DIGITAL POETRY AND THE REMATERIALIZATION OF THE TEXTUAL-HUMAN-MACHINIC BODY

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While it's quite clear that "official verse culture," as it's been called, continues to hold on as the mirror-opposite of the posthuman, the liberal humanist subject (a subject that, to echo Katherine Hayles, sees itself as whole, coherent, and possesses a self, a body, goods), Neil Badmington's work on posthumanism brings home to me a rather obvious point: in many ways this official verse, the poetry that (by in large—there are of course always exceptions) receives the most funding, the most institutionally-sanctioned awards, has the largest audience, is one of the last bastions of humanism. Here's an example: having just moved from Buffalo to Atlanta in August, and eager to get involved again in a poetry community, I decided to go to a poetry reading by three writers—none of whom I had read before, most of whom I had not heard of, none of whom I need to name here. The reading had well over a hundred people in attendance, the vast majority of which were clearly fans of this poetry that espouses, in as clear terms as possible, key tenets of humanism. By 'humanism' I mean it in the sense that Badmington defines it: a "discourse which claims that the figure of 'Man' naturally stands at the centre of things; is entirely distinct from animals, machines, and other nonhuman entities; is absolutely known and knowable to 'himself'...and shares with all other human beings a universal essence" ("Mapping Posthumanism" 1345). Here is an excerpt from a poem that was read by one of the poets that night and one that received a lot of nods of the head and thunderous applause:

> *Resurrection of the body of the beloved,*
> *Which is the world.*
> >*Which is the poem*
> *Of the world, the poem of the body.*

And a few lines later:

> The shape of the Book
> Is dark as death, and every page
> Is lit with hope, glows
> With the light of the vital body.
>
> When I open the Book
> I hear the poets whisper and weep,
> Laugh and lament.

With its metonymic substitution of an unmarked, generalized, and so immaterial body for the world which in turn, as if this wasn't universalizing enough, stands in again as "the poem of the body"; and with its earnest belief in the poet's ability to provide hope and inspiration with tales of laughter and lament in contrast to the deathly, earthbound (and so material) "shape of the Book," nothing could be further from posthumanism or the posthuman. Or I could also say that nothing could be further from the model of the posthuman we *don't* want. Although the excerpt above has nothing whatever to do with the seamless intermeshing of humans and machines, it certainly does read as the problematic version of the posthuman that Hayles wrote against in *How we Became Posthuman* in 1999 and which is still being argued against by scholars such as Joel Dinerstein who described this posthuman in the September 2006 issue of *American Quarterly* as "the dream of bodies of pure potentiality—ones that do not decay..." (588). In fact, such official verse as I just read may point not only to how humanism is alive and well, but it may point to how humanism continues to thrive in the guise of a posthumanism that is just as invested in (what's usually a white male version of) purity, transcendence, immateriality and so on. Badmington makes a similar point in a 2004 essay "Mapping posthumanism;" he writes, "...I do think that [Althusser's] recognition of humanism's longevity is worth remembering today. If, as Fukuyuma's book confirms, anthropocentric thought is still at large, still enjoying a certain degree of credibility, then posthumanism is probably not to be understood as marking or making a clean and clear break from the legacy of humanism." (1349)

In this vein, then, I see digital poetry as continuing a poetic practice of dissent—one that stretches back at least to the early-twentieth century avant-garde and one that seeks to intervene in or upset this persistent model of sameness (whether you call it humanism or anthorpomorphism or posthumanism). This is indeed a posthumanist/posthuman poetry in that, in Nicholas Gane's words, it is perpetually in "a condition of uncertainty," "in which the essences of things is far from clear" (432) and which is firmly grounded if not in the material world, then in an interrogation of the way in which the material world is understood, reconstituted, rematerialized, and re-presented in the digital realm.

Certainly, an emphasis on material conditions of textual production and reception dovetail with the importance of material conditions, material bodies of the posthuman. Mark Poster forcefully makes this point in his essay "The Information Empire" that appeared in a *Comparative Literature Studies* special issue on the posthuman. Here he declares that "there is nothing immaterial about networked digital information systems" and that—mostly importantly, in my mind, for any study of poetry written in our digital era—"only by recognizing the *specificity* of the materiality of new media can one assess the potentials for critique that might be developed around them" (325). This is a

position we know Hayles continues to endorse in her work insofar as she continually emphasizes the ways in which information and its medium are inseparable, simulations and virtual realities have "sophisticated bases in the real world," and the ways in which subjects are embodied in the human-machine interaction.

So, insofar as digital poetry is inherently involved in materiality and processes of rematerialization, I somewhat unusually then understand it to include poetry that has both of these two qualities: 1) it is created using digital technologies and 2) it is self-conscious and/or self-reflexive about its digital medium of creation and representation. I probably don't need to point out out, then, that athough the poem I read to you about "*the body of the beloved, / Which is the world. / Which is the poem Of the world, / the poem of the body*" was probably written on a computer using a word-processing program, it clearly is not self-conscious or self-reflexive about its medium of creation and reception. In fact it seems to be interested in running away from materiality altogether. By contrast, as I continue my thinking on Kenneth Goldsmith's growing oeuvre of conceptual writing, it becomes clear not only that his online work *Fidget* is an exemplary digital poem of the posthuman, but so too is the book-version of *Fidget* along with his other "bookbound" works. A brief introduction to Goldsmith: he is a New York-based poet or, as he's been called, a "conceptual writer." Early works such as his 1993 *73 Poems* are both visual and procedural—*73 Poems*, for example, is a series of 79 visual poems which are related to each other by virtue of layers of text that are carried over, receding from black to grey, from one page to the next, and the text itself, as Geoffrey Young writes in his introduction to the book, consists of "morphemes, words, and phrases" picked "for their endrhyme sound as well as for their number of syllables. On his pages the word or phrase almost always increases in syllables from top to bottom, usually in increments of one" (unpaginated). The bulk of Goldsmith's subsequent work, almost all of which has been transcriptions, is unabashedly *un*visual and conceptual. These are transcriptions of misheard song lyrics (*Head Citations*), of the *New York Times* (*Day*), of every movement his body made over a thirteen hour period (*Fidget*), of everything he said in a given time period (*Soliloquy*), of radio weather reports (*The Weather*) and, the latest, of traffic reports (*Traffic*) which will be followed by sports reports. But just because they're unvisual does not make them less involved in the material conditions of their writing/reading. That is, in his attempts to quantify and concretize "the vast amounts of nutrionless language" via an "idea that becomes a machine" ("Paragraphs on Conceptual Writing" 98) who couldn't help but notice the heft of the 836-page *Day*? or avoid thinking about the hours and days and months of physical labour that went into typing the newspaper into a word-processing program? or be reminded of the obvious: that without the visual markers and coding of the *New York Times*, the newspaper is overwhelmingly incomprehensible (not to mention intensely boring)?

But again: it's not just his engagement with materiality and boundedness to the body that makes his work posthuman. Instead, I think it's the odd way his work, so "of" our present cultural moment, he becomes what Poster calls a "humachine" as he dematerializes language via a digital recording device or computer, mines the data, and rematerializes it again via the book and often back to the computer again as an excerpt from the book. Take his 2005 *The Weather* as an example: like all of his transcription works, this one comes with an explanation or recipe for how the text was created, one that's invariably written by someone other than Goldsmith; in this case, David Antin explains on the back-cover that "starting at the winter solstice, Kenneth Goldsmith by subtle framing has turned a literal transcript of a year's owrth of radio weather reports into a classical narrative of new York's four Seasons." Arranged into sections of winter, spring, summer and fall, the book itself is constructed as a year-long narrative but, with Antin's introduction, the reader is simultanesouly aware of the ongoing narrative of the labour-intensive process that went into listening to radio reports about, for example, the "very intense low...uh, located just south of Jones Beach right now" that's "sliding off to the east, northeast, here as we, uh, go into the evening hours" (3), transcribing these reports, mining them and shaping them into a form suitable for a book.. It's not just that Goldsmith is a computer (in the Renaissance sense of the word), but these conceptual works wouldn't be possible if it weren't for the self-reflexive looping or intertwinement here between the human-author and the medium of the radio, machine, book, and back to the machine again as Goldsmith posts from the book on his website.

So, to close, I want to reiterate that Goldsmith's work stands in as an example of poetry in general in our current cultural moment and it reminds us that we ought to be thinking of this poetry in terms set out for us by theorists of the posthuman—to not do so, we run the risk of either overlooking the obvious (that most of us, most poets are already humachines) as we try to continue literary studies as if it were business as usual or we risk unthinkingly perpetuating a humanist tendency to disregard the medium/materiality (whether human or machine or humachine) of information.

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