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Bodies in E-Lit

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Introduction

In this chapter, we offer a survey of electronic literature (“e-literature” or “e-lit”) that deals with embodiment, corporeality, and body image in aesthetic and material ways. We begin with an examination of e-literature that foregrounds the post-human body as embedded in the cybernetic feedback loop in ways that debunk Cartesian dichotomies of mind/body and human/machine intelligence. We explore body-themed, feminist e-lit in theory and practice, arguing that female-coded bodies have been pitched against patriarchal neoliberalist appearance culture and positioned to challenge reader-players’ normalized expectations of bodily playability in digital media. In this context, we examine feminist encoded hypertextuality as perhaps the most canonical, poststructuralist approach to anti-phallogocentric corporeality in e-lit. We consider works that subvert the “ergodic gaze” (Ensslin et al.) in multimodal ways, rupturing the scopophilic interface and allowing the voyeur to gaze via haptic intrusion. In concluding, we surface some of the ways that postdigital *écriture féminine* has sought to write new languages, spaces, and worlds for women-identified and gender

nonconforming bodies. Expanding on the latter, we map out a new, applied e-lit project (“Writing New Bodies”) that adopts a reader-centric, feminist, participatory co-design process to allow young women-identified and gender nonconforming individuals to write new worlds of digital-born fiction in which they feel at home in their bodies.

Cybersomatics and AI

Cybersomatic works of e-literature expose reader-players’ bodies as both situated and physiologically contingent constituents of the cybertextual feedback loop. They foreground ways that embodied reading may draw readers’ attention to physiological processes that are usually taken for granted and treated as inferior binary counterparts to cognitive processes of decoding and comprehension. Against this critical post-human backdrop, cybersomatic works operationalize machine intelligence in how they expose human reading as only one component of a complex, cybernetic communication system that depends, for its poetic and narrative effects, on the reciprocal response circuits between cognitively embodied human consciousness and machine code. Cybersomatic e-lit thus subverts normalized accommodation processes underlying human-machine interaction in digital mass media like mainstream video games, where technological affordances are readily “adapted to and appropriated into our available repertoire of bodily behaviours and aptitudes” (Dovey and Kennedy 2006: 111).

Kate Pullinger, Stefan Schemat, and babel’s gothic hypermedia mystery, *The Breathing Wall* (2004), for example, exposes readers to the idea of losing control of intention-driven decoding and inferencing for the sake of cybernetically controlled processes of information disclosure (Ensslin, “From (w)reader”). It uses the reader’s respiratory system as the driving force for revealing key referential meaning, or “clues” about the plot. The reader has to breathe into a microphone, triggering a software called Hyper Trans Fiction Matrix to release piecemeal narrative information, depending on the reader’s depth and rate of breathing. Inevitably, readers’ attention is drawn to the impossibility of gaining full control of their breath and to the intrinsic interplay between cortical and subcortical control at play in respiration. Along with other breath-driven digital art such as Lewis LaCook’s *Dirty Milk* and Char Davies’ *Osmose*, *The Breathing Wall* aestheticizes the anatomical and site-specific double-situatedness of the reading body, and the relative uncontrollability of physiologically contingent cognitive processes.

Fast-forward one-and-a-half decades, we find ourselves in the midst of the algorithmic turn in e-literature (Ensslin et al. forthcoming). Bot poetry has become an intrinsic element of contemporary e-literary culture, populating

the web from social media sites such as Twitter to idiosyncratic sites such as Nick Montfort's agglutinative, crowdsourced *Taroko Gorge*. An e-lit work that plays with cybersomatic AI in humorous and thought-provoking ways is Serge Bouchardon's *Storyface* app. "[A] digital creation based on the capture and recognition of facial emotions" (Bouchardon 2018), the app presents a fictional dating site, asking users to project those emotions into the webcam that seem "to characterize him/her the best." By profiling the reader's face, the app suggests an age range and, coupled with standardized emotion(s) captured from the reader's facial expression, proposes profiles of fictional partners. Once the reader has chosen their ideal partner, they can engage in a fictional chat with them under the face recognition algorithm that continues to track the reader's standardized, monolithic, and normalized emotions. Thus, *Storyface* critiques the collectivizing tendencies of state-of-the-art AI and their implications for interactional ethics.

Fragments and Patchworks

From the outset, feminist works of e-literature responded to a call by second-wave feminists (famously Hélène Cixous and Luce Irigaray) that, in the mid-1970s, demanded new, anti-phallogocentric forms of writing. Cixous argued that the truths we subscribe to are man-made and man-biased. In "The Laugh of the Medusa" she urges women to reclaim their bodies and, by extension, their desires and identities through writing. The challenge but also potentially liberatory implication of *écriture féminine* is, according to Cixous, that women's writing, if understood simultaneously as an intervention and as a fleeting concept cannot be reduced to an essence—and this is what makes it relevant for fluid, dynamic, and playful digital as well as postdigital, medium-critical re-encodings.

In e-lit's early years, nonlinear hypertext networks of nodes and links lent themselves to ideas of writing women's bodies via the notion of the fragment that eludes materialization as it constantly deconstructs and reconstructs itself. Metaphors of quilting, weaving, sewing, and patching have proven to be pervasive elements of feminist digital fiction beyond first-generation standalone hypertext. For example, Shelley Jackson's Storyspace hypertext, *Patchwork Girl* (1995), and Christine Wilks' more recent, interactive Flash memoir, *Fitting the Pattern* (2008), engage with motifs of sewing and patching—on a textual and referential level. *Patchwork Girl* has frequently been described as perhaps the most fitting allegory of poststructuralist thought in digital space. Its readers "have to sew [the female monster] together ... to resurrect [her] ... in piecemeal" (graveyard). Jackson's work presents a compelling, cyberfeminist response to Mary Shelley's phallogocentric *ur*-story.

Fitting the Pattern shifts the focus onto the instrumentality and materiality of bodily construction. Wilks' reader-player can choose from a range of dressmaking tools to cut and sew together pieces of cloth as synecdochic backgrounds to autobiographical sketches, allowing the reader to construe elements of Wilks' younger self via ludic interaction. Those sketches, which appear in lexias on pieces of cloth, reveal the protagonist's exposure to the restrictive body ideals of her time, culture, and class, and the overpowering role of her mother in urging her to "fit" those ideals. Similar to the elusive, fleeting persona of the nameless Patchwork Girl, Wilks' former self appears in flux and fragmentation, thus giving rise to questions of self-denial and conflicted identity.

In her Flash fiction *Underbelly* (2010), Wilks takes on the historical theme of women working in British coal mines. She juxtaposes their physical suffering with the physical work of a twenty-first-century Yorkshire sculptor (based on Wilks' sister), who has very different concerns about her body and the prospect of childbirth. They share a concern with earth and stone, and both make a living by carving stone, for mining and artistic expression respectively. The sculptor's voiced over meditations are overwritten by the voices of women working in Victorian collieries, whose static images are shown flitting across the screen as the reader-player clicks their way through animated subterranean images. The women's voices relate the dire conditions in healthcare and maternity support at the time, and their reports are accompanied by uterine and fetal images, indicating affinities of exploitation between women's bodies and Mother Earth. Gaian exploitation is thus doubly encoded in an ecofeminist narrative that, once again, foregrounds the fragment—this time as a token of capitalist-patriarchal exploitation and destruction.

Another way of portraying the body as fragmented concept is through the theme of becoming women via social inscription (Grosz 1994). As body-image scholar Carla Rice explains, "[g]ender is something we become. We become gendered by modifying our bodies and behaviours to match how we feel inside with the messages that we get from outside" (65). This gradual process of bodily modification to meet social expectations is thematized in Juliet Davis' dress-up Flash e-poem, "Pieces of Herself" (2005). Here, the protagonist's "docile body" (Foucault 1995) is literally inscribed by interactive fragments, or icons, of domesticity, in a process that is alleged to help her "find herself." The reader's role is to furnish the outline of a dress-up doll with multicoloured patterns they pick up as they scroll through black-and-white domestic environments. These gamified, "metaphoric acts of inscription ... trigger audio files ranging from music to a biblical pronouncement about the 'proper' socio-cultural function of women" (Borràs et al.), suggesting a multisensory process that occurs on multiple layers of mediation.

Postmedia Bodies, Postfeminism, and the Ergodic Gaze

In our postmedia (Manovich 2014), post-human, postbiological world, bodies are hybrid, malleable, and multiple—they cannot be seen as monolithic, stable entities. Online, we can mold and shape them to meet our innermost desires and address our deepest-felt anxieties. Digital media allows us to stylize our digital bodies as idealized representations of our own narcissism, customizable through on-screen avatars. We can create countless digital bodies and experiment with a diversity of corresponding alter egos. We can enrich our bodies with algorithmic, “post-cybernetic control” mechanisms (Parisi 2004: 105), making them readable and controllable. These mechanisms provide us with greater insight into and awareness of our somatic processes yet simultaneously expose our bodies, mostly unwittingly, to hacking, datafication, and surveillance.

Our on-screen digitalized bodies seem liberated from their actual-world fleshliness. In digital media, we can experiment with our forms and those of others. These refashionings can leave our bodies simultaneously liberated and “alienated from themselves, augmented thanks to technology, modified, reincarnated, multiplied” (Brodesco and Giordano 2017: 11). Thus, our online bodies can enact metaphors of cognitive dissonance and broken relationships with ourselves and others. This phenomenon is reflected poignantly in Serge Bouchardon’s and Vincent Volckaert’s short, episodic Flash fiction, *Loss of Grasp* (2010). The work is a first-person narrative, told by a man who is losing control of his life and relationships. It centers his futile search for control in a variety of screen interactions. In Scene 2, the reader’s mouse-over interactions construct a photographic portrait of the protagonist’s wife from hundreds of miniature questions projected on the black background of the page, thus symbolizing his futile attempts at “revealing” her character and her true opinion of him (Figure 1).

Scene 5 features a metaleptic webcam (Bell 2016) projecting the reader’s body onto the two-dimensional screen. Mousing over the image distorts it to the soundtrack of dissonant music, and the homodiegetic narrator comments, “I feel manipulated,” thus constructing a parallel between the reader’s simulated body and his own.

Despite the seemingly endless possibilities of de- and reconstructing our bodies online, post-human beings ultimately remain ensconced within Foucauldian dispositifs, in the kind of hegemonic power networks that make it near impossible to escape hypermediated toxicity, sexism, anti-fat attitudes, ableism, racism, and other appearance-centered forms of abuse. These phenomena are the side effects of postfeminist appearance culture (Rice 2014; Gill 2007; Riley et al., 2018)—a “culture of contradiction”

FIGURE 1 Screenshot from *Loss of Grasp, Scene 2*.

characterized by the paradoxical neoliberalist synergies of women's societal empowerment, the persistent, feminine "beauty myth," and "the beauty industry's colonization of women's bodies" (Rice 2014: i).

This persistence of the primacy of looking and being looked at (see Riley et al., 2016) has been theorized by media and cultural theorists as "the gaze" (Mulvey). The gaze forms the imagined or material starting point of unequal power relationships. It is seductively malleable and can take on a variety of highly effective manifestations. The Mulvean, binarist male voyeur, which assumes that women are the passive object of the active, male voyeur, has been modulated and augmented throughout the history of visual culture. The "looking relations" (Berger 1972) we adopt as a way of naturalized looking and being looked at are primed by the cultural-hegemonial gazes we are exposed to on a daily basis, through magazine covers, billboard displays, social media "pic culture," and (hyper)sexualized bodies on screen. Among these broader hegemonial gazes are, for example,

the fat-phobic gaze, which semiotically deletes and/or *abjectifies* plus-sized bodies (Rinaldi et al. 2019). The medical and able-bodied gaze pathologizes sick, disabled and otherwise “abnormal,” “unruly” bodies (Rice et al. 2018). In particular, it is targeted at perceived female monstrosities such as menstruating and pregnant bodies (Braidotti). The settler-colonial gaze exposes Black and other racialized bodies as the inferior other, limiting beauty ideals to the Western ideal of whiteness (Nelson). The cisgender gaze exposes transphobic tendencies by objectifying transgender people. The female gaze ambivalently incorporates the shift from an “external, male judging gaze” to an internal “self policing” gaze (Gill, “From Sexual Objectification”: 104). It may represent deeper manipulation, since it invites female audiences to become more adept at scrutinizing their own and other female-coded images (Rice 2014; Riley et al., 2016).

That being said, in all examples of scopophilic visual culture discussed so far, the object of the gaze remains at a mediated distance. The female-coded body consistently figures as an object of imagined penetration yet manifest separation. In body-themed works of e-literature (and other forms of digital-interactive narrative), by contrast, this mediated distance is minimized or seemingly erased by a material, symbolically permeable interface between the body of the voyeur and the body on screen. These medium-specific affordances allow e-lit artists to hold the voyeur accountable for objectifying the target they are manipulating rather than simply observing.

While there are manifold ways in which e-lit has critically engaged with scopophilia, perhaps the most pertinent of these responses is the “ergodic gaze” (Ensslin et al. 2011). In Annie Abrahams’ agency art e-poem, “Ne me touchez pas / Don’t touch me,” the user-activated, ergodic cursor physically enacts the gaze of the beholder. With every touch or click, respectively, these works materialize the reader-player’s insatiable appetite to control the screen and all that it embodies. Reading “Ne me touchez pas” involves mousing over the body of a reclining, scantily dressed woman who is turned away from the camera and buries her head in her pillows to avoid the viewer’s gaze.

The cursor, which Marie-Laure Ryan terms “the representation of the reader’s virtual body in the virtual world” (2006 122), thus represents an “augmented me, ... [which] is ‘you’ and ‘You,’ as the narrator distinguishes us while also drawing us together ... [and making us] feel some liminal and flickering sense of presence through the screen” (Keogh 2018: 3). This idea of “embodiment ... distributed across both sides of the glass” (5) is a phenomenological concept of presence that reflects the mutual incorporation of player and game, of reader and digital-born text. And yet, while, in most video games, it would likely be correct to say, with Keogh, that “as we touch the videogame, it touches us back” (4), this is not the case in “Ne me touchez pas.” The work poignantly implements the despair of the faceless woman’s body on screen that reader-players keep poking mindlessly, without obtaining the expected cybernetic feedback. She does

not want to touch us back: all she wants is to break free from the constraints of the ergodic gaze, a physically and forcefully enacted gaze that is wired into user interfaces with relentless univectorial certainty.

Writing New Languages, Spaces, and Worlds

Cixous' call for newly embodied forms of women's writing, symbolized by "white ink," has been widely read as a request for experimentation with new materialities of writing. In this context, Giovanna di Rosario highlights the works of María Mencía as powerful attempts at developing "a new poetic form of language" (2017 274) that are independent of the conversational conventions of patriarchy. In Mencía's video installation and Flash poem, "Birds Singing Other Birds' Songs" (2001), for example, this new language oscillates elusively between human and animal and manifests as a perpetual "play with letters, sounds, and forms" (Di Rosario 2017: 274) that blend and morph trans-semiotically without enabling the construal of transparent meaning.

Di Rosario further suggests that postdigital, medium-critical *écriture féminine* may involve writing new *spaces*, which offer new possibilities and dimensionalities for linguistic expression and/or break their own constraints for poetic writing. In Christine Wilks' and Andy Campbell's Unity-based, immersive 3D fiction *Inkubus*, for example, the reader-player navigates the interior of a human body. Not unlike in a first-person shooter, the player-character can hit inimical units. Yet these units of opposition are fragments of appearance-based cyberbullying, which move towards the camera eye and can be shot with a fireball, thus re-appropriating and detouring phallic mechanics.

Yet postmedia also means participatory culture, and to break free from postfeminist constraints, the need arises for readers from a variety of backgrounds to become co-creators in works that may help them envisage new worlds in which they might feel at home in their bodies. To address this need, the "Writing New Bodies" project (Ensslin et al. forthcoming) has employed participant research to explore how a research-creation project might help young woman-identified and gender nonconforming individuals open up paths for envisioning new body worlds through digital fiction—a type of e-lit that foregrounds playable narrativity in medium-specific ways.

Working with bibliotherapy experts, WNB is seeking to understand how digital fictions can be used as a body-image intervention. The project is a collaboration between digital media scholars, gender and the body theorists, critical psychologists, and award-winning digital writer, artist, and game developer, Christine Wilks. Through workshop collaboration and creative autofictional writing exercises on paper and online (using Twine), participants raised and discussed thematic, narrative, semiotic, and ludic design ideas informing the development of the WNB digital fiction.

Qualitative analysis of workshop transcripts, Twine creations, and written narratives in MAXQDA generated fifty distinct body-image themes, only some of which can be highlighted here. For example, participants grappled with the duality of consciousness and difficulty in breaking out of, and resisting, binary thought. The mirror surfaced as a symbol embodying all external and internal pressure and judgment. Further, there was an acknowledgment of complex, ambiguous, or nuanced experiences with one's body. Participants recognized a theme of looping or a cycle (similar to yo-yo-dieting) from which it is difficult to escape. Participants discussed their desire to be content with these moments which drew conflicting responses in themselves. Finally, they spoke of a longing to embrace the transformative potential of "the gaze" or locating space for the nonbinary gaze.

The WNB co-designers shared a desire for an intervention that could rupture the usual restrictive, binary ways in which we come to understand our bodies. The envisioned digital fiction, or literary game, will open up novel pathways and unleash new ways of knowing and being with the body. Ultimately, an applied work of digital fiction must em-body—in the sense of enabling embodied imaginaries of ontological repositionings in an intersectional variety of reader-players—a challenge that applied electronic literature is only beginning to tackle, yet that opens up new opportunities for transdisciplinary collaboration and community co-authorship.

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