

Fictocritical Cyberfeminism:  
A Paralogical Model for Post-Internet Communication

by

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## **AUTHOR'S DECLARATION**

I hereby declare that I am the sole author of this thesis. This is a true copy of the thesis, including any required final revisions, as accepted by my examiners.

I understand that my thesis may be made electronically available to the public.

## ABSTRACT

This dissertation positions the understudied and experimental writing practice of fictocriticism as an analog for the convergent and indeterminate nature of “post-Internet” communication as well a cyberfeminist technology for interfering and intervening in metanarratives of technoscience and technocapitalism that structure contemporary media. Significant theoretical valences are established between twentieth century literary works of fictocriticism and the hybrid and ephemeral modes of writing endemic to emergent, twenty-first century forms of networked communication such as social media. Through a critical theoretical understanding of *paralogy*, or that countercultural logic of deploying language outside legitimate discourses, involving various tactics of multivocity, mimesis and metagraphy, fictocriticism is explored as a self-referencing linguistic machine which exists intentionally to occupy those liminal territories “somewhere in among/between criticism, autobiography and fiction” (Hunter qtd. in Kerr 1996). Additionally, as a writing practice that originated in Canada and yet remains marginal to national and international literary scholarship, this dissertation elevates the origins and ongoing relevance of fictocriticism by mapping its shared aims and concerns onto proximal discourses of post-structuralism, cyberfeminism, network ecology, media art, the avant-garde, glitch feminism, and radical self-authorship in online environments. Theorized in such a matrix, I argue that fictocriticism represents a capacious framework for writing and reading media that embodies the self-reflexive politics of second-order cybernetic theory while disrupting the rhetoric of technoscientific and neoliberal economic forces with speech acts of calculated incoherence. Additionally, through the inclusion of my own fictocritical writing as works of research-creation that interpolate the more traditional chapters and subchapters, I theorize *and* demonstrate praxis of this distinctively indeterminate form of criticism to empirically and meaningfully juxtapose different modes of knowing and speaking about entangled matters of language, bodies, and technologies. In its conclusion, this dissertation contends that the “creative paranoia” engendered by fictocritical cyberfeminism in both print and digital media environments offers a pathway towards a more paralogical media literacy that can transform the terms and expectations of our future media ecology.

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## **PREFACE**

This dissertation utilizes the integrated or “sandwich” thesis model, where previously published materials on topics directly relating to the dissertation have been inserted as-is in place of typical chapters. These previously published journal articles and creative-critical texts are supported by a traditional introductory chapter and conclusion—the bread of the sandwich. In addition, between previously published material are short subchapters that provide additional context and establish connections to ideas presented in the introduction.

Due to the interpolated structure of the sandwich model, the reader will likely find navigating the following chapters to be a somewhat fragmentary experience in terms of shifting conceptual focus, writing voice, and tone as these change to suit different publications and audiences. However, in the peculiar case of this dissertation, which examines at-length the practice of “fictocriticism”—a so-called hybrid form of writing that is often intentionally fragmentary in form and style—some conceptual value stands to be gained by presenting the research in such a manner. In other words, formal gestures of the research materials come to be reflected in the form and structure of the dissertation, to some extent demonstrating as well as describing the practice in question.

At the time of writing this, the dissertation includes two previously published journal articles and a third that is not yet published but has been submitted for peer-review. Two non-academic texts also appear—one a piece of art criticism and the other a work of creative writing for an international online exhibition. All previously published material has been solely authored by me. Distinctive and consistent

header sections with full bibliographical information precede each previously published piece to make their insertions in the document clear.

Finally, while great care has been taken to reproduce texts in the way they originally appeared in publication, minor adjustments have been made where necessary to conform to MLA and departmental formatting standards. I have also taken the liberty to correct the occasional typo that managed to make it past the copy editor and into 'print'. I hope the reader will forgive these small discrepancies between versions.

1A.

**“In/Among/Between”**  
*or the Profound Indeterminacy of Fictocriticism*

## 1. Indeterminacy & Networked Media

Doubt and uncertainty are constitutive of the networked media environment in which we find ourselves. The rise of disinformation and “alternative facts”<sup>1</sup> since 2016, precipitated by the algorithms of social media that aggressively commodify online interaction and treat it, by design, as rote consumption, have bred an online culture replete with information silos and echo chambers (Rainie & Anderson). Noting how the increased personalization of the Internet has led millions of users to only see what they want to see, many in the humanities have suggested that we are now living in a “post-truth” or “post-factual” world (Moser; Cosentino; Kellow, Varghese & Pullanikkatil). Broadly speaking, concepts of “news” and “entertainment” are no longer mutually exclusive in experiences of networked media, where memes bookend breaking news in various feeds, and all of them are trimmed with tailored video advertisements. Labels like “true” and “false” to describe these forms of content are decreasingly reliable as these words are co-opted by the Twitter and Facebook accounts of multinational corporations and politicians to legitimate their narratives. At the same time, personal communications have generally become fuzzier in their constant straddling of physical and virtual environments and of on- and offline identities. The voice I use to post on Instagram is not the same one I use to edit my LinkedIn profile or to text my mother. But all these utterances circulate in

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<sup>1</sup> A phrase first uttered by Kellyanne Conway, then Counselor to President Donald Trump, on January 22, 2017, during an interview with Chuck Todd on NBC’s *Meet the Press*. Conway used the phrase to defend then White House Press Secretary, Sean Spicer, who had falsely inflated the size of the crowd at President Trump’s inauguration despite photographic evidence of historically low attendance. Conway was widely mocked at the time, but the phrase has since been adopted into popular culture, most often employed by the political left in the U.S. to describe misinformation campaigns by those on the political right.

concert and many in the public domain. Thus, things I write online have lives of their own which may come to complicate or contradict one another in ways I cannot possibly foresee. Add to this that much of our online communication is authored collectively, the product of many competing and even conspiring voices, and the boundaries between what is real and verifiable versus performative or fictional begin to falter.

Some have placed the blame squarely on the mimetic efficiency of contemporary technology—the sheer rate at which copies of copies can be produced and distributed through digital networks. Writing in the journal *Kritikos*, Keith Moser, building on the work of Baudrillard, has opined that an “ocean of simulacra” makes interpretation of much online content futile, for “when simulacra are *everywhere*, any frame of reference to an outside reality vanishes” (2021). However, I would argue that Moser’s critique is misplaced; mimesis is not the culprit. Rather, the problem emanates from the strict and binary logic of the assumption that there can be an “inside” versus an “outside” reality, or that one is more comprehensive in yielding truth than the other. If anything, the political and social divisions that have arisen in 21<sup>st</sup> century networked media are the result of binary oppositional thinking built into our popular understanding of media literacy<sup>2</sup>. Whether it be the sophisticated misinformation campaigns run by Russian agents during the 2016 presidential election in the United States or the weaponization of Facebook by ultranationalist

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<sup>2</sup> Media Literacy is not a unified field, and many definitions exist. Broadly, I define media literacy as the education of the public to engage critical thinking skills when consuming all forms of media, analog or digital, and to actively consider and question the ideological forces at work behind media production and distribution. For a more comprehensive definition that largely aligns with my own views, see Curiel, Daniel. “Media Literacy: Concepts, Approaches and Competencies,” in *Professional Communication & Translation Studies*, 9, 2016.

Buddhist monks in Myanmar against Rohingya Muslims, the current paradigm of teaching and practicing media literacy has been revealed time and time again as inadequate to navigate real-time online communication at a global scale.

Instead of attempting to maintain legacy categories for interpreting these media—to parse absolute truth from absolute fiction—the notion of media literacy today must evolve to adopt a critical mode of reading and writing that welcomes indeterminacy and expects entanglement, especially as we move back and forth between page and screen, analog and digital. Certainly, a more networked logic of interpretation is necessary to apprehend the distributed nature of the technologies and the corporations producing the contemporary mediascape. Of course, the public education system has a significant role to play in reorienting the aims of media literacy, exposing people from a young age to non-binary modes of perceiving and analyzing the information they encounter. And while important, pedagogy is only part of the paradigm shift that is needed, and one that takes at least a generation to bear fruit.

Rather, I want to focus on the larger apparatus preventing the adoption of a more nuanced media literacy—the ongoing presence and wide acceptance in society of binary models for structuring how we think about technology and communication. These models are embedded in the practices and cultures of computer science and engineering as well as in the economics of selling the devices necessary to participate in the networked media environment. These disciplines and industries behave like a “hangover” of the Enlightenment, perpetuating binary myths of purely objective versus subjective perspective as foundational to their narratives of

progress. This is despite an increasing awareness in the scientific community that chaos and randomness govern the smallest units of our physical universe (Lykken & Spiropulu; Johnson). Myths of simplistically binary realities, I argue, underpin the mainstream of today's scientific research and technological development. One only need look to an institution like Apple and its documented aspirations to make its own interfaces "invisible" based on the postulation that consumers "just want to be people" and not have to think about being users (Lialina). Such thinking on the public's behalf precludes the value of negotiating in-between states, filtering down into the marketing of new technologies and the media culture that consume them. Binarisms of smart versus "dumb" devices and old versus "new" media promote false equivalencies between discreet events of technological invention and revolutionary moments of societal progress.

Yet, unlike the strict binary code that operates networked media, humans remain decidedly indeterminate in our use of technologies, especially communication technologies. We introduce all kinds of in-betweenness to the networked communication equation—exaggeration, sarcasm, play—none of which can be "solved" or conclusively mapped through faster algorithmic decision trees or more robust computational ontologies. The ambiguous and the irrational are cornerstones of human communication, and this axiom is difficult to square with the determinist rhetoric pervading today's technology development climate.

In *New Dark Age: Technology and the End of the Future* (2018), writer and virtual artist James Bridle cautions his reader to raise their awareness of the



influence of “computational thinking” on their understanding of technology, and in particular the Internet, chiding that “there is no problem to solve, only collective enterprise” and to bear in mind that “nobody set out to create the network” in the first place (Ibid.). While not necessarily advocating for a laissez-faire attitude toward how the Internet is used, Bridle implores all of us to view it more adequately as a massive contingency that necessitates an “embrace of the unknowing” to fully apprehend its complexity, let alone use it effectively (Ibid.).

Taking a cue from Bridle, I want to suggest that an integral part of interacting with others through digital and networked media involves recognizing the important roles of doubt and speculation in the human dimensions of the interaction, and that doubt especially belongs at the centre of how we read and write in networked environments. In other words, the propensity to question and question often should be the baseline of our media literacy and not an adrenaline-state of fight-or-flight engagement with a given text. Stemming from indeterminacy, a doubtful literacy means foregoing a strict dichotomy between fictional and factual texts to arrive at a practice of *reading meaning through difference*, apprehending gaps and overlaps in the construction of narratives, more generally.

Ironically, we would be wise to ‘regress’ and look backward in time to a specifically doubtful practice of writing and reading that emerged in the academic peripheries of Canadian universities in the 1980s. A literature that, in both form and style, anticipated the networked logic of the media environment we find ourselves in today. Not surprisingly, the indeterminacy of *fictocriticism*, with its elision of author

and subject and abrupt shifts in voice and register, has made it difficult to classify and thus easy to dismiss. It continues to be obscure in academia, a footnote in Canadian literary discourse. However, in this dissertation I argue not only for the relevance of fictocriticism but for its salience at this particular point in the history of communications; it has something to teach us still about the value in looking for and reading meaning through differences over connections. And perhaps, fictocritical techniques provide an armature of sorts upon which to build a more adequate media literacy in networked communication contexts.

## 2. Fictocriticism: Notes Toward a Definition

In the wake of poststructuralism, postmodern theory, and the rise of digital media, many forms of writing have emerged that exploit the malleability of language and the materiality of the text to critical effect. Most of these ventures have been theoretical in motivation, done so in the interest of crafting new modes of authorship that intentionally collapse subject and object. There is the blending of memoir and fiction seen in works of autofiction from the late 1970s onward<sup>3</sup>; the anecdotal dispatches of The New Journalism movement<sup>4</sup> that developed in tandem; to the undercurrents of social and critical theory present in many works of speculative fiction

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<sup>3</sup> See the pioneering autofictional novels of Serge Doubrovsky, beginning with *Fils* (1977, Éditions Galilée); Marguerite Duras' *L'Amant* (1984, Les Éditions de Minuit); Eileen Myles' *Chelsea Girls* (1994, Black Sparrow Press); Chris Kraus' *I Love Dick* (1997, Semiotext[e]); and Bret Easton Ellis' *Lunar Park* (2005, Knopf). For a Canadian example of autofiction, see Sheila Heti's *How Should A Person Be?* (2010, House of Anansi Press).

<sup>4</sup> The most outspoken practitioner of the New Journalism was undoubtedly Tom Wolfe, who coined the term, and whose experimental opus of embedded reporting, *The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test* (1968, Farrar, Straus and Giroux), became a national bestseller and set the groundwork for the larger movement. Other notable works of new journalism include Hunter S. Thompson's *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* (1971, Random House), Joan Didion's essay collections *Slouching Towards Bethlehem* (1968, Farrar, Straus and Giroux) and *The White Album* (1979, Simon & Schuster) and Normal Mailer's 'true life novel' *The Executioner's Song* (1979, Little, Brown & Co.).

published in recent years<sup>5</sup>. But aside from those writing practices which directly engaged digital and networked media in their architectures<sup>6</sup>, few print based ‘genres’ of writing that followed the proverbial death of the author have proven so indeterminate in form or purpose as fictocriticism. This peculiar practice of writing, which “deliberately blur[s] the distinction between literature and literary-critical commentary” (King 1994) results in “a kind of...writing [that] takes place ‘somewhere in among/between criticism, autobiography and fiction,’” and makes no attempts to reconcile its generic transgressions (Hunter qtd. in King 1993 20).

Subsequently, fictocriticism is difficult to identify let alone theorize. Others before me have wisely recognized that attempting to define fictocriticism risks subjecting it to the very conventions and legitimations of academic knowledge production that it seeks to eschew (Atienza 35; Flavell 2004 5-6). Rather than providing a typology of fictocriticism, this dissertation aims only to explore the rhetorical and political significance of the indeterminacy that guides fictocritical texts and to argue for its ongoing cultural relevance in navigating an increasingly convergent and fictive mediascape. I argue across the following chapters that the indeterminate or ‘doubtful’ stance of authorship employed in works of fictocriticism since its inception forty years ago is more useful today than ever; as a self-reflexive mode of literacy, a means of political intervention, and a space of invention.

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<sup>5</sup> See William Gibson and Bruce Sterling’s masterful *The Difference Engine* (1990, Ballantine); Neal Stephenson’s *Snow Crash* (1999, Bantam Books); *Oryx and Crake* by Margaret Atwood (2003, McClelland and Stewart); and, arguably, Haruki Murakami’s *Kafka On The Shore* [English translation] (2005, Shinchosha).

<sup>6</sup> The hypertext fictions of the e-lit movement, such as Michael Joyce’s *Afternoon, a story* (1987) or Mark Amerika’s *GRAMMATRON* (1997) come to mind, as well as the software narratives of net artists working in the late 90s—Olia Lialina, Vuk Cosic, the artist collective JODI, and Shu Lea Cheang, among others.

Perhaps the first source of indeterminacy that we encounter with fictocriticism is its origin. Though the term “ficto-criticism”<sup>7</sup> was first employed by Canadian writer and cultural theorist Jeanne Randolph in 1983 to describe her own experiments in re-envisioning the rhetorical strategies of art criticism (Flavell 2009; Randolph 2020), it only came to some prominence in the early 1990s when it was introduced to and then repeated by Frederic Jameson in an interview by Andrea Ward for the Toronto journal *Impulse* (Flavell 2009). In that exchange, Jameson affirmed ficto-criticism as a useful description for the “flowing together” (qtd. in Ward 9) of narrative, poetics and criticism that he argued elsewhere were characteristic of the post-modern turn (King 1993). Jameson’s use of the term was also essential to the introduction of fictocriticism in Australia—the only other country where the practice has since persisted—when its invention was misattributed to him by Stephen Muecke and Noel King in their own formulation of the practice (1991). In studying Randolph’s oeuvre and eventually vindicating her authority over the term (2009), Helen Flavell noted the consistent “political energy” of Randolph’s “fictocritique[s]” and the overall “commitment” in the writing “to unravelling binary systems.” As such, emphasizing the personal within the political and the collapsing of subjective and objective voices, often to intense effect, should be seen as foundational motivations of any fictocritical text, regardless of geographical context<sup>8</sup>.

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<sup>7</sup> The use of a hyphen between “ficto” and “criticism” was an important typographic device to Randolph in order to “impl[y] ever so feebly, collage” and to incite a “potential for mischief and merry-making in mock-battles about whether a form of art writing or artwriting or art-writing is a unified whole, or a unified-whole or a unifiedwhole.” (2020)

<sup>8</sup> The Australian practice of fictocriticism is more closely aligned with engaging critical issues of postcolonialism, i.e., identity politics in relation to Australia’s history of systematic displacement and oppression of Maori peoples (Brewster qtd. in Atienza 35-36, Jones in Kerr & Nettelbeck, Kerr 2001 & 2003). However, I

Notable works of fictocriticism in Canadian literature include the essay collections *Psychoanalysis and Synchronized Swimming* (1991) by Randolph and *A Frozen Tongue* (1992) by Aritha van Herk; both of which strategically inflect their intellectual orientations with doubt and make use of citation as a formal cut/paste methodology. From Québec, there is also the theatrically autoethnographic novel *Main Brides* (1993) by Gail Scott, and *Mauve Desert* (1988) by the poet and feminist scholar Nicole Brossard—a novel that fictively narrates its own analysis. The pseudo-historical free-verse fiction *Ana Historic* (1988) by Vancouver poet Daphne Marlatt also merits a station in the essential Canadian fictocritical ‘canon’<sup>9</sup>.

Importantly, the aforementioned works are distinct in their formal and stylistic approaches—enough so that it initially obscures their fictocritical constellation. However, this heterogeneity of form is also paradoxically indicative of fictocriticism. Principal to the fictocritical modality is an idiosyncrasy of style that often borrows from and even mimics its subject in the interest of intervening in that particular discursive space:

For the heterogeneity of fictocritical forms bears witness to the existence of fictocriticism as a necessarily performative mode, an always singular and entirely tactical response to a particular set of problems—a very precise and local intervention, in other words. (Gibbs 2005)

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would argue that the core gesture of engendering critical empathy between self and other in fictocriticism extends beyond a particular dynamic of nations, races, communities, etc. into more general intersubjective and intertextual terms.

<sup>9</sup> More works should and could be listed here, but the list would also inevitably be insufficient. As marginal, indeterminate writing, fictocriticism often appears in very localized forms of publication that quickly enter the territory of literary ephemera—in leaflets and chapbooks, on blogs and digital magazines for “experimental genres”—making its apprehension (in both senses of the word) generally difficult, unless it garners a sizeable print run and commercial distribution in the form of a book or catalogue (in the case of art exhibitions). My ‘canon’ has been directly informed by my access (coincidental or strategic) to identifying and analyzing fictocritical texts.

The notion of fictocriticism as a local act of intervention is important for the way it frames the practice as spatial in orientation. The fictocritical text is both inimitable and derivative because it is aesthetically positioned very close to its subject matter. It is similar yet marginal and operating in parallel *in response* to its (textual) environment. This is not unlike how anthropologist Michael Taussig discusses the psychology of the human mimetic faculty. Taking a cue from the writings of Roger Caillois, in *Mimesis & Alterity* (1993) Taussig argues mimesis is not the technique of becoming similar to *an other* so much as the process of just becoming *similar* (34-41). Like blending into the background, Taussig frames the mimetic faculty as an instinctual movement into space itself—away from the specificity of self toward alterity ergo otherness.

This same tendency of ‘spacing out’ can be seen in fictocritical writing, where the role of mimesis is not to copy the object-text and reproduce it but to interface with its textual borders and “engender new differences” (Gibbs 2005). In the parlance of design, one might refer to fictocriticism as a means to “activate negative space” around and within the text; transit spaces (for the eye) that are no less constitutive of the total image. Because of this negative function, fictocriticism is reliably subtle in the most etymological sense of the word<sup>10</sup> and often dismissed as illegible or impenetrable<sup>11</sup>.

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<sup>10</sup> The English word “subtle” comes from Latin *tela* (loom, warp (threads that run lengthwise), a web). The prefix of the Latin *sub* determines the threads as being woven *under* or *beneath* the surface of the weft (threads running widthwise). Thus, “subtle” can indicate a thing that is interwoven with another but, importantly, one that also lives literally behind or beneath the layer of the sensible.

<sup>11</sup> I use this word somewhat ironically, given the influence of feminism ergo female embodiment in fictocriticism.

Fictocritical works risk falling flat in their mimetic gambits, and thus failing to register as critical acts of intervention. By that same token, however, there can be great value in training oneself as a reader to look for the subtleties of fictocritical texts, if for nothing more than to nurture a default state of doubtful interpretation and a healthy paranoia of the augmented reading experience. This is a characterization of media literacy that hypermedia theorist Stuart Moulthrop envisioned and termed “interpretive resistance” (697).

In what lies ahead, I argue that disregard or dismissal of fictocriticism is due in large part to a media literacy problem. By “media literacy” I do not mean becoming more proficient in the technical operation of digital and networked communication devices but becoming more cognizant of the entities and forces that shape their invention, marketing and use. In the West, this involves recognizing media as inherently saturated by a neoliberal mentality of technology-as-progress that is rooted in technoscientific ideology (Reynolds & Szeryszynski) as well as increasing cultural technomorphism, or the likening of human beings to machines (Winner 1977). Rhetoric of the precise, the efficient, the objective, and the new function now as quantities and commodities in and of themselves that consumers/users can supposedly possess by purchasing a device or an online membership. As a result, discourse surrounding media literacy has arguably become a mirage of uphill technical aptitude and “keeping pace” with relentless software upgrades and developments in digital media rather than recognizing that language and rhetoric are the technologies most

often weaponized by tech corporations to deceive and manipulate consumers (Tham and Hill Duin).

Fictocritical writing seeks to challenge and undermine the public perception that technology and neoliberal capitalism are naturally or otherwise logically intertwined. Randolph has previously called this underlying myth of their inevitable braiding the “technological ethos,” criticizing its foothold in the public imaginary (1983, 1984, 2020). And going forward I will refer to this same braiding of technological discourse in informing personal *and* political relations as *the technocapitalist narrative*.

Purposely crafted to avoid explication or conclusion, the fictocritical text is meant to function in a peripheral capacity to the deterministic frameworks of technocapitalism, which demand teleologies, or through lines. In counterbalance, fictocritical writing omits a clear argument or outcome that might be easily copied, packaged and consumed, making *lines of flight* instead<sup>12</sup>. Yet, significantly, a fictocritical text is no less technical in its calculated construction. The meticulous crafting of a “zone between...handy binaries” (Randolph 2020) takes a fair bit of planning and experimentation on the part of the writer. And in this respect, fictocritical works are exercises in artifice and prowess of writerly technique. But foregrounding

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<sup>12</sup> Here, I am referencing the (in)famous theoretical concept developed by Deleuze and Guattari in their two-volume work, *Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (1972, 1980). A “line of flight” is essentially defined as an ad hoc and imminent means of escape, or a trajectory to maintain growth and dispersion in avoidance of entropy and death. Its mapping challenges the grid or process of mapping a particular domain of experience or series of events and in doing so exposes the multiplicity of experience as a network of pathways. This concept inspired Marion Campbell’s fictocritical novel by the same name (1987) and also factors into the pair’s collected essays on the writings of Franz Kafka, *Kafka: Toward a Theory of Minor Literature* (1986), in which they theorize the circuitous structuring of Kafka’s narratives as lines of flight.



technicity to such an extent also magnifies any gaps or inconsistencies in technique, and in doing so every fictocritical text opens itself up to critique, drawing attention to the mechanisms as well as the motivations of its composition. As Nikki Sullivan puts it, technicity, as derived from the notion of *techne* (*teknē*), comprises “the techniques... in and through which corporealities are formed and transformed” (187). The auto-critical impulse in fictocriticism presents a ‘move’ in language away from the technocapitalist narrative in which technology is objective, purely external to self, and instead replaces it with a more Heideggerian notion of technicity where technology is the narrative of the formal techniques by which human agency becomes and extends itself into the world. To that effect, unlike Jacques Ellul’s conception of *la technique* (1954) in which technology acts as an autonomous structural force shaping our world, fictocritical technique is an animation of the text in a prosthetic gesture precisely to evince the human element in the machine.

Moreover, the forms and formatting of fictocritical texts are equally important factors in their interpretation. The techniques, analog and digital, stylistic and typographic, through which those texts are inscribed, published and distributed are indexical of the ways in which their particular technological environments construct bodies and subsequently writing subjects. A text with different fonts denoting different voices or the use of indentation to signal a simultaneous narrative reflects a media environment and writing space that is equally layered and heteroglossic while avoiding simple imitation of those technologies. This parallel logic is notable for its striking resemblance to Lyotard’s concept of *paralogy*—a term he deploys in *The*

*Postmodern Condition* (1984) to describe an unorthodox linguistic utterance in a language game; its formal obliqueness serving as a countermove to the dominant mode(s) of knowledge production and legitimation (43, 60-61, 66).

A paralogical move means side-stepping the discourse and working theoretically in the periphery. Both the mimetic faculty and the auto-critical impulse of fictocriticism can be viewed as paralogical tendencies, which, by definition, must operate abnormally and in parallel to the status quo of critical writing. On a practical level, the paralogy of fictocriticism also means that there can be no rubric or standards of form or style for what a fictocritical text looks like on the page (Brewster, Prosser, Flavell 2004). Rather, it is more productive for the purposes of this thesis to concentrate on discussing prevalent fictocritical *tactics*; methods joined in politic but not necessarily in form, and which repeat across a range of pieces, each of them working to disrupt conventions of exegesis and closure in particular ways.

A prime tactic in achieving these aims is the strategic implication of ‘others’ in the fictocritical text—other people, places, identities, and politics—that may either exist within the narrative, but more often outside the diegesis altogether, never explicitly mentioned. Often this takes form as names and pronouns that are positioned in such a way as to imply multiple characters or identities at once. This is the case in *Ana Historic*, where Marlatt uses “who” to triply signify the main protagonist, her mother, and the historical figure Mrs. Richards, as their lives overlap in a fragmented, non-linear narrative. At other times, pronouns are inflected with collective identity to remind the reader of their own complicity in the narrative’s

construction. Notable examples include the use of “we” and “our” in Randolph’s satirical science report, “50 Normal White Men” (1987) to imply consensus (with the scientists *and* with the reader) even while she argues against conformity, and the American author Carmen Maria Machado’s fictocritical memoir *In the Dream House* (2019) where the author-character transitions from narrating as ‘I’ to an almost exclusive use of ‘You’. The effect of this pronoun ‘break’ is a sudden pointing outward to the exterior of the narrative, simultaneously implicating the writer, the reader, and the ostensible other in a semi-fictional account of emotional abuse. By writing in such a way that the ‘I’, the ‘you’, the ‘we’ and ‘us’ of the writing continually signify more than one subject position, fictocriticism invokes strategic doubts about the certainty of these concepts, and it *haunts* its own reading in the interest of opening the text up to subjective interventions and moments of critical empathy (Pearl 2019).

Another fictocritical tactic is the self-conscious mixing of creative and critical registers, manifesting as a fluid movement between the informal, the poetic and the academic (Gibbs 1997). In this regard, I argue the majority of fictocritical texts can be characterized as *multivocal*, or as writing that advances two (or more) voices in parallel, and which may or may not eventually cohere. Competing voices in the text then work to convey an aporia between the poetic license of ‘creative writing’ and the purportedly objective perspectives of literary and cultural criticism. The multivocality of fictocriticism affords its writers the liberty to “not close the parentheses” around any one voice or perspective, and to conscientiously “drift” through the text,

“thereby avoid[ing] ‘the tedium of foreseeable discourse’” (Barthes qtd. in King 1994). In her essay “Theory as Praxis”, Randolph likens this approach to pulling ideas like debris from “a long slow river,” remarking:

If the theory is praxis, if my praxis is to make theory, I will not pretend that I am deleting my autobiography from that praxis. I expect, and you can expect, my autobiography to splash out in many different ways. (2003 27)

Consequently, reading fictocriticism is an equally liquid and mercurial affair. Sudden shifts in tone, register and form can easily startle the most seasoned reader and appear accidental in their juxtaposition. Reading fictocriticism means navigating text blocks like crossing currents. It requires an interpretive resistance to the braiding of technology and late capitalism as a ‘natural’ narrative in favour of an openness to a plurality of interpretations in technological qua textual engagement, to shifting subject positions and slippage (in the river).

In “Notes toward an Introduction,” from her own anthology co-edited with Heather Kerr, *The Space Between: Australian Women Writing Fictocriticism* (1998), Amanda Nettelbeck offers some ‘rules of engagement’ for how readers might approach such idiosyncratic and indeterminate texts. These include

self reflexivity [sic], the fragment, intertextuality, the bending of narrative boundaries, crossing of genres, the capacity to adapt literary forms, hybridized writing, moving between fiction (invention/speculation) and criticism (deduction/explication) of subjectivity (interiority) and objectivity (exteriority). (4)

But obviously, the unwieldiness of this list—that each of Nettelbeck’s ‘rules’ is, in effect, its own discourse within literary scholarship—in combination with its

complex composition of modalities offers little reassurance to the average reader. To recognize where and when paralogy is taking place, and how and why it might matter, requires an acute philosophy of media literacy; one of skepticism and Moulthrop's "creative paranoia" towards the message and medium at hand. And yet, one could argue that Nettelbeck's list also sounds eerily familiar in its bending of boundaries and crossing of genres, echoing many of the same moves and shifts between identities and interfaces required to navigate contemporary digital and networked media. Whether reading fictocriticism or a Facebook news feed, there is an ongoing negotiation with the text as a technology and the technological literacy to activate and engage it.

### 3. Writing As/Against Technology

...I don't share the traditional belief that there's a divorce in nature between the objectivity of the scientist and the subjectivity of the writer, as if the former were endowed with a "freedom" and the latter with a "vocation", both of them likely to spirit away or sublimate the true limits of their situation: my claim is to live to the full contradiction of my time, which can make sarcasm the condition of truth.

— Roland Barthes, *Mythologies*, 1957, xii.

Given the multimodality of writing and reading fictocriticism—operating the text as an armature of the self, or a linguistic prosthetic—is it that much of a leap to think of fictocriticism as an operational corollary of the digital age and its myriad devices? I ask this in the face of an undeniable societal move toward literally moving around and through everyday spaces with networked electronics in our ears and pockets.

Indeed, ideas of writing, reading, sharing, and access to digital technologies have grown into synonymous actions over the last forty years, amounting to a convergent writing space of socio-technical forces. Today, switching between multiple curated identities is a pastime more than a nuisance, and the general elision of fact and fiction is arguably required on some level to tolerate much of the content populating social media platforms. But these behaviours seem equally apt as descriptions of fictocritical practice. A text messaging thread written fictocritically is a deliberate concatenation of textual fragments. An edited Instagram post can be a fictocritical gesture of self-representation.

Rather than dismissing these acts of online expression on ubiquitous platforms as merely ephemeral or casual pieces of content creation, these kinds of “anti-aesthetic” media (Foster, Kerr 2003) present relevant examples of a particular critical modality for engaging our ever-evolving writing technologies; indeterminate, multi-vocal, paralogical—fictocritical. If the auto-critical impulse is indeed an interrogation of its own technicity, then would it not follow that the fictocritic, practicing in any time but especially our current epoch, is also a critic of the writing technologies available to them and their associated protocols—digital, networked, typographic?

While not immediately apparent, such an axial correlation between questions of technology and fictocriticism is evident if one considers the technological environment in which fictocritical texts first emerged. Early works by Randolph, van Herk, Marlatt and Brossard were written and published during the 1980s and early 90s amidst an ‘explosion’ of digital technologies into the workplace and at home. The

camcorder, the home video game console, the personal computer, and eventually dial-up Internet access all contributed to dissolving the monolithic status of the author in the public imaginary and bore an entirely new form of identity: the ephemeral and virtual user, who could potentially intervene and participate in the making of a text from various time-spaces (Patterson).

Not only did these rapid technological advancements work to level the proverbial field for creative-critical expression, but they also introduced new categories of subjectivity altogether, such as the cyberpunk, the gamer, the avatar, the lurker. These inherently networked forms of identity hinged on being able to shift, sometimes seamlessly sometimes abruptly, between multiple environments, interfaces, narratives and lexicons. In step with these developments in writing technologies, one finds a similarly nomadic movement between registers and identities in the narrative of fictocritical works published during that era. For instance, in Gail Scott's *Main Brides* (1993) the narrator, Lydia, is a writer who haunts the cafés along Main Street in Montréal looking for "brides" that will inspire her characters. As a result of these character-studies, Lydia's voice increasingly intermixes with the voices of her fictive protagonists, oscillating between various identities and time-spaces while she sits and sips her wine:

Across the bar, the girl (even whiter than before) is pushing aside her café au lait as if it's poison to her. Lighting a cigarette. Not that she's anorexic. Just anxious, like any normal person, because her friends are late. Melina, and the guy in black (it's hard to exclude him). He, too, lighting a cigarette as he moves along the sidewalk. Oh, he's stopped. He's leaning against a wall cajoling Melina. No. M.'s against the wall and he's leaning over her, joking. Menacing. Nanette laughs self-

consciously. But under the white skin, the high cheekbones, the dark-rimmed eyes, her jaw is set in determination to experience any sensation life brings her. The value of a mask being that of an anchor to the surface. This she knew already when, in pigtails, she moved up to her high room: that everybody had a mask, even if they weren't "dressed up." (23)

Much like bouncing from one browser window to another or from profile to profile on a social media platform, the reader gains brief, curated glimpses into the lives of others. Lydia's narration is nomadic and intersubjective with the storyline of her characters such that they function as "device[s] or armature[s]" through which "practices of the self" are invented and revealed (King 1994 15). Lydia's (and ostensibly Scott's) "brides" are effectively avatars that she dons like the masks that Lydia/Nanette is reflecting on in this excerpt.

In Chapter 2A, I explore in further detail how many works of Canadian fictocriticism are mimetic of operating and communicating through digital networked media. For now, however, I wish to focus on some antecedents of fictocritical writing that have historically informed its relationship to technology and its polemic against the technocapitalist narrative.

Foremost, the suppression of binarisms and a preference for multiplicity in fictocriticism is largely seen as stemming from the poststructuralist, feminist discourses of post-war French philosophy (Bartlett qtd. in Prosser, Flavell 2009, Gibbs 1997). Not only does this suggest that fictocriticism is a feminist writing practice at its foundation but also one generally opposed to the determinism of structuralist, technoscientific approaches to language, and in particular, the notion of a univocal



objectivity. In her landmark essay, “La rire de la méduse/Laugh of the Medusa” (1986) literary critic and feminist theorist Hélène Cixous wrote:

[W]hat I say has at least two sides and two aims: to break up, to destroy; and to foresee the unforeseeable, to project. (875)

Here, Cixous argues for women specifically to take up a more embodied practice of writing from and *through* their bodies in order to overcome the “marked writing” of phallogocentrism. Located in a logic of sexual opposition, marked writing is a negative descriptor for those metaphoric or elegiac modes of expression more closely associated with the feminine (879). The ‘two sides’ that Cixous invokes in this quote are then the bodily (feminine) ‘I’ and the typographic (masculine) ‘I’ of the written text, which have classically been opposed and irresolvable. Her call to transgress the binary logic of writing not only challenged systemic sexism in Western literature (a call that sadly resonates just as sharply now) but also put forth the provocative equation of destruction and projection as concomitant phenomena. For Cixous, and for the many feminist writers and theorists her work has inspired, to see the “unforeseeable” involves first making a reality and then “jeopardiz[ing] the status of th[at] event” by “re-presenting the sequence” (Hartman qtd. in Rosner 1). Only by risking utter decoherence in the process of writing can new possibilities for communication and representation emerge.

A particular discursive site of the technocapitalist narrative that Cixous sought to fracture with embodied writing was academia. And similarly—perhaps ironically—the majority of fictocritical writers have been professionally associated in one way or another with the academy, ostensibly adhering to the conventions of

academic writing while shirking them in alternative venues (Flavell 2011). The embeddedness of fictocriticism in academia is not all that surprising if one considers the opportunity for institutional critique. There is perhaps no better antithesis of fictocriticism than the rigidly objective voice and disembodied register of most academic writing. And what better way to trouble that “rubber-gloved quality” (Elbow qtd. in Atienza 38) than to undermine it, first by gaining access to its intellectual sphere then writing texts saturated by “subject[s] with personal interests, concerns and uncertainties” (Atienza 38)? The multivocality of Cixous’ ‘Medusa’s laugh’ suggests an autoethnographic stance to academic writing where research communication is not *ex post facto* to its subject but done *with* its subject in a self-reflexive process of “writing as research” (Gibbs 2005). In foregrounding the materiality of the critic’s voice, the rhetoric of the writing takes on even greater significance as an index of the research process, adding another critical layer of information to the text that must be parsed with feeling, not facts alone.

Also significant in Cixous’ framing of embodied writing is her invocation of projection. In writing differently and ‘destroying’ the dominant mode of writing, one also explodes its dimensions, creating new vantage points and unforeseen modes of representation at the material level of language. The open nature of interpreting such a text yields many simultaneous possibilities that exist in active paradox and contradiction. This understanding of projection assumes a kind of dialectical montage (Benjamin) is at play; a moving image-concept is cast upon a static surface and

the limits of each medium are revealed in their juxtaposition.<sup>13</sup> Anna Gibbs has characterized this dialectical dimension of institutional critique within fictocritical writing as “an attempt to surprise the paternalistic voices of theory in action, to unveil them and reveal them for the partial rather than the universal view they in fact represent” (2005). Such schisms with conventional modes of writing, especially those that break from the formulaic author-evacuation of academic writing, arguably only emerged through the purposeful abstraction and material deconstruction of the text at the letteral level—an “ecstatic” task—performed in several essays by Luce Irigaray, Claire Clément and Julie Kristeva, who, along with Cixous, established the literary-theoretical movement of *écriture féminine*.

The same penchant for reinvention via de(con)struction present in those germinal poststructuralist feminist texts echoes loudly in the formal experimentalism of many works of fictocriticism.<sup>14</sup> And the dual aim to both project and destroy arguably defines the anti-technocapitalist ambitions of the fictocritical writer. For, at the same time the fictocritic endeavours to build a compelling fictional narrative that the reader can latch onto, they are also working against this system: switching

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<sup>13</sup> Ironically, this concept of projection is not unlike the ubiquitous moment of “technical difficulty” that often occurs with literal projectors in lecture halls. How does the interpretation of the lecture differ when the images are out of sequence, or out of focus? What if the lecturer is speaking faster than slides are moving, and what do we gain from this anticipatory state of communication? In the worst-case scenario, the machine is out of commission, being actively worked on at the back of the hall, and now the lecturer is forced to go ‘off-script’—adlibbing their way through the technical difficulty. But the awkward tension of this performance is likely closer to what Cixous meant by writing serving as a means “to project”. As the lecturer fumbles their way through a nervous-funny diatribe about the ales of technological dependency, we also embark on an unforeseen Ulyssean journey of immanent discourse, with “no attempt at a ‘homecoming’” and a “holding together of what does not ‘fit’” (Derrida qtd. in Ulmer 1994 31).

<sup>14</sup> In particular, one might point to “Sheila Ayherst: Mincemeat for a Disaster” (1990) by Jeanne Randolph, which is a hybrid of recipe writing and art criticism, or her earlier “Small Diary of a Suppression” (1985) that mixes diary entries with citation, and academic writing with anecdote. See also, “Modernity” by Gail Jones (1991), “Bodies of Words” by Anna Gibbs (2005), the free-verse novella with archival interruption that is *Ana Historic*, by Daphne Marlatt (1988) and the lyrical experimentalism of Nicole Brossard and Marion Campbell.

registers, juxtaposing voices, and crafting moments of parody. These strategies actively undermine the unity of the text and make its technicity—its artificial unfolding—all the more apparent. They force the observant reader to not only take stock of the formal composition of the text as a material and performative gesture *during the reading process*, but also to sense the hesitance of the writer:

It is with great uncertainty that the fictocritical work unfolds. How to take seemingly disparate elements of story and attempt to make them into a work that wants incoherence yet demands coherence? [...] There is a desire for closure that is never met, and there is a need to give it a use value, to ask—of what use is this work? (Prosser)

Hence, fictocritical texts are always rhetorically ‘pointing’ outward to the precarious context of their own making, and their motives. Such a self-reflexive methodology is indicative, I believe, of fictocriticism’s even older historical germs in post-structuralist theoretical texts of the late 1960s, which subsequently influenced the countercultural tact of *écriture féminine*. Specifically, I refer to those essays emanating from French Deconstruction; the writings of Roland Barthes and Jacques Derrida—their distinct yet materially-motivated approaches to the text—which, according to Noel King, have greatly influenced the evolution of fictocritical writing (1994 270).

In the case of Barthes, across much of his work one can see a self-conscious fascination with shifting the writerly voice and an intentional occupation of multiple diegetic positions within the text. Similar to the aims of fictocriticism, his writing often forwent explicit argument in favour of analogy, metaphor and textual fragments of hybrid registers as a means to demonstrate his theory. Heather Kerr has remarked

that Barthes is the “exemplary practitioner” of fictocriticism, likening his adeptness to manipulate and animate language as a kind of cyborg symbiosis with the text (1996 93-94). In treating the written text as a material theory-making device, open to modulation, Barthes was able to formulate a practice of critical writing that was equally concerned with medium as message, content and form, as constitutive of the act of critique. Arguably, he best illustrated this vision in the semiotic fever dream analysis that was *S/Z* (1974). Exhibited in that vivid vivisection of de Balzac’s *Sarrasine* (1830), Barthes textually embodied, paradoxically, the “whole landscape in a bean” through a diametric and diagrammatic format of literary criticism, where semantic annotations of individual words were strategically interrupted by poetic theorizations of their tabulations (3). This juxtaposition of techniques demonstrated that the literary academic text could, in fact, withstand multiple and competing strategies for knowledge-making and interpretation. And furthermore, that the writer could “resist [...] habitual conceptions of coherence and pattern” while still crafting a critical stance (Barthes qtd. in King 1994 271).

With Derrida, his concepts of deconstruction and, even more significantly, grammatology were highly influential to many writing practices to have emerged since the 1970s. In the case of fictocriticism, one can observe a direct line between Derrida’s formulation of written language as metaphysical material and the formal experimentalism of fictocritical texts. In particular, Derrida’s notion of the *gram*, or written sign, as a legitimate signifier of its own opened up the possibility for ‘post-critical’ modes of writing that “explore[d] the literal—*letteral*—level of the language

itself, in a horizontal investigation of [its] polysemous meanings” (Ulmer 108). In doing so, Derrida established a discursive space for the praxis of writing as the literal making of theory, effectively bestowing critical writing with a creative, almost artistic function. In a seemingly anti-technoscientific stance, he argued that theory, when done purely in the service of science, regulates the critical imagination to the realm of usefulness and instrumentality—“the absolute transparence [sic] of discourse” whereas its true potential lies in an “unproductive productivity” (1982 167).

In *Margins of Philosophy*, Derrida states:

Theory, therefore, is the name of that which can neither dispense with objectification in the medium nor tolerate the slightest deformation in its subjection to the medium. There is no scientific sense (*Sinn*) without meaning (*bedeuten*), but it belongs to the essence of science to demand an unequivocality without shadow, the absolute transparence of discourse. Science would need what it needs (discourse as pure meaning) to be useless: it is only to preserve and to glance at the sense which science confers upon it. Nowhere else can discourse simultaneously be more productive and more unproductive than as an element of theory. (Ibid.)

The implication of Derrida’s statement is that theory qua critical writing may also, like visual art, retain a metaphysical space of inaccessibility that runs counter to the determinism of modern science and a technocapitalist narrative of seamless, inevitable progress. This postulation pivots on the crux that that theoretical writing can “neither dispense with objectification ... nor tolerate the slightest deformation in its subjection to the medium”—only oscillate between these extremes of positionality. This understanding of theory gives credence to the paralogy of fictocriticism in that the Derridean text is already always multivocal and indeterminate, never

pretending to make clear distinctions between sign/signifier, author/audience, writer/reader and so forth, all in the explicit interest of forcing the reader to imagine what liminal state might be possible to inhabit between them. Such liminal territory demands a closer reading precisely because it does not compute with known or explicit outcomes, only partial perspectives that remain open and *amenable* to continual subjective intervention. The real power of the gram then is to displace and defer meaning, not to locate or isolate it in a fixed position. In the spirit of Derridean deconstruction, fictocriticism mines this many-sided nature of language to pronounce the desires and human factors that go into the act of reading and interpreting texts, both as a meta-gesture of multivocality and a form of metagraphy—a writing about the very act of writing.

In her essay “The Amenable Object,” (1991), Randolph (unintentionally) takes the figurative baton from Derrida on this matter in a sort of a priori thesis to her own “ficto-critical” practice<sup>15</sup>. Reflecting on then-current trends in art criticism, she notes the hypocrisy of the entire concept. A philosophical quandary in Randolph’s mind was the common notion that the artwork, in its cultural designation as an object of perpetual psychical speculation, was reserved a unique space of amenability and “subjective intervention,” while this same quality would be denied to art criticism, or any other critical genre, despite that writing in any form must inherently involve subjective judgment. She recognized that critics were forcing artworks into theoretical systems rather than thinking “a theoretical system [that] [w]ould

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<sup>15</sup> Randolph intentionally hyphenates “ficto” and “criticism” to graph and maintain the awkward conjoining of these terms and concepts. Personal Interview, 2020.

answer to the materials, imagery, ideas and subject matter of the artwork” (2020). Randolph frames this relished territory of intersubjective engagement, whether as making or the making of theory, as the “amenability” of the artwork. As an alternative, she imagines a model of art writing that would better reflect the amenable nature of its object-text by foregrounding the subjectivity at the core of the aesthetic encounter:

It would be gripping indeed to read a critical review in which the writer is able to reveal in what way certain of his or her very own most hidden libidinal longings<sup>16</sup> are linked to the particular quality of an artwork. (24)

From this, it is fairly clear that the “The Amenable Object” was a theoretical precursor for the execution of Randolph’s own fictocritical texts. In them, she sought to bring the subjectivity of artmaking and its criticism into conceptual and practical alignment. But beyond simply foregrounding the I, Randolph’s mimetic model of criticism also endeavoured to project its own ‘window onto the world’ and exist within the same sacred space of fabulation reserved for the artist and their work, which was also paralogically the subject of the text. Her proverbial gauntlet-

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<sup>16</sup> As the title of her essay collection suggests, it is important to qualify Randolph’s theoretical position as one based in psychoanalysis. Her use of “libidinal” to describe the timbre of the subjectivity in her alternative arts writing model is surely based in Freud. However, Randolph often raises the spectre of Freud only to interrogate his concepts. In this same essay, Randolph writes about the significance of artworks to elicit “primary process”—another Freudian idiom that describes that quasi-primordial state of perception which exists before and/or briefly outside social conventions and pre-conception (1991 22). Randolph reluctantly agrees with Freud that primary process is a fundamental function of an artwork. But she quickly absconds with this theory in the pages that follow, and, again, questions why writing that responds to an art object should not also seek to engender the same “change[s] in perception [...] values or priorities,” the same “suspen[sion] ... of definitions, ignoring precedent in the form and function of things” (25).



thrown-down was this: Why have subjectivity and materiality been evacuated from art criticism, and critical writing, in general?

But, to accomplish this return to a more subject-oriented practice of criticism, there must be a loss of certainty and a deliberate stress on the reader's imagination over that of the author's (Ibid. 26). In a recent conversation I was lucky to have with van Herk, she elucidated that fictocriticism is a practice of reading more than writing, and thusly the real intervention of a fictocritical text takes place not in the fragmentation or multivocality of the writing process but in its reading. And Randolph recognized the necessity of this power shift as well; the reader would need to be a constituent of the text in its meaning-making, and the writer would need to perform less as an authority of the text than a designer of possible worlds.

Within a year of publishing "The Amenable Object," Randolph would move this theorem into practice, writing her first fictocritical catalogue essay, "Joanne Tod." Beginning with a then-unthinkable admission that Randolph, the critic, and Tod, the subject, were close friends, the essay launches into a diaristic retelling of a road trip between the writer and eponymous painter that geographically goes in circles while discursively critiquing the hypocrisy of the contemporary art world. Of course, it is left fully up to reader to decide which parts of this road trip, if any, are based in real experiences or memories. More than that, however, there is an uneasiness in the reading experience to arrive somewhere—a destination, an argument, the point stated clearly and concisely—that never materializes.

This initial foray into fictocriticism was met with equal parts enthusiasm and dismay (Randolph 2020). One of the factors that even made its gambit possible was the pre-existing friendship between Randolph and Tod—a detail that became the sticking point of skepticism for many (Ibid.). However, I would argue that the most radical aspects of the essay had little to do with what was said but what was not said. There was no mention of a gallery, or an exhibition. There was barely the mention of painting, and certainly no discussion of a literal painting:

Taughannock Falls. We strolled, viewed the cascade. One of us had asked, “What if someone decides the point in all these paintings is to distract the viewer from the conditioned simplicity of sexual allegory, itself resembling that of sexual response, so that we feel equal participation with the sexes as well as with the separate planes of art and life.” I or maybe she had added, “Painting enters into this relationship. It is both image and object. Painting mediates one to the other while delivering an image to the viewer and the viewer to the image at the same time. (105)

In response to the artworks and the painter’s general practice, Randolph invented a fictional reality in which the narrative was symbolically representative of the ideas that she wished to draw out and comment on in Tod’s work. That the two of them, as protagonists in the essay, never really arrive at their destination but nomadically drift from place to place, environs to environs in the American south, strategically mimics Tod’s long-time fixation with the history of Civil War-era portraiture and her own personal ties to what would have then been called civil rights activism, more accurately described today as black anti-racist allyship.

In whatever regard Randolph’s essay was held—blasphemy or messianic—it was an advancement in the theory of critical art writing. “Joanne Tod”

demonstrated that art writing could also inhabit that shamanic territory of world-building that art, architecture and design are otherwise granted access without scrutiny and still generate a discourse. That sacred permission to fictionalize as a means of making sense of the world through story, so freely afforded to artists and other creatives since the early Modernist period, had been quizzically denied to those writers wishing to theorize such intrinsically subjective activities. Through her fictocriticism, Randolph approached the text like a piece of found-object art or assemblage, rearranging its components and re-inventing their limits. She constructed a total system of signifiers that, while not critiquing her subject directly, re-presented it in a counter-formational act of tactical and creative response. If all forms of writing are inscription technology, then Randolph's writing machine was programmed to capture the "negative space" around its artefact and record the amenability of that space to ongoing (re)interpretation.

Ultimately, this gambit had major ramifications for critical writing in Canada and Australia that went well beyond the art world into gender studies, anthropology and postcolonial histories, spurring a diverse array of fictocritical approaches to making the reading experience more technological. Remarkably, this understanding of "technology" as not of the typical variety—rather a more basic and subtle technology of difference-making—also gave renewed relevance and significance to theories of reading literature as potentially "ergodic" affairs, or opportunities for participation in the construction of the narrative and its limitations as a text (Aarseth). For, at the heart of Randolph's then-radical practice was the not so radical idea that the

critical text could function, like a figure-eight or a string game, in an open system of recursive meaning-making with the reader—a concept better known in cybernetics as a feedback loop.

#### 4. Fictocriticism & Cybernetic Fiction: A Body, A Network, A Thesis

Within the amenable object there is the intrinsic meaning that a change in perception can initiate a future reality.

— Jeanne Randolph, “The Amenable Object” in *Psychoanalysis and Synchronized Swimming*, 1991, 32.

The ficto-criticism that Randolph envisioned could, like a circuit or a spiral, rhetorically turn back on itself, exposing its various positions and vulnerabilities as a system, a narrative, and a professional undertaking. But importantly, this turning back would be perpetual movement. Operating the text as a kind of machine assumes an ongoing “irritability” (Wiener 1948) between the states of the writing and reading processes. In re-turning the reader to the technicity of the text time and time again one might not only draw their attention to style and form as critical rhetorical gestures but also generate unforeseen connotations and a/effects. In a manner of speaking, a different future reality might emanate from a fictocritical text each time it is read, depending on the proclivities and speculations of its particular reader. Because the text is left open and indeterminate, fictocriticism can ‘respond’ to and accommodate the beliefs, fascinations, and desires of its reader in a synergistic way that argumentative phallogocentric writing cannot. The fictocritical reader

fills in the logical gaps of the text with their own subjectivity and recursively becomes situated within the act of interpretation. In this sense, the relationship of the fictocritical text to its reader endeavours to be a self-referencing and autopoietic one—a cybernetic one.

Though the mention of cybernetics often garners mixed reactions in literary scholarship (many see it as code speak for robotic limbs and dystopian futures), in its most basic understanding cybernetics is the study of control and communication in any given system. Norbert Wiener, widely considered ‘the father’ of cybernetics, developed this ‘new science’ with the input of computer engineer Julian Bigelow and physician Arturo Rosenblueth in the late 1940s as a novel research space that could house what were then several converging disciplines—mathematics, engineering, biology, psychology—all working to advance automation (Wiener 1948 2). Wiener’s conflicted participation in government contracts to develop automated military technologies led him to “the realization that the brain and the computing machine have much in common” (144), and that communication between any “closed” or ostensibly self-contained system<sup>17</sup> with another involved the same principal dynamic: oscillation between feedback and entropy. In Wiener’s vision, cybernetics would become the great science that bridged seemingly disparate domains through a universal theory of communication, whether it be in machines or animals, a community or a

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<sup>17</sup> Although we know from Bateson that cybernetic systems are both open and closed simultaneously. See “Cybernetic Explanation”, 1967, 30-31.

language (155). Writing in *The Human Use of Human Beings*, Wiener clarified communication as the lynchpin holding together all dimensions of cybernetic inquiry:

[S]ociety can only be understood through a study of the messages and the communication facilities which belong to it [...] whether human or animal or mechanical, [cybernetics] is a chapter in the theory of messages. (16)

This more comprehensive application of cybernetics was explored in the 1946-1953 Macy Conferences, in which a general theme of reflexivity pervaded discussions as disciplinarily disparate as computer programming and literary criticism. Remarkably, anthropologists Margaret Mead and Gregory Bateson would use their experiences participating in the conferences to apply cybernetic theories to ecological and social concepts, most notably adapting the “black box” analogy for studying human behaviour (Porush 54). In 1967, speaking at the inaugural meeting of the American Society for Cybernetics, Mead argued for a practice of cybernetics that went beyond reflexivity to self-reflexivity and responsibility—a cybernetics in which “circularity is taken seriously”. This was the effective birth of so-called second-order cybernetics, or

Cybernetics, when Cybernetics is subjected to the critique and the understandings of Cybernetics. It is the Cybernetics in which the role of the observer is appreciated and acknowledged rather than disguised, as had become traditional in western science. (Glanville 2003)

Not only can one draw parallels between the technological orientation of fictocriticism and the technological applications of cybernetics. But there is also a shared theoretical concern for circularity between them. In particular, the notion that the

observer (reader) is no longer “disguised” or discounted in the dynamic of interpretation but expected to intervene and even participate in the meaning-making process adeptly captures the anti-technocapitalist ethos of fictocriticism as it transgresses boundaries of consumption and production.

A few years after Mead delivered her address, a young PhD candidate at Yale named Donna Haraway would utilize some of these second-order cybernetic concepts in her biology dissertation, *The Search for Organizing Relations: An Organismic Paradigm in Twentieth-Century Developmental Biology* (1972). Haraway would, of course, go on to establish herself as a feminist critic in science and technology studies, making an illustrious career out of revealing scientific objectivity as a patriarchal myth, often employing cybernetic imagery to do so. The cyborg body of her (in)famous 1985 “Cyborg Manifesto” is after all formulated as a fluid and decidedly “local possibility” of embodied knowledge (1991 181) in antithesis to the global and unitary body of Western “technoscience.” Haraway’s reclamation/revision of the cyborg image as anti-technoscientific is one of purposeful irony. It is a “network ideological” orientation that shirks conventional understanding of networks in favour of more radically distributed ones—identities that operate on a mentality of “permanent partiality” (1991 170-173). In a sense, Haraway’s cyborg body is always already coming apart in its permeability to other modes of sensing, feeling, knowing.

In Michaela Atienza’s fictocritical essay “Strange Technology: Fictocriticism and the Cyborg,” she paralogically employs second-person ‘you’ to “invit[e] (or forc[e]) the reader to occupy the cyborg’s position,” in her text, speaking *to* the cyborg-as-

reader, embodying them within the narrative (48). This obviously contrasts with conventional technology criticism where one speaks only *of* the cyborg as an evacuated symbol (Ibid.). Rather, Atienza attempts to animate cyborg identity as a paradigm for critical thought not just about the body's relationship to technology but the interfacing of bodies and identities that occurs in the mechanics of writing and reading. In the work of Atienza as well as that of Canadian fictocritical writers, it is difficult to ignore correlations between the formal gestures of the text and the motives of Haraway's cyborg politics. Many of these threads will be teased out and examined further in Chapters 3A and 3B in the context of cyberfeminism and networked art-making. For now, however, it is sufficient to say that many feminist conceptions of second-order cybernetics equally inform the politics of fictocritical approaches, especially when it comes to foregrounding the constructed-ness of the text as a material system. Conceiving of fictocriticism as a cyborg writing practice à la Haraway also makes its paralogy more legible insofar as "permanent partiality" is typographically embodied through acts of textual fragmentation, cut/paste citation, and discordant voices. These gestures comprise a text that refuses to cohere, to be easily categorized or consumed, and thus is much harder to commodify or instrumentalize.

Remarkably concurrent with Haraway's "Cyborg Manifesto", literary theorist David Porush published *The Soft Machine* (1985), a treatise on his theory of "cybernetic fiction," which, like the cyborg writing that Haraway calls for in her manifesto, elucidates a kind of fiction that accents its own construction to critical effect. Analyzing narratives by Roussel, Vonnegut, Pynchon, Beckett and others, Porush



makes the case for recognizing a particular brand of fictional writing in these works that “presents itself as a machine, but only ironically” (19) in the interest of establishing a dialectical friction between art and technology (16-17):

The play between the expressible and the inexpressible—between logical structures of information encoded in language and the enormous, silent presence of meaning that lies behind it—is precisely the play out of which cybernetic fiction derives its force and out of which it forges the resolution between private truth and technological enframing... (83)

Amidst the rapid uptake of digital media in the 1980s and concerned with what he saw as the “threat” of first-order cybernetic concepts converging with capitalist interests, Porush positions the dialectic of cybernetic fiction as a corrective to the extreme determinism of cybernetics in the hands of state and corporate interests. Although his view comes off as cynical, even neurotic in its characterization of cybernetics as an extension of “technical assertions in the human skull” (55), Porush’s notion that fictional writing, in its exaggeration of the “mechanical and algorithmic properties” of language (19), might serve as a “counter-method” (13) or anti-technology to expose the mechanisms of technoscientific thinking is strikingly aligned with the paralogy of fictocriticism.

As such, I suggest that the theorization of cybernetic fiction is a significant temporal analog to fictocriticism and also evidence of a larger synchronicity in the development of writing as/against technology, especially in relation to the substantial growth of digital and networked technologies during that period. Like fictocriticism, Porush’s theory of cybernetic fiction seeks to exploit the very limitations and paradoxes which govern the text as a communication system. And like the serious

circularity of then emergent second-order cybernetics, cybernetic fiction demands its own inspection and deconstruction as part of the reading process. Through similar tactics of mimesis and multivocality, the fictocritical text *or* the cybernetic fiction

calls attention to itself not merely as a machine but as a fictional work. That is, either through the direct intrusion of the authorial voice or by some more complicated arrangement of formal structures, these texts signal to the reader that they are artefacts of human creation. (19)

In all facets—fictocritical, cybernetic, cyberfictional—there is a recognition of any text as the indexical sign of a human being, innately fallible as they are fabulous, and this has groundbreaking potential to contrast and combat phallogocentric writing. Both Gregory Ulmer (1994) and Anna Gibbs (2005) have argued for the value in making evident the precarity of writing as a form of practical autoethnography, a heuristic “writing as research” that

stubbornly insist[s] on the necessity of a certain *process* in these days when writing is treated by those who determine what counts as research to be a transparent medium, always somehow *after the event*, a simple 'outcome' of a research which always takes place elsewhere, in the archive, in the field or the focus group, on the web. (Gibbs 2005)

Through fictocritical approaches, the writing process becomes an index of the embodied research practice, and that embodied writing can render a “situated knowledge” of its subject which, like Cixous’ dual aims, accommodates paradox and actively acknowledges the limitations of identity, perspective, and location in an anti-technocapitalist posture (Haraway 1991 188-190).

Key to evincing this precarity in the writing is the introduction of risk to both parties (writer and reader). In Espen Aarseth’s *Cybertext* (1997) he lays out his

theory of “ergodic literature” or writing that “focuses on the mechanical organization of the text by positing the intricacies of the medium as an integral part of the literary exchange” (1). Importantly, he puts forward the axiom that the success of ergodic narratives rely on a rhetorical and formal pivot in the writing between aporia and epiphany—contradictory moments of obfuscation and reveal that engender multiple effects and outcomes (91). Aarseth specifies this sensation of risk by the reader as the “risk of rejection” (4). In other words, there is the possibility in ergodic literature that the reader will not be able to access the text in the way(s) that they expect or are necessarily prepared to endure, and an element of antagonism becomes allocated within the text as kind of agency or automaticity. Adjacently, in literary theorist Bruce Clarke’s formulation of “neocybernetics,” he notes the foundational status of “embeddedness,” or a concerted effort to represent the steady dissolve of boundaries over time that arises as a natural consequence of articulating the self within a system/environment relation (85). The further that one immerses themselves within a text, the less authority that they wield over its interpretation. Clarke effectively “demystifies the seductions of immediate or unmediated being” by reminding us that all writing is “a code through which to cognize a distinction between self and world” in which we must first acknowledge that all readable expressions of self are firstly mediated by the available technology, and we become, at least partially, *of* the text—a node in the semiotic system.

Again, fictocriticism seems to accommodate both these perspectives with relative ease. Randolph has framed her foray into “ficto-criticism” as a “rhetorical gambit”

within the realm of criticism (2020) and Heather Kerr has spoken of the political risks in attempting to write the self-as-other through fictocritical approaches, particularly in a postcolonial context (2003). But there is also the more general risk of rejection that Aarseth names. That is, the risk that the author takes on in writing in such a manner that breaks with longstanding conventions of what critical thought looks and sounds like; that they jeopardize their credibility. But there is also the risk that the reader will be discouraged, dismayed, even baffled by the paralogy of the text and simply disengage. As a cybernetic text, the reader must meet fictocriticism halfway and be willing to sustain the engagement, delaying its entropy. But by that very same token, the reader of fictocriticism loses power over (or apart) from the text as they become further involved and implicated in its interpretation. Clarke's vision of narrative as a cybernetic system that shapes our own lives as much as we influence it has perhaps no better practical home than in the serious circularity of fictocriticism.

Given these revelations, how does the writing and reading of fictocriticism come to matter in the design, use and analysis of contemporary media? Is this even possible given its historical obscurity or its opacity? And what is the role of the fictocritic in advancing this radical (re)appraisal of media literacy for the 21<sup>st</sup> century? These are obviously wide perhaps even overreaching questions. But the domain of research into fictocriticism is presently so small relative to other literary discourses that it warrants a bolder investigation and enunciation of its relevance to critical issues in media studies and media culture.

## 5. A Paralogical Model for Post-Internet Communication?

In the chapters ahead, I shed light on the value of fictocriticism in cultivating doubtful reading habits and paranoid conceptions of the text that are increasingly necessary when engaging media in a “post-Internet” world (Olsen qtd. in McHugh). Living *with* the Internet (not after it) plus its exponential swell of information means that many of the indeterminacies inherent in reading fictocriticism have become part and parcel of navigating digitally networked interfaces. With that said, the reader will notice that the scope of the first part of the dissertation is broader, interrogating “technology” and the problematic ways in which this term has become divorced from notions of embodiment and environment. This includes an in-depth discussion of mimesis as its own form of technology central to fictocritical practice and the role of ecology in reframing our understanding of communication in a networked paradigm. In contrast, the second half of the dissertation homes in on the relevance of fictocriticism to crafting paralogical narratives in online spaces and the political overlaps that join the motivations of fictocritical writing and cyberfeminist art and activism.

Importantly, inserted between and interpolating the formally traditional essays of the following chapters are fictocritical interludes. These experimental pieces are included to both explore theory in praxis and to expand the bounds of the academic dissertation as a written work involving a veritable network of voices, histories, and subjectivities. Motivating the decision to include these interludes is a conscious engagement with various expanded research practices commonly housed under the

term *research-creation*. Defined by Chapman and Sawchuk (2012) research-creation is an emergent but growing category within social sciences and humanities scholarship that “integrate[s] a creative process, experimental aesthetic component, or an artistic work as an integral part of the study” (5-6).

In the case of this dissertation, I have undertaken research creation by writing fictocriticism in order to experience and critically reflect on the process and limitations of the fictocritical tactics I theorize and use to frame my thesis. This is as much a matter of attempting to conduct a form of embodied, empirical research of my research topic as it is a subversively-motivated ambition to push against the limitations of the prescribed conventions of the dissertation ergo academic standards of writing and knowledge creation. As Chapman and Sawchuk note, research creation “can thus be read as a methodological and epistemological challenge to the argumentative form(s) that have typified much academic scholarship” (6). And my own fictocritical writing included in this document should be dually read as both a supplement and a “strong intervention” (Ibid. 21) amongst more traditional essays, interfering and space-making letterally between the schema of hegemonic knowledge production.

However, the fictocritical interludes are not simply objections or ‘non-sensical’ acts of interference—they critically, paralogically comment on ideas presented in their traditional counterparts and, at the same time, open up other avenues of thought that would otherwise be considered inappropriate to include in the traditional chapters, such as apparent shifts in voice and style, and the prioritization of

affect and phenomenological dimensions of the research topic. Seeing academic and creative-critical research as complementary processes has the potential to reveal and pronounce forms of “personally-situated knowledge” (Leavy qtd. in Chapman & Sawchuk 11) or a materially-evident, autoethnographic insight into the relation between the researcher and the topic.

Owen Chapman and Kim Sawchuk have identified four major “sub-categories” of research-creation: *research-for-creation*, *research-from-creation*, *creative presentations of research*, and *creation-as-research* (2012, 2015). Of these sub-categories, my own fictocritical texts belong to the latter, and what Chapman and Sawchuk have described as the most dubious for its reliance on an entirely internal or private process. However, as the authors note, the creation-as-research model is by equal measure almost exclusively process-driven, approaching matters of theory as “hands-on” material engagements with the topic at-hand (21). From my own subject position, as a literature and media scholar with a formal background in art and design, and a queer person who has long identified as a feminist, I felt it was necessary to not only theorize fictocritical texts through close reading and description but also attempt to create them myself to better understand how the conceptual and political motivations manifest in the writing process. I feel that this approach has been especially fruitful in thinking about fictocriticism as an embodied mode of writing that can register the qualitative dimensions of doing theory and criticism. I hope that the interludes interspersed between the following essays will issue a

productively palpable ‘shock’ of the body that complements the otherwise cerebral tone of the writing.

In Chapter 1B, “Haunted by Technology,” I begin to further explore the notion of fictocriticism as haunted writing (Gibbs 2005) and make the case that it is especially apt for critiquing the alienation that results from consuming and participating in the contemporary mediascape. I argue that the technocapitalist narrative is largely about strategic invisibility and erasure, and I draw on Walter Benjamin’s concept of the *wish-image*, among others, to elucidate how fiction and technological progress are intertwined. I also discuss how his own approach to writing critically about technology and culture often involved formal deviations from academic writing that can be interpreted as fictocritical in the present day.

For these same reasons, in the first fictocritical interlude, Chapter 1C, “Grem-lins,” I take on the persona of Benjamin in an allegorical fashion to bring his fragmented treatment of language and his ideas on presence into confrontation with a technoscientific voice and perspective. The entire piece is comprised of a single exchange between an unnamed psychotherapist and his patient, “Mr. B.,” who struggles to explain how various technologies in his apartment have been evolving. Ultimately, Mr. B. has begun to doubt his own perceptions are real and relies only on sensing difference—a thinly veiled nod to the work of both Anna Gibbs and Gregory Bateson. At times, “Mr. B.,” serves as literal annotation for Benjamin, repeating quotations from *One Way Street* or *The Arcades Project*, while at other times as a



cipher for my own voice. Through this multivocality, I/Mr. B. perform the paranoia in question in the narrative while at the same time subtly and repeatedly casting doubt on the unity and authority of the text in a fictocritical gesture.

In the second section, these same questions of alienation and authorship in relationship to technology are taken up specifically as matters of feminist materialism and feminist critiques of technoscience. As I already described, fictocriticism is grounded in a feminist tradition of literary criticism and, as a result, offers a means to identify valences between feminist critiques of science and technology and media literacy discourse via engagement with the paralogy of fictocritical texts. A guiding question might be: To what end can literacy be rethought as a feminist, fictocritical re-visioning of the present in the interest of a better future?

In Chapter 2A, “Feminist Digital Ecology: Mimesis, Fictocriticism & Altering Technological Space,” I delve into this question by looking at the ways in which fictocritical writers in Canada during the 1980s and early 90s were re-envisioning the birth of the digital age in feminist terms. I consider the role of the mimetic faculty in fictocritical texts as a manifestation of the technological environment in which they emerged and whether “fictocritical mimesis” can be considered a feminist technology for space-making and fostering betweenness. Through close readings of *Mauve Desert* by Nicole Brossard (1987) and *Places Far From Ellesmere* (1990) by Aritha van Herk, I make the case that fictocriticism affords an altering and ecological conception of our digital age in which the land and architecture are also networked spaces of nomadic identity and capacious flux, challenging divides between

technology and body, and technology and nature, both of which are essential to the propagation of a technocapitalist narrative.

In 2B, “Medusa Writing,” I shift to thinking explicitly about the connected iconographies of the Medusa, from Greek lore, and the cyborg body, as both abject and superhuman, drawing on recent writing regarding each by Donna Haraway. Through three themed sections, “tentacles,” “trespass,” and “transmission,” I suggest the conceptual overlaps between fictocriticism and Haraway’s radical ecological vocabulary of “tentacularity” are co-located under an umbrella of “medusa writing,” where textual mimesis is a boundary-crossing and material engagement with entanglement on multiple fronts.

In Chapter 2C, I attempt to demonstrate the propensity for fictocriticism to function as medusa writing in more than one way. I have intentionally included two successive fictocritical interludes, each one critiquing a categorically different object-text; the former concerned with contemporary art and the latter social science literature. These texts exhibit distinct formal strategies but analogously enact parallel narratives that trespass and ultimately transmit, sometimes cacophonously, feminist theoretical concerns into traditionally patriarchal and overtly technologized intellectual spaces such as architecture and academic conferences, respectively.

“Break-and-Enter,” is a fictocritical review of a group art exhibition mounted in Toronto in 2019 called “Undomesticated.” The show was a sprawling endeavour, filling three floors of a converted school that now serves as a multi-purpose creative hub. Of particular interest was the exhibition’s display strategy. Making little effort

to blend into the existing architecture, the show was a double intervention into the space, first through the punctuation of transit spaces and doorways with rough and unfinished construction materials, and then through the aberrance of many of the artworks themselves. Through a fictive narrative that includes autobiographical details of my own real-life encounter with a late-night intruder, I reimagine the exhibition as a literal home where the memory of the intruder is embodied in the porosity and ephemerality of the space that the artworks create. Using fictocritical mimesis, I explore the semiotics of the artworks within their environment *as a space* and a total work (*Gesamtkunstwerk*).

Ideas of medusa writing and tentacularity are perhaps more apparent in the premise of the second fictocritical text. “Cat’s Cradle with Mary Catherine Bateson,” does not describe a literal game of cat’s cradle played between me and the famous anthropologist and daughter of Gregory Bateson and Margaret Mead but utilizes the string figure game as a dialogical textual model. In an imagined, translocal encounter, Mary Catherine and I ‘weave’ an apparatus of knowledge that typographically synthesizes our research concerns, enveloping discourses of cybernetics, ecology, epistemology, and poetics. In many ways, the piece functions as a feminist re-reading—a fictocritical reading—of Bateson’s *Our Own Metaphor* (1972), a book that documents and comments on a weeklong conference on human consciousness she attended with her father in 1968. In a move of fictocritical mimesis, I exercise a sampling technique, rearranging her own voice with quotations from others at the conference, including her father, to perform a kind of reparation, integrating

Bateson's affect and intellect into the conversation and constructing a feminist digital ecology of my own by re-presenting Bateson's telling of the conference as a technological space of entanglement and transmission.

In Chapter 3A, I zero in on the connections between cyberfeminism and fictocriticism through the work of Shu Lea Cheang, a prominent filmmaker and experimental digital media artist. "Brandon Is A Network Not A Name," looks at, among other works, her ground-breaking piece, *Brandon* (1998), which was simultaneously a generative work of networked art, an installation and a performance that drew upon research into the murder of trans man Brandon Teena as well as the artist's own lived experience to create a network of indeterminate bodies and cyborg actors. I examine the overlaps in the motivations and tactics between the work of this exemplar cyberfeminist artist and the fictocritical writer, who also strives to continually put their own authority in question as an act of political transgression through strategic moments of doubt, play and complicity, crafting instances of negative feedback. Ultimately, I suggest that the two practices are interrelated in their cybernetic trouncing of binarisms and paralogical treatments of the technocapitalist narrative.

Building on notions of doubt and complicity as essentially cyberfeminist *and* fictocritical, I depart briefly from Haraway's vision alone of the cyborg in Chapter 3B, "Working for the Splice?" to look at N. Katherine Hayles' analysis and elucidation of the hyphen as a textual, material articulation of contingent and pluralistic identity which threatens the status quo. She contrasts this with imagery of the "splice" in

Bernard Wolfe's novel *Limbo* (1963) as a seamless phallogentric fantasy of cybernetic coupling. With the difference in mind of the potential between hyphen and splice, I come back to the importance of the fragment and typographic variation in fictocritical texts as crucial means to preserve in-between spaces of knowledge and identity letterally and literarily.

Chapter 3C, "Up on the Toe: Unbuilding A Body v.1.0," is perhaps the most blatant of the fictocritical interludes to exemplify the theories that come directly before it. It was written for and published in an international online exhibition called *After Progress*, co-organized and curated by faculty at Goldsmiths University and the Sociological Review Foundation. Responding to the prompt, "what comes after progress?" my fictocritical text samples and remixes lyrics from Björk's song "Vertebrae by Vertebrae," (2007) with dialogue from the animé film *Princess Mononoke* (1998) and interweaves fragments of Bernard Stiegler's *Technics & Time* (1998) to explore the theoretical un-building of the technologized body as a matter of text as much as a matter of flesh and bone. Through radically abrupt insertions and shifts in register as well as poetic interludes that rethink the body as the primary technology, I attempt to perform the same kind of radical contingency and plurality that Hayles finds so lacking in narratives of cybernetic futures and cyborg body politics.

Returning to the idea of haunted writing in Chapter 4A, "Ghost Writing the Self: Autofiction, Fictocriticism & Social Media," I suggest new and more complex relations between fictocritical tactics, narratives of mourning and performative uses of networked writing spaces, namely social media platforms. Through close readings of

Aritha van Herk's *Judith* (1978) and Carmen Maria Machado's *In the Dream House* (2019) I establish how aspects of autofictional and fictocritical writing, in particular the ambiguous or duplicitous use of pronouns, can dramatically open up the writing to critical speculation and subjective intervention, leading to a more sensitive, doubtful mode of reading. At the end of the chapter, I introduce Moulthrop's thinking on "creative paranoia" and "interpretive resistance" in detail while pointing to recent examples in contemporary art of online performances on Instagram and Twitter that utilize similar fictocritical tactics of multivocality and fragmentation, and which subsequently encourage a more attuned mode of media literacy and an understanding of online writing spaces as environments for multifariously representing the self, or "ghost writing the self."

In Chapter 4B, "Ghostly Posts," I conduct further analysis of one of the pieces cited in 4a, the online performance *Excellences and Perfections* (2014) by the Argentinian-American artist Amalia Ulman as well as the Instagram persona Toreup Incognita, whose "slideshows" of remixed memes are both curated confessions and fragmented political interventions. While being careful to outline the potential pitfalls of Ulman and Incognita's collective flirtation with the line between artmaking and deception, I outline how above all other principles it is once again a tactical employment of mimesis that allows both women to propose parallel narratives for technology use, for what social media entails, and how they challenge our interpretations and expectations of networked communication on mainstream platforms.

In the last of the fictocritical interludes, Chapter 4C, “My New Friend, Gillian,” I stay with the theme of ghostwriting the self to ruminate on notions of identity as commodity and confession as currency in the context of contemporary artmaking, where economies of circulating images transform private experience into public archival material. The narrative is written from the perspective of an anonymous participant who has agreed to take part in one of British artist Gillian Wearing’s confessional video portrait series, where strangers recount their darkest moments behind ill-fitting masks. Though exchanges between the ‘I’ of the writing and Gillian are clearly professional, often curt, and occasionally cold, the intimacy of confession and the gaze of the camera lens produce a delirious headspace where various voices interrupt and intercede, and Gillian is perceived as a “friend” and co-conspirator of the cathartic event. Stressing the materiality of the text to act as a form of excess and index for the different writing spaces in co-existence, the format shifts abruptly from prose to citation to free verse poetry to integrated e-mail transcripts, mimicking the way in which present-day platforms like Twitter and Instagram remediate and flatten multivariate forms of media into an ostensibly unified ‘story’.

Finally, in Chapter 5, “Towards a Paralogical Media Literacy,” I give a brief summation of the concerns presented in previous chapters before returning to a discussion of fictocriticism as a frame for thinking through the paralogy of online communication and a more adequate media literacy that anticipates the fictive, n-ary relations of media in a post-Internet paradigm. In an era where images circulate as “image-objects” (Vierkant) and URLs function as object-texts, fictocriticism is a

mode of operating the spaces between these terms, occupying hyphenated identities, and attempting to articulate the difference that makes a difference as a matter of agonism or risk-centred politics. I argue that an increased exposure to and engagement with fictocriticism is necessary to cultivate a more creatively paranoid and therefore paralogical mode of interpretation and knowledge production in society more broadly. I finish by posing a series of questions designed to guide further research and reaffirm the vital connection between cyberfeminist and fictocritical practices.



**1B.**

**Haunted by Technology**

In the introduction, I described fictocriticism as *haunted*. This idea was first put forward by Australian scholar Anna Gibbs (2005). It is one that I will build upon substantially in Chapters 4A and 4B to characterize practicing fictocriticism and using social media platforms as ‘ghostly’ forms of communication. At present, Gibbs’ notion of fictocriticism as a kind of “haunted writing” is best summarized as the intensive employment of multivocality within a text to produce conceptual tension in the reading experience between opposing perspectives (voices), or to draw meaningful attention to the absence of other perspectives pertinent to the narrative. For Gibbs and myself, hauntedness is a desirable attribute in a fictocritical text, because it suggests that what is not written—the *who* whom is not speaking—can play an equally integral role in the reading and interpretation of the text. If one thinks of paralogy in a visual sense, where the fictocritical text is spatially positioned in periphery to its subject, then rather than occupying the spaces between subjects, as is the case of Taussig’s space-making theory of mimesis (1993), the fictocritical writer can also craft tactical absences and adjacencies of subjects that recurrently interrupt the reading experience as textual lacunae. Just as the technocapitalist narrative is based on a rhetoric of results and high-resolution, the haunted dimension of fictocriticism calls for a low-res and patchy narrative—one that sidesteps the promise of a conclusion by textually framing and venerating void spaces in communication and knowledge production.

In the following fictocritical piece, the voids distributed across the text act as frames for the elusive concept of “technology.” The word itself seems to be just

around the figurative corner at several points in the narrative but is intentionally withheld. This is an act of textual haunting, or an enactment of being haunted by “technology” via its letteral omission. Rather than an expository thesis or use of an interrogative, the critical gesture in this work of fictocriticism is a performance of the opacity that typifies so much of contemporary technology development and marketing. Its palpable absence from the page renders it as an egregiously codified subject that nears the surface tension of inscription but ultimately evades it.

As I have previously suggested, the current confluence between accelerated technological development and neoliberal capitalism in the West has worked to cast technology as a ‘natural’ force, therefore naturally evolving rather than being actively shaped by corporate interests and institutional dogma. Additionally, as Langdon Winner points out in his book *Autonomous Technology* (1977) “in a fundamental sense...determining things is what technology is all about” (75). So, while it is certainly not inevitable that profit and tech innovation must coincide, a society that determines itself must establish a common base of knowledge and practices, and it must do so technologically (Ibid.). However, the danger comes when the structural conditions of using and inventing technology become the sole means of economic development, leading to a public imaginary that confuses gods with machines and innovation with invention.

A warning bell about this very confluence of forces came from historian David Nye (2004) who found that tendencies of mythmaking about technological advancements such as the axe and the mill in Protestant colonial America as God-given

creations could just as easily be applied to the faithful consumption and adoption of digital networked media today. After all, it was not so long ago that the invention of the Internet was seen as an “inevitable” culmination of the democratic aspects of modern technology; a view which media theorist David Weinburger has argued was actually its own breed of misguided “technodeterminism” (2015).

I heed Nye’s point here to highlight that technological progress is always complicated by humanity’s obsession with narrative and the narrativization of new media. The rhetoric, verbal and visual, surrounding digital and networked media today of “slick” and “compact” designs with “seamless performance” promotes a duplicitous understanding of newer technology that affords it to be opaque—operationally and aesthetically—while at the same more ‘transparent’ in its gradual integration with our bodies and built environments. As much as computers and mobile networked devices are becoming ubiquitous, they are also becoming invisible (Lialina 11), paradoxically getting smaller, thinner, and lighter. And this disappearing act allows for the average user to become increasingly ignorant and compliant to their presence. For mega tech companies like Apple, invisibility has become enshrined as a guiding principle for development, fuelled by the mystical notion that “technology is at its very best when [...] you are conscious only of what you are doing, not the device you are doing it with... (qtd. in Lialina 12).

Rather than focus on arguing the merits of either an opaque or transparent philosophy of technology, however, fictocritical writing works to eschew that oppositional dynamic, opting instead for paralogy and the creation of a parallel model for

expressing the interplay of opacity and transparency as a dialectic of technological engagement. It is a means of analysis and critique via allegorical construction, not teleological argument. Thus, concepts become embodied in the narrative's characters, with layered voices that often quote from other texts, identities, and time-spaces, sometimes analogously but often disparately. And the narrative's setting as well as the writing style, including its fluctuation, take on serious interpretive value as constituents of the 'best' possible reality within which the ensuing dialogue takes place. Moreover, because the creation of "possible worlds" within fictional narratives "give[s] concrete content to modal distinction[s] between necessity and possibility" a fictional narrative based in theoretical inquiry can render critical knowledge of essential relations between entities regardless of the degree to which those entities are accurately represented (Ronen 356).

Accordingly, in the piece that follows I have chosen to represent aspects of Walter Benjamin's theories and writings in a way that most would hesitate to characterize as "accurate". This is not to say that I have misquoted or misattributed any of his material, but rather that I have selectively employed quotations and ideas in a way that emphasize them *as material*, i.e., in a manner akin to collage or digital remix where they can be freely reorganized, inserted, truncated, etc., for semiotic effect and for the sake of intellectual provocation. The disjunctures between the referential or 'factual' aspects of that material and the fictional elements of the narrative craft meaningful instances of contrast and tension meant to call attention to their materiality ergo technicity as much as stress their actual underlying concepts.

This treatment seems particularly apt for the work of a theorist like Benjamin, who wrote at length about the importance of paradox in the construction of historical narrative and of technological progress. Key to this argument were his complicated but nevertheless ground-breaking elucidations of the *wish-image*, through which he explained how new forms of technology (and, to an extent, new forms of anything) could only be apprehended by and integrated into the public consciousness via collapsing time and space, ultimately making the vision of that new technology a mythic thing that *both* preceded and exceeded historical thinking. Benjamin characterized this society-wide ‘affliction’ as “a phantasmagoria of the ‘new nature’,” noting its hallucinogenic qualities (Buck-Morss 1991 143). Under this paradigm, the new can only exist simultaneously in past and future settings but, critically, never in the present moment, at least not in a fully realized form.

Benjamin referred to the manifestation of the wish-image in European society as the “restorative impulse,” and in Susan Buck-Morss’ *The Dialectics of Seeing* (1991) she poignantly observes:

Nowhere was the restorative impulse more evident than in the forms taken by the new technologies themselves, which imitated precisely the old forms they were destined to overcome. Early photography mimicked painting. The first railroad cars were designed like stage coaches, and the first electric light bulbs were shaped like gas flames. (Buck-Morss 1991 111)

To unmask this paradox, Benjamin also took to writing in a way that mimicked that collapse of time and space. He purposely conflated moments of personal history and objectivity, eventually crafting a series of the very wish-images he sought to publicly denounce. But his were ones that could be read and then unread de-

constructively. This mimetic approach is best demonstrated in *One Way Street* (1979) where reflections on Benjamin's childhood sit next to detached observations of European industrial urban life and bouts of poetic even surrealistic phrasing. A significant dimension of *One-Way Street* is also how closely it echoes Cixous' clarion-call in "La rire de la méduse/Laugh of the Medusa" (1975/76) for a writing that aims to "project" the subjectivity of the writer onto the page. Benjamin's writing in this instance enacts the same understanding of projection-as-juxtaposition that I outlined earlier when describing the tenets of fictocritical practice. Except, because it is Benjamin, we encounter this sensibility as his use of dialectical montage, where the collocation of different moving images (or rather word-images) induces a sensation of multiple possible realities, thus, revealing their contingent critical differences.

Along those lines, Susan Sontag notes in her introduction to *One-Way Street* how Benjamin consistently projected himself into each of his major subjects, citing his strategic injection of the personal within the universal, and that often "his temperament determined what he wrote about" (8). From this, one can assume that Benjamin recognized the value of deliberately deploying subjective voice in theoretical writing to dialectical effect, and that he sought to reconcile any misgivings about the capacity to write something of both fictional and critical import.

Again, like the conscious interweaving of subjective and objective voices in the writings of Barthes and Derrida, antecedents of fictocriticism bubble up in Benjamin, particularly in a work like *One-Way Street*. Composed of textual fragments and alternation between diaristic and academic registers, Benjamin seemed committed

to highlighting the infidelity of his memories as a productive force in theorizing the culture taking shape around him. His anecdotes serve to perform (more than document or cite) the quotidian ways in which he saw Modernity and technology breeding an ‘alienating solitude’ (Sontag in Benjamin 9). Crucially though, such a thesis is never stated outright. *One-Way Street* might be described then as haunted fictocritically by the absence of that “solitude” precisely to illustrate its dubious ubiquity. In “Fragments of a Fictocritical Dictionary,” Rosslyn Prosser notes that often “[fictocriticism] utilises a discontinuous narrative which demonstrates these characteristics of memory, expecting you to fold back and follow the clues [...] The crime is found in the gaps and fissures of memory and anecdote” (2009).

Accordingly, the narrative that follows makes use of a paranormal trope—the gremlin—as an analogy for not only the micronized, nearly invisible movement of technological ‘progress’ but also to convey an impish, even self-destructive behaviour within the text itself that lends itself to many “gaps and fissures.” The abrupt transitions of voice through citational insertions as well as the omission of terms and constructed moments of incoherence in the dialogue are meant to suggest to the reader that select aspects of the narrative are only implied and curatorially obscured, rather like memory. Further, because the gremlin trope is attached to pilots and planes, elements of that vernacular like “nose-diving” or “night flying” are employed throughout as agitating metaphors that create a motif as well as a formal friction of tone and vocabulary in the reading experience.



Finally, fragments of Charles Massinger's 1944 article "The Gremlin Myth" are included, mostly ironically, to reference the very real efforts of American scientists during and after World War II to investigate the psychological effects of "gremlin sightings" on U.S. army pilots regardless of any physical evidence. For Massinger, the very existence of the gremlin myth had damaging effects on the cognition and perception of pilots, encouraging them to have their own "interpretations," thus leading to "serious problems" in the line of duty (361). Apparently, a sense of doubt plagued military knowledge in the post-war era due to the increasing ubiquity of the gremlin myth, and this set off a very real internal crisis of rational and "substantial truth" in military culture—that too much autonomy amongst soldiers presented an existential threat. In Massinger's view, the danger of subscribing to the myth was for the pilot to regress, resorting to the base instincts of imagination and invention (366).

Clearly, this was an expression of fear of 'free thinking' and an endorsement for rote knowledge and repetition. But as the epigraph to the following text—taken from Massinger's essay—makes clear, even he was beginning to realize that there were material consequences to the technological conditions of flying that "irritated" and influenced pilot behaviour (363). This suggests an emerging and cognitively dissonant realization in Massinger that the acceleration of technology and mythical thinking were, in fact, concomitant phenomena, and that the paranormal, in all its ephemeral and bewildering attributes, was inseparable from the spectre of human progress. As such, in my own text, the use of "gremlins" signifies a duality of

technological engagement, as opposed to a binary relation, co-locating myth and technology in the same word-image and prompting the reader to discern the potential difference *in context*. Fictocriticism can and should be seen as the articulation and maintenance of such duality by systematically re-presenting the printed word, or inscription more generally, in such a way that both its prosthetic and narrative capacities are fully engaged.

**1C.**  
**Gremlins**

Night flying, high altitudes, blind flying, diving, and other stunts necessary to the effective manipulation of planes in combat apparently tend to effect extraordinary changes in the organic and subsequently the nervous balance of the [hu]m[a]n. A chronic irritation of the sensory nerves ensues. The cortical system, ordinarily functioning smoothly in the reception of ordinary sense impressions, is flooded by a constant stream of new and unaccustomed impressions.

— Charles Massinger, “The Gremlin Myth” (1944)

“It’s no use! I’ve tried telling you a hundred different ways. I really have. I’ve tried making it sound serious or oracular, elliptical, or *roping*<sup>18</sup>, even outright pathetic. But I get no reaction from you anymore. No feedback!”

“Mr. B., I want you to take a deep breath. Let’s do it together. Ready?

One...two...that’s it...yes. In through the nose and out through... yes, good. Now, please sit down. All that pacing is wearing hammerheads<sup>19</sup> in the carpet. I assure you; I’m listening to every word you say with exacting precision. I’m dissecting your syllables before they even become audible. But, it’s not doing either of us any good when it’s a different story week after week, or minute to minute. How can I help if the narrative’s always changing?”

“Sorry, Doc. Sorry about that, really. I guess I am a bit prone to wandering into “different scenes”<sup>20</sup> these days, what with all the crosstalk out there. Always getting my pitch and my yaw mixed up, aren’t I? I’m just so nervous. You’ll have to excuse me, Doc, really. Exegesis makes me this way, always has...”

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<sup>18</sup> “The fictocritical text may also rope in characters to present or dramatize certain points,” in Atienza, 40.

<sup>19</sup> See “Stall Turn” on Wikipedia. Last edited 13 January 2021. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Stall\\_turn](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Stall_turn)

<sup>20</sup> Michaela Atienza, “Strange Technology: Fictocriticism and the Cyborg,” in *Journal of English Studies and Comparative Literature*, vol. 14, no. 1, 2014, 41.

[prolonged pause/a familiar holding pattern]<sup>21</sup>

“Please continue, Mr. B.”

[spinning around in place, slowly]

“Well, you see, lately it’s just the more specific I get the further I end up from what I thought I was talking about in the first place... I try to make myself explicit, I really do—to others, at least—but I just wind up all wound-up like a little thaumatrope. You know, those spinning subject positions? Except, *I’m* the one holding the strings!<sup>22</sup> Surely, you must know the feeling?”

“I’m afraid not. No.”

“Oh... Well, that’s a bit of a shame. Do you want me to demonstrate?”

[spins around faster, arms out like a propeller]

“No, Mr. B. That’s not necessary. Please have a seat.”

“Alright then. But can we at least go back to the issue of my TV?”

“What about it?”

“Well, you see, it keeps getting bigger.”

[textured pause] [arms outstretched with palms facing inward]

“Bigger?”

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<sup>21</sup> The insertion of choreographed notations into the piece is a particular gesture, an injection of my own history and practical knowledge into the text, montaging personal and universal themes. I spent twelve years of my youth in a dance school, negotiating the dialectic montage per se between my internal representations and my image reflected in a wall of mirror. Like Benjamin on “Hashish in Marseilles,” I have endeavoured to layer subjective and objective voices not to reunite them in some prosaic condition of ur-language but to regard and elevate the slippery nuances of their material (dis)junctures: “For I saw only nuances, yet these were the same. I immersed myself in contemplation of the sidewalk before me, which, through a kind of unguent with which I covered it, could have been, precisely as these very stones, also the sidewalk of Paris.” (1979 220)

<sup>22</sup> See “Thaumatrope” by Gail Jones in *The Space Between: Australian Women Writing Fictocriticism*. Heather Kerr & Amanda Nettelbeck, Eds. Perth: University of Western Australia Publishing, 1998, 98–114.

“Yes. Every morning a little bigger. I go to bed watching, and then when I get up the screen is larger, closer to the corners of the ceiling than it was before. And a thinner profile, like it’s becoming part of the room.”

“I see... And you’ve tracked this phenomenon, measured it I assume? To confirm the dimensions are actually getting larger?”

“Well, no. But then again why bother when you can just *feel* it—difference. It creeps in regardless of the numbers, wraps around you, hangs above you like...

[holding hands above the head, fingers crooked and pointing down]

...a tidal wave merging with the sky, or one of those extra-wide murals you see in old-timey theaters. You know the kind. They play on your periphery and your ‘primary process,’<sup>23</sup> pulling you forward into the frame.”

“A panorama?”

“Yes, that’s it. A panorama where my TV should be. But this is no ‘city in a bottle’<sup>24</sup>, Doc. It’s nothing quaint to look at, let me tell you. When it’s on, the ‘[f]aces loom large or contract to tiny circles. There are severed heads, multiple dismemberments, and horrible discontinuities.’<sup>25</sup> And when it’s off, it’s still humming, buzzing, doing something in the background I can’t make out. A giant black buzzing shape, concealing God only knows what.”

[tucks legs into chest and hugs them] [muffled mouth noises]

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<sup>23</sup> In Randolph’s “The Amenable Object,” *Psychoanalysis & Synchronized Swimming*, 1991, 22-26.

<sup>24</sup> See Walter Benjamin *The Arcades Project*, Howard Eiland & Kevin McLaughlin, Trans., Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1999, 5.

<sup>25</sup> In “Modernity” by Gail Jones from *The House of Breathing*, Fremantle Arts Centre Press, 1992, 11.

“Well, ‘the true has no windows,’ Mr. B. ‘Nowhere does the true look out to the universe,’<sup>26</sup> only inward, back at itself.”

“Come again?”

“A mirror, Mr. B., a big black mirror. This...phenomenon that you describe might be a psychosomatic manifestation of the ego—an invitation to look at yourself differently, more directly. You said it yourself best, didn’t you once? Something like: ‘Look inside the windowless house to see the true?’<sup>27</sup>”

“Not to be rude, Doc, but please don’t paraphrase me. I see myself just fine. It’s what’s going on when I’m busy not looking that’s getting the better of me: Damn gremlins!”

[arms Akimbo]

“The who???”

[standing and ponying in triple meter—a solo fandango]

“You know, the ornery little goblins or elves or whatever you want to call them—spirits that systematically take airplanes apart midair, causing them to crash. At night, when I’m asleep or sometimes just when I’m out of the room for a few minutes, it’s like that in my apartment. Someone, something else, is there precisely whenever I’m not, making little tweaks, messing with my devices, my architectures, prizing apart the seams of the perceptible...”

“Mr. B, you know I hate to ask this, but any chance that you’ve been intoxicated while noticing these, eh...differences?”

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<sup>26</sup> Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, 840.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

[snickers] [crouched pose not unlike Rodin's *le penseur*]

“Trust me, ‘[o]f [my] home nothing is left to fiction. It is completely actual and labelled everywhere.’ I know my ‘place as [I] knows [my] own body; that is to say, with coy particularity,’<sup>28</sup> the way a captain knows every inch of his craft, for better or worse. So, if something’s amiss, then I notice it. Like I said, I *feel* it: difference. Like the other day when I went to the broom closet looking for something or other, probably a new thing of dish soap, and when I opened the door, I just knew something was off, something was missing. So, I closed the door. Then I opened it. Closed it again. Opened it. Over and over again, faster and faster until the inside and the outside were twirling, overlapping—the same thing. And that’s when I saw *it*.”

“What?”

“The vacuum.”

“What was odd about that?”

“I don’t own a vacuum!”

[X-pose; arms and legs spread eagle]

“Mr. B., [clears throat] with all due respect, I can see how this sudden change to your environment would be distressing, but isn’t that a change for the better, no matter how it got there? Let’s put aside this notion of ‘gremlins’ for a second and just focus on the present. Let’s focus on You. Maybe there’s an opportunity here to trust that whatever You’re experiencing is in Your best interest after all?”

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<sup>28</sup> Jones, 1992, 13.



“Hah! One step ahead of you, Doc. You see, I thought of that, too. But it turns out that wasn’t the end of it.”

“Oh?”

“Yes, because the vacuum keeps changing, too. Getting smaller and then a little smaller but somehow more expansive as well. It basically takes up the entire apartment now, even though I wouldn’t have the faintest idea where to look for it... It’s a “transistorization of the environment,”<sup>29</sup> one could say, a permeation. And it’s a very “destructive character,”<sup>30</sup> that vacuum—operating according to one principle and one principle only: “make room; only one activity: clearing away.”<sup>31</sup>

[the furious rhythms of annotation]

“Isn’t that its function? To remove things from view?”

“Well, yes, I suppose. But ‘[a] destructive character obliterates even the traces of destruction.’ It leaves behind only the most minimal residue possible of its mimetic faculty<sup>32</sup> until it vanishes completely into the cultural unconscious. What good does it do me if the damn machine is invisible?”

“Mr. B., if we can get back to these ‘gremlins’ for a moment. Are you having this sensation all the time?”

“Come to think of it, no. It really only occurs at night, or sometimes the early morning—subliminal times.”

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<sup>29</sup> See Jean Baudrillard, “The Ecstasy of Communication” in *The Anti-Aesthetic: Essays on Postmodern Culture*. Hal Foster, Ed. New York: The New Press, 1998, 148.

<sup>30</sup> See Benjamin’s essay “The Destructive Character” in *One-Way Street and Other Writings*, Edmund Jephcott and Kingsley Shorter, Trans. London, UK: NLB, 1979, 157.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

<sup>32</sup> Benjamin, “On the Mimetic Faculty,” in *One-Way Street*, 161.

“Is it possible then that you’re dreaming some of these changes, that the ‘grem-lins’ are hypnagogic hallucinations? Dreams that seem realer than real?”

“Hmmm...yes...the dream state, and the wish image.<sup>33</sup> Very close but not the same, Doc.”

[perched on the chair now in a bent arabesque]

“The difference is that the differences keep building—the space doesn’t reset. When I get home tonight nothing will be the same as when I left. The coffee maker will have grown a plasma screen or maybe the lightbulbs will all resemble floating flying saucers. Who am I to say? What I can tell you, Doc, is that

presence of mind is an extract of the future, and precise awareness of the present moment [is] more decisive than foreknowledge of the most distant events. Omens, presentment, signals pass day and night through our organism like wave impulses. To interpret them or to use them, that is the question.”<sup>34</sup>

“And how do you answer that question, Mr. B.? Privately, of course. How have you tried; I should ask?”

“Answer? An answer, Doc, is out of the question—that’s the catch. At least, that’s if I assume we’re still talking about wishes. Presence and futurity; ‘[t]he two are irreconcilable’.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, 4.

<sup>34</sup> Benjamin, “Madame Ariane—Second Courtyard on the Left,” in *One-Way Street*, 98.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*

“Mr. B., I’m trying to talk about these strange...occurrences that you claim to be witnessing...”

“Feeling.”

“Fine. These things you’re *feeling*.”

“The gremlins.”

“Yes... Though I think it’s important we qualify what you’re saying. If indeed there are so-called gremlins running amok in your apartment, tinkering with this and that and maybe even replacing your appliances, then where do they live? What are they eating to stay alive? What do they sound like? Have you ever *seen* one?”

[upside down and rigid; basically, a headstand]

“That would be impossible, Doc.

The Other doesn’t appear in front of me, facing me, so much as turn or incline itself toward me, summoning me as responsible from outside my consciousness or perception. It is precisely by [this] means of such a ‘curvature of intersubjective space’ that the face-to-face resists being reduced to vision, ‘goes further than vision’...<sup>36</sup>

“And you can be satisfied with such an aporia?”

“Would you expect the pilot to stop flying the plane if he suddenly can’t see, if the night gets in the way? I think we’d all be airborne by now if that were the case.”

[swan dive over the chair’s edge, arms slung backward]

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<sup>36</sup> David Wills. *Dorsality*. University of Minnesota Press, 2008, 45.

“Fair enough. I suppose that we can’t always count on facing forward, assuming we can see what’s coming our way... But there’s something that bugs me about your comparison, Mr. B. The modern plane is such a developed piece of machinery that the thing practically flies itself. The pilot is largely an observer to metrics. You, yourself, you would know this. So, even if the sun sets on takeoff, Mr. B., what becomes of all those apparatuses? Do they, too, suddenly disappear? Surely not. What difference does the light make in the work of machines?”

[child’s pose; the Fool]

“The difference makes difference, over and over, Doc. Night is a time *and* a space... and when it changes it makes for changes in perceptions... and well, then they start to make future realities<sup>37</sup> and little prisms—built out of the sights and structures that confabulate around you. Even the dimmest constellations can appear as

‘bright entanglement[s], newfangled [and] stunning, a distillation[s] of incandescence [...] some kind of Divine Revelation, the trajectory, perhaps, of a passing angel, a signal through space, the pointing finger of God.’<sup>38</sup>”

[return to full arabesque, tilting forward ever so slightly]

“Mr. B., really. How can you expect the sensible to keep up with you when you’re going on so rhapsodically? But beyond that, again, even if these little creatures you envision so vividly do have physical presence and some kind of calculated

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<sup>37</sup> Randolph, 1991, 32.

<sup>38</sup> Jones, 1992, 17.

agenda to upgrade your environment—unsettling your moors— then what exactly will you do about it other than babble incoherently?

[an icy gasp; a chime]

“Oh. Well, I’m terribly sorry, Mr. B. Actually, that’s the fire alarm. Never can be sure if it’s the real thing or not, so we’ll have to evacuate all the same, I’m afraid.”

[On tiptoe and arms at a diagonal]

“Doc. I don’t think I have to emphasize how unfair this is—we were beginning to make real headway.”

“Headway to where, Mr. B.? The eye of the storm? I don’t mean to be rude, but you’ve really taken us both on quite a ride today—a carousel of intellectualism. I can’t be sure what’s up, what’s down... if we’re moving at all...”

“That’s okay, Doc. Sometimes, the best that any of us can do is to speculate, making little spaces for space’s sake. It’s an escape plan of sorts... A delirious task now that you mention it. But there again, that’s night flying for you... Shall we?”

**2A.**

**Feminist Digital Ecology:  
Mimesis, Fictocriticism & Altering Technological Space**

## 1. Fictocritical Mimesis

This book is a theoretical fiction about postmodernism. A theoretical fiction, because I treat discursive ideas and arguments in a way analogous to how a novelist treats characters and events.

— Steven Shaviro, *DOOM PATROLS*, 1995-1997.

In Steven Shaviro's episodic e-text, *DOOM PATROLS*, the modus operandi is mimesis. It serves not only as a feature of media to be critiqued but a mode of critique in itself; where formal attributes of the text mimic the subject matter to explore their conceptual incongruencies rather than produce an illusion of sameness. A prime example are the eponymous titles of the essays, each suggesting the focus will be on a real famous person: "CINDY SHERMAN," "DAVID CRONENBERG," "BILL GATES," etc. But these names are ciphers for Shaviro's theoretical exploration of postmodern identity construction. His analogous treatment of ideas as characters mimics the hypertext referentiality of his publishing medium and results in fragmented accounts such as listening to My Bloody Valentine alongside vignettes of bathhouses and reading Deleuze and Guattari in "BILINDA BUTCHER." Then, in "MICHEL FOUCAULT" he muses on the technosexual dimensions of Marshall McLuhan's media theory via quotations from an online bestiality dungeon and lyrics by Sonic Youth. Nowhere does the person whose name graces the title become the subject of the essay. Rather, in crafting a "theoretical fiction," replete with "singularities" and not actual identities ("PREFACE"), Shaviro brings the generalizing

tendencies of critical-theoretical writing into formal alignment with the surface-driven logic of postmodern culture. Characterizing his mimicry as “irresponsible freeplay,” Shaviro suggests that a tactical response to the artifice of contemporary culture may lie in a differentiation between acts of imitation and those of play—a move in language from a logic of replication and accuracy toward alternates and indeterminacy.

To fully appreciate the role that indeterminacy plays in critical acts of mimesis, *DOOM PATROLS* should be examined as a work of *fictocriticism*. Succinctly, “fictocriticism” describes an experimental practice of writing that blurs the distinctions between fiction and theory, literature and literary critical commentary, to expose the limitations in each (King 1994 270). Originating in the cultural criticism of women writers in Canada such as Jeanne Randolph, Nicole Brossard and Aritha van Herk in the 1980s, and then soon taking hold in Australia (thanks to the work of King and Muecke [Flavell 2009]), fictocritical texts were born from feminist and countercultural stances that sought to reflect “doubtful” (Kerr 1996) and non-binary critiques of hegemonic knowledge production in the form and style of their writing (Gibbs 1997; Pearl 2022; van Herk 2021). Though fictocriticism resists a rubric, common tactics do exist, including multivocality, fragmentation, citational writing and mimesis (Pearl 2019) all guided by an attitude of *paralogy*, or intentional “moves” in language that run counter to institutional logics (Lyotard 60-66). By situating itself “somewhere in among/between criticism, autobiography and fiction,” (Hunter qtd. in King 1993 20) the fictocritical tactic encompasses all these forms



while managing to evade categorization in a radically indeterminate gesture of “writing between” (Flavell 2004). Under the fictocritical, mimesis entails an effort to become *like* another text through form and style but crucially never the same as that source. Instead, by existing in a parallel relationship to its object-text, fictocritical writing occupies the figurative margins of that text and makes a tactical intervention into its interpretive ‘space’, positing an alternative narrative.

Shaviro demonstrates this when he enacts his consumer-driven theory of postmodern culture by speaking *with* the voices of various pop culture icons, as if those identities, too, are merely commodities to be sculpted in the image of his theoretical fiction. Seen fictocritically, *DOOM PATROLS* is a textual embodiment of Shaviro’s postmodern subject, within whom multiple voices exist simultaneously and sometimes in discord to call attention to their assemblage. A subtle but intriguing example is in the essay “CINDY SHERMAN,” where Shaviro writes:

Femininity, we now realize, is a variable construction, not a pregiven mythological essence. Ladies are made and not born. It's not enough just to have a cunt, or XX chromosomes, in order to become a woman. Genes can be spliced, and cunts, too, are prosthetically manufactured. But how, then, are women constructed? What are little girls made of? [...] There's a curious ambiguity at the heart of this process, an insidious, fascinating slippage from obligation to desire, from coercion to seduction. I resent it, yet I become absorbed in it.

While Shaviro does dedicate some lines to describing Sherman’s oeuvre in broad strokes, he foregoes literal description of any work. In this passage, typical of the piece, it is the timbre of his simultaneously reflective and biting tone that evokes the thorny gender politics at play in Sherman’s art as opposed to describing specific photographs or films. Notably, there is also the subjective rhetoric and

autoethnographic focus on his own felt experience— resenting becoming “absorbed in it.” It is an enactment of a Cindy Sherman aesthetic rather than a didactic visual analysis of her work or an impersonation of her voice. A line like “[w]hat are little girls made of?” is fairly generic on its own, but, in the context of Sherman’s portfolio, it incites her earliest work that explicitly dealt with the capitalist consumption of female sexuality, like the 1975 black-and-white silent film “DOLL,” depicting the nearly nude artist vacuum-packed under plastic with floral borders. The blunt assertion that “[i]t’s not enough just to have a cunt,” resonates on its own as a pared-down observation of sexed-specificity but also echoes the tone of Sherman’s more explicit series of photographs using medical prosthetics and doll parts to portray women’s bodies as receptacles (Wallach).

It should be acknowledged that Shaviro performs this mimicry, for better or worse, as a cis-gendered man of academic privilege. Presumably he is a target of Sherman’s feminist critiques. Yet, I would argue Shaviro seeks to make a statement precisely through the potentially inflammatory contradictions of his fictocritical approach, drawing attention to the gaps between subject positions. Anna Gibbs has argued that mimesis, understood fictocritically, involves the rendering of affect qua the articulation of difference amongst the similar (Gibbs 2005), not only through the act of writing but also in the protocols of reading, where subjective interventions occur in the absence of certainty (Randolph 1991 34). Therefore, the moments of indeterminacy and difference that pepper *DOOM PATROLS* are there to trigger pause in the reader and establish a self-reflexive circuit of interpretation.

The notion of a circuit or feedback loop, understood in Wiener's cybernetic terms (1948) is also key to the spirit of fictocritical practice (Kerr 1996), because its recursivity makes legible the various levels of entanglement and oscillation that cohere in the reading process: reader-to-text, author-to-reader, text-to-environment, reader-to-environment, etc. A kind of writing as shadow play where the puppeteer and audience are equally legible aspects of the performance, open to reading and interpretation as much as the images on the wall.

This analogy is a helpful segue to thinking of fictocritical mimesis as a "space-making practice" that alters the relations of the sensible, a concept elucidated in *Mimesis and Alterity: A Particular History of the Senses* by anthropologist Michael Taussig (34-41). In it, the cultural function of mimesis is first illustrated by way of a story about the Cuna people (or Kuna) of what is now central Panama, whose wooden figurines for healing rituals, post-contact with Europeans, began to take on the appearance of those outsiders in exaggerated ways that were neither completely factual nor fictional in appearance (Ibid. 2-8). Taussig affirms how the mimicry seen in the ritualistic objects not only acted as means for the Cuna to exert power over their changing milieux but also as bonds to those they encountered, integrating aspects of outsider culture into their own worldviews (Ibid. 8-16). From this, Taussig frames mimesis as a primitive (as in primary) technique for difference-making and borrows the term "mimetic faculty" from Walter Benjamin (1933) to stress its technological dimensions. Ultimately, Taussig proffers that human sensibility is based on an ability to become similar *with* and therefore influence a given environment

via the mimetic faculty. I have borrowed his understanding of this concept to theorize, in a literary capacity, how fictocritical texts position themselves in parallel and porous relations to their subjects, writing “the story of reading” those texts (van Herk 2021) in a circular, cybernetic mode.

Accordingly, ‘contact’ in a fictocritical paradigm is neither congruent nor boundary-abiding. Fictocritical mimesis is a means to “space out” (Taussig 33) in an explorative, world-building fashion that borrows from resources already present in the text, and to figure alternatives the way a child instinctually pushes sand around until it amounts to *something*. Exactly because of that amorphousness, the sand structure and the fictocritical text alike serve as “transitional objects” (Winnicott cited in Randolph 1991) that facilitate and index the process of subjective negotiation with one’s given environment. Likewise, Taussig characterizes the mimetic faculty as the first human technology in that it allows us to conceive of our surroundings as an extension of ourselves, paving the way for more granular and physically apparent acts of prosthetic manipulation. However, most of society is unattuned to the non-binary nature of that faculty, since recognizing it would threaten a certain degree of “dissolution” into the sea of images that otherwise defines contemporary media culture (Taussig 36)—a concern I will return to later.

Having read Taussig’s take on mimesis, Shaviro surely recognized the significance of its pluralistic formulation to behave as a foil to the deterministic thinking which underpins the conscious replication and commodification of visual culture in late capitalism. Though highly skeptical of simulation in the interest of

neoliberalism, Shaviro seems to embrace how the extreme referentiality that typifies postmodern culture can ironically also offer hope in the sense that we, as a culture, can never reach an end (to simulation). There is always another version, another sequel, another “apocalypse”. “[W]hat Taussig calls our culture's ‘mimetic excess,’” Shaviro rightly points out, “destabilizes all fixities of signification and power” (“GRANT MORRISSON”). An endless parade of mimetic excess requires that “[t]here's always the possibility, indeed the necessity, of once more upping the ante” of invention and imagination, even at the risk of exceeding the sensible. While this potentially comes at the cost of authority—the death of the author (Barthes 1967)—mimetic excess and correspondingly fictocriticism present spaces for meaning-making alternative to patriarchal expressions of language and technology; texts that displace binary oppositions and rigid hierarchies of knowledge production.

## **2. Fictocritical Mimesis as Feminist Technology**

With verve, I want to suggest that the mimetic faculty is conceptually a feminist technology, and that this is expressly the case when deployed within works of fictocriticism, which deliberately ignore dichotomies of subject/object and disciplinary boundaries of fiction/theory. By dissolving the boundary between themselves and their subject matter, fictocritical writers not only create a mimetic model for reading and interpreting that dynamic but subsequently perform a feminist form of “interference” (Verloo) in the dominant, patriarchal narratives that delimit ways of knowing from being. Crucially, this sense of interference proceeds as an

amplification of specificity to the point of inequality (Verloo in Geerts & van der Tuin 172) or the eruption of critical difference in the making of the similar. Like Taussig's many examples of figurines and talismans imitating white men made by indigenous populations following their respective first contacts, the point of exercising the mimetic faculty in a fictocritical capacity means intentionally making of a 'poor' copy; an embodiment of contact, not replication. This act of interference resists decisive interpretation and instead mines the symbolic space between.

Further, I want to suggest that mimesis is essential to performing feminist critiques of technoscience and patriarchy. That same modality of betweenness and reflexivity—a form of in situ or “situated knowledge” (Haraway 1991 111) which the rhetoric of “hard truths” systematically excludes—makes it prime for deconstructing fixed oppositions. For example, if one accepts that a principal tenet of feminism is to problematize sexed specificity, or the man/woman dichotomy, and that this dichotomy is instrumentalized in the scientific disciplines to systematically disadvantage those who don't identify as “man,” then it becomes evident how the intrinsic betweenness of the mimetic faculty can be animated as a feminist technique or 'tool' for interfering with performances of gender in knowledge production.

Importantly, employing the mimetic faculty fictocritically entails writing that evinces process and acts of becoming over an arrival at a fixed argument or stable format. The 'failure' of the text to arrive at a concrete form precludes the possibility of that writing fitting within (or being forced inside) a matrix of knowledge production dominated by taxonomies, genres, and the objective imperialism of the male

ego (Irigaray and Oberle). This is especially true in science and technology communication, where the social structure of patriarchy has not only shaped the conventions of practice to largely omit female perspectives (Bowling and Martin) but the language games necessary to legitimate scientific knowledge are based on a principle of exteriority ergo objectivism (Lyotard 25). Therefore, the fictocritic who is actively engaged in mimesis is equally engaged in a feminist critique of patriarchal communication regimes when their writing refuses to delineate between subjective or objective modes, charting paralogical and divergent trajectories to existing metanarratives (Ibid. 61).

Clearly, the role of narrative in the construction and deconstruction of social and cultural norms has also informed feminist theory since the 1980s (Warhol & Lanser 2). But recently there has been an increased focus on “acting” and “undoing” hegemonic narratives via praxis, through feminist and queer interventions *in* literature that “perform” the intersectionality of identity construction (Ibid. 7). In particular, the rise of autofiction, or the intentional blending of fiction and memoir—a practice related to but distinct from fictocriticism—has been gaining traction as a paralogical means to challenge the possibility of nonfictional writing altogether. In Shayln Claggett’s poignant essay “The Human Problem,” she builds on the theories of feminist narratologist Mieke Bal to consider the reciprocal influence of narrative on the construction of everyday human identity, especially regarding the understudied notion of “character” as it regularly transcends literary bounds to structure social relations (355). Claggett suggests that the fluidity of “character” to cross the fictional-

factual divide, particularly in an autobiographical context, might function as the only real “tool” available to marginalized individuals to achieve self-actualization—by casting themselves as various characters in stories of their own agency (Ibid. 356). For the fictocritic, whose writing practice is calculated, the fluidity of character can be employed systematically as a literary technology for constructing porous narratives that welcome subjective intervention by design.

Considering fictocritical mimesis as feminist technology also invites recalibration of the frames through which we encounter and use the word “technology.” One dimension consistently lacking in technology development discourse is that of affect. Fictocritical mimesis foregrounds the affective labour of communication when language and writing are thought of and fully considered as technology. This conception of technology is intersubjective and inherently social in its construction as opposed to heroic or monolithic. As I mentioned in the context of *DOOM PATROLS*, a neglected element of mimesis is that the act of becoming similar can only occur *with* others, *with* one’s surroundings, in an interactive, even symbiotic dynamic. And this liminality of subjectivity threatens patriarchal and technoscientific values of isolation and opposition, where such events acutely happen *to* a privileged subject in a vertical and hierarchical stance. Taussig, in turn, describes this distributed quality of mimesis as collaborative and political (83), and his description resonates with the more agonistic and onto-epistemological elements of so-called fourth wave feminism or feminist new materialism. Through collective negotiation and reformation, these modalities of feminism seek to move beyond modernist binaries altogether toward



the conscious recognition of hyphenated and contingent identities (Dolphijn and van der Tuin 2011).

A pioneer in this area of thought and whom Taussig discusses is Julie Kristeva. Though famous for rejecting much of mainstream feminism, Kristeva's radical theories on the psychological nature of the feminine have stirred incredible debate in feminist theoretical discourse (Oliver 94). Arguably, Kristeva's dissent has advanced feminist theory more broadly precisely because of the controversies surrounding it. Namely, her work has been both lauded and criticized for a "double and indeterminate" treatment of maternity and the mother figure as indexical of the semiotic (*le sémiotique*), or the discharge of the material drives through language (Oliver 94 & 96). Kristeva positions the connotative complexity of "mother" as symptomatic of our failure as adults to reconcile with our former symbiotic and non-binary status of existence in the womb. After entering the symbolic order of language, Kristeva suggests, one experiences a continuous dissociation of this identity via rigid binarisms, especially as enacted by divisions of man/woman, masculine/feminine.

But the symbolic violence of binarisms in language goes beyond gender to trouble the most basic forms of expression. Even the use of "we", according to Kristeva, is laden with the false promise of community despite its ostensible plurality (Oliver 99); that "even while [the] individual participates in this 'we,' is the source of this 'we,' each is also its victim" (Ibid.) In other words, through pronouncement and inscription, the actual plurality of actors and social forces comprising a community are flattened. Kristeva deemed this paradox an embedded "double coding" where

standards of grammar and syntax work to reinforce existing power structures despite attempts at theoretical or practical deviance (1980 114). Such theories were critical to the emergence of *écriture féminine* in the 1970s, or those countercultural essays by French post-structuralist philosophers writing ‘from the body’ and a specifically female point of view. Unsurprisingly, works by Kristeva, Hélène Cixous, Monique Wittig and Luce Irigaray have all been cited as influential to the development of fictocriticism (Flavell 2004 166 & 222; Gibbs 1997 1; Gibbs 2003 309).

Irigaray, whose writing at the time concentrated on the systematic exclusion of women from psychoanalytic and philosophical thinking, was also concerned with the pervasiveness of double-coding in the production of scientific and technological knowledge. In her co-authored article with Édith Obérlé, “Is the Subject of Science Sexed?” (1985), they argue that any means to “explode” or fully render the multiple facets of one’s identity inevitably re-enacts the imperial logic of Western science and patriarchy by perpetuating strategies of isolation and modelling (75). Interestingly, they allude to mimesis as a possible foil to this figurative dissection of the self through a strategic collapse of discourse:

Restricted to a defensive or offensive mimeticism, women<sup>39</sup> run the risk of absorbing the meaning/ direction of discourse by collapsing it for lack of a possible response. They then intercept the finality or intentionality of discourse. This accelerates a process of acceptable deconstruction if a new language were to make way for itself. (Ibid. 85)

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<sup>39</sup> Though they name “women” in this passage, Irigaray and Oberle’s comments should be liberally transposed to indicate any non-hetero-normative identity that seeks a legitimate non-binary mode of expression or knowledge production.

In the same manner that patriarchal modes of expression foreclose multiplicity and fluctuating identities, Irigaray and Oberle suggest a tactical feminist response might be mimicking the absurdity of this embargo by writing in “a new language” which evades the possibility of a linear discourse altogether. Rather than seeking to make sense of the writing process, feminist interference would amplify the multiple senses involved in writing, merging different voices while going to great lengths to also mark their difference within the fixed (ty/to)pography of the page.

Notably, Kristeva also scrutinized the dizzying phenomenology of writing, which she defined by an essential incoherence. Her pithy formulation of the writing subject as “divided” not only reaffirms her understanding of language as a technology that fragments the subjectivity of its user but also that those fragments are capable of piercing otherwise strict social and personal boundaries in their partiality:

Writing is upheld not by the subject of understanding, but by a divided subject, even a pluralized subject, that occupies, not a place of enunciation, but permutable, multiple, and mobile places... (Kristeva 111)

For Kristeva, writing is inherently an act of self-distribution, because written language functions as shared experience; something that is ours and yet not ours. Like the mimetic faculty, Kristeva casts writing as pivoting on an oscillation toward and away from subject positions. The plurality of writing then affords the mutability and mobility necessary to move beyond unified conceptions of self toward an Other.

Fictocritical mimesis is feminist technology precisely because it requires such an ongoing recognition of the ways in which writer and subject continually (re)constitute their shared environment and one another via the text in a material relation of technicity (Stiegler). Such a relation can only be sustained through the ongoing articulation of difference (Gibbs 2005). Duly, the imagined environments created through fictocritical mimesis, no matter the setting, are mutually feminist and technological in their concentration on iteration and versioning, or self-reflexive simulation. Accordingly, new features of the technological environment in the 1980s and 90s—when fictocriticism was emerging—such as textual collage and telepresence served as new formal tactics for introducing doubt and reflexivity into the text. Though it may have been entirely unconscious (Randolph 2020; van Herk 2021), fictocritical writing in Canada at that time eerily mimicked the digital and networked protocols of its technological environment. And it did so in an anticipatory manner, resembling what we now recognize as fourth-wave or new materialist feminism, considering technology as relational and indexical of social and cultural dynamics. Through fictocriticism, feminist writers in Canada were re-envisioning the parameters of technological space, inventing paralogical environments for technological engagement that were less determinate yet evermore contingent in their boundary-crossing.

### 3. Fictocritical Geographies to Digital Ecologies

Human intelligence is not just located in our brains; it also necessarily involves some degree of extension into the outer environment [...] It is therefore impossible to disentangle biological intelligence from its “artificial” prosthetics and extensions...

— Steven Shaviro, *Discognition*, 2015, 95.

I now conduct close readings of two texts I consider to be fictocritical<sup>40</sup>, drafted and published by feminist Canadian writers between 1985 and 1990: Nicole Brossard’s *Mauve Desert* (1987) and Aritha van Herk’s *Places Far From Ellesmere* (1990).

While their narratives and stylistics are discrete, they both use land and environment as fictional vectors for theorizing female identity. As its title implies, *Mauve Desert* is a work replete with vivid desert imagery, specifically of the American Southwest. On the other hand, *Places Far From Ellesmere* shifts locations, poetically mapping three sites in Alberta before heading to Ellesmere Island—the northernmost place in Canada. Despite opposite climes, the geography of these sites and the mobility of the female body (or its lack thereof) features so prominently in each work that the idea of environment becomes multimodal, functioning beyond setting but also as character, image, and event. In their multimodal expressions of

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<sup>40</sup> Nicole Brossard has never labelled her work as fictocriticism but instead uses her own term *la fiction-théorique*, or “fiction-theory” in English, to describe the intentional marginality of her writing technique. Formally, however, the strategies she employs—mixing poetry with essay, multivocality and metacriticism, where the narrative structure is “self-mirroring” and deconstructive (Godard et al. 1986)—overlaps so greatly with fictocritical practice that Helen Flavell, in her landmark dissertation on Canadian and Australian fictocriticism, has classed Brossard as one of the most important Canadian women writers “writing between” (Flavell 2004). It is also worth noting that van Herk read and admired the work of Brossard, making mention in her 1990 essay for *Border Crossings* that she “want[s] to write/read the horizontal texts that Nicole Brossard calligraphies [...] to write the same body’s same passion” (87).

landscape and architecture as more than backdrops but agents in the construction of the diegesis, I argue these works fictocritically mimic the increasing digitality and convergence of the technological environment in which they were written, specifically that they re-imagine the digital turn in feminist, materialist terms.

In the late 1980s, many technologies originally designed during the post-war period entered the consumer market and increasingly became synonymous with mainstream culture. The CD player allowed users to ‘skip’ back and forth through an album in an instantaneous, fragmentary mode of navigation. Portable recording and playback devices like the camcorder and the Sony Walkman transformed the everyday environment into something that could be casually ‘captured’ and replayed. And of course, the growing popularity of the PC and word processing made the remixing and “compression” of electronic documents a commonplace and graphically uniform affair (van Herk 2021). The emergence of networked aspects in these devices also had significant effects on the ethos of the evolving mediascape. The growing prevalence of fax machines, online forums, and the promise of early e-mail like the X.400 system allowed for unprecedented translocal acts of communication that transformed the definition of authorship (Hepp). Arguably, any writers during that time, let alone fictocritical ones, could not avoid the influence of these developments in the communication *ecology*.

The term ecology is crucial here, because it has equal relevance in the study of natural *and* medial environments, bridging discourses of land and technology through a central understanding of networks (Patten). In their respective

articulations of bodies and landscapes as sites of mutable and mobile connection, one might go as far to say that *Mauve Desert* and *Places Far From Ellesmere* can be read equally as works of fictocriticism and as stories of ecologies that operate digitally. This is not such an original argument. In John Durham Peters' *The Marvelous Clouds* (2015), he makes an excellent case for recognizing environment as the foundational medium upon which all other media are conceived. However, contemporary definitions of digital ecologies tend to downplay the role of "environment" in the construction of networks. Raptis et al. (2014), speaking from a human computer interaction (HCI) perspective, argue that while the given environment may influence the behaviour of a digital ecology or how an individual user perceives it, it is largely irrelevant in defining that system (Ibid. 4). This is a prime example of a deterministic and technoscientific view of ecology that treats environment as an extrinsic factor rather than a constituent force. More importantly, it denies the Batesian notion of an "organism-in-its-environment" (Bateson 1972 458) or the contingent relation between self-perception and physical and spatial limitations. Applied in a digital context, a Batesian ecology presumes that the user and digital artifact are interdependent in defining one another; that a digital technology cannot exist without a 'digital human' to enact it as such. This view insists on a conception of digital ecology that goes beyond simply injecting a 'human element' into considerations of technology use toward a more "posthuman" view that digitality and virtuality are not exclusive to machines but already present in the semiotic matrix of human experience (Hayles 1999 247-249). It follows then that humans enact digital protocols as much

as our devices do in a hyphenated and ongoing negotiation of a shared technological environment.

In *Mauve Desert* and *Places Far From Ellesmere*, this negotiation is expressed fictocritically through mimesis, where features of digital technologies like replication (versioning), simulation (iteration) and sampling (remix) are not isolated phenomena within electronic objects but become the letteral substance of the spaces between literary subjects, interconnecting the characters, settings and events of the narrative. To elucidate a feminist relational sense of technology, each narrative presents female protagonists whose bodies and psyches are intricately connected or *networked* with the landscape in a distinctly porous and indeterminate representation of the digital.

### ***Mauve Desert***

Published in 1987 as *Le Désert mauve* then translated to English in 1990, the narrative of *Mauve Desert* mimicked a media environment saturated with notions of transience and transformation, as greater access to personal computing and networked communication sparked debates over the arrival of an information revolution (Winner 1986) and the rise of simulation as social practice (Nichols 631). Brossard's book encompasses these concerns in its unfolding networked narrative, where meaning is generated through the reading of difference amongst different versions.

The first section, "Mauve Desert," recounts the existential ennui of fifteen-year-old Mélanie, who lives with her mother, Kathy, and her lover, Lorna, in a run-down



motel in Arizona. Mélanie's struggle to define herself as separate from her mother's relationship to Lorna and come to terms with her own homosexuality is juxtaposed with interludes of the mysterious motel guest Longman, who endeavours to realize his visions of a massive explosion. After, the narrative of the first section becomes the subject of the second in "A Book to Translate." The reader is thrust diegetically outward into the consciousness of Maude Laures, who has "found" the book *Mauve Desert* and tasked herself with its "translation." Whether that translation is from one language or one subject position to another is left intentionally unclear. The structure of the book also shifts at this point from chapters to title-less fragments and vignettes of Maude's inner thoughts and translation process before moving into a detailed dissection of the "Places and Things," "Characters," "Scenes" and "Dimensions" that make up the "Mauve Desert" narrative. These 'notes' culminate in the third and final section, "Mauve The Horizon," where a new cover design insert alerts the reader that this narrative is also by Laure Angstelle but has been translated by Maude Laures.

The circuitous structure of *Mauve Desert* cybernetically *points* the reader back to the artificial and technical dimensions of the text. It also constructs a highly digital and networked narrative in which characters, places and events exist simultaneously but differently, in an interrelated system of competing versions, none of them any more real than the others. Many parts of "Mauve Desert" are replicated in "Mauve The Horizon," sometimes word for word, without significant difference in the course of their events. However, the use of language in each is distinct.

Differences emerge in the nuances of their formal construction. For example, in “Mauve Desert” we find the passage:

I lost the desert. I lost the desert in the night of writing. There is always a first time, a first night that blurs passions, that confuses our sense of direction. A first time when it must be acknowledged that words can reduce reality to its smallest unit: *matter* of fact. (29)

And in “Mauve The Horizon” we find:

I lost the desert. I lost the desert in the night of writing. There no doubt comes a moment when one has to know to stop, to halt in front of stupidity, to acknowledge that words are not always worthy or that they can cloud our enthusiasm...” (185)

In the former, the writing style is more descriptive of bodily sensations—vision blurring and moving without direction—while the latter takes a more metaphorical approach of facing down the figure of stupidity and being enveloped in a cloud of words. Though they communicate the same sentiment, differences matter in how embodiment is expressed. A subtle but critical difference of phenomenological or metaphorical description inevitably impacts the reader’s interpretation of the overall narrative.

Of course, interpretation also depends on how one navigates the text, in which sequence the sections are read, and how actively the reader compares and cross-references their details. Like many of the works that Espen Aarseth would go on to define as “cybertexts” or “ergodic literature” (1997), reading *Mauve Desert* is akin to navigating information in a digitally networked space, where the distribution of information across multiple locations or ‘nodes’ of the network means the pathways constructed as well as all those not chosen equally inform the interpretive process.

Similarly, *Mauve Desert* functions as a “literary communication system” where negotiating differences in form and mechanics plays “a defining role in determining the aesthetic process” (Aarseth 22). Accordingly, a significant aspect of the narrative is the work of constructing its “semiotic sequence,” piecing things together with “nontrivial effort” (Ibid. 1).

Also key to the text’s mimesis of a digital network is the role of the visual environment in structuring the psyches of Brossard’s characters. Like the graphical windows of digital interfaces that divide the screen into parallel perspectival views and time-spaces, images of the desert and the Motel frame and fracture the motivations of the protagonists. At the outset of “Mauve Desert”, for example, the desert is implied to inhabit Mélanie’s vision, “in its mauve and small lines which like veins mapped a great tree of life in [her] eyes” (Brossard 11). And shortly after she narrates:

I was wide awake in the questioning but inside me was a desire which free of obstacles frightened me like a certitude. Then would come the pink, the rust and the grey among the stones, the mauve light of dawn. (Ibid.)

The ideas are not explicitly linked, but their proximity in the text implies that the image of dawn has psychological power over Mélanie. The same way that the light reveals the landscape it also obscures Mélanie’s fears. Conversely, images of the desert at night are positioned as liberating limitless spaces inviting Mélanie’s desire and paranoia:

At night there was the desert, the shining eyes of antelope jack rabbits, *senita* flowers that bloom only in the night. [...] Shadows on the road devour hope. There are no shadows at night, at noon, there is only certitude

traversing reality. But reality is a little trap, little shadow grave welcoming desire. (13)

Eventually, Mélanie's inner world merges with her environment to the extent that she is no longer an individual subject but the "object of the image":

The horizon is curving. Around the great saguaro, the trembling atmosphere. On my way back to the Motel I run the last light filled with the desire of my mother's face and Lorna's. My mother is absent. Lorna is watching a television show. Crazy gleam of light in my room and my fingers there, that's it, there, yet sways, amuses me, *always* me.

That same night the awareness of words circuited my feeling, wrapped round it, got it turning in the wrong sense. My impression was of a thousand detours of grave gestures within matter. The sensation of living, the sensation of dying, writing as an alternative among images. Then reality became an IMAGE. I fell asleep at dawn, strapped in my sheets, *object* of the image. (24)

The presence of the television is notable for the way it, by typographic proximity, may or may not be the "crazy gleam" of light invading Mélanie's room. The doubt which that ambiguity engenders works to collapse ideas of natural and medial environments in a single vivid detail. In the epigraph preceding Chapter One, a description of the Motel bar also notes how its "entire surface resembles a television image..." (16). This detail suggests a similar conflation between the public setting of the bar and the publicness of television, recasting the physical environment as another kind of 'screen'. In both instances, Mélanie's perception of space is shaped by streams of visual information that distort the surfaces around her, hinting that her surroundings are porous and programmable as the media projected onto them. And these sensations are not limited to the visual. Kathy, Mélanie's mother, is described

as so entwined with the porous qualities of the Motel that her voice merges with the architecture and takes on the plurality of its inhabitants:

Kathy Kerouac's voice was in itself a presence, a sound sequence of space and time which like perfume wafted through the rooms, the hallways, the apartment. The entire Motel was permeated with her grave and melodic voice, a voice which, when no attention was paid [sic] to the words, could bring to mind a motet. Every vibration of the vocal chords gave the impression of a sound originated in multiple mouths. (89)

In describing Kathy's motherly identity as both ephemeral but architecturally fixed, Brossard expresses an understanding of the digital as a contradiction in which feminine subjectivity is no longer restricted to the literal body yet ultimately confined still within a larger structure of communication beyond its control. In *Mauve Desert*, mothers are defined quizzically as "open spaces" and yet "like civilization, fragile in front of their television sets, forgotten like some ancient knowledge" (174). Read through a feminist lens, Kathy's existence is double coded in both physical and virtual capacities, existing as an open *and* closed system, exemplary of the struggle facing female identity to not only move freely within but eventually beyond the structural limits of a patriarchal, technoscientific communication apparatus. As Mélanie observes, "[i]n the worst moments of her existence [her] mother would conclude: 'This is a man, we need a bed; this is a woman, we need a room'" (Ibid., 19).

Recognizing the existential struggle between femininity and physical borders in her mother, Mélanie rebelliously exercises a kind of wanderlust, 'stealing' her mother's Ford Meteor at all times of day or night to drive for hours across the desert in a state of "exemplary solitude" (19):

I was driving, perfect on the edge of solitude. Desiring only the horizon, cacti and a little light as naturally during the day.

It was cold in the desert night and everywhere heat brought beings to life, I trembled about turning reality into an episode by getting close to beings.  
(23)

Fascinatingly, Mélanie's driving "episodes" mimic the simulated intimacy of digital virtual encounters. Her stationary perspective from behind the dashboard of the speeding Meteor reflects the paradox of immobile transience that users experience when moving through digital spaces behind a graphic interface; "getting close to beings" in an imminent but heavily mediated manner. The Meteor affords Mélanie an experience of the world that is both framed and buffered by an additional layer of technical operation, rendering the desert landscape as an immersive information space. And like steering a digital avatar in a virtual world, the Meteor anchors Mélanie's identity within a particular kind of mobility, its technological aspects structuring what she considers to be 'real' or doable within her environment. As Maude Laures observes in her notes, outside the car Mélanie was so ephemeral she appeared like a mirage (69) but within it, driving "ravenous," she "bec[a]me living matter; isolated from everything, hands on the steering wheel [...] multiplying seconds, crystals, aerial creatures in the folds of [her] eyelids" (174). As a literal vehicle, the Meteor already promises mobility, but descriptions of its movement portend *translocality* as opposed to the purposive "not being there" of telepresence (Durham Peters 274), allowing Mélanie to do more than perceive an elsewhere but occupy other bodies and spaces in concert. The pink earth, "torrential lightning" (Brossard 20) "orange and jade footpaths" (24), and swaying saguaros (23) that compose

*Mauve Desert* converge seamlessly in the interface of the car and present themselves as equally accessible, at any time, in a digital paradigm of infinite distribution and simultaneity.

Baudrillard discusses this same seductive dimension of driving as part of the “house/automobile axis (*immanence/transcendence*)” (146). Building upon Barthes, Baudrillard declares that the car has made it so that “[n]o more fantasies of power, speed and appropriation” are held within the object itself but “instead a tactic of potentialities linked to usage... the car as vector and vehicle” (Ibid.). Similarly, the dashboard and windshield of the Meteor produce the illusion that the desert is a space of prosthesis, of objects awaiting desire and animation via the transcendent movement of the vehicle. And this is not isolated to Mélanie’s story. In a series of passages where Maude is working to translate “Mauve Desert” she becomes so involved in the mechanics of the text that her snowy Montréal apartment begins to merge with the desert and she, too, inhabits the driver’s seat of the Meteor:

Thus she could parallel, albeit briefly, the small sensation that leads to emotion and the meaning that leads to believing. Indirectly *highlight the passage* into her language, accelerate the feeling, with glittering effects, the slippage.

Noon, the snow is still falling. Dreading that which at night skirt the shapes of the great watchful *sagueros*, Maude Laures translates as ‘finally the storm rose to subtract reality from the eyes.’ Then she dozed off ‘in the Meteor, between two songs.’ (59)

In this moment, *Mauve Desert* proposes a particularly liberating feminist potential of digitality where the subject is not defined by a particular body or even a singular image but by the interpolation of many images and identities in networked co-habitation. Maude exceeds her physicality *and* her own subjectivity when she “skirts”

the shapes of imposing saguaros and surrenders to the same “storm” that vexes Mélanie’s perspective. Yet, the networked nature of the narrative still supposes that only a certain amount of moves or semiotic sequences can be constructed. Despite the translocality of the Meteor or the posthuman permeability of the desert, neither Maude nor Mélanie can ultimately transcend their situations. The endings of “Mauve Desert” and “Mauve The Horizon” are essentially the same. Mélanie still witnesses the murder of her crush, Angela Parkins, and Maude Laures, though successful in finishing her translation, grows, ironically, less connected to others around her in the process:

Trajectory, thought Maude Laures, trajectory. And she progressively got accustomed to the idea of becoming a voice both other and alike... The characters would soon slip away one after the other, become little transparencies in the distance... She would be alone in her language. (160)

Echoing Kristeva’s concerns, Brossard ponders the divided subject through Maude’s acts of translation. By positioning her own writing as someone else’s, (Laure Angstelle) and then having Maude’s character dissect and question the meaning of that writing, Brossard opens the text to immense speculation, signaling the work is counterintuitively not her own and may also be unknowable, even to her, as its mimesis of digital networks implicates readers as co-constructors. In a lengthy passage in the middle of “A Book to Translate” that is purportedly written by Maude, we see more of a noticeable break in tone that suggests Brossard’s own voice is coming through and actively reflecting on whether she will succeed in creating an “irrational” digitality in the writing, an “undivided” self:



For there was nothing precluding the thought that Laure Angstelle was a pseudonym and that, under her truly name, she had written and published several books. If such was the case, it then became necessary to consider the possibility that this book was a climax of sorts, a rupture, shrouded in anonymity. [...] Perhaps also she had written out of pure provocation, as a challenge, wanting to feel herself sliding, 'frenching,' irrational, spent; perhaps had she wanted over time to let seep out like an unobstructed story, a part of herself, the undivided part. (83)

*Mauve Desert* is a complex text, with many other dimensions that I have neither space nor scope to discuss here. But I hope to have adequately demonstrated its feminist-digital dimension. Specifically, that Brossard's use of fictocritical mimesis in *Mauve Desert* embodies the double coding of language as well as the binary logic of the technological environment in which it was written. The immersive and virtual qualities of the desert in combination with the avatar-like function of the car imagine whether it is possible to transcend the prescriptions of female bodies and feminine desire through technology. But as is the case with digital devices and networked platforms, the routes for navigation and expression are not in fact limitless. While open-source programming communities offer a glimmer of hope, digital experiences today remain highly predetermined, designed by corporations looting to profit from the status quo of patriarchy and neoliberal technoculture. In this way, the digital ecology that *Mauve Desert* presents continues to be a salient thought experiment for what a less rational or deterministic digital culture could look like; one in which hyphenated relationships and boundary-crossing are factored into the design of user experience.

## *Places Far From Ellesmere*

After reading Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina* (1878), Aritha van Herk knew that she wanted to tell the story of that reading experience (van Herk 2021). Rather than craft a traditional, 'objective' critique of the book's narrative, van Herk took the fic-tocritical approach of mimesis, inventing a paralogical narrative in which the geographies of her past intermingle with the Russian landscape of *Anna Karenina*, and a journey to the northernmost Elizabethan Island of Ellesmere becomes a feminist act of boundary transgression. *Places Far From Ellesmere* (1990) is divided into four geographical "sites", three of them places in Alberta, Canada where van Herk either once lived or currently resides: The rural town of Edberg, the provincial capital of Edmonton, and the sprawling metropolis of Calgary. Each is a poetic essay that interweaves geographical and autobiographical details. These blurring fragments of subjective and objective perspective frame stinging commentary on the many ways in which female bodies and feminine identity have been consistently denied mobility within narratives of the West and the "great white" North. The final essay, in a defiant move, heads as far North as one can in Canada, to Ellesmere, during the height of its night-less summertime. Among icy and permanently lit features of the "Arctic desert" (77), van Herk's solitude and wanderlust seem to conjure psychedelic visions of Anna. These ephemeral moments become attempts to "free" Anna from the patriarchal trappings of Tolstoy's narrative, in which her decline of social mobility and inability to leave her marriage end in her gruesome and ironic suicide on the train tracks.

As I have shown elsewhere, even van Herk's earliest novel, *Judith* (1978), was explicitly feminist *and* spatial, critiquing how gender is constructed in Western Canada according to divisions (and oppositions) of the land (Pearl 2019 172). Utilizing fictocritical tactics of multivocality and collage that often result in identities and space-times shifting from one sentence to the next, *Judith* forces its reader to constantly question where and when they are in the narrative. These ruptures work to eschew patriarchal representations of rural life as monolithic or linearly navigated through a deliberate distribution and fragmentation of rural identity (Ibid. 175-76). In *Places Far From Ellesmere*, this line of thinking is even more acute in its feminist exercise of "self-geography" or an autoethnographic mapping (van Herk 1990 37). From the local post office in Edberg to the unmarked graves buried under parking lots in Calgary, van Herk keeps the narrative and subsequently the reader in motion, visiting a new location, a different memory (private or collective), from one paragraph to the next. Consequently, the reader must adopt a dualistic mode of navigating features of environment and affect simultaneously, acknowledging that in effect "[e]verywhere is here... that illegitimacy lurks everywhere, [and that one] only has to read the story differently..." to reconfigure the terms of one's environment (Ibid. 36). Throughout her nomadic descriptions, she weaves in subjective responses to *Anna Karenina*, re-reading it as a story of (im)mobility at the hands of men: Her husband's unwillingness to grant her a divorce traps Anna in the limbo of a failed marriage; her choice to elope with her lover, Vronsky, leads to her fall from high society, stunting her socially. But most infuriating for van Herk is that Anna is

frozen out because she reads too much (131). Because Anna wants education and intellectual mobility within her male-defined surroundings, Tolstoy condemns her to death. Meanwhile, far less developed male characters in the story travel freely and prattle on about “the emancipation of women” (Ibid.).

Paradoxically, images of trains and the network of railway that connects them populate *Anna Karenina* and paint a landscape of linked and careening bodies that move in stark contrast to Anna’s social and cultural isolation. In mimetic fashion, trains appear in *Places Far From Ellesmere* as dichotomous signifiers either representing the prospect for transformation and escape or total annihilation. Early on in “Edberg, Coppice of Desire and Return” van Herk succinctly remarks: “No town without a train/No train without a town,” (19) insinuating that one’s survival hinges on access to an elsewhere—the possibility of escaping one’s place in the world. Reflecting on her youth, van Herk recalls playing in the stationhouse, thinking that the “platform stood on the lip of the world” (16). But later, she characterizes the railroad as an “implacable training for departure” (18); as absent-minded residents are run over, as the economy only survives by way of the train’s “death and carryings” (30). Like the ostensible permeability of *Mauve Desert* that Mélanie traverses in the exemplary solitude of the Meteor, trains in *Places Far From Ellesmere* allow networked virtual movement beyond the body and present time, but at the expense of lasting connection and the potential erasure of self (87). To rescue Anna from the tyranny of such a dichotomy, van Herk configures a far less linear, digital network

of desire and longing for the North that yields an interpenetration of space-times, an identity existing emphatically *between* Russian and Canadian geographies:

Temperatures and ice thicknesses no longer measured, but winter comes nevertheless and your coat hopelessly inadequate, your legs always cold. [...] And Russia is looming, lurking, lurking, Anna's quick step on the platform of desire reaches all the way to Edmonton.

The Czar of Russia, who lost his wife a short time ago, is married again. He had not been blown up for several days and was feeling lonesome.

The world at large and Edmonton its stagnation point: how to get from this place farther, how to reach the reaches of the world, maybe Russia. Are seductions to Arctic Islands possible? Do they read themselves a future, a presence on a map? You want to go there, Nova Zembla<sup>41</sup>, its trembling promise, its unrailwayed joining. (Ibid. 48-49)

In the above, the winter climate is a vector not only connecting van Herk and Anna's geographies but also their desire to escape, to know a place untouched by the strict, linear networks of railroads in favour of the chance imbrication of islands. Additionally, the quotation about the Czar, inserted in the middle but unattributed, textually mimics the image of land masses in an archipelago, connected by adjacency and proximity rather than continuity. Consequently, the nature of who is speaking opens itself up to speculation. Is it still the voice of the author? Could it be the voice of Anna? Or is it sampled from one of the many books listed on the very last page of the paperback that begins with the unequivocal statement that "[w]riting is an act of appropriation" (144). The more interesting proposition is that the ambiguity of

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<sup>41</sup> The proper designation for this archipelago is Novaya Zemlya, roughly translating to "New Land" in Russian. It is unclear why van Herk chose to call it Nova Zembla except perhaps to further draw connections between Russian and Canadian geographies, as a much smaller "Nova Zembla Island" lies off the northeastern coast of Baffin Island in present day Nunavut.

the source allows the quotation to perform as all these things simultaneously in an interchangeable and digital capacity within the analog structure of the printed text.

Such interchangeability is seen again in “Calgary, This Growing Graveyard,” where van Herk’s mentions of Southern Albertan weather are interrupted by parenthetical and anonymous quotations:

And everywhere picket fences fencing out the prairie, fencing houses from themselves and each other, the neat divisions of denizens. Home of chinooks (“disarming winter of its severity”). Erotic in intent (“blizzards are unknown”). A lie, but there are always those who lie, continue to lie. Believe it, you say, blizzards are known and not only in the passive sense. The great snow of May, 1986, there were no tracks. (67)

These insertions have a dual effect. First, they align the physical environment in the narrative with the trait of multivocality, generating an ongoing interpretive tension between van Herk’s memories and subjective knowledge of place with the distributed nature of weather and public opinion. Second, they highlight how the ‘unknowable’ in this distributed dynamic comes, problematically, to be associated with feminine desire. The extreme distribution of a winter storm across the land is positioned as “erotic”; its multiplicity—the way it cannot be contained to an individual or active experience—makes the blizzard a boundary-collapsing event. And this is mimicked in van Herk’s willing insertion of other voices. She momentarily loses control of the narrative via interruption, the intrusion of other voices who doubt her ability to know such things. And while this seems to at first only reinforce the patriarchal treatment of her ideas, reinscribing these interruptions challenges the unity and univocity of patriarchal conventions of communication, expressing a far more networked sensibility of authorship.

Most interesting are the multivocal passages in which van Herk's formal arrangement of the text resembles the digital technique of "sampling" or the recreation of the present with found objects (Miller 2004). Closely aligned with the practice of digital remix, sampling is based in an ethos of appropriation and assimilation, and supposes all texts are acts of assemblage. In *Places Far From Ellesmere*, fragments of other texts, most of them written by men, are interspliced with van Herks' writing to both complement and contradict it. By appropriating them, van Herk asserts some authority over those male voices, assimilating their words into her feminist mapping of place. But her sampling is also scant on integration. The textual fragments mostly appear as block quotations, unedited or adapted, and inserted abruptly between ideas without context or traditional setup:

You are those ghosts, con/ and de/construction, shareholders and mortgagees, full of sites and demolition.

Drink up.

Picturesquely situated so as to be within easy reach of the brewery, Calgary extends right and left, north and south, up and down, in and out, expanding as she goes, swelling in her pride, puffing in her might, blowing in her majesty and revolving in eccentric orbits around a couple of dozen large bars which close promptly at 11:30 right or wrong (Bob Edwards).

The York. The King Edward. The Alberta Hotel, the longest bar. Anywhere. Wait. Brewing and malting. Exporting dead meat. Quarrying sandstone. Right or wrong. (van Herk 1990 69)

Like the overlay of audio tracks or overlapping transparent images, the environments that van Herk maps are defined by a preservation of difference. Disparities that arise between her voice and those of others offer additional spaces of perception and interpretation predicated on recognizing the value in difference-making. In the

following excerpt, the ominous epigraph that opens *Anna Karenina* is inserted between van Herk's self-reflexive commentaries on "un/reading" Anna precisely to accentuate how its meaning changes through a negotiation of difference. The indented placement of the words, the clear change in tone and graphic distinction of italicization creates a calculated indeterminacy of attribution. The reader must explore multiple possibilities before deciding for themselves whether the words are being issued from a male or female perspective, from an author or a character, or all of them simultaneously...

Anna. All Annas women written by men, now re/read by women. The reader un/reading the Anna.

*Vengeance is mine, and I will repay.*

She is supposed to represent the epitome of the nineteenth century psychological novel, its high-water mark. High water, Anna, think of that. Is high water the Arctic Ocean? Past the high arctic: the middle north, the far north, the extreme north. You can read her only at extreme north. (van Herk 1990 85)

Considered as digital ecology, *Places Far From Ellesmere* imagines a technological environment where processes of communicating and navigating digital and networked media are no longer synonymous with seamless transitions from one interface to the next but grounded in a material negotiation of technological difference. In "Ellesmere, Woman As Island" van Herk envisions this negotiation as the long and complicated journey from Calgary to Ellesmere, enduring turbulent icy air, camping on frozen ground, and sleeping under unchanging "white nights". But through that process she becomes more attuned to the distributed workings of the Arctic landscape—the expanse of "frost polygons" (110) and the "slow cracks" of



“blue between” (111). Embracing the austerity of that environment presents van Herk opportunities for self-effacement and a strategic dissolution of self. This is evident in her eventual declaration that “Ellesmere teaches pleasure, the pleasure of oblivion...” (130), and she protests that “Anna Karenina should have escaped to Ellesmere,” (77) to evade the empiricism of patriarchy, the impulse to produce proof of one’s presence, instead attesting that

Ellesmere is absence, a hesitation where you can pretend there are no telephones in the world... You are only a body, here in this Arctic desert, this fecund island. (Ibid.)

But even as van Herk celebrates the absence of Ellesmere, she begins to exhibit a more intense identification with Anna’s plight to the point of self-harm. At one point while hiking, van Herk is overtaken by the urge to drown herself in a glacial river, professing to Anna that the “gradual numbing” of the icy water would be a better death than by the “instant violence of trains”:

For a moment, transfixed in the swirling middle, you want to sink to your knees, submerge in this passionately shaped water pouring itself down from the perpetual glaciers of the Arctic. This river, the Snow Goose, would be an ideal death, better than the instant violence of trains, Anna, you would let go so peacefully into a gradual numbing, numbing, numbing, the body nothing more than a stone rubbed smooth and tumbled over... (100)

Again, we encounter the train as symbolic of a violent patriarchal ethos, this time for the speed in which it collapses points in space. van Herk’s image of the river rubbing the body smooth suggests a more subtle interpenetration of boundaries and bodies that while still leading to death insists on movement *as process* over outcome and a prolonged hyphenation of identity as the body gives way to its surroundings.

The longer that van Herk spends on Ellesmere she begins to see visions of Anna, as if Anna *is* that hyphenated relation, intimately connecting van Herk to the landscape and offering alternative ways of thinking about movement and communication:

And Anna, there you see her, herself in brilliant yellow, standing tall... The yellow Arctic poppies so much less proper than the wifely blue harebells. Their slender, hairy stems bend to the ink inside their yellow cups, as if they are flowers of writing, writing themselves strewn over Ellesmere. (106)

Like colonies of Arctic wildflowers, van Herk portrays Anna as an ecological force on Ellesmere that “writes” itself upon the land; a highly distributed text that emerges through deliberate divisions and dispersals of self until the “I” is several and simultaneous. We hear echoes of this networked thinking again near the end of the book when van Herk describes Anna as “source, text, and the act of reading,” (136) suggesting her narrative can only be apprehended in a cybernetic fashion as a self-referencing system, an ecology of inscription and interpretation exceeding the bounds of a singular body or identity to enact a world unto itself. And in this way, though Anna never ‘escapes’ Tolstoy, van Herk’s reimagining of her character allows Anna to remain partial, part of Ellesmere, and for the island to be read provocatively *as* woman and, in turn, woman-as-island.

#### **4. Conclusion: Altering Technological Space**

Pulling you this way and that, mimesis plays this trick of dancing between the very same and the very different... this habitually bracing activity in which the issue is not so much staying the same, but maintaining sameness through alterity.

The inverse of mimesis is alterity, a complete break with one's environment so that the threat of dissimilarity becomes an existential one. Though fictocritical mimesis is concerned with constructing paralogical spaces that promote the reading of difference as critical gesture, their critical capacity is only maintained through a carefully crafted proximity to their subject. The maintenance of a proximal similarity, or the making of an imperfect copy, necessitates closer reading to perceive the space between them, revealing the 'glue' of mimesis to in fact be interpretation, not identification.

Near the end of *DOOM PATROLS*, Shaviro includes the essay "TRUDDI CHASE," named after the author of the New York Times bestseller *When Rabbit Howls* (1987). In it, Chase details living with dissociative identity disorder, claiming to have ninety-two simultaneous selves due to chronic emotional and sexual abuse from her mother and stepfather. Chase nicknames her personalities "the Troops," and the register of the writing in the book shifts, purportedly, depending on which personality is in control. Interestingly, Chase's story also served as the inspiration for the character of Crazy Jane in the Vertigo Comics long-running antihero series *Doom Patrol* that ostensibly informed Shaviro's title and formula for his equally motley project. In this way, *DOOM PATROLS* is an exercise in emulating the partitioned collectivity of Truddi's "Troops," or otherwise making and holding space between the "I" of the mind (psyche) and the "I" of the written page, which is always already other and elsewhere:

Signals, commands, and complaints circulate among them. The multiple selves cannot ever merge into one, but they also cannot escape each other's proximity. This relation-in-difference impels their frenetic activity. [...] But if Truddi Chase has more selves and generates more interference than do most of us, the difference is only one of degree, not of kind. I am only a self in relation to another self, *in communication with another self*; I can't be *one*, without first being at least two.

Shaviro suggests that identity is impossible without something to negate it. Inner dialogue breeds a multiplicity of subject positions, and then we use these positionalities to gauge and formulate an “I” versus a “you” versus an “us”. In fictocriticism, the figurative space created by the oscillation between these subject positions *is* the parallel narrative or where the story picks up, and the margin of difference between them yields a critical space of inquiry.

In *Mauve Desert* and *Places Far From Ellesmere*, the relationship between the female body and the landscape is positioned in proximal similarity to the technological environment, articulating the overlaps and fissures that exist between narratives of female liberation and social mobility with those of digital and networked technologies. Capital “T” technologies like computers, camcorders and cell phones are nowhere to be seen—the narratives are quite technology adjacent in their lateral content. However, this absence creates a productive interpretive tension when bodies and environments are interacting in porous and nonlinear ways that, shy of magic or myth, are only conceivable in terms of digital and networked technology. This is what Taussig means when he illuminates the push and pull of mimesis as a dance in which a particular amount of space must be maintained between entities.

And in both texts, the void between body and environment is *the space of technology itself*.

If not giving way to alterity but dancing with it, then we can also think of these texts as *altering* their subjects through a process of give-and-take, a negotiated collapse of boundaries. In *Mauve Desert* and *Places Far From Ellesmere* technological space is compressed with that of physical environment to reveal their mutual influence on bodies and identities. As such, each work offers an alternative vision of a distinctly feminist ecology where porosity is considered as technological and environmental in effect, and the recognition of indeterminacy actively challenges patriarchal values embedded in notions of technology. In *Mauve Desert*, Mélanie is an interstitial being in the Meteor, inhabiting cacti and the eyes of desert hares. Her indeterminate body defies the binary oppositions and determinism of today's technological rhetoric while also exceeding the technical capabilities of the most sophisticated virtual reality simulations. And yet, she has no recourse. Her fate remains the same. Brossard's narrative imagines a version of simulation that is tactile in the conjoining of bodily sensations but intentionally does not go so far as to promise metaphysical resolve. Likewise, in *Places Far From Ellesmere*, the eponymous island is portrayed as a kind of extra-technological geography where Anna's identity can find refuge. But by the end of the narrative, she remains confined, equally frozen in the permafrost and conservatism of Tolstoy's writing (van Herk 1990 142-43).

Both narratives propose that communication, movement, and contact are synonymous, braided together in a singular modality that renders technological space as

ecological in its imbrication of digital and material thinking. Crucially, in the effort to maintain a proximal similarity to their subjects, neither of the narratives fully collapse into alterity but work to sustain an aggravating space of doubt and possibility: Mélanie and Maude, despite their translocal mobility are restricted to the manmade vectors of the Meteor and the Motel; Anna, even in her ephemeral haunting of Ellesmere, remains an intermittent presence at the edges of the Earth. As much as boundaries of identity and gender are reimagined in the digital formalisms of these texts, they equally mime the dichotomous environment of a technoculture undergirded by a technocapitalist narrative (Green), re-enacting the schisms of cardinal directions and opposite genders that necessitate fictocritical interference.

Fictocritical mimesis does not offer us solutions but a “strange technology” (Atienza); strange simulations of the present that tempt our speculation and intervention in their strategically placed semantic gaps. Prime among them in these works is the recurring role of technology as a means of erasure. In their alternate versions of technology, *Mauve Desert* and *Places Far From Ellesmere* contemplate what would it mean to truly drive *into* the desert or exist *as* an island. Each daringly asks whether it is still possible for technology to actualize desires for interconnection *and* erasure, to grow or accumulate a sense of self at the same it is actively distributed? And, at the heart of this question is a feminist gambit that movement ‘forward’ in technological space, “progress” as it were, can occur as a peripheral motion, oscillating between nature and technology to the extent that the vertical division of binary opposition becomes a horizon, a spectrum. Though they garnered little attention at

the time, the persevering value of *Mauve Desert*, *Places Far From Ellesmere*, and other early works of fictocriticism is their tactical response of invention, crafting alternative, feminist technologies for engaging textual space. Worlds in which interference and indeterminacy are not communication glitches but critical tools for working the land.

**2B.**

**Medusa Writing**



Besides, isn't it evident that the penis gets around in my texts, that I give it a place and appeal? Of course I do. I want all. I want all of me with all of him. Why should I deprive myself of a part of us? I want all of us.

— Hélène Cixous, “Laugh of the Medusa,” 1976, pp. 891.

Cixous famously used the image of Medusa laughing as a kind of totem for the performativity of third-wave feminism in her landmark essay; a wish-image to scoff in the face of patriarchy. Because it juxtaposed notions not only of the feminine and the monstrous but also the godly, and because it diverted male sublimation with mockery, it embodied a taunting rejection of the binary constructs that relegate female bodies according to the aesthetics of male desire. Medusa was not *any one* thing, and her mythical power to turn men to stone with nothing but a glance certainly served as a conceptual antagonist to the voyeurism of the male gaze. As such, one might say that *écriture féminine* and its literary descendants like fictocriticism are a kind of “medusa writing” in their celebration of indeterminate communication. They are not *any one kind of text* written with only one voice, but a symbolic act of laughter and cacophany directed at the technocapitalist narrative—a gesture of refusal in a narrow language game.

But what of Medusa’s hair? (I ask with sincerity.) Yes, a laugh can be powerful. It can disarm and frighten an opponent just as well as any weapon. But what about the theoretical totemic potential in all those serpents upon Medusa’s head; that network of other(ing) beings and perspectives slithering every which way? Their continual acts of entanglement and amorphousness arguably provide a much richer metaphor for the “accidental” mode in which fictocritical texts are conceived and

constructed (van Herk 2021). What if, rather than conceiving of writing as an extension of one's voice, or even various utterances in the sonic flux of a laugh, medusa writing, like fictocriticism, was a prosthetic extension of the body into words—words as gestures seeking contact, or words as slippery, clamouring limbs?

## **Tentacles**

In *Staying with the Trouble* (2016), Donna Haraway takes up the figure of the Medusa as one of several mascots in her promotion of “tentacular thinking” (51); a mode of feeling-thinking in which one tries to consciously entangle themselves with the material and metaphysical circumstances of other living things (30-31). For Haraway, tentacular thinking is only one subplot among many in a larger narrative she is weaving of “SF,” an acronym that intentionally abbreviates multiple concepts at once—science fiction, string figures, and specular fabulation, encompassing modalities of each within the others. In the case of “tentacular thinking,” Haraway makes clear that it involves a “sympoietic” process (34) of radically contingent co-construction between subject positions. Like two players weaving an image in a string game, tentacular thinking is an embodied practice of thinking and “making-with” (58) others in the present moment, or rather, exploring subjectivity beyond the self in a process-led mode of discovery. SF advances a narrative of knowledge produced only in tandem and tenuous moments of contact with entities outside one's subject position, briefly but irreverently reframing knowledge production as the material negotiation of difference *between* subjectivities.

I would argue that fictocriticism has the potential to act as the textual embodiment of tentacular thinking insofar as the shifting registers and voices, as well as the insertion of quotations and citations produce a relationality that can only be sensed across and through the dissonance of time-spaces, genders, and languages in the ever-present reading experience. The successful fictocritical text crafts a kind of perpetual non-space, a transit space where bodies and technologies abrade, and tentacular thinking presumes that they do so in mutual co-construction. It is not so much that fictocriticism writing *is* tentacular thinking, but that it can serve as a method to map such lived complexity in narrative form.

In both *Mauve Desert* and *Places Far From Ellesmere*, environmental signifiers merge with technological protocols—screens behave like sunsets, glaciers transcend geography like railways—stressing the ways in which worlds and networks are conceptually beyond material parameters. Brossard and van Herk weave *and unweave* notions of “mobility” and “communication” until these ideas are suspect to one another. Significantly, I argue that all works of fictocriticism, even those not as explicitly geographical or technological, portend this movement (via a network) and proffer intellectual problems of representational dualism. Each ‘glitch’ of appearance foregrounds the “seriously tangled” (42) narrative that comprises it, subsequently threatening to reveal the artifice of various metadiscourses—media, technology, science, gender and so on. To reveal entangled narratives is to “deterritorialize” them, treating their elements as equally concrete *and* abstract, a double articulation (Deleuze & Guattari 142).

## Trespass

The Gorgons are powerful winged chthonic entities without a proper genealogy; their reach is lateral and tentacular.

— Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble*, 53.

Because Medusa is a Gorgon, chthonic, birthed from air and earth without a clear biological origin, Haraway perceives in her the same radical quality of ambiguity and affiliation as her theoretical cyborg. Unattached to particular kind or kin, the cyborg and the Medusa are free to move laterally across categories of gender, sex, race, even species. And so, like the fictocritical writer who uses citation, multivocality and mimesis to speak through various identities and subject positions, Medusa and her cyborg familiar raise many ethical and existential questions in their tentacular border-crossing.

When, if ever, is it appropriate to write through the voice of another? Or, to inhabit a subject position totally alien to the writer for the purpose of difference-making? Can the white male fictocritic, for instance, in the interest of paralogy, write as a black woman or a trans person? How freely can one sample from the texts and dialects of others in the interest of advancing fictocritical thought?

In cultivating indeterminacy, all fictocritical tactics risk committing trespass, potentially encroaching on and displacing the identities and discourses they seek to activate. This is especially so when it comes to fictocriticism written in the interest of gender studies or racial and post-colonial theory, where the performativity of the text can fall into tactless pantomime of its subject matter, if one is not careful to

maintain a balance. However, done with a self-conscious oscillation between ethical and aesthetic modes of authorship, fictocriticism can

produce an empathic critical stance, a shared textual horizon somewhere in the spaces produced by what Heidegger calls ‘the struggle’ between a critical practice that ‘leaps in and dominates’ and another that ‘leaps forth and liberates.’ (Kerr 2003 184)

The real trespass of fictocriticism then amounts to crossing the artificial divide of the personal and the political—a “wanting all of us” that renders distinctions between subjective and collective acts of enunciation as curatorial in nature. By intentionally appropriating other texts and voices, weaving them with one’s own, the fictocritic emphasizes the already public and political friction of what it means to write and publish in the first place. To reference or to quote another writer means all the communities of discourse that accompany those words are also, like a network, connected and in sudden interpretive proximity to one’s own words, inevitably yielding discontinuities and contradictions. But as academics, we have been taught to minimize the potential for conflictual interpretations and to unify the register and tone of our arguments. Equally, we have been taught to dismiss the allure of hermeneutics that index the struggle to negotiate personal and political views. But rather than try to diminish the tangled affair that writing comprises, fictocriticism is the accentuation of these differences in the hope to articulate the technical division of subjects through language and to provocatively propose that entanglement is an essential feature of meaningful knowledge production.

## Transmission

The conventional (patriarchal) techniques of writing that continually fork the 'I' of the writing and the 'me' of the body comprise a figurative fence too tempting not to climb for Medusas or cyborgs on their lateral and tentacular rampages through the techno-environment. If you fence it, they will hop it, semantically speaking. But these fictocritical trespasses mean little unless they can effect lasting changes and *transmit* themselves into the discourses of other texts.

Raymond Williams once suggested transmission is a means to unify society; the sender/receiver dynamic serving as a model for knowledge reciprocity (1974). It is a lovely sentiment to imagine the proliferation of medusa writing affecting social change and greater global unity. But that future seems keenly optimistic at best. Instead, the kind of transmission that fictocritical texts perform must include and embrace the potential for conflict as well, holding up interference as a meaningful component of communication and thinking-feeling.

Paradoxically, media theorists like Williams, who at first seem natural allies of fictocriticism in their own critical opposition to technological determinism, often end up constructing a technological utopianism that equally suppresses the difference-making function of feminist technologies, of fictocriticism and other 'species' of medusa writing. Conversely, McLuhanian critiques of technology arguing that certain mediums will categorically have certain effects proves no more adequate for accommodating the necessary frictions or divisions of writing. In either case, there will

always be glitches, technical difficulties and moments of trespass that foreclose a completely lucid or legible media culture.

In a recent keynote address for the Posthuman Mimesis Conference hosted by the European Research Council, esteemed digital media and literary theorist N. Katherine Hayles argued that mimesis is a medium of survival for its imminent construction of meaning through radical self-reflection (2021). Her allegorical reading of bacterial reproduction versus viral means to life as “microbiomimesis” is, of course, especially resonant in the era of COVID-19, where viral transmissibility as an analogy for doing media theory has seemingly fallen out of favour. But Hayles, in a typical cyberfeminist posturing of indeterminacy, reminds us that even as efficient microbial reproduction goes, the genetic code that replicates between cells is no less flawed or prone to mutation after its reproduction, and subsequent tools for reworking the medium in which it subsists must be activated to make a significant difference. Tentacular thinking, trespass and textual transmission continue to be necessary interventions to avoid the repetition of unfortunate scientific and technological narratives that already seem to replicate at astonishing speed. Though medusa writing and by extension fictocriticism makes no promise of fixing or fine-tuning the existing infrastructure through which it takes place, like Michel Serres’ theoretical characterization of the parasite (2007), fictocriticism and other forms of medusa writing take advantage of the neglected spaces beside and along their subjects of critique, making differences, however subtle, in the contested margins of the discourses they occupy.

2C.

**Break-And-Enter**  
**(On the Exhibition *Undomesticated*)**



This text was written in critical response to the group exhibition “Undomesticated,” held at the Koffler Gallery @ Artscape Youngplace in Toronto from September 18–Nov 17, 2019.

Originally published in *Peripheral Review* on January 9, 2020, (<https://peripheralreview.com/2020/01/09/break-and-enter-on-the-exhibition-undomesticated/>) the piece appears here in a revised version.

Official documentation of the corresponding exhibition can be found at: <https://kofflerarts.org/Exhibitions/Gallery/Gallery-Exhibitions/Undomesticated>

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### *in miniature*

The mid-century modern across the street, now composed, perfectly centered within the window of the storm door, appeared angelic and fantastically distant in its miniature state.<sup>42</sup> Unassuming power poles and trees were mirrored in the wetness of the street, and they seemed to extend forever, piercing the top and bottom of the frame. Paralyzed there, like a chrysalis under glass, the image of the house was a reality unto itself. All power lines and branches led back to its door, its half-open windows. “Thus, in miniscule, a narrow gate, [had] open[ed] up an entire world,” in which details were all that mattered.<sup>43</sup> The silhouette of a radio, a spider plant descending in pairs.

This was all I could focus on as I came face to face with the Intruder.

His eyes were dark and too remote for reflection. Vanishing points. I couldn’t bring myself to return a shrinking gaze. He was shirtless and bedecked in beads of sweat, holding his shirt in a menacing fist. I thought of all the teenage boys in the locker room who clenched their gym shorts and their pecs like hammers chasing

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<sup>42</sup> Kevin Yates, *Camp Street*, 2013, Bronze, painted wood.

<sup>43</sup> Gaston Bachelard. *The Poetics of Space*. Maria Jolas, Trans. 1958. Beacon Press, 1969, p.155.

nails. The beautiful grossness of their moist hormonal bodies. The smell of adrenaline filled the vestibule like a fog, and I could only look elsewhere—to the emergent tableau of a floating house:

Creamed corn siding.

Dusty crimson shutters.

Hundred-year-old oak trees undergoing a long mitosis.

Like me, the house was shipwrecked in time, unable to re-enter the current, the present. Was it a mirror? A dialectic? *Was I the house*, now defeated and redoubled, contained within a frame?

Neither of us were moving. Only the slight swelling of breath. The intruder was like a mime awaiting his instructions; he seemed more a fixture than a person. And this anti-dynamic rendered our encounter as an object for study, then one of hesitation, and eventually neurotic meaning-making. *He was taunting me with the threat of interpretation.*

Abruptly, an angry car horn shot between us. Passing headlights brought surfaces to life again and his face strobed into acuity. I instinctively lurched forward and puffed up my chest.

“This is a private residence. You should go.”

I was disarmed by the steadiness of my voice, the politeness of my words.

[How erudite. How Canadian!]

After a thick pause, he simply turned around. His movement was slow and deliberate, as if pivoting to place a heavy bottle on a high shelf. As he fingered the door

handle, he muttered something lurid I couldn't quite decipher. But his breath was heavy and close. Then finally, with a huff, his sinewy frame was gone. Or perhaps, it only receded.

### *doors and corners*

A morbid curiosity settled over me after he left. You would have thought me grateful to see him go. And I was. But gnawing questions gathered on my arms and legs like cobwebs as I ambled from room to room. If he had gotten in with such ease, then what prevented parts of me from leaking out?

I started groping for the lights in long-neglected corners of the house just to prove that the space indeed had its limits. Weaving my fingers through the viscosity of the dark and eventually finding the switch became a reassuring game, a perversely futile form of entertainment. But the questions continued to nibble...

The ones that lingered weren't the typical "did I do the right thing?" or "how the hell did he even get in?" I *knew* the latter:

- ✓ The door was unlocked.
- ✓ It was late at night; I was high.

A cynic might say I had it coming. (Lock your borders behind you, you idiot.) But I was oddly unconcerned for my own safety. Instead, what haunted me for days afterward were the questions of identity and ethos:

Not: Who was he?

But: Who was he *to me*?

Not: What was he thinking?

But: What was he thinking that I was also thinking?

Not: Where did he come from?

But: Where was he headed after me? And, why?

Like a photograph, our encounter offered a proof of some kind. But it didn't offer knowledge of his character, his origin, or trajectory. The Intruder was a network of references, but only the image—our particular intersection—was legible to me.

Finally, after examining every lock, latching them again and again—as if the act of locking was a cumulative gesture—I came to rest in the reading nook. Unlike the others, this corner of the house is always illuminated, always already revealed in artificial light. Its details are not presumptuous. Rather they wear their insides out. The MDF that normally sits behind the smooth façade of drywall is exposed here and decorated in the measurements of its construction.<sup>44</sup> Bold lines of caulk reinforce the essential junctures, and these lines converge behind the back of a sky-blue sofa. From its centre, I can sit and look out onto the vastness of the main floor, my body stationery but my lines of sight infinite. No looking back—only out and through. There is something totalizing about this lookout position; an all-seeing function of the home-as-technology.<sup>45</sup> Such is the power of the corner, to act as “a haven that ensures us one of the things we prize most highly—immobility. It is the sure place, the place next to my immobility” and my antithesis.<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> Nicholas Fleming, *Mini Bungalows, 4/8 & 7/8*, 2018, Drywall, latex paint, varnish, AstroTurf, MDF.

<sup>45</sup> David Wills. *Dorsality: Thinking Back through Technology and Politics*. University of Minnesota Press, 2008, p. 11.

<sup>46</sup> Bachelard, p. 137.

Who is Antithesis? Surely, not the Intruder. He and I are a dialectic. “Antithesis is a wall without a doorway.”<sup>47</sup> It privileges no view. It reciprocates without reflecting any Other. This corner of mine is solely internal—solipsistic. And yet, I still don’t feel alone. Some residue of the Intruder remains, around the corners and forever just beyond my perception. Eventually, lines of sight turn to vectors of escape. I look down to see I am clenching some weathered hardback of Deleuzian theory. But even a minor critique can only operate within the confines of a major literature.<sup>48</sup> The air in the room grows thick with dichotomy, and I sink beneath its weight.

I once saw a movie like this.<sup>49</sup> The viscera of a room come bearing down on a girl, and she clings to the wall in terror as if thrown by some sublime and centrifugal force. Her hair is a violent shade of red against the green. She moves slowly and painfully sideways, looking for escape. When she reaches the corner, she just keeps on moving and disappears into the seam. Her hand is exceptionally lit as it exits reality.

### ***nests***

A home, a fort, a nest—a place to protect from the through-lines of age. “A nest-house is never young,” only undamaged.<sup>50</sup> Something ancient and chthonic emanates from its circular logic. But in its round and armoured motif lay the blueprints

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<sup>47</sup> Roland Barthes. *S/Z: An Essay*. Richard Miller, Trans. New York: Hill and Wang, 1974, p. 65.

<sup>48</sup> See “What Is A Minor Literature?” in Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Kafka: Towards a Minor Literature*, University of Minnesota Press, 1986, p. 16-28.

<sup>49</sup> Julie Favreau, *Chambre*, 2009, Video, 5:21 minutes.

<sup>50</sup> Bachelard, p. 99.

of a petrifying holding pattern. Nothing woven in its timeless structure can ever escape.

Like a windblown thread or piece of debris, the Intruder's shape has been accidentally stitched into the nest, and now it's here for good. Broad shoulders and beads of sweat are etched everywhere in sharp relief: Against the stairway, the spackled bedroom wall, the recesses of the pantry. His profile alternates, moving over and under, inflaming figure and ground until He is the contrast, the keynote. Every object once familiar and intimate is made strange and unhomely in the warp and weft of shadows. There is an informatics of daylight as it reveals and sculpts the environment.

Beside the picture window, sun is drawing the contour of rolled carpets so banal they seem to mummify before my eyes, turn to stone.<sup>51</sup> In the kitchen, an old radio murmurs something about viscosity.<sup>52</sup>

The only safe space is in the atrium, away from doors and corners. I slink there and stand beneath the skylight to watch its voyeuristic beams make a spectacle of the ornamental rug. The motif of hybrid flowering creatures stitched into its surface begin to move and bleed together, at first slowly then quickly clockwise in an ontoepistemological motion.<sup>53</sup> *How to know?* and *how to be?* as rotating orbits of inquiry that cross-pollinate. The trilliums of the outer ring spawn new roots and move

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<sup>51</sup> Valérie Kolakis, *The square side of a diagonal supported by a framework or a lumpy painted rug*, 2011-2019, Concrete soaked rugs.

<sup>52</sup> Nicolas Fleming, *Boom Box 01*, 2018, Boom box, drywall, epoxy, latex paint, acrylic medium, glue.

<sup>53</sup> See Karan Barad's concept of "agential realism" and her call for ontoepistemological frameworks in science and technology in *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning* (Duke University Press, 2007).

toward the centre, across boundaries and species, making kin with all things natal and unformed.<sup>54</sup>

I think about the Intruder as a fluorescent egg sac, and he hatches in my psyche.

### *shells*

“The surest sign of wonder is exaggeration. And since the inhabitant of a shell can amaze us, the imagination will soon make amazing creatures, more amazing than reality, issue from the shell,”<sup>55</sup> says my head from inside an IKEA lamp.<sup>56</sup>

The Intruder is a fantasy of architectural conflict. I invent his ongoing menace around the house to mould my identity in counter-formation, but there is no imminent threat. His sly frame left weeks ago now, and I am spiralling inward—reinforcing borders, becoming anti-Intruder.

It’s the moment of origin that I’m after. “The origin makes possible a field of knowledge whose function is to recover it, but always in a false recognition...”<sup>57</sup> I can’t go back to the impossibility of that conflict. There is no there *there* that functions outside or apart from the *here*. So, why contemplate its imaginary spaces?

Would I even have the courage to do anything differently, to dare begin a conversation? How far into the house would I be willing to retreat in order to cage, to engage, to marvel at the appearance of my Other from a distance?

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<sup>54</sup> Hannah Claus, *interlacings*, 2015, looped projected animation, pine needles, 3:36 minutes. Animation Technician: Scott Benesiinaabandan.

<sup>55</sup> Bachelard, p. 107.

<sup>56</sup> Gunilla Joesphson, *Missus Sisyphus (Funeral)*, 2019, Video, 15:09 minutes.

<sup>57</sup> Michel Foucault, “Nietzsche, Genealogy, History” (1977) in *The Foucault Reader*. Paul Rabinov, Ed. Pantheon Books, 1984, p. 79.

## *the attic*

How much does the interior of the home mirror the psyche? All the knick-knacks and souvenirs take on archival significance as indexes of memory-making—the “I” am becoming. Post-Freud it’s easy to imagine what significance might be drawn out from the collected objects of the bedroom, and a hungry libidinous Id is obviously chained to the furnace in the cellar. But, what of the attic?

Its mystique stems not from its hidden contents but from its aerial nature. It hovers above us like an in-house heaven, taunting us with the imaginary of our past and the urge to escape, to seek higher ground.

“But over and beyond our memories, the house we were born in is physically inscribed in us. It is a group of organic habits. After twenty years, in spite of all other anonymous stairways, we would recapture the reflexes of the ‘first stairway,’ we would not stumble on that rather high step. The house’s entire being would open up, faithful to our own being. We would push the door that creaks with the same gesture, we would find our way to the distant attic. The feel of the tiniest latch has remained in our hand.”<sup>58</sup>

As I surface, pulling my frame up and over the threshold of the trap door, I emerge into an unwritten space. Miscellaneous furniture is tucked into every nook and cranny, and all of it veiled in heavy white muslin. It would be impossible to

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<sup>58</sup> Bachelard, p. 14-15.



distinguish a human body from a draped dresser or coatrack. The liquid code of the textiles render all the forms amorphous and faceless.<sup>59</sup>

Could one of these ghostly assemblages be the Intruder? What if he actually never left? Perhaps this is where he's escaped—into a faceless world, into a moment that hasn't happened yet. An Ellesmere?<sup>60</sup>

“What often appears as separate entities (and separate sets of concerns) with sharp edges does not actually entail a relation of absolute exteriority at all.”<sup>61</sup>

When I close my eyes, I can only remember his movements. I cannot recall his face.

As I walk, floorboards moan and make unbecoming sounds. Plumes of dust rise into the air, and the whole space is awash in dancing particles. Their fluid tapestry performs tricks on the eye. Trains of muslin shift and writhe, and I am unsettled by their shadow play. Although they are only ‘things’, they seem capable of performance. They do not possess but perform the makings of an attic. “Agency is not an attribute but the ongoing reconfigurings of the world.”<sup>62</sup>

Downstairs, I hear the ominous sound of the shower turning on. *No one is in it.* The wind picks up and rattles the house with the low drone of an elevator shaft—the technicity of a constructed abyss.<sup>63</sup>

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<sup>59</sup> Birthe Piontek, *Ghost*, 2016, from the series *Abendlied*. Laminated vinyl.

<sup>60</sup> Aritha van Herk, *Places Far From Ellesmere*, Red Deer College Press, 1990.

<sup>61</sup> Karen Barad, “Posthumanist Performativity: Toward an Understanding of How Matter Comes to Matter”, *Signs*, vol. 28, no. 3, Gender and Science: New Issues (Spring 2003), pp.803.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 818.

<sup>63</sup> Lewis Kaye, *Elevations*, 2019, Site-specific six-channel audio installation, 5:13 minute loop.

I leap backwards down the ladder and slam the trap door shut. I bound to the bathroom and throw back the shower curtain. Only my own hairs are collecting in the drain. They are wet and evasive. Above me, I hear the faintest thrum of footsteps.

### *house and universe*

“So, you say this was a break-and-enter?”

“Not exactly. The door was open.”

“Open or unlocked?”

“Open to the universe maybe, but formally shut.”

“Okay. But he threatened you, right?”

“Do you mean physically or existentially?”

The police officer scowls, remembering why he hates his job. Then he adopts a strange and technical smile.

“Sir. I’d really like to help you out here. But, like I said over the phone: Without any evidence of forced entry or a perceived threat to property or safety, we can’t consider this a case of ‘home invasion’.”

“Well. He definitely entered without my permission. And, he definitely broke some things, though you can’t really *see* the damage.”

“How do you expect me to document that?” the cop says cocking an eyebrow.

“Look,” I said plaintively, “the real issue is that he’s still here. He never really left. I saw him move towards the front door, but I can’t be sure he went outside.”

“But you said that this incident happened several weeks ago.”

“It did.”

“And you only came face-to-face with him once.”

“Once that I’m aware of, yes.”

The cop blinks stiffly.

“Listen, Son. I’m not sure exactly what you’re trying to tell me is going on here. But I don’t think I can be of much help. And I advise you don’t call us again unless you have some evidence.”

“Do you daydream, Officer?”

“Excuse me?”

“I take it back. I do think the Intruder left... But when he did, he didn’t take all of him *with him*. And since then, I daydream a lot. In fact, I seem to be dreaming all the time. Just the other day I looked out the window and saw the strangest thing—a disintegrating house!<sup>64</sup> It was whirling around in the air like a flower petal, and it was breaking apart in circles. Even stranger though, was that it seemed to reveal more and more of its structure even as it disassembled. The violence of exposure... It looked a lot like this house, actually...but you didn’t, did you?”

Suddenly, the police officer goes grey and sombre. He begins looking around, inspecting the walls and the furniture in the room. Then he says: “Sometimes the house grows and spreads so that, in order to live in it, greater elasticity of daydreaming, a daydream that is less clearly outlined, [is] needed.”<sup>65</sup>

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<sup>64</sup> Gwenaël Bélanger, *Breakdown*, 2008-2013, Animated 3-d video, 4:01 minutes.

<sup>65</sup> Bachelard, p. 51.

“And maybe the Intruder caused this?”

“The Intruder is a fantasy. But the House is a Universe—one full of ‘agential intra-activity in its becoming’<sup>66</sup> and ‘things’ going bump in the night.”

“I’m not sure I follow you.”

“Look, Son. There’s not much more I can do for you. The locks on your doors work just fine. Nothing is missing or damaged. Call me when you have something concrete, OK?”

With that he got up from the sofa and placed his pristine card on the table. Oddly, rather than leaving an impression of his body in the cushion, the upholstery seamed to bloat and billow outward in a mutating gesture.<sup>67</sup> I stared at it in quiet bafflement for a while until the sound of his boot heels on the driveway broke the trance. Then I heard the engine turn over and dissolve into an autumn fuzz.

After I was sure he’d gone, I went to the storm door and looked out through the frame for a long time. Looking for who or what I’m not exactly sure. The neighbour’s house, with its peeling crimson shutters, was no longer a static image. Gusts of wind carried leaves across its darkened windows like antennae feeling for prey. The whole scene seemed less stoic now, more porous, and fragile in its floating world.

I tried to make out more silhouettes in the windows through the pale haze of the afternoon. Vaguely, mistily, I could see something like a figure looming in the picture window. They were motionless—statuesque and intentional. Somehow, I was

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<sup>66</sup> Barad (2003), pp. 818.

<sup>67</sup> Lucy Howe, *Untitled (Chair)*, 2009, Mixed media.

certain that they were looking back at me, *into me*. I do not remember if my mouth was open or closed.

**2D.**

**Cat's Cradle with Mary Catherine Bateson**

The game started somewhat disproportionately, as there were several ~~decades~~ between us. And I had yet to finish my terminal degree. But the threads of theory running through our respective areas of inquiry were braided despite being so far apart in time and geography.

It was a grey day on both sides of the Atlantic, full of cloudy conversations that ironically only seemed to part when we addressed them as one and the same. In fact, it was only when we could consider ourselves as parts of a whole and peculiar machine, an apparatus for knowledge-making, that we were able to value the individual junctures (and consequent disjunctures) of the discourse taking shape between us. Otherwise, on an empirical level, we recognized only brief overlaps or traces of what mattered. Our hands and threads knew more than we did in the microseconds that separate the doing from the knowing; a parallel conversation taking place that was, in some ways, more authentic in its articulated subtlety.

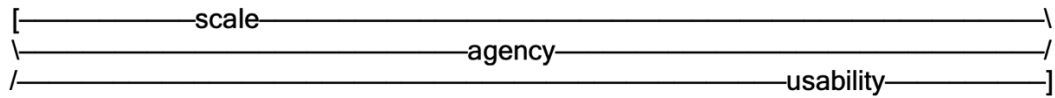
### **Move I. (An Armature)**

The algae bloom as a “bottleneck”—that was a clever analogy to sneak into a book about metaphors.<sup>68</sup> I wonder, though, how far it can take us given that agency affords humans the ability to turn a bottle upside down but not a lake, certainly not an entire ecosystem... Is there a critical difference then in the operability of the artefacts we choose to make our analogies with? I get that the physical function of a narrowing vessel and an oxygen sucking eukaryotic super-colony are essentially the

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<sup>68</sup> Mary Catherine Bateson. *Our Own Metaphor: A Personal Account of a Conference on the Effects of Conscious Purpose on Human Adaptation*. 1972. Hampton Press, Inc., 2005, p. 49-52.

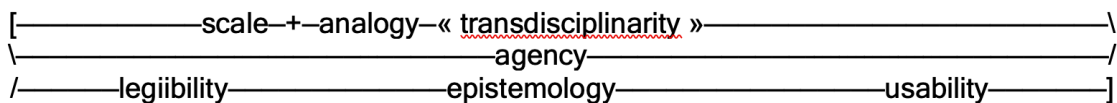
same. But one is a tool and the other an emergent microcosm. What do you say to someone who wants more of a practical (technical) connection between these concepts?



For the first time... we were dealing directly with formal analogies between minute systems and very large ones, in this case single brain cells and large ecosystems like Lake Erie. Part of the excitement of a discussion like this for me was that the similarities became visible even with next to no knowledge of the subject matter.<sup>69</sup>

We spent the middle part of the conference on epistemological problems. This means that we went right back to the thesis stated by Gregory in the Memorandum that our failures in relating to natural processes stem from systematic distortions in the way we think and talk about such processes.

*[Any discrepancies in perspective were due to angles of approach, not proximity to the matter at-hand.]<sup>70</sup>*



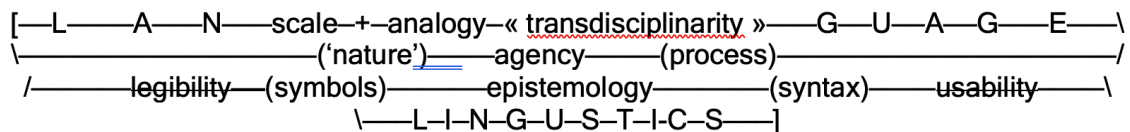
<sup>69</sup> Bateson, p. 52.

<sup>70</sup> Bateson, p. 148.



## Move II. (System *as* Process)

Well, this is very interesting, to me, because it suggests that “process” and the “nature” of an ecology are separate dimensions of understanding the system. So, biology, for example, becomes the ongoing construction of a difference between how we know things about organic systems versus the nature of studying organic life. And these cognitive territories only converge at a particular angle or configuration? An interesting philosophical experiment. But can we really say there’s a boundary between the “system” and the “process” of knowing or understanding something as pervasive as nature? Or is this another false distinction of language that shields us from apprehending the whole, vis a vis Derrida? A moebius strip in which we can’t truly perceive the influence of linguistics on consciousness or comprehension because we’re always already steeped in its grammatical, material arrangements?



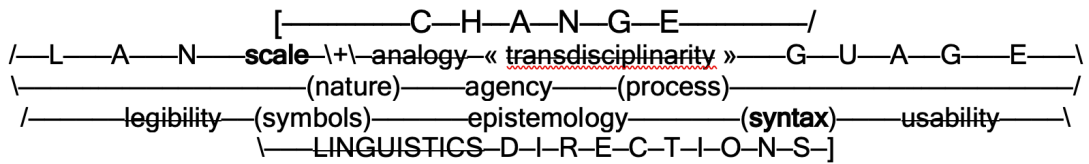
“The critical emotional problem that we face [as academics] is to confess. It’s very difficult for people [like us] to say, ‘Look, the whole damn shooting match is wrong and it goes right down the line.’”<sup>71</sup>

Gregory broke in [then] to underline another aspect of the point he had been reaching for with his question: “A considerable part of the learning

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<sup>71</sup> Holt qtd. in Bateson, p. 128.

experience was a perception of a direction of the starting point of that movement and, of course, only a very dim idea that the other end of the movement is some sort of hell, either on earth or elsewhere. Direction of change is a thing that people can perceive where they cannot perceive the state that they're in."<sup>72</sup>



“That’s the first time I’ve ever seen someone able to make the difference clear between information and control...”<sup>73</sup>

### Move III. (Ornamental Tension)

In the background, the slow swish of a finger sandwich swept its way between tense jaws and white clammy fingers. Lunchtime was a tense affair at the conference, since most of the older men preferred to continue intellectual sabre-rattling through their rye bread and cucumber.

If one can truly perceive the change in direction but never the scale of the vessel that facilitates the experience, then what hope is there for recording, let alone describing, a sense of purpose apart from the collective movement of time?

<sup>72</sup> Bateson, p. 130.

<sup>73</sup> Horst qtd. in Bateson, p. 203.

Not being *at* the conference, of course, but *with* Bateson in the environs of her conference narrative, I was free to ponder these things without the imminence and intensity of her father's esteemed colleagues. I wonder if she tossed the same question around while furiously chewing Bavarian pretzel after pretzel, just to avoid making small talk with "experts"? And all the while ignoring dismissive glances from the tenured old men, spewing their equations like watchwords.

*Could she map what was happening around her without knowing its scale?*

For Mary Catherine, who often smoothed her blouse in the anteroom with impeccable poise, this paradox was no shock; she had already accounted for numerous disjunctures in her recitative minutes of the conference...the hesitations at lunch to 'eat well' after Barry's "ominous" oration of ecological collapse;<sup>74</sup> the bizarre limbo of intuitive pause before reaching for one's cigarette despite the convenience of the manufactured... There was an ironical thickness, a weight to the ordinary, in that utmost of cerebral meeting spaces.

I coughed dryly before heaving a sigh. My fingers plum with restricted blood from maintaining our game throughout the aside. And then I ventured out loud:

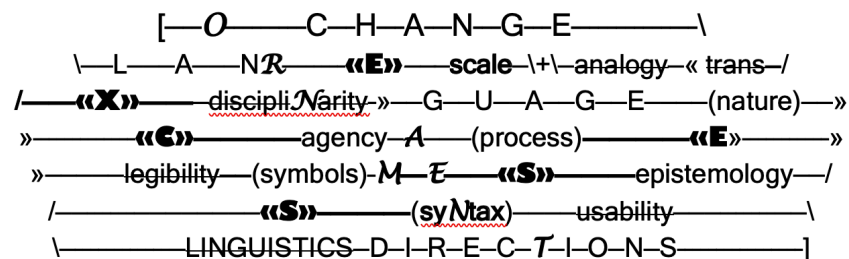
"I wonder, Catherine, if, in the face of a self-imploding reckoning with perspective, we the human species might learn or *return to* something that is already within us but suppressed by edicts of efficiency and technoscience—*ornament*—as a poultice to that metaphysical wound of usefulness?"

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<sup>74</sup> Bateson, p. 72.

She pulled her ends of the game taut and gave me her full attention, pretzel still subsiding in her throat. I continued:

“According to Jeanne Randolph, ornament is a personal-political tactic for undermining the rigidity of the slave/master relation in knowledge production by virtue of its excess.<sup>75</sup> The tactical exaggeration of form increasingly resists formal interpretation, exceeding the parameters of available lexicons for classification and determination. And I would say, by proximity, ornament—in writing, in research—is equally effective in disturbing the expectations of how discourse is performed in regards to consciousness, purpose, nature, etc. What are we to make of the excess of dancing, or laughter? Are they not integral parts of the system? Or, for that matter, what about the emergent architecture of termites, making land art from compost, from garbage?<sup>76</sup> Is the ornamental not the knotting of signifiers, the inverse of the scientific aesthetic?”



There is a profound illusion that it is possible in a systematic sense to separate the representation from what is represented...<sup>77</sup> [Y]ou must always keep in mind the

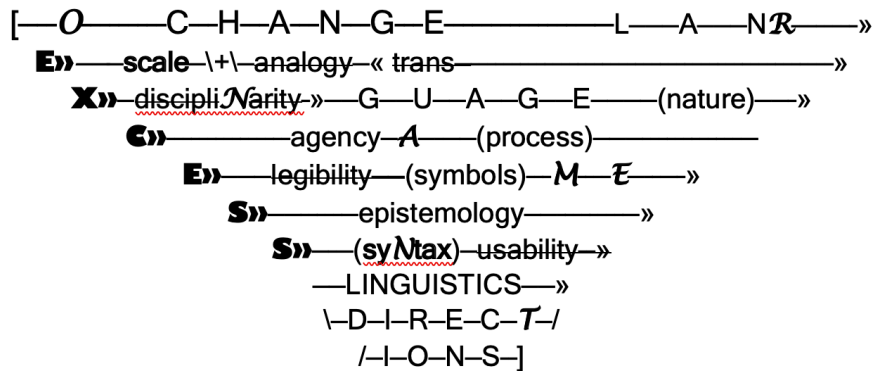
<sup>75</sup> “Dancing in the End Zone: Football, Psychoanalysis, and Ornamental Activism,” in *Crime and Ornament*, Bernie Miller and Melony Ward, Eds., Toronto: YYZ Books, 2002, pp. 227-240.

<sup>76</sup> Kenneth Chang. “A Metropolis of 200 Million Termite Mounds Was Hidden in Plain Sight.” 20 November 2018. The New York Times. <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/11/20/science/termite-mounds-brazil.html>

<sup>77</sup> Holt qtd. in Bateson, p. 156.

fact that the twoness is not there unless you have a representation and in fact it involves all of the possible representations. What he is saying is that it is much richer than the simple concept of twoness; it involves a whole universe of cases of two.<sup>78</sup>

I thought of my own exasperation on many occasions, sitting fuming in just that situation, feeling that the delay arose from the slowness and inattention of other drivers, rather than from the basic interweaving of space and time in an on-going process. It soon struck me that the diagrams looked like nets of knotted string. You could follow the alternating conditions on a strand in the net, the lines leading from knot to knot; in some cases following a particular strand seemed to have consistent meaning.<sup>79</sup>



**Move IV. (Poiēma)**

It was long after lunch but still dreadfully far from coffee break. The grey of the sky came crashing into the valley and a fine mist covered the most detailed of

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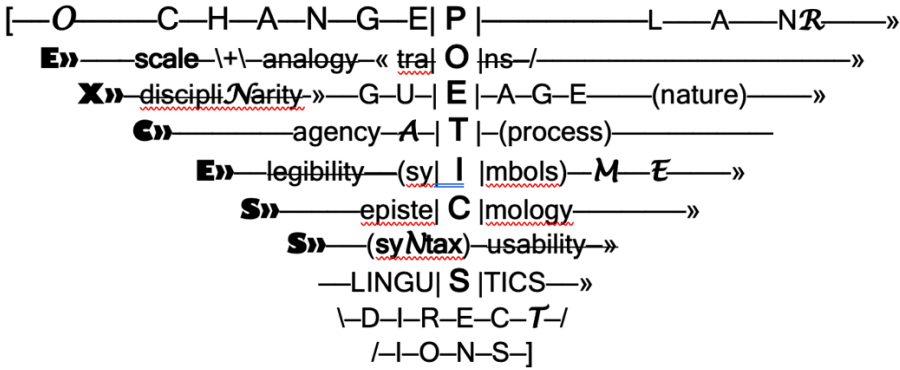
<sup>78</sup> Commoner qtd. in Bateson, p.157.  
<sup>79</sup> Bateson, p.169.

expositions, making the trajectory of our movements hazy. But we pressed on with our game anyway because Mary Catherine had not yet reached her signature move.

I said coyly:

“Catherine, we haven’t really talked much about the role of poetics in how we’re making what we know. But ornament would seem to stem from a tactics of poetics. It accounts for the existence of concepts like beauty and love that wouldn’t be interpretable without a baked in sensibility for the unnecessary and the fictional. Did you not once say that ‘we need poetry as knowledge about the world’?<sup>80</sup>

Something about mapping complexity on complexity... I think you were maybe getting at the notion that consciousness might boil down to the ability to match the intricacy of an outside world with equally rich internal fictions. Is this the central relationship that you see occurring between the nature and the process of every system, the writing of a universal poetry?”



There’s only one relationship and they’re both it. If we’re going to talk about relationships instead of about things, then all our talk about what exists, what’s prior to

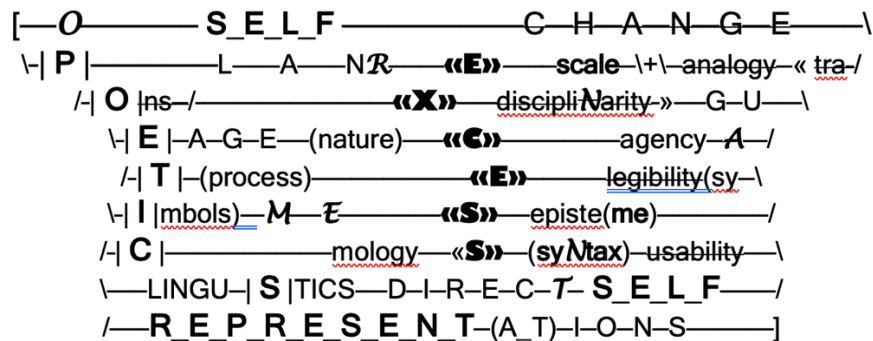
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<sup>80</sup> Bateson, p. 288.

what, and so on, just has to be rethought completely. [...] We can't relate to anything unless we can express its complexity through the diversity that is ourselves.<sup>81</sup>

When, for example, you dream, what actually happens is that you drop out the functioning of the apparatus that handled the operands and leave in the functioning of the apparatus that handled the operators. Therefore you construct patterns of dependency... you construct metaphors, the metaphor being a chunk with a certain structure inside it, corresponding, we'll say, to a chunk of nature.<sup>82</sup>

[I]n poetry a set of relationships get mapped onto a level of diversity in us that we don't ordinarily have access to[: The fiction of self-representation.]<sup>83</sup>



### Move V. (Catching Threads)

At the close of the conference, I could tell Mary Catherine was frustrated.

<sup>81</sup> Bateson, p. 286.

<sup>82</sup> Gregory Bateson qtd. in Mary Catherine Bateson, p. 297.

<sup>83</sup> Bateson, p. 288.

(I was full of misgivings as Gordon pursed his lips, straightened the papers in front of him on the table and began to speak, with a small precise cough.)<sup>84</sup>

Her novel perspectives on poetics as a critical component of cybernetic thought and ecology was not completely lost on the group, but the nuances were casualties of the format. Perhaps if everyone had engaged in string figures rather than verbal presentations, there would have been more opportunity for a tactile grasping of the self-environment metaphor and the role of ornament in subverting that distinction. Either way, the most significant move had been played, and now it was up to me to catch the remaining threads and weave them into the configuration.

I said to Mary Catherine:

“You seem a little miffed that the rest of the group didn’t pick up on your discussion of religion. I have to say that I, too, am suspicious of any social group that promises a unifying metaphor. As you noted, too much faith in paradigm shift *can* lead to cultish behaviour<sup>85</sup>. However, there was a connection that you were trying to draw out between the epistemological unification of religions and what you referred to as ‘deep ecology’<sup>86</sup> what was it again? Oh, I remember: “The purposive use of religions is a tool that turns in the hand.’ Do you want to expand on that?<sup>87</sup>

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<sup>84</sup> Bateson, p. 306.

<sup>85</sup> Bateson, p. 315.

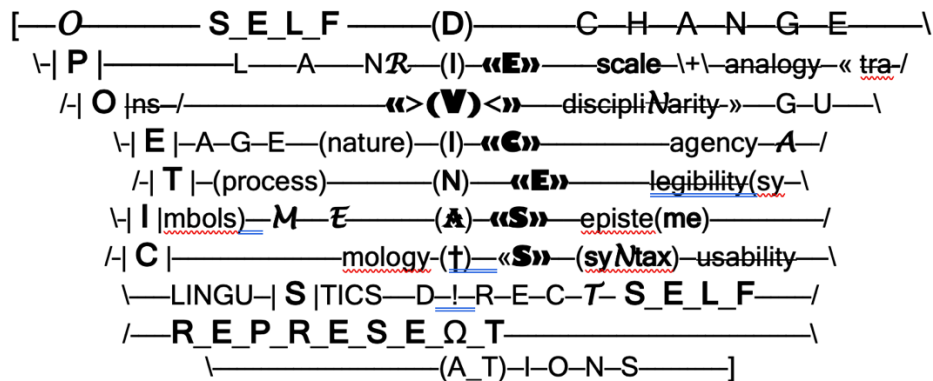
<sup>86</sup> Bateson, p. 317.

<sup>87</sup> Ibid.



A very large proportion of humanity identifies itself with one or another of the great universal religions. Where so many passed, paths are there to be found, and strands of humility and recognition of the sacred immanent [in] the natural world. [...] In recent years, we have seen an effort at synthesis of scientific and poetic formulations... that loo[k] at the planet cybernetically as a living—that is, self-regulating—organism. [...] I would still argue, as I did in my memoir of my parents, that “cybernetics makes poets of us” by allowing the recognition of formal similarities, not only from one living system to another but from ourselves to other living systems.<sup>88</sup>

“Ah, I see. And so, the work of deep ecology would be a divination of self *through* the poetic relations of living systems?”

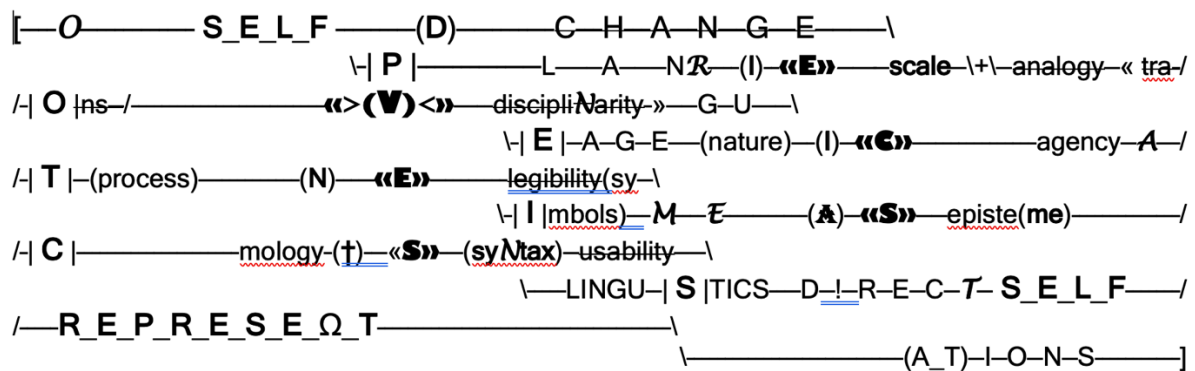


I believe that the emerging ecological awareness is necessarily multistranded. There is no single metaphor that can be used to evoke in all human beings a commitment to protecting life on earth. I chafe sometimes at those who are so focused

<sup>88</sup> Bateson, p. 316-18.

on cetaceans that they are careless of smaller species... What we can do is work to make sure that the perception of living communities of many kinds is widely and repeatedly available...<sup>89</sup>

It is very important to speak, to publicize, to broaden the political agenda and offer to others those systems of metaphor that may change their understanding, all the while keeping those understandings diverse, for that diversity is the health of the system.<sup>90</sup>



“Where is the difference?”

“Well, I think it’s there as well as in my perception of them, of course.”

“You can say it is both in your perception and there. But of course it’s not localized over here?”

<sup>89</sup> Bateson, p. 321.

<sup>90</sup> Bateson, p. 324.

“It’s not in the one [thread],” [Mary Catherine] sang. “It’s not in the other [thread].”

“If I bring them together I should be able to pinch it?”

“No... the relation is there even when the [threads] are apart.”

“Agreed.”<sup>91</sup>

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<sup>91</sup> Bateson, p. 298.

**3A.**

**Brandon Is a Network Not a Name:  
Fictocriticism & the Cyberfeminist Art of Shu Lea Cheang**

The following is a journal article that originally appeared in the *Open Library of Humanities Journal* as part of the special collection, *Binary Modernisms: Re/Appropriations of Modernist Art in the Digital Age* (2022). Some mechanical adaptations have been made to the text to conform to MLA citation standards.

In addition, it should be noted that the third section in the essay deviates from the core discussion of the dissertation in its explicit art historical focus, which was implemented to better fit the themes of the special collection submission. It should also be acknowledged that dissenting perspectives have been expressed by committee members about the validity of attempting to weave early 20<sup>th</sup> century artists, particularly male artists in Dada and Surrealism, into the theorization of fictocriticism as a cyberfeminist practice. If possible, without violating the restraints of the sandwich thesis model, the author would make amendments to said section to highlight more key female figures in Dada and Surrealism as well as women trailblazers in performance art of the 1970s.

The official open-access version of the article can be found at:

Pearl, Z. "Brandon is a Network Not a Name: Fictocriticism & the Cyberfeminist Art of Shu Lea Cheang", *Open Library of Humanities*, vol. 8, no. 1, 2022. DOI: 10.16995/olh.6391

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## 1. Amenable Texts: Fictocritical Writing & Cyberfeminist Art

Another characteristic that can only be subjectively known is the capacity to sustain a response that is unsettling or thrilling. It is the absence of a solution, the absence of a resolution that is significant. The viewer realizes that there is no interpretation that will validate retreat into quiescence, no reassurance. Instead, there is an uneasy recognition of the artist's insistence he or she can contribute to the store of potential public realities.

— Jeanne Randolph, "The Amenable Object"  
in *Psychoanalysis and Synchronized Swimming*, 1990, pp. 34-35.

The studio practice of media artist Shu Lea Cheang (b. 1954) is best described as the making of uncertainty. Beyond consistently choosing to engage the emerging technology of the day, whether it be digital video in the 1980s, net art in the 90s, or more recent forays into facial recognition and augmented reality, the constant in Cheang's oeuvre has been a carefully crafted absence of a resolution to her largely narrative-driven works. Using networked models for production and participation,

often in conjunction with networked technologies, Cheang's artworks achieve a tactical indeterminacy in which the scope and structure are ever-changing, depending on use and context. In that process, Cheang's creations call into question the fixity that has defined so much of the Western art historical canon in favour of *amenability*, or a tendency towards critical acts of play. In this paper, I examine those tactics of indeterminacy embedded in several of Cheang's more famous works, including her ground-breaking piece, *Brandon* (1998), through the lens of Jeanne Randolph's theoretical writing on 'the amenable object' and her subsequent experiments to make this critically playful theory of art interpretation manifest in art writing, a process she later coined "ficto-criticism" (Randolph 2020; Flavell, 2009). Specifically, I seek to show how the reflexive technicity at work in fictocriticism aligns with the cyberfeminist politics of Cheang's practice in both crafting amenable objects and transgressing binarisms of subject/object, physical/virtual, fact/fiction, in the interest of institutional and cultural critique.

Discussing Cheang's work in the context of amenability and dismantling binary oppositions means adopting a staunchly postmodern and distributed understanding of identity, one not far from the "divided subject" central to Jacques Lacan's psychoanalytic theory, in which the self is not only governed but ultimately defined by oscillating forces and contradiction (Dor 129). As a racialized, queer woman and self-declared "cyber-nomad" (Rich) Cheang's work and personal life are conceptually linked and stratified by their geographic and aesthetic flux. In the early 2000s, Cheang left the U.S., just as she was rocketing to the top of the New York art scene

(Ibid.), choosing instead to live without a permanent address or fixed studio space for seven years, criss-crossing the Eurozone as a “floating digital agent” (Ibid.) before eventually settling in Paris (Ng). Much like the tentacular narratives of her art, Cheang attempted to situate herself not in any one place but decidedly between borders and subject positions, effectively embodying the “wildly indeterminate, gender-blurred” posthuman characters of her films (Rich). Cheang has also gone on record about the metaphysical harms of binary oppositions. That, in her words, they operate as “non-confined prisons” for the regulation of bodies (Ng). Her primary concern as an artist seems then to be the invention of border-crossing interfaces that allow for the blurring of identities and representational resistance:

To obscure and revoke the omnipresent surveillance of queer bodies, we need to remodel, morph, and transpass [sic] all gender binaries. There is no ‘passing’; rather, gender and racial identities in constant flux to avoid confinement. (Cheang qtd. in Blas)

The nomadic bio-politics of “transpassing,” and the brief assemblages of bodies and identities produced along the way, recall that mercurial figure of Donna J. Haraway’s cyborg, whose bodily sensations are always in flux, based in “partiality” and “a matter of fiction and lived experience” to evade the technoscientific logic of our times (1991 149-151). By her own admission, Cheang’s approach to developing the narrative aspects of her film work is similarly “parallel, non-linear” to its subject matter and installations are “multi-stream” by design (Ho), often utilizing fragments of research material to interrupt and/or augment her own narrative. *Fresh Kill* (1994), for instance, is an ostensibly dystopic, science fiction film about an over-polluted world in which contaminated fish cause people to vanish. However, the

setting is clearly personal and hybrid for Cheang, drawing on the very real eco-political disasters facing residents of Staten Island in her then-home New York City as well as drawing from events on Orchard Island—a largely Indigenous-inhabited territory used as a nuclear waste-dumping ground in her native Taiwan. The day-to-day life of the characters in the film is also told through the perspective of a queer family enduring the loss of their only child, and subsequent questions of reproduction and futurity are jointly interrogated through a gender and race-sensitive lens that adroitly embodies the entangled subjectivity of Haraway’s cyborg and the anti-technoscientific logic it mythologizes.

Cheang’s work has also been qualified numerous times as “cyberfeminist,” (Abrams; Ugelvig; Voon; Walsh), a philosophy that Canadian media artist Nancy Patterson eloquently described as “reconstructing feminist politics through theory and practice with a focus on the implications of new technology...” (74). Looming large in Cheang’s cyberfeminist lexicon have been the trappings of video surveillance; through spatialized abstractions of circuits and feeds, she has repeatedly framed issues of race, class, and capitalism as embedded factors in the use of networked video. In *The Airwaves Project* (1991), for example, television monitors hang suspended from the ceiling over a levelled gravel ground, joined by an elastic cord that when pulled ‘breaks’ that circuit, replacing silent images of garbage scows on the monitors with video playback of chanting protesters. While the piece is implicitly about the continual shipment of waste from rich Western countries to Third World nations, the circuit-breaking gesture required to activate the piece



transforms the average gallery-goer into a temporary co-constructor of the image—one suddenly complicit in the asymmetrical flows of global economics. The conceptual tension that arises from wanting to activate the work through participation yet not wanting to acknowledge one’s unwitting participation in a technological system of economic disparity is precisely the kind of self-reflexive reckoning that cyberfeminist discourses seek to evince.

Writing in *Modest\_Witness@Second\_Millennium. FemaleMan\_Meets\_On-coMouse: Feminism and Technoscience* (1997) Haraway describes this parallax view as becoming cognizant of the “artifactual,” or recognizing those “ethnospecific, naturalizing discourse[s] that continu[e] to justify ‘social’ orders in terms of ‘natural’ legitimations” (108). Revealing artifactual discourse, depends, counterintuitively, on creating an even more fictional counternarrative that cannot be so easily ‘read’ or naturalized into the social order. And this approach is arguably no better demonstrated than in the obscure but richly indeterminate practice of fictocriticism, which aims to “deform the expectations of the reader” in its hybridity (van Herk 2021).

Originating in Canada in the late 1980s and then quickly taking hold in Australian academia (Gibbs 1997; Flavell 2004) fictocriticism is a particular practice of critical writing that, by virtue of its elision between subjective and objective voices, deliberately blurs the line between what can be considered as “art” or “literature” versus literary critical commentary (King 1994). As a result, fictocritical texts incite doubt in their reading by actively drawing attention to their own gaps—their own technicity—ergo the assemblage of various registers and voices that amplify their

differences in a cybernetic, feedback-driven fashion (Kerr 1996; Porush 1985). Much like the cyber-nomadism exhibited in Cheang's artworks, fictocritical texts are also written to be decidedly partial experiences, and to avoid the entropic trappings of genres, or the violence of naming, more generally. Duly, there is no agreed upon canon of fictocriticism. But several notable writers from Canada and Australia have either declared their work as fictocritical or have been labelled as such in scholarship. Pioneers in Canada include Jeanne Randolph (see *Psychoanalysis and Synchronized Swimming* [1991] and *Symbolization and Its Discontents* [1997]) and Aritha van Herk (*Places Far from Ellesmere* [1990] & *A Frozen Tongue* [1992]), whose essays are diaristic and choreographic in their multivocality. There is also the dense and polysemous work of Nicole Brossard (see *Picture Theory* [1982] & *Mauve Desert* [1988]) whose self-branded *fiction théorique* often houses narratives within narratives to explore the imbrication of fact and fiction. Moreover, Daphne Marlatt's *Ana Historic* (1988) interweaves archival data and autobiographical poetry to reimagine the politics of femininity in colonial British Columbia:

Ana/Ina  
whose story is this?

(the difference of a single letter)  
(the sharing of a not)

she keeps insisting herself on the telling  
because she was telling me right from the  
beginning stories out of a life are stories,  
true, true stories and real at once—this is  
not a roman/ce, it doesn't deal with heroes (73)

Gail Scott's painterly essays on femininity also deserve mention as fictocritical in treatment, especially for the ways they seem to shift location and even subject position from line to line in a rhetorically variegated gesture:

It's April again. On the radio they're saying a chunk of Antarctica, the size of P.E.I., is collapsing into icebergs. A CBC journalist chirps about the advantages of global warming—for gardeners. Much extended growing seasons. Of course the bugs will get a foothold. Bug oils advised. Feeling weird, I turn off. If dread seems part of who we are, maybe to recount is to launch reasoned if defensive resistance. Camped up with lipstick. Like women during war. (1981 15)

Meanwhile, in Australia, Marion Campbell's *Lines of Flight* (1985) arguably paved the way for fictocriticism in that country, with its “psychological[ly] insight[ful] poetic and painterly language, time layered with memory and even stories within the story” (Moore). Gail Jones' *The House of Breathing* (1992) is a stunning collection of geo-political “auto-fictions,” and the work of Australian fictocritical scholars Anna Gibbs and Heather Kerr have made invaluable contributions to the notion of “writing as research.”

Notably, fictocriticism has been described on more than one occasion in terms of technology and even as cybernetic in its prosthetic qualities:

The [fictocritical] text is regarded as “a device or armature within particular conducts of life and practices of the self” (King 1993: 15); and here we seem to encounter the critic as cyborg (Haraway but also, perhaps Porush). [...] Like the cyborg's oxymoronic fleshly metal (for example) this kind of writing “is not decisively any one thing” (King 20). (Kerr 1996)

Because fictocritical texts purposely elide subjective and objective perspectives, mixing anecdote and autobiography with essay and critique, they, like the cyborg body,

form a patchwork of identities and desires. And because many fictocritical texts make use of fragments, interludes and collage-like citational writing, this patchwork is quite evident on the page; gaps between voices as well as literal gaps between words are foregrounded as meaningful aspects of the reading experience. As Gibbs has noted, intentionally jeopardizing the continuity of the reading experience in the fictocritical text is crucial to also jeopardizing the patriarchal and colonial systems that maintain the status quo. In allowing “numerous voices [to speak] in unison, at other times in counterpoint, and at others still against each other, in deliberate discord” the notion of universal truth becomes impossible, and affect comes to matter again in the production of knowledge (Gibbs 2005).

Consequently, I proffer an intrinsic overlap exists between the aims of the fictocritical writer and those of the cyberfeminist artist. Though it would be an overreach to claim that every fictocritical text is also a work of cyberfeminism and vice versa, when creating either the fictocritical text or the cyberfeminist object-text, the task at hand is essentially the same—the making of a *cybertext* (Aarseth 1997) as opposed to a ‘plain’ text that cannot be altered dynamically. The notion of a cyber-text, regardless of specific physical form, implies that the given document, whether digital media installation or codex-bound book, can be *operated in and of itself* like a machine, possessing affordances and articulated parts that generate multiple outcomes and, in doing so, draw attention to their own construction. Aarseth famously uses the example of the self-referential *I Ching* (indexically based on permutations of a hexagram) to demonstrate how printed and bound matter can be programmed

like a machine. But, here, I argue that the generative aspects of cybertext have less to do with unconventional structure than conventions surrounding the perception and consumption of a particular text.

This stance is largely informed by Randolph's essay, 'The Amenable Object,' first published in 1982 and reprinted in 1991, in which she draws on her background in psychoanalysis to explore fundamental questions about the role of subjectivity in writing art criticism. In it, she suggests that artworks are unique in their status as amenable objects; meant to be "pliant" in their multiple potential readings and, therefore, nearly exclusive in their ability to incite or inhabit a certain mode of *adult play* in the viewer, returning us to a less logical mode of "primary process" (Freud qtd. in Randolph 1991 22-24). This notion of adult play provides a segue into a discussion of D.W. Winnicott's psychoanalytic theories of object-relations, specifically the 'transitional object,' wherein infants attach to a particular object that "serv[es] the child in the attempt to become a body and self distinct from the mother's body and self" (Winnicott qtd. in Randolph 1991 27). Because the transitional object is perceivable and manipulable by the child but not *of* the child, "the transitional object is neither inner nor outer, but partakes of both," initiating the child to the child-world paradigm (Randolph 1991 27). Randolph adeptly observes a similar dynamic at work in the contemporary art gallery, where the intended function of culturally designated space is to incite in the adult viewer a propensity to never arrive at a conclusion and exist in "perpetual plasticity"—a playful modality (Ibid. 32).

Crucially, Winnicott's transitional object presumes that there can be no sense of worldbuilding or identity construction without this non-binary and liminal talisman to bridge the internal and external perceptions of self qua the body. One can surmise then, at the core of the amenable object theory is a refusal to abide by binary models and reserve a hybrid space of interpretation—a refusal to take sides. I believe Randolph's motivation to write ficto-criticism was directly informed by this desire to exceed the cultural baggage of linguistically taking sides in what was then an overly theorized field by foregoing explicit labels of the "art" versus the "experience"; neither of which can be extricated from the fluctuating sociocultural conditions that grant its meaning. This sentiment is concisely captured in Randolph's first-ever (attempt at a) fictocritical text, "Stan Denniston: Reminders" (1983), an essay that accompanied an exhibition of photographs by the eponymous artist at the Art Gallery of Greater Victoria, B.C.:

Wednesday, April 18<sup>th</sup>, 3:15pm, along North Peters Street:

*The REMINDERS do not mark where the Unconscious flows beneath the current of appearances.* I was standing at the top of the stairs on the levee, eating peach ice cream. The sky was turquoise. Looking along the Mississippi eastward, I saw a white balloon tremble upwards, limn in the air a longhand "i," which it had not time to dot, and quiver to the ground. The REMINDERS might be moments of parapraxis when the Unconscious sees only enough of the landscape to seize the symbol in it. Maybe every REMINDER harbours a symbol for exactly the same thing that has been symbolized in all the other REMINDERS. The viewer will have to choose between discovering those symbols through reason or through intuition. (1991 96)

Not only does Randolph mix anecdote and personal imagery in this passage with literal details of the artworks, but she also makes an ultimatum to the reader/viewer: Choose a rational, conditioned literacy—one that suppresses the

subjective capacities of the work in favour of ‘objective’ interpretation—or adopt an amenable mode of literacy that treats connections between images and spaces between words as equally important reading material. In either case, there is no ‘right’ way to read it, and this forms the base of the critical gesture. Essays like “Joanne Tod” (1986), in which no literal painting is discussed despite being an exhibition essay for a new collection of paintings by Tod, or “Theory as Praxis” (2003), in which Randolph admits to an imaginary auditorium audience that “the images may or may not... correspond to what the hell I’m talking about,” (28) the most radical dimension of cyberfeminist theory is enacted, which is to put one’s own authority in doubt (Barnett 2013). In thinking about the text as another technology subject to critique, Randolph foregrounds how “the absence of a resolution [becomes] significant” in our relationship to that technology (Wills 2008 15), when the possibility of malfunction, accidents and mutations hold meanings in themselves. Whether a slippery microphone on one’s lapel or a malfunctioning slide projector (Randolph 2003 32–33), writing fictocritically reflects the dubious and somewhat antagonistic capacity in which we engage communication technologies, underlining their infidelity as well as the inevitable entanglement of the “I” with its given interface.

## **2. *Brandon*: A Fictocritical Network**

In 1998, Cheang would debut her most famous work, *Brandon*; a sprawling Web-based narrative that sought to highlight the very real violence that can erupt from a name when tied to binary conceptions of gender identity. For years, Cheang had been researching the story of Brandon Teena, a young transgender man from

Lincoln, Nebraska, who was brutally raped and murdered in 1993 in the small town of Humboldt, after being outed at a New Year's Eve party. Cheang kept multiple notebooks collating 'hundreds of newspaper clippings, citations, notes, and other documentation' on the case as well as trans literature and history from the 1800s onward (Kennedy 2021 3). The sheer amount of data she had amassed in combination with the protracted four-year coordination of the piece as a commission by the Guggenheim Museum in New York afforded Cheang time to develop the project into a massive online architecture with the help of multiple other artists and programmers. Though Brandon Teena's story served as the touchstone, *Brandon* was an extrapolation on gender identity construction more broadly, reflecting the fluidity of trans identity through the recombinant properties of digital networks. The site consisted of five distinct interfaces "accessible by a myriad of entries and exits" (Kotlarczyk 2015 686), "over 82 webpages" and "approximately 65,000 lines of code" (Engel et al. qtd. in Kennedy 2). Notably, navigating the website was also designed as a collaborative experience. "Multiple hidden hyperlinks" and the "use [of] mixup programs to randomize content so that that the webpages appear different every time they load," meant that new permutations of the website took shape in real-time as indexes of users and their participation (2).

This randomization was perhaps most evident in the "Bigdoll" interface—the first that users encountered—which allowed them to repopulate a five-by-five grid of imagery that combined newspaper headlines, pierced body parts, anatomical illustrations, and sex toys, amongst other signifiers. Again, we find the notion of the



patchwork cyborg body front and central here, but this time infused with an additional layer of meaning as a public, socially, and electronically negotiated *body* of fact and fiction in the form of interlacing research documentation and graphic design. Technologies of surveillance, historical and contemporary, also loomed large in later interfaces “Panopticon” and “Theatrum Anatomicum.” The former recreated Jeremy Bentham’s (in)famous prison design in an online environment of twelve pixel-confined “chambers” while the latter served as a video portal to live performances that occurred in parallel to the Guggenheim installation, the first of which was held at De Waag Society for Old and New Media in Amsterdam, housing the 17th-century medical amphitheater that inspired Cheang’s initial concept for the interface. By including inverse models of spectacularizing and policing bodies in the *Brandon* narrative, Cheang effectively articulated “the historical collusion of medicalization, criminalization, and technology in reinforcing gender and sexual norms,” (Kennedy 11) and how this collusion only culminates in the porousness of online spaces.

After a period of primarily making feature films, the literal and figurative “boundary-crossing” of Teena’s story and its violent consequences fuelled Cheang’s already building interest to work virtually (Ho), but in way that was countercultural at the time. In the late 1990s, many artists and theorists regarded the Web as the first step to realizing William Gibson’s immersive “cyberspace,” and that the increasing presence of virtual reality would liberate society from the “meatspace” of the body. However, after reading Julian Dibbell’s “A Rape in Cyberspace” published

in *The Village Voice* the same month as Teena's murder, Cheang was inspired to illustrate the opposite: that the co-existence of physical and virtual reality only complicates the navigation of the other, especially for already marginalized individuals (Kennedy 6). This attitude was also deeply informed by a residency at the Banff New Media Institute in Alberta, Canada, where Cheang met theorist Jennifer González and resonated with her view that "it is not possible to set aside processes of identification... like [those that] race or gender instigate simply because a digital representation may or may not have a 'real world' referent" (González qtd. in Kennedy 9). Thus, the body and the politics of aesthetics that govern it inevitably persist beyond dichotomies of physical or virtual interaction.

As I previously alluded, to make this idea palpable Cheang insisted that *Brandon* would also have physical counterparts where it could be navigated collectively (Ho). The Guggenheim obliged, and the finalized installation consisted of three different views of the website projected in a triptych-like fashion on one of the gallery walls. In front were small waist-high kiosks where users could explore and alter the projected pages in real-time, clicking and hovering to reveal new content. The installation at the Guggenheim lasted for one year, while other more temporary installations were created to house related performances and interventions, including a live virtual forum that linked scholars on transgender politics at the Guggenheim with those at the medical amphitheater in De Waag via webchat as an act of "textual surgical operation" on the "construction of technosocial bodies" (Cheang qtd. in Kennedy 13). A series of virtual court hearings that symbolically re-tried several

cases of sexual violence against known transgender individuals took place nearly a year later and were also accessible through the “Theatrum Anatomicum” interface. In each instance, the effort to bridge physical and virtual realities expressed a fundamental rejection of binary oppositions of online versus “real” life as well as the refutation of Cartesian mind/body divisions foundational to the perpetuation of technoscientific narratives. Creating a virtual work that stretched the conventions of virtuality beyond literal technology was paramount to *Brandon*’s cyberfeminist message.

This tarrying of physical and virtual realities is also key to seeing *Brandon* as an exemplar of Randolph’s amenable object, which pivots precariously on the “partak[ing] of both,” (Randolph 1991 31). Beyond being interactive and narrative, over the course of its yearlong exhibition the interactions of Guggenheim gallery-goers and free-roaming digital agents involved in the mixed-reality performances enacted a transitional space that existed between categories of physical installation and online artwork, activism, and academic research. This ambiguity of scope and form echoes Randolph’s “final characteristic” of the amenable object in her essay, which is that it proceeds continually “incomplete” and subject to “the viewer’s impulse to *play* with the illusion that has been created” (34) [my italics]. The sense of play that Randolph alludes to is not absent-minded but inquiry-based qua negotiating the boundaries of the given object-text and improvising within the limitations of its design. Clearly, Cheang intended for *Brandon* to be played with and tested through its generative interfaces. But by expanding the project into different physical and cultural spaces, it was also continually remade, shifting in focus and function in an

autopoietic fashion. Gradually, *Brandon* became too unwieldy to classify as an art object on display in a museum. Was it an online narrative or a series of networked performances? Was it really art anymore, or was it tactical media? The amenability of the piece also made it near impossible to experience in completion. Commenting on that in an interview with *Rhizome*, Cheang was frank when she affirmed that “no one (including myself) can claim to have viewed the entirety of this work” (qtd. in Ho 2012). But rather than diminish its significance, the absence of a totalizing view only underscored the importance of subjective intervention and exploration to apprehend the value of the work.

Arguably, the point of engaging the *Brandon* narrative is never to arrive at one. Instead, the amenability of its various points for interaction made possible through its operation as a digital, networked medium *is* the story. Cheang’s narrative strategy is quite McLuhanian in this way (coincidentally, a theorist that Randolph often invoked in her own writing). But her tactics can also be considered fictocritical for the same reasons. In repeatedly drawing attention to the properties of the medium as they sculpt the narrative over the specifics of that narrative, *Brandon* touches on the metagraphic essence of fictocriticism, which is to perform “a meta-discourse in which the strategies of the telling are part of the point of the tale” (Gibbs 1997). In fact, Cheang sought to animate within the user an awareness that the same technologies they were using to experience her indeterminate artwork were complicated by their origins in and reliance upon the interests of tech entrepreneurs and global corporations who directly benefited from the deterministic status quo (Kennedy 5).

This also suggests that, while no less important to the work as a whole, Brandon Teena's story functions as part of a parallel narrative that advances in concert with a more basic but normalized one about power and mediation; neither narrative being resolvable. Cheang seems to have positioned the piece in the same "doubtful category" of fictocriticism, where the construction of the text is "double-voiced" to articulate its "contradictory trajectories" (Kerr 1996 95).

It is worth noting that as a Web-based artwork *Brandon* is also literally made of text; written in HTML, Java and JavaScript. Unlike other media, even in the case of other modern forms of digital art making, working in code emphasizes the act of writing as a mode of building and offers a more dynamic, material understanding of writing in the practical sense. Additionally, the technological nature of language and its dubious dimensions become more apparent in coding, as the writing process that structures the interface has no conceptual connection to the content it eventually displays: the arbitrariness of signs is evident and amenable (to some degree). In this regard, the making of *Brandon* was closer to the textual construction of a "traditional" work of fictocriticism than one might think. However, there is also the obvious difference that the documents comprising *Brandon* are electronically networked, and not just figuratively so through reference and citation.

What then is gained by seeing *Brandon*, or any other of Cheang's work, as fictocritical as opposed to cyberfeminist or simply as networked art? Amenability perhaps, in its formulation of play and worldbuilding. But, as Randolph argues, amenability is ideally a quality of any intriguing art object. And, as I have shown,

amenability is indicative of cyberfeminist discourse as well. So, what other concepts within fictocritical discourse offer more to the analysis of Cheang's piece than cyberfeminism or art theory can alone?

Elsewhere, I have written of practicing fictocriticism in online environments as a kind of "ghost writing the self," in which the ostensible goal of self-representation is replaced by an effort to write the self-as-other in a gesture of critical empathy (2021). I do not seek to further this theory here except to suggest that *Brandon* posed a revolutionary gesture of identity construction in a manner that encouraged its users to participate in a collective exploration of identity apart from their own. It is important to consider that the piece was exhibited at a time when trans identity was far more closeted than today, and much of the public had limited vocabulary to speak about transgender people let alone empathize with the circumstances of their marginal subject position. In designing the *Brandon* narrative as an interactive and generative experience, Cheang created conditions for people to engage with the complex politics of trans identity in a self-directed and amenable manner that forewent a distinct narrator, avoided binary depictions of bodies, and allowed for self-reflexive exploration of gender signifiers via remix and randomization. But more significantly, the networked status of *Brandon* forced its users to consider the presence of various others in the text—other users, bodies, interests—in the active composition of that narrative space. The shifting appearance of webpages by other anonymous "agents" in the gallery setting and the extension of the site into hybrid physical-virtual events added to the sense that *Brandon* was a web document of "haunted

writing,” replete with numerous voices and histories that collectively were “making difference” over different time spaces (Gibbs 2005). Accordingly, theorizing *Brandon* as a fictocritical network presumes that it was not only an amenable object-text, open to play and subjective intervention by its users, but that the critical capacity of the text in fact hinged on the indeterminacy of its usership as well—the degree to which it was haunted.

### **3. Dada & Surrealism as Fictocritical Antecedents**

Though the networked media in which *Brandon* was realized was cutting edge for its time, the fictocritical tactics employed in its making were not unprecedented. In fact, much of the art produced in Western Europe and the United States in the early 20th century was also made in response to an increasingly technoscientific and deterministic culture that was advancing under Modernity and against the devastating backdrop of the Great War. Paradoxically, many of the values espoused by Modernity such as normativity, rationality and universal truth came to be contested in the graphic and figurative abstraction of early Modernist art. One need only to think of the compressed and fragmented bodies in Picasso’s cubist portraiture circa 1910<sup>92</sup> or the violent distortion of the body in Umberto Boccioni’s (in)famous *Unique Forms of Continuity in Space* (1913) as visual testaments to how industrialization and geopolitical conflict were fracturing the psyche of the European citizen in ways that ran counter to the aims of Modern philosophy. In particular, artists who

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<sup>92</sup> See *Portrait of Daniel-Henry Kahnweiler* and *Woman with Jar of Mustard*, both from 1910, as prime examples of how Picasso was actively foregoing empirical methods of proportion and perspective.

identified with the movements of Dadaism and Surrealism sought to counteract homogenizing narratives of truth and progress promoted by modernist governments and cultural institutions with pieces that explored non-linearity, indeterminacy and the layering of many references and voices to chaotic effect. These movements are generally grouped under the theoretical banner of the Avant Garde: a contested term whose roots lie in writing that circulated in the years prior to the French Revolution in which “the idea of the interdependence of art and society, but also the doctrine of art as an instrument for social change and reform” was stressed (Poggioli 9). Much like fictocritical texts, Avant Garde artworks are heterogenous in style, but a recurring theme amongst them is the paradoxical alienation of increasing participation in modern society (103), a trait that could also be qualified as falling within the same doubtful category of interpretation as fictocriticism.

It is important to contextualize this doubtful tendency as emerging during a time of unprecedented international conflict. The physical horrors of World War I along with the dubious ways in which mainstream media became more entangled with political propaganda led many young artists to become disenfranchised with modernist ideals. In Paul Virilio’s insightful *War and Cinema* (1984) he writes:

Since the battlefield has always been a field of perception, the war machine appear[ed] to the military commander as an instrument of representation, comparable to the painter’s palette and brush. [...] Similarly, the pilot’s hand automatically trip[ped] the camera shutter with the same gesture that release[d] his weapon. *For men at war, the function of the weapon [was] the function of the eye.* (20)

Avant Garde artists attempted to evade the deathly certainty of the technological perspective by removing passive components of the aesthetic experience and



intentionally moving away from the concentration on craft toward a more ephemeral and conceptual mode of making.

This was mostly clearly seen in the “anti-art” Dada movement, which sought to “annihilate” the preciousness of the art object by attributing the same cultural currency to ideas and actions (Stokstad and Cothren 1037). More so than in other art movements, the interpretation of Dadaist artworks art also pivoted on an understanding of play (Prager 242). Art historian Susan Laxton elucidates that Dada, as well as surrealism, pivot on the “ludic compromise of boundaries” (13) in a gesture of *flou*, the French pejorative to describe a blurry photograph (34). Much like the amenability of fictocritical texts, the flou of Dadaist works necessitated agile and improvisational thinking to discern meaning amidst their “blurring distinctions” (Ibid.) Marcel Duchamp, the most famous artist to be associated with Dada, was exemplary in this regard. His readymade sculptures, like the infamous upended urinal, *Fountain* (1917), or the lesser known but no less provocative *Door* (1927), a literal door from Duchamp’s Paris apartment, slightly ajar, transplanted into the gallery, juxtaposed lexicons of the quotidian with the transcendental, collapsing previously sacred boundaries of personal and cultural space. Duchamp’s intentional blurring of mass-manufacturing processes with artistic production only served to highlight their increasing overlap in the consumerist sphere (Pelcher 2019). And this pointedly recalls the self-reflexive motivations for Cheang to execute *Brandon* as a website, where the medium was equally open source and home to counterculture as it was economically driven and corporately governed.

The auto-critical sentiment of Dada was particularly vibrant in the Berlin scene as well in the years surrounding World War I. Kurt Schwitters' *Merzbilder* or "trash pictures" were two- and three-dimensional works of collaged urban detritus like train tickets, beer labels and coupons that he would draw and paint over until they resembled cubist interiors of shifting planes. This was a radical gesture at the time for the way Schwitters, like Duchamp, erased the distance between popular material culture and fine art making. In *Merzbild 5B (Picture-Red-Heart-Church)* (1919), postage stamps and trapezoidal fragments of newspaper emerge from colour fields of ochre and burnt umber, sometimes foregrounded sometimes bisected by angular swatches of greenish blue. The overall effect is one of an abstract information space that seems stuck between perspective and flatness, concealing as much as it portends to reveal and therefore remaining decidedly indeterminate.

Schwitters' contemporary Hannah Höch also used collage to collapse distance between concepts but in a much more directly political fashion. Her photomontage *Cut with the Dada Kitchen Knife through the Last Weimar Beer-Belly Cultural Epoch in Germany* (1919) is populated by androgynous portraits of Dada artists, including herself, cutting apart, interrupting, and recombining the faces of German politicians in a sharp critique of the establishment. The visual hybridity of body parts melding with machines and typography, as well as the mixing of men's and women's bodies illustrates a desire to challenge the hegemony with indeterminate forms and identities in a manner reminiscent of Cheang's recombinant bodies. Also notable is the inclusion of characters and scenes that seemingly have no role in the symbolic

violence of the piece: a man's balding head emerging from a girl's body in a tutu to kiss another, a body in the centre juggling his own head while dancing spryly on top of a larger one. These are amenable features that require the viewer to intervene and instill those elements with their own subjectivity and meaning to integrate them into the larger narrative of the piece. Despite the aggressive polemic of the image, there is a real sense of play embedded in its aesthetic and a celebration of the body-as-material through an improvisational exploration of form. Because Höch considered herself part of the evolving women's movement in Germany (Stokstad & Cothren 1039) it is tempting to see these amenable bodies as precursors to the feminist partiality of Haraway's cyborg and the networked, reprogrammable bodies in the cyberfeminist art of Cheang.

Meanwhile, as Dada grew enclaves across Western Europe, another group of artists were inspired to bring ideas of automatism and the unconscious into the creative process. Published in 1924, André Breton's "Manifesto of Surrealism" envisioned society as essentially somnambulant—in a "walking state" (1969 11)—in which an overreliance on rationality had come to preclude "any kind of search for truth which is not in conformance with accepted practices" (10). His call for a return to subjectivity and instinctual self-discovery emboldened young artists like Max Ernst and Salvador Dalí to embrace the visual language of dreams and forbidden desires as another viable means of liberation from the "rational, orderly, and oppressive forces of the conscious mind" that dominated the post-war period (Stokstad & Cothren 1056). Though Dalí's biomorphic imagery dominates the aesthetic of

Surrealism in the popular imaginary, the paintings and drawings of Joan Miró are arguably a purer example of the Surrealist ideology in their psychological plasticity (Riese Hubert 52). Miro sought to replicate the freedom of a child's imagination in his work, gradually developing "mindless" doodling into full-scale compositions on canvas. The results were often stark and graphic arrangements absent of gravity where inverting organic shapes and crude suggestions of bodies floated among merging colour fields. Writing on Miró's artist book *Constellations* (1959), an idiosyncratic cosmology of sorts, the Surrealist scholar Renée Riese Hubert noted the power of the indeterminacy in the interpretation of those paintings:

Time cannot serve as a means of orientation, and the cardinal points or other geo- graphical or astronomical conventions are equally useless. The sun and moon refuse to remain solitary, a red glow and black rays do not preclude one another, and all objects are free to choose their own proportions. In this world of dream and fantasy where destiny is absent, everything becomes possible. (1964 53-54)

For Hubert, the image of multiple red suns spouting black rays was hopeful rather than troubling precisely because it seemed to have no basis in logical time and therefore no conclusion or prescribed limitations. At the same time, several of the *Constellations* can be seen as macabre in appearance given their temporal context was the aftermath of World War II. In *Chiffres et constellations amoureux d'une femme (Ciphers and Constellations in Love with a Woman), Plate XIX*, we see a morphing and gelatinous creature drawn in thin black lines. Its limbs are irregular and overlapping: a long black fin-like appendage kicks out from the side while another arm shoots out from the back with only the slightest suggestion of fingers. The whole silhouette is oddly squat and triangular. A large green eye with a black

and red iris seems to float menacingly in the centre until one looks closer to see it is the more developed of two eyes set vertically within a semi-circular head. Is this a body in the process of formation (or fornication)? An expression of the psyche? Or is this visual amorphousness indicative of something more dubious: the monstrous creations of war, aggregating bodies of the fallen? The indeterminacy of the bodies Miró depicts is simultaneously delicate in its child-like simplicity yet also grotesque in its flux and hybridity. Given their proximity to World War II, one cannot help but feel these works have been touched by the radioactive effects of the atom bomb. As such and like a fictocritical text, Miró's work has a "hauntedness" about it. Through the visual language of myriad suns and moons and physically impossible conjunctions of body parts, the purported narrative of constellations—heavenly, astrological bodies—is used as a device or armature for the articulation of narratives about earthlier bodies, the circumstances of which complicate the telling of the tale and draw attention to the conditions of the book's creation.

In the cases of both Dada and Surrealism, the indeterminacy of boundaries, bodies and media served as tactical expressions of amenability against monolithic narratives of truth and certainty that had that failed so many on a material level. The promise of factory work drew people into cities under the guise of a utopian narrative about industrialization while at the same time the automated technologies that made those factories possible also spurred innovations in war machinery and surveillance capabilities. Writing of Breton, who was considered a bridging figure between Dada and Surrealism (Prager), Walter Benjamin commented, "...Breton

declared his intention of breaking with a praxis that presents the public with the literary precipitate of a certain form of existence while withholding that existence itself” (1979 226). Accordingly, the art that Breton made and the artists he inspired sought to create work that held within its reading the complications and contradictions that constitute experiential reality as opposed to a symbolic conception of reality. The better part of a century later, a similar pattern was repeating in the vestal years of the World Wide Web leading up to the dot com boom and the eventual conflation of Internet usage with e-commerce. Although nowhere near as viscerally violent, the technological landscape that gave rise to the transgressive practices of cyberfeminism and fictocriticism was equally contradictory in its utopian promises of liberating users from their bodies while attempting to do so through interfaces and systems designed according to binary logic. As Foucault prophesized in *Discipline and Punish* (1977) the reach of the law would only, and ironically, increasingly be felt “at a distance, in the proper way, according to strict rules, and with a much ‘higher’ aim” (11). For this reason, it is striking to consider that Dada and Surrealist art, while originating from a time before the existence of digital networks, might be theoretical predecessors to cyberfeminist and fictocritical texts for the ways in which they refuse to render bodies and identities according to conventional representations. Furthermore, it may be fruitful to consider that these movements of art and literature are emergent and epistemic in the Foucauldian sense of that world. That is to suggest that their emergence points back to a common tension in the body politic, and that like symptoms of a chronic disease—in this the case, the binary

logic of a technoscientific narrative—an essential quality of indeterminacy joins these artistic and literary movements as instruments of irritation to the status quo and a resistance to interpretation and categorization.

#### **4. Fictocritical Futures**

In 2019, Cheang was invited to make new work for the Taiwanese pavilion in the 58<sup>th</sup> international Venice Biennale. Her submission, *3x3x6*, was a multi-faceted four-room installation that continued the intellectual trajectory of *Brandon* in even more interactive and participatory terms, though the nature of participating in *3x3x6* was tacit and not exactly consensual. Whereas *Brandon* was a fictocritical network distinctly navigated in organized segments of content on a two-dimensional surface, the interface for *3x3x6* was spatialized and seamless. Referencing the panopticon and medieval prison architecture as well as the broader yet insipid surveillance facilitated through social media and big data (Blas), the installation joined modern and ancient technologies of subjugation. The largest room hosted a tower of ten outward facing projectors that displayed different scenes of a ten-part video narrative where actors portrayed different historical figures who were known “sex offenders,” including the likes of Giacomo Casanova and Michel Foucault (Simpson, 2019). Meanwhile, cameras embedded in the tower used 3D scanning and facial recognition software to catalogue and remix gallery-goers as they made their way through the space. The smallest room, deemed “The Cube,” held a tilted transparent box (ostensibly the opposite of the proverbial black box) containing all the devices used to run the installation, thus giving viewers insight into the underlying process.

Facial data collected from viewers were then integrated into the video narratives so that characters in the scenes became virtual assemblages of the physical bodies that observed them. It was intended as a totalizing inversion of Bentham's model, wherein passively viewing the work actively contributed to its growth and evolution through a "reverse peephole" effect (Scott). To watch you must also *be watched*.

Again, Cheang presents us with the ethical and conceptual aporia of mediation simply by engaging with the artwork. But this time, unlike the concrete gesture of the cord pull in *The Airwaves Project*, there is no trigger, no dividing line between action and inaction or viewership and usership. In *3x3x6*, to look alone is to participate, and to keep watching is to be complicit in one's own commodification. On the surface, any utopianism that lingered in *Brandon* regarding the potential of the Web for transpassing gender norms is notably absent here, and identity has become an aggregate product of technology rather than the other way around. If Cheang's practice is fictocritical, as I have argued, then what about the narrative of *3x3x6* is amenable and open to intervention? What about it serves to challenge the technoscientific ethos?

I began my discussion of Cheang's work in the context of amenability with a passage from Randolph's essay in which she reminds us that a large part of the uneasiness we feel when engaging an amenable text is the slow realization that we are contributing to a possible future in its reading and negotiation—"to the store of potential public realities" (1991 35). In addition to moments of subjective intervention in an amenable text there is also the possibility for speculation. In the case of *3x3x6*,



Cheang asks us to contribute to a collective act of speculation on the future of surveillance by becoming complicit in that surveillance system; forcing us to partake in both subject positions of the commodity and the consumer, neither more important to the nature of the speculation than the other. Most importantly, one can no longer consider themselves distinct from the possible futures they contribute to, even those of the dystopian variety, since the relation is ultimately revealed as circular. This is the concept of *negative feedback*.

Though the cyberfeminist theory that I have applied to Cheang's work so far grew out of the more meta-minded philosophy of second-order cybernetics in the 1970s, it was in Norbert Wiener's eponymous treatise *Cybernetics* (1948) where the necessity of the feedback loop to cybernetic systems was first outlined. Counterintuitively, key to sustaining the loop is the notion of negative feedback; forces which antagonize or destabilize the organism and thus keep it from slowing down—a process known as *entropy*. Too much positive feedback and the organism returns to utter stasis, i.e., death. But negative feedback in fact only instigates further changes; life as it were. It is with respect to negative feedback that the circularity of Cheang's interfaces hold the greatest potential to affect change, because they may antagonize viewers just enough to inspire them to take their subjective interventions outside the gallery, into other digital spaces or even to the streets in acts of non-violent but no less transgressive border-crossing.

The same potentiality can be argued to be inherent to any amenable text, since it is the circular, self-reflexive mode of engagement necessary to apprehend its double-

voiced narrative and contradictory trajectories that leads to critical reflection on the terms of the medium and speculation of alternatives. Whether speaking of fictocritical writing or of cyberfeminist, Dadaist or Surrealist art, the shared amenability and indeterminacy of those texts and object-texts are tactics to instigate negative feedback within the rigid and oppositional conventions of their given media environments. Binary oppositions and deterministic thinking are revealed as static-inducing positive forms of feedback that will slowly self-indulge and lead to entropy.

Whereas the perplexing and paradoxical features of amenable texts work (or seek at least) to stoke the embers of a more heterogenous and haunted version of the body politic that proceeds according to the systematic making of difference. A final reflection on *Brandon* then might be that it still exists today as a part of the Web without really being online. The Guggenheim restored the piece in 2017, but it only exists as a launchable Applet from the museum's website, not actually directly accessible through any major browser. When I first learned of this, I was somewhat disappointed, because I felt that its reinstatement as a fully distributed web document was essential to maintaining its nomadic politics. However, seen fictocritically, it is perhaps even more appropriate and radical for the *Brandon* network to live slightly outside the mainstream Web but situated within it as a parallel narrative. Because in existing as such, categorically in between spaces of artistic and social networks, private and public interests, the *Brandon* narrative adapts and grows to challenge the verity of these oppositions as well.

**3B.**

**Working for the Splice?**

I cry at the start of every movie.  
I guess 'cause I wish I was making things, too.  
But I'm working for the knife.

[...]

I always thought the choice was mine.  
And I was right, but I just chose wrong.

I start the day lying and end with the truth,  
that I'm dying for the knife.

— Mitski, “Working for the Knife,” 2021.

In Mitski Miyawaki’s lead-single from her sixth studio-album, *Laurel Hell* (Dead Oceans 2022), she sings reflexively about her rise to fame as a labour of self-harm. Rather than “working for the man” she’s been working for the exacting, all-seeing public eye of “the knife.” Her stark lyrics analogize the machinations of the music industry in the age of social media as an omnipotent dissection tool, cut-copying identity, fragmenting self-perception and ultimately manufacturing celebrity—a fame machine she now depends on.

Incredibly popular yet incredibly private, Mitski is an interesting figure amongst millennial musicians. Her music is diaristic, lyrically portraying deep internal fears and intimate moments. But as a performer, she maintains a conscious distance from her fans, fully aware that they see her as an idea more than a person (Pollard). She participates in mega-platforms like Instagram but seems to deride the “illusionary attention” (Goldhaber) that social media produce.

While I would not label “Working for the Knife” a fictocritical text per se, it does share a fundamental gesture of doubt with other forms of fictocriticism I have

explored. The whole concept of the song is to undermine its own credibility by pointing to the problematic nature of making profit off one's identity and affect, doing just that to a catchy beat with virtuosic production. But sonically there are also tensions, the instrumentation is at times spare and the guitar intentionally out of tune (Zhang). Like a fictocritical text, these 'off moments' in the music work to remind me of the technicity of the medium; that mood and affect are actively being constructed, and their 'offness' pushes against the seamlessness of a technocapitalist narrative that presents the conflation of affect and commodity as natural. Meanwhile, Miyawaki's lyrics firmly implicate the consumer, i.e., me, as the problem. As I sing along, I *feel* the feedback loop; I am enjoying and identifying with a song about the implicit violence I cause to the artist by consuming their music within the capitalist apparatus of a music *industry*.

In their self-referentiality and double-voicing, Mitski's songs often exhibit a literacy of the fictocritical that requires me to acknowledge the networked subjectivity of the mediascape in which she creates. The duality and entanglement expressed in "Working for the Knife"—that I am both Mitski's anonymous assailant and her benefactor—is tolerated in the unnerving combination of shiny synth rock and masochistic confession. I must acknowledge and tolerate such uncomfortable junctures if I want to keep listening to ergo reading her texts. Additionally, in knowing Mitski as a public figure, I have access to some diegetic details of her music. And when listening to such a self-reflexive song, I am being asked to actively acknowledge the complicated intersections of gender, race, and class that have influenced her career

and songcraft (Sheperd Lee Williams) as well as the commodification of those identifiers in the attention economy.

In “I would rather be a cyborg than a goddess,” (2012) Jasbir Puar argues that the animation of intersectionality in feminist theory has been, like a knife, a double-edged affair. On the one hand, it allows for critical intervention in the paradigm of racial difference, while on the other, intersectional strategies often reify those differences by always needing to produce an otherness for the sake of argument (52). In online spaces, categories of gender, race, and class are all too often replicated in binary terms, producing a “digital dualism,” that insists on a separation between offline and online experiences of identity and the body (Jurgensen qtd. in Russell 30). Thinking through the representational politics of intersectionality in cyborg terms, Puar rightly reminds us that the notion of assemblage, particularly as it has been instrumentalized by intersectional feminists, is plagued by a poor translation from French to English that deemphasizes the role of design in the making of bodies and identities. Rather, *agencement*, the Deleuzian concept from which North American understandings of cyberfeminist assemblage have been derived, means something closer to “laying out,” in English, implying that it is the conscious process of arrangement that supersedes any moment of radical hybridity, and that cyborgs primarily select meaningful connections far more than complete them (57). The problem of realizing intersectionality online may then very well be a problem of design. That is, there is a critical failure to recognize the specialized form of skilled labour necessary to construct a digital body that can intersect or translate across the

aesthetics of networked communities and communication. *A post-Internet cyborg is a matter of communication design.*

Mitski is a post-Internet cyborg insofar as her public identity is carefully laid out and digitally distributed. Through professionally-produced and curated album art, press photos, sound bites and music videos, the virtual body of Mitski is constructed by way of circulating fragments and utterances that actively anticipate their own remix and remediation. A cyberfeminist assemblage, however, differs from these strategies in stressing an ethos of the cut-up or *le découpé*<sup>93</sup>, where fragments visibly collide and possibly glitch, producing material disruptions in the apprehension of the whole, potentially even precluding the notion of ‘whole’.

Notions of assemblage in fictocriticism operate on a similar logic of graphing lateral differences between subject positions in text. Typographic choices such as indentation, bolding, italicization and use of multiple fonts function to convey, in a paralogical capacity, the plurality of voices and the intersectionality afforded through writing as a technology. Hyphenation, in particular, holds great significance in the discourse of fictocriticism.<sup>94</sup> Because fictocritical writing seeks to preserve a space

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<sup>93</sup> A literary technique that developed during the height of the Dada movement in Western Europe and involved cutting up existing texts then randomizing them somehow (often by pulling them out of a hat) to rearrange and produce new texts. The process and aims of the technique are outlined in Tristan Tzara’s 1920 essay HOW TO MAKE A DADAIST POEM. Cut-up was most famously popularized in the 1950s and 60s by author William S. Burroughs after being introduced to it by painter Brion Gysin. See Rob Bridgett, “An Appraisal of the Films of William Burroughs, Brion Gysin, and Anthony Balch in terms of Recent Avant Garde Theory,” *Bright Lights Film Journal*. 1 February 2003. [brightlightsfilm.com/appraisal-films-william-burroughs-brion-gysin-anthony-balch-terms-recent-avant-garde-theory](http://brightlightsfilm.com/appraisal-films-william-burroughs-brion-gysin-anthony-balch-terms-recent-avant-garde-theory)

<sup>94</sup> Jeanne Randolph, who first coined the term “ficto-criticism,” saw its hyphenation as an important marker of the practice’s conceptual relationship to collage: “I see a potential for mischief and merry-making in mock-battles about whether a form of art writing or artwriting or art-writing is a unified whole, or a unified-whole or a unifiedwhole. [...] Collages are constructed with fragments, pieces, portions, bits, slivers, splinters, sections, parts, chips and scraps. Formally I can see that ficto-criticism could be described as a concatenation of fragments. Any scrap, however, can evoke an aesthetic, intellectual, emotional, quizzical response. Indulging

between subjects and inhabit the margin there is perhaps no better means to graph that threshold than the hyphen. This attitude is no different when it comes to formatting and graphically representing spaces between words, voices, and registers. Subsequently, I would argue that the overlaps between the aims of fictocriticism and cyberfeminism imply that any cyberfeminist text, whether in the form of a book or an art installation, functions largely according to this logic of hyphenation.

Writing on Haraway's conception of the cyborg through a literary theory lens, N. Katherine Hayles has noted how "the conjunction of technology and discourse is crucial" to its design (1999 114), reminding us that cyborgs are as much material constructions of language as they are patchworks of circuitry and flesh. Put otherwise, cyborgs are hyphenations of words and machines. Only through the imbrication of these categories—language and techne—is technology revealed as discursive and discourse is duly revealed as technological. In the preface to Gail Scott's fictocritical collection *Spare Parts: Plus Two* (1981), she unequivocally and succinctly echoes this sentiment when she writes, "[a] sentence, after all, is a device, like any other" (18).

Seen like a sentence, the hyphenated body of the cyborg makes a kind of literary sense. Maintaining regular space between elements, whether speaking of letters or limbs, is key to keeping the larger system open to reconfiguration and pattern generation ergo written communication. Hyphenation offers the cyborg *and* the fictocritic a practical means to index acts of (dis)assemblage by maintaining the marks

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in the myriad effects of collage, a gestalt might emerge, a gestalt coalescing in the reader's imagination." (2020) However, other practitioners, particularly those in Australian academia, do not hyphenate the term



of difference. And Hayles infers that some aspects of contemporary media like the avatars and virtual worlds of online gaming culture can engender such a hyphenated cyborg embodiment when she invokes Scott Bukatman's phrase "terminal identity" to name an

'unmistakably doubled articulation' that signals the end of traditional concepts of identity even as it points toward the cybernetic loop that generates a new kind of subjectivity. (115)

Thus, a terminal identity resembles a hyphen in its doubled articulation of self. Physical and virtual identities are bridged via screens and digital interfaces in terminal identity, but they do not always occur in tandem, disturbing conceptions of the subject as unified in space in time. For example, an avatar exists independently of its user in a network where it circulates perpetually as both image and data that can be intercepted and interpreted regardless of whether the user is logged in, or even alive.

Recently, I was eerily reminded of my friend Mary's untimely death when I received a notification from the professional networking platform LinkedIn telling me to log on and "Congratulate Mary on her work anniversary." Mary passed away from cancer nearly seven years ago, but her online profiles remain, and the record of those acts of communication she made in the past go on being animated by platform algorithms. In a cyborgian way, Mary lives on in the debris of a virtual body she constructed in concert with her brief physical existence. As disarming it can be to receive such reminders (complete with a thumbnail image of her grinning face) there is a sense of comfort in the futurity of her virtual self insofar as it has

exceeded the bounds of physical death—a macabre form of transcendence perhaps but transcendence nonetheless.

What Hayles elucidates is that, perhaps for the first time, the subject and the body cannot be considered essentially whole rather they are essentially hyphenated in the perpetual maintenance of virtual and physical self-representations. Or rather, the real work of subjectivity has become the working of the space between these simultaneous realities. But despite this, the development and marketing of networked technologies is increasingly typified by a rhetoric of seamlessness (Ratto). And Hayles herself has suggested that the semiotics of the hyphen might no longer be adequate to theorizing the contemporary cyborg body (1999 113-132). In her analysis, the same duality that has afforded double articulation has also been co-opted as a symbol of an imperfect or grotesque relation to technology.

In a close reading, Hayles critiques Bernard Wolfe's science fiction novel *Limbo* (1952) as a "frustrating and brilliant" exemplary of the "masculine fantasy" of cybernetic relation, where fears about hyphenated identity are symbolically and cosmetically re-envisioned in the "splice," or the clean truncation and modification of the male body to allow for prosthetic extension at will. In Wolfe's bizarre and deeply sexist narrative, men willingly amputate their limbs to replace them with "superhuman" appendages in order to compete in war-like Olympics against the neighbouring state. Consequently, these militant athletes known as "vol-amps" must remove their superhuman cybernetic limbs to have sex lest the enhanced limbs take the lion's share of the necessary blood supply. Removing the enhanced limbs effectively

reduces the vol-amp to an immobile state of physical infancy while still possessing an adult penis. Thus, while having sex makes them physically vulnerable it also psychologically completes the man's unconscious desire to re-enter the pre-symbolic order, achieving a man-baby state. As Hayles rightly points out, there is a Lacanian perversity with which Wolfe deploys the hyphenation of "vol-amp," under which articulated identity is not only exclusively male and heterosexual but reproduces misogynistic views as electable surgical enhancements for men only. Most troubling of all is the association of hyphenated identity with institutionalized sexual violence, more specifically that Freudian concepts of castration anxiety be technologized and thus normalized into a fetishistic rape culture of the future (124-125).

Beyond these highly problematic aspects of the narrative itself, Wolfe's book also represents a distortion of hyphenated identity in the way that vol-amps so cleanly and efficiently add and subtract from themselves. Wolfe's use of the word "splice," where it does appear in the text, falsely portends a doll-like treatment of bodies that ignores the viscera of coupling and how bodies are continually reconstituted through contact with other matter. Hayles chides that "in fact, once male and female are plugged into a cybernetic circuit, the question of origin becomes irrelevant," prompting us to consider that binary concepts of gender are only possible through a systematic negation of all the real, material ways in which subjectivity loses its borders while engaging in digital and networked communication (1999 125). She casts the notion of "splicing" bodies as a graphic reflection of the messy cyberfeminist politics embodied in technology use, especially those that facilitate communication and

inscription. Can one redistribute themselves without losing some part(s) of themselves?

Whether the hyphen is adequate to graphing this relation remains an open question. Luckily, there are many other typographic gestures that the fictocritic or the cyberfeminist can avail themselves of and explore in service of paralogical writing. The icon on the screen or the page is not so important as the context and rationale for how it is being deployed. In a networked mediascape, there are also multimedial and interactive means to splice narratives and identities ranging from legacy Web tools like hypertext, where words can simultaneously be electronic vectors to whole other narratives to the practice of “jogging” popularized by post-Internet artists Artie Vierkant, Brad Troemel and Jesse Stecklow, along with others on their Tumblr blog *the jogging* (2012-14). Comprised mainly of appropriated and manipulated stock photos as well as remediations of existing memes, the site was run as an online sketchbook and archive for the group’s ruminations on Internet culture. A prime example is a screenshot of the Vimeo screen “Sorry. This video does not exist” reposted with the caption “Foreign Policy, A Proposal, 2014.” In its blatant reappropriation, there is both a mocking *and* mourning recapitulation of an otherwise banal online artefact. In imbricating not only different voices and registers but also different types of media, hyphenated identities and fictocritical texts necessitate a conscious negotiation of the semiotic gaps that construct and reify technology and culture as different domains of thought, both in academic research and everyday life.

**3C.**

**Up on the Toe (Unbuilding a Body v. 1.0)**

This text was originally published as part of the “After Progress” exhibition, a website and multimedia curatorial project co-ordinated by faculty at Goldsmiths University (UK) and members of *The Sociological Review* Foundation (2021-22).

The current online version can be accessed here:  
<https://www.afterprogress.com/up-on-the-toe-unbuilding-a-body-v-1-0>

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*Up on the toe.*

*There is a view up on the toe. And the spine.*<sup>95</sup>

A lookout position.

Let us conduct an experiment:

Rather than face forward, orient the gaze and the posture continually upward. Assume the shape of something unclaimed and undetermined, like an embryo, an embodiment of future:

Oracle: “Ashitaka, are you ready to face your destiny?”

Ashitaka: “Yes. I was resolved when I let my arrow fly.”

Oracle: “The poison [of progress] will seep into your bones and you will die.”

Woman’s voice: “Can nothing be done?!”

Man’s voice: “He fought for the women and the village!”

Ashitaka: “To simply wait for death...”

Oracle: We cannot change our fate. But we can rise to meet it.”<sup>96</sup>

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<sup>95</sup> Björk Guðmundsdóttir, “Vertebrae by Vertebrae,” from the album *Volta*. One Little Indian Records, 2007. Subsequent strings of italicized text in this piece indicate further lyrics taken from the song. The sequence of the lyrics presented here reflects their chronological sequence in the music.

<sup>96</sup> Screenplay lines in this piece are adapted from: “Princess Mononoke (1997) - Full Transcript,” [sublikescript.com](https://sublikescript.com/movie/Princess_Mononoke-119698), [sublikescript.com/movie/Princess\\_Mononoke-119698](https://sublikescript.com/movie/Princess_Mononoke-119698). Accessed 15 May 2021. This is an unofficial transcription of the English subtitles for the Japanese version of the film *Mononoke Hime* (もののけ姫).

*Up on the toe, we tempt fate and eat the future. Straight and erect. Hungry and curious.*

But hunger is difficult to align and keep aligned to future. It wanders. And it grabs at the immediate—the prosthetic.

For the purposes of this experiment, it is essential that the hands be kept to themselves, like labyrinths:

This presentation, cursory, dramatic, but nevertheless exact, wishes to stress what today is universally felt if not clearly acknowledged: the urgency of an elucidation of the relations between anthropology and technology. This, at a time when technology has disquietingly cast doubt upon, while perhaps for the first time confronting, the very form of this question: what is the nature of the human?<sup>97</sup>

Ashitaka: “[To steal] the boar's woods and ma[k]e a monster of him...”

...to invent the concept of nature and then to demonize it, that is humanity.

The human body concentrates the paradox of invention in its insistence on also inventing its own limitations, its own apocalypse—real and figurative enemies—all of them technologies for making difference:

Ashitaka: “Will you breed new hatred and evil with those [inventions]?”

(his fist clenching, veiny forearm bulging)

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known as Princess Mononoke in English, written and directed by Hayao Miyazaki, animated by Studio Ghibli for Tokuma Shoten, Nippon Television Network and Dentsu, and distributed by Toho.

<sup>97</sup> Bernard Stiegler. *Technics and Time 1: The Fault of Epimetheus*. Translated by Richard Beardsworth and George Collins. Stanford University Press, 1998, 88.

Eboshi: "I'm sorry you suffer... Your right hand wants to kill me?"

Ashitaka: "Perhaps that would lift this curse. But my hand would not be stayed."

Eboshi: "Must it kill us all to find peace?"

*Up on the toe, peace is a growing pain. Looking forward to anew. The air is thinner here.*

In the continual upward movement, the lungs and chest compress to make space for other organs, other voices. But gravity intervenes. Gradually, the neck begins to arc ever so softly down like an apostrophe, the weight of curiosity taking physical form. And the eyes become fixed on shiny little objects. They vibrate and sing siren songs, like talismans, magic mirrors. Reflecting back is the image of a faceless animal, rearranging its features to suit the angles of its prostheses, its many tools for taking up space. But, what if the means for extension do not, in fact, lie outside the body? What if those tools emanate from within, starting with the toes?

*Up on the toe, the body is a budding taproot, bridging earth and air, dark and light, matter and milieu through a protean headlong projection:*

The [body] is the point of encounter of two milieus, the technical and the geographical, and must be incorporated into them. It is a compromise between these two worlds.<sup>98</sup>

What is lost or re-distributed in this compromising posture?

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<sup>98</sup> Ibid., 79.



Permanently teetering on the toes, extending always upward, the eyes will be less valuable. The centre of perception re-distributes and moves outward. The face (perhaps shrinking in size) will act more like an anchor or a lighthouse in an otherwise fluctuating cumulous of sensory nodes. And the hands will become larger, fragmented like a cephalopod and equally distributed; like compromise, like peace. Peace is tentacular feeling-thought.<sup>99</sup> That is: Critical empathy; or feeling and thought joined permanently in the same modality<sup>100</sup> of slip-sliding brain-fingers.

Jiko-bô: “Are you guiding us, or getting us lost?”

Footman 1: “Sir, these [mind-body distinctions] aren't helping us.”

(Forest creatures flow out from every cranny and form a caravan.)

Footman 2: “There are more of them!”

Jiko-bô: [Talking to the forest creatures:] “What a magnificent tree. Is she your mother? [Sotto voce:] That girl and the wolves... So, this is where they live...”

Footman 1: “We're getting in deeper, Sir. This way [of being] leads into the [after]world...”

And as the hands transfigure—device connectors to thought-feeling suckers—they become heavy and magnetized to the murmurs of the ground, the forest floor. Emanating from behind the ears returns the subterranean-as-subcutaneous-

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<sup>99</sup> Haraway. *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene*. Duke University Press, 2016.

<sup>100</sup> Kerr. “Fictocritical Empathy & the Work of Mourning.” *Cultural Studies Review*, vol. 9, no. 1, 2003, 180-200.

percussion of blood vessels and bone. The body settles into an umbral, internal rhythm (again).

*On four legs. [She] set[s] her clock to the moon. Raises her spine and unhinges her joints.*

*Vertebrae by vertebrae, a string of pearls dispersing.*

The body that extends itself unfolds in the same choreography as a constellation exponentially drifts apart. It is a process only possible through the invisible grace of implied lines and shapes. As the brain-fingers work their way deeper into the earth and make kin with worms and fungi they in turn branch out like rhizomes, and the spine (still rising while it falls) approaches parabola. The body that extends itself is an unbuilding body, simultaneously growing while shrinking, ceasing to conform to any one particular state of matter...

*I have been filled with steam for months, for years. Same old cloud, claustrophobic me.*

The unbuilding body, lacking strict material states of being, eventually gives way to unforeseen junctures and conditions:

The steam engine, as it becomes more powerful, becomes more cumbersome. [...] Such limits, which can 'block a whole system... can just as well... create disequilibriums inducing crises,' engendering evolutions and decisions. [...] When a set of conditions is grouped into a system, a decision to evolve takes place.<sup>101</sup>

Ashitaka: "I'm sorry. I tried to stop it."

San: "Everything is finished. The forest is dead."

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<sup>101</sup> Stiegler, 33.

Ashitaka: “No, it's not. We're still alive. Help me [to live].”

*Let it burst [now] like old train sounds. Make them leave me to my Nature. Vertebrae by vertebrae by vertebrae...*

Okkoto: “You bring monsters. Not animal! Not human!”

San: “Neither animal nor human?”

(The boar god halts his progress through the forest)

Okkoto: “I burn! A flame bursts from within me!”

*My arms ooze out of my shoulders!*

New arms—not-arms; tentacular and uncertain they glide vaporous from the pith of the imploding face, the parabolic spine.

*And the arms ooze out of my shoulders! I curl my tail inwards, inwards...*

Viewed as a distributed system, the unbuilt body reclaims the origin of the technological human by re-turning to nature<sup>102</sup>, turning back and into itself like a snail. The unbuilt body asks itself: “Why reach for shiny metal objects when cellulose and salt make equally rich prostheses?”

*[She] set[s] [her] clock on the moon. Vertebrae by vertebrae, the unbuilt body edges toward what cannot be named, becomes the beyond, the nighttime sun—holding every opposite in its explosive implosion.*

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<sup>102</sup>David Wills. *Dorsality: Thinking Back Through Technology and Politics*. University of Minnesota Press, 2008.

San: “Even restored, these are not the Deer God's woods. The Deer God is dead.”

Ashitaka: “He cannot die. He is life itself.”

San: “He is both life and death.”

Ashitaka: “He is telling us we should live.”

The unbuilt body, having become kin with its own contradictions, evolves not into something more—a god or demon, or even a machine—but something basic and vital: pure potential energy... life-living.

There is a myth in old Japan, about a forest spirit who takes the form of a deer in the day only to become the embodiment of death under starlight. Its massive body is amorphous and translucent, apparently full of stars and yet shifting about, actively disrupting the notion that any bodies in the universe ever truly come to rest...

*Please release this pressure off me.*

*Please release this pressure off me.*

*Please release this pressure off me.*

*Let off some steam.*

**4A.**

**Ghost Writing the Self:  
Autofiction, Fictocriticism and Social Media**

The following journal article first appeared in a special issue of *English Studies Canada* released in January 2021. Despite its actual publishing date, the physical journal and official citations online list the publication period as March/June 2019:

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March/June 2019, 161-188. DOI: 10.1353/ESC.2019.0004

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## 1. Autofiction & Fictocriticism (in the Age of Social Media)

It should not surprise that autofiction, a 'genre' that purposely occupies the liminal space between memoir and fiction, has only recently gained traction amongst literary and media scholars in North America (Worthington 4). The performative gesture of the author-character figure readily employed in autofiction is also playing out in the quotidian activities of networked communication, particularly on social media, which encourage a highly curatorial ethos of self-representation. These platforms conflate notions of self-narration with digitally mediated documentation through their visual and textual rhetoric. Examples include the popular "stories" feature on Instagram that strings together disparate images in a linear (therefore, supposedly narrative) sequence, as well as the similar "moments" option on Twitter, where, upon clicking the feature for the first time, one is greeted by the existentially troubling message: "You haven't created any Moments". In either case, by populating their feeds, users engage in a heavily mediated form of self-authorship, one that rhetorically equates "making memories" with digital, mutable acts of making, editing, and publishing for the purpose of socialization. These practices are already transforming the bounds of self-concept in youth populations, reconfiguring how

self-image and identity are constructed, for better or worse (Anderson & Brown McCabe, Jones 2015, Zhao).

It follows then, amidst this moment of the selfie and its highly technical, “imitative” logic of self-expression (Lovink 104), that scholars of media and literature in Canada are taking note of how the skillful elision of author and author-character in autofiction mimics the self-authoring labour of our everyday communication through networked media. However, as a researcher of *fictocriticism*—a particular method of writing that “deliberately blur[s] the distinction between literature and literary-critical commentary” (King 1994) and has its origins here in Canada (Flavell 2004 4)—I am frustrated by the fact that this comparably performative practice of writing remains largely absent from Canadian literary and media while a neighbouring (and no less contested) practice moves into the limelight. The benefit of expanding focus to include fictocriticism as a salient form of writing in the age of the selfie lies in its capacity to highlight a certain kind of pragmatics in negotiating the personal within the political. Like autofiction, fictocriticism is a highly individual, anecdotal form of writing, but it is also one that has an object of study or critique at its base. In practising it, there is always already an other outside the text that the fictocritic, and subsequently the self, must respond to in an extra-diegetic fashion. This necessitates that not only the I of the writing come into question but also the you, the we, and the they. While certain autofictions are no doubt capable of eliciting these same liminal spaces, the diverse formal nature of fictocriticism, which includes not only mixing essay and fiction but also poetry, citation, lists and “all

manners of literary detritus” allows for more experimentation in style and technique (Gibbs 1997). Fictocriticism is “a kind of hysterical writing... moving not simply from position to position, but between positions as well; a writing refusing and incapable of ‘an ordered account’... (Stewart qtd. in Gibbs). This nomadic quality of fictocriticism, in combination with its interrogation of self and other, make it equally relevant to the protocols of online profiles and social media platforms as autofiction.

Consequently, I demonstrate that fictocritical texts deserve just as much critical attention as autofictions when it comes to their mimetic relationship to digital, networked media and their implications for the future of self-authorship. Their differing terminologies and origins are not irreconcilable either. I will also attempt to reconcile their differing terminologies and origins by arguing that autofiction and fictocriticism are interrelated, stemming from a larger metafictional philosophy of writing based on the cultivation of doubt and spectrality. After examining Anna Gibbs’ theoretical framework of “haunted writing,” I conduct close readings of two texts that may be considered either fictocritical or autofictional in their approaches but are most generatively regarded when analyzed under this fictocritical framework: *Judith* (1978) by Aritha van Herk, and *In the Dream House* (2019) by Carmen Maria Machado. In both, strategies of multivocality, fragmentation and allegory are deployed to erase the boundary between self/other and author/author-character, inscribing “traces” in the text—indeterminate, doubtful moments that allow for “numerous voices [to speak] in unison, at other times in counterpoint, and at others



still against each other, in deliberate discord” (Gibbs 2005). Such strategies repeatedly refer back to the constructed nature of the texts and the precarity of their narrating subjects to reveal self-authorship as inherently ghostly and fictive. I consequently argue this agonistic reading experience engenders a productive paranoia, or “parallax gnosis,” that affords the capacity for “interpretive resistance” in an increasingly fictive mediascape (Moulthrop 697).

## **2. Contested Terms/Competing Voices**

Beyond their marginal status, autofiction and fictocriticism share the contested nature of their terms—their definitions and origins—which vary considerably (Flavell 2009, Gibbs 1997, Worthington 6). Parafiction, paraliterature, post-criticism—all these terms circulate contemporaneously with autofiction and fictocriticism. Yet, while not necessarily interchangeable, each suggests the same “anti-aesthetic” terrain of authorship where ethics and aesthetics dissolve into one another, producing something simultaneously intimate and othering (Kerr 2003). This spectrality is a tactic, a rhetorical gambit. As writing that, in many ways, “attempt[s] to exorcise the paralysing interdictions of disciplinary academic authority” (Gibbs 1997) and sidestep prevailing modes of knowledge legitimation (Lyotard), works of autofiction and fictocriticism intentionally resist rubrics. Still, select formal aspects do appear more frequently than others—conflation of subjective and objective voice, citational writing, fragmentation, allegory—all of which bear notable resemblance to French poststructuralism of the late 1960s and 70s.

In particular, the writings of Barthes and Derrida greatly influenced the evolution of autofictional/fictocritical texts. Barthes' experiments in narration and textuality, which first manifested in *S/Z* (1970) and arguably culminated in his autoethnography-as-autobiography, *Roland Barthes par Roland Barthes* (1975), pushed the logical limits of what Foucault calls the "author function" and continually brought the I of the writing into question. This performative approach to literary criticism exposed the technicity—the extension of self via tools and technical systems such as language—of the linguistic conventions that underlaid so much of literary history up to that point. Accordingly, Heather Kerr has remarked that Barthes is the "exemplary practitioner" of fictocritical writing, "a kind of ... writing which takes place 'somewhere in among/between criticism, autobiography and fiction'" (Hunter qtd. in Kerr 1996). Concurrently, Jacques Derrida was articulating his concepts of deconstruction and grammatology. These theories for engaging language opened the possibility for 'post-critical' modes of writing such as "narrative allegory", which "explore[d] the literal—*letteral*—level of the language itself, in a horizontal investigation of [its] polysemous meanings" (Ulmer 108).

Among those in the French literary community who engaged Derrida in serious discussions about (post)structuralism was Serge Doubrovsky (Garrison 360). Widely considered the inventor of the term "autofiction," Doubrovsky's *Fils* (1977) first made explicit use of an author/author-character complex. In it, the I invokes an extra-narrative identity—always doubly signifying what/whom is absent or present, 'dead' or 'alive' through its very pronouncement (Artous-Bouvet §3, 26). Practically

speaking, the reader must stay conscious of this dualism throughout to fully apprehend the text. This strategy marked a radically somatic approach to writing for the way that the author's actual body (and all the ways in which it might differ from the propositional I) became a foil to the seductive objectivity of conventional literary diegesis. In Derridean terms, Doubrovsky's autofiction exposed the impossibility of the author's objective stance by *tracing* the self in the act of writing. Though "fiery debates" over the merit of this tracing continue in French literary circles today, autofiction inspired many American writers of the 1970s, particularly those associated with the New Journalism, who saw distinctions between themselves as subjects and those they covered as antiquated and ineffective (Worthington 20, 93).

Synchronously, *écriture féminine* was germinating in France: a polemical feminist, poststructuralist writing that sought to expose binarisms and patriarchy by juxtaposing multiple ways of speaking in a singular text. Hélène Cixous, Julia Kristeva, and Luce Irigaray, among others, interwove the personal and the political, using a mix of registers to convey the phenomenology of the lived female experience. In particular, clarion calls from Cixous to write *from the body* crossed oceans and inspired early fictocritical writing in Canada and Australia (Gibbs 1997). Thus, French poststructuralist theory can be seen as an antecedent to the subject under erasure employed in works of autofiction and fictocriticism, although the specifics of these terms and their applications have diverged in the decades since.

Despite this forking, autofiction and fictocriticism share another significant historical axis: the rise of digital and networked media. The fluidity of authorial voice

evident in their development during the 1970s occurred mostly in step with early commercial video technologies. Handheld video cameras and video game consoles introduced users to scenarios of reading media in which they oscillated between technical operations of the device and the performativity of playing, pretending and memory-making. To operate such media also meant cognitively operating at differing levels and speeds of communication, managing multiple points of interaction and combining registers (administrative, procedural, expressive) on the singular surface of the screen. The hybridity of this surface enabled the paradigm of “writing space,” in which the plurality of modalities became the definitive characteristic of writing, and distinctions of nature/culture and medium/information grew increasingly unstable (Bolter 98). With the inception of writing space also came the sense that authorship had been democratized. The camcorder and, later, the personal computer, chipped away at the traditionally elevated status of the author in the public imaginary. Amidst this digital (re)death of the author, autofictional and fictocritical texts emanated, and their performativity is mimetic not only of formal attributes of new media but also of the convergent media environments in which they have matured.

Convergence, of course, has only intensified with the introduction of mobile networked media (Jenkins 5). The portability of smartphones, in particular, is reconstituting our spatial and material understandings of writing. The destabilization of the author figure in North American culture, most acutely manifest in autofiction and fictocriticism, is being accelerated by the proliferation of digital and networked

media in our pockets, our vehicles, our bedrooms. This ubiquity of writing space has considerable ramifications for younger generations who rely almost exclusively on digitally mediated and networked forms of communication for socialization.

How can the motivations of autofictional and fictocritical writing assist users of online platforms like social media in navigating a media culture growingly devoid of authority or certainty? I will return to this question in detail later. For now, however, a critical framework is needed that can house autofiction, fictocriticism, and networked communication.

### **3. Haunted Writing: A Fictive Framework**

In her 2005 essay “Fictocriticism, Affect, Mimesis: Engendering Differences,” Anna Gibbs argues that fictocritical texts force the recognition of otherness through their hybridity and heterology. That is to say that the multivocality, performativity and mimicry (of other texts) seen in much of fictocritical writing has the capacity to pronounce critical differences by “allow[ing] the voice of the other to interrogate the voice of theory in such a way as to reveal its particularity and its partiality.” Fictocriticism reveals the complexity and partiality of what it means to write in the first place: to bifurcate the self into the material I of the body and the literary I of the writing. Rather than attempting to expunge traces of this bifurcation, the personal and the anecdotal are elevated as legitimate rhetorical modes that contend with objective and collective stances. This affinity for partiality dovetails interestingly with the work of Donna Haraway in her critiques of technoscience, which she sees as bound up with the increasingly corporate logic of social institutions. She advocates

for the reformatory potential of methodologies that embrace messiness and urges us to “stay with the trouble” (2016). Similarly, Gibbs makes clear that the enterprise of fictocriticism is troubling discourse, never arriving at a place of certainty. The prevailing insistence on a logical conclusion in critical writing only reproduces existing power structures and phallogocentrism. Rather, through collapsing binaries and attempting to write the self-as-other, fictocriticism and autofiction expose those conventions and biases that otherwise work to conceal difference and promote unified narratives (of science, technology, race).

By pointing the reader away from conclusiveness and towards indeterminacy, Gibbs suggests that these texts constitute “haunted writing,” or writing that produces a particular excess in the making of difference. This excess or trace of the bifurcated writing subject then functions as a rhetorical device that pervades the text like a ghost, immanently sensed by the reader but never addressed in the narrative. Producing such an indeterminate space of interpretation requires authorial intention. And yet, the haunted writer also undermines their authority, disrupting the continuity of the reading experience by reminding us of what is not being said, whether in reference to their own extra-textual life or the lives of various others implicated in the text.

When haunted writing centres on grief, loss or mourning, the work of negotiating this ghostly presence in the text takes on greater significance as a means to foster critical empathy between self and other—one that goes beyond sentimentality or moral duty (Kerr 2003 181). In this instance, haunted writing demands a keener

awareness of boundaries for the sake of recognizing meaning in difference. Rather than promote a predominantly Western, 'colonial' fantasy of boundary collapse, in which differences are assimilated, haunted writing draws attention to the discontinuity of its own textuality to charge the negative spaces of the text with doubt and absence as rhetorical gestures in their own right. Training oneself to read the borders of a haunted text as rhetorically significant reminds the reader that a pervasive sense of otherness is equally dynamic to sameness in constructing the text as a whole, a perceived form or 'body' of words. Thus, literal boundaries of the text in haunted writing encourage extra-diegetic meaning to freely surface in line breaks, between fragments, in an ellipsis, until self-awareness gradually becomes "other-awareness" (McCarthy qtd. in Kerr 2003 183).

In the case of mourning, which assumes a certain kind of performance of affect in order to register as such, haunted writing exposes the psychosocial labour of that affective territory. Through the recurrent disruption of the 'I' as a unified entity, mourning is transformed into a collective experience via the haunted text. This can be a restorative and socially engaged activity despite the precarity of the text's authority. For the oscillation between poles of self and other necessary to complete the text—whether one is writing or reading it—transgresses historically established realms of ethics and aesthetics, bringing thought and feeling into the same modality (Kerr 2003 180). The importance of this oscillation effect lies in the recognition of a tertiary non-space that occurs between them but can only briefly be apprehended (184). Heather Kerr illustrates this concept through a close reading of Gail Jones'

“Thaumatrope” (1998), in which Jones “allegorises” the antiquarian toys—essentially a series of paper discs on a string with opposing images on each side—as a theoretical device for cross-cultural scholarship” (184). By repeatedly torquing the string, Jones describes twirling the discs so fast she can eventually see the binarily opposed images of a black Mammy figure and white baby simultaneously, so much so that the Mammy figure appears to hold the baby, forging a “shared experiential space” between them (183). Kerr elucidates that as epiphanic as the thaumatrope is for its embodied performance of montage, it is actually the recursivity of the described interaction—a pointing backward at oneself as operator and activator of the between space—that bears import. For Jones—who as a child dreamt of being born to an aboriginal mother—to become aware of her own role in the movement of the signs that create racial identity compels the self into other, sympathy into empathy (Ibid.).

From this example, one can extrapolate the thaumatrope as an analog for the I in haunted writing, in that it implicates a continual oscillation amid subject positions. The experiential knowledge gained through twirling Jones’ theoretical device is that non-binary conditions are perceptible via strategic, constant movement—a nomadism. And the ghosts of haunted writing are indeed nomadic as they follow the reader across the text, unfixed to any typographic position. Subsequently, distinctions between objective and subjective voices or positions within any text begin to reveal themselves as aesthetically motivated decisions. That is to say that haunted writing hones a mode of literacy in which the reader becomes acutely aware of the



materiality of the text and the malleability of the meanings assigned to a particular sequence of typographic symbols. In attempting to unfix the signified from the sign and make it nomadic, haunted writing reveals the aesthetic dimensions of writing as codes of convention based on historical usage and literary tradition. But these same codes can just as easily be altered or creatively ‘misused’ in the interest of crafting a critical rhetorical gesture, to make a point that is metagraphic. For example, in the free verse, fictocritical novella *Ana Historic* (1988) by British Columbian poet Daphne Marlatt, the pronoun “who” is often used triply to signify the protagonist Annie, her mother, and a historical figure named Mrs. Richards, all without explicit distinction. The reader alone must determine which of these characters is “who” in the moment, or if they are always being simultaneously addressed. While this shifting reference adds to the labour of reading *Ana Historic*, it alludes diegetically to the very creation of the narrative by reminding the reader that the book is a product of archival research—a practice where names are often inaccurate or unknowable. Such gestures point to the capacity of any written symbol to perform in both universal yet peculiar ways that can yield a layered and multiple interpretation. In accentuating the aesthetic possibilities of the text, haunted writing reveals the ethical dimensions of making such decisions, acknowledging those social and cultural values that have historically determined the default appearance of I, of you, of them, and, by association, the systems and institutions that keep those conventions of meaning-making in place. Thus, reading haunted writing requires the reader to adopt a more labour-intensive, strategic mindset, which treats the text as

a process—indeterminate and “amenable” to further interventions of subjectivity (Randolph).

This amenable quality of engaging haunted writing—an openness to “further interventions”—is most potent in works that deal with the affective labour of emotional processes such as mourning. As mentioned earlier, mourning typically presumes performance in order to be recognized by others in a given social setting, especially when religious and/or cultural customs are involved. And it is fairly easy to recognize performance in this context as a form of physical, even social labour. But performing mourning is also labour that inherently involves others in its affective construction—the emotional (re)actions of family and community members are integral to reifying and validating the various emotional states of the mourning individual as s/he exhibits them. Grief and loss, too, are increasingly framed as ongoing interpersonal and psychosocial forms of work in an emotional economy where sympathy and recognition behave as currency (Martocci 94). Thus, like any economy, these affective territories can only be navigated through a circular logic of give and take between sender and receiver that has no obvious endpoint, only a process to sustain it. While since the time of Freud, notions of grief and mourning as work have been confined to linear models—involving progressing through distinct stages that terminate in ‘letting go’ (Martocci 96)—typically the opposite is observed when mourners and victims put their traumas into writing, where more questions arise than resolutions. As Martocci writes, “[s]elf-narratives are not, fundamentally, the possession of the individual. Rather, they are organic, jointly constructed products of social

interchange” (117). They open up to incoherence and fragmentation to allow for reconstruction and re-visioning of what has taken place. Like Gibbs’ haunted writing, such texts are interpolated by the voices of others in the writer’s social environment, who *work together* to make difference sensible. Narrativizing painful experiences then seems to hinge on some degree of erasure or othering of self in order to move beyond the traumatic event and imagine another way of being.

In examining Doubrovsky’s oeuvre, Anaïs Fusaro has similarly argued that his latent motivation for writing autofiction was self-transformation, wherein traumatic experiences were literally re-written as fragmented yet highly designed narratives (2018). Doubrovsky’s desire to regain a sense of control over his own narrative was also a desire to explore its alternatives—versions that held room for doubt and spectrality—that might provide insight into his life from a critical distance. Comparably, in speaking about her internationally acclaimed autofiction *L’Amant (The Lover)* (1984), Marguerite Duras offered the enigmatic provocation that “the story of her life did not exist” and that “[i]t’s in the imaginative memory of time that it is rendered into life” (Garis). These sentiments call attention to the spectacular dimension of haunted writing, or that elusive vantage point of seeing the self outside oneself through the writing process. Spectacle in haunted writing qua critical self-observation is integral, then, not only to self-transformation in the face of painful experiences, but also, more generally, to eliciting social value from peculiar and private circumstances.

Insofar as social conventions dictate the boundaries of self-disclosure, shame and acceptability are also intimately bound up with notions of spectacle in haunted writing. In her book *Writing Shame* (2020), Kaye Mitchell examines autofiction in the context of gendered self-disclosure, when women writers of autofictional texts are decried as narcissists and ‘famewhores’. She explores the belief that this backlash is due to the “excessive visibility” of the female experience as rendered in autofiction, which poses a “threat to the social order” precisely because it capitalizes on “shame-as-spectacle.” Autofiction draws out that which is typically experienced as negative attention and subverts the power dynamic of who is allowed to expose whom (151). Mitchell astutely observes that this dynamic presents a double-bind for women, in that acts of self-disclosure and self-narration restore agency while reinforcing the idea that women have something to be ashamed of. She nevertheless entertains the possibility that spectacularizing one’s shame in autofictional contexts can be an “act of self-shaming or an embrace of a shamed position, and thus a route to more productive, challenging or disruptive forms of self-disclosure—or even self-transformation” (Ibid.)

Again, self-transformation appears attainable only by crossing to the ‘other side’ of painful and unpleasant processes, embracing a position of otherness that jeopardizes one’s sense of belonging in the social order. Because the pain of affective territories such as shame and mourning emanates from an acutely relational social dynamic of pain (Ablow), any effort to transgress this pain must involve moving back and forth from the individual to the social. Paradoxically then, “social pain” must be

processed via highly individualized modes of authorship that further accentuate the precarity of the narrating subject (Mitchell). Put another way, to transcend the particulars of pain one must make the particular spectacular, further opening oneself up to doubt and speculation. Notably, readership plays a fundamental role here as spectatorship, not in the traditionally passive sense but rather as witness in the sense of implication. The reader's scrutiny and doubt are equally contributing factors in the transformational capacity of the narrative. Thus, self-transformative writing is a recursive logic that points backward at its source while intentionally moving further away from it. In the process, excess is produced in the form of multiple selves—some captured and fixed in the writing and others merely traced, hovering in the margins as ghosts. Meanwhile, the individual, evermore unfixed, becomes more 'socialized' in the sense that their self-concept is increasingly defined through acts of distribution and a general concern for collective identity.

At this juncture, I want to offer the provocation that the most prevalent form of haunted writing may very well be the writing that occurs on social media. If one replaces "writing" and "authorship" in the preceding paragraphs with "posting and "usership", conceptual aspects of haunted writing begin to graft neatly onto networked communication, expressly social media. The idea of witnessing self-transformation via the production of others' multiple selves maps squarely onto the central concept of most social media, which implores users to create and circulate excess(ive) documentation of the self for reception and recognition by others. In combination with the embedded digital writing tools of social media interfaces that allow

for editing, copying, filtering, and hyperlinking, authorship on these platforms is a highly mediated writing practice, inherently mutable and (re)constructive. Thus, authorship on these platforms is fictive—not necessarily false or completely imaginary, as in the case of fiction, but neither is it “true” in the empirical, scientific sense. The question rightly arises: Is it feasible to hold onto a concept of empirical truth in this kind of writing space, as it steadily becomes ubiquitous? Or, rather, should we, as a society, be looking for ways to adapt? On the latter, I believe that haunted writing plays a pivotal role in establishing a critical framework of doubt and speculation for navigating everyday encounters with fictive media. As I have suggested, the relationship of the social to the individual and the self to the other are counterintuitive in their conventional states of binary opposition when in reality they are temporal nodes of a network of contingent positions. The framework of haunted writing accounts for this network by valuing the traces produced while plotting coordinates and asks what can be gained by measuring the gaps between.

#### **4. Haunted Houses: *Judith & In The Dream House***

I turn now to two books that may be considered autofictional or fictocritical according to the previous sections, and I consider them here as works of haunted writing.

*Judith* (1978), by Canadian author Aritha van Herk, purports to be a fictional coming-of-age story about a woman who abandons her urban life for a pig farm in rural Alberta. In time, we learn that this about-face is motivated firstly by an effort to appease her recently deceased parents, especially her father, who had wanted her to take over their own farm, and secondly, by the need to end an affair with her

male boss that edges on abuse in her pet-like role as his secretary. While the power dynamics of gender are front and centre, it is also a narrative about mourning as sacrifice. In negotiating her independence and proving she can manage the farm on her own, Judith not only gives up her well-paying job and the comforts of the city but also the affection and approval of the men in her life. In mourning, she oscillates between shame, anger and doubt. In particular, doubts surrounding the nature of her relationship to her father arise at regular intervals as interludes from the past that disrupt the otherwise linear progression of events. However, the most doubtful and therefore haunting aspect of the text is in the slippage between variations on her name.

Growing up, the protagonist is “Judy”, her father occasionally modifying it to “Judy-girl,” as if to reaffirm her feminine identity while she follows him around the farm (3,17, 23). In the city and in present day, however, she is “Judith.” This distinction is presumably a way for the protagonist to distance herself from her youth and the diminutive connotations of “Judy”—a nickname she no longer tolerates (56). At first, we encounter the variations in relative isolation: “Judy” is relegated to the past, and “Judith” reassures us we are in the present moment. However, van Herk begins to place them in close proximity, often with only a line break to indicate time-spaces have changed:

Cold glass against her nose, Judy watched until the barn light snapped into darkness. “He’s coming. The light’s off.”

“Set the table then, Judy.”

Judith did not bother to set herself a plate but rummaged in the cupboard for crackers and cheese. (5)

Here, Judy waits impatiently for her father to come inside for dinner, while Judith eats alone, “listlessly” staring into the empty yard of her own farm (6). The juxtaposition of these time-spaces in the text, and the lack of setup on the part of the author to distinguish them, further collapses one identity into the other and requires careful navigation by the reader.

Navigation is central to van Herk’s writerly intentions, as her oeuvre has steadily engaged the politics of mapping, both literally and figuratively, to trouble the notion of a one, ‘true’, “exclusive map whose centripetal force verifies and affirms a unitary discourse among men’s imaginations” (MacLaren). Accordingly, in *Judith*, van Herk maps a more plural, variegated narrative of Western Canada in the 1970s that shirks the typical phallogocentric fascination for the exterior to explore “the country of the interior, the world maze of the human being” (van Herk qtd. in MacLaren). This maze-like navigation of interior and intimate spaces is a counter-move to the archetypally outward posturing of a masculine perspective; it manifests metaphorically in Judith’s recursive commute from the century-old farmhouse she lives in and the barn that faces it. Early passages describe the physical *and psychological* labour of alternating from one domestic space to the other (8, 22–23). The stillness and “secrecy” of the empty house plays in dialectic to the fecundity of the barn with its pregnant and nursing sows that remind her she is never alone (66, 99):

Everything began with them; she had only been waiting for them to arrive to set everything in motion and make it real. [...] She knew they would be waiting for her. She knew they would be watching, wondering at her, that her



every move would occupy them. [...] She stood and put her hand on the coolness of the doorknob. Come on, she thought, come on. Where's your guts? (21–22).

It would also seem that this fretful passage is functioning as metaphor in its own right—the anxiety of patriarchy depicted as a paranoia of pigs. However, viewed through the lens of haunted writing, this passage takes on a deeper, allegorical function. I venture that this passage from van Herk's first major publication registers the author's embodied doubt about engaging in haunted writing via Judith. The "they" of this passage can easily indicate the pigs in the barn, the patriarchy, or the literary public. This extradiegetic interpretation requires a parallel knowledge that is not unlike the constant twirling of Jones' thaumatrope. As distinctions between house and barn become more pronounced, those between past and present inversely subside, as if to signal where in the text van Herk is twirling hardest and is most comfortable leaving traces. These instances are significant for implying not one, but multiple voices constructing the narrative. By Chapter 3, Judy and Judith inhabit the same paragraph, often involving the memories of others, wherein the oscillation between past and present gives way to oscillation between subject positions as well. Suddenly, pronouns "her" and "they" take on greater significance for their liminality, implying multiple subjects. This elision is especially vivid in a scene where Judith, pondering her "other face," recognizes the image of her mother in herself to the point that "her" comes to indicate both women:

In the cramped, blue-painted bathroom off the kitchen, she stared intently at herself in the narrow mirror. [...] She stared a long time trying to remember her other face, Judith with hair falling to her shoulders, eyes outlined and shaded, lips colored. [...] Now her face was pale and colorless, hair short and

ragged. More familiar than any image of herself, her mother's motion of passing her hand over her face, erasing something there. And it was her mother's face, smooth and younger, looking back at her from the mirror. "Can I go outside now?" Her mother turned from the mirror on the wall, fingers pursing her lips, hand moving from brow to chin, wearily molding it back, back into place. She touched her hair nervously then sighed. "Sweep the floor first, Judy." (35)

This passage deliberately blurs speaker and addressee in terms of Judith and her projected image(s). What results is a retroactive interpretation of schism and slip-page between Judy and Judith in preceding pages, with only a keystroke to separate them. Could it just as well be that Judith is rhetorically asking herself this question out loud, as she misrecognizes herself as (m)other? Amid van Herk's strategic pivots, how can one be sure? One cannot, and this is the point. These instances of overlap are deeply multivocal. They imply multiple voices speaking as one. And they invite speculation rather than seek to abase it. The lack of certainty around the intentions of these moments becomes excess, hovering unresolved and haunting the book's remainder.

Another means of generating excess that van Herk employs is a combination of insertion and fragmentation through the father's character. He appears intermittently as fragments of dialogue that interrupt interactions with her past and present love interests—her former boss, Norman, and Jim, the eldest son of her neighbours. Again, the lack of physical space in the text between fragments demands scrutiny of their borders. This is not to suggest that van Herk is exploring incestual desire by inserting the father into romantic contexts but more so that she is

problematizing the father figure in general as an untouchable territory on the map of feminine desire:

She fumbled open the door to let her body plunge into the hot pungency of the barn, farrowing sows and steaming yellow piss and electric rat-like piglets, pink under the light. And her father in his crooked attitude of weighted labor, shaking chop out of a five-gallon pail over the board fence. Standing beside him, she reached out to touch the rough brown wool of his coat, and he turned to her, setting down the pail to lay a blunt and heavy hand on her shoulder, so that they stood together almost lovers in the pale light of morning (109-10).

The visceral description of the barn and piglets establishes a material tone that grounds the scene in the present and the body. However, the next sentence swiftly troubles this certainty by describing Judith's father as a visible, animated entity in the room. Is it a memory? A ghost? Are we even certain that it's Judith's body that we, as readers, are vicariously inhabiting? van Herk never bothers to clarify. As haunted writing, *Judith* is a work of posing questions and crafting inconsistencies precisely to elicit doubt, not clarity. Judith does reach out to touch her father's coat in this passage, but it is left purposely unsaid whether her fingers ever make contact. The reader must ponder the possibilities—the excess—then either move on or ruminate in this between space.

More significantly, the framing of Judith and her father in this dreamlike scene as “almost lovers” creates immense speculation around the nature of their relationship and its impact on her interactions with Norman and Jim. In the following, van Herk weaves them all together, portending that the spectre of her father pervades any intimate, romantic connection:

[Jim] pulled up in front of the hotel, the entire ground floor alight under a painted sign that creaked in the wind, carrying a ridge of snow: Licensed premises.

They entered into a hot, sour smell of sweaty bodies and spilled beer. [...] Judith blinked, the dimness of all those lounges after work, sipping martinis as they huddled together over a table, his hand stroking her leg...She thought of that time in the Stettler bar with Norman, her father never in the bar—"Too busy working to sit around all day and gab."

She had never been in a bar before, Judy twisting her fingers together in her lap ... (129)

In about a hundred words, three, possibly four, different space-times are imbricated as if in a visual collage, borders pressing up against the others. Judith blinks, and suddenly she is/we are no longer with Jim in the tiny Norberg bar but sipping martinis with Norman. And yet, his presence can only be experienced in contrast to "her father never in the bar," with the following fragment told through young Judy's perspective. The implication is that no part of the narrative is being told in isolation, only in counterform<sup>103</sup> to another time-space, another Judith. While not unlike the modernist stream-of-consciousness that emerged with the semi-autobiographical novels of Dorothy Richardson and peaked in the works of Virginia Woolf and James Joyce, van Herk's tactic is one of fracture and fragmentation over flow. Not so much a stream, *Judith* often reads as more a jagged brook of consciousness, where certain thoughts, certain versions of the author-character jut out from the surface to interrupt the others.

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<sup>103</sup> The term "counterform" is regularly employed in art and design to indicate a significant portion of blank or 'negative' space in a composition that helps to emphasize the positive space through the figure/ground principle (*prägnanz*). The term likely evolved from typography, where the hollow spaces of letters like 'a', 'o', 'b', 'd', etc. are signally important in discerning their graphic appearance and thus their meaning. The importance of using the word here is to illustrate that the multiple time-spaces in *Judith* never happen in isolation but are only legible through their close proximity in the text, visually adjacent and 'pressing' against one another.

The paralogy<sup>104</sup> of this tactic culminates on the last page only after the narrative has ended, when the reader encounters van Herk's biography (182). One learns that she also "grew up on a farm near the village of Edburg" (the closest town to Judith in the narrative is *Norberg*); that she presumably moved to the relatively big city of Edmonton when she attended the University of Alberta; that she "worked at various times, as a farm hand, as a tractor driver, secretary, researcher, teacher, editor, and bush cook" (Ibid.). It is not that any of these vocations are suspect, and it is certainly common to write about something one has lived firsthand. However, the high degree of similarity between the biography and the protagonist without formal explanation *points back* and underlines the precarity of the narrating subject. The notion that "Judith" and "Judy" may at any point, though not necessarily, be equally read as "Aritha" demands a second, more studious reading of the text as one of multiple iterations, multiple selves. Considering its date of publication, *Judith* carries immense value today as an indicator that the urge to combine biography with fiction or otherwise tarry the line between the two is not new or directly a result of social media platforms but a tendency of self-narration and writing, more generally.

#### 4.1 Haunted House as Dream House

*In the Dream House* (2019) by Carmen Maria Machado, is labeled a memoir yet reads like a kaleidoscope. In over a hundred fragments, it collages an account of the

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<sup>104</sup> This is a term that Jean-François Lyotard uses infrequently in his longform essay *The Postmodern Condition* (1984; University of Minnesota Press) to describe a "countermove" in the context of his theory of language games for knowledge legitimization. However, in his introduction to the book, Fredric Jameson offers a clearer definition as "[a] search, not for consensus, but very precisely for 'instabilities,' as a practice of *paralogism*, in which the point is not to reach agreement but to undermine from within the very framework in which the previous [knowledge] had been conducted" (xix).

author-character's past in an abusive same-sex relationship that begins in Iowa City and climaxes in a century-home in Bloomington, Illinois (the titular 'dream house'). Like *Judith*, *In the Dream House* centres on the psychosocial labour of shame and mourning specific to the female experience. The author-character oscillates between antipathy and complicity in her own abuse, navigating different 'spaces' for interpretation of the past. However, Machado's text is a much more explicit work of criticism than *Judith*, incorporating excerpts of essays and making use of citations, all while wrapped in the guise of a memoir. In this way, *In the Dream House* exceeds the fictocritical characteristics of *Judith* in its formal experimentation and its deliberate mixing of anecdotal and academic registers. Abridged versions of Machado's own essays on the minority politics of queerness and the "inconceivability" of lesbian violence in popular culture (135) act as critical interludes to the otherwise charged and elegiac fragments of the narrative. For example, sandwiched between "*Dream House as Hotel Room in Iowa City*" (196-197), a painfully candid recounting of reluctant break-up sex, and the mock fairy tale romance "*Dream House as the Queen and the Squid*" (201-204), is the short form op-ed "*Dream House as Equivocation*"—a sobering reflection on the persistence of gender roles in queer culture "as a way of absolving queer women from responsibility for domestic abuse" (198). This parabola of registers, moving from the confessional to the editorial to the fantastical, compels the reader to recognize the multiplicity inherent to self-narration—that Machado's narrative is never completely her own.

Machado also makes use of Stith Thompson's *Motif-Index of Folk Literature* (1955-58), regularly citing catalogued archetypes as footnotes to the events of her own fragments. Some of these "types" are quite general and ungendered like "Type X905.4, The liar" (150), while others are curiously specific to negative depictions of women, such as "Type S12.2.2, Mother throws children into fire" (71). In "*Dream House as Mystical Pregnancy*," Machado cites nearly forty different "types" of supernatural conception ranging from "T521, Conception from sunlight" to "T532.10, Conception from hiss of cobra," all of them equally absurd in their characterization of women's reproductive bodies as leachy and accidental (161). The sardonic insertion of Thompson's typology throughout the narrative functions to demonstrate in a recurrent, intrusive manner that women in literature who seek liberation from prescribed categories, sexual or social, only end up getting cursed, killed, or vilified for trying (36–37). These insertions of another text not only remind the reader there is an extradiegetic layer of meaning in play but accumulate as a performative gesture that, in a literal sense, violently interrupts the narrative to reinscribe the symbolic violence of traditional literature on the female experience.

While the ex-girlfriend in *In the Dream House* does clearly commit acts of physical and emotional abuse on the author-character, the narrative is devoid of monsters or other traditional horror tropes. Instead, it is this pervasive sense of symbolic violence that riddles the text. The supernatural instances of violence that spooked the pages of *Her Body and Other Parties* (2017) are gone, replaced by tactics of allegory and multivocality that haunt the reader rather than the protagonist.

In her prologue, Machado addresses this approach outright, stating that memoirs are re-creations; they “resuscitate the dead” (5). As a haunted memoir centred around the image of a house, the book elicits the expectation that the dream house will show itself as a haunted house. However, Machado is quick to preface that the dream house is not a metaphor or a signifier of a particular space. Rather, the inhabitant of a space defines its purpose (9). She opts instead to open the dream house up to indeterminacy and extra-diegesis as a means of haunting it. Deployed sarcastically, the trope of the dream house readily haunts itself by the impossible reality of its own existence. To remind the reader constantly of its paradoxical absence/presence, Machado includes “*Dream House*” in every single fragment title, often challenging its connotations as a physical space: “*Dream House as Time Travel*” (18); “*Dream House as Heat Death of the Universe*” (63); “*Dream House as Spy Thriller*” (91) “*Dream House as Soap Opera*” (130). The profusion and positioning of these analogies for the dream house then has two effects: 1) the reader experiences the narrative as always already ‘framed’ within the dream house, even if it seems absent, not typographically present in a particular fragment, and 2) the dream house behaves less as an element inside the narrative and more as a network that ‘houses’ the narrative in a precarious system of reference:

*Dream House as Double Cross*

This, maybe, was the worst part: the whole world was out to kill you both. Your bodies have always been abject. You were dropped from the boat of the world, climbed onto a piece of driftwood together, and after a perfunctory period of pleasure and safety; she tried to drown you. And so you aren’t just mad, or heartbroken: you grieve from the betrayal (142).



The dream house is located in this fragment but only as a boundless ocean, a non-space. In this way, it functions less as a setting and more as an allegorical vehicle for exploring the processes of Machado's painful experiences in a polysemous, horizontal fashion where the sign/signified relationship is one of moving around (through?) the subject, hovering and nomadic. This nomadism haunts the reading experience, because it forces the reader to reckon with the possibility that even if the dream house does correlate to a physical building somewhere in the midwestern U.S., its details matter very little in the narrative construction of its meaning.

While there is an actual house that acts as setting for later scenes of the narrative, its dimensions and connotative possibilities have already been extended beyond the platonic concept of a physical structure—the dream house is also an emotion, a film genre, a scientific event. Thus, the unmooring of details from lived experience, the pronouncement of doubt in the process of self-narration, becomes evident as desirable, even necessary, in effectively communicating its bounds as an affective territory and an open process.

Machado also recognizes the processual, amenable capacity of her self-narration by intentionally troubling her pronouns, calibrating them as multivocal to again express their multiple dimensions. In what, at first, seems incidental, the author-character gradually transitions from the 'I' of narrating the first few fragments to an almost exclusive use of 'you':

You meet her on a weeknight, at dinner with a mutual friend in a diner in Iowa City where the walls are windows (15).

You wondered, when she came along, if this was what most people got to experience in their lives... (24).

You'd been staying at the Dream House for weeks over Christmas break, careless, careless. You shouldn't have been so stupid; the warnings were already there... (123)

The effect of this pronoun 'break' produces many traces that point outward to the exterior of the narrative, simultaneously implicating the writer, the reader, and the ostensible other—the pervasive possibility of yet another presence not explicitly named by Machado—as the possible subject of 'you'. Again, Machado makes it fairly explicit that this is an intentionally ghostly aspect of the text. In "*Dream House as Exercise in Point of View*," she describes the self-conscious bifurcation I have previously outlined:

You were not always just a You. I was whole—a symbiotic relationship between my best and worst parts—and then, in one sense of the definition, I was cleaved: a neat lop that took first person—that assured, confident woman, the girl detective, the adventurer—away from second, who was always anxious and vibrating like a too-small breed of dog (14).

For Machado, 'you' is "anxious and vibrating," because it is partial, always inferring something or someone has been lost. But, in fact the excess her tactic produces actually provides a greater sense of presence in the narrative through the doubt and speculation that accompany it. If *Judith* engenders other-awareness by requiring the reader to oscillate rapidly between time-spaces and identities of the author-character, then *In the Dream House* pushes this further to continually suggest that the reader is also one of these others that circulates in the narrative and must be considered throughout. In the vein of Mitchell's shame-as-spectacle, Machado's 'memoir' turns the particular spectacular through a recursive logic that continually points outward at the reader, reminding them of their own role in constructing the

otherness of the narrative, and effectively also making them a ghost that haunts the writing. Machado seems to confirm her awareness of this mise-en-abyme dynamic halfway through the book when describing the layout of the dream house as “functionally a circle...the house[,] like a ghost is trying to make itself known but can’t...” (73).

## 5. Ghost Writing (the Self)

As demonstrated by *Judith* and *In the Dream House*, reading haunted writing means always weighing it in relation to the presence of some other subject, whether intra- or extradiegetically. As I have earlier alluded, this requires a paralogy or sidestepping kind of reading that occurs in parallel to the text and is adequate to the self-conscious bifurcation of the writing. The “para” of parallel is important here as it relates to the adjacent concept of paranoia and the theorist Stuart Moulthrop’s notion of a “creative paranoia” (1991). Writing on hypertext and networked media, more generally, Moulthrop suggests that when

...dealing with vast and nebulous information networks...a certain ‘creative paranoia’ may be a definite asset. In fact the *paragnosticism* implicit in hypertext may be the best way to keep the information game clean. Surrounded by filaments and tendrils of a network, the sojourner in...hypertext systems will always be reminded of her situation in a fabric of power arrangements. Her ability to build and pursue links should encourage her to subject those arrangements to inquiry (698; my emphasis).

Here, Moulthrop describes the experience of hypertext as paragnostic, or as *paragnosis* from the Ancient Greek word for knowledge, meaning a way of knowing that occurs alongside another, and could also, in its very presence ‘outside’ and apart

from the first, be considered as a contrary and corrective force. Thus, my own ability to forge links and manipulate their context, their “arrangements”, should also incite me to ponder the constructedness of the total environment in which these operations are taking place. As Moulthrop envisions it, paranoia in the network context acts as a productive agonism<sup>105</sup> that confronts the reader/user with the constructed nature of the medium while opening it up to reconstruction and critique. Like haunted writing, the paragnostical reader/user can only navigate the given text by means of oscillation between passive acceptance and pervasive doubt. Moulthrop goes as far to speculate that, if harnessed as a new norm of engaging networked media, a culture of “interpretive resistance” might emerge that critiques the design and intentions of information encountered online by creatively reframing it (697).

Writing this in the early 90s, Moulthrop’s comments may seem either prophetic or downright naive, for the fictive dimension of online communication has grown tenfold in the decades since. In particular, the proliferation of fake news is exponential while more and more teenagers, members of a generation that has never known a world without online communication, increasingly identify online spaces as safer

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<sup>105</sup> My use of this word is meant to reflect how often it appears in Moulthrop’s own explanation of creative paranoia in the article. However, more broadly, my understanding of agonism is informed by the political theory of Chantal Mouffe, who argues that true democracy relies on a “pluralistic agonism”—as opposed to the dichotomies of antagonism—which elicits critical differences rather than ideological divides. See “Deliberative Democracy or Agonistic Pluralism?” in *Social Research*, vol. 66, no. 3, Prospects For Democracy, Fall 1999, 745-758. [www.jstor.com/stable/40971349](http://www.jstor.com/stable/40971349).

for socialization than physical environments (Zhao 394). What might we in the present day do then to explore the linkage between the agonistic reading experiences of haunted writing and networked media in the service of fostering a more critical media literacy? Can a creative paranoia in online environments like social media platforms be engendered through the adoption of tactics from haunted writing?

I would like to conclude by conducting a couple of thought experiments for writing about the self online that are informed by the two texts I have just discussed, to imagine how their approaches might be adapted to popular social media platforms like Instagram and Twitter. Earlier, I elucidated how these particular platforms conflate the notion of self-narration with documentation through the visual and textual rhetoric of features like Instagram “stories” and Twitter “moments.” These are apt starting points for injecting methods from haunted writing into a networked media context, because the protocols of using these features already involve methods of collage, fragmentation and multivocality through the mutability of their digital interfaces.

Introduced in 2016, the ‘stories’ feature on Instagram “poaches” the most successful aspects of Snapchat (Constine). Users create ten-second slideshows either from photos and video captured through the app or from the last twenty-four hours of recorded media on their smartphones. Digital tools for drawing over photo and video content as well as adding captions and icons or “stickers” allow for diegesis and further layering of different ‘voices’ within the ultrashort narrative. Notably, stories on Instagram also have expiry dates, disappearing from followers’ feeds after

twenty-four hours. In combination with the affordances of the digital interface, this vanishing effect lends them an even more unfixed and indeterminate quality. Taking inspiration from *Judith*, one might imagine treating this aspect of Instagram as a means to create situations of oscillating signifiers and explore the self-as-other. Each Instagram story could serve as an experiment in the making of a digital thaumatrope. What if Judy and Judith were different aesthetics of self-portraiture—one focusing on nostalgia and girlhood and the other on signs of independence and womanhood? To go further, what if the user were to photograph others but still label them as self-portraits of “Judy” and “Judith” under the singular username of “Aritha”? The rapid progression of the “stories” slideshow would be capable of communicating the oscillating character of van Herk’s writing in *Judith* while arguably augmenting it through the ability to juxtapose different visual aesthetics. As a gesture within the context of socialization online, this approach would also complicate how another user begins to interact with it. While the culture of the selfie dominates social media, how does one comment or otherwise respond to documentation of the self-as-other?

Part of the answer lies in creative ‘misuses’ of social media that have been peppering the Internet since the early aughts. Some instances have been ironic and playful avoidances of self-documentation or narration, as in the case of @big\_ben\_clock, a Twitter account that since 2009 has hourly tweeted the number of “BONG”s that the physical Big Ben in London sounds. Others have been quasi-self-narrative in the form of archetypal figures or personae, such as the long

running @god account, which daily posts clever quips about current events from an intelligent design perspective. However, it is rarer that the social media user performs *as themselves* to purposely trouble their own reliability as a narrating subject.

More recently, emerging female contemporary artists have ventured into this territory. Argentinian-born Spanish artist Amalia Ulman exclusively used Instagram in 2014 to create 186 still and moving portraits for an exhibition at London's Tate Modern titled *Excellences and Perfections*. Many of Ulman's portraits, which ranged from softly-lit meditation selfies to grainy video clips of trying on dresses before her bedroom mirror, confounded Instagram users for their banality, especially male users who bungled the difference between performing femininity and 'authentic' portrayals of being a woman (Farmer). Meanwhile, the "Sad Girl Theory" of American artist Audrey Wollen, whose mimetic self-portraits of 'tragic' women historical figures posted to Instagram serve as research creation for her own particular brand of feminism—one that rejects a binary opposition of fake and real when it comes to gender representation (Tongcoo)—reveal a power struggle for popular images of vulnerability. But however haunted and thought-provoking these acts of creative paranoia may be for considering the self-as-other, it is important to remember their status as works by trained artists and products of professional practice. Engendering this same kind of media literacy amongst non-artists and non-creatives on social media is a loftier, more difficult goal, and requires inciting strategic re-evaluation of "the media" in the first place.

One possible means of facilitating this sea change is to encourage haunted writing on those very platforms where news media, social media and self-narration are already most imbricated. In the years since its introduction, the Twitter moments feature has been increasingly embraced by corporations and private interest groups as news media and a means to broadcast their value-oriented narratives in a different venue (Duguay). Unlike Instagram stories, Twitter moments do not disappear and can even be ‘pinned’ to the top of one’s user profile page. Moments can also include more types of visual media, such as animated GIF files, and do not have time restrictions on when content was created. While the intentions of these organizations may be little more than capitalizing on the popularity of the medium, the growing trend of social media channels functioning as news sources has led to a culture of informational echo chambers and divisive political conflicts: a polarized United States in the wake of Russian disinformation campaigns that touched “every major social media platform” (BBC News); the mobilization of social media to spread anti-refugee sentiment and right-wing narratives in the European Union (Ekman); the susceptibility of fringe political parties, like that of Wexit in Canada, to be co-opted by state-run social media hacks (Laing). These schisms underscore the need to develop simple but effective habits geared toward a scrutinous, doubt-oriented literacy for writing and reading networked media. For example, if one were to treat one’s Twitter moments like Machado’s dream house—each an allegory for making the particular spectacular—what would that look like? One might imagine firstly that the title of any moment would begin with “*Dream House as...*” followed



by whatever might be the news of the day: *Dream House as North Korean Missile Launch*; *Dream House as Tax Cut for the 1%*; *Dream House as Election Day*. What would be gained or possibly lost in seeing the news cycle as allegory? This is not to suggest trivializing the gravity of world events or the very real bodies and lives affected but rather to see the social media format as a means to explore world events on a more literary, even poetic level. One that points back at itself and foregrounds the constructedness of the linguistic patterns and conventions that make some forms of expression qualify as ‘news’ in the first place—the “arrangements” that Moulthrop spoke of.

While contemporary artists have demonstrated that such a poetics of social media is possible, it is admittedly unrealistic that every user, every social media post will become a deliberate engagement with haunted writing. And, perhaps this is not actually all that desirable. All haunted writing *all* the time, even on social media, would inevitably yield a writing space so replete with doubt that it ceases to hold discernable value. Rather, when deployed occasionally and strategically, haunted writing in networked media can act as a corrective to the dominance of binary conceptions of information as ‘true’ or ‘false’, purely ‘objective’ or ‘subjective’ voice, and so on. More than ever, it is salient to imagine crafting a media culture in which our youth engage social media as already haunted, with a disposition of doubt and indeterminacy in order to garner a critical understanding of difference over one of division. Notably, is this not the ideal of a humanities-based education qua critical thinking and contextual analysis? As autofiction and fictocriticism gain traction in

scholarly discourse for their mimetic relationship to networked media they will also hopefully gain entry into university literary curriculum, creating this reality and triggering these connections on their own accord, functioning as points of entry for discussing the psychosocial labour of self-narration in networked contexts. If upcoming generations are to understand the nature of the media they most often engage with, they need analogs and models for its dynamics that can illustrate the excesses and the precarity of the narrating subject produced. Only through a shift toward seeing self-authorship, paradoxically, as a kind of ghost writing, a ghost writing of the self, can we begin to appreciate the potential for critical empathy that already exists, latent and hovering on the periphery, in our most quotidian acts of self-expression.

**4B.**

**Ghostly Posts**

## 1. Amalia Ulman & “The Meditation Selfie”

Torso facing the camera but head twisting toward the window, eyes closed, half-bathed in sunlight and sitting atop a neatly made bed in a textbook lotus pose, Amalia Ulman’s left index finger and thumb are connected in a quasi-Buddhist mudra. She is “[m]editating before a long day of work.” Or this is what her Instagram post from September 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2014 claims. Yet, the longer one stares at the sheer level of detail in its semblance this seemingly benign ‘selfie’ arouses suspicion. Never mind the somewhat absurd proposition of taking a selfie while meditating, or that Ulman is quite far away from the camera and almost fully in the frame (only her right hand not pictured), making it unlikely she was photographing herself, at least not with a smartphone. But over and above these inconsistencies, it is the high degree of craft in Ulman’s photograph that makes it register as uncanny in the context of casual, non-commercial social media use. It is not only her toned physique, her skillfully rounded top-bun without a strand of frizz, or her à la mode black and white workout getup that signal theatrical staging but the overall attentiveness to lighting, to colour, and to composition that unsettle the viewer/user with illusionistic prowess. A blur effect moves in a gradient from right to left getting fainter as it reaches her body, pushing her further into focus though she is already the sole human subject; in her seated and stabilizing triangular pose, her body anchors the bottom-left corner of the composition, echoing the right-angle of the photo’s frame with geometric precision. On an image sharing platform ostensibly driven by immediacy and amateur photography, Ulman’s “meditation selfie” is too polished to fit

comfortably into one's feed. It approaches the artificial without fully crossing into the fictional and irritates the difference between these concepts. It is a fictocritical and cyberfeminist intervention into the deterministic qua algorithmic writing space of social media.

Like many fictocritical works I have explored, Ulman's selfie proposes an indeterminate and paralogical narrative, crafting a prism of sorts that performs the selfie in a conflation of advertising and self-authorship. *The self is an inflatable moment*. As a result, the viewer/user oscillates between thoughts of intimacy and spectacle, documenting and manufacturing, self-portraiture and diaristic writing. Meanwhile the technical excellence of the imagery critically refracts, like a funhouse mirror, the asymmetry of social values at play in the conventional interpretation of what can be considered real or factual in online communication and socialization.

Similar to the carnivalesque<sup>106</sup> nature of tableau vivant in 18<sup>th</sup> century Europe, which was meant to evoke 'the look of painting' regardless of being based on any existing work of art, the meditation selfie is an exercise in imagining a moment without a referent; one that "hover[s] indeterminately between the living and the dead, the uncanny and the familiar" (Rossner). The key difference, of course, is that Ulman was doing this on social media where expectations around communication and identity have become increasingly tied to embodied subjectivity and government issued identification. Ulman offends this paradigm not through a deviation from race

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<sup>106</sup> A term developed by Mikhail Bakhtin to describe the temporary abeyance of societal hierarchies and linguistic categories such as sex, gender, race, ethnicity, creed, etc., during times of festival or during theatrical productions, where costume and willing suspension of belief may lead to eruptions of power symmetry and power sharing.

or class but by presenting erratic shifts in the performance of femininity, posting imagery as diverse in conceptual nature as a kitten tucked into terrycloth bedding to a closeup of manicured hands restrained by iridescent carnation pink ribbon. Gradually, the semiotic boundaries between cuteness, ornament and femininity are overlaid with notions of submission and capture. As one makes their way through the rest of Ulman's Instagram account, scrolling down and back in time, many similarly unsettling in-between images emerge, often accompanied by vague and generic captions consisting mostly of hashtags. Steadily, the impression builds that this is not simply an overly artsy interpretation of the selfie by a contemporary artist but a serial intervention into networked culture *about* the selfie, *about* Instagram, and choreographed to play out in networked public space for all to ironically "like" and "share".

Ulman would eventually confirm that between April and September of 2014 she was indeed conducting an online performance—a fragmented narrative titled *Excellences and Perfections*. Over those five months, the artist became a self-pronounced "Instagram girl", portraying three different personae in corresponding phases, each based on a popular female trend in social media culture: the "sugar baby", the "cute girl", and the "life goddess" (Kinsey). The meditation selfie belongs to this last persona. And it epitomizes not only a growing ethos of curation in online self-representation but also a prevailing obsession with constant self-improvement and self-transformation. The stress on self-improvement through picturing one's physical improvement is increasingly common among younger generations of women on

social media platforms due to a gradual conflation of beauty ideals with ethical ideals, and the tendency to treat beauty as a form of online currency (Reid). As noted in a 2018 *DAZED* article that came out in tandem with the release of Ulman's book documenting the performance, posts like the meditation selfie were weathervanes for just how common demonstrations of visible self-transformation would become on Instagram and social media writ large—not only as signifiers of personal but *social* achievement. Her overzealous embrace of aesthetics served, in a speculative fashion, to predict the inevitable new normal for future users of the platform where self-representation equals self-promotion:

Back in 2014, Ulman was already considering the power of curating an Instagram profile [...] Today, we are fed advice about the importance of developing 'personal brand' on Instagram—we're told that we can achieve this by sticking to a consistent theme; creating a simplified character that others can consume. (Ruigrok)

Despite this fast-food quality to consuming the individual posts, when considered collectively as a narrative, Ulman's total Instagram feed is much harder to digest. Though the premise of the meditation selfie is borderline absurd, its subject matter is quite tame in comparison to other more adventurous entries. Some of these include a close-up of a spoon slicing through a Jell-O mould containing a single hibiscus flower, captioned: "So pure I only eat flowers"; a headless, spread-eagle shot up the skirt with a stuffed pink bunny in a censoring position; and a grainy, sepia-tinged selfie where Ulman partly obscures her face with a handgun. What is the unsuspecting follower to make of these radical shifts in persona and register?

Tenuously connected by little more than a username and recurring face, the majority of Ulman's posts come across as incompatible fragments, not only of the same narrative but even the same person. This fragmentation is then exaggerated by the distributed nature of the networked medium and the Instagram interface, which visually isolates and largely decontextualizes individual posts. Even when viewing Ulman's Instagram homepage, where posts are arranged chronologically in a three-by-three grid, the thick margins of white space between them only further accentuates their aesthetic and semiotic differences. For example, the aforementioned sleeping kitten sits diagonally across the grid from a close-up of a gloved hand holding a syringe. In this way, *Excellences and Perfections* is designed to be read partially, in subtle discord, with difference baked into both its visual and conceptual architecture, very much like Puar's intersectional feminist reading of the term.

In a 2016 interview with Nate Freeman for *ARTnews*, Ulman addressed some of the politics in embracing partiality, suggesting that despite the fictional nature of the performance, the incoherence created by embodying multiple personae was something that more closely resembled her own life experience:

People denounce my performance and say it's like, you're laughing at basic bitches. But, you know, I'm also a little bit of a basic bitch—I'm laughing at myself a little bit. I'm also all these things—the cat lady, the crazy female artist, the feminist, and I'm the conservative woman who goes to work every day. And I'm tapping into all these things. I don't stand on the outside and just judge. (Freeman)

As much as *Excellences and Perfections* was a critique of the Instagram Girl, Ulman's admissions reveal her piece is equally motivated by a kind of fictocritical



empathy; not empathy in the conventional sense but a self-reflexive understanding of the other that goes beyond morality or sentimentality to seek out interstitial spaces of shared experience (Kerr 2003). Because the ideation and execution of Ulman's performance required both imagination and critical self-observation, thought and feeling were joined in the same 'ghostly' or transmittal modality, "work[ing] the gap between between self and other, [repeating a] dialectical oscillation between sameness and difference, thought and feeling, ethics and aesthetics," (Ibid. 183).

Seen in this light, *Excellences and Perfections* was much more than an artistic ruse. Instead, it points to the potential for public discourse and critical empathy to emerge from acts of ghost writing the self in online environments. When the narrative being constructed systematically produces doubts about its authority because of the very features that define the medium, it generates semiotic excess. Through increasingly larger narrative gaps qua fragmentation users/readers become haunted in their consumption of the text and must continually (re)consider how the technical affordances of the medium differ from the social norms that govern its usage.

However, in our post-Internet age, online acts of communication can certainly have real, physically damaging consequences, and globally governments are investing billions of dollars annually in countering cyberterrorism. The idea that something circulating online can be fictional *and* critical is increasingly seen as an irresponsible, even antidemocratic sentiment. After the advent of "fake news" on social media and the general explosion of disinformation in online communication culture over the last decade, this notion of a 'fake' social media presence serving a critical

function is likely to be dismissed as part of “the social dilemma”<sup>107</sup> rather than an opportunity for discourse and speculation. And because *Excellences and Perfections* played out ‘in the wild’ of Instagram itself, without Ulman making much effort<sup>108</sup> to contextualize it as a performance or distinguish between ‘real’ and ‘fake’ uses of the platform, it risked being read as actively contributing to a growing crisis of disinformation rather than critiquing it. In fact, many of Ulman’s followers who were duped by the performance continue to be angry with her to this day (Freeman).

Importantly, the reaction would likely be much different if one were encountering Ulman’s performance in a gallery space or a book, where it could be analyzed in isolation. But like the net artists and hypermedia creators of the late 1990s<sup>109</sup>, contemporary artists who have grown up post-Internet, with social media as a pillar of their worldview, are drawn to making work designed to live specifically on those platforms, circumventing traditional venues and the interpretive frameworks that come with them. Along with Ulman, artists like Audrey Wollen and her “sad girl theory” Instagram account, or Molly Soda—who leaked her own nudes as part of her performance piece *Should I Send This?* (2015)—disturb the notion that the convergent writing space of social media is somehow off-limits to the same creative-critical

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<sup>107</sup> I’m referencing the title of the popular 2020 documentary *The Social Dilemma*, produced by Exposure Labs and distributed by Netflix. The narrative-style documentary looks at the problematic nature of a handful of tech corporations (and the designers they employ) having disproportionate impact and influence over how socialization is structured and experienced.

<sup>108</sup> Ulman made a post on April 19<sup>th</sup>, 2014, showing the words “PART I” in large serif font, accompanied by the caption “Excellences and Perfections”. Aside from this, no other visual or textual cues appeared within her posts or on her account that alluded to them as performative.

<sup>109</sup> Notable artists who identified with the Net.Art movement of the 1990s included Olia Lialina, Heath Bunting, Vuk Cosic, the artist collective JODI, Franco & Eva Matte (f.k.a. 0100101110101101.org) and Cory Arcangel.

inquiry of non-digitally networked forms of writing like the novel, the play or the poem. Ironically, by using social media platforms in the way they have been designed—as digital tools for constructing and curating a personal narrative—these artists have engaged with those media fictocritically.

## **2. Ghost Writing & Glitch: @toreup\_incognita**

In September 2021, a curious new account entered my Instagram feed with the handle @toreup\_incognita. I was immediately interested in the obvious pseudonym as well as the content of the post, which comprised of several memes in slideshow format and a long caption underneath. Notably, there was no selfie or any self-referencing images that would otherwise show me who this person was. Subsequent posts were largely the same, consisting of as few as five and as many as 10 found texts—mostly memes but also found photos, drawings, or movie stills with custom subtitles—all of which had self-care or sex positivity and gender diversity as their subject matter. For example, a post from October 7<sup>th</sup>, 2021 begins with a medical imaging meme of a human skull stretching and distorting on one side in technical-speak and the caption, “This version of me will die. I hope my molecules end up in a radish or something cool.” The next image or ‘slide’ is a screenshot of a Twitter post by user @notmenotmag talking about the “root chakra” and how “sex is the sacral chakra” while at the same time advising, “it has to do with community and family, of all which capitalism and colonialism has destroyed.” Other slides of note in the post include a grainy photograph of a closed delivery truck door with bold red lettering overlaid that reads, “[d]on’t let someone’s emotional inconsistency make you

addicted to temporary highs and constant lows,” and a still from the 2018 Marvel movie *Venom*, with a close-up of the grotesque main character’s oily black face, gnarly fangs and lizard-like tongue superimposed with a glittery script reading, “you might not like it but this is peak gender performance.” The concatenation of these bits of Internet detritus do work to produce a larger narrative of sex and death. But notably, it is a nomadic narrative that shifts focus with each reference, approaching incoherence and making it equally entertaining and frustrating to interpret.

Many of the posts also have extensive captions which echo the themes of the imagery, describing shedding inhibitions and undergoing personal transformation, but they do so in a calculatedly vague way that is autobiographical without offering identifying information. An excerpt from the caption accompanying the same October 7<sup>th</sup>, 2021 post reads:

wow self compassion is a mind-blowing and humbling ego-killing thing. It always seemed kind of annoying, truncated, tedious, wasteful to have those “sidecar files” (ie hidden baggage/bondage) following me around or being prematurely severed in fits.

i am talking about spiritual and psychic evolution my frienz... through age, curiosity, a lot of variations of study on the mind, therapy, addiction, mental health, anxiety, depression, religious philosophy and theory... travel... you name it, it never was a wasted attempt to make sense of IT.

i don’t believe in raw intelligence as a static or stoic thing (beyond the psychopathic [thinking face emoji])... as an artist i can talk about my view of physics and it is OK to have that as an interpretation of a hypothetical speculation on science fiction [puppy dog face emoji]

Similar to the melange of imagery in the post, the caption text slip-slides from one paragraph to the next in a stream of consciousness. While this is certainly not

uncommon across social media use more broadly, I would argue that there is a discernable level of editing and curation going on here in what otherwise comes across as a kind of ‘gushing’ or excessive sharing of personal feelings. Early posts also mention cutting off contact with a “toxic” and “narcissistic” mother, but names, dates and places are notably absent.

A month after launching the account, Toreup Incognita started programming and promoting an afternoon show on a New York City online-only radio station called KPISS.fm. A lone, dimly-lit self-portrait at the microphone was included as part of a post about an upcoming show. Through this and other sleuthing, I eventually verified that Toreup Incognita was in fact the parallel account of my former roommate and then Brooklyn-based fine arts photographer, Jocelyn Chase, whose account I already followed on the platform.<sup>110</sup> I was fascinated by this tacit move to create an alternate persona and web presence when Chase had already established a following on Instagram under her legal name and handle, @jocelynechase. Why compartmentalize the self-care and sex positivity of the radio DJ persona from the Guggenheim-affiliated fine artist? Are these online representations really so incompatible that they demand a paralogical response? And was this, like Ulman, a choreographed act of networked performance? If so, what did the construction of the

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<sup>110</sup> I include this detail not only to be fully transparent about my relationship to Chase/Incognita but also because it is this kind of marginal space, in-between the personal and professional, that fictocriticism seeks to foreground and explore. After all, when Jeanne Randolph wrote “Joanne Tod” (1986) it wasn’t so much the fact that painting was only peripherally addressed in an exhibition essay about a show of paintings that angered critics but the fact that Randolph and Tod were good friends and that Randolph made no attempt to disguise this in her writing (Randolph 2020).

Toreup identity offer to Chase that was not already possible through her studio art practice?

In a sprawling interview earlier this year, Chase put some of these questions to rest and, in many ways, affirmed that the motivations for creating the Toreup Incognita persona were closely aligned with fictocritical tactics and cyberfeminist principles, including multivocality and the crafting of a doubtful, speculative space for critical reflection. In particular, Chase confirmed a conscious intention to leave specific autobiographical details out of her posts while still treating the writing diaristically, blurring private and public modes of communication. She explained that the need to be mostly-anonymous in her posts sprang from a desire to gradually explore and express aspects of her personality that she saw as agitators within the patriarchal, heteronormative culture of working in a major art museum and the conventions of the contemporary art world, more generally (October 2022). In other words, Toreup Incognita was an expression of knowledge—exploratory self-knowledge—outside the legitimacy of institutional, contemporary art discourse. In her own words, Chase identified, ironically, experiencing an increasing “lack of authority” in those cultural spaces reserved for creativity and radical acts of subjectivity, i.e., the museum, the gallery, the pop-up. This contradiction motivated Chase to consider social media as a material extension of her artistic “craft,” amplifying acts of (re)arrangement and remix on massive digital networks as important acts of storytelling in and of themselves. As she put it near the end of our interview, with a defiant grin on her face, “you have to *create* your life” (Ibid., my emphasis).

In speaking to Chase, and from my own analysis, Toreup Incognita is clearly an act of intervention insofar as it exceeds and seeks to stand outside the norm for content on Instagram. Highlighting the dissonance between modes of using the platform is certainly part of the point in Incognita's online presence. However, just as acts of fictocritical mimesis distort the protocols of forms and discourses they sample from in their process of 'becoming similar,' Toreup Incognita is also an intervention into the interface design of Instagram, poetically and purposively misusing location data and searchable features. Examples include setting the geotagging location function to inscribe something metaphorical, like uploads occurring "In the Woods" (post on July 24, 2022) or dispatches at "Life School" (Oct. 7, 2021). And then there are posts that only use special characters to write the corresponding caption text, changing fonts with each new word and sometimes appearing to place random symbols. Not only does this push the notion of Instagram's core pivot on visuality and visual language to an extreme, but practically the inclusion of non-standard glyphs makes it harder for human and machine reader alike to scan or 'scrape' the content in a quick scroll (post on January 15, 2022). Like many fictocritical texts open themselves up to critique through their paralogical construction, the form betraying technique, Toreup Incognita's use of Instagram underlines the multiple ways in which the technology avails itself to artifice and semiotic excess *by design*.

c In Legacy Russell's *Glitch Feminism: A Manifesto* (2020), she speaks to the importance of crafting calculated errors in online spaces that work to disturb binary constructions of gender, race, class, and sexuality. As a theoretical descendent and

proposed re-application of cyberfeminist philosophy, glitch feminism embraces fragmentation and employs doubtful speech acts to rhetorically ask and answer: “What is a body without a name? An error” (Russell 75).

Glitch feminism celebrates moments when our bodies (or rather our definitions of the “body”) fail us. The glitch feminist argues these moments of failure are opportunities to move beyond present understandings of what a body can or should be (Ibid. 93). Because Toreup Incognita’s Instagram account is visually devoid of a body as we expect to encounter it—in the form of selfies or candid vacation snapshots—the “body” she constructs of mixed media, of memes, and Internet detritus, performs the function of glitch in its ‘failure’ to cohere into a figurative whole on a photo-sharing platform flooded with digitally-enhanced faces and the sculpted torsos of self-acclaimed fitness gurus. Rather, in reading across Incognita’s numerous posts composed of disparate aesthetics and shifting voices, her followers are forced to reconsider the body and the selfie as textual objects and curated collections of messages amounting to an online persona, a virtual body, in the same way that photos of my Aunt Mariam or Ronald McDonald do. The glitch of presenting a plural, non-figurative body re-orientates the gaze of the Instagram user toward alternative conceptions of a virtual self and expanded concepts of embodiment that are no less actively constructed by the design features and of the available technology and the customs of the technosocial paradigm. Even something as simple as being able to edit or delete an image of oneself, and to know that those changes will take effect



instantly, across a global network of privately-owned devices, has an inevitable impact on how one understands the reach and reachability of the “body” in space.

A prime tenet of post-Internet thought is that the mechanics of massive digitally networked communication—concepts of translocality, recursivity, and remediation—have become so central to the way we navigate and interact in the world that they now comprise what we think of as the banal (McHugh 23). Operating at the conscious level of background noise, the post-Internet human expects translocal access to information, anticipates recursive replication and remix of their own image as ‘natural’ forces that structure their informational landscape. But by choosing to work artistically within these paradigms, mis-using the same interfaces and design principles that promote the post-Internet imaginary, the activities of Incognita and Ulman disrupt the banal by treating its conditions as fiction. Their alternative uses of Instagram produce glitches in a technocapitalist narrative of seamless networked self-authorship by virtue of their embedded proximity to it, injecting difference directly into the network.

In the previous chapter, I discussed the hyphen and splice as useful analogues for thinking through how fictocriticism positions itself in close conceptual proximity to its subject while crafting the remaining space between as a marginal site of possibility and critical difference. Though glitch is far less uniform in appearance, its irregularity performs the same function as those typographic symbols in the context of convergent writing space, denoting and holding a space of indeterminacy within an information architecture. Critically, a glitch originates from within a particular

program, born from the same code, the same logic that it eventually breaks. *Glitch is an embedded technique* of dissent. In the context of fictocriticism, Helen Flavel has theorized the motivations of such embeddedness as a form of institutional critique, politically occupying the marginal space of academic writing and research as a “minoritarian” literature (2004). While the French philosopher Michel Serres’ theoretical fable of *the parasite* similarly frames critical proximity as a prerequisite to meaningful transgression (2007). By the same token, a glitch can only provoke new associations by working in juxtaposition to its status quo, within yet against the medium. In the case of fictocriticism, the status quo is largely the academic institution and the conventions of academic writing that suppress subjective, autoethnographic perspectives as legitimate forms of knowledge-making. For the parasite, the institution may range from the intimacy of the physical body to the virality of the body politic. But for the glitch feminist, the status quo is squarely the cultural institution of mainstream social media-use and the more literal corporate institutions of big tech that design and ideologically shape the terms of online communication. None of the above modes of intervention however ‘work’ outside the logics they oppose because they are themselves based in a logic of cybernetic feedback and negativity that antagonizes its surroundings to stay alive; to sustain its particular dynamic. Tactics of fictocritical writing satisfy the spatiality that post-Internet communication requires (in its ubiquitous distribution) through an ecological understanding of language and technology as constitutive forces of one another *and* of environment.

In “Situating Post-Internet,” (2015) Domenico Quaranta discusses the “dual site”—a hybrid mode of presentation that bridges the specificity of an architectural display space like a gallery or museum with the ephemerality of data circulating online; not to equate them but to expose and exploit their differences. Quaranta notes that this is what net.art artists Natalie Bookchin and Alexei Shulgin referred to as “the cultural loop,” in which one transcends the physical institution to become a virtual institution in oneself. Often, a dual site involves a networked participatory aspect, allowing a degree of telepresence and real-time feedback between distributed online users and the physical location and spatial context of the artwork, precisely to exceed the walls, more so physically but also figuratively, of the institution of the day. But this is not always the case. Quaranta also points to simpler yet no less transgressive gestures like curatorial remediation, with artists like Kevin Bewersdorf and Guthrie Lonergan presenting documentation of documentary acts as original works of art (5). Similarly, he cites artists working exclusively with existing, pre-circulating media as surface design or motif, so that one’s creative work, whether physical or virtual in composition, is embedded within an extant ecology of images that precedes and exceeds the gallery or the institution. This was the case in Oliver Laric's *Lincoln 3D Scans* (2013), in which the artist made open-source 3D models of the Nigerian sculptures in the collection of the Usher Gallery, U.K., to “deterritorialize” their colonial iconography (10). In all cases, the activation of a dual site signifies the attempt to mine the gap between physical and virtual realities rather than mend their sensible edges—all in the interest of elucidating a

larger technocapitalist apparatus dictating the bounds of said realities. And, one can see eerily similar tactics of exposure at play in the indeterminate formalisms of fictocritical texts.

Though specific to post-Internet art, the trope of the dual-site has value beyond that discourse. It speaks more broadly to the frustrations of a younger generation of technology users who have grown up and *within* the logics of networked communication. Users who desire to inscribe and register their own physical and virtual experiences simultaneously but are repeatedly forced, by design, to privilege one modality over the other for the sake of producing a consistent, 'legible' self; even when a market-driven, commercially fragmented media environment seemingly demands otherwise. The promise of the dual site is the promise of inscribing a trace between the physical and virtual, registering these paradigms as aesthetic symptoms of one another in a feedback loop of cultural production. The cyberfeminist artist who crafts political resistance through gestures of glitch and the fictocritical writer who invokes ghosts within the aesthetics of academic writing and knowledge production equally share an interest in the intellectual exercise of oscillation and the struggle to maintain a dual site for creative-critical knowledge production. What began in the 1980s with Jeanne Randolph's refusal to talk about literal paintings in an exhibition of portrait paintings—precisely to remove the paternalistic separation of description from experience—lives on today in the haunting refusals of Amalia Ulman and Toreup Incognita to name "art" while they artistically engage social media as a medium of self-portraiture and identity construction. Any semiotic gaps planted in

their respective writing spaces are there to maintain dual-sites of experience, inviting spectral-material negotiations of “text” and “technology”.

4C.

**My New Friend, Gillian**

**“Before the focus on faces and identity, words served as masks...”<sup>111</sup>**

A delicate hand emerges from the black. Milk-white knuckles move like pistons if engines were instruments of grace. The severed hand of an angel perhaps, momentarily intervening in brute matters of human communication—the signals, the wires, the violence of the frame as it carves its inset.

*St. Augustine, is that you?*

Suspended in midair, the hand rights an extension cord before slipping back into the abyss. I’m mesmerized by the simple act of insertion.

How does one uncover the root of a technology when no visible puncture remains? Just a mirror. A mirror has scars but no insides. A cool, digital blackness reflecting back.

*No lights allowed.*

No ground plane either, but at least it’s quiet now. I need some quiet even though I’m about to blab my guts out. I’ve always taken solace in a stark horizon and an undeniable focal point, so I’ll be fine... eventually. Just red over there. Red and Me. Red dot blinking in the distance and the whir of electricity, of circuits connecting in ways I don’t understand.

*And that’s fine.*

Heavy curtains blot out the world and keep it at bay for a while...

Thirty years ago, an image, a stream of pixels across the screen and the deafening wail of machines talking over the phone line.

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<sup>111</sup> See Alicia Eler. “Gillian Wearing’s Masked Confessions.” 14 January 2015. *Hyperallergic*. [hyperallergic.com/170494/gillian-wearings-masked-confessions/](http://hyperallergic.com/170494/gillian-wearings-masked-confessions/)

I cry: “Make it stop!”

And my father: “Nonsense! The popcorn’s almost ready”

Five minutes later, I’m on his lap, and we’re facing the Minotaur in an 8-bit labyrinth. I focus on a pixelated icon of a bloody club.

*The world cannot be contained—it bleeds right through. Leaves a trace.*

*A screech.*

“How are you doing in there?”

The voice is effortless and disembodied, controlled. Meanwhile, the mask is both taut *and* loose. The eyes too wide and roughly cut while the neck presses in beneath my chin like a vice. I feel like a living doll or a talking head, unsure which of these is the less fortunate existence.

*Silicon knows nothing of forgiveness, and art cannot afford it.*

“Please stop touching it,” the voice issues from beyond the curtains. “Look straight ahead and be still for as long as you can. I’m taking test shots...”

That’s my new friend, Gillian. We met on the World Wide Web. We met Tuesday. Today is Friday. Mid-afternoon. 16 degrees (outside) with showers. Friday, I’m in love. And now she’s about to make my secret into Art.

Did you know that the original name for the Internet as we know it was “creep-space”? I surely did not. But Gillian said so. And, I’d believe it, if I were You. Gillian is very smart about most things. She’s made a whole career out of things that don’t really exist—pictures, performances, documents.

*No matter though.*



I like to meet new people whatever the circumstances. Mum would say “only the strongest parts of their psyche get through the sieve.”

*You can make a fine jam of the people in your life.*

**Today:** Today, we’re making a video about my secrets.

And once I’ve said them into the camera, they won’t be secrets anymore. They won’t even be mine. Instead, they’ll just be Art. Gillian says the camera can turn anything into Art *if* the lighting is right *if* the lens is slightly out of focus...

Aesthetic distance seems built into the very experience of looking at photographs, if not right away, then certainly with the passage of time. Time eventually positions most photographs, even the most amateurish, at the level of art. (Sontag 16)

Oh, and the audience, too. You mustn’t forget them. (Gillian says.) Any change, any measure of difference needs its witness to fulfill its purpose.

Strangely, You come to realize that ‘reality’ is proportionate to converging vectors of proximity and spectacle.

FOR ILLUSION ISN'T THE OPPOSITE OF REALITY...

Photography is our exorcism. Primitive society had its masks, bourgeois society its mirrors. We have our images. We believe we can overpower the world with technology. But through technology, the world has imposed itself on us... (Baudrillard 1998)

I feel articulated—useful—as Gillian corrects my posture, a photometer sitting ergonomically in her graceful hand. Placing her cool



“Whenever you’re ready.”

I glance down, hesitating, and stare at the skirt of the silicon mask as it breaks crudely against the colour of my shoulders. The line where they meet says “artifice,” taunts me with “we do not belong together.” Not far away, the silky-straight strands of the dark-brown wig match a little better but are strangely geometric alongside the small wiry hairs of my arm. I feel uncanny and suddenly nauseous.

*I am a half-melted Barbie in a forcefield of fear.*

“Whenever you’re ready!”

The voice is booming now. The arms latch tighter.

*Is this the right way to expose oneself?*

“Whenever you’re ready!” the voice demands. It shoots around the room like a rumour, filling the space between breaths. The Red seems like it’s growing again, extending into the gaping silence. And it smacks you right between the eyes, where it’s impossible to see for yourself. To see that there You are.

*Shhhhhhh.*

Look to the side for a while, beyond what the lens can frame.

The latch loosens a little. Slowly, the oven-heat of the spotlight recedes, or it’s only skin doing its thing, adapting to its surroundings. Perhaps it’s psychosomatic—all in Your head—the heat, the long arm of the Red, the crushing dead air—but Your head is inside the strange cavity of another head. A head in the shape of a person that purposely doesn’t exist.

*Here I am, and there I go.*

I consider myself for the first time as an image, *as Image itself*. An approximation for something language cannot express, and an abstraction of time and space that condenses the two, appearing to freeze them in place (only appearing). And in this 'frozen' state, space and time can be exploited and turned into profit, something to be made scarce. But all the while, images are moving like nomadic herds of deer, moving at incredible speed through giant cables beneath the ocean in the form of electric signals at the same speed our memories move as electrical signals careen in our brain. Images, thoughts, pictures, memories, all of them oddly constantly in unintelligible motion whether we like it or not.

*How long have I been circulating?*

I remember when I was five, and a dog nearly chewed off half my face in the neighbour's backyard. The way my mother looked at me when I came in the door; the skillet of beef hitting the linoleum and the pronounced sound of our family dog lapping it up for what seemed like hours.

The slurping dog tongue and my own dog-eaten tongue in a dialectic of exposure.

But her face, her expression—I knew I was an image then: The Image of Horror. I learned something then; something existed that would make the world pause and sit in waiting. Gillian says Art is like that—good Art. Art looks back and makes You realize that, in fact, You Are The Image.

Beneath the mask, something is stirring. Things that can't, shouldn't ever be uttered are suddenly bubbled-up to the surface and trying to become vapour. The silicone cozy for an affective hand grenade. That's me.

*On camera, vibrating bodies are an aesthetic motif of the insides coming out.* And now I know firsthand. I know I am The Image of an image of

### **The shock**\_\_\_\_\_

Among the statements that she makes on photography and its relationship to the “pain of others”... Susan Sontag writes that “[b]eing a spectator of calamities... is a quintessential[ly] modern experience, the cumulative offering by more than a century and a half's worth of those professional, specialized tourists known as journalists. Wars are now also ~~living room sights and sounds~~ in our [pockets]”... there is a tremendous interest, a deep desire, and a scopic impulse ~~behind the public's thirst~~ [online] for “more” shocking images. (Sontag qtd. in Morel 2018)

“Whenever you're ready!!!!” the voice explodes.

Several minutes have somehow passed. The heat is getting unbearable. Parts of the mask feel as if they're melting and mixing with my own cellular matrix. I briefly contemplate smiling through my second skin as an emergency procedure akin to breaking the fourth-wall, but Art makes that impossible. (Gillian said that, too.)

Then, fearing either the voice or the Red might swell so large that one of them pierces the mask and enters my brain, I heave a dry cough and begin...

██████ I was an elementary-aged child, I had a favorite ██████████  
We used to watch TV together, soap operas, while the other kids ██████████

█ Eventually, there was █  
who started coming, and she took up all the attention. I was so jealous.  
I used to █  
█ Once, when we were playing  
█ and she wouldn't stop  
crying I started █ sev-  
eral times, █ progressively █ and stunned. █  
█ before stopping. █ felt amazing.

**“...[D]aintily dangles her own face’s mask on a string...”<sup>114</sup>**

My new friend, Gillian (#blessher) is a force to be reckoned with, for sure. Her voice was a storm bearing down from above. Pure white lady black noise. But, I trust she knows better than I do. After all, she knows what it takes to turn trauma into Art, which, hey, that’s no small feat. And apparently, she does it all the time.

With lights.

~~With Focus.~~

With Frames.

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<sup>114</sup> Wearing, posing as the cross-dressing modernist Claude Cahun, daintily dangles her own face’s mask on a string, suggest[ing] that art and life stem from the same impulse to playact, with masks and other accoutrements of deception as a way to break out of the stalemate, or even the trauma, of the gender bind. See Ela Bitencourt. “Trauma and Freedom: Gillian Wearing, ‘Wearing Masks’–Review,” in *ArtReview*, 21 February 2022, [www.artreview.com/trauma-and-freedom-gillian-wearing-wearing-masks-review/](http://www.artreview.com/trauma-and-freedom-gillian-wearing-wearing-masks-review/)

I can't do that... well, maybe, but ~~not without~~ practice... that's saying... Practice makes ~~me us you~~ perfect. Perfect can still take direction, too, when the lights aren't too hot or the framing too tight.

I'm no dummy. When the frame shifts, You shift, too.

**Tomorrow:**

From: Gillian Wearing <gwearing@notherrealaddress.com>  
Re: Looking for YOUTH, FEMALE preferred but not necessary  
\*\*\*Share your deepest secrets anonymously, no details revealed\*\*\* Professional ART Project ✂️ modest pay \$

To: [REDACTED]

Hi, You 😊

Thanks again for being such a good sport with the shoot!

I know that I can be a little 'demanding' when I'm in the studio, so I appreciate it. Creativity has its demons... Payment should be on its way. Let me know when you receive the cheque.

I'll get in touch in a few months closer to the show. to let you know the details. We can maybe get a cup before the opening or something.

Thanks again for participating!

G.

p.s. I still haven't received your consent form – send a.s.a.p or I'll have to pull your video. Bye ♥

My new friend, Gillian. So... considerate. A true friend, a conspirator, really.

A true friend is someone who reaches out when they're concerned about you, right away, even when they might incur legal troubles because of your acquaintance.

*Friends get right down to the matters at hand.*

Consent.

Cups.

DETAILS.

*Doing the work.*

Gillian knows how hard it is to make Art; to make something from nothing. The banal is a fresh graveyard though, if you're willing to pick up that metaphysical shovel. And along the way, you'll dig up Others who you can (re)animate in your cyclical process—for vengeance, for luddism, for satire.

*To make a friend: Turn the image of shock into a moving image once again. A loop.*

[A]pppearances, [...] now come from somewhere else, from their own place[s], from the heart of their banality; they are bursting in on us from everywhere, joyously multiplying on their own. The joy of taking photographs is an objective delight. [...] If something wants to be photographed, that is precisely because it does not want to yield up its meaning; it does not want to be reflected upon. It wants to be seized directly, violated on the spot, illuminated in its detail. (Baudrillard 1998)





See you soon, luv. [crossed-fingers emoji]

♥Y

p.s. Ugghhhhh, this heat...

p.p.s. if you say no I'll just die

### **Figuration**

#### §11

In this sense, a dialectic image is not a foreclosed object. It is one which carries out its own crisis (burn), which lets its intrinsic deformation arise, one in which the foregone field of view “recorded” by the photographic apparatus collides with the now in the suddenness of a figuration.

#### §12

“Image”, writes Benjamin, “is that wherein what has been comes together in a flash with the now to form a constellation. In other words: image is dialectics at a standstill.

(Morel 2018)

Two weeks later, I was on the phone with my mum trying to explain what I was doing for money these days. We hit a wall. She told me Gillian was a thief. I explained that art requires money and Gillian is really busy. She can't be expected to answer every e-mail. She told me Gillian was a “greedy bitch” who took advantage of me, and I should call the police.

I tucked my hair behind my right ear, enjoying the rustling sound in the phoneline as it drowned out her babble.

*There was a rebellion brewing in my cellular matrix.*

In my mind, I said, “shut yer big fucking mouth, Mum. Gillian is twice the woman you’ll ever be.”

In reality, I told her that I had bizarrely felt seen in the ghostly gaze of the camera. Big Red Freedom. I told her that I knew what I was doing.

*Shhhhhhhhhiiiiittttt into shhhhhpppectacle.*

She hung up a few minutes later.

**“...[B]ut the sheer number of poses muddy the idea without adding any real substance.”<sup>115</sup>**

My secret is out there now, weaving in and out of threads, criss-crossing lady boss memes and fashion vlogs, haunting the corrupt pixels of hydrangea desktop wallpapers and GIFs of cats mashing on keyboards. It lurks slightly outside the Zoom room call (always on mute). It feeds on remaining bandwidth the way cobwebs devour the quiet spaces of a house.

A secret given up to a network is

### **The Haunting Signifier**

§13

What [it] shows is what we are not able to watch, and in a way, [it] embodies what photography and cinema are all about when they politically make visible what is in front of us that we cannot see. Or worse, that we do not want to see. The burn. (Morel 2018)

A secret heard cannot be unheard. And an image cannot be unseen. But it can be misremembered, or it can simply be muddied by the profusion of other images.

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<sup>115</sup> See Will Heinrich. “Gillian Wearing Is Spilling Your Secrets.” 18 November 2021. *The New York Times* [Online]. [www.nytimes.com/2021/11/18/arts/design/gillian-wearing-is-spilling-your-secrets.html](http://www.nytimes.com/2021/11/18/arts/design/gillian-wearing-is-spilling-your-secrets.html)

Images produce f(r)iction in the form of traces: cracks, stains, burns, scars. Traces acquire stories of their own. The scars on my neck and face are the traces of curated images more than factual events. Fingering their ridges recalls flashes of a falling frying pan, a football game on TV, large orange flowers in textured linoleum, the amber light of mid-September through a half-open window. And my mother's face—shock embodied. But what do I remember of the actual attack? I see no black beast lunging toward me. Even when running my tongue across the scar that spans the inside of my cheek, there are no flashes of gnashing teeth.

The trace betrays that our world is mostly structured by sequences of images and not by events. The sun does not so much “come up” in the sky—we apprehend the consistent image of “sun” in its gradual movement across our singular visual plane. The “attack” that I suffered was not the result of the physical event but the consequence of the power of images.

*The Image is a hot white void we rotate around in space.*

On the record, I do like events. After all, Art is a particular kind of event—it requires a particular state of mind; a way of being in the world that collapses aesthetics and events into a singular mode of interpretation. To make secrets into Art or any other grand narrative, trauma must be treated as a kind of material substance.

The same can be said of dreams, too, or desire for that matter.

*Material spaces of affect bleed through.*

But in particular, these days, the event is so notably absent once there's a detailed image to take its place. Sure, show me an image of my desire, and I might forget all about it. But it's much easier to ghost one's own vacation.

As You read this, cursors around the world are furiously locating the juncture of image and event and selecting the former, because it travels, even if only as a trace of the latter. The Image persists as part of the ambience. The erasure of the click—whether the mouse or the camera shutter—dismisses the previous image and elides us all into an unending chain of other absences...

...[A]bsence[s] of the world in each detail, like the absence of the subject which shows in every feature of a face. You can achieve such an illumination of detail by mental gymnastics or by a subtle use of the senses too. But, here, technology brings it about as smoothly as can be. Perhaps it is a trap. (Baudrillard 1998)

Meanwhile...

The second skin is getting hot again. Exhausted from spilling my guts, I lean forward in the mask too quickly and a sharp farting sound emits from the undulating silicon neck folds.

"Stay still!" the voice shrieks.


But this time, I know it's not Gillian—not my new friend, Gillian, anyway. It's Gillian-the-acclaimed-British-Young-Artist and socialite. And *that* Gillian is an image-making machine, perpetually moving. Making ghosts like cigarette burns in virgin couch cushions, she seizes the unclaimed spaces, all the absences amounting to a pattern of recognition (if, you go fast enough).

But friends address each other outside of time. They approach media by trying to get through it, pushing the human to the blunt edge—leaning in.

“We’re still recording!” the voice eviscerates.

As I struggle to freeze inside the mountain of melting silicone, forbidden words bubble up again and froth in the corners of my mouth like magma spurts from a weary volcano. Soon, it’s simply too much to contain, and more of the Image appears:

**Yesterday:**

  
Re: Looking for YOUTH, FEMALE preferred \*\*\*Share your deepest secrets anonymously, no details revealed\*\*\* Professional ART Project 🎨💰 modest pay \$  
To: Gillian Wearing <gwearing@notherrealaddress.com>

Hi G!!!!!!!!!

Just heading out the door to meet you ☺

I know you probably won’t get this in time. I just have so many thoughts - jotted some notes down. They’re a mess. It’s like a movie of the future (in here) – my head that is. Maybe we can discuss when I get there???? [halo face emoji]

- About the giant Japanese wig—I don’t know if it’s really necessary. How would You feel about a really large

witch's hat or a headscarf? I'm good at updos and anything involving lots of pins. Its just that I tend to break out in hives sometimes form the synthetics. You know what I mean?

- And do I use my own voice when we're recording? Maybe that's a strange question??? But I can also do a pretty good American accent when the pressure's on... a Southern one, like Kelly Clarkson.
- What are your thoughts on plants? Like some really large ferns or banana leaves off to the side straddling the frame and anchoring the picture plane? It might help to lighten the mood a bit, no? Create a more calming vibe [smiling and sweating emoji] ...

What am I saying? You are the Artist. [female faceplant emoji]

Silly me to assume You haven't already thought of any and every aspect of what it means to turn secrets into sellable Art. I'm sure whatever You have in mind is absolutely perfect. The perfect Image. *A total work.*

Be there soon luv –

half an hour at most.

♥Y



**5.**

**Towards a Paralogical Media Literacy**

Over the last several chapters, I have explored various aspects of fictocriticism as they manifest within neighbouring feminist and cyberfeminist discourses—ecology, networked art, autofiction, and post-Internet culture. And I have done so, admittedly, a bit fictocritically, through providing equally as many analogs that function as parallel narratives for fictocritical thinking. One can imagine the fictocritical text in several ways: As a transgressive model for writing art criticism; as a kind of literary cyborg in the form of medusa writing; as a metagraphy of absence and loss in the form of haunted writing. Post-Internet, one can think of fictocriticism in even more ephemeral and distributed terms, like a feminist digital ecology of future technologies or as acts of ghost writing the self in online spaces designed for commoditized self-promotion. Across these manifestations, tying fictocritical endeavours together is a tactical approach to literacy and media that questions and interprets *as it creates*. The fictocritical cyberfeminist puts not only their own authority but the very notion of authorship in perpetual doubt through a negative feedback loop or oscillation between poles of text and subject.

In the previous chapter, I talked about the notion of the dual site (Quaranta) in post-Internet culture as a way to position fictocriticism in the contemporary media landscape. Understood as dual site, fictocriticism is a strategic occupation of the conceptual space between media, between the writing subject and the text, constantly moving back and forth as a matter of existing in the world. This oscillation is what Stuart Moulthrop meant by “creative paranoia” to characterize the self-aware navigation of hyperlinked texts as a “meta-sense of pattern

recognition” (698). For Moulthrop, the literate user of networked communication space “will always be reminded of her situation within a fabric of power arrangements,” and to “subject those arrangements to inquiry” (Ibid.) Moulthrop’s juxtaposition of ostensibly incompatible cognitive modes—creativity and paranoia—is intentional to signal the kind of paralogical thinking necessary to both steer a system and stay subject to its movement. For Moulthrop, paranoia encapsulated the maintenance of multiple perspectives, holding many possibilities in mind at once, and thus navigating media as a construction and not a given thing. Likewise, the paralogy of fictocriticism proposes that self-reflexive, “paranoid habits” of writing and reading can simultaneously construct and dismantle language in a process-driven engagement with its technical limitations, registering the tension between art and technology at the letteral, material level. Succinctly, the fictocritical cyberfeminist works to reveal communication as a “matter” of technology and “technology” as a matter of fiction.

However, those who seek to foster an ethos of creative paranoia in the present mediascape must contend with the reality of a widespread non-creative paranoia toward ‘fake news’ and a debate over the nature of truth. The rapid sharing, replication, and remix of information across post-Internet culture has given way to a “post-truth” media era, where photoshopped images and AI-driven deep fake footage contemporaneously circulate in many of the same media ecosystems as the ‘original’ source material they spoof. Online and off-, the spectre of post-truth has led to a “constant discursive obsession” with the trustworthiness of news and a

palpable “public anxiety” toward the role of ideology in producing mainstream media (Harsin 1). In the U.S., where the term “post-truth” exploded in popularity to describe the dubious rhetoric of Donald Trump’s populist 2016 presidential campaign, it is generally applied as a pejorative label for distinguishing beliefs held by the political far-right (Vivian). Some politicians and pundits on the political left have mobilized the term “careless speech” to characterize the intent of far-right media to disrupt and delegitimize democratic discourse. However, without discounting the real threat of civil public discourse breaking down, scholars of post-truth politics have been quick to point out that democracies invite and even require radical forms of speech, such as Foucault’s conception of *parrhesia*, or fearless speech, and Hannah Arendt’s distinction between rational truth, or truth of the mind, and factual truths recorded through scientific method (Hyvönen 33-35). This conception of democracy embraces acts of agonism as theorized by Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe (1985 ) where risk and conflict are considered not only necessary but productive social forces of the public forum. By design, the agonistic nature of democratic debate affords many different truths to circulate and contest one another, including the prospect of both careless speech and fictocritical writing.

In terms of media literacy, such agonism is currently at odds with an intensifying binary logic around the world toward the motivations of news outlets and media corporations; they either pedal ‘real’ or ‘fake’ content. On the surface, enhanced skepticism seems like a good thing: Does it not serve as evidence of an adequate media literacy level amongst the general public? Does it not promote

increased contextualization of media in the public consciousness? These questions seem like tautologies, but only because they mistake heightened awareness for deep reading and critical thinking. In a 2021 study of over one hundred Gen-Z undergraduate students in the journalism school at Nicholls State University in New Orleans, less than twenty-five percent of participants were able to confidently assess the credibility of their information sources, and overall respondents overestimated their own savviness at identifying fake content while underestimating their peers (Arnold & Simoncelli). Of course, this is a tiny subset of the population. But, as aspiring journalists in a higher-education setting, the findings of this study are troubling to say the least. So, while the general population's literacy for operating various devices seems to be accelerating, adopting more and more complex interfaces with greater speed, the acuity of media literacy, especially in younger generations, seems to be tanking.

Increased skepticism towards media in general is simply not enough to be literately communicating online today, because the prevalent model of media literacy is based on a binary classification of information as true/false. This model is outdated and incongruent to the non-binary or n-ary relations of texts connected through digitally networked environments. Assigning discreet categories of true/false or real/fake to networked media fails to account for the very human propensity to narrativize and express bias unconsciously. This is especially salient in digitally networked environments which afford replication, revision, and remix as 'native' properties of the medium. A media literacy that insists on a clean and

orderly breakdown of true and false information simply misses the point that online platforms are fictive by design, engineered to facilitate curated and fragmented forms of authorship. And while this is certainly not to say that there are no such things as facts or that everything is entirely relative, it is important to underline that the features of our media environment only enhance and amplify the slippage from documentation to fabulation.

Ironically, although fictocriticism began before the Internet and still mostly exists in printed form, it is potentially more relevant than ever in its mining of this inherently fictive territory that language, writing and technology jointly occupy. Whether online or on the printed page, through tactics of multivocality, mimesis, and metagraphy, fictocriticism functions paralogically in its given medial environment, creating parallel versions of texts to articulate material differences in knowledge-making and self-authorship. Because of its calculated indeterminacy, the fictocritical text requires careful navigation and a self-reflexive mode of interpretation that considers oneself as jointly part of the text and a co-constructor of its authority.

Just as Stuart Moulthrop talked of fostering a philosophy of paragnosticism in the navigation of hyperlinked texts and networked media more broadly, engaging fictocriticism demands a literacy of the parallel, or rather the anticipation that not only the text but also its chosen format(s) and venue produce meaning in themselves, so that all these levels of communication are open to simultaneous reading and subjective interpretation. The most frustrating yet equally productive

aspect of fictocriticism is that it necessitates reading the text in multiple ways simultaneously and discerning how these different levels of communication come together in the semblance of a narrative.

By and large, the narrative dominating online communication today is one of defacto participation under technocapitalism, or more specifically an unavoidable attention economy pivoting on principles of surveillance capitalism. As philosopher and technology critic Shoshana Zuboff has noted, the existential danger of surveillance capitalism is the total abstraction of the user to an economic datapoint, or the wholesale conversion of democratic online spaces to technocratic marketplaces (2019). In some ways, I fear that this has already come to pass. And fueling this insipid sea change is a visual rhetoric of seamlessness in contemporary media—the way social media platforms and gaming interfaces work to aesthetically smooth and obscure the assemblage of physical infrastructures, corporate interests and code that comprise them.

A technocapitalist narrative works to erase the presence of technology altogether in order to re-present the conjunction of economy and technology as a natural and inevitable condition; no stranger than the air we breathe. Tech giants like Apple, Google, and Microsoft have made billions over the last quarter-century by making devices increasingly smaller and thinner, processors faster, and interfaces more streamlined and less functionally complex—all of which suppresses the materiality of engaging various technologies and infrastructures. As multinational corporations possessing combined wealth that rivals the gross domestic product of many nations,

these companies have steered the aesthetic and the narrative on what technology is and can be in our social reality. And, through its systemic erasure of the myriad processes by which machines and humans frequently cohere and decohere, it is a narrative that dangerously reproduces and accelerates the mythical thinking of the objective imperialism of technoscience and the tired binary oppositions of nature versus technology and (hu)man versus machine.

In its paralogical and indeterminate approach to writing, fictocriticism offers a cyberfeminist response to such an opaque and misleading rhetoric of technology by foregrounding the messiness of networked communication. Fictocritical tactics work to recursively expose the seams where linguistic and technological systems abut and then prod those fault lines as dual sites for critical intervention and creative response. In line with the self-reflexive politics of second-order cybernetics, the fictocritical cyberfeminist is a writer who exposes the systemic binary trappings of the writing process, regardless of format or medium.

Consequently, I contend that fictocriticism, or more precisely select tactics of fictocriticism such as multivocality, mimesis, metagraphy and representational devices of the hyphen, the splice, and the glitch, yield a creatively paranoid toolkit for writing on and within networked environments. Taking a cue from Donna Haraway's theoretical interpretations of Ursula Le Guin's "carrier bag narratives," (2016 119-125) fictocriticism is not a stable configuration of principles or even a singular apparatus for doing criticism but a loosely connected and changing set of tools that are contextually determined by the status quo of one's medial



environment. As such, the creative paranoia engendered by fictocritical texts can transcend its historical origins in pre-Internet times to make two very important contributions to contemporary thinking around networked communication and post-Internet media culture:

1) The adoption and integration of fictocritical tactics into online communication at both the individual and collective level to enact valuable cyberfeminist critiques and interventions within a prevailing technocapitalist narrative. Fictocriticism can productively disrupt the conventions of those writing spaces by exposing the rigidity of such conventions in situ.

2) A greater engagement with and exposure to fictocritical texts can encourage a less binary paradigm of media literacy better suited to reading and writing across digital networks and interfaces. In a state of creative paranoia, users are required to abandon dichotomous frameworks for interpreting what they encounter and reserve the intellectual space for contingent and conflicting perspectives to exist simultaneously, in dialectical proximity.

The post-Internet reader-user-writer-content-creator with firsthand knowledge of fictocritical tactics can make an informed choice to employ fictocriticism when the narrative gaps possible and the ostensible epistemological oscillation promise to reveal the limitations and thus the confines of the representational system in which they find themselves. Figuratively armed with anti-technocapitalist literary and rhetorical strategies of doubt and indeterminacy, the fictocritical cyberfeminist can exhibit agency in crafting paralogical utterances of digital protest, paralogical

narratives as social or cultural commentary, or paralogical personae in a medium-driven experiment of self-authorship and institutional critique.

Yet, I am not naïve. Regardless of its reformative potential, a mass adoption of fictocritical tactics by mainstream users of social media or online gaming platforms is highly unlikely, at least anytime soon. In an increasingly polarized media state split along binarily opposed political ideologies, there is substantial social risk in binary and indeterminate acts of communication. The general-purpose user employing fictocritical tactics risks online harassment and isolation, or potentially being censored and “cancelled” for intentionally straddling the camps of truth and post-truth media culture. More realistically, invested attempts at fictocriticism will remain relegated to those cultural spaces that the public already interprets as somehow naturally inclined—art, literature, music—to elide and sustain a fact-fiction duality as a matter of (supposedly) working outside private enterprise. Still, that does not foreclose the possibility that fictocritical tactics can enter the larger public consciousness by other means.

Promoting greater awareness and engagement with fictocritical ideas largely comes down to education reform, not just in literature and art but also in the sciences, making room in science and technology curriculum for moments of doubt and speculation that lead to larger discussions about the ethics and politics at the intersection of science and technology. And likely, this requires an increased cross-pollination of teaching and learning methods across historically distant departments of English and engineering, cultural studies and biology. Though a

'hard science' like math cannot be interpreted fictocritically, it certainly can be critiqued through fictive narratives that imagine the personal and political consequences of unmitigated mathematical thinking. And this has just as much practical value within the profession as any theorem. Across disciplines, there needs to be an increased focus on nurturing open-ended thought that anticipates possibilities beyond "right" or "wrong", "true" or "false" through an open-ended, explorative mode of writing that accommodates and affirms moments of doubt and error as valid aspects of a research and development practice.

Exposing young readers and writers to n-ary narratives of all stripes—in books, films, games, contemporary art—is essential, but it does not have to be so explicit in its politics. Working at the level of parents, teachers, and community leaders, youth can be guided towards and exposed to media and narratives that exceed the simplicity of binary classification and necessitate an in-between, indeterminate mode of interpretation, nurturing elements of fictocritical thinking without direct exposure to fictocritical texts. This at first sounds a bit outlandish, but the profundity of existing open-ended media provides a readymade toolkit of early-learner exercises in the paralogical. There only needs to be an angular shift in how the available tools are seen (read) and held (interpreted). For example, the incredibly popular video game Minecraft has no official ending because its environments and characters are user-driven, built upon and generated by and through play. This generative model proliferates endless worlds and endless narratives that are wholly contingent on the ongoing subjective interventions of

users. Even after defeating the “boss” in the realm known as “The End” players are free to keep playing, exploring, interacting, and contributing to the game (Isaac Williams 2022). How might a generative gaming environment like Minecraft be animated as an educational experience or forum; a digital lab for youth to engage in meaningful discussions about open-ended narratives? Or about multivocality in the form of multiplayer design? About mimesis, as players remix and recreate existing aspects of the digital environment? Another ‘old school’ example of such a teaching tool might be the choose-your-own-adventure book. Typically, young readers have been instructed to pick “the right” path through the tentacular narrative—one that guarantees a “happy ending” (usually to avoid a monster or certain death). But what if the book was presented paralogically as an intersection of simultaneous narratives, all of them possible worlds that exist in different and occasionally conflicting states? How would youth regard their interactions with media differently if they were encouraged to look beyond “right” or “wrong” paths and see them in relation? To see the value in the connections between parallel narratives and recognize how they come together constitutes a larger narrative that also warrants reading and a critical awareness of information architecture.

Down the line, university arts and humanities faculties have a pivotal role to play in exposing young adults to fictocriticism, whether as supplementary or even agonistic texts to the aims of their own coursework. If the function of the fictocritical text is to invent and occupy a paralogical space within a discourse, then fictocriticism can and should be treated as a discursive technology for exploring

when and how historical and cultural narratives fail, or rather fail to account for critical difference, across disciplines. Equally, introducing fictocritical tactics in the classroom encourages students to experiment with language and modes of authorship in a relatively safe space, where difficult conversations around the ethics and intentions of employing fictocritical tactics can be facilitated and moderated by instructors.

To that point, fictocriticism should merit more discussion in university arts and humanities curricula, especially in here in Canada where it originated. Although it would be antithetical to enshrine and institutionalize fictocriticism within the academy as a go-to stylistic convention or canonized “genre” of study, it can again be seen as a productive antagonist to conventional methods and discourses in media studies, literature, and art. Fictocriticism offers paralogical models for doing theory and criticism that speak to a writing-as-research model of research creation.

Mandates for more “practice-based” research are increasingly common among Canadian universities, and competitive institutions would be wise to introduce and explore more examples of what expanded research practice can look like (Chapman & Sawchuk 2012 8). Greater exposure to fictocriticism for students and faculty alike can foster a better shared understanding of what research creation entails and how it can be positioned in complement to traditional forms of writing and academic knowledge production.

There is also the more aesthetic argument that many works of fictocriticism exemplify brave and interesting assemblages of literary forms and techniques, and

that this should warrant greater attention and study in and of itself. And, as I have demonstrated, fictocritical texts are cybertexts, exhibiting a networked logic of arrangement, narratively and aesthetically. Such works are more valuable than ever in media and literary scholarship as object-texts for critical speculation on how principles of cybernetics and protocols of networked communication come to matter and manifest in writing. If the labyrinthine prose of *Ulysses* (1922) is a paragon of plural voices and narratives intersecting in unexpected ways, then certainly the postmodern indeterminacy and experimental form exhibited in the fictocriticism of Brossard, Randolph, Gibbs, Kerr, Jones, Marlatt, Machado, Scott, and many other cybernetically-aroused feminist writers qualifies as equally significant networked literary territory.

Outside of academia (or peripheral to it) feminist activists and feminist artists also have a crucial role to play in disseminating the tactics of fictocriticism and reforming media literacy indirectly by corrupting the status quo and conceptually altering the terms of writing technologies. Like the artists, poets and playwrights who composed the 20<sup>th</sup> century avant-garde, fictocritical cyberfeminists transgress the limits of the current media literacy paradigm by collapsing the distance between (social) life and art, radically reconstituting one in the other. Using the basic features of any prominent social media platform,<sup>116</sup> the feminist activist can assemble a globally distributed protest network of human and non-human actors.

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<sup>116</sup> I define “any prominent social media platform” as any social media platform that has more than one million users and allows basic features of text and image posting, commenting on others’ posts, ‘liking’ or otherwise upvoting content, and being able to ‘tag’ or label and identify circulating content through keywords.

With the same technology, the feminist artist can impersonate themselves in an intellectual critique of mediated gender roles and simultaneously create an online gallery of affect and vulnerability that extends this critique into the spectacular nature of the contemporary art world. The tools do not change, only the intention behind their use. And this axiom is critical to renewed concepts of media literacy in post-Internet times, where socialization, self-authorship, commerce, and entertainment converge in the same surface on the same device in dizzying alternation. Refusals by feminist activists and artists to use networked media, and technology more broadly, in prescribed or established ways, challenge the user-reader-writer-content-creator to reevaluate what aspects of communication are readable, to think more deliberately about legibility in networked communication as well as the fictive properties baked into the designs of digitally networked writing technologies.

Finally, critics—of media, art, literature, culture—have a responsibility to advance society towards a more paralogical media literacy by attempting to better reflect the fictive properties of the texts and objects they study and critique through the tactics and techniques they employ. By utilizing fictocritical tactics to craft paralogical texts of books, artworks, films, etc., critics create textual objects to think with and think through, speculating on the alternatives and possible futures that the object-text evokes. It is a critical approach that is generative rather than deconstructive, attempting to register the embodied experience of the object-text, its subjective and affective dimensions, through mimetic excess and worldbuilding.

I have tried to accomplish this myself in the dissertation through the inclusion of the fictocritical interludes, injecting works of research-creation between traditional forms of academic writing and knowledge-production and making space or building a ‘world’ where the tensions between these modes of knowing and speaking are complementary. As stated in the introduction, the intention of including my own fictocritical writing was twofold; to explore my own theories of fictocritical writing in a practical, process-led manner, and to communicate connections between fictocriticism and cyberfeminism in ways that cannot be expressed through conventional academic writing—poetically, performatively, paralogically. Ultimately, I cannot say whether the interludes are successful. Only the reader will determine that through the connections they make (or do not make) in their own account of reading them. However, as works of research-creation, or more accurately as works of creation-as-research, their purpose is to “extract knowledge” or gain moments of insight into the research subject by materially engaging it (Chapman & Sawchuk 2012 19). Creation-as-research is a “hands-on form of theoretical engagement,” (Ibid. 21) that unfolds in nonlinear pathways through the act of making, uniquely weaving theory and practice into a “situated complexity” (Loveless qtd. in Chapman & Sawchuk 2012 20). As such, I want to take a moment to briefly reflect on what I had hoped to accomplish in each of the fictocritical interludes and how they both enhance and complicate the claims of my central argument.



In “Gremlins,” the most important tactic in play is haunted writing. My aim was to convey the anxieties of accelerating networked technologies without mentioning “technology” and without making obvious references to things like cloud computing or the Internet. Instead, the focus is on myth and paranoia—a gesture to foreshadow how important this concept will become to arguing for a paralogical media literacy. The gremlins that Mr. B. describes in his dialogue with the Doctor are intentionally vague and nebulous, just like the calculations of a black box technology or a technocratic society. The purely dialogical format for the piece is also meant to reinforce a dialectic of “rational” scientific thought, embodied in the voice of the Doctor, with the dialectical montage and poetic language of Mr. B., who evokes, sometimes directly, the writings of Walter Benjamin. Admittedly, choosing to write only dialogue is challenging—it tends to be the weakest part of any writer’s skill set. And accordingly, there is a certain clunkiness to the text that plagues it with a kind of childish amateurism. The format, which is largely that of a short story, also risks diminishing the intellectual and theoretical dimensions as they are overshadowed by letteral space and time spent on character development. However, the clunkiness of the narrative has its benefits in keeping the reader alert and suspicious to its aims and its techniques. The heavy-handedness of the writing in many ways puts the technical dimensions of a narrative tacitly critiquing technology on full display whether in an irritating or illusory fashion.

“Break-and-Enter,” is a more successful work of fictocriticism in its proportion of fictional narrative to theoretical quotations and references. The exhibition of

unheimlich art that it reviews is well-accommodated by concepts from Bachelard's *The Poetics of Space* (1969), which provide the section titles and inspiration for the writerly tone of the piece. In fact, while writing it I was actively aware that I was taking on the voice of Bachelard, which speaks to the multivocality that I argue often arises during acts of fictocritical mimesis. "Break-and-Enter," also benefits from an autobiographical experience of dealing with an actual intruder in the night that happened on the heels of visiting the exhibition. So, the oscillation in the writing between subjective experience of one's home turning unhomey and the details of the artworks and gallery space flowed together fairly easily. This piece also benefitted from several edits before it was published in *Peripheral Review* in January of 2020. Requests from the editor to add in more literal description of the artworks and create a consistent footnoting system to signal when I was referring to specific artworks or artists gives some scaffolding for the reader to recognize and navigate the parallel narratives. And yet, I am not fully convinced of my own positioning of "Break-and-Enter" in the dissertation as an example of medusa writing, which I argue is a textual embodiment of entangled subjectivities. Certainly, the metaphor of trespass that I mention in Chapter 2B is apt within the narrative and the exhibition premise, but how does the piece demonstrate the tentacular thinking that I claim is so central to Haraway's analysis of figures like the Medusa or the Cyborg? There is quite a bit of quotation and stitching-in of other authors and texts, but does this necessarily embody tentacular thinking, or is it

merely literary collage with the aspirations of conveying radically entangled subjectivity?

In that regard, “Cat’s Cradle with Mary Catherine Bateson” comes closer to expressing tentacular thinking, first through the diagrammatic writing that interpolates the text with representations of a language game—an inter- and extradiegetic move that analyzes and deconstructs the text while being positioned within it, in a distributed and embedded fashion. Secondly, “Cat’s Cradle,” better realizes tentacularity by assembling various quotes from Bateson and others into an ostensibly unified voice that does not, like other fictocritical texts, somehow visually differentiate between sources. The result is the portrayal of Bateson as a polyvocal entity that, much like the book itself, expresses an entanglement of different scholarly perspectives. The main intention of the piece was to perform a critical reading of Bateson’s *Our Own Metaphor* (1972) as a graph or visualization of the messiness of the central concepts presented in the book; all ideas originally presented at the conference it documents. But by putting my own ideas of fictocritical cyberfeminism and digital ecology in a fictional dialogue with theories of second-order cybernetics and networked ecologies that Bateson and her colleagues explored in 1968, the value of poetry and poetic devices like analogy and metaphor comes to the fore in transcending these discourses and perceiving them within a total system. I also employ the trope of the string game—in the diagrams as well as in the dialogical format and alternating alignment of the text—to both reference Haraway’s theories of SF and tentacularity and to emphasize the oscillation of

subjective and objective voices underpinning the text. But despite the individual merit of these tactics, I now look back and see that the text suffers from too many ideas in play at the same time and perhaps becomes illegible in parts to the point of incoherence. Though this not necessarily a complete failure as an experiment in fictocritical rhetoric, since, as I have argued extensively, the feminist politics that motivate fictocriticism indeed call for acts of illegibility and incoherence as means of shirking the reader's expectations and establishing a meaning-making space outside patriarchal convention. But, within the context of the dissertation, it could be simplified in form and vocabulary for the sake of clearer connection to ideas in the traditional chapter and subchapter that precede it. For example, if the diagram following the mention of the algae in the lake and "the bottleneck effect" was adapted to show "writing" rather than "agency" in the middle of the matrix spanning "scale" and "usability," then the focus on the writing subject as the tableau or the background to the conversation oscillating between ecology and poetry would presumably make more sense.

"Up On The Toe," is the shortest fictocritical interlude but the most experimental in its multivocality and fragmented layout. This is another piece already published in early 2022 for the online multimedia exhibition *After Progress* (Goldsmiths & *The Sociological Review*), but unlike "Break-and-Enter," the piece did not undergo a formal editing process and remains largely as it was in the first draft. I approached the piece as a textual equivalent of a found-object sculpture in fine art, collecting disparate texts—lyrics from a Björk song about physical

transformation, excerpts from Bernard Stiegler's *Technics & Time* (1998), and lines from the Miyazaki film *Princess Mononoke* (1998)—to juxtapose different voices and narratives about conflicts between nature and technology, or more specifically the myth of technological progress. Because the piece is relatively short, I believe that the extreme use of collage and abrupt shifts in form and tone are better tolerated than in the lengthier prose of a piece like “Cat’s Cradle with Mary Catherine Bateson.” But do such gestures amount to “unbuilding” a body in cyberfeminist terms? This is what the text purports to do, as it follows a lengthy essay on the joint concerns of the fictocritic and the cyberfeminist to challenge the binary and determinate narratives that govern bodies in technological spaces. A short but not glib answer is yes, insofar that the fragmented formulation of the text challenges the reader to hold competing voices and narratives together as they visibly disconnect. But is this primary gesture of the assembled text powerful enough or adequate to getting across the philosophical concerns of cyberfeminist artists like Shu Lea Cheang or fictocritics like myself? The text would seem to need a much more substantial engagement with a narrative of gender and more explicit reference to writers and artists whose work exemplifies a similar brand of politics.

On a personal level, I am most satisfied with the quality of writing in the final fictocritical interlude, “My New Friend, Gillian.” But more importantly, as a matter of creation-as-research, I also gained the most insight from conceiving this piece, because I had to engage in an agonistic relationship with myself and the text. As a multi-layered critique that addresses the ethics of Gillian Wearing’s art practice

and the scopophilia and commodification of trauma in contemporary media, I was pushed to develop a strategy and structure for the piece that could accommodate very specific references to Wearing's oeuvre and yet still allow for less specific and more autopoietic reflections on the primacy of the image and self-distribution in post-Internet media culture. I decided to write from the imagined perspective of one of Wearing's already marginalized subjects to both restore agency to the voice of the participant and also to wear a mask of my own, attempting to embody another identity and perspective through the writing process—ghost writing myself. As I theorized in Chapter 4, ghost writing the self has the potential to transcend the moral and the sentimental to generate a critical empathy through spectacularized experiences—networked, shared experiences. My own lived experience as an openly gay, Jewish youth raised in an evangelically Christian and xenophobic town in the U.S. Midwest in the 1990s will never be equal or proportionate to another subject's narrative, especially racialized subjects. But I can say with confidence that I have been, at several points in my past, an Other to some degree. I know what it feels like to be looked at with hate; what it feels like to be kicked and punched for things I did not choose to be. And I know the value of drag and the celebration of identity construction in queer culture that evocatively proposes all identities are matters of performance. Fictocritical writing in the service of critical empathy exploits this queer sensibility of identity as play, where little by little, through calculated risks—fictocritical tactics—the writing subject can explore alternate narratives and positions through a shared stance of otherness.

In "...Gillian," I construct a fictional narrative around being in the studio with Wearing as she directs me in one of her signature confessional video artworks. Crucially, while I narrate the experience from a first-person perspective, including the process of being on camera, the resulting video is never described, and the confession of the secret, while textually present on the page, is heavily redacted and intentionally indeterminate. This allowed me to inhabit a character that could express all the anxieties and hopes of being involved in an act of spectacular confession without limiting that subject position to a particular event or identifiable video existing in Wearing's catalog. It was a queer animation of a masked figure that I felt could move fluidly between various subject positions of spectacle. What is left for the reader to concentrate on and contemplate then is the phenomenology of the experience and the psychology of (I allege) turning trauma into art. Similarly, I decided to portray Wearing less as the artist herself, foregoing any biographical details, and instead to craft an allegorical figure of the artist in a cynical and technocratic post-Internet mediascape; one who sees all things as potential image-objects to be captured and circulated. To establish different levels of critical commentary, quotations from reviews of Wearing's most recent travelling retrospective serve as titles of the various sections, encapsulating the fictional narrative in the critical observations of others and therefore positioning my own textual intervention as one node among many in an existing ecology of art writing. Quotations from Susan Sontag and Jean Baudrillard on photography and spectacle also enter and interrupt the monologue of the narrator to juxtapose the personal

and public domains that those theorists argue collapse in the making of images. And lastly, I reinforce the circularity and recursion of a post-Internet media mentality later in the piece by injecting excerpts from an essay by Olivier Morel writing on Sontag in relation to her work on image and horror, and then weave these into the first-person narration of the protagonist as sudden revelations about their own condition.

Throughout the process of writing and applying these various tactics, I had to actively grapple with ethical questions of representation. How much detail can be included or omitted to retain a space of indeterminacy large enough to welcome speculation and subjective intervention yet not so big as to render the text wayfaring and unfocused? How could I make strategic decisions about words, phrases, details that would allude to the lived experience of someone else without making it so specific that it excluded various subjective perspectives from entering and occupying that position in the narrative? How could I do so without lifting and appropriating the writing and speech from identities and communities that I am not already engaged with or embedded within? Again, I had to rely on my own queer identity as being based in its own kind of nomadism, moving between poles of masculinity and femininity and building family relations through sovereign association. While these experiences do not allow me to know firsthand what it is to be, for instance, a woman or a person of colour, they grant me insight into the ways that otherness is constructed through patriarchy and then weaponized as ‘fiction’ sitting opposite to the ‘factual’ ethos of the technocapitalist narrative. Of course, I



enter into this territory with some hesitation. White male voices are decreasingly tolerated as interferences in conversations that stretch beyond their lived experiences. And rightly so. However, as a scholar of fictocritical cyberfeminism and someone who seeks to use their research to argue for and empower non-binary and n-ary perspectives, writing “My New Friend, Gillian,” amounted to important autoethnographic work to stretch my understanding of my own otherness, to whatever extent it permits critical empathy.

While writing the piece, one could say I indeed became creatively paranoid—suspicious of natural connections that I was making between words and images. In particular, the connotation of mask as both a disguise and a ceremonial symbol of power complicated and informed how I depicted the confession scene as physically uncomfortable yet almost transcendental. I also spent a great deal of time thinking about interruption and interference as shared semiotic territories of censorship and protest, seemingly containing a contradiction. I sought to structure the piece as a series of interruptions in format and time, and I consciously interrupted my own patterns of thought and language with the voices of other authors through citation and textual collage to draw attention to the artifice of the writing process in direct dialectical relation with Wearing’s artworks.

Such a space of self-reflexive authorship is not possible without actively putting one’s authority in doubt and one’s propriety at risk, even if that means that eventually what one produces is met with ambivalence, even outrage. Undertaking such risk was at the heart of the very first works of fictocriticism as they railed

against the patriarchal impositions of technoscience and academia. That risky impulse is just as valuable today, essential to countering and contravening the technocapitalist narrative as it works to permeate and instrumentalize our increasingly distributed and shared writing space. The fictocritical cyberfeminist must put their identities in jeopardy every time they write in order to preserve a space of doubt and a margin of possibility that can imagine a different cultural narrative for the future of networked communication and technological innovation. As networked technology becomes less discernible from “environment” and “infrastructure,” the risk-embracing fictocritical cyberfeminist has a crucial role to play in aggravating and animating the disappearing lines between these concepts as meaning-making spaces—with indeterminate voices, with complications of the flesh and the psyche, inclusive of intersectional experiences that render the subject open to textual reconstitution. And on the other side of this equation must be a creatively paranoid reader who actively recognizes the fluidity of the media they engage and is prepared to read a text in parallel ways, navigating matters of critical difference at the material, letteral level.

As with many dissertations, the scope of my research exceeds what can be accomplished within the length and technical limits of this document. And perhaps that is ultimately a good thing, as I am confident there is much more research and research-creation to be done in the years ahead. But, in the preceding body of words I have identified and outlined several fascinating lines of inquiry that meaningfully

connect an obscure and understudied mode of writing to expansive and salient discourses. I have shown how the indeterminacy of fictocriticism matters in contemporary discussions of cyberfeminism, of glitch feminism. I have shown how select works of fictocritical writing connect directly to theoretical issues of feminist materialism, of network ecology and the relation of technology to environment. And, of course, I have shown how cybernetic tendencies within fictocriticism overlap with the aims of feminist artists working in networked media as well as more general trends of ghost writing the self on social media platforms. With these fruitful connections in mind, I want to end by generating some key questions that account for what cannot be covered here and will guide and extend this research into the future:

1. How can fictocriticism be more strategically positioned as a feminist theoretical technology within a broader discourse of feminist science and technology studies? I have alluded to some possible avenues, namely feminist ecology, but these avenues are underdeveloped at present.
2. How can fictocriticism or other texts that foster creative paranoia realistically be introduced to a broader public within a hegemonic binary framework of factual and fictional information? Are there already real-world examples where educators or writers themselves are facilitating exposure to fictocritical narratives and fictocritical ways of thinking?
3. And finally, what role does fictocriticism have to play in informing the history and contemporary study of cybernetics and technological innovation? More

specifically, how can fictocritical texts and tactics inform discourses on artificial intelligence and machine-thinking as it applies to language and creative writing?

Within each of the above questions (or assemblages of questions) lies an entire thesis-worth of work; each a promising angle along which to dive headlong into a further investigation of how fictocriticism is happening beyond the printed word in a variety of disciplines and media, and how it can meaningfully interfere in the status quo. But aligning all these potential avenues of research is still a pervading concern with the indeterminate and the ironic wisdom of uncertainty. A concern with the doubtful as a meaningful stance that performs the critical function of the refusal, or the conscious move away from the systems that govern communication and, increasingly, our environment. Fictocritical writing breeds alternative ways of thinking about networked communication. And the study of fictocriticism is the study of tactics that forcibly expand the bounds of networked communication, reframing the act of writing as the simultaneous mapping of geographies, bodies, devices, and discourses. And it is this networked logic of technological engagement that deserves, if not demands, further practical exploration and scholarly attention.

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