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Special Issue **Representational and Literary Futures:** **American Writing in the New Millennium**

Guest edited by
Tatiani G. Rapatzikou and Arthur Redding

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Representational and Literary Futures: American Writing in the New Millennium

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This special issue, appearing at the very end of the first decade of the 21st century, considers the trends that have emerged in American literary production by thematically focusing on the exploration of the printed and digital intersection. While the essays contained herein examine varying works and develop distinct perspectives, each aims to evaluate what comes next for American writing: what new beginnings—if any—or new trends are emerging from the intertwining of the current global, cultural, economic, and political scene with writing technologies, and how are print and digital media being variously reconfigured?

In the introduction to the volume of essays entitled *American Fiction of the 1990s* (2008), Jay Prosser speaks of the diverse body of writing that appeared between the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 and the terror attacks of September 11, 2001. One of the essays in Prosser's volume, however, does deal with the status of American literary production by looking at the way writers in the 1990s and after responded to postmodern aesthetics. Stephen J. Burn comments on the metafictional quality of postmodern writing, arguing that it 'draws the reader's attention outside the book, to recognize the way [our] own life story is constructed ... escap[ing] the narcissistic inward spiral of self-referring fiction [to] represent one of the most important articulations of what might be called post-postmodernism, a genuine illustration of how the techniques of post-modern fiction could be redirected toward alternate ends'.¹ Metafiction and, specifically, historical metafiction characterizes much of post World War II writings in their attempt to challenge both story telling practices and the narrative structure. By moving beyond the official documentation and singular objectivity of History, metafiction enables writers to question the way historical facts are represented, narrated, and recorded, thereby, putting into question the materiality of the text itself and paving the path to the incorporation of multiple other 'textualities'. Linda Hutcheon in *The Politics of Postmodernism* (1989) characteristically writes that 'postmodern fiction does not [...] disconnect

itself from history or the world [... It] contests the conventionality and unacknowledged ideology of that assumption [...] and asks readers to question the processes by which we represent ourselves and our world'.² What this means is that literature, in metafictional terms, becomes 'the medium for transmitting other forms of information',³ thus allowing readers to access the 'collaborative foundations'⁴ of writing itself or, in other words, the "tangential" material that a piece of writing relies on, draws upon, relates to or is produced by.

With the introduction of electronic and online technologies in the late 1980s and 90s, the procedural connection that existed between textual production and literary experimentation has gradually led to a slowly forged awareness of how electronic and print media can work together. N. Katherine Hayles notes in *Electronic Literature* (2008) that '[s]o essential is digitality to contemporary processes of composition, storage, and production that print should properly be considered a particular form of output for digital files rather than a medium separate from digital instantiation'.⁵ What this suggests is that innovation rests not in the technological apparatuses themselves but in the opportunities these offer for various expositions and representations of the narrative material in a fully interactive (rather than merely simulated) manner, revealing thus the re-generative ability of the media involved. Neil Frestat and Elizabeth Bermann Loizeaux in their study *Reimagining Textuality* (2002) talk about the emergence of 'the poetics of the book', which refers to 'the material and linguistic elements of a book [...] seen as interacting under the horizon of its production, transmission, and reception'.⁶ Thus, what matters here is the way in which words in a literary text move by going beyond their own wordiness so as to embrace or engage with other types of visualization, setting up a far more intricate and multi-faceted web of information. W.J.T. Mitchell in *Picture Theory* (1994) underlined quite early the interweaving character of material production or information representation by saying that 'writing, in its physical, graphic form, is an inseparable suturing of the visual and the verbal, the "imagetext" incarnate'.⁷ So what is delineated is the re-inventive, heterogeneous and expansive character of textuality, something which, in different ways, is highlighted by the essays included in the present special issue.

The debate surrounding the future of print has been resurrected by the digital reading technologies (Kindle and iPad)⁸ that have flooded the book market. What has developed is an interdependence between mediums as well as between these mediums and their users. This

relationship is not one of dominance but of co-development and co-evolution on the basis of how the differences and similarities between these two mediums challenge the perception of the users and, hence, how the perception or attitude of the users towards them shapes the make-up of the mediums both aesthetically and structurally. 'The difference between a culture of reading and a culture of spectatorship, for instance, is not *only* a formal issue [...]; it has implications for the very forms that sociability and subjectivity take, for the kinds of individuals and institutions formed by a culture',⁹ Mitchell claims. This stipulates that one needs to look a little bit beyond the mere print vs. digital controversy, which is not where the scholarly concern of the papers in this issue lies. The concentration on the print-digital interaction actually suggests various possibilities about how information, either visual or verbal, can be 'read', evaluated, represented and circulated as has already been stated. Mitchell notes that this is 'not a return to naïve mimesis, copy or correspondence [...] theories of representation [....] It is rather a postlinguistic, postsemiotic rediscovery of the picture as a complex interplay between visibility, apparatus, institutions, discourse, bodies, and figurality'.¹⁰

In 'Resisting Extinction: The Pictorial in Contemporary American Literature', Danuta Fjellestad situates her argument in the realization that contemporary narratives prompt us to do more than merely look at or read through a printed page, since attention should now be paid not to the conventionally-looking typed text but to its paratextual (or marginal) visual components. This brings to mind the avant-garde experiments of a number of American poets since the 1950s who attempted to create a much more expansive public space where their innovative pieces could be accessed and disseminated. Their 'heightened anxiety over how to define a public space for experimental poetry, to move beyond a small circle of fellow poets to a community of readers for those experiments'¹¹ underscores their interest in redefining reading practice. This was achieved by challenging textual aesthetics as to the way a typographically experimental text interacted with other more linguistically-accessible and variously-formatted texts or circulated within a much more expansive community of readers.

This vanguard trend is somehow echoed in the contemporary concerns about the novel—but with a twist. The para-textual material one finds in a book edition today does not emerge from the need to fill in the gaps that language disjunctures create in the narrative, but rather from the need to re-vitalize the medium itself, in other words, from the book's

own material properties. Alexander Starre's piece, "'Little Heavy Papery Beautiful Things': McSweeney's and the Rejuvenation of the Print Medium in the USA", discusses the metamedial character of literary journal production. With text emerging from any corner of McSweeney's journal issues in the form, for example, of fold-out pictures, small print close to the volume spine, and faded borderlines, the self-referentiality of McSweeney's publishing endeavour shifts from mere language concerns or language games to the materiality of the medium itself. Following up from what has already been suggested about contemporary metafictionality, it is worth highlighting the passage from language instabilities (the decoding of reality) to medium reconfigurations (the decoding of their material properties).

What this leads us to is the following two literary developments the essays in this issue uncover: meta-materiality—a fascination, or even a fetish one might claim, of the tangible, the sensual, the pictorial, and the physical—and the over-saturation of the public sphere with micro-narrative. In Starre's case, the 'rejuvenation of print' could be seen as delightfully and sensually material, while for Fjellstad, pictorial pleasure and the poaching of literature on icons marks a paradigm shift. Although they both insist on materiality and sensual pleasures, they provide very different readings of the relations of those things to the digital and new media. Pronouncements about the decline or the death of the novel have been audible for nearly a century now; perhaps what most needs accounting for is the curious survival and mutability of what is, after all, largely an 18th century cultural technology. Even so, many of the indispensable inventions of that era—from bifocals to the U.S. constitution—persist, albeit in a highly altered form. While a discourse of crisis does not always appear to be satisfactory, one might consider at the very least that perceived crises—social or technological—can be culturally generative. For example, if there is still surprisingly little American fiction that addresses the 9/11 events in specific detail—Jonathan Safran Foer's *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close* (2005), Don DeLillo's *Falling Man* (2007), and Joseph O'Neill's *Netherland* (2008) stand as exemplary exceptions—American writing more broadly unavoidably dramatized our inescapable meditation on the fate and suffering of 'bodies', either physical, textual, or digital.

There is indeed little evidence that sensual pleasures and indulgences have ever dislodged social commitments to critical meditation, despite a tradition of thought that places them as opposed, a tradition whose variants run at least from Immanuel Kant to Roland Barthes. Hayles,

perhaps the dominant thinker of new materialism, assures us of the rootedness of print, even if we increasingly conceive of those roots as parasitical or rhizomatic. In her study, *My Mother Was A Computer* (2005), Hayles does take a step beyond media singularities or single media domination. The fact that 'print readers relish all the more the media-specific effects of books precisely because they no longer take them for granted'¹² leads to the realization that print and digitality are no longer in opposition or in isolation with one another but entangled with human interaction insofar as they are received and interpreted. By introducing the term 'intermediation', Hayles focuses on 'the spirit of multiple causality in emphasizing interactions between media'¹³ in addition to interactions between media and the human subject, in an attempt to shed light on a 'synergistic dynamic that allows emergences to occur across many levels of complexity'.¹⁴ This may only be to admit what would seem an obvious Derridean point: that the written word, from the day Gutenberg invented 'distance-learning', has been revolutionary from the get-go, that print is the most unstable, mutable, and mercurial of cultural technologies in the many ways it interacts with the human subject and gives vent to constant re-configurations of its material form. One of the earliest critical meditations on electronic writing, George P. Landow's *Hypertext: The Convergence of Contemporary Critical Theory and Technology* (1992), after all, put forth the argument that what characterized both post-structuralism and hypertexts was a participatory, open-ended, and interactive reflectivity: '[W]e must abandon conceptual systems founded upon ideas of center, margin, hierarchy, and linearity and replace them with one of multilinearity, nodes, links, and networks'.¹⁵ The question that now arises is this: where has the dynamic endurance of the physical taken us since the 1990s?

In Philip Leonard's essay, "'Without return. Without place": Rewriting the Book and the Nation in *Only Revolutions*', the physicality of print translates into a physical experience of expansive narrative consciousness and spatiality that constantly reconfigures itself both textually and digitally. As a result, the two principal characters in Mark Z. Danielewski's *Only Revolutions* (2006), Hailey and Sam, do not simply mirror one another, but, as the narrative evolves, become engaged in a process of on-going deterritorialization and reterritorialization which contests any print-bound limitations. Leonard highlights the emergence of a 'chiral' or 'assymetrical' textuality where the two characters' storylines do not simply reflect or superimpose upon one another, but are driven by an auto-poetic force functioning both

singularly and synthetically. This echoes Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari's argument in *A Thousand Plateaus* (1987) that automata and bodies share the ability to assemble and reassemble themselves since they are driven by the desire not to cohere, but to reassemble involuntarily into new configurations. In the case of Danielewski's novel, this can be understood by the way the book is typographically arranged, with each storyline independently commencing at opposite ends and gradually coalescing or intertwining with one another, creating a double helix effect. This kind of digitally-manipulated design endows book materiality with physical properties making it resemble a living organism caught up into an on-going process of evolution and expansion.

This kind of re-conceptualization of the book 'space' and 'physical existence' endows the narrative with a placing, replacing and displacing dynamic which Leonard interprets as 'translocationality'. To questions occurring nowadays —'What ever happened to multi-culturalism or to globalization?'; 'Has the celebratory or triumphal impulse that motivated some of the political and social thinking during the 1990s (from Francis Fukuyama to Anthony Kwame Appiah) proved to be misconceived?'— Danielewski's book provides a slightly different response. It actually situates the global and the cosmopolitan within the instability of the national itself, since the narrative, although located in the U.S., is nothing more than a collage of *intra*-national and *intra*-temporal histories, accounts of past and present events co-appearing in reversed order and different font sizes alongside the 'main' narrative line. In this way, the printed page takes on global dimensions, making every piece of information appearing on it part of a narrative which not only evolves but also adapts to and transforms according to the information contained in it. This information in turn feeds back into the narrative system and interacts with the readers, who also become part of such a textual globality. As a result, the printing mechanism not only communicates various sources of information to us the readers but prompts us to become part of it, 'weav[ing] together the embodied materialities of diverse life forms [so as] to create richly complex distributed cognitions',¹⁶ as Hayles would claim.

The development thus of a 'polysemic' narrative is what Cristina Iuli examines in her essay, 'Playing with Codes: Steve Tomasula's *Vas, an Opera in Flatland*'. In particular, her interest lies in the multi-cognitive content of Tomasula's narrative in an attempt to point towards the codified nature of language which is presented here as a diversified system of communication that goes beyond but at the same time

interacts with speech and writing patterns. Hence, Tomasula's book introduces readers to such different types (digital, genetic, musical and alphabetical) of code, which transform the book into a database containing intricate information strands that interrelate and blend with one another. Iuli argues that such an emphasis on coding highlights the post-humanist perspective that Tomasula introduces in this novel by presenting code as both a machinic and a human characteristic. In this way, he confronts the reader with a transgenic narrative whose layered-code make up (DNA, speech/sound, writing) can be rewritten and transmuted. Similarly to a living organism, the book acquires a life of its own, due to the multiple correlations that develop amongst the various codes it contains. What matters now is not the kind of messages verbal codes carry forward but the changes that occur when multiple code systems intersect or interact with each other. In this case, the human-like characters that one encounters in Tomasula's book constitute the outcome of a code-modification process leading to the emergence of a post- or trans-human consciousness.

However, this modification process is carried out inside as well as outside the body as it may be affected by the unforeseen, unexpected or contingent events that constitute reality. Rodica Mihaila in 'Falling Man Tropes and the New Cycle of Vision in the Recent American Novel' focuses on the examination of Jonathan Safran Foer's *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close* (2005), John Updike's *Terrorist* (2006), Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* (2006) and Don DeLillo's *Falling Man* (2007) in an attempt to highlight the kind of vision that each one of these texts brings forward in relation to the status of human consciousness and western civilization immediately after the 9/11 events. Having emerged as reactions to this moment of crisis, these novels have responded to the need to present the unrepresentable and articulate the inarticulate by forging a 'language' which is in constant tension because of the various and shifting socio-political, cultural, technological and ethical forces triggered by such an event. Jerome Klinkowitz and Patricia B. Wallace claim that the 'writing in a time of terror began during the first hijacking, as passengers on the doomed plane made cell-phone calls and sent text messages'.¹⁷ So, this leads to the following questions: Is human consciousness and fate intertwined with narrative? What happens when the unspeakable is digitally captured and transmitted? In the texts mentioned above, human consciousness appears to be a constructed, mediated, acted upon, contested and faltering marker. However, the falling-man trope Mihaila resorts to in her essay is stripped of any redemptive qualities. As it moves through various textual

mediums and modes of representation—photographic documents, racially infused discourse, revisionist myths and post-apocalyptic scenarios—this trope becomes indicative of the re-mediated and inter-mediated status of human consciousness, all reconfigured by the narrative strategies employed in each novel as well as by the ways these novels interact with each other. What these texts make the readers aware of is that, at the intersection of speech and writing acts with digitization, they function, according to Hayles's views on 'intermediation', as 'mediating interfaces connecting humans with the intelligent machines that are our collaborators in making, storing, and transmitting informational processes and objects'.¹⁸ In a post 9/11 world, various systems of narration, either media- or textually-based, are caught up into an on-going process of co-development and reconfiguration that pushes the readers to the limits of speech as well as beyond it.

This argument brings us back full circle to the beginning of this introductory piece: the metafictional value of contemporary writing is now positioned not in the text itself but in the multiple other 'textualities' within which it is entangled. In all the essays that feature in this special issue, printed textuality is either commented on, questioned, re-assessed or re-invented, but never abandoned, even if its material status makes it look standardized. The fear of losing the ability to speak or the inability to speak about real life events, which resulted from the terrorist attacks in 2001 in the U.S., has paved a distinct path for the emergence of new trends in contemporary writing. Hayles notes that "What we make" and "what (we think) we are" coevolve together; emergence can operate as an ethical dynamic as well as a technological one. Realization arrives not in an instant but in successive cycles of awareness, each building on what came before'.¹⁹ As a result, the boundaries of materiality are crossed without being discarded, while digitality, either in being visually or verbally manifested, comes to enhance human communication as well as human consciousness by leading to various and open conceptualizations that built on what already existed. In our world, both objects and subjects are equally dominators of and dominated by external reality. They are equally influenced by the changes occurring around them and they are both recipients and transmitters of information. The ability to store and disseminate knowledge affects the way they respond to events, involving them both into a process of confluence and convergence. The 9/11 events highlight the moment when 'intelligent machines', to use Hayles' phrasing, captured the feelings of the traumatized subjects so as

to transmit it to other subjects, who in their turn recorded their reactions with the help of other intelligent machines initiating both a chain reaction as well as a feedback loop effect. It is in this dynamic and complex cross-referencing of practices, mediums and subjectivities that the re-resourceful capacity of contemporary novel writing resides.²⁰

Tatiani G. Rapatzikou is Assistant Professor in the Department of American Literature and Culture at the School of English of the Aristotle University of Thessaloniki, Greece. She is the author of *Gothic Motifs in the Fiction of William Gibson* (Editions Rodopi, 2004), editor of *Anglo-American Perceptions of Hellenism* (Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2007) and *American Poetry in Greece* (Hellenic Association for American Studies, 2006) as well as co-editor of the 2008 special issue of *GRAMMA: Journal of Theory and Criticism* with the title Revisiting Crisis/Reflecting on Conflict: American Literary Interpretations from World War II to Ground Zero and of a series of articles on the topic of the American culture-industry of image-making for the *European Journal of American Culture* in 2005. She collaborated with Penguin Classics for the 2003 edition of *Edgar Allan Poe: The Fall of the House of Usher and Other Writings*. Her current research interests focus on print/digital convergence.

Currently Chair of the English Department at York University in Toronto, **Art Redding** is the author of *Raids on Human Consciousness: Writing, Anarchism, and Violence* (South Carolina, 1998), *Turncoats, Traitors, and Fellow Travelers: Culture and Politics of the Early Cold War* (Mississippi, 2008) and the forthcoming *Haints: American Ghosts, Millennial Passions, and Contemporary Gothic Fictions* (Alabama 2011).

Notes

- 1 Stephen J. Burn, 'The End of Postmodernism', in *American Fiction of the 1990s: Reflections of History and Culture*, ed. Jay Prosser (London: Routledge, 2008), p. 230.
- 2 Linda Hutcheon, *The Politics of Postmodernism* (London: Routledge, 1989), p. 53.
- 3 Burn, 'The End of Postmodernism', p. 228.
- 4 Burn, 'The End of Postmodernism', p. 229.

- 5 N. Katherine Hayles, *Electronic Literature: New Horizons for the Literary* (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 2008), p. 159.
- 6 Neil Frestat and Elizabeth Bermann Loizeaux, *Reimagining Textuality: Textual Studies in the Late Age of Print* (Madison, Wisconsin: University of Wisconsin Press, 2002), pp. 5-6.
- 7 W.J.T. Mitchell, *Picture Theory: Essays on Verbal and Visual Representation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), p. 95.
- 8 It's quite interesting at this point to consider the case of the new Toshiba dual screen PC which 'folds like a book', as the title of a June 21st, 2010, article in *Wired* suggests. Priya Ganapati writes: 'Perhaps most interesting: Toshiba is promising to deliver e-reader software that will make the Libretto into an e-book reader, capable of showing full two-page spreads with one page on the left and one on the right — much like those paper books you might still have lying around'. Priya Ganapati, 'Toshiba Dual Screen PC Folds Like a Book', *Wired* (21 June 2010), <http://www.wired.com/gadgetlab/2010/06/toshiba-dual-screen-pc/#ixzz13qJZLD9X> [Accessed 10 December 2010].
- 9 Mitchell, *Picture Theory*, p. 3.
- 10 Mitchell, *Picture Theory*, p. 16.
- 11 Susan Vanderborg, *Paratextual Communities: American Avant-Garde Poetry Since 1950s* (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 2001), p. 18.
- 12 N. Katherine Hayles, *My Mother Was A Computer: Digital Subjects and Literary Texts* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2005), p. 32.
- 13 Hayles, *My Mother Was A Computer*, p. 33.
- 14 Hayles, *My Mother Was A Computer*, p. 36.
- 15 George P. Landow, *Hypertext: The Convergence of Contemporary Critical Theory and Technology* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992), pp. 2-3.
- 16 Hayles, *My Mother Was A Computer*, p. 213.
- 17 Jerome Klinkowitz and Patricia B. Wallace, 'Writing in a Time of Terror: September 11, 2001' in *The Norton Anthology of American Literature*, Vol. E, 7th ed., ed. by Klinkowitz and Wallace (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2007), p. 3205.
- 18 Hayles, *My Mother Was A Computer*, p. 33.
- 19 Hayles, *My Mother Was A Computer*, p. 243.
- 20 We would like to thank Jared Morrow, Ph.D candidate in English, at York University, Canada, for his invaluable editorial assistance.