The Author is Dead, Long Live the Author - Alt Lit, Authorship, and the Objectification of the Self Through Art

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I pledge my word of honor that I have abided by the Washington College Honor Code while completing this assignment.

I.

Between roughly 2008 to 2014, Internet blog culture and burgeoning alternative small presses produced the short-lived literary genre of alternative literature, or alt lit. Alt lit's primary driving ethos was one of production rather than style: that of self-promotion and self-publication using social media to foster a sense of literary community. Steven Hitchins notes something similar, "Alt lit is not just about the art object (e.g. the book), but everything that goes on around it. The catalogued documentation is part of wider social and community events" (6). This intra-communal focus—and self-driven publication ethos—also resulted in an aesthetic bent. A.D. Jameson, writing in notable alt lit scene journal *HTMLGIANT*, sees the aesthetics of writers like "Dorothea Lasky, Matt Hart, Nate Pritts, Tao Lin and the *Muumuu House* scene, Marie Calloway, Steve Roggenbuck—and many others," the latter three of these writers all being heavily associated with alt lit, as having been "fairly or unfairly" aligned with the already-established genre of "new sincerity." New sincerity, in his view, can be understood as "poetry and prose that produces the effect of somehow being sincere/real/transparent/artless, and less theoretical/abstract/mediated/ artificial" (Jameson). If taken at face value, Jameson's linkage of new sincerity with alt lit suggests an emphasis on capturing an individual sense of the real and that, taken with the knowledge of the small publications and presses devoted to this movement, builds a case for what it is that alt lit entails as a genre and as a movement.

Alt lit, to my knowledge, has yet to drum up significant critical interest in the academy. The movement's most visible writers, like novelist Tao Lin and video-poet Steve Roggenbuck, generated interest in traditional print publications in the form of interviews, op-eds, and book reviews. Similarly, Lin's prose garnered some interest for its style. The vast majority of writers in the genre, however, have yet to receive any proper critical analysis within academic

scholarship. This is not to say there is no critique of alt lit out in the world, but, rather, peer-reviewed works of scholarship are in pretty short order. It is important to note that this was, at least in part, by design. The brief life span of alt lit as a genre, as well as the emphasis placed on its insularity as a literary movement, stemmed from its rejection of traditional publication avenues and interest in the aforementioned self-promotion and intra-community publishing. Thus, if it was approached at all, it was with distance and passing curiosity. There was neither the attempt at connecting this burgeoning, tech-oriented, democratized movement to similar, preceding literary movements, nor the desire to treat it as a novel thing in and of itself beyond its technological implications.

Alt lit, and alt lit's lack of a reputation, was not merely defined by novelty, but by the controversy surrounding the community's demise. Part of this apathy towards alt lit, and perhaps even its decline as a genre, is due to the perceivable delegitimization of the genre in the wake of the various sexual assault and abuse allegations levied at writers like Lin and Roggenbuck, as well as Stephen Tully Dierks, Steven Trull, Gregory Sherl, and others. While not the first or last literary genre to be plagued with rapists, abusers, and predators, the pre-existing academic indifference seems to have only been further reinforced with this characterization of its writers. What interest there is in the genre largely existed outside of the academy and was instead seen in blogs, mainstream literary magazines and newspapers, and the few alternative spaces created for and by writers within the genre. However, with sites like *Gawker, Salon, Quaint Magazine,* and *Flavorwire* all decrying something along the lines of "Alt Lit is Dead" after the allegations against these writers in the summer and fall of 2014, any possible interest in the genre has waned. A brief search of Google shows that the idea of alternative literature is largely confined between the late aughts and, at latest, 2015; similarly, a search of JSTOR reveals very few

scholarly sources. As such, my approach to this SCE is first to explore what academic engagement there is for alt lit, in order to define how the genre has been critiqued both in its aesthetics and in response to these abuse allegations. Secondly, I want to contextualize this genre with other literary traditions that have come before it, chiefly literary modernism.

Roland Barthes provides a useful framework for this conversation, as Barthes's seminal *The Death of the Author* has seeped into the foundation of literary analysis in a way that feels specifically important to address in the context of art that directly engages with the abuses of the authors. When Barthes writes, "The reader is the very space in which are inscribed, without any being lost, all the citations a writing consists of," he argues against the critical emphasis placed on authorship as the essence of literature's meaning, returning that "essence" to the reader (6). This comes, however, as a double-edged sword at the intersection of the artistic and the political, where the message conveyed by the author directly includes references to their real life abuses. In the context of a text's essence and meaning, alt lit raises the question of how we responsibly and ethically discuss work where the celebrity of the author is so very present, so immovable from the text? Furthermore, how do we move from a self-fulfilling mantra like "Alt Lit is Dead," when such an idea is loaded with the erasure of (primarily but not exclusively) women's voices, the privileging of the perspectives of the voices of men with power, and the implied lack of culpability on the reader's part in the proliferation of this culture?

Barthes's argument at the crux of *The Death of the Author* is often extended as a wholesale dismissal of the author as component of text, as is the case in Camille Paglia's argument against his work (see "Is there anything more affected, aggressive, and relentlessly concrete than a Parisian intellectual behind his/her turgid text? … Behind every book is a certain person with a certain history."), rather than his actual, comparatively limited argument against

the author as integral to a text's interpretation (Paglia 34). Interpreting authorship and art as entirely separate domains has become an increasingly commonplace approach to generalized art critique, especially when addressing subjects of theming and meaning, and now, too, in the realm of art-consumption in this post-#MeToo moment, with numerous *New York Times* articles posing variations on this question of separation (Lyall, Proulx). This brings an interesting conundrum to Barthes's entrenched argument, one that is evident in the sphere of alt lit. Like modernism before it, the context of creation and distribution for alt lit is as important as the text itself in discerning significance. Further, the indistinct and constantly negotiated terms of autobiography and fiction in this movement complicate any attempts at simplified relationships between art and artist. In examining the short stories "Adrien Brody" and "Jeremy Lin" by Marie Calloway and the novel *Richard Yates* by Tao Lin I will explain how the overextension of "the death of the author" has failed in adequately defining the ethical boundaries of art movements and artistic communities that have resulted in the recontextualization of the artist as their own art object.

II.

Alt lit, as a literary movement, is not an entirely or even primarily new conceit, either in terms of its community or its actual artistic production. While alt lit has a definable aesthetic and significant paratextual elements as part of its development, it is necessary to contextualize the genre in relationship to other art movements. The most obvious point of comparison is literary modernism. Aside from the two genres being established in the early decades of their respective centuries, alt lit and modernist literature share some stylistic similarities and, more importantly, possess a shared sense of artistic community. Instead of the modernist coteries of Ezra Pound, T.S. Eliot, Gertrude Stein, and others associated with publications like Wyndham Lewis's *Blast*

there are the "common links" of online avenues such as "*Alt Lit Gossip* […] *HTMLGIANT*, *Pop Serial*, *Muumuu House*, and/or satellites or associates of same" (Spilker).

Both literary communities in part can be defined by the way they exist in terms of cultural capital. Jonathan Goldman's *Modernism Is the Literature of Celebrity* suggests the idea that, "Modernism, far from being indifferent to popular culture and the production associated with it, defines itself in relation to that culture, and usually establishes itself as the antithesis of the most commercially successful products" (3). The idea of modernist literature defining itself in "relation" to popular culture, rather than acting as apathetic or hostile towards it, is applicable to alt lit: references to topical celebrities, to recognizable stores and restaurants, and to the role of technology and the Internet in the creation and curation of alt lit art permeates the body of work of artists across the genre.

Moreover, Goldman looks to Frankfurt sociologist Leo Löwenthal's survey of biographies to continue his argument on celebrity influence:

> In 1943, Löwenthal surveyed biographies published in the United States since the beginning of the twentieth century and identified a dramatic change in the subjects represented, which he cast as a "considerable decrease of people from the serious and important professions and a corresponding increase of entertainers." Along with this development, he claims, the form and structure of biographical texts undergo a comparable stylistic transformation, visible even in the biographies categorized as "serious and important."[…]Löwenthal's study reveals an important change in the figures on whom the public would lavish attention, and a transformation in the narrative conventions governing them. (Goldman 8).

The transformation of the conventions of biography within modernist texts, through this complication of celebrity identity in literary communities, is observable throughout modernism, but here it becomes a generic difference: take Stein's *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*, which is technically a biography rather than autobiography, but freely incorporates elements of both the subject and the authors biography; or, Ernest Hemingway's *The Sun Also Rises*, which,

while fictional, includes enough autobiography that a common line of critique involves how the novel reflects his real-life post-war anxieties. While the focus of Löwenthal's survey was *biography* rather than *autobiography*, the change in understanding of what accounts mattered, a move from "serious and important professions" to any degree of "entertainers," and the subsequent changes in the literature itself, with the lines between memoir and fiction blurred, show in the insularly focused writing of modernism.

Alt lit has an appreciable similarity to this conception of modernism. While it "is mostly devoted to autobiographical narratives" as a genre, deviating from Löwenthal's observation of biography but in line with Goldman's conception of author-celebrity, the lines between fact and fiction in alt lit are blurred and renegotiated in just the same way as modernism (Hitchins 1). This is absolutely the case with Tao Lin's novel *Richard Yates*; the statutory rape described within the novel mirrors his real life abuse of a minor, who also accused Lin of plagiarizing real email conversations between them for said novel. Goldman explains how, "modernism[…]advances the idea of the author, and therefore the celebrity, as a paradigmatic subjectivity, all the while replicating the process by which one turns the self into an object" (11-12). Through this, Goldman suggests a commodification of artist as art product, a similarly observable phenomenon in the self-promotion and self-publication of a press like Lin's Muumuu House, which has published works by a number of alt lit authors, including Lin himself and Marie Calloway.

The content of Lin's novel *Richard Yates* leads into another important tie between modernism and alt lit: the focus on authors, and the discourse surrounding their interpersonal controversies. In many ways, Lin is comparable to Ezra Pound. As modernist poet and thinker behind numerous manifestos, Pound has a secure and far reaching legacy. As Victor C. Ferkiss

notes, “Pound is without doubt the single most influential poet and literary critic that America has produced during the [then] current century” (173). The other fact to recognize about Pound, says Ferkiss, is his avowed fascism and anti-semitic propaganda. Ferkiss uses his article to place Pound in the context of a history of American Fascism, which explains the tension inherent to his legacy. Pound’s overt fascism later in life, and his oscillating but consistent anti-semitic rhetoric, are significant black spots not just on the perception of his character, but also within the works themselves. A complimentary, albeit slighter, example would also be T.S. Eliot, who, as Michiko Kakutani puts it for the *New York Times Magazine*, “was one of this century’s pre-eminent poets, a great artist and perhaps the premier modernist. He was also an anti-Semite, a racist and a misogynist” (Kakutani). Both artists, however, have maintained prestige and critical interest between centuries, inside and out of academic studies. This is in spite of, and often contextualized through, their personal bigotries. Alt lit, whether justifiably or not, has not received that nuance.

Outside of literary modernism, however, alt lit still finds useful points of critical reference in other artistic frameworks. While not a visual artistic medium, alt lit in many ways replicates the intersection of the economic and the social in the ‘art world’. Alt lit, as movement, is driven by personalities and the recreation of the self as brand identity, where self-publishing and self-promotion are some of the only definitional traits of the genre. In Harvey Giesbrecht and Charles Levin’s book *Art In the Offertorium: Narcissism, Psychoanalysis, and Cultural Metaphysics,* Giesbrecht laments how both cultural capital and literal capital have “corrupted” the art world, introducing their influence in a variety of ways, most essentially how we engage in the dialectics of art: “If the *paragone* of art was once the competition in status between painting and sculpture, or between the power of the word and the power of the image, it now concerns the

form of aesthetic value itself' (1). Despite the melodrama, this is an important change to notice; art is no longer judged and evaluated under some broad understandings of aesthetics and instead those very aesthetics are being negotiated under capitalism. It matters less what is on the canvas than how it is being sold, in much the same way that alt lit's literary merit and actual text mattered less than the community it fostered.

Giesbrecht's references Don Thompson's *The $12 Million Stuffed Shark: The Curious Economics of Contemporary Art* to argue how the artist and the branding of the artist have superseded the actual art object: "According to Thompson, with 'branded work[…]the role of aesthetics in judging art decreases. Paintings are described in terms of the mystique of the artist, who else collects the work, and recent prices achieved by the artist at auction'" (3). Observing art exhibition as an act of curation of commodities rather than creation of finite pieces is a useful means towards understanding how alt lit is distinguishable in its sense of community. One aspect to alt lit's notoriety is the particularities of the paratextual elements of any given text: in their small presses, proximity of community through technology, and the way in which the celebrity of their authors impacted the reputation and interest in the texts themselves. These external factors of literary galleria nonetheless have an interior effect in the ways they promote and celebrate of certain voices over others. While Giesbrecht posits this as a unique-to-medium trouble for art and art culture, it strikes me as not an isolated problem so much as as symptomatic of the growing recontextualization of self into brand, an especially observable phenomenon in alt lit's approach to self-publication and promotion. This shift is significant, and I agree with Giesbrecht on its effects: "In all this visual and performative turmoil, the line that defines the art world is not at all clear. Whether we like or not, however, the social role of the art world has become crucial, because it creates a kind of buffer zone in the void where tradition once

performed its function of triage" (5). With this increasingly blurred line between the art piece and art culture, and so to between literature and literary culture, understanding art necessitates a recognition of and grappling with the context art is created in, including, but not limited to, the authors themselves.

Moreover, conceptualizing literary movements as larger than the literature itself is a helpful in considering both modernism and alt lit. In Harold Diepeveen's *Mock Modernism*, he provides a useful paradigmatic understanding of modernism in this way: "Modernism wasn't just a series of texts and artworks: it was an event, an event whose meaning was under constant negotiation" (23). Viewing literary movements in terms of negotiated meaning, especially given how conceptions of these "events" change so deeply between artists interior and exterior to the genre, is useful beyond just modernism, and provides a good sense with which to approach alt lit. Negotiation is a key part of these 'events' here—for alt lit-adjacent critic Jameson, that negotiation is observable in the overlap and supersession of "new sincerity" with alt lit: "NS started as a half-silly, half-serious movement launched c. 2004[…]They wrote manifestos and blogged a lot and called for a poetic return to earnest self-expression and sincerity. Other writers since have either fairly or unfairly come to be identified with this philosophy and style: Dorothea Lasky, Matt Hart, Nate Pritts, Tao Lin and the Muumuu House scene, Marie Calloway, Steve Roggenbuck—and many others" (Jameson). Beyond looking at this transition as a genre-equivalent of "New Look, Same Great Taste," this contemporary re-evaluation of writers between collectivizing identifiers demonstrates part of this complication and negotiation of the "event"; or as with the Hitchins observation at the beginning of this paper, "alt lit is not just about the art object (e.g. the book), but everything that goes on around it. The catalogued documentation is part of wider social and community events" (6). Moving beyond these literary

movements as a way of defining art objects, but instead as a collection of artists and communities, helps to approach works that are self-reflective upon their contexts and conceptions. Alt lit is not wholly unique in its community or even truly in the art itself, but the context it exists in, and the moral questions it provokes, are worth taking seriously and distinctly.

III.

While the self-fulfilling, market-driven nature of the art world that Giesbrecht decries suggests that art movements can be understood agnostic to the work itself, this reading ignores how the work itself replicates that which is outside of, but periphery to, the actual work. To fully understand a literary movement, and to further interrogate the underlying politics of one, the text should take precedence. By approaching alt lit as a genre through the short stories of Calloway and a novel of Lin's, I want to interrogate how the aesthetics and generic similarities between these texts create unsettling questions regarding the voices of authors and whose voices "matter," as well as unpack the ethical dilemmas surrounding authorship and the artistry of alt lit.

Perhaps more than any other non-cis-male writer associated with the moment, Marie Calloway is the name most recognizable outside of alt lit. Calloway initially garnered attention with the digital publishing of two short stories: "Adrien Brody" and "Jeremy Lin." "Adrien Brody" was first published on the website of *Muumuu House*, a small press founded and run by Tao Lin since 2008. "Jeremy Lin" was published later in *Vice*, with a blurb stating "this story picks up where that one left off" (Calloway, "Jeremy Lin"). Both short stories would later be included in her debut novel, *What Purpose Did I Serve in Your Life* (2013), which was released to reviews that, according to one source, primarily took the language of "whore" and "jailbait," or from those "more encouraging" reviews and comments, "a 'naive,' a 'Lolita,' an 'enfant

terrible','" when describing Calloway's narration, and oftentimes her own real-life character (Carver). This deeply misogynistic reception is important to consider as part of the greater conversation surrounding alt lit as a genre, but to do so accurately requires some understanding of the texts on their own terms.

Structurally and rhetorically, both pieces share a preoccupation with dialogue as the primary means of progressing and displaying the story, followed by a distanced observation of the speaker from their own perspective. "Adrien Brody" adopts informal stylistic flourishes towards emulating digital communication in chat messengers and emails. This includes emoticons (":o"), a lack of consistent grammatical punctuation, inconsistent capitalization, and a playful abuse of em dashes ("or at least I am forcing a resonance in my mind —In Amsterdam now but back in New York on Monday — will plan on seeing you next Sunday — " [sic]) (Calloway, "Adrien Brody"). "Jeremy Lin," meanwhile, has a more distanced affect in its tone but remains comparatively formal, as more consistently grammatically and syntactically correct in its recreation of digital communications. Both approaches, however, control tone and a sense of intimacy largely through extended exchanges between characters, punctuated by narration centered around a character sharing the same name as its author.

There is a semantic issue with both "Brody" and "Lin" on the level of genre, however, in that both pieces can be observed as either creative nonfiction essays, wherein the dialogue exists as citation and narration exists as annotation, or as fictional short stories, attempting a facsimile of lived events (thus the use of the author's own pen name within the text and the thinly veiled allusions to other authors) but with an implied distancing of speaker and author. This ambiguity of intent is key to the strength of Calloway's prose and contributes to the highly fractured reception of the pieces and her own status as a writer. "Adrien Brody," first published on

December 29th, 2011, struck a chord with many because it was crafted around a narrative that presented the scandal of reality television with the false distance of fictional literature. “Brody” is about a woman’s sexual liaison with the editor of an unspecified New York-based publication, where he cheats on his partner and espouses that his career and public-facing persona are, in mild but telling ways, fraudulent. The twist? As *Flaunt Magazine* puts it so succinctly, “The writer in the story was/still is a real writer who people in the NY Lit Scene could identify. Writer had a girlfriend. Girlfriend and other people found out identity of ‘real writer.’ Scandal caused” (Maitland). This resulted in Calloway’s microcelebrity status online. Scandal and gossip are both thematically and externally essential to “Adrien Brody,” as its online dissemination was largely proliferated through the buzz its salacious content generated. That salaciousness and controversy were balanced, however, by the piece’s overwhelmingly confessional tone, one without significant editorializing but, nonetheless, obsessed with cataloguing the interiority of its point-of-view character.

Roxane Gay, writing for *HTMLGIANT*, posits that in “Adrien Brody,” “there’s an interesting vulnerability to this writing at times, but on the whole, it doesn’t feel like writing. It feels like a writer confessing to a mirror, transcribed e-mails included. I suppose that might be the point” (Gay). This apprehension of acknowledgment is, in some ways, understandable; when observing any extended bit of writing without dialogue tags or quotation marks, the language feels automated and perfunctory, as if it exists for the sole expression of thought rather than of engagement with language. In “Adrien Brody,” this can bee seen in the way Calloway describes her time waiting for the title character:

> I examined myself in the full length mirror in the hotel room, and decided to change my clothes. I decided my legs looked too fat for the shorts I was wearing, so I put on a black pencil skirt and a blue pinstriped dress shirt to match. I thought that I would meet him

> near the subway, so I went and stood out in front of the station. I was worried about my face. I examined my face with my pocket mirror, but I didn't trust it.

The language here is functional, flat, and specific, with short declarative sentences that definitively places the speaker's stance on every single action. There is no real description of the skirt and shirt, but their significance to the speaker is clearly understood. It is unclear why Calloway's speaker does not trust her pocket mirror, but distrust is the dominant feeling in this moment. With this flatness of language, one of Calloway's major focuses in "Brody," and likewise "Jeremy Lin," is the cataloguing of the interiority of its speaker. This process of transcription is faithful to the speaker's experiences, but never interrogates it. "Confession into a mirror" is an apt metaphor, and in this passage somewhat literalized, but the hesitation towards acknowledging whether or not this is "writing," be it literary or otherwise, is not unique to Gay's analysis. While not her focus, it recalls rhetoric towards Calloway's writing catalogued in *VICE*, which features a commentator who says that her "'lazy, *Penthouse* Letters style' is 'offending to real writers'" (Carver), or even within the piece for *Flaunt*, where Calloway is described as getting "between 'Important For Our Age' and 'Waste of Time' and stay[ing] there" (Maitland). This conversation around Calloway's literary merit refuses to move forward and, with exception to Gay, so often seems a pivot away from the subjects Calloway addresses in her text. By focusing on questions of what the text is not, critics unjustly move away from what the text is, which is a prescient transcription of uncomfortably-charged sexual encounters in the era of the Internet. Moreover, through this affectation of language that is at once distanced and highly intimate, Calloway, whether intentionally or not, makes it difficult to approach the ethical questions raised by the text.

Gay argues that Calloway's own place in the dialogue surrounding the publishing and aftermath of the publication of "Adrien Brody" needs to be examined. She asks, "However

flawed he may be, did he [the titular Adrien Brody] consent to being written about in this manner? And so publicly? Would Calloway have written "Adrien Brody" if she had to use her given name?" (Gay). While the title character's name is pseudo-anonymised through celebrity reference, Calloway does also leave significant clues to his identity in the piece, including this reference to his work: "Weeks later I would read the article about fast fashion he talked about then, and when I saw that the opening line was, 'I have always thought that Forever 21 was a brilliant name' I wondered if he had written that in response to what I had said" (Calloway, "Adrien Brody"). By placing a real life allusion to a then contemporary article that is easily cross-referenced through Google, the text, because it was published online, plays into the scandal and gossip surrounding the piece, making it all too easy to find the identity of the man Calloway has "anonymously" called out. It is a dishonest move, contextually betraying the anonymity previously granted, but one that is self-reflective, prodding at online celebrity in a way that Calloway's speaker seems unable to do early in the story.

Gay makes one final argument worth considering regarding Calloway, and points to an interesting, resolutionless question regarding the ethics of such a work:

> Calloway recently deleted her blog, said she doesn't like being watched. That's not quite the impression she gives, though, through her *confessional* writing. She wants to be watched so long as she is in control of how she is watched. Unfortunately, she doesn't seem to extend that courtesy to the other people she writes about or who might be affected by what she writes. That is revealing, too (Gay).

This line of thought is important to address not just in terms of Calloway's short stories but also Tao Lin's *Richard Yates*, and it poses challenging questions relating to ethics, genre, and authorship. Is there a definable, ethical reach for writing memoir, especially memoir that masquerades as fiction? Is a man indicted in the way "Adrien Brody" does to its pseudo-titular character entitled to the same considerations an author provides for themselves? Calloway's

intentions are not of primary interest here, but what the text says about consent in ownership of stories challenges a separation of the author from the text. The ways in which "Adrien Brody" constructs and deconstructs Internet-era conceptions of celebrity, both in the micro and macro, as well as ideas around online anonymity, both through its characters and authorship, negotiate a difficult space in terms of its ethics as well as its capacity for literary analysis.

Calloway's other significant piece, "Jeremy Lin," is less about sex but no less about gender and navigating the ethics of the art world. In simplest terms, the story surrounding the publication and fallout of "Adrien Brody" is the literal plot of "Jeremy Lin." Just as in her previous story, "Lin" explores its narrator's working relationship with a character named after a celebrity as an act of pseudo-anonymization. However, it is much more quickly apparent from the chosen celebrity who the piece is about. Writing on the piece for *VICE*, Lisa Carver conjectures as to the fraught relationship between Calloway and Tao Lin, who in the text is given the pseudonym of Jeremy Lin. "After she sent him a piece of hers to publish, he started enthusiastically bossing her around: how to change her writing style, how to use other writers, how to look at things, how to be" (Carver). Calloway's speaker comes to the same conclusions, as she plainly and directly states how, "After this conversation I thought about how I admired Jeremy Lin's obvious intelligence and thoughtfulness, though I wondered if he was trying to mold my thoughts and ideas and felt uncomfortable" (Calloway, "Jeremy Lin").

Instead of the text taking an active interest in things like sex in the internet age, Calloway's focus in "Jeremy Lin" is responsive, interested in control and authorship as much as criticism; the story is centered on Calloway's feelings in the fallout of the publication of "Adrien Brody" and depicts her relationship with the publisher of that story, here named after the Taiwanese-American basketball player, but directly alluding to author Tao Lin. There is a

mentorship here but a troubled one. Carver argues that, to her, that Lin "recognized something giant in her that was still unrealized, and he seized his opportunity to go down in history as The One Who Had Her First. Writing-wise, that is. It's worse to penetrate still-forming talent than a vagina" (Carver). Parallels can be drawn between the dynamic between Calloway and Lin with other, earlier, gendered mentorship relationships, be it H.D. and Pound, Ford and Rhys, or Eliot and Haigh-Wood, but with the sexual dynamics shifted more firmly into the artistry. "I feel like I definitely come off as like I'm trying to prey on young girls and as an unseemly presence in the piece," says Lin in response to an interview referenced by the speaker as it concerned the both of them and it is telling (Calloway, "Jeremy Lin").

In Calloway's prose, the interplay of objectification and celebrity artistry, and the dilemma of the compression of the two, is expected and played into. Denise Dooley, in a review of Calloway's *What Purpose Did I Serve in Your Life*, the full-length novel that republished both "Jeremy Lin" and "Adrien Brody," argues that:

> By refusing to obscure instances of this character's passivity with retrospective narrative intent, and by continually deploying the airy tone, resistant to moralizing, Calloway preserves a sense of herself as a girl-object in a historical moment framed by service work and cultural exhaustion. (146-147)

Calloway's narrator admits to such a fascination, and in "Adrien Brody," says, "I've never been able to figure out why I get off on being used as an object." The feeling of her objectification is intensely felt in the depiction of sex in "Brody," and in her professional-come-emotional dependence on "Jeremy Lin," with the emotionally forward declaration, "Or perhaps I do need Jeremy Lin, because I know that without his emotional and public support I would have cracked. I want Jeremy Lin to like me a lot, though I don't know how much I genuinely like him as a person and how much my feelings are distorted by him being Jeremy Lin." Still, as Gay argues, Calloway admits to both only under a *nom de plume*, and does not provide nearly as much

consideration to the men she indicts, providing ample detail to name and shame them through the narratives. Calloway both faces and exerts a level of objectification in the creation of her art that is wholly dependent on the medium of delivery and who is presented as delivering it.

Still, could these stories be told without such confessions, without indictment? In 2019, when the #MeToo movement has been viral for two years (despite its coinage by Tarana Burke many years prior), conversations around consent, from many different angles, have dominated the public sphere in a unique way. These conversations are typically fueled by the same technology that enabled the stories told in Calloway's prose. This is both true within the texts and outside of them. Inside these texts, much of the communication between characters exists solely through technology, with "Jeremy Lin" also obliquely and self-reflexively referencing the type of online communities surrounding alt lit ("The day after the article came out, it was discussed on *Gawker,* a popular Internet gossip site, and *HTMLGIANT*, a popular literary site. There were hundreds of comments" (Calloway "Jeremy Lin")). Outside of the text, both of Calloway's stories were originally published online, on the websites for *Muumuu House* and *Vice* magazine. This external closeness to the depicted technologies is integral to understanding the texts and also invites a very different kind of understanding of the ethics of what exactly it is that Calloway is doing. This is a text that precipitates online concepts like "callout culture" and "receipts," providing a thinly veiled version of the real events, making the anonymity of its subjects suspect, and leaving its author intact behind pseudonyms.

At least, the author is *comparatively* intact. There is a negotiation and complication of authorship here beyond just Calloway's clout, and modernism again makes for a useful parallel. Goldman observes how literary modernism "advances the idea of the author, and therefore the celebrity, as a paradigmatic subjectivity, all the while replicating the process by which one turns

the self into an object" (11-12). Alt lit replicates this process, using this connectivity through the Internet to do so. Gay asks a question of Calloway's "Adrien Brody": "Is the story honest? Or is it a deliberate performance in service of the 'story'?" While a worthy interrogative on its own, the word that stands out the most is "performance." Because of the closely autobiographical nature of her short stories, Calloway is as much author as performer, at both the creation and curation stages. By advancing the subject and authorship of the texts into an online performance, the author becomes art object, in the way a performance becomes a cohesive part of the larger, visual art object. To understand "Adrien Brody" and "Jeremy Lin," the author needs to be comprehended as part of the art object, inseparable from the greater whole. Instead of conceiving of the voice of the author's intent as integral to the meaning or substance of the text, or conversely divorcing the author from the text wholesale when looking for meaning or messaging, the authorship surrounding a text (be it the context in which a text is published, the biographical details of an author that inform the themes put into the text, the ways in which an author has discussed the creation of a text, or the ways in which a text has been curated) needs to be recognized as part of the art object. Artistic intent and meaning are not the concerns here; what is significant is engaging with how an artist is objectified by their own work.

IV.

After allegations against multiple writers, all cisgender men, associated with alt lit regarding sexual abuse and misconduct came out in 2014, the waning interest in the genre reoriented itself around these allegations. This had the unfortunate effect of minimizing the work created by those directly affected by the actions of such men. Klara Du Plessis, writing for *Broken Pencil*, outlines this problem, suggesting that "disillusionment with the golden boys has

become synonymous with an overall dissolution of an otherwise legitimate literary movement; writers and journals have disassociated themselves from Alt Lit left, right, and center" (8). Du Plessis contextualizes this misogyny against a wider history of women's voices being marginalized in male-dominated art scenes, only to be "resuscitated years later" (8). This frustration is further cemented in the "inequity" of framing the women accusers primarily as "ex-girlfriends," which neglects the artistic value and stature of these people, as was the case in the receptions of H.D. and Jean Rhys for so long.

Similarly to the celebrity-tinged pseudonymous conventions of Calloway, Lin's *Richard Yates*, depicts a relationship between 22-year-old writer Haley Joel Osment and 16-year-old Dakota Fanning. Both characters are consistently referred to with their full names, and neither of them resemble the celebrities for who they are named beyond shared ages at the time of publication. The novel's working title, according to Lin in an interview with *Bookslut*, was *Statutory Rape* (Jones). *Yates* in many ways resembles specifically Calloway's "Jeremy Lin," which is fitting given that texts connection to Lin, but it predates the publishing of either of Calloway's pieces. "Jeremy Lin," in particular, seems to borrow this aesthetic of Lin's closely, reflecting his role in the text. The narration is in a distanced third person, but primarily orients itself around the psychology of Haley Joel Osment, who pursues Dakota Fanning, six years his younger. The text explores their sexual encounters and the growing pains of their relationship as Dakota Fanning's erratic moods and Haley Joel Osment's disaffected but controlling demeanor cause conflict. Through this conflict and their growing codependency, *Richard Yates* ultimately ends on what is presented as an upbeat note, with Haley Joel Osment sharing a Thanksgiving meal with Dakota Fanning's family. The novel has alternatively been read as fictional and as

autobiographical, or a mix of both, and this ambiguity of intent and genre complicates the story of *Richard Yates*, both the story of its text and its context.

Richard Yates has a few stylistic gimmicks that are immediately apparent on reading. Firstly, Lin's prose is heavily dependent on statement and an overwhelming sense of flatness in the language. Take, for example, this passage from early in the novel:

> At 2:00 a.m. their heads and bodies were under blankets with their lips touching but not kissing. Haley Joel Osment stared at Dakota Fanning's face. After a few minutes she kissed him with dry lips. He licked her lips and kissed her. The windows we up because Haley Joel Osment was allergic to cat hairs. Dakota Fanning usually did not put her windows up. (Lin 21)

There is a deliberate choice throughout the novel to frame all actions as definitive and factual through declarative statements. "Haley Joel Osment was allergic to cat hairs" is not a remarkable bit of writing, but it eschews any unnecessary description beyond what is the artifice of the facts, and the necessary verbage for the sentence to function. In doing this, Lin does gesture towards the power dynamics of the situation; the acquiescence to Haley Joel Osment in the scene is recreated through this biasing of him in the prose, but that isn't interrogated, or defined. Instead of engaging with, or even interrogating, this tension of the power imbalances in this story, Lin's writing instead dedicates itself towards analyzing motion and action step-by-step, as in "Haley Joel Osment Stared at Dakota Fanning's face. After a few minutes she kissed him with dry lips. He licked her lips and kissed her" (21). It is chronological and minute, but again, not elaborated upon beyond the statement of what has transpired. The result is methodical, but flat with a certain ennui to the whole affair, and this is deliberately so. There is something Stein-esque to Lin's style, more severe and stark than Calloway's short stories, but comparable. Alt lit, through these stories, appears as something presenting itself as obsessive, earnest, and rejecting of literary traditions. Any disruption of tradition is, in a gimmick-driven sense, interesting, but it has proven divisive—a review of the book in the *New York Times* states that "By the time I

reached the last 50 pages, each time the characters said they wanted to kill themselves, I knew exactly how they felt" (Bock).

The second element of *Richard Yates* that is apparent on close reading is just how technologically oriented the experience is, and this is intentionally tied to the flatness and general ennui of the narrative. The essay, "Towards a Relational Poetics: Conceptual Writing and Alt Lit" by Steven Hitchins, published in *Poetry Wales*, outlines useful aesthetic principles for alt lit. Of interest to this point, Hitchins observes how alt lit is "emerging through communities of writers promoting and publishing their work on social media networks. In its obsessive documenting of online life [...] alt lit is mostly devoted to autobiographical narratives" (1). Like the found-or-recreated excerpts of online correspondence in "Adrien Brody" or "Jeremy Lin," a significant portion of dialogue in *Richard Yates* exists in the form of online correspondence between its principle characters. The opening lines of the novel demonstrate this commitment: "'I've only had the opportunity to hold a hamster once,' said Dakota Fanning on Gmail chat" (Lin 7). When Dakota Fanning and Haley Joel Osment are not together physically, they communicate entirely through technology. Their relationship in the text is quite literally augmented and enabled through this form of correspondence. In a sense, the text can almost be read as often epistolary, but the nature of those exchanges are in many regards of troubling origin.

Because of this expression of late aughts ennui through the wholly unadorned prose and dialogue, there is a sense of immediacy and the affectation of honesty throughout the text. Hitchin describes aspects like "appropriation…through fragmentation and collage" as well as "sincerity" as other formal qualities for the genre (3). Tao Lin engages with this in a multitude of ways, from the non sequitur of an allusion to novelist Richard Yates in the title, to his alleged

usage and “theft” of the intimate email exchanges between himself and his accuser. Allie Jones, writing for *Gawke*r, reported on this, stating, “[E.R.] Kennedy says Lin statutorily raped him, was abusive, and "stole" his emails and work to write his 2010 novel Richard Yates.” Jones cites this through screenshots of now-deleted tweets by Kennedy where he states that Lin “literally copied and pasted my emails into his ‘novel’. he took credit for my words, for my painful memories, for my story [sic].”

This is a significant allegation given the weight Lin has given to these exchanges in the text. The Gmail chat correspondences between Haley Joel Osment and Dakota Fanning does key thematic and dramatic work in the text, showing an idiosyncratic sensibility with its dialogue, but also establishing the murkiness of their relationship (intentionally or otherwise). Here is a passage from early in the novel:

> “I don’t think she knows how old you are,” said Dakota Fanning. “The majority of my friends are your age and she doesn’t care. I think she thinks you’re 35 or something.”
> “Why does she think I’ll rape you?” said Haley Joel Osment.
> “She thinks everyone on the internet is out to rape everyone.”
> “What should I do,” said Haley Joel Osment.
> “You should rape me out of spite,” said Dakota Fanning. (10)

The impetus of the text is to assert agency in the younger Dakota Fanning’s character, to develop her character as being both sexually forward and in a position where she is not immediately coerced by Haley Joel Osment, who is instead depicted as submissive. Given the text surrounding this passage, and that last line of Dakota Fanning’s, this is to be observed by readers as comedic rather than unsettling, a “meet cute” of sorts, playing off of stereotypes of Internet predation. Their relationship remains consensual from the perspective of the narrative, as beyond early lampshadings of this age gap and of the tropes of predatory online relationships the text does not comment on the moral, and legal, complications within the relationship between Haley Joel Osment and Dakota Fanning. By New Jersey and New York state laws, Dakota Fanning is

depicted as of age of consent, but their relationship, with interstate travel and solicitations of sex facilitated online, are in violation of Federal Law. Debating the semantics of law, as Lin evidently did (as shown in the *Gawker* article), ignores the more troubling aspects of the relationship in the novel; Kennedy has accused Lin of abuse and rape, and the text gives ample evidence of a power imbalance between the two characters that mirrors the real life relationship it appears to be based on. One of Kennedy's tweets describes how Lin imposed himself on his eating habits: "when i was 16 tao lin accused me of binge eating after i ate 300 calories of plain soybean pasta in one sitting" (Jones). In *Richard Yates*, Lin's avatar, Haley Joel Osment, tells Dakota Fanning, the stand in for Kennedy, that "she should eat more times throughout the day and whenever hungry to prevent urges to binge-eat," before imposing a "Peanut Butter Cookie" Luna bar on her (Lin 201). The book even describes sex between the two as an exchange of "rapes," with the characters mockingly accusing each other of rape, and using that verbage to define the intercourse itself (33). Taken in the context of Kennedy's allegations, this scene depicts the act of normalizing and justifying abuse, and to ignore his perspective in any analysis of the book is to view the art object devoid of its necessary context, and to allow Lin's perspective to go unquestioned.

Beyond even these troubling allegations and the resulting ethical concerns with the text, viewing art in the full context of its time, creation, and publication is also, to Hitchins, an important consideration with alt lit on the level of genre: "Like relational art, alt lit is not just about the art object (e.g. the book), but everything that goes on around it. The catalogued documentation is part of wider social and community events [...] Like relational art, alt lit is about friendship and ethics" (6). While I think some of this is helpful in conceptualizing the necessity of context in understanding alt lit, there are a multitude of ways in which this sentiment

needs to be expanded upon. Firstly, consider how Giesbrecht (through Thompson) expresses the importance of gallery culture surrounding art: "with 'branded work . . . the role of aesthetics in judging art decreases. Paintings are described in terms of the mystique of the artist, who else collects the work, and recent prices achieved by the artist at auction'" (Giesbrecht 3). Despite differences in medium, there is agreement in the way art (and resultantly art consumption) is often defined by those external factors. In the latter case, however, this also encompasses the "mystique of the artist," or as Gay called it for Calloway, the "performance" of the author. Alt lit is not just this performance, however, but also literal, traceable histories: be it the numerous sexual assault and abuse allegations levied at prominent authors in the genre, the salaciousness of individual works like Calloway's; or even moments more benign, like the liveblogging of Megan Boyle, or the openings of small presses like *Sorry House*. These events having meaning for individual people and their collective consciousness; moreover, their existence acts to reify alt lit as a moment, and maybe that is what Hitchins is arguing. This leaves lingering questions, though: what do "friendship and ethics" mean in the face of a plurality of allegations of sexual abuse and misconduct?

As is the case with Calloway and her short stories, Lin reconstructs his authorship into an art object, in comparable but even more complicated ways given the allegations surrounding *Richard Yates*. With his interview with *Bookslut* where he provided the intentionally provocative working title *Statutory Rape* and the fact that he allegedly used real chatlogs between himself and a minor as the basis for much of the text, Lin's presentation of the novel blurs the line between presenting himself and presenting a fiction. The flatness of the narration is a means of furthering this perception, too. Beyond even the novel, though, so much of Lin's career has been this negotiation of his role as artist and his actual art objects. His self promotion has ranged from

the opening of a small press of his own, the establishment of an independent film company called *MDMAfilms*, the publishing of a book of tweets, and the defacing of *Gawker*'s offices with Britney Spears stickers. His art is not agnostic to his life, but rather it is so often informed by his life; any attempts at separating the two ignores the codependent relationship between his performance as artist and his creation of individual art objects.

Tao Lin released a new novel in 2018, titled *Trip: Psychedelics, Alienation, and Change*, to a positive review in *The New Yorker*, a place on the *LA Times* best-seller list, and a pre-release buzz article in *New York Magazine* banally titled "What Tao Lin Can't Live Without," for a section in their "'Celebrity Shopping' feature" (Maier). Writing for *Buzzfeed News*, Jakob Maier outlines the kind of press Lin's newest and how the response to the now-34-year-old writer has been that of open arms, an "uncontested return, after he was accused in 2014 of statutory rape, emotional abuse, and plagiarism." Kennedy refused to comment on Lin's resurgence in 2018, just as he had disagreed with the approach to Lin in the blogosphere in the wake of *Taipei*'s release in 2013, and his subsequent callout of Lin. That is wholly his prerogative, but Kennedy no longer has his career in literature while Lin's is somehow still celebrated. Alt lit has dissolved as a moment: Calloway's most recent publication was a nearly unnoticed short story in *Playboy* in 2016; Mira Gonzalez, a poet and writer associated with *Muumuu House* who co-authored a "book of tweets" with Lin, has left writing for the time being, instead publishing a coloring book and running the social media for *MERRY JANE*, a cannabis-culture blog; Boyle, formerly married to Lin, recently had a book published under *Tyrant*, but it is a collection of those aforementioned liveblogs primarily from 2013; the other men of alt lit accused of abuse and sexual assault have not seen resurgences. Some authors from the movement have been writing

consistently, as is the case with poet J. Jennifer Espinoza and author Noah Cicero, but there has been a collective distancing from the style of and the associations with alt lit.

As a result of this distance, alt lit, from some points of view, might look insubstantial, or unworthy of further interest: its central personalities could not sustain the genre beyond niche interest, and as a result, voices that did not rise to the level of Lin's were never really taken seriously; its literary culture is definitionally messy, with an insularity, a fixation on its specific moment in time, and more of an interest in the presentation of the art than the art itself; and, subjectively, the texts range steeply in quality, and eschew traditional qualities of writing in an attempt to capture a specific sensation for a specific kind of readership. Alt lit presents much more compelling questions, however, when looked at in conversation with larger considerations surrounding literary communities and the relationships between art objects and artists. The overextension of "the death of the author" has resulted in the dismissal of the author's voice as relevant to what a text says, and more importantly, what a text does. The prose of Calloway and Lin exemplify the unique ways in which this specific art movement has played with this delineation, and challenge that death, instead suggesting that sometimes the experiences surrounding the author are just as important to discerning meaning from a text than what the text says itself.

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