

ELECTRONIC POETICS ASSAY
Diaspora, Silliness and ?Gender?

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Until I received an e-mail from Loss Pequeño Glazier asking me if I had anything to say about gender and e-poetry for a *Cybertext Yearbook* issue on “ergodic” (“difficult,” “writerly”) poetry, I’ve resisted entering the world of electronic poetry criticism despite a seemingly good fit between me and the subject.¹ Over the last six years I’ve gotten involved, through collaborating with poet and publisher mIEKAL aND, with the world of electronic, Web-based, mostly hypertext poetry. I’ve been to conferences and festivals, and our work (notably *Literature Nation*, *eros/ion*, “Erosive Media/A Rose E-missive,” and “Semetrix”) has been shown, mostly through aND’s entrepreneurial spirit and Web renown, in exhibits around the world. So one might reasonably assume I had some interest in the theorizing the subject, which is also a subfield within a hot new field currently known as “new media studies.” The reason for my resistance must be less obvious to all but me. My engagement has been not as a theorist nor even as a fully immersed practitioner at the level of the medium – aND is the techno-wizard and design genius – but more as a sort of participant/observer, fellow-traveler – a platonic groupie, an anthropologist semi-wistful but not quite willing to “go native,” a permanent apprentice – at this point I’m thinking GENDERGENDER as an obvious if subtextual category to characterize this list of characterizations. And in fact, our relationship has been quite gendered in traditional ways; he was the techno-wizard who can learn any system in no time, while I did the fluffy, lyrically fragmented writing (though he writes, too, his style is decidedly less baroque and more “experimental” than mine) and the pretty photography that he then defamiliarizes with groovy programs and an equally groovy confidence in his know-how. This writing has been a source of

energy, enjoyment and expansion, and I have not held it to any critical standards nor taken any initiative in seeking publication opportunities, as aND has posted our work on his Web site which is housed at my institution.²

Insofar as dealing with the realm of digital poetics critically is concerned, there has seemed to me to be no social urgency, no acute need for my advocacy in the field, as there is for the kind of micro-poetries, populist verse, marginalization or extreme eccentricity, the pathos of which has heretofore commanded my attention and labors. Advocacy for “ergodic” digital poetry as opposed to argotic poetry would be a mere plea for recognition for a usually overlooked subfield within poetics, rather than an intervention related to larger issues of social justice, or even the many theoretical offshoots from the post-1968 era that have come into play around those issues: post-colonialism, gender and sexuality theory, ethno-racial studies. In fact, it may be worth questioning what the investment or collective interest is, embedded in the term “ergodic,” in maintaining a distinctly modernist division between an “avant-garde” or “writerly” text/aesthetic and the plethora of other possibilities that take advantage of this new, quintessentially postmodern medium. The e-poets I know in the “experimental” world – that is, those who write the sort of work that seems to carry over from the print-(or visual -art, or musical) avant-garde to the digital medium – seem by and large to be a happy lot. In fact much of the work – like Jim Andrews’s “Nio,” with its swinging a capella soundtrack, or Komninos Zervos’s several works with their cartoonish, childlike playfulness – conveys a sense of freedom and even joy, perhaps a sort of rejoicing at being (virtually) freed from the body, like the exuberance of participants at gravity-defying thrill-rides at carnival midways. Even works that don’t exhibit the same kind of exuberant happiness – and I’m thinking here of, for example, Brian Kim Stefans’s beautifully unruffled “The Dream-life of Letters,” John Cayley’s pastoral riffs on Wang Wei, or Reiner Strasser’s many globally conscious projects – have a kind of serenity born of aesthetic certainty, a self-contained sequential orderliness that elicits admiration of a closed object, although there is plenty of movement *inside* the objects. Not the kind of messiness that signals lack, longing or desperation, and towards which I feel critically drawn.

Perhaps I found the messiness and anxiety lacking because when I arrived in the e-poetry world I was already pretty well jacked in to a situation of institutional privilege and security myself (well, let’s not exaggerate: a tenured position at a second-rung land-grant research universi-

ty), with little serious sense of material struggle from which position to empathize with the tattered fringes of the scene. Perhaps it was because, other than with mIEKAL's deliberately tenuous and dramatically alternative lifestyle at Dreamtime Village, an anarchist community in rural Wisconsin, my only firsthand contact with e-poets was at the E-Poetry 2001 Conference/Festival, a wonderfully expansive international symposium dominated by lovingkindness and goodwill to all, with an explicit caveat against "quoting Adorno," a prohibition, as I took it, against cultural pessimism as well as against the cultural cachet acquired by dropping the pessimist's name. The internationalism of the conference was an opportunity for utopian celebration of mutual recognition, a chance to join in on "hey baby, they're singing our song" or "we are the (unacknowledged legislators of the) world," rather than an opportunity for identifying and tracking differences born of different material and political circumstances – an analytic perspective that had been part of my intellectual training and generational hard-wiring. Where's the cultural studies, the materialist angle? Simply celebrating the much-vaunted "access" enabled by the Web – the opportunities for instant publication, the short-circuiting of the protracted "vetting" system of print publication – didn't seem sufficient intellectually or politically to compel my thinkerly energies, especially since so many others had made similar points years ago, and with more eloquence and conviction than I could muster. Also, quite simply, I have been reluctant to contaminate my little ludic space, my ergodic garden, with the professional concerns of meeting rigorous analytic or critical standards. But contamination is the point; thinking aloud about the circumstances of my own production, for example, as well as that of the writers whose work I like to study, becomes a form of materiality here.

Why hadn't I seen it before? Considerations of performativity, diaspora, fragmentation, identity and access, all issues that preoccupy me, are central to Internet poetics. The messy, broken aesthetic, the lyric-gone-awry that Nathaniel Mackey calls an aesthetic of "discrepant engagement" in a series of critical essays that examine "dissonance, cross-culturality and experimental writing," is not alien to Web art, and is not inherently uncongenial to the medium that many experience as sterile and hypermediated (Mackey 1994). In fact, much work on the Web derives its power precisely from explicitly working the boundaries of what we consider organic/inorganic, from the Australian artist Mez's use of "code" (or protocol) punctuation to convey linguistic/ affective/bodily brokenness to

mIEKAL aND's explicit concern with networking between the worlds of "permaculture" and "hypermedia" (neologisms that help to convey the utopian ambition of integrating the botanical and the wired, the premodern and the postmodern). That Mez's work is knotted, self-interruptive and challenging while aND's is multisensory and expansive (see, for example, *Seed Sign* and *Flora Spirae*) suggests that there are innumerable ways to foreground, theorize and embody in Webwork the issues of nature/technology, body/machine, organicity/inorganicity, life/death, and other such binary oppositions.

In what follows, however, I will approach these issues obliquely, from an angle not usually found in considerations of either engagé critique or cyberpoetry: that of the inanity and foolishness to be found in certain throw-away texts. Why fill up the pages of *The Cybertext Yearbook* with analyses of the spontaneous, intentionally ephemeral poetic detritus that follows when I could spend my time enshrining serious work in this contribution to developing a "secondary literature on electronic poetics"? Because it is messy, hit-and-run, proliferative work that creates a texture, a discursive thickness, a culture, out of and against which any e-canon (or, in Talan Memmott's more apt phrase, "provisional shortlist") emerges and derives its significance.³ Attending to the subcultural textures, the "white noise" or the ongoing processes (processes of both development and devolution of language and meaning) of a literary locus – what I call "poetic activity" rather than "poetry" per se – reveals its values, its sociality, its – to use a phrase from a bygone political and cultural era – "relevance" to everyday life. So, in addressing e-poetic culture, I'm decisively not trying to establish an alternative canon but rather to attend to writing *processes*, and to writing that embodies a "space-taking" or "world-making" post-literary vision.

Diaspora

The aesthetic of "wrongness," which has preoccupied me in several studies of what others would consider doggerel as well as of work that bears traces of disintegration of some kind – that of, for instance, Hannah Weiner, Bob Kaufman, John Weiners – can be found even in as high tech and sophisticated a medium as Web poetry. All of the many, sometimes contradictory characteristics enumerated above (no one could possibly, for

instance, term Mackey's work "doggerel," and he might argue that the latter category of verse acquires its lowly status precisely through its clumsy attempts at "rightness") are particularly apposite in discussions of Alan Sondheim's work. Sondheim, who comes from the (post-punk/Fluxus) avant-garde art and music world of 1970s New York City, has taken issues of process to heart so deeply that each time he presents at a conference or reading is a spontaneous, one-of-a-kind performance: he displays videos and photographs, and plays soundtracks accompanied by his live typing response along the bottom of the computer screen. Often there are four things to look at simultaneously – more than one of them is moving – as well as a compelling sound component that drives the piece rhythmically. Mastery and dissolution are both on overwhelming display, a frenetic dispersion of letters, words, images, sounds. The performance is both abject (much of the work involves ludicrous and/or disturbing nudity in kind of self-parodic exhibitionism, syntagmatic fragmentation or other indices of a failure of communication; much of the thematics of the text-in-process is Kristevan, psychoanalytic, confessional, preoccupied with polymorphous perversity, etc.) and perfect (the performances always seem to hang together aesthetically as well as narratively or theoretically – whichever mode is appropriate to the given piece and, in spite of the sensory overload, they always last exactly as long as they're supposed to for any given venue). These live performances are hypnotic; unstoppable semio-sacred garbage pours across the screen, or pulsates in several overlapping frames, like tarot cards come to exhilarating but terrifying life in a dance that predicts the sublimity of failure, the excess of absence, the abundance of loss. Sondheim's embrace of all info-human detritus and debris mandates a sense of unfinishedness; though it is not celebratory in theme, its endless generativity and scattering suggests some kind of diaspora-machine, swirling out material with a hangdog-humorous, Beckettian persistence in the face of the impossible. Sondheim dwells in impossibility, which is the same realm as Dickinson's eerily indeterminable possibility.

My first exposure to Sondheim's work was through the Poetics Listserv, to which I was introduced by the poet Charles Bernstein in 1995. The list, despite the limitations endemic to that form, opened a world to me, of experimental, "avant-garde" poets, poetry and poetics. Sondheim was an obsessive writer and a compulsive poster of his work to the list and I found the verbo-emotional flotsam and jetsam of his effluvia captivating in their twisted simplicity; a theoretical and emotional acuteness clearly

underlay even the most accessible or (deliberately) clumsy text. One of my early favorites, from 1996 or 1997, which I later included in a book of writing exercises for children (Franco & Damon 2000), used the simple device of “search and replace,” and an equally minimal lexical range, to defamiliarize the all-too-familiar experience of the “roller-coaster relationship”:

Wath You

A do love you. A don't hate you. A don't lake you at all. A don't love you. A hate you. A lake you a bat. A lake you a lattle bat. A lake you a lot. A lake you a tany lattle bat. A lake you. A love you a lot. A love you so much. A love you so very much. A love you. A really do love you. A really don't hate you. A really don't lake you at all. A really don't love you. A really hate you. A really lake you a lot. A really lake you. A really love you a lot. A really love you so very much. A really love you. A really really do love you. A really really don't hate you. A really really don't lake you at all. A really really don't love you. A really really hate you. A really really love you. A sort of lake you. A'm an love wath you. A'm not an love wath you. A'm really an love wath you. A'm really not an love wath you. A'm really really an love wath you. A'm really really not an love wath you. A'm so much an love wath you.

Much more recently (7/7/02), the following very typical piece came over the screen as I was laboring with this essay (I should point out, in case it is not clear yet, that I am choosing very simple examples from a body of complex work):

From: Alan Sondheim <sondheim@panix.com>
Subject: # my leaky sieve ##
To: POETICS@LISTSERV.ACSU.BUFFALO.EDU

my leaky sieve

drwx - s - x lrwxrwxrwx drwxr-xr-x drwx - S - -rw ---- -rw ----
-rwxrwxrwx -rw ---- -rw ---- drwx ---- -rw-r - r - -rw ----
-rw ---- -rw ---- -rw-rw-r - -rw ---- -rwxrwxrwx -rwx - x - x
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-rw ---- -rw ---- -rw ---- -rw ---- -rw ---- -rw ----
-rw ---- -rw-r-r- -rw ---- drwx-s-x-rw ---- -rw-r-r-
-rw ---- -rw-r-r- -rw ---- -rwx ---- -rw ---- -rw-rw-rw-
-rwxrwxrwx-rw ---- -rw ---- -rw ---- -rw ---- -rw ----
-rw ---- -rw ---- drwx-s-x-rw-r-r- -rw ---- drwx-s-x
drwx-s-x-rwxrwxrwx-rw ---- drwx ---- drwx-s-x drwx-s-x
drwx-s-x-rw ---- drwx ---- -rw ---- -rw --r- -rw-rw-r-
-rw-rw-r- -rw ---- -rwxr-xr-x drwxr-xr-x-rw ---- -rw ----
-rw-r-r- -rw-rw-r- -rw ---- # my leaky sieve ##
i never stole anything i once ran away from a dying animal i once
had sex with a minor i once thought i was going crazy i once
tried to kill myself with iodine i once was a coward i once killed
a mouse i once insulted someone i never raped anyone i once insulted
anyone i once touched someone i once abandoned someone i once
slapped anyone i never hit anyone i once was a coward i never killed
anyone i once ran over a cat i never hit a deer i once killed a
raccoon i never stole anything i once was rude i once was fired i
once failed a course i once was shameful i once had an accident i
once wasn't driving i once abandoned someone i once was responsible
i once was beaten i once had jaundice i once was ill
106817160311111211111111111111121111111211111111121
111111121111111111111111121172112322121111121111
# my leaky sieve ##

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Recognizable here again, as in “Wath You,” through repetition-with-the-occasional-slip-up, is both excess and minimalism, accessibility and impenetrability. A sharply restricted vocabulary and series of simple declarative sentences pull the piece in one direction, while the lack of punctuation (an old trick in the modernist poetry world) creates a headlong rush, the weird lapses in normative idiomatic use, and above all the unintelligible frame of letters, dashes and numbers pull it in the opposite direction. The combination of formulaic confession (“i once”), defensiveness (“i never”), repetition, serious and comic elements, terror and tongue-in-cheek, hyperverbalism and non-idiomatic phrases (“i once slapped anyone”) and the words’ emergence from and then total total breakdown into letters, dashes and numbers – all point to a survivalist mode of expressive culture I associate with diaspora and particularly the more outré permutations of diasporic language style (think Lenny Bruce, Gertrude Stein, the Marx Brothers, Franz Kafka, Franketienne, Nathaniel Mackey, or even James Brown’s vocables). It has been hypothesized in recently emergent disciplines (post-

colonial theory, postnational studies) that diaspora, far from designating the condition of one or two stigmatized and displaced groups (Jews, Armenians), has come since the decolonizing era of the 1960s to typify the postmodern condition; though far from normative in the world of representation, which still favors the “traditional American family” and the ethno-racial, linguistic, and monocultural stasis the phrase euphemizes, diaspora is becoming the experiential and/or demographic norm rather than the exception, in spite of the violent backlash of nationalist posturings. So the genre of e-poetry, both because of its medium (work is set adrift with often no clear origin or destination, and travels rhizomatically rather than in a fixed telos or predicable trajectory) and because of poetry’s designated role as laboratory where the micro-effects of subjectivity in discourse can be experimented on and through the manipulation of language, could be explored as a key to contemporary diasporic consciousness.

Sondheim has been posting several of these fragments a day for many years, dispersed and published in this ad hoc way, to a community of poets and electronic media artists on several different listservs, some of whose members sometimes beg for respite and campaign against his “intellectual diarrhea” only to elicit exhortations from the rest of us to continue, continue, keep on going on though you can’t go on. Most recently, and in response partially to “# my leaky sieve #” as well as other poems, the usual “I hate Sondheim”/“I love Sondheim” debates on the Poetics List took a curious turn. Though some of the attacks were very imaginative and entertaining (for example, John Tranter’s anagrammatic “Insane old ham. (Denials? Oh man!),” one pro-Sondheimite exhorted poets to be each others’ “best friends,” and challenged the membership of the list, some of whom had accused Sondheim of being a bandwidth hog who monopolized the list as a form of self-publication, to post their own poems. One by one poets whose work we had never seen started to share their work; some lurkers came out of hiding, and well-known poets joined in with brand new work. Thus Sondheim’s steadily prolific work and his commitment to sharing it, far from deluging and drowning others (“help!” was the subject line for the anti-Sonheimers’ pleas), became a catalytic agent for a new phase in this community’s ongoing formation. On a list usually more devoted to theory/“poetics” than praxis/“poetry,” the border between the two, the permeability of which had been the topic of an unusually thoughtful and high-quality discussion a week or so earlier, became a hybrid space in practice as well as theory.

My own experience of reading “# my leaky sieve #” was that the word “once” became utterly defamiliarized, so that eventually I was pronouncing it “awnce” each time I read it and thinking that the word I wunce knew as “once” must really be spelled “wunce” (anti-Sondheimites on the list-servs would no doubt propose “wince” as the proper cognate) or that this must be a typo on Sondheim’s part for the word “ounce,” but that wouldn’t make any sense, except that “ounce” does have a feline referent and he does mention running over a cat. In short, my life-long intimacy with simple words (“once upon a time” being the classic hardwired narrative cue for many of us) – their meanings, their spellings, their relationship to other simple words in the way they form simple statements – is completely undermined in the space of one longish stanza-paragraph. Ever since my youth I had had as a goal to “transcend language,” without even exactly knowing what that could mean. Sex and drugs seemed the most popular means to this end at the time (1960s-1970s), but they were all too easily recuperable into rather banal narratives. Paradoxically, “poetry” seemed far more effective than either of these. The experience of reading Sondheim’s work or witnessing him in performance comes as close as any means I know to “transcend language.” Disoriented, I am extrojected from my point of origin – Zion, homeland in my head, goodbye! – and set adrift across a globe spinning with its own refuse surrounding it at close range like a three-dimensional halo – we outcasts are the aura of our world, its atmosphere in the limbo where gravity does and does not claim us; we are consumed so it can live, we must be replenished for our and its survival. We’re out of control, spinning around like this, like the letters and numbers themselves (are we byproducts of someone’s compulsive creativity?) we’ve “gone over the edge,” we’ve “gone beyond the point of no return” – diaspora as hysterical silliness (about which more anon), the dissolution of knowns and norms, syntax and semantics, their trace the shadows we evoke for safety, our talisman words, our rickety bulrush baskets in which we spin down the river of abandon, styx, Nile or liffy. Our leaky sieves, our verbal coracles, take us from one exile to another.

What more can be said about the gibberish at the outset of the poem, letter-clusters separated by Dickinsonian dashes? Are these instances of the semiotic, written language’s most basic units (letters and punctuation) stammering and conglomerating, separating and sizzling? In fact, though one can read the piece successfully this way, further discussion of “# my leaky sieve #” on the poetics list revealed that these were in fact meaning-

ful within the context of computer programming. Jerrold Shiroma explains to a skeptic that

basically, any perl script on the Web must have certain permissions assigned to it by the owner of the script (i.e., the webmaster, programmer, site admin, etc.) ... each script has different permissions granted to the user, group, & world...with these permissions being “read” (the “r” in the above text ... allowing the permission to access the script), “write” (the “w”...granting the permission to write, or alter, the script), & “execute” (the “x” ... granting the permission to run the script) ... where alan mentions that there are too many “777”s means that there are too many instances where the permission to write to the script are granted to everyone...

In addition, the numbers represent numerical values given to each permission script⁴. So Sondheim is using computer code, commands usually suppressed in the final text, in this case known as “permissions,” as an explicit part of his piece. And the piece is about “permission” – what is permitted and what is not, what one is permitted to say and what should remain unsaid, control over knowledge, information and speech.

In short, the piece is legible and garbled (what is opaque nonsense to some is transparent to others), accessible and “coded,” manic and controlled, a compound of “natural language” and computer code, a confession and a disavowal, a gesture of intimacy and of distance, of shame and of self-assertion. While this could be said about many texts that are not e-poetry (and I suggested some of them above; I could add Kathy Acker’s *Blood and Guts in High School* and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s more “confessional” essays), these two examples from Alan Sondheim’s sprawling oeuvre specifically use Web technology – in the first case, a simple word-processing, editorial command to “search” and “replace;” in the second, an incorporation of command language itself into the poem to create a sort of hybrid language that gestures at intelligibility, framing the intelligible but disturbing “natural language” text. While some of my colleagues and students have an initial resistance to electronic poetry because they imagine it must be soul-less, sterile and based on special effects and gimmicks, I would argue that quite a bit of affect and even feeling can accrue to expressions in this medium – one can bond with anything, after all, and part of the pathos of Sondheim’s work is that its tenor, its means of production, its form and its content – i.e. its general vibe – embodies this desperate openness to which nothing (post)human is alien.

Looking at these “bleeding texts” (the phrase is Mez’s) against the backdrop of collective history, E-poetry could be considered diasporized language at its most ethereal, at its most mobile and rootless. It is “rootless cosmopolitanism” – Stalin’s term for Jewishness – dis/embodied. Much of the most interesting e-poetry features mutating, swarming, or dancing (“winking,” one critic puts it) letters (see Stefans’s “Dreamlife of Letters” and mIEKAL aND’s “After Emmett”), morphing fonts and language made both visible and sonic beyond what we usually think of as “orality” and “literary,” “verbivocovisual” in ways beyond what Joyce, arguably a diasporic subject, could have imagined. My decision to finally address this theme is not meant to exalt e-poetry as the apogée of deracinated *poiesis*, but rather, as I have suggested, because it is the latest of my own exposure to the post-literary world. It’s my personal experience of outer space, the ultimate diaspora-to-be, as Sun Ra and William Burroughs have indicated – “natural” home to the queer, the distorted and dissonant, the parasites (*viri* in the most creative sense of the word) of the planet; the misfits, the whackos – despite its also being, of course, the next frontier for the weapons industry and the military.

The Internet, itself originated by the military intelligence complex, has become a temporary autonomous zone (the term coined by Peter Lamborn Wilson aka Hakim Bey) for anarchism of many types, commercial predators as well as aesthetic rebels. There’s no point in celebrating a utopian vision of freedom – certainly not at this time in U.S. history, when our civil liberties are under erasure in the government’s vast juggernaut sweeps in the name of “homeland security”; the electronic media are positioned to serve as a primary means for this disenfranchisement. But nonetheless, there is a wonderment in the fantasy of both intimacy and distance offered by the medium, and in the virtuality – the non-materiality – of the sound sculptures that words become under the manipulations of e-poets.

Silliness

The phenomenon of the silliness of these Sondheim bits and other e-poetry texts deserves further exploration, because silliness’s proximity to horror (through hysteria and hyperrealism – gee, hasn’t that last word gone out of style) and its wisdom about horror may have something to teach us

about surviving postmodernity with grace. Silliness is not quite hysteria, doesn't have its ominous edge, but is nonetheless a somewhat "ungrounded" experience, a relatively pleasant symptom of anxiety, tension, disturbance. Etymologically, "silly" derives from a word meaning "empty" – a descriptor that has repeatedly been associated with postmodernity and a postmodern aesthetic. While the blankness of postmodern emptiness is not quite identical to silly light-headedness, there is a sufficient overlap and continuity in the experience of dissociation that these permutations can illuminate rather than cancel each other out. The over-the-top hysteria of, say, some of Acker's routines in *Blood and Guts in High School* is both comical in its adolescent excess and horrific in its subject matter (treating, among other things, ambiguously metaphoric father-daughter incest, sexual slavery, and cervical cancer contracted through sexual abuse). One can process this material as a reader, I think, only by seeing the text as an instance of the hyperreal, a cartoonishly funny exaggeration intended to dramatize the degree to which female sexuality is oppressed, repressed, and mangled in U.S. society.

I don't want to overstate the relationship between catastrophe and silliness, but certainly, trauma, play, and experimental writing are closely connected. The Oulipo (Workshop for Potential Literature) writers, particularly Georges Perec, obsessively created writing exercises using constraints (like Canadian poet Christian Bök's recent "novel," *Eunoia*, which uses only one of the vowels, but all the consonants, in each chapter) or substitutions (like Sondheim's "Wath You"), found structures to contain and represent a surplus of shock, sorrow and loss from World War II, often with hilarious results. (Perec's famous novel *La Disparition*, written entirely without the letter "e," a mainstay in the French language, concerns a mysterious but unspecified disappearance; in his early teens during the War, Perec came home one day to find his entire family missing forever, and this shattered the focus he thought he needed in order to achieve his youthful ambition of becoming a great novelist in the Dostoyevskian sense; constraints and exercises proved to be the only way he could re-enter the world of writing). While hardly as directly or primally traumatic in its genealogy, post-war U.S. poetry has been seen (as has much of global post-war culture) as a reaction to the shocks of the atom bomb and the concentration camps, combined with the hyper-aggressive domestic anti-Communist purges in the 1950s (which successfully, if temporarily, depoliticized literary culture), and racial oppression or ethnic cleansings of all

kinds. The more “experimental” of those poetries – Beat, Black Mountain, Black Arts Movement and other emancipation-oriented movements, women’s poetry, the New York School – embodied responses to these upheavals in fiercely “trivial” (New York School), fragmented (Black Mountain), ragingly confessional and countercultural (Beat), and, later, overtly politicized vernacular (ethnoracial liberation movements) poetries, all of which foregrounded the values of spontaneity, collaboration, and anti-academicism. One could speculate similarly on the cataclysmic effect of World War I on European poetry and the rise of Dada, Surrealism, and a host of lesser known experimental endeavors.

A small listserv called Flarf, devoted to the aesthetic of goofiness and comprising younger poets mostly in New York City but also in California, started in the summer of 2001, but has reached new heights of activity and intensity in the wake of 9/11. (Would it “ruin it” to add to this description that the members of Flarf are also “serious” poets who publish a variety of work, all of which fits into the rubric of the “avant-garde” or “progressive”? By which, in the US context, is meant New York School, Black Mountain, and the like, as described above.) While Sondheim’s ongoing project quite obviously works the border between humor and terror, Flarf, though considerably more firmly committed to silliness, can be seen to thrive in a performatively post-traumatic space of resilience and ingenuity. After a brief hiatus directly following the September 11 attack on the World Trade Center, one member of Flarf, who was also posting long and harrowing accounts to another list about his day working in Manhattan and walking home through human dust with thousands of others, posted this parody of Anne Waldman’s 1973 poem on universal womanhood, “Fast-Speaking Woman”:

Fast-posting Flarfy

I am a scared and pissed off Flarfy!

I am a post-traumatic stress Flarfy!

I am a gritting my teeth in my sleep Flarfy!

I am a waving several flags at once Flarfy!

I am a trying to remember the words to God Bless America Flarfy!

I am an unable to sing the national anthem Flarfy!

I am a retaliating in ever-widening circles Flarfy!

I am a gas-mask and antibiotics buying Flarfy!

I am a suddenly blurting out hateful things in public without realizing it Flarfy!

In terms of its reliance on Web or electronic media, Flarf draws most heavily on the language of search engines, as well as the content of successful or failed searches, set-up options (“Signature. Include a set quantity of X at the end of every message. You can include your contact information, favorite OOOHHHHHHH YEAH BAY-BEE! or anything you want in your FELINE TELEPHONY. Lick on Options and then on Signature to find out more”), spam (“THIS IS NOT A GET-RICH-QUICK SCHEME! Remember- you can sleep with Ostrichs made of remote controlled sailboats to get to the top if this doesn’t pan out! ... If you remember that time in the car, on the way home from seeing the doctor, and getting so incredibly angry, yelling at your mother and telling her that you hated her then YOUR FINANCIAL PAST DOES NOT HAVE TO BE YOUR FINANCIAL FUTURE!”), teen chatrooms (“Maybe you should go to the crocodile forum here. My grammar is fine maybe you should work on getting a life. Maybe you should have said elimination diet didn’t work for you. Screw you and screw him...”), and other mass-cultural Web annoyances. While Sondheim foregrounds the suppressed matter of programming “meaningful” content, Flarf focuses on the in-your-face everyday garbage we have to wade through in this putatively sped-up and disembodied communicative medium. It uses these, the detritus of hypermediated culture, as the material for specifically, but ridiculously, literary genres: primarily plays and poems, though sometimes also in mass-cultural forms like mock news articles (“The SBPTX Flarf Index dropped three percent today, as real-life grim wackiness continued to outpace google-derived transitional objects for flavoricious fluffy-luv.”). Sometimes, too, a serious cause for alarm is signaled by a comically worded subject line: the recent subject heading “fuuuuuuck” gave us a Web site for an article headlined: “New Tests Confirm Acrylamide in American Foods: Snack Chips, French Fries Show Highest Levels Of Known Carcinogen.”

Recently this poem was distributed to the Flarf list:

SESTINA

Your search – “I hate blow jobs” – did not match any documents.
Your search – “I hate Stonehenge” – did not match any documents.
Your search – “I hate monitor lizards” – did not match any documents.
Your search – “I hate Tender Vittles” – did not match any documents.
Your search – “I hate Boethius” – did not match any documents.

Your search – “I hate vasectomies” – did not match any documents.
Your search – “I hate US imperialism” – did not match any documents.
Your search – “I hate al-Qaeda” – did not match any documents.
Your search – “I hate Jacques Derrida” – did not match any documents.
Your search – “I hate Bessie Smith” – did not match any documents.
Your search – “I hate tuna melts” – did not match any documents.
Your search – “I hate lymph glands” – did not match any documents.
Your search – “I hate UNICEF” – did not match any documents.
Your search – “I hate cholera” – did not match any documents.
Your search – “I hate kamut” – did not match any documents.
Your search – “I hate uranium” – did not match any documents.
Your search – “I hate narwhals” – did not match any documents.
Your search – “I hate Pernod” – did not match any documents.
Your search – “I hate Modigliani” – did not match any documents.
Your search – “I hate turds” – did not match any documents.
Your search – “I hate Arthur Conan Doyle” – did not match any documents.
Your search – “I hate the Little River Band” – did not match any documents.
Your search – “I hate independent clauses” – did not match any documents.
Your search – “I hate Pinochle” – did not match any documents.
Your search – “I hate Kenya” – did not match any documents.
Your search – “I hate laboratory mice” – did not match any documents.
Your search – “I hate transistors” – did not match any documents.
Your search – “I hate projectile vomiting” – did not match any documents.
Your search – “I hate bok choy” – did not match any documents.
Your search – “I hate eternal rest” – did not match any documents.
Your search – “I hate vellum” – did not match any documents.
Your search – “I hate windshields” – did not match any documents.
Your search – “I hate Pebble Beach” – did not match any documents.
Your search – “I hate Cthulhu” – did not match any documents.
Your search – “I hate feminine protection” – did not match any documents.
Your search – “I hate Mao Tse Tung” – did not match any documents.
Your search – “I hate Hawaiians” – did not match any documents.
Your search – “I hate Hawaii Five-O” – did not match any documents.
Your search – “I hate Hawaiian weed” – did not match any documents.

'Nuff said? The effect here combines male adolescent – that most performative of all life stages – humor (smart, juvenile, scatological, misanthropic but politically progressive to the degree that it's political at all – think *Simpsons*) with poetic talent. Thus Flarf's delightful and ridiculous ephemera is dominated, though not entirely, by manic thirty-somethingish men who clearly delight in assuming younger personae for the purpose of posting. Again, think Monty Python, Firesign Theatre, Lenny Bruce, Robin Williams, Matt Groening, the early days of Saturday Night Live. In a verbal competition distantly related to the street-sparring insult game of the dozens (more juvenile, less mother-oriented and more scatological, indulging in a greater display of formal education), the Flarfies egg each other on, riffing off of each others' newly achieved heights of silliness, sometimes complimenting a particularly successful flarf with the single-word post: "Dude." The responding post (from Gary Sullivan) to the above (by K. Silem "Kasey" Mohammad) was the following:

WHAT I BELIEVE

Searched the web for "I believe in deodorant". Results 1.
Searched the web for "I believe in George W. Bush". Results 2.
Searched the web for "I believe in population control". Results 4.
Searched the web for "I believe in dinosaurs". Results 6.
Searched the web for "I believe in social darwinism". Results about 7.
Searched the web for "I believe in marxism". Results about 11.
...
Searched the web for "I believe in shopping". Results about 15.
...
Searched the web for "I believe in literature". Results about 19.
...
Searched the web for "I believe in recycling". Results about 137.
Searched the web for "I believe in rock n roll". Results about 142.
Searched the web for "I believe in art". Results about 164.
...
Searched the web for "I believe in being honest". Results about 359.
Searched the web for "I believe in less". Results about 405.
Searched the web for "I believe in the death penalty". Results about 418.
Searched the web for "I believe in more". Results about 436.
...
Searched the web for "I believe in evolution". Results about 844.

Searched the web for “I believe in love at first sight”. Results about 888.

Searched the web for “I believe in America”. Results about 1,070.

Searched the web for “I believe in ghosts”. Results 1,160.

Searched the web for “I believe in everything”. Results about 1,200.

Searched the web for “I believe in santa claus”. Results about 1,270.

Searched the web for “I believe in nothing”. Results about 1,420.

Searched the web for “I believe in love”. Results about 18,300.

Searched the web for “I believe in God”. Results 38,100.

In the world of Flarf, silliness is raised to the level of an aesthetic, and at the same time it is obviously a form of abjection, a dramatic departure from the self-contained dignity of either the “real man” or “real poetry,” but recuperable through its display of superior intelligence. This manifestation of self-indulgent, masculine hysteria, inviting, participatory, and collective, serves as a salutary counter-experience to the masculine hysteria of militarism. At the same time, it has to be distinguished, I think, from feminine hysteria, which is covert and isolated; it is much more difficult for a woman to perform hysteria and/or silliness in public, the social opprobrium far more severe. With certain exceptions (Lucille Ball comes to mind), female silliness isn’t funny. (I will return to the gender issue vis à vis Flarf in a moment). Typical themes for improvisation on Flarf are squids, chimps, neologisms like “spork,” “words that are always funny” (snood, wimple, chimp, panties), top ten imaginary hits or bestselling books, sex with Britney Spears, poetry and poetics. In order to handle the amount of material coming in, some members of the list have created special silly addresses: joe flarf writes from flarf@hotmail.com, Flarfety Flarf Flarf from toomuchflarf@hotmail.com; a third, Sir Flarfalot, posts from flarfalot@hotmail.com (explaining, “I like to flarfalot.”). There is a sense of in-group, collaborative competition; guys racing to find and post the URL to the weirdest site on the Web. Though individual posts are single-authored, the point is not the individual posts, or – god forbid – Authorship, but the thick texture of inanity that accrues to provide a gloriously anarchic parallel narrative to the working day. As (the very funny) Charles Bernstein has pointed out, “[the comedic] collapses into a more destabilizing field of pathos, the ludicrous, shtick, sarcasm; a multidimensional textual field that is congenitally unable to maintain an evenness of surface tension or a flatness of affect.” (1992; 220) The “manic pace of life” and the “mechanized routine” of postmodernity become the “manic routine” –

in the sense of “wild shtick” – of the comic, and the polar tyrannies of flat affect and catastrophic disaster are mediated by hilarity; fragmentation of contemporary life is mediated here by e-mediated collaboration. In this sense hilarity is always a shared process – one needs, optimally, an engaged and participatory audience that is equally active as creative force. With some exceptions, comedy is better non-solo, as the concept of the “troupe” or the “team” conveys; Groucho just wasn’t as funny when he went out on his own. Even the solo comic – Lenny Bruce, let’s say – relies on a kind of in-joke ness, or cult following, for his/her power – the essence of the “hip comic” is specialness, some degree – though not absolute – of esotericism. Again, the group experiments of Oulipo, the Surrealists and Dadaists, and of New York City’s St. Mark’s Church Poetry Project Workshops, come to mind as arenas in which poets keep their work *en procès*, not necessarily intended for publication. Flarf did consider some forms of publication – the stupidest possible: a print collection idea was proposed and then abandoned, and a Flarf reading at a café in Brooklyn reportedly erupted into a foodfight, a kind of schoolboy spoof on, for instance, a Bukowskian bucket-of-blood barroom brawl style poetics, or a sophomoric counterpart to the fistfight over aesthetics that broke out at a Russian poetry festival reported on at length some years ago on the Poetics list.

?Gendergender?

The Web has been heralded as a realm of anonymity and hence freedom for artists, entrepreneurs, consumers and socializers; if no one knows who you “really are,” went the line, you can’t be discriminated against. You can even pretend to be someone else and by the time your “real identity” is revealed, you will have gotten what you wanted: publication, bandwidth, product, intimacy. However, while there is much collaboration in Web poetry, and also a great deal of female artistry (Mez, Geniwaite, Christy Sheffield Sanford, for example) and many brilliant “new media” critics who are women (Rita Raley, Katherine Parrish, Wendy Chun, Liz Kotz, etc.), there does not seem to be as much female-female editorial or creative collaborative work as there is either in the print world (Hejinian/Scalapino, Hejinian/Harryman, Spahr/Osman, Mayer/Brown/xx) or among men, or male-female collaborations (like my own with aND), in e-poetry. Come to think of it, there aren’t very many all female comedy troupes or teams.

With specific regard to Flarf, female Flarfies post, though not as often as men and in fewer numbers. In fact, only one female flarf is a regular poster (and until she changed her nom de flarf from Flarfety Flarf Flarf to Flarfette Jones, her gender was not clear to me); her flarf is especially aggressive in its bawdy humor, including the magnificent “The Sausage: an Essay,” its companion piece “The Banana: an Essay,” and a somewhat menacing piece rendered from the results of Google searches for “kiss my...” + “scissors,” which earned the praise, “Now *that’s* flarf,” from a male colleague. These pieces are especially focused and tough, with no sentimentality discernable, unlike, say, Sullivan’s death-of-a-favorite-pet jag right before September 11, 2002. Flarfette Jones’s pieces, sexually themed though they be, do not engage “women’s” issues, or even gender issues more broadly (unless one could characterize a phallic or occasional castration theme as such) but do participate in the general adolescent bawdiness of Flarf, though, “or perhaps this is just my personal reading,” with the occasional extra edge of anger (the scissors, for example). These pieces resonate with Acker’s work, though they are also for the most part funnier; while Acker has some brilliant comic moments, her social critique overshadows those moments, while in Flarfette’s work, the reverse is the case.

The only other recent female poster of flarf does not participate in the sustained manic abandon of her male counterparts (my own attempted flarf is so lame, in addition to near-non-existent, that it would be better analyzed in the context of disability studies than here). Nada Gordon recently posted a series of “v imp” sonnets (“very important,” in e-talk; also evokes a vampish imp, an impish vamp, a virtual sprite...). When I asked her permission to include one in my section on Flarf, she immediately qualified her consent. Though posted to the Flarf list, the series is, according to Gordon, intended for conventional print publication and was generated in a notebook rather than online – indeed, she doesn’t consider them “flarf per se” though they are to some degree “silly,” by which she intends reference to another etymological ancestor – “happy.” She writes:

Not that these are happy poems; it’s just that they strain for a kind of levity in a context that clamors for anxiety at every turn... Which is not to say flarf poems don’t have anxiety at their core – they are simply less transparent, more effective defense mechanisms than are these “very important” sonnets. The sonnets are “very important” because they aren’t, of course. And because they are, in the vicious private way that poetry is important in the social organiza-

tion of the contemporary USA whose official dictum is that poets are either irrelevant buffoons or spewers of irrelevant pabulum. The sonnets *are* parodic, at times, but – unlike pure flarf, which takes as its satiric object all of creation – mostly of *literature*, in a characteristic wrestling bout with literary “problems” (as if there were nothing more truly urgent to address in these gloomy times)...

The difference she points to, the stakes of her endeavor, are immediately obvious when one reads the sonnets. What silliness there is self-parodic; a woman committed to struggling with literary problems has to sillify them in a disarmingly, if mildly, self-disparaging way. To be too serious about being a smart woman leads to the same social opprobrium as to be too silly or hysterical; but Gordon is too serious (or is it, in John Cayley’s felicitous coinage, “sillious”?)⁵ about literature as an activity to sacrifice anything by dissembling either her seriousness or her playfulness. In fact, the series thematizes, among other things, the specifically gendered nature of her literary struggles. NB each sonnet has a v imp title: “Vaudeville Improvisation,” “Vaguely Impudent,” and so forth:

v imp sonnet 1:

Vaudeville Improvisation

Wild fauns create chaos

in the romantic-repressive moss!

Where pulses! found in seething birds!

loose their girliness onto paratactic rock!

Kakemono! O Kantacky! What color is (c)lover?!

Roll me over in the burdock and the Indian buckwheat!

Roll me over in the plantain and the chickweed!

Your melting flesh is too-too solid,

your enigma putative as tungsten rose!

Hey, whoa! There’s the cat that ate my gnostic suit!

I hold these truths (!) to be self-evident,

though some restrictions apply!

Look out, here comes the me(te)rmaid:

keep your hands on your chant!

Though it shares characteristics with both Sondheim’s work and other Flarf, this series is far less concerned with using the e-medium for anything but distribution among friends. My own observations from the periphery of the e-poetry world, as a chick fellow traveler, reveal a rich engagement of women Web poets and critic/theorists, possibly somewhat

fewer than men but numerous and accomplished nonetheless, some of whom explore specific gender issues obliquely or directly. Not a very insightful or incisive comment, but as it turns out, gender has taken a back seat, so to speak, to diaspora and silliness here as thematized matters. I have no doubt, though, that readers will see a subtext if they so desire, and they are welcome to.

Conclassay

Much of my energies here have been spent showing a continuity between classic vanguard poetic movements and what is happening now in the world of e-poetry, or “digital poetics.” One might ask about the wisdom of using a postmodern medium to reproduce a fundamentally modernist category. One might productively ask about new poetics from other margins. What are poets doing in regions less known to myopic US Americans: to paraphrase Frank O’Hara, what are the poets in Ghana doing these days? Or on the Standing Rock Lakota Reservation, for that matter? Korean anarchist artist Young Hae Chang creates Web pieces for “Heavy Industries” in English, Korean and French. One piece which may not be considered “ergodic” but nonetheless uses Web technology (and for which, somewhat surprisingly, the author cites the first few of Pound’s Cantos as direct influence (Swiss 2002)) to promote a jazz/post-Beat aesthetic is his DAKOTA⁶, which moves from a spoken-word style, angry-young-man, road-trip poem into a diatribe against the limits placed on racialized American subjects. Using only a percussive sound-track (an Art Blakey recording) and black-on-white words to unfold its narrative, the text functions as a series of slaps in the face as the words and phrases hit the screen successively and make way abruptly for the next; it’s a bombardment that grows in intensity as the piece progresses. Although it conforms to a teleological narrative structure, its presentation in word and phrase-fragments has less of a linear effect than one might suppose – each word is a new blow, an entirely visceral, whole-body attack which has the effect of altering time (just as the experience of getting beaten up by police might or getting kicked by a rival gang, or a gang of skinheads might) – although time is also kept regular through the drumset-sound track/blows. Here is a case in which regularity itself becomes the springboard for entry into an altered state – just as the relentless predictability of

police-state, hate-crime, or intra-group gang violence against people of color becomes a medium for entry into a state of double-consciousness - or, indeed, in a postmodern world, of multiple-consciousness. Chang's work is taken seriously in the digital ("ergodic") poetry world (Swiss 2002), as is exciting work from Brazil (again, a place with a powerful modernist experimental tradition) and Indonesia. It all differs markedly from Alan Sondheim's restless sensory/intellectual tangles and Flarf's focused inanity in that it is Art with a capital A, rather than artistic process that challenges that very term. What is truly compelling is the way e-poetry proliferates, growing in aleatory, non-directional ways. Let's hope this form of aesthetic experience continues to permeate our everyday lives, corrupting it irretrievably and making us all distant, homeless, silly, anonymous and insignificant in the most helpful way: as part of the fragile World Wide Web of sentient and non-sentient beings.

NOTES

1. Thanks to the following people for thoughts, suggestions and/or feedback: Loss Glazier, John Cayley, Rita Raley, Jani Scandura, Ed Cohen, Joanna O'Connell, and Anca Parvulescu.
2. [Http://cla.umn.edu/joglars/](http://cla.umn.edu/joglars/).
3. Talan Memmott, conversation with the author and Rita Raley, July 17, 2002.
4. Detailed information is available at <http://www.linuxlookup.com/html/guides/chmod-chown.html#2.2>
5. John Cayley, conversation with the author and Rita Raley, July 17, 2002.
6. [Http://www.yhchang.com/DAKOTA.html](http://www.yhchang.com/DAKOTA.html).