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THE AUTHORSHIP OF HEATH LEDGER IN THE NEW READING ENVIRONMENT; ON TAN LIN'S *HEATH: PLAGIARISM/OUTSOURCE*
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Heath: Plagiarism/Outsource by Tan Lin. Tenerife, Canary Islands, Spain: Zasterle Press, 2009. Pp. 86, full color, with numerous text blocks and photos. $15.00 paper.

Tan Lin's *Heath: Plagiarism/Outsource* is a book meant to be viewed as much as read. As the son of an artist and an English teacher, Lin has seemed, in his books and artwork, very much at home blurring the distinction between visual art and writing, but nowhere has this been more apparent than in the current book. *Heath* is a text and image environment, but even with regard to the text, the visual component is a major feature of how readers will apprehend the book's meaning. Even at first glance, it is quite obvious that most of the text has been cut and pasted directly from Web sources. There is a lot of unformatted text, reminiscent of a typical student plagiarized paper: chunks of prose copied from the Web and pasted directly into MS Word, producing irregular line breaks and showing up in Courier. The use of Courier in the book's design is particularly striking, because printers have long considered it to be the ugliest font, simply not made for use in book environments.

Additionally, the pictures in *Heath* are not "beautiful" accompaniments to the words, but present the kinds of images we have come to take for granted when reading on the Web, such as the advertising that leaps forward in pop-up messages and perpetually renews itself just inside the frame of every page. Some images in *Heath* even include the frame of

the website from which they were lifted. The overall effect is a book highly performative in its design: brazen, clumsy, and unattractive to anyone accustomed to the page arrangement and artist book formatting typically found in small-press poetry. Its appearance throws the reader out of context, throws the content back into the context its title equivocally suggests: Plagiarism/Outsource. But there is substance that reaches beyond what, for some, will appear at first to be a reckless anti-aesthetic gesture; its import becomes clear as one reads on. For one, in this work Lin is flying in the face of poetry as a staging ground for the expressive originality or the studiously politicized critical acuity of the author. It is clear that Lin doesn't intend to be read as the author and is even actively discouraging it, referencing instead something about the textual condition of the Web and the variety of engagements with language and image to be found there. All told, this is one of the most exciting books I have read in years. Provocative on issues of reading, writing, publishing, literacy, and identity, *Heath: Plagiarism/Outsource* can inspire the full range of dialogue the emerging environment of Web 2.0 requires. This new reading-writing-publishing environment is not going away, and the challenges it brings to literature, literacy, and teaching are presenced here in rich complexity.

Readers should not be surprised to find that *Heath* challenges not only the traditional standards of poetry-book production but what it even means to be a book. On the second or third page (it's hard to say which page not only because the book does not include page numbers, but also because the front matter and the colophon blend without distinction into the opening sequence) there is a description of an electronic book copied directly from Project Gutenberg, referring to ASCII as the "format in which the following text will appear." This reference sets the stage for the space of *Heath,* and so some history of ASCII will be helpful. ASCII means that no font is specified: a "plain" code for the appearance of the Western alphabet on computers, readable to all machines at any level. As Project Gutenberg originator Michael Hart explains, it has come to be known as "plain vanilla" text and is the least discriminatory in terms of who, in computer-code-reading terms, will be able to access it. As Hart says, ASCII "addresses the audience with Apples and Ataris all the way to the old homebrew Z80 computers, while an audience of Mac, UNIX and mainframers is still included." It's what came with the original e-mail environments, where there was no choice of font or style by the user—just text as it is defined at the root level of the operating system, unstyled.[1] Allegorically speaking, in *Heath* this

can be seen not only as a gesture of openness to a diverse set of readers, but also as an engagement with the history of computerized information exchange and initiatives like Project Gutenberg and what they mean in terms of what constitutes both a book and its editing, not to mention how the computerization of literary texts may change our relationship to reading.

These questions are central to *Heath,* "plagiarized" and "outsourced" as it is. At one humorous point early in the book, we find an image of a Google search result for the article "The Arts of Contingency." The text of the search result is allowed to run through the margin into the fold of the book, where it disappears before the reader can ascertain the full citation. The reader is invited to play with the idea of contingency here, to stop and consider the book's inability to contain its own material, its relationship to some larger space outside itself, like an accessory to an outfit and the fashions of the moment that define it. But while it may be true that the meaning of the text, and of every text, is contingent on the double context of its production and its reception (last year's fashions are *so* last year this year), *Heath* also intensifies the time-based nature of writing in that what enters the book is a gathering of materials from an environment dominated by reading RSS news feeds and SMS text messaging. The book's content was not wholly determined by an author, but assembled out of "what happened," including what got sold, purchased, clicked through, searched, etc., during the time of its composition, as dictated by the feeds and interests of its producer, Tan Lin.[2]

This is made obvious in two ways. First, many of the images in *Heath* have been pulled from the Google advertising environment that appeared while Lin was compiling the book. That Google's advertising is a real-time auction conducted by a series of computers across various corporate networks makes the ads a marker (and a kind of visual receipt) of the time in which the book was made. Every time one searches using Google, Google's program AdWords analyzes the search to determine which advertisers get each of the sponsored links on the results page. Advertisers, in advance of this, have bid on search terms, keywords, and prearranged a price they are willing to pay Google each time a user *clicks through* their ad. The whole process, the application, is called AdSense. So Lin's searches during the time of composition are a part of what determined the ads he was shown and hence some of what appears in the book. There is also the interesting visual effect that images from Lin's bibliographic or citational searches, such as that for "The Arts of Contingency," cannot be fully distinguished from the AdSense images,

though the underlying algorithms are distinct.[3] Second, the book's primary title, *Heath,* itself marks a contingency in that the thread it represents, on the death of Heath Ledger, arose because Ledger died during the composition of the book, and Lin began to follow the surrounding reports. In every way, it is what is being read that gets written into the book.

The formatting, title, and content of the book consistently reference the act of reading in a noncausal, real-time, language-saturated environment, and explore the ways an individual both composes and is composed by a nonrigid stream of information. Free to subscribe or unsubscribe from content providers, to draw connections, and possibly share bits of information with others, the subject of this environment becomes at once reader, author, and publisher. Text messaging enables individuals present at an event to report on that event directly to the Web in real time, framing it with an urgency and a multiplicity previously unheard of, and the RSS syndication format enables readers to gather content from blogs, online news sources, and other frequently updated websites—pulling them all into a single location, enabling a reader, as he or she surfs the Web, to also build a kind of newspaper. Here, the death of Ledger (a rumor, a contingency, an ambience, an event transmitted through such sources) became an animating source for *Heath,* the outsourced work of art. In this way, the book also foregrounds how Web 2.0 raises basic questions of subjectivity.

One of the first ways this occurs is that very early in the book we are presented with a series of Project Gutenberg descriptions of the e-text of Samuel Pepys, the famous diarist. Suggestions of both a diary and the cataloging of that diary are invoked, calling upon the reader to consider whether this book, though "plagiarized," somehow also simultaneously engages in both the intimacy of personal address and the framing of such an address by the gray and silent work of institutions, distribution platforms, and communication services. Along with Pepys, the main character, Heath Ledger—the ultimate absent subject of the moment—pops up throughout. Ledger's death and troubled life appear as a series of repetitions from news feeds and blog entries, including (of course?) the reaction of Jack Nicholson, the previous Joker-actor, amidst a growing mill of rumors and news of, or from, people gathering near the hospital. Because *Heath* takes as its material what was coming through the Web during the time Lin was composing the book at the request of publisher Manual Brito, the contingent relationship between the person of the author and the institutions, platforms, and events that give rise to his work (between "Ledger" and "Lin") stands at the

center of this book. If Heath Ledger hadn't died when he did, the book would be titled something else and all of the content would be different; but it is also true that Lin (that is, the body of work that we know as "Tan Lin") would be different. In this sense, it is Ledger who is the author of the book and Lin who is only its witness and beneficiary—accounting in part for the strange intimacy of the title, the star's first name. In this way *Heath* acts as both a kind of diary and an archive—but of who? There is a "self" in *Heath*—both a subject and an author—but they are present only through rumors, reports, data sets, and the intermittent representation of consumer choices. The subject becomes more like a quadrant of the ocean—porous, saturated, clearly marked off but strangely indefinite—not an internal experience, but an atmospheric condition produced by wavelengths, repetitions, and redundancies.

In addition to the powerful notion of speaking through others, using others to speak to/with/through, and also of being spoken to, through and with, one of the second ways subjectivity is complicated in *Heath* concerns the particular modes of ethnic subjectivity released by the text. For example, in contrast to the predominance of Web-based text sampling, one particularly lovely section, which seems to introduce the piece "Notes on Furniture and Lighting," includes a series of handwritten index cards filled out with one-sentence biographies produced by students in Lin's Asian American poetry-writing workshop. The bios explode the "Asian American" identities of the students—not only are they "from" a plethora of places in the United States and Southeast Asia, but they handle the idea of the one-sentence bio in different ways, from Helena's "Chinese American" who "has lived in many houses" to another student who opens with "Made in Taiwan," that once-ubiquitous reference from tags and labels on American products. One might think of William Carlos Williams's "pure products of America." In Williams's poem, and in this instance, there is nothing pure about it.

Lin's take on this is quite humorous compared to Williams's though, because this section of the book is introduced by the reappearance (it also appears in the earliest section of the book) of an image from an ad for Jackie Chan's "Xtra Green" green tea powdered drink mix. The image of Jackie Chan reaching out—somewhere between making a karate move and framing his own face—from the box of tea powder into the camera points to the way advertising culture makes identity cartoonish. Perhaps it's as simple as the assumption that if you like powdered green tea, you like Jackie Chan. Or perhaps the advertiser hopes the relationship between Chan and the powder will

suggest the drink packs a better punch. Whatever the case, a reader must ask the question in an environment like this: how was it that the Jackie Chan green tea ad came to Lin during the production of this work? Was Lin searching on Google for Asian American poets, and the best Google had to offer was a karate-clown movie star? Or did Lin's online subscriptions suggest an Asian American who marketers targeted as likely to want green tea? Just as my own Facebook page targets me for wrinkle cream, I assume because I filled out the profile form indicating my gender and birth date, the presence of the Chan ad here reminds us of the new level of targeted advertising made possible in Web 2.0, and its telic relationship to identity. The subject in this environment is defined by algorithms that mine an individual's available e-mails, profiles, and browsing choices to present him or her with a real-time, customized pattern of options and advertisements—a shadow identity drawing from the merest click of the trackpad. The Web environment wraps around the subject it constructs, funneling that subject ever toward a bank of choices that it thinks the subject wants to make him who he is. It is also worth noting that, as much as Chan, like Heath and Pepys, is a present, constituting subject-author here, because of their participation, the students who wrote the bios are co-authors, and the listing of their names on the back of the book honors their part in the book's production, further the complicating Lin's status as "pure" author and adding to the general notion of identity as based in the collective as opposed to the individual.

Over the years, Lin has described his various projects as attempting to bring ambient language from the environment into contemporary writing without making the reading experience difficult. In a 2005 interview on Pennsound (http://writing.upenn. edu/pennsound/x/Lin.php) with Charles Bernstein, Lin says he's long been interested in creating "not a book, but a reading environment." Though his earlier books *Lotion Bullwhip Giraffe* (2000) and *Blipsoak01* (2003) clearly develop this approach, it is far more apparent in *Heath* to the extent that this new work imports and dramatizes not only the content but also the framework of the environment in which it was composed. *Heath* produces a space that reflects multiple aspects of the information ecosystem and its impact on the contemporary sphere of cultural text and image production. More recently, Lin has said on his Tumblr (http://tanlin.tumblr.com) that he sees his work as expanding the book beyond the notion of authorship into what Jerome McGann calls "the bibliographic condition," a writing turned outward, with no pretense to originality or genius, more an index to the labor of reading that

led to the book, or a sourcebook to a diary of one person's cultural experience.[4] As Lin describes it, *Heath* provides "a series of loosely annotated notes to cultural production and reading practices conceived more generally or generically or ambiently."

The textual strategies employed in this book make clear Lin's commitment to ambient language, a transitory area of language practice, as opposed to the modern and postmodern avant-garde move of challenging the reader/listener to hang closely at the edge of the word or the line. At a talk he gave at CUNY (City University of New York)–LaGuardia Community College in April 2009, he spoke of this project as "trying to get away from difficulty" and the stress produced by the kinds of reading practices of modern and postmodern avant-garde poetries of the twentieth century. He described wanting to produce work that would be "more relaxing, more yogic." He wants readers to be relaxed, perhaps as if they are sitting in the presence of (but not exactly watching) a long, slow movie, say, Andrei Tarkovsky's *Solaris* (1972), in the late-night hours after a couple of beers, or Chris Marker's *Sans Soleil* (1983) slowed down by about 1,000 times while they are sitting on one of those new public beach chairs in Times Square on a day when almost everyone is out of town. In the Bernstein interview, Lin says, "I want people to relax, and if you

fall asleep, that's ok too." Instead of producing a text that asks readers to attend to the valences of individual words and phrases, Lin simply puts you in a computer-based language environment where you are encouraged to pay the kinds of attention you would when reading on your computer: peripheral, inconsistent, skipping around based on your interest, getting distracted.

Though the art environment of this book is both about viewing and about observing descriptions of texts and the construction of authors, there is primarily a theatrical nature to the whole project. In the first few pages of the book, there is a series of the kind of ambient, half-heard language you get entering a theater, "tickets for film programs in Theater 3 are available at the Museum lobby information desk," alerting readers that they are entering a space, and that perhaps there's a bit of a show being put on here. But the show here is no spectacle; instead it is filled with the language and images we all encounter in the everyday world of computer use, the kind of language and framing of language that we tend not to pay any attention to.

Despite Lin's claim that he wants to make reading that one could fall asleep to, I find every page of this book infinitely stimulating. But he has succeeded in his effort to create a book that is not "difficult" in the usual sense. Any-

one can pick it up and immediately recognize what is going on and talk about it, and I am certain it will provoke challenging discussions about the nature of reading, writing, and the book in the twenty-first century.

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NOTES

1. In computer-programming terms, the word *unstyled* indicates only that users cannot affect the style of the text. For example, one cannot italicize, underline, or bold characters in an ASCII environment. ASCII (American Standard Code for Information Interchange) first entered commercial use in 1963 as a seven-bit code for American Telephone & Telegraph's TWX (Teletype Wide-area eXchange) network. It was originally designed not for visual appeal, but as a purely functional, bare-bones code for text that would maximize both compression and compatibility in electrical communication. In terms of compatibility, if every machine had been let to work with a separate code, then every communication would have needed extra layers of decoding on the part of end users and been subject to error. As the use of electrical communications grew, this lack of compatibility across users would have seriously slowed things down. In terms of compression, with a telegraph, messages went out one letter at a time, and the amount of information transmittable was limited by the lack of bandwidth in the tapping armature. To make the transmission fast enough, the code needed to take up as little space as possible to accommodate these parameters. ASCII successfully met these needs for speed and easy translatability. Today, we can say the speed with which the Internet spread and grew is due to this highly efficient common underlying code and set of conventions.

2. Oddly enough, the publisher registered the copyright in Spain at the time Lin agreed to create the book, prior to all the events that fed into the content. So the time code of the book as a book appears out of synch, prescient.

3. Some images in *Heath* are neither advertising nor bibliographic search results, but are in the book to point to the problem of images on the Web in general. There are some images designed to be copied and disseminated—advertising of course wants to be disseminated as widely as possible. But many images on the Web, even though they are technically copy-able, are protected by copyright. Lin references this quite humorously by copying the image from the dialogue site for Redvers (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/User_talk:Redvers), one of the administrators of Wikipedia, who is charged with removing images that are not in line with copyright law. Redvers's page contains discussions about why certain images cannot be kept on Wikipedia, information about what kind of blocks can be placed on "malicious users," messages from and responses to users who request explanations for why their image has been removed, and Redvers's preemptive responses to users who may want to "hunt down and kill" him for removing their images. Also notable, Redvers's page image is a text and says, "Talk to Redvers Here / Post at the Bottom / Sign / I'll Reply Here / Posting Only to Annoy Me? / Don't." But if you click on the image, you'll find it's licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution 3.0, so anyone can use it, as Lin does. So, the image ecosystem in *Heath* is as complex and interrelated as the textual one.

4. It should be noted that while the reading conditions on the Web are foregrounded in *Heath,* the copying of

overheard language and print-based materials also enters into the book at several points. For example, in a section titled "Funny Games," Lin describes watching Michael Haneke's *Funny Games* and transcribing the results "in a single viewing, without pausing to correct typos or rehear what I had not been able to retain." It is also interesting that among the sections copied from Project Gutenberg are descriptions of Pepys's documentary writing practice—print based for sure.