

WHY I AM NOT A FUTURIST

by Eugene Lim

[Presented at the Left Forum's panel: *The Intellectual Commons After the Book: Contemporary Experiments in Not-for-Profit Literary Publishing*]

I'll start with a few observations (some of them depressing and familiar, others perhaps less so):

Firstly, the societal recognition of the value of literature is diminishing. (So not only is reading literature happening less, we don't collectively care that it's happening less). For example, the [Common Core State Standards](#) -- which is an influential and widely accepted piece of curriculum reform for our public schools -- calls for less time spent with literature in favor of "informational texts" (a given example of one of these informational texts is a graphic called "Recommended Levels of Insulation"). In other words, our nation's educators are now successfully arguing that reading a novel or a poem is a waste of time compared to studying a chart about fiberglass.

A second observation: **Amazon has squeezed the big NY publishers so they've given up on literary publishing.** The vertically integrated behemoth Amazon.com has so threatened traditional commercial publishers that they've adapted a zero-risk tolerance in their already anemic editorial policies.

Always wary of avant-garde authors -- who were tolerated, if at all, as a kind of prestige investment -- commercial publishing now has no latitude for it. They've abandoned poetry and translation and all but shed entirely authors who write challenging prose or god forbid so-called experimental fiction.

A third observation: **Content is becoming cheaper and cheaper.** Or, more precisely said, content creators are abandoning the assumption that they'll get paid directly for their work. This is true of poetry and this is true of pornography and this is true of comedians and this is true of restaurant reviews. From across the media spectrum, content creators are giving it away.

So the digital revolution has produced some strange developments... Notably we can now get almost any form of content for free. Almost any album or movie or book, I can get for free and instantaneously. Not exactly free and not really instantaneously -- but we're approaching that asymptotic limit quickly.

The citizen-consumer lives therefore in an embarrassment of riches -- in fact it's more than an embarrassment, it's a paralysis of riches.

Everything is available, but we get overwhelmed. The choices are too numerous. So how does a person know what to read?

This is obviously not a problem *only* for the avant-garde, but for everyone. The question is how to get anyone's attention in such a crowded field.

So there's been a proliferation of content, made possible by a *lowered* cost for production and distribution. However another set of costs has risen (outside of production and distribution): that of promotion.

And so the promotional -- the curatorial and editorial -- function has risen in value and cost.

To this complex and in many ways depressing situation, I've three proposals (two obvious and one perhaps less so):

1) **Support small presses and independent and university presses.** The commercial business of publishing has all but abandoned literature. Crossover success stories are wonderful, but let's not invest too much of our time trying to woo back commercial publishers and industry publications and awards. Independent, small, and university publishing is where the present AND the future of literature is at. Important fiction writers -- like Peter Dimock, Blake Butler, Renee Gladman, Tao Lin, Gary Lutz, Miranda Mellis, Joanna Ruocco to name only a few -- are being introduced and are having their writing lives sustained by independent and small presses. So support them and give them money and buy their books. That's an obvious first step.

2) **Create and fund awards and prizes and review publications not indebted to the publishing industry and not beholden to sales.** Two times in the recent history of the National Book Award the judges bucked the trend and recognized non-commercial books: in 2004 and in 2010. Both times the industry reacted harshly and condemned the subversion of *their* interests. We need to create and validate literary works independently of the publishing business. (Ironically, this might mean endowing the prize with a high cash award to increase its visibility).

3) And thirdly and perhaps less obviously: I propose *we* should all **write more book reviews...** I think this is the more useful of the proposals only because the other two are based on philanthropic effort -- they're based on some rich person's donation -- while *this* third proposal is something we can all do:

Now why would writing books reviews help anything?

If one aspect of the technological revolution is an increasingly networked citizenry (even if that network is a commercial one like Facebook or Twitter), and another aspect of the new cybernetics is the rise of review culture seen in places like Goodreads and yelp, then one helpful response is to call upon our intelligentsia to **more purposefully participate in the crowd-sourced curating and gatekeeping.** That is, to write reviews ("substantial" ones in places like *The New Inquiry* or Rain Taxi or even mini-reviews in places like Goodreads), not so much for the reviews themselves (which, to understate it, may vary in quality) or the (rather miniscule) publicity such reviews might at first generate, but for the inculcation (in academics, their students, in writers) of the habit of critical participation in contemporary literary culture.

We have been given the infrastructure, whether we like it or not, by these new networks to create a culture. If we invest ourselves and our time, this will create the culture.

If professors and students and writers and readers become as involved in review culture as so-called foodies do on Yelp, and if we fund awards and support small presses, then within the dominant, alienating, merely-transactional, conscious-lowering consumerist culture in which we exist, literature (and in particular avant-garde writing) may once again become a salient counter force.