Reading/Writing Machines
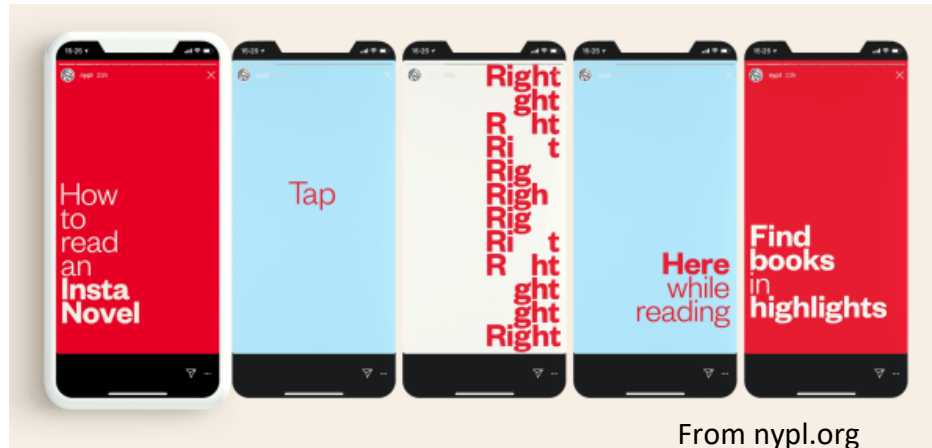# ENGL4431: Contemporary American Literature

Donal Harris (donal.harris@memphis.edu)// T/Th, 1-2:25pm // Spring 2026

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Twenty-first century literature is overwhelmed by the communication technologies that shape contemporary life. Even before the advent of ChatGPT, the possibilities and pitfalls of 'media plenitude' forced writers to consider what makes reading literature worthwhile, let alone writing it. At the same time, the rise of digital media—first computers, then the web, smartphones, e-readers, audiobooks, and now GenAI—raised questions about what exactly counts as writing, publishing, and reading a piece of fiction or poem.

This course will look at the development of twenty-first century literature in the U.S. by way of the many overlapping media technologies that shape its path from an author to, ideally, many readers or listeners. We'll survey a range of works that engage (or vehemently disengage) from our noisy, algorithmically saturated media landscape. We'll cover early attempts at algorithmic writing in the ELIZA program, web- and app-based novels like Paul LaFarge's *Luminous Airplanes* and Horowitz/Quinn's *The Silent History*, the Google-search poetry of Aran Shiriyan's *Your Country is Great*, autofiction by terminally online writers like Tao Lin, Sheila Heti, and Lauren Oyler, and human-AI 'collaborative' art by writers like K. Allado-McDowell. We'll also consider how the relatively recent rise of YA and fantasy might signal an appetite for a slower, quieter, and less-networked media ecosystem.

Course requirements: semi-regular short writings, book review or teaching portfolio, and a final research project.