best when the line between professional and amateur ventures is stark. However, it becomes more troublesome when Lessig’s logic of free culture begins to resemble the logic of the free market.

When Lessig claims that free culture will increase access to the arts while also increasing profits in a hybrid economy, he minimizes the detrimental potential of Web 2.0 companies to exploit amateurs and appropriate their creativity for private enterprise. He also overlooks the ability of powerful corporations to sap the power of public institutions and organized workers, including professionals, to support their own creative and intellectual spheres of life.⁶ These points are at the root of leftist critiques of amateurism, as it has been appropriated for the free market. Astra Taylor recasts commercialized amateur creativity as a form of unpaid labor and accuses Web 2.0 companies of “digital sharecrop-

ping.”⁷ In turn, Jodi Dean dismisses any association between digitally and democratically free culture by suggesting that such logic involves a slippage between “expansions in the infrastructure of the information economy” and “enactments of a demos.”⁸ Such critiques of free-market logic are essential to deflating triumphal accounts of mass amateurization as a revolutionary good, but in a mirror of such accounts, they also tend to simplify or ignore the connections between print and digital culture as they inform the publishing of creative works and definitional accounts of art. This is a shame for scholars who want to understand the effect social media platforms are having on the making of contemporary literature in light of longer histories of reading, writing, teaching, and publishing. And, in turn, the effect that contemporary literature is having on its interlocutors’ understanding of cultural ownership, exchange, and participation.

I enter into the debate on amateur creativity from a more sociological than politically prescriptive angle because I am interested in the actually existing conditions under which amateurs write stories online, and because I do not think one can make a blanket case for or against the emancipatory potential of participatory culture on the Internet. This is not to say that I back away from identifying ideological mystification or possibility in Web 2.0 platforms for amateur creativity, but that I see such attributes as elements in a larger account of how digital mass culture, like print mass culture before it, shapes the milieu from which professional literary authors draw inspiration. Such inspiration extends from formal experimentation to innovation in the publishing and promotion of authors and their works. My approach learns much from studies by Graham Huggan and Sarah Brouillette, who have analyzed how postcolonial and contemporary writers navigate the global marketplace, but it is less likely to view the commodification or consumption of culture as proof of the illusoriness of the public sphere.⁹ Rather, building on Miriam Bratu Hansen’s study of early cinema fans and Henry Jenkins’s extensive analysis of fandoms, it treats the public sphere not as a normative ideal but as an always already commercialized, industrialized, and pluralized space.

Although the study of fandom has largely been the province of cultural studies in television and film, it should play a larger role in literary studies as print and screen culture intertwine. I see in fandom the origins of amateur literary creativity as a digital phenomenon—one that puts pressure on the property regimes of capitalism and professionalism precisely because actual amateurs and amateurism-as-ethos are regularly exploited by capitalists and professionals. Such exploitation generates justification and resistance. I will attend to the language of both as I

look at a cross-section of web platforms that are geared toward amateur writers, but whose publishing strategies have also inspired professional writers ranging from Margaret Atwood and Elena Ferrante to Wu Ming, Cory Doctorow, and Lauren Beukes. All of these writers or writing collectives have drawn on aspects of the digital publishing scene to break with the “literary” mold in one way or another. Their invocations of amateurism reveal a fascinating rejection of, but also entanglement with, individualist conceptions of authorship, the excesses of celebrity culture, the economy of prestige, and market-circumscribed attempts to monetize cultural wealth.

I. The Sharing Economy of Amateur Creativity

In his groundbreaking study of the economy of prestige, James English cites Oscar winner Nicolas Cage’s ironic acceptance speech in which he thanked the academy “for helping me blur the line between art and commerce.” English argues that Cage’s response is indicative of the “deeper equivocality of all such prizes,” which blend supposedly disinterested aesthetic reward with the “most businesslike system of production and exchange.”¹⁰ Amateur creativity in the hybrid economy also mixes art and commerce, but in ways that appear far more pleasurelike than businesslike. “Hybrid economy” refers to a combination of commercial economies, in which money and profit are central to exchange, and sharing economies, in which other values predominate. What is at stake is not the purity of aesthetic value but the purity of the amateur pursuit, which is, ordinarily, a source of pleasure rather than money. As anyone who has used a platform like Facebook, Instagram, or Tumblr will know, creativity is “shared” by “friends” and “followers” and not sold to them, even if the platform sells user information to advertisers. If the economy of professional prestige is organized around prizes, a word etymologically related to “price,” the economy of amateur creativity is organized around sharing, etymologically related to “dividing up.” Division, in the Web 2.0 parlance of sharing, does not imply a finite amount but rather a splitting into infinite copies to be adapted and recirculated through nonmonetary exchange.¹¹ Explicators of such exchange have turned to the gift economy as a forerunner of the sharing economy.

The gift economy, as described by a vast anthropological and sociological literature, is far from the same thing as the sharing economy and is itself a contested term. However, certain notions of the gift economy play a major role in early philosophical conceptions of sharing on the Internet. Christian Fuchs has argued that anarchist theories of the gift,

traceable to the thought of Peter Kropotkin, played a role in the free software, GNU public license, and open-source movements of the 1980s and 1990s. The movements aspired to develop an alternative mode of production to capitalist exchange rooted in the passing on of knowledge, rather than the proprietary accumulation of it. Such a passing on or gifting is not seen as a form of wasteful expenditure, but as a form of voluntary cooperation through which knowledge, software, and source code circulate as a “public good.”¹² That good binds people through their freedom to use it, change it, and distribute those changes under the nonproprietary conditions through which they receive it.

Richard Stallman, the leader of the free software movement and pioneer of “copyleft” licensing, renounced the idea of free software as a gift in his longstanding rift with Eric S. Raymond and Linus Torvalds of the open source movement. Stallman rejected their use of the gift to position themselves as participating in a “special good deed, beyond what is morally required.”¹³ Such a rhetoric of altruism legitimates the distribution of proprietary software without source code and thus effectively buoys a capitalist approach to information as private property awaiting commodification.¹⁴ As notions of the gift became integrated with the prevailing market economy, the “sharing logic” of privately owned Web 2.0 social media platforms was born.

Most social media users are hostile to seeing their creativity and information commodified by platforms, yet amenable to sharing both with other users in the name of contributing to an online community. It is the communalism of the gift that private service providers leverage when they use social rewards rather than financial incentives to facilitate exchange. The gift economy informs the sharing economy as far as the latter aims to replace a “faceless, impersonal 20th-century capitalism” with a warm and fuzzy version “that is somehow more connected, more embedded in community.”¹⁵ Unlike the market economy that demands money for a commodity, a sharing economy built around the gift depends upon and exploits users’ common sense of purpose. Their gifts need to be paid forward; individual users may contribute as much or as little as they want to the collective reserve of content, but that reserve must be replenished over time.

Lewis Hyde’s *The Gift* (1983) has been influential amongst theorists of the digital sharing economy. Hyde wrote the book to explain the work of art’s simultaneous participation in gift and market economies. This combination is an uneasy one for Hyde, who sees art as distinguishable from “pure commodities” precisely because the work is “the emanation of its maker’s gift” and is “received by its audience as a gift.”¹⁶ The gift status of art does not prevent it from becoming a commodity in the

marketplace, but the gift trumps the commodity in determining art's ontological being: "Where there is no gift there is no art."¹⁷ Art, as gift, is an eroticized property whose circulation forges bonds amongst those who are moved by its experience or who derive a sense of tradition from its transmission. If that gift is turned into capital, the drive to accumulate surplus wealth threatens the erotic bonds created around the artwork. Whereas in a market economy, the sale of an artwork earns profit that "stays behind" with those who produced the work, in a gift economy, the artwork "gives increase," meaning that its value "stays in motion and follows the object."¹⁸ The discrepancy between earning profit and giving increase is at the root of conflicts about the sharing economy. When privately owned platforms capitalize upon their users' desire to give increase or share, they turn one person's gift into another corporation's profit.

Facebook presents its "platform as a gift without commodity logic" when in fact user information is the hidden commodity being sold to advertisers.¹⁹ Web 2.0 companies furthermore treat the labor of marginalized peoples intervening in racist, sexist, and homophobic discourse on social media as a gift paid forward by "affective currencies such as 'likes,' followers, and occasionally acknowledgment or praise from the industry."²⁰ As Lisa Nakamura argues, the unremunerated amateur labor of fighting hateful speech ultimately lies outside capitalist incentives and values. It exemplifies instead the resurgence of the proletarian public sphere from within the domain of the market.²¹ This sphere is the unwanted byproduct of market imperatives in which the "concrete needs, conflicts, anxieties, memories, and fantasies" of particular groups become publicly recognizable and examinable by these groups themselves.²² Exploitation and resistance are two sides of the same coin, which is why the complexity of amateurs' activities online cannot be ignored.

Just as the productive energies of amateur creativity are irreducible to digital sharecropping, so too is *The Gift* irreducible to its function as a resource for proselytizers of the sharing economy. Hyde wrote the book while struggling to support himself as a poet, translator, and independent scholar.²³ He was an amateur in Carolyn Dinshaw's sense of the term: outside the regulative regimes of paid work and thus different from the professional whose "expert time" is like money: "abstract, objective, and countable."²⁴ It was Hyde's status as a financially struggling creative worker that led him to the gift economy. He wanted to explain his vocation to himself and others who found themselves eccentric to (though also in thrall to) a market-based society.

Hyde is now a chaired professor of creative writing at Kenyon. His decision to become an institutionally affiliated scholar complicates his

amateur status, but does not nullify his early career commitment to pursuing his vocation for the love of it. As Mark McGurl argues, the creative writing program is one of the most powerful ways by which Eros enters into the university. If for Hyde, the erotic charge of gift exchange binds people together in a way that the rationality of the market does not, then for McGurl Eros extends to the institutionalizing of creativity. The writing workshop becomes the space in which the “‘sticky’ group dynamic” takes off. Workshops descend from “Plato’s erotically charged symposium, and their leaders, the creative writing teachers, can be counted on to love literature (if not necessarily the teaching of literature, or even the teaching of writing) with a passion.”²⁵ Loving literature, if not teaching, informs debates about the nature of creativity that necessarily underline the mission of creative writing programs. The Iowa Writers’ Workshop, for example, regards creativity, like love, as something innate (a talent that cannot be taught), yet at the same time they promise to encourage and develop creativity as a technical skill. The program’s contradictory mission statement acknowledges dispute over whether creative writing is a teachable enterprise, but as Louis Menand’s review of McGurl’s book notes, it is the dispute that has helped creative writing programs to flourish.²⁶

The same might be said of disputes about amateur creativity’s role within the hybrid economies of social media. Such creativity functions as a gift through a platform’s interface with users and as a commodity behind that interface. The communities forged by users are mixtures of hobbyist pleasure, professional aspiration, political conviction, and erotic attachment. It is this heady cocktail that makes social media addictive and that enables its proliferation and popularity amongst people who love it and love to hate it. It is also the cocktail that is changing the domain of contemporary literature.

II. The Digital Platforms of Amateur Writing

The most trafficked social media platforms are now household names: Facebook, Instagram, Tumblr, Twitter, YouTube. These are all-purpose platforms for users to share information about themselves, circulate creative work, and connect with others. The platforms of amateur writing are designed around narrower but still varied collective purposes, and are foremost identified as communities rather than workshops. The community model, though now thoroughly caught up in standard social media lingo, is also indebted to the fact that some of the oldest, continuously operating online writing groups are organized around fan

fiction. This is a genre in which the erotic bonds created by an artwork are paramount. Broadly speaking, fan fiction rewards fantasy over critique and attachment over detachment as modes of reader engagement. FanFiction.net, founded in 1998 in Los Angeles, remains the largest platform for writers of fan fiction on the Web. E. L. James published *Twilight*-based fan fiction on this site, which became the inspiration for *Fifty Shades of Grey*. Other platforms particularly dedicated to fan fiction include The Archive of Our Own and Kindle Worlds. The former is a nonprofit operated by the Organization for Transformative Works, an institution for preserving fan creativity. The latter, launched by Amazon in 2013, represents a new monetized phase in the publication of fan fiction in which fans can package and self-publish their work. Amazon only hosts and sells fan fiction based on original works for which the company has licenses, which is how it maneuvers around the fuzzy legal status of most fan fiction.

Other online communities present themselves as alternatives or supplements to the sociable professionalization offered by the MFA-granting creative writing program. These include Critique Circle, established in 2003 in Iceland and one of the oldest communities of this style. The average age of members is between twenty-one and thirty. Litopia defines itself as “collegiate” in its ethos.²⁷ Figment, a platform started by former *New Yorker* journalists, is geared toward teens and young adults. Its slogan “Write yourself in” combines the promise of community with the language of admissions. It was acquired by Random House in 2013. AgentQuery Connect and BookRix pool advice on securing an agent and on self-publishing routes.

Although it is impossible to peruse every writing community on the Internet, a recurring value of the most popular English-language ones is autonomy. Litopia, though privately owned by a writer/literary agent, bears the slogan “Writers doing it for themselves.” The Archive of Our Own, is “run by and for fans.”²⁸ Yet, as with Kindle Worlds and Figment, the sharing economies of amateur writing are also becoming part of the market economies of the largest online retailers and traditional publishing houses.²⁹ Such developments make these platforms major players, in what Simone Murray calls the “digital literary sphere” and what Nick Levey identifies as “post-press literature.”

The digital literary sphere encompasses websites and digital content dedicated to the production, circulation, and consumption of contemporary literature. It reflects the role that Web 2.0 technologies play in shaping authorial careers and reputations, transforming publishing opportunities, and generally guiding popular conceptions of literature, reading, and critical judgment.³⁰ Meanwhile, post-press literature des-

ignates those self-published works that, in becoming destigmatized, are changing the form of contemporary fiction, the experience of reading it, and the business of publishing it.³¹ Megacorporations such as Amazon and publishing conglomerates such as Hachette now compete in the marketplace of books and differ as to books' commodity status. Hachette claimed that books, particularly literary ones, are unique precisely because of their ability, as gifts, to give increase to the culture at large. Amazon treats books like any other commodity in its warehouses.

As digital platforms blur the line between amateur creativity and professional book publishing, appropriations of and conflicts over autonomy circulate through online writing communities. Even when such communities are top-down affairs, they unleash unpredictable energies. Take the platform "Authonomy," owned and operated by "Big Five" publishing conglomerate HarperCollins with the express purpose of "talent-spotting."³² The site was launched under the conviction that aspiring authors would be the best judges of each other's work. Community members would vote monthly on the top five manuscripts uploaded to the site, and these would be sent for review to HarperCollins editors. Referred to by Cory Doctorow as an "open slush pile," Authonomy was far from autonomous from a political economy perspective. The aspiring authors/amateur judges were performing free labor and providing consumer data by winnowing manuscripts down for professional editors.³³ However, from the perspective of user behavior, Authonomy developed in ways that went beyond HarperCollins's plans for it. In addition to a monthly contest, it evolved into a writing workshop where regular members not only rated but also advised one another on their manuscripts. For the majority of users, this cooperative aspect of the site had more value than the competition aspect, even if the workshop elements of the platform broke with the conventions of the university creative writing workshop.

Better antecedents for the intragroup dynamics of Authonomy are cultures of fandom where contributions and commitment (forms of giving) are stronger measures of standing within the group than degrees and credentials (forms of earning). Also, while registration for a class might be capped, there is, in principle, no cap on online writing communities and no teachers except for the members themselves. This leads to expertise being distributed throughout the group rather than being concentrated in one individual—a viable claim to collective autonomy when it comes to group decision-making.³⁴ Henry Jenkins portrays fandoms as self-governed and somewhat horizontal in structure, even though gatekeeping persists and amateur specialists emerge over time through their commitment to the community and access to specific

kinds of information. Jenkins's analysis of the spoiling practices of fans of the television show *Survivor* shows how their "collaborative production and evaluation of knowledge" about the show enabled them to develop relationships outside producers' control.³⁵

A similar underground network grew within Authonomy when certain members of the community developed cabals around their manuscripts. Rather than rate manuscripts on merit, these members exchanged positive reviews and voted each other into the top five. As Scott Pack, the site runner said, they "learned how to game the system."³⁶ Once the amateurs stopped working for the professionals and started working for themselves, HarperCollins closed the platform, but not before launching the careers of a few professional and bestselling authors, including Miranda Dickinson, Steven Dunne, and Kat French.³⁷ The irony of Authonomy's closing evidences the fragility of self-government on a platform designed to serve commercial interests. One can acknowledge this point but still argue that the participatory cultures of amateur writing platforms are structurally changing the publishing business in ways that literary historians cannot ignore. We must account for these digital spaces as sites of institutionalized and self-organized creativity. Moreover, we must explain how amateur creativity invokes, alters, and extends traditional literary and aesthetic categories. Such categories include authorship, autonomy, the canon, the novel, and the work of art itself.

One major digital platform that can serve as the object of such an approach is Wattpad. Described in the *International Business Times* as the "YouTube of Stories," Wattpad is the largest amateur writing platform to date. It was founded in 2006 by Canadians Allen Lau and Ivan Yuen. As of 2016, it has over forty million members and an Alexa Global Rank of 660 (meaning it is ranked 660 on the list of the most-visited websites in the world). As with other Web 2.0 platforms, Wattpad brings users into a sharing economy where they can access each other's stories without spending money or contributing much in the way of writing themselves. Still, the site is a user-generated forum, and thus relies on its unpaid writers for content provision. Wattpad's inventory of "free" novels in over fifty languages and its method of content delivery (formatted to be readable on smartphones and other mobile devices) takes advantage of revolutions in mass reading technologies, which go back to the invention of the Gutenberg press in the fifteenth century, the mechanization and automation of print in the nineteenth century, and the distribution of cheap paperbacks in the twentieth century.

Wattpad's constraints and affordances play a determining role in the form that stories take. Novels are the privileged genre, and the platform demands that users upload one chapter at a time. Serial writing divides

a single novel into multiple installments, which builds suspense, yields more site visits, and enables a constant stream of conversation around a work. Such a strategy, of course, remediates nineteenth-century publishing practices, wherein writers such as Charles Dickens treated readers as consumers to be satisfied and a public to be addressed. As Levey argues, building on the work of John Butt and Kathleen Tillotson, the serialization strategies so pervasive within twenty-first-century digital publishing go back further still and evoke the relationship between writing and orality evident in Chaucer. The speed and sociability of instantaneous commenting reintegrates “the dynamic communication between speaker and listeners into the novel rather than defining the form as the output of a solitary individual in a room of her own.”³⁸

Wattpad depends on amateur creativity and interactivity for all of its content, and so it encourages serial writing that is spontaneous, frequent, and free-flowing. Wattpad conversation—lots of praise, a little critique, advice, wishes for the story’s direction, and random comments—folds into the creative process such that the line between writing a story and publishing it virtually disappears. An amateur writer on Wattpad can cultivate a fan base before ever completing a novel. Users who amass a strong readership become eligible for an elite program called “Wattpad Stars” that helps connect star users with professional gigs in reviewing, marketing, film and television writing, and book publishing.

Serial writing injects the camaraderie of fandom into creative writing, such that the mythology around authorial autonomy, individuality, and creativity shifts. Wattpad star novelists such as Ali Novak, Rebecca Sky (pseudonym: L. J. Michaels), and Anna Todd (pseudonym: ImaginatorID) do not identify with the tortured artist seeking perfection, nor do they hold romantic notions of expressive genius. Rather, they see writing as fundamentally social and supportive and turn to anonymity or pseudonymity only as a way of maintaining some privacy and self-protection.³⁹ Anonymity is no guarantee against harassment, but it is also no bar to intimacy. Stars and fan bases emerge precisely because of users’ proximity to one another and because of the egalitarianism that suffuses the site. Todd’s *After*, like James’s *Fifty Shades*, is based in fan fiction and has been optioned for book and movie deals.

Such phenomena at first glance intensify the divide between the canon, as an institution of literary value, and the slaughterhouse as an institution of literary waste.⁴⁰ In J. M. Coetzee’s *Elizabeth Costello*, Elizabeth writes, “That was my great ambition: to have my place on the shelves of the British Museum, rubbing shoulders with the other C’s the great ones: Carlyle and Chaucer and Coleridge and Conrad. (The joke is that my closest literary neighbor turned out to be Marie Corelli.)”⁴¹ Wattpad

novelists, like Instapoets (a term for Instagram and Tumblr poets including Tyler Knott Gregson, Rupi Kaur, Lang Leav, and R. M. Drake, the latter a pseudonym for Robert Macias), tend to be more Corelli than Coetzee. The novelists' writing is plot-driven and follows the conventions of popular romance, while the poets offer transparent rather than opaque verse. If the novelists strive to entertain, the poets aim to inspire. Each group builds massive followings that operate entirely outside the professional literary circles that dictate prestige.

And yet some authors who operate within those circles find themselves drawn to Wattpad. When Margaret Atwood is quoted in *The Times Literary Supplement* blog as calling Wattpad "the future of the novel form," we must wonder to what degree canon and slaughterhouse intersect. Atwood's involvement with Wattpad shows how these two spheres of novel culture overlap just as the spheres of amateur and professional writing overlap. Contra to expectation, Atwood does not praise the platform for its capacity to produce breakout stars—a rarity indeed. Rather, she credits it for enabling pseudonymous novel-writing on a mass scale. She sees such writing as an opportunity to improve one's writing in a relatively shielded way, as a gateway to the profession for some and, in the vein of canonical writers like William Faulkner and Graham Greene, a way for her to write popular and high literature simultaneously. Unlike Faulkner and Greene, who wrote genre fiction to pay the bills, Atwood sees using a transformative publishing technology as part of her literary art. Wattpad is the best medium for writing genre fiction because it is shaping what such popular fiction will look like in form and what common reading will look like in practice.

In a video for the 2015 Future of Storytelling Summit, Atwood describes coauthoring a novel called *The Happy Zombie Sunrise Home* on Wattpad with Naomi Alderman. Atwood and Alderman wrote chapters of the novel in tandem, turning the upload system into an improvisational mode of call-and-response. As the story unfolded serially, digitally, and collaboratively, the novel became a gamelike and televisual form. One writer would place characters in a scrape from which the other would then extract them. More interested in a shared writers' room than a room of one's own, Atwood extols the eros of collaboration over the autonomy of individual control. She frames the cowriting of the novel through the coreading of it: as a product of friendly palaver and amateur pleasure rather than focused intensity and professional expertise. Indeed, Atwood explicitly rejects the idea of Wattpad as a platform for "professional storytelling."⁴²

Yet Atwood's partnership with Alderman resulted from Alderman winning a professional award from the thoroughly commercialized



Figure 1. Margaret Atwood, "A State of Wonder: How Technology Shapes Story." Reproduced with permission of The Future of StoryTelling, fost.org.

Rolex Mentor and Protégé Initiative in 2012. At the time, Alderman had written three novels and received several awards and citations in literary venues, such as *Granta*, but was still making her living as a video game author. Although Atwood emphasized the amateur nature of their novel, professional mentorship occasioned it. The result is an alignment of two competing visions of creative writing's sociality. In the amateur one, creative writing is egalitarian from its inception, and when readers exert interventional pressure over the creative process, it is only a matter of time before authorship becomes more systematically collective. In the professional one, creative writing is made possible by patronage and mentorship. *Happy Zombie* is not outside hierarchy, but hierarchy can breed friendship. The born-digital novel is visibly indicative of the eroticized relationships of amateur and professional sharing and challenges the close association of authorship with possessive individualism in more ways than one.

Even those skeptical of Atwood's prophecies as to the future of the novel should treat *Happy Zombie* as more than a one-off experiment and Wattpad as more than a diversion. Haughty dismissals of the platform's unliterary status overlook how celebrated authors and esteemed arbiters of the literary have turned social media platforms into venues for formal experimentation. Consider Jennifer Egan's story "Black Box" (2012), which *The New Yorker* serially published through its Twitter account before reprinting it in the magazine. Or Teju Cole's story "Hafiz" (2014), which he wrote alone, but then divided into lines to be tweeted by his online

followers. He then published the entire story on his own feed through retweets that entwined artist and audience in collaborative storytelling. A more difficult-to-dismiss criticism of Wattpad regards the thorny and ever-present issue of labor. Here is how Atwood rationalizes Wattpad's decision to not pay its writers:

But shouldn't writers get paid for their work? In an ideal world, yes. However, though \$1.99—standard for a shortform ebooklet—is low in western terms, it's a prohibitive amount elsewhere. And how can you pay online if you don't have a credit card?

Our generation in the west was lucky: we had readymade gateways. We had books, paper, teachers, schools and libraries. But many in the world lack these luxuries. How do you practice without such tryout venues? Without a piano, how do you learn to play the piano? How can you write without paper and read without books?⁴³

Atwood's defense of Wattpad's sharing economy recapitulates a free market logic that thinks more about consumers than about workers, which writers on Wattpad are, insofar as their content provision sustains the site. She gives free culture an ethical cast by invoking the developing world where, yes, \$1.99 per e-book is prohibitive. Yet Atwood's preference for free over fair culture overlooks important points about an electronic access that already limits Wattpad's membership in countries such as Mexico, India, Philippines, and Vietnam (which have the most users outside of the United States).⁴⁴ Even when an Internet connection is more accessible than "books, paper, teachers, schools and libraries," the smartphones and mobile reading devices for which the platform is designed are still products for the elite (as measured by college education).⁴⁵

Wattpad may be reaching some segments of the global poor through collectively shared computing devices, but for the most part its market growth reflects its accessibility to middle-to-upper-class users in developing countries. The reality of transnationally networked free culture is less morally uplifting than Atwood suggests. A more modest and persuasive claim would be that more "tryout" venues and internationally diverse audiences for amateur writing facilitate the structural growth of a multidirectional global popular culture. Where the promise of Wattpad shades into ideological mystification is in the recoding of its gateway opportunities for creative literacy as globally philanthropic.

III. Gifting and Selling

Still, the gift is a powerful rhetorical tool—especially in a global economy where displays of goodwill matter almost as much as the goods themselves. Digital platforms like Wattpad tap into the desire for shareable culture in ways that build on but also depart from the mass-market commercial ventures of print. Paula Rabinowitz describes the paperback book as “priced to sell,” a downmarket commodity that also functioned in the United States as “an interface among the masses, the author, and the thing itself.” The paperback carved communities of readers out from the indistinct masses by expanding “what could be seen and touched by individuals en masse as they collectively brushed against one another through and within the privacy of reading.”⁴⁶ Rabinowitz’s claims about the connection between reading, media, and collective formation in the American context help us understand Wattpad novels, Instapoetry, and the like in their global context.

Such writing is global pop literature whose economic status (hybrid of gift and commodity), labor status (largely amateur and unpaid), and mode of circulation (digital and participatory) enable public displays of reader response to grow out of the privacy of reading on electronic devices. Unlike mass-market paperbacks, which are professionally produced commodities with set pricing, amateur digital fiction circulates without set value. It is not priced to sell but given away to keep people coming back to a shared space that they play an active role in creating. Global pop literature, with a few exceptions like *The Archive of Our Own*, yokes the amateur spirit of writers and readers to private enterprise. It is this very market co-optation of amateurism, sharing, and gifting that draws contemporary authors of aesthetic significance like Atwood to explore such processes in thoughtful if imperfect detail. I refer here to writers who have resisted the trappings of professional authorship, sophisticated celebrity, and honorable distinction in high cultural, if not subcultural, economies of literary prestige. This last section offers a brief tour of such writers, mainly novelists with crossover literary and popular appeal, who have made the publishing strategies of amateur creativity part of their larger art. I say “larger art” because they have, where possible, brought the publishing and promotion of their novels under their control.

The first is Elena Ferrante, the absent center of the “Ferrante phenomenon.” The Ferrante phenomenon refers to the unlikely and explosive success of an Italian novelist in translation who has publicly defined herself as passionate about anonymity.⁴⁷ In a now-famed letter to her Italian publishers at Edizioni E/O, Ferrante wrote “I believe that

books, once they are written, have no need of their authors. . . . I very much love those mysterious volumes, both ancient and modern, that have no definite author but have had and continue to have an intense life of their own. They seem to me a sort of nighttime miracle, like the gifts of the Befana, which I waited for as a child. . . . Besides, isn't it true that promotion is expensive? I will be the least expensive author of the publishing house. I'll spare you even my presence."⁴⁸ Ferrante avers that anonymously authored books are miracles that cut costs. This mix of mythic idealization and market pragmatism informs her likening of books to gifts of the Befana, a Santa-Claus-like being in Italian folklore, though figured as an older woman. Rebecca Falkoff writes, "It's a metaphor I find troubling, one that Marx might have glossed as follows: the magical quality of the commodity—in this case, the literary text—is the result of an erasure of labor. Is this really what Ferrante means? I don't think so."⁴⁹ It isn't what Ferrante means. What's magical is not the literary text or even the book as fetish object, but the anonymous style of publication and delivery. Labor may be unseen, but it is not erased. After all, the Befana is a hardworking distributor. What is erased is a verifiable physical presence—one that is more and more demanded of professional authors who must do public readings, attend literary festivals, campaign for awards, and provide interviews.

In Ferrante's once-private letter, anonymity makes the book a gift around which a creative social circle, rather than a conforming audience, gathers. In her public writing, Ferrante's justification for and attachment to anonymity shifts from a folkloric tradition to a literary tradition, which is also a publishing tradition. Jane Austen, whose first published novel was credited to a "Lady," is at the center of that tradition. Ferrante admires "the moment when Austen decided to make public one of the texts she had been secretly working on for years, to have it printed at her own expense, and even to renounce the idea of a pseudonym."⁵⁰ She further frames Austen's gendered anonymity as a bookish transcendence of the economic and social conditions limiting women's intellectual labor. Ferrante's passion for Austen's anonymity is a passion for labor conducted on stolen/spare time and for the do-it-yourself financial risk of self-publishing. It is respect for Austen's trajectory as a lady amateur who became a fixture of the canon.

When Ferrante pledges allegiance to Austen, she lends literary-historical heft to her own publishing situation, which is equally if not more implicated in popular culture. The packaging of Austen's anonymously published novels resembled the anonymously published popular romances of the time. These novels, designed to stock circulating libraries and dashed off by "writers-for-pay," were the popular fictions

against which Romantics defined their own literature as highbrow and constructed authorship as an “elite profession.”⁵¹ Ferrante’s decision to use a pseudonym, the cliffhanger style of the Neapolitan novels, and the reference to her stories as gifts elevates the strategies of sharing that are tied up in digital publishing platforms. The major difference is that these platforms feature writers-for-free as well as writers-for-pay. Many of these writers-for-free were drawn to the pursuit through fandom, and Ferrante cannily addresses her own fandom in real time. She seems not only to arouse but also to court a readership as avid as Austen’s “Janeites.”⁵²

We could easily see Ferrante’s bond with Austen as the ultimate professional and promotional strategy. Yet if Ferrante can be dialectically identified as a savvy professional, it is only because she, via the Befana and Austen, has rejected the circuits of literary careerism. Her aristocratic standing makes a silk purse out of a sow’s ear by giving popular and gendered traditions of anonymity and self-publishing a decidedly noble, antibourgeois cast. By contrast, her condescending disinterest in competing for Italy’s most prestigious literary award, the Strega Prize, makes it seem an unworthy form of culture and, worse, a corrupt and exploitative version of the “proprietary dictatorship” of Berlusconiism.⁵³ Yet, inside and outside Italy, Ferrante’s professional amateurism has added to her celebrity by generating participatory cultures around her absenteeism. Fans, critics, and haters alike are free to circulate rumors, fictions, and hoaxes about her in national newspapers, literary reviews, blogs, and more. Even Claudio Gatti’s exposé of Ferrante, however reviled by her supporters, counts as part of this culture and is a compelling example of how a reputed literary venue like *The New York Review of Books* can come to resemble a supermarket tabloid.

Literary journalism, popular critique, and gossip converge in more congenial ways in a feature on Ferrante for *T: The New York Times Style Magazine*. Three early-career writers, Gideon Lewis-Kraus, Meghan O’Rourke, and Emily Gould, reinvented the conventions of the celebrity profile in the absence of a physically available subject. First, their ratio of three writers to one subject contributes to Ferrante’s elusive stardom by approximating the plurality of fandom. Second, given Ferrante’s absence, the writers need not play up the role of disinterested journalists struggling to stay objective in the presence of a charismatic figure. Instead, they readily declare themselves “admirers.”⁵⁴ Each writes his or her own encomium, mixing reportage and analytical criticism with blatant desire and emotional investment. Lewis-Kraus’s piece is peppered with the lighthearted conspiracy theories of a fan he meets on an airplane: “Everyone knows Ferrante is really a man,” and later, “I think she must be a film director.” These theories become the ground

for his more serious insights into “speculation” as a form of absorption. Speculation demands close attention to language to find evidence in the text for one’s claims, to justify oneself to others, and to persuade them through argument. By the end of Lewis-Kraus’s piece, speculation has become the basis of “good reading.”⁵⁵

O’Rourke and Gould offer up their own fantasies to bookend thoughtful close readings of Ferrante’s novels. “I hope Ferrante is a woman, and one who might one day find it possible to unveil herself while still writing with the same ferocity,” opens O’Rourke’s psychoanalytically inflected interpretation of *The Days of Abandonment* and *The Lost Daughter*.⁵⁶ “I imagine her to be someone who knows the temptation to write about what is closest to home, and who has done what she can to protect the people she loves from herself, even though that has meant giving up anything good that being the public representative of her work could ever entail,” gushes Gould at the conclusion of her piece on the *Neapolitan* novels.⁵⁷ As criticism mixes with speculation, projection, and fantasy, professional literary journalism looks more and more like fan fiction. And Ferrante looks more like a phenomenon than an author.

Ferrante’s strategies of anonymous publishing mix gifting and selling and have turned her into a literary and commercial success. Such a mixture also inheres in the publishing strategies of her Italian compatriots Wu Ming, but it serves the explicitly political project of threatening commerce by weakening copyright restrictions. The group Wu Ming formed in 1999 as Luther Blissett, a pseudonym adopted by hundreds of “artists, activists, and pranksters” trying to “raise hell in the culture industry.”⁵⁸ Its members later changed their name to “Wu Ming,” a Mandarin phrase that, depending on the pronunciation of the first syllable, means either “no name” or “five names,” in reference to the five writers in the group at the time. The members’ real names are known and they do appear in public, but they publish works related to Wu Ming projects under the monikers Wu Ming 1, Wu Ming 2, and so on. They do not allow themselves to be photographed for the media, nor do they appear on television. Schooled in new media theory and the cultural studies of fandom, Wu Ming’s manifestoes and digital publishing strategies tend to be livelier and more avant-garde than their formally conservative historical novels.⁵⁹

Wu Ming offer a copyleft critique of authorship as “a profession caught in a circuit of property values.”⁶⁰ They are notable for being amongst the earliest writers to successfully bring Creative Commons licensing from the digital sphere into the print sphere of publishing. Wu Ming’s novels, when distributed in codex form from *Qonward*, include copyright notices that permit the partial or total reproduction of their work for noncom-

mercial purposes. The collective also makes all its published material available for free download, allowing for digital distribution circuits unconstrained by commercial exchange.⁶¹ Wu Ming I has invoked the gift economy as a rationale for the collective's publishing style and, in a nod to the halcyon days of the Internet, has asserted the importance of open systems and free software to materially redistributing the means of telling stories.⁶² Opening the digital means of production rather than issuing free services through private platforms exemplifies for Wu Ming the radically democratic potential of the gift. Their Marxist-anarchist ethos informs the artistry of their publishing decisions such that the circulation of their novels becomes an extension, rather than a curtailment, of their utopian politics.

Nevertheless, altering the proprietary systems through which literature circulates is an act of defiance complicated by the containment of gifting and sharing within a market economy of selling. Science-fiction writer Cory Doctorow has used this containment to his professional advantage even as he credits the amateur spirit of fandom for his decision to give away his novels as E-books while selling them in codex form. He cites the "bookwarez scene wherein fans cut the binding off their favorite books, scanned them, ran them through optical character recognition software, and manually proofread them to eliminate the digitization errors. These fans were easily spending 80 hours to rip their favorite books, and they were *only* ripping their favorite books, books they loved and wanted to share."⁶³ Rather than criminalize and police fan piracy, Doctorow reframes ripping as a labor of love. He then leverages that love through his own labor in the hopes that preemptively ripping his books will gain him free publicity and promotion in the market.

Doctorow argues that free e-books (distributed with a Creative Commons license to share and adapt for noncommercial purposes) can build an audience of paying customers rather than destroy it. Doctorow treats rippers as amateur creators and distributors, and though he links himself with piracy movements such as bookwarez, he also realizes that such undergrounds have less cool ancestors in the genealogy of common reading. He points to the middlebrow book clubs that turned *Divine Secrets of the Ya-Ya Sisterhood* into a bestseller and suggests that pirate communities, like book clubs, might actually improve sales if the publishing industry appealed to their members as customers rather than criminals.⁶⁴

Doctorow's sympathetic rendering of pirates as devoted and industrious fans foregrounds the disparity in how booksellers and fans conceive of property. As Jenkins has argued with respect to the "Potter Wars," teenage fans of *Harry Potter* were so suffused with love for the series that they took umbrage when Warner Bros. Studios threatened them for creating

fan fiction.⁶⁵ For the studio, *Harry Potter* was a commercial brand whose reputation was to be scrupulously protected; for fans, *Harry Potter* was a world of novels, films, and their own amateur creativity, which were bonded together. Digital technologies scaled up and internationalized their capacities to share their love, adapt their objects of affection, and look out for each other, as when US-based fans defended Polish ones from threats by Warner Brothers. What we may call, via Hyde, the erotic life of art led a subculture toward self-organized resistance. The nature of that resistance—to copyright protectionism and not consumerism—is what Doctorow hopes to channel into sales by giving away his novels as e-books.

Doctorow would not be able to give his novels away in digital formats without the support of his publisher Patrick Nielson Hayden at Tor Books, an imprint of Macmillan and the leading publisher of science fiction and fantasy in the world. It is unsurprising that science fiction presses have been at the vanguard of copyleft sharing practices, given fandom's historical importance to the genre. Science fiction and fantasy (SF/F) fandom grew out of the club and magazine culture of the 1920s-'30s. The influential editor of *Amazing Stories*, Hugo Gernsback, created columns for fans to publish letters within his pulp magazines and facilitated direct networking amongst fans to exchange their own written materials. Amateur and professional exchanges were built into the publishing logic of science fiction, and the most ardent fans would eventually become writers, editors, and historians of their movements and ultimately find paid work within them.⁶⁶

Hayden is one such person. A self-identified fan and professional editor, Hayden argues that today's digital self-publishing strategies ("BBSes and Fidonet and Usenet and LiveJournal and blogs and Facebook and Twitter") descend from the analog amateur press association (APA). Referring to an APA as a "technology," Hayden chronicles how the flourishing of distinct APAs "helped foster a set of interlinked virtual communities worldwide that were, by the late 1970s, as ready for the social potential of the Internet as it was possible for pre-Internet people to be."⁶⁷ Hayden's decision to call APAs "technologies" makes sense given his affiliation with science fiction, but it creates too much slippage between the technologies that mediate exchanges and the actual people who comprise an association of readers and writers. Literary and media histories should tease out the relationships between technologies, aesthetic forms, and sharing practices rather than lump them all together. The contemporary novel that best enables and rewards such analysis is Lauren Beukes's *Zoo City* (2010), a complex amalgam of amateur creativity, shared writing, and professional publishing.

Zoo City was published by Jacana Media, an independent South African press, and by Angry Robot (at the time the sci-fi/fantasy imprint of HarperCollins) in the United Kingdom, United States, and Canada. The production and promotion of the book drew on longstanding SF/F practices of fan involvement and made use of Authonomy as a digital interface for that involvement. Through the site, Angry Robot sponsored a fan fiction contest, based on Beukes's first novel *Moxyland* (2008). They published the winning stories by Sam Wilson, Bryan Steele, and Charlie Human as "Extras" in *Zoo City*. Wilson was already in Beukes's professional network, and Human went on to become Beukes's advisee in the University of Cape Town's creative writing program. What is unusual about *Zoo City* is that such behind-the-scenes connections moved front and center when Beukes commissioned Wilson and Human to guest-write chapters in the novel along with a third writer, Evan Milton.

Wilson's, Human's, and Milton's chapters look like textual found objects. They are respectively written in the form of prison interviews, an abstract of an academic paper, and a music magazine interview. These pieces interrupt Beukes's diegetic narrative, which centers on Zinzi December, an ex-convict who lives in the slums of Hillbrow in a post-apartheid Johannesburg characterized by deepening economic inequality and de facto racial segregation. Zinzi belongs to a criminalized class of people alternatively called *aposymbiot*, or *zoo*. *Zoos* are tied to animal "familiar" that mark their dehumanized status. These familiars, loosely inspired by the *mashavi* of Shona religious tradition, also confer special abilities that help *zoos* survive without access to higher education, professional training, or steady jobs.⁶⁸ Zinzi's familiar is the sloth, and her "particular gift, curse," as she calls it, is the ability to find that which is lost.⁶⁹ She is charged with finding Songweza, a teen musician who with her brother S'bu won the reality talent show "Coca-Cola Starmakerz."⁷⁰ Sibling orphans of impoverished backgrounds, Songweza and S'bu's commercial packaging capitalizes upon people's post-apartheid hopes for a democratic and meritocratic South Africa. Beukes's conceit of *zoos* as a resourceful but heavily exploited and policed class conjures the world of the novel; however, that world was made richer and more absorbing by her fans *before* the book was published. Their additions of genres of vernacular testimony, scientific knowledge, and popular culture diversify the languages and skills associated with expertise in the novel, which is fittingly about surviving without credentials.

Beukes has worked in television and film. Like Atwood, she is ready to trade a room of her own for the writers' room. Unlike *Happy Zombie*, *Zoo City* has a head writer. When the novel won the Arthur C. Clarke award, Beukes took and deserved the credit of author. That credit,

however, is not independent of her sharing practice, which walks a fine line between exploiting labor, providing mentorship, and conferring opportunity. Such themes are refracted through the novel itself, in which talented amateurs learn to maneuver within extractive regimes, as Zinzi does, or are destroyed by them, as the teen musicians are. Beukes's success straddles the categories of literary and genre fiction in a moment made ripe for such crossover by prestigious writers trying their hand at popular genres (think Atwood, Michael Chabon, Junot Diaz, Kazuo Ishiguro, David Mitchell, and Zadie Smith). But even if Beukes's path to respectability is aided by the levelling of the literary/genre divide, it is her multimedia mix of writing and publishing practices that represents the vanguard of literature today.

Matthew Kirschenbaum and Sarah Werner have argued that "the conduct of literary history in the present" should take into account "just how complex the contemporary book's media environment has become."⁷¹ Some of their recommendations are technical. Navigating a book's digital media environment will demand facility with web crawlers and screen scrapers and familiarity with social media feeds and torrent sites. Others are practical. Scholars will need to think about how the ambiguities of intellectual property and preservation on the Internet might shape and constrain their research. As we begin historicizing digital literary works, we are confronted by the ephemeral nature of collaborative storytelling experiments, as well as the perplexity of how to cite works where authorship is divided amongst many parties and where reader comments carry weight. Add to this expired domains and the obsolescence of digital media platforms and file formats, which will make our objects of study unavailable to us if they are not archived in retrievable ways.

Kirschenbaum and Werner's recommendations are vital, but they need to be augmented by sociological and aesthetic ones. Scholars must analyze the kinds of collectivities that are forming around new media platforms for literary and artistic work. These include fandoms, online writing communities, professional writing teams, and publishing partnerships that can be vertical or horizontal, corporate or public in structure. Such groups require us to revisit how institutional histories of literature have constituted distinctions between amateur and professional creativity and whether those distinctions still hold today. Finally, literary historians and scholars of the arts broadly must better understand how creative works absorb audiences into their worlds and compel those audiences to extend those worlds in the form of fan fiction, unorthodox redistribution, and other kinds of collaborative invention. To do this, we must offer a sociologically informed theory of the artwork that addresses its ambiguous property status as a commodity, a gift, and, now more than ever, a share.

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NOTES

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- 10 James F. English, *The Economy of Prestige: Prizes, Awards, and the Circulation of Cultural Value* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Univ. Press, 2005), 7.
- 11 Andrew Piper questions whether such copying deserves the name "sharing," as it strips sharing of personal investment and sacrifice. I appreciate his skepticism but think that the definitional quandaries around sharing are precisely what make digital practices intriguing. Piper, *Book was There: Reading in Electronic Times* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 2012), 103.
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- 16 Lewis Hyde, *The Gift: Creativity and the Artist in the Modern World* (1983; New York: Vintage, 2007), xvii. Hyde originally subtitled the book "Imagination and the Erotic Life of Property."
- 17 Hyde, *The Gift*, xviii.
- 18 Hyde, *The Gift*, 47.
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- 33 Cory Doctorow, "HarperCollins' Authonomy—an open slushpile," Sept. 2, 2008, <http://boingboing.net/2008/09/02/harpercollins-authon.html>.
- 34 This point builds on Pierre Lévy, *Collective Intelligence: Mankind's Emerging World in Cyberspace* (Cambridge, MA: Perseus Books, 1997).
- 35 Henry Jenkins, *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide* (New York: New York Univ. Press, 2006), 57–58. Spoiling refers to discovering elements of an episode before it airs.
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