

‘AN INTERNET BARD AT LAST!!!’: The Positive and Perverse Power of Alt-Lit Poet Steve Roggenbuck

Content warning: This paper discusses instances of and responses to grooming, emotional abuse, and sexual violence.

Introduction

“In a strict sense, I don't believe there's any definition of poetry that applies to all poets. Different poets have different goals. Different poets have different things in their hearts that they're trying to express in different ways that they want to express them. Are my videos where I'm running around in the woods talking about YOLO and dogs and dads – are these really poetry? Why call them poetry?” (Roggenbuck, [“AN INTERNET BARD”](#))

These are the words of Steve Roggenbuck, a twenty-something self-proclaimed video artist and poet who released YouTube videos from 2010 to 2017. Roggenbuck's video poems comprised clips of his stream of consciousness, often filmed while he rolled in the grass or ran through natural scenes, screaming. Amongst random – and, frankly, weird – remarks, Roggenbuck also offered words of motivation, urging viewers to appreciate nature and follow their dreams. Many videos have been edited to include musical accompaniment, green screen-facilitated backgrounds, and/or additional graphics.

Over seven years, Roggenbuck's fanbase grew larger and more devoted, with Roggenbuck being established as one of the alt-lit (alternative literature) movement's most renowned contributors. In October 2018, though, Roggenbuck's fans turned their backs to him as he confirmed allegations of sexual misconduct: allegations that followed numerous others made against alt-lit contributors. Roggenbuck makes for an interesting subject of study because he embodies various facets of digital culture: visual and aural disjointedness, conscious contempt for grammatical correctness (a poetic license, so to speak), premeditated performance of personality, and – as he has confirmed – sexual misconduct brought to light in the #MeToo moment. This paper also centers on Roggenbuck because focus on a single individual allows for deeper understanding of the particular qualities of alt-lit – and third generation e-literature (henceforth, 3G e-lit) more generally – that facilitate such behavior. An individual example allows us to concretize otherwise abstract arguments.

This paper first introduces readers to Roggenbuck's work, observing how his poetry fits within the category of 3G e-lit. It then considers how the allegations against Roggenbuck may impact interpretations of his work. It aims to start a conversation about negotiating cultural value and socially unacceptable authorial behavior with new expectations and potential issues for 3G e-lit. To use Roggenbuck's own words (Roggenbuck, ["AN INTERNET BARD"](#)): "I am the bard. I am the poet. And to be a poet while the Internet exists. Man, we got an opportunity." The 'opportunity' offered by the Internet allowed Roggenbuck to rise to fame. It was also his demise.

Although Roggenbuck has engaged with other forms of dissemination, including print and podcasting, his YouTube videos are the primary focus of this paper.

Roggenbuck's Videos as Third-Generation E-Lit

Steve Roggenbuck was born in Michigan in 1987. He earned a degree in Creative Writing from Central Michigan University, and began an MFA program at Columbia College Chicago, but did not complete his studies (Davidson). "I recently decided to drop out of my school because it had no purpose for me," Roggenbuck explains in one of his videos from 2011 (["Nobody Can Stop You"](#)). "I was just doing it. People will do things that they don't need to do. They don't need to spend time on it, but they just do it because that's what everybody does." But Roggenbuck did not seem to need an MFA to succeed online. Alongside his poetry YouTube channel – featuring 167 videos from 2010 to 2017, which at the time of writing collectively have nearly two million views – Roggenbuck also uploaded videos to another channel that features vlogs, information about his vegan lifestyle, and his *Plant Liker* podcast, which ran in 2016 (["plant liker Channel"](#)). Another podcast hosted by Roggenbuck called *Read Poetry and Eventually Die* ran from 2014 to 2015 (["Read Poetry"](#)). Roggenbuck also cofounded Boost House, a poetry publisher and vegan co-op house funded by more than \$17,000 USD of Kickstarter donations raised in 14 days at the end of 2013 (["Boost House"; Boost House](#)). Between 2010 and 2015, he released six books of poetry, most of which are still available as free e-books. In addition, Roggenbuck toured across the USA, Canada, Western Europe, and Australia, selling t-shirts adorned with snippets of his poetry along the way.

Roggenbuck is often classified as a catalyst for alt-lit: a movement broadly characterized by online self-publication, social media usage, and conscious self-reference to Internet culture. Renowned alt-lit authors include Elizabeth Ellen, Sheila Heti, and Tao Lin, among others. In a 2014 article for *The New Yorker*, Kenneth Goldsmith heralded Roggenbuck as "one of the bright stars of Alt Lit." A year later, Fan Wu (66) described Roggenbuck as a "heavy-hitter" (and, at the same time, an "Internet

maniac”). A 2016 review ([Holloway](#)) speculates that “[w]hen Alt Lit’s wiki has been finally whittled away, his [Roggenbuck’s] will be the one name left.” This same review observes that “Roggenbuck embodies, in a way virtually no other Alt Lit wordsmith does, the new sincerity,” and ends by stating that “Kate Tempest made me want to be a better poet. Steve Roggenbuck made me want to be a better human being.” While excitement for alt-lit has largely waned, the genre is perpetuated in various corners of the Web. It is also implicitly manifest in meme culture, notably the subset of the ‘image macro’: when humorous text, usually in a white blocky typeface, is placed atop a related – or perhaps purposely unrelated – image.

Roggenbuck’s work, and much of alt-lit more generally, sits comfortably in the category of 3G e-lit. As [Leo Flores](#) explains, 3G e-lit, “starting from around 2005 to the present, uses established platforms with massive user bases, such as social media networks, apps, mobile and touchscreen devices, and Web API services. This third generation [...] accounts for a massive scale of born digital work produced by and for contemporary audiences for whom digital media has become naturalized.” 3G e-lit meets audiences where they are through references to popular culture and remixes of extant content. At the same time, [Alex Saum-Pascual](#) suggests critique over continuity, noting that 3G e-lit “maintains a hyperawareness of the capitalist commodification and datafication of human experience on the Web, but relates to it in a sort of ironic, shoulder-shrug-meh, as it oscillates between defiance and conformism.” Other scholars have also argued for a critical political economy of ‘amateur’ digital artifacts like video poetry posted to popular platforms (Iribarren). Saum-Pascual observes that “purposeful amateurism is read as a critique of those other polished techno-imperialist aesthetics that make software invisible [...] or that make even hardware invisible[...]. Poor remixes, glitchy programs, patchy sites, all serve as a reaction to the cleanliness, lightness and invisible pervasiveness of the Web in our lived experience.”

Much of the praise Roggenbuck received during his popularity climax noted his ability to spark interest in poetry amongst teenage and young adult viewers through such oscillation between defiance and conformism, as well as through his ‘purposeful amateurism’. In an early video, Roggenbuck reflects upon what he considers the problems of modern poetry. “Almost every poetry book is eighty pages long,” he laments ([“am i even a poet”](#)). “Almost every poetry book is twelve-point God-dang font. Black on white. Left-aligned. I’m interested in the more flowing culture. [...] Art is the making of belief systems. [...] How can you have a belief system if all you have is eighty-page, black-on-white, twelve-point font, serifs – God help me.” As his videos were posted, Roggenbuck’s distinctive poetic style emerged and evolved to reflect this ‘flowing culture’. One video from May 2011 ([“1,000 twitter followers”](#)) begins with motivational clips of Shunryu Suzuki and Gary Vaynerchuk, transitions to Roggenbuck listing ridiculous ways to be murdered, and then ends with

Roggenbuck doing what looks to be a frenetic *Napoleon Dynamite*-inspired dance. By August 2011, Roggenbuck has started filming outside ("[How to Live Your Lief](#)"). Within only a few months, he is screaming at the camera while outdoors or in public spaces ("[Nobody Can Stop You](#)"). By 2012, his video style appears to have informed his performance style, and a video of a live poetry reading opens with Roggenbuck excitedly declaring that "I am a fucked up prick!" ("[Steve Roggenbuck at Lollapagazna](#)") The first video to showcase all of these features is dated 27 December 2011 ("[LIEF IS BEAUTIFUL](#)"), although numerous preceding videos include various combinations of these features. Roggenbuck starts using a green screen at the end of 2016, around the same time he develops his fascination with different types of clouds ("[DON'T QUIT](#)").

Teachers and researchers have observed how digital affordances are changing forms and perceptions of poetry in ways that correspond with Roggenbuck's views (Padgett and Curwood; Stuart). Moreover, many continue to question the Internet's effects on literary cultures (de Haas; Inwood; Murray; Tsaiior). Despite inconsistent conclusions, it is clear that digital technologies are changing what it means to be a poet, and what it means to read or – as per Roggenbuck's evocation of poetry's oral tradition – hear, and even see, a poem. Roggenbuck directly responded to these changes through explicit observation of the contemporary literary landscape, as well as deliberate experimentation with literary form and video editing software. For Roggenbuck, poetry is not words on a page, but the evocation of feelings that promote the interconnectedness of human experience. Roggenbuck's work is rooted in the banality of the everyday, encouraging viewers to consider both the beauty and the suffering of their own lives. At the same time, his work embraces the strangeness of mental processes and incoherent thoughts so often pushed aside in favor of rationality. Roggenbuck is, in these ways, a prime example of a 3G e-lit poet: a mass of diverse cultural influence, packaged in a performance that is both bewildering and beautiful.

Roggenbuck's aesthetic – including the misspellings in his video titles; videos; and YouTube, Twitter, and Tumblr comments and posts – distinguished him not just on the social media platforms he was using, but also within the more traditional poetic tradition that he wanted to be part of. In one of the few scholarly reviews of Roggenbuck's work, Prathna Lor (154) argues that:

Roggenbuck advocates for the reconceptualization of textual production through social media as poetic production, and he attempts to infuse poetry into every aspect of digital production as a democratizing force. Paradoxically, such attempts nonetheless perpetuate a logic of exceptionalism and the cult of celebrity. Roggenbuck's work thus provides an example of digital realism in which social media is used to produce a low poetics that is sincere and lifelike and yet ultimately fictive.

Roggenbuck establishes a powerful persona of relatability. However, as Lor acknowledges, this is indeed a persona, a consciously-crafted character. In his article about Roggenbuck, Lor identifies a

fundamental issue with the tendency towards digital realism: namely, that it is commonly straight, white, and male. In Lor's words (159), "digital realism mobilizes social media poetics as a force of democracy, but it also frequently rests on exclusionary logics of white male heterosexism. [...] The digital realism of Roggenbuck — and of alt-lit more broadly — celebrates expressions of banality, boredom, and absurdity by privileged subject positions." In *Literature in the Digital Age*, Adam Hammond similarly notes the complexity of the celebrity enjoyed by alt-lit writers, writing that "[i]f their literary productions are deliberately lazy, flat, and boring, their strategies of self-promotion are tireless and ingenious" (144). This calculated use of popular social media "[makes] the social dimensions of poetry visible to twenty-first century readers" (McGrath 142). Such use responds to the emergence of a new kind of predominately digital audience, which expects access not just to an author's works, but also to glimpses of that author's personal life and mind.

And glimpses into Roggenbuck's mind we get, however dark. Undoubtedly representing efforts to be deliberately shocking, many of Roggenbuck's videos make reference to the illuminati, Satanism, murder, or dead children. He may also insert more sexualized clips wherein he mentions kissing, sex, penises (his own, or those of others), or some combination thereof. "I will literally kiss this cake into your mouth," he declares in one video ("[me and you](#)"). "You fucking dumbass. I got my dick length notarized," he shouts in another ("[THE LOST TAPES](#)"). As time progresses, though, Roggenbuck more explicitly incorporates issues of social justice, including feminism, into his videos. In a video from 2014 ("[BE YOURSLEF, PART 3](#)"), he recommends bell hooks' *The Will to Change: Men, Masculinity, and Love*. In another from the same year (Violent J in Roggenbuck, "USE INTERLIBRARY LOAN"), he includes a clip of Violent J from musical duo Insane Clown Posse commenting on fellow musician Chris Brown: "Fuck Chris Brown. Every time they spin his shit, they're not spinning somebody else's shit, who didn't beat up a woman." These examples illustrate the manifestation of our modern zeitgeist of advocacy, the oscillation between defiance and conformism observed by Alex Saum-Pascual, in works of 3G e-lit. They also illustrate the protean nature of the human mind. Roggenbuck is consistently inconsistent in a way that affirms his personal depth to his audience.

The apparent randomness of Roggenbuck's videos make his moments of insight even more impactful. Amidst of rapid video cuts and frantic remarks, Roggenbuck inserts clips of either motivational speakers (e.g. Gary Vaynerchuk and Steve Jobs) or himself inciting critical self-reflection and, at times, uninhibited hedonism. In early videos, he touts his idea of 'boosting': encouraging people to be their best selves through acknowledgement of everyday joy, and by passionately following their dreams. In later videos, he speaks to viewers more directly. "Have I convinced you that when you breathe it is the most miraculous thing that has ever happened in history?" Roggenbuck asks in one video ("[life is right now](#)"). "Everybody dies," he declares in another ("[make](#)

[something](#)). “Make something beautiful before you are dead.” While Roggenbuck’s videos parody the chaos and bleakness of modern life, they simultaneously encourage viewers to appreciate the simplicity and wonder of grass and trees.

Interpreting Immoral Authorship

“Today some really disgusting things have been publicly exposed about past actions of mine. You can search ‘Steve Roggenbuck’ on Twitter to find the posts that I am aware of at this time,” Roggenbuck wrote in a Twitter post on 3 October 2018 ([“I’m sorry”](#)). “Many people will now look back on my ‘feminism’ as if it has been a stunt or a front, meant to deceive [sic] people. It was not a stunt. It has been a sincere effort made by a flawed person.” The tweets to which Roggenbuck refers included screenshotted messages from 2011. In the messages, Roggenbuck asks a then 16-year-old Ashley Olson if she would be interested in being his sex slave, with Roggenbuck proposing forceful sex acts ([christlover2000](#)). A feature in *The Daily Beast* details other similar accusations against Roggenbuck, exposing Roggenbuck’s repeated abuse of his celebrity status to exploit young women and trans people ([Zimmerman](#)).

Other alt-lit contributors have likewise faced claims of sexual misconduct. For example, in 2014 the editor of the now-defunct *Pop Serial* alt-lit magazine Stephen Tully Dierks was accused of sexual abuse ([Jones](#)). Soon after, Tao Lin was publicly accused of statutory rape and emotional abuse ([Tsjeng](#)). Roggenbuck took to his Tumblr blog to respond to the claims against his peers, commending victims for sharing their stories, as well as writing extensively about sexual consent. The final item on his list of consent tips is “BE AWARE OF POWER IMBALANCES” ([“content warning”](#)). Roggenbuck’s blog post about consent followed from numerous others exploring gendered lives and issues related to feminist theory and practice (for example, [“\[untitled post\]”](#)). Despite his public promotion of consent, Roggenbuck himself appeared to struggle with the concept. Of course, Roggenbuck may have now had time to reflect upon his past behaviors, and may have worked towards making more mindful decisions going forwards. What matters, though, is that his publicly-available works were produced in a context tainted by abuse, however unintentional or unrecognized. Even if he has made efforts to change his behaviors, as per his own admission, the durability of digital documentation makes it so that an analysis of Roggenbuck’s work is incomplete without recognition of his being a ‘flawed person’. Roggenbuck is not bound to the reported instances, but his poems’ contexts of creation matter because they inform our judgements of their beauty and our understandings of Roggenbuck’s authorial intentionality.

Steve Roggenbuck’s poetry was once important for its content, for its exemplification of a new generation of e-literature. Now, Steve Roggenbuck’s poetry is also important for another reason. It is

important because it serves as a starting point for a discussion about issues related to the development, dissemination, and consumption of digital artifacts: issues that will undoubtedly inform the production and reception of 3G e-lit. It exemplifies the potential darkness of digital connectivity, and of the use of the Web for new forms of interpersonal control. Alt-lit, as a digital-born literary form, was – and perhaps still is – a particularly well-paved path to such control. As Ashley Olson observed in an interview about how alt-lit may serve as a tool for underage grooming ([Iskander, Olson, and Karsavin](#)):

Alt Lit grooms because it is something on a surface level that youth could relate to, media that appears at first glance to be tailored for them. Alt Lit mimics a teenaged affect, establishes a more infantile or youthful voice to use as a vehicle for sometimes very violent or disturbing ideas, and presents these ideas alongside ones that are relatable to adolescents with total indifference.

The voice of Alt Lit is also established through its technical convention. As in the case with Roggenbuck and others, there are abundant grammatical errors, “creative misspellings,” emojis, webspeak, text that is literally copied and pasted from social media, in the attempt to convey familiarity and intimacy through a relatable, confessional mode. Readers can mistake the lack of structure and unrelenting oversharing in Alt Lit for vulnerability, authenticity, familiarity, and sincerity. This voice was integral to the public persona as well; when I was minor whom Steve solicited for sex, he never dropped the childish affect – it was utilized to mask or soften the violence of his behavior.

Flores’ formative article about 3G e-lit repeatedly stresses the accessibility of this new category. “If you count image macro memes as a kind of electronic literature, as I do, then the numbers of works produced and circulated are in the millions,” Flores writes. “The number of practitioners is equally enormous, numbering in the thousands, millions if you count image macro meme makers.” Flores’ article does not, however, recognize the social inequalities already rampant online. Certainly, 3G e-lit has the potential to engage a more a wide-ranging and diverse audience than its categorical predecessors. However, we cannot ignore the fact that certain voices are amplified online, while others are marginalized ([Robinson et al.](#)). We also cannot ignore the significance of familiarity established through remixing and popular culture references in 3G e-lit that appears in our personalized newsfeeds. We literally welcome 3G e-lit practitioners into our homes when we consume their content in domestic spaces. These practitioners exploit the sense of closeness that comes with familiar language and personalized consumption experiences for affective impact. This impact may very well be harmful, as was so in Roggenbuck’s case.

For this paper, I have applied a ‘critical reading’ approach to Roggenbuck’s work. I have watched every one of Roggenbuck’s videos, and have read most of his published works, for a deep understanding of his literary style and cultural contributions. Other scholars, however, have taken ‘critical not-reading’ approaches to problematic authors. In her explanation for “Not Reading DFW

[David Foster Wallace]" in light of Wallace's blatant misogyny in both his published works and personal life, Amy Hungerford (163) writes that "[i]n placing my reasons, and the evidence on which I base them, on the table, in suggesting the *kinds* of reasons it might be legitimate to consider as we make our best guesses about how to parcel out our reading hours, I hope to draw attention to the fact that refusal can be an intentional and transparent part of professional life for the scholar." Hungerford's choice to not read Wallace is rooted in a decision to dismiss valorization of misogynistic views perpetuated by his work and discussions about it. As Hungerford asks (155-156):

What do people want novels to do for them? What kinds of thought and meaning do literary works make available? What stories matter to a given culture at a given moment in history and what do they tell us about that culture? Wallace's works surely suggest some answers to these sorts of questions.

[...]

But with a contemporary work, a work that is still in the process of being integrated into the culture, the scholar finds herself in a different position. What if we just stop talking about such a work before it matters that much to the culture at large? Stop reading it, stop teaching it, stop studying it? What if we start suggesting something else to read instead?

Instead of giving culturally problematic works and authors lip service, Hungerford adopts an approach that emphasizes alternatives. There is, after all, so much to read, and so little time. Why focus on that which was produced by the unsavory?

Hungerford's argument is well-articulated and convincing, and provides a basis for future justifications of readerly refusal. My opposing approach, though, is driven by an answer to Hungerford's question about "[w]hat stories matter to a given culture at a given moment in history." It is not so much Roggenbuck's work that is most important here, but what Roggenbuck represents in a time of transition towards an upsurge of digitally-produced literature and Web-induced connectivity. Roggenbuck's public activity reflects many stories that matter in our culture, right now: stories about human-computer collaboration for artistic output, means of interpersonal communication, societal perceptions of consent, and questions of power dynamics in both digital and embodied space. Engaging with the corpus of Roggenbuck's work permits nuanced comprehension of how such cultural stories may influence or be influenced by this work. Not talking about such stories, or deflecting discussions with recommendations for alternatives, does not make them go away. The path towards change is paved with painful and awkward cobblestones that we must traverse to reach a more equitable destination. This is a destination that 3G e-lit practitioners and scholars should strive towards reaching, whichever road is taken.

Conclusion

This paper represents my own efforts to determine the cultural value of alt-lit poet Steve Roggenbuck's work following verified accusations of sexual misconduct made against him. It also serves as an appeal for further conversations about hermeneutic processes associated with 3G e-lit in particular: works appearing on widely-accessible platforms, often responding to contentious contemporary issues. While works of 3G e-lit may have extraordinary positive effective and affective impact, scholars must be attuned to the potentially negative social implications of 3G e-lit practice. Whose voices are heard? Whose are not? How and why? What power imbalances might 3G e-lit perpetuate or create?

Although Roggenbuck was by no means the only person forwarding the alt-lit movement in its prime, he was one of the most renowned, establishing a widespread and dedicated fanbase by personally responding to fans' comments in an eccentric and endearing way. The character he cultivated, to cite Prathna Lor (154), provided "an example of digital realism in which social media is used to produce a low poetics that is sincere and lifelike and yet ultimately fictive." While Roggenbuck's online character was promoting inclusive and feminist practices of consent, though, Roggenbuck himself seemingly struggled to do the same.

Roggenbuck was, to use his own words, an Internet bard, seizing digital opportunities for poetry production and dissemination. "And to be a poet while the Internet exists," he contemplates (Roggenbuck, "[AN INTERNET BARD](#)"). "Man, we got an opportunity." Unfortunately, Roggenbuck also seized inappropriate opportunities arising from his Internet celebrity. His choice to exercise his power in this way concluded his saga of Internet fame. This saga serves as a stark reminder of our responsibility as 3G e-lit scholars and practitioners to remain diligent in maintaining inclusive and safe literary communities for all.

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