

The Absence and Potential of Electronic Literature

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Even science learns to recognize a zone of the “fundamental,” peopled with dense, open, rent beings of which an exhaustive treatment is out of the question. – Maurice Merleau-Ponty

As if I wrote the Internet on my iPhone, the entire thing, texted it, 140 characters at a time. It is *as if* I wrote *it*. It, what is it? It, the word suggests the *thing*, the object that language does not touch. *It* is the totality of the net, that impossible total text.

As if I wrote it yesterday, in my spare time.

Why not? The net seems eternal, timeless, but also - and at the same time - renewed and endlessly young. It is constantly written and re-written. Why not? The internet seems personal, so *mine*, ranging from the pages with my name on them – and they are everywhere, I find my name in every page, I read it between the lines, on CNN dot com on blank pages, on every page everywhere – from such explicit namings, to the oddest, most extreme corner of the net. Of course, there are no corners, the net is shapeless and all shapes: it touches itself and touches me. It is part of my pathology. I am constantly written and re-written into and by it. Every page, every code, every character, every email, every blog post, every YouTube video, every torrented song. I wrote it all. I am modest, but I must take credit. That Facebook status update and Tweet you just sent? I wrote those as well.

But you are a writer too. Perhaps you wrote the internet? It could be, I give you that, it could be otherwise, it could be written by you, *as if*.

Whatever else it is, literature is this possibility of uncontrolled enunciation, of inscription without a trace, of inscription *in* and *as* all traces, everywhere *as if* inscribed. “Inscribed” is a term too easily deployed: use it to mean not simply marked but marking as an act, marking me in the mark. Inscribed is both “it is written” and “it writes,” both “I am written” and “I write.” The slightest or the largest act is inscribed: a click of a mouse or the entirety of the net. The first is slight, almost nothing at all, the second a totality I cannot imagine, one that saturates all imagining.

I confess not to care about this or that work of electronic literature. It is both a blindness and a cultivated response. I cannot become interested and I refuse to. I worked hard at this indifference. My goal is a general recognition of the literary as it takes place in digital writing: indifference to individual works and openness to the overall work of writing. I try to resist the determination that some works are more *interesting* or less – some works on one side, some on the other – I try to resist categories and sortings. Literature befalls writing. It takes place and takes the place of the mark, takes it to another place. *In the absence of the trace, in electronic writing utterly bereft of my presence, there is literature.* E-lit is a consequence of this fact and my project, here and throughout, is to discover this consequence in all that we write. Consider this – my essay, my presence before you – as a performance of the problem of literature. There are paths and a problem to follow *towards electronic literature*. Indeed - some of these paths and problems are named, are works of e-lit. *I cannot say* the totality of the net; I can only say many things as I follow the problem of literature. My mission: offer a tribute to and recognition of literature.

It is the institution of the name and the text, or better of the login and the file, that regulates our inscriptions, that indebts us to writing online, such that I assert possession of certain web pages

and you other pages, and together we form a crowd of electronic writers. Literature is the seal and guarantee of such inscription. Literature is the consumption and collapse of this seal. I wrote every work on every computer everywhere and for all time. I just put my name to it all now. Literature's "everything is permitted" means acceleration not regulation. In the following, I fast forward to the literary that inhabits and transforms a crowd, that brings it into intimate community; second, I separate the literary community from the crowd of electronic writers; in conclusion, I describe the crowd to consider its obligations and debts.

1. The Crowd of Electronic Writers

Where is the literary community? Everywhere, as are the works of e-lit, everywhere, in every medium, on every surface. Media's indifference to what it signifies, its indifference to what it performs, and its indifference to materiality, are all enabling conditions for literary community.

There is literary community and there is the crowd of electronic writers. The crowd is mobile, with skilled access to capital and to practical techniques. Within this crowd, we have nothing in common. I share nothing with you, and yet here we are. Such is the condition of our relation and enrollment in the *organization*: there is no community *here*. No, in the crowd there is multiplicity. Crowds are constituted through and operate on surfaces. Electronic writers are a crowd operating on the surface of electronic media. What constitutes and operates the crowd?

The crowd of electronic writers can form around use of technologies. Look at the crowd of writers using Flash or the crowd using iPads. They crowd around the technologies, they operate through technologies, and they recognize themselves as a crowd through this operation. Crowds can also form around other crowds. Look at a crowd of electronic writers amidst the crowd of new media artists or amidst digital humanists or amidst PERL programmers. They are in a crowd

of other inventors and creators. They crowd on the surface of media. They recognize themselves through their use of language and through their identity as writers. Crowds can also form through codified communications. Look at crowds emerging from listservs or blogs. They crowd around the site of communication, and they recognize themselves through their repeated inscription in this site. Crowds can also form with pressure from above through availability of funding and prizes and university positions and residencies and the like. Look at the crowds following great projects such as ELMCIP or following conferences such as the Electronic Literature Organization conference. The ELO is nothing if not a crowd. They, or you, or us, crowd around conferences like this one, crowd around readings like this one, and recognize themselves (yourselves, ourselves) by being at these sites and by participating in the themes and debates held there (or here).

In short, there is a *crowd* of electronic writers. Is there a *community* of electronic writers?

Crowds differ from communities. Communities of friends are present through hands for shaking, voices for mingling. My child presents its cries and I commune with her, sharing and soothing. Communities are organized on the skin and within the body. Amish or Mennonite communities dress simply, cut their hair, and hold their bodies in specific ways and according to set protocols. The Ndebele of Zimbabwe wear neck rings, force their necks to stretch and lengthen and accommodate more rings, all signs of belonging to their people, to their community. My daughter pierced her ear and then pierced it again and then pierced it again, all in the same area, all the same ear, and this scarring and opening on the surface of her body marked her as a member of her community. The Ndebele's neck or my daughter's ear or the clothed Amish feels the community on the skin and within the body. Communities are organized by marking bodies, by marks readable only by those in the community.

Communities of lovers touch bodies, share warmth, and offer each other stroking fingers, smeared fluids, and soft and hard membranes. There is no address or reference in communities of lovers. Their discourse is impossible, meant only for themselves. It is a discourse of “extreme solitude,” as Roland Barthes put it, and yet also of *affirmation*. How do you read the words of lovers? I do not mean how do you read the words of *your lover*, whose words are addressed to you, but how do you read *from the outside* the words of a community of lovers? How do you observe lovers and read off their community? Such observations and such readings recognize the impossible secret that is community, the love and hate that it involves. It recognizes this secret through the emptying and distancing of discourse, in short, through impossibility. It is impossible to read the words of a community of lovers and instead we read only the mystery and privacy of their intimacy. No writing is sufficient for the love of lovers, which is why there is no end of writing on love. In short, nothing *marks* the lovers; they are marked for each other. Lovers know each other, read each other, but there are no writings that show their community. They *are* community.

Crowds are not communities. The crowd of electronic writers is well-articulated, well-formed, but it is not a community, or at least not in this way or for these reasons. The crowd is constituted and operates first and last through inscription on surfaces of media. The bodies of electronic writers share nothing. It is not that we are not embodied; it is not that we do not bring our bodies; it is not that our bodies are not *here*; all of these are the case but none of these are what constitutes us as a crowd. It is our inscription on the surface of media that constitutes us as a crowd, not the intimate sharing of community. I share nothing with you, we have nothing in common. We are no community, we are no we. There is not a community of electronic writers. Yet we all may be lovers of literature, we all may be members of the literary community.

The electronic writing crowd does not start from the mingling and presentations of organs and body parts. Not at all: this crowd starts from the non-presentation, from the negation and gap across which no bodies are presented. Non-presentation, negation, gap: the crowd starts from attachment to a medium, to a tool, to an operating system, without reference to bodies or intimacies. Put aside your body and your self, in order to be constituted and operate as one of the crowd of electronic writers. The crowd is a commitment, a contract, and a membership. You join the crowd just as you join the Electronic Literature Organization.

The crowd may include those already in community with each other. Lovers and friends in the crowd share with each other. I think of Christopher Funkhouser, a scholar and artist working with electronic writing, I think of him as one of my oldest friends, someone I met over twenty years ago. The day we met was before either of us was part of this crowd. Neither of us was involved with electronic literature. I remember Chris telling me that no poet would ever write on a computer. The two of us mingled, followed paths, collaborated and communed, and here we are. I feel Chris and I share and are in community, but that is fundamentally different from the electronic writing crowd we enter into. I write a blurb for his book, he writes a letter for my tenure: all this is part of our work in the crowd. Even if there is community *in* the crowd of electronic writers, it does not make electronic writers a community. You may be my lover, we may share ecstasy and intimacy, but that is *never* the commitment and condition of joining the crowd of electronic writers.

You see what this means, do you not? I create or write about works of electronic literature built on indifferent drives that float and skew across surfaces of media. The writing is on the surface for the crowd to read and write. It is intractable and real yet distant, an other work that remains intimate and secret. In the ecstasy of media, I dream this other work. I am the subject of e-lit.

You might respond and tell me you share all the time. You share stories on Facebook, and you share music through file torrenting, and share data through USB or memory stick or Dropboxes. I might reply that there is sharing and there is sharing. In these examples, it is not the sharing of bodies but of codes. *There is intensity in code*. I take pleasure in codes that display and assert *you*, I take pleasure in *your* Facebook posts and the files *you* give me, I take pleasure in your images, in your texts. I feel pleasure in relation to the code. And not just pleasure: I also suffer in those codes that display and assert those that suffer or those that threaten me. A webpage that displays pain or atrocity or injustice causes me to suffer. Unlike the immediacy and contact of community, the intensity of code is a delirium of the other's body. I decode *you* through shared files. Such is the mingling of the crowd: our files share and we read each other in and through the files. Such sharing of code is not about bodies, not about intimacy but about *imagination*, which is part of its power. The code is on the surface of media. It is the negation of bodies. Your Facebook page and your driver's license are abstractions in relation to your body and your concrete existence. They are files that circulate and allow you to share in the delirium of the surface of media. Your intimacy and privacy is a setting, just as Facebook constantly reminds you to check and set your privacy. These sharings must be understood not in terms of the intimacy of bodies in community but in an encompassing capital investment in floating images through the axiomatics of media, around which form varieties of crowds. The crowd's delirium is the absence of mingled bodies. The crowd's mobility and speed is the lack of touch, the hollowing out of organs, the gaps between skin and skin.

The term "community" is used in many ways, including to capture the fantasy of sharing achieved by the crowd. I am attempting clarity in using the term "crowd" to recognize that the crowd – not the community - of electronic writers is constituted on the surface of media. What

difference does it make? Multiple surfaces are available for the crowd of electronic writers. In fact, unlike the community, with its depth and commitment to bodies, the crowd is mobile, growing, and intensive. The neck of the Ndebele or my daughter's earlobes are singular and attached to bodies. They are part objects in close proximity and never straying from interiority. The crowd is always straying, always detaching, always mobile. We are at the periphery, riding the edge of the crowd. The crowd of electronic writers can mark iPhones, Twitter feeds, Arduino controllers, an electronic billboard in Sao Paulo, a paper that prints out computer code in Cambridge, a screenshot on my computer at home, a webpage, and so on; the list is infinite.

Any surface will do, any sign. Call this the designative function of the surface of the medium. We will attach to any flow at all. Our crowd is indifferent to the marks and means of signification. We are not writers in the sense that we do not work directly with words. We are writers in another sense. The contractual logic of the crowd allows anyone writing on any surface of media to run with the crowd. The electronic writing crowd can operate in ways community cannot.

2. Debts and Obligations

Preta in Sanskrit or “hungry ghosts” of Chinese Buddhism are unsatisfied and desiring souls, partly alive and nourished through scraps. I am hungry. I am frantic to maintain accounts. I keep up my home page, archive documents, remind others – you – and myself of my existence. I post to Facebook and check email. I fulfill the debt and obligation to be myself online.

The crowd of electronic writers is no different from any other crowd constituted on the surface of media, in the space of flows, and in relation to capital. This crowd is no different from the crowd of net art or interactive fiction, but also no different from the crowd of trout fishers and

basketball players, no different from crowds of plumbers and nuclear physicists, no different from any and all other crowds. The dynamics of crowds operate regardless of content and concerns. So much of what is done in the name of electronic writing is application of this dynamic. So much of what is written and researched about electronic writing is insistence that the crowd of electronic writers behaves like all other crowds. Perhaps we do behave in this way, but perhaps we do not.

Rather than marks or signs, I tell you that writing is *permission and obligation*. The trajectory of the writer is one of commitments and tributes. What obligations? To history for a start: the history of writing and the history of literature. We all feel the obligation, we all tally the account. Electronic writing owes a debt to the avant-garde. Electronic literature owes a debt to concrete poetry. Electronic literature owes a debt to poststructuralist theory. To OuLiPo. To Language poetry. To postmodern fiction. To Alan Turing. To Ada Lovelace. The list continues. We pay homage: to talk of electronic literature is to give examples, to reference other writers, to insert myself into the network of circular debt. In addition: electronic literature owes debts to the future, to emerging writers, to the need to keep up to date. Like all electronic writers, I feel obliged to know the *latest* work; I am in debt to the emerging future of e-lit.

Debts are tallied and the accounts are balanced through scholarly and critical practices around electronic writing. Tagging, indexing, and cataloging: these ring up what is owed. The Consortium for Electronic Literature or ELMCIP or any other examples you choose are about the constitution of electronic literary works through obligations and affiliations; they are about an investment in maintaining the author's name and the work's name and the debts surrounding these names. Such projects claim we need to form communities, we need to identify works, we also need to enable artists. My point is not whether this is true or false— it is good enough, it

helps us out – but rather to point to the debt assumed, to point to enacting of obligation, and – with this – to also point to the way this claim to community wants to please, wants the pleasure of being stroked by the other.

Most of all, there is a debt to the machine, a debt to software and devices, debt to the mega-apparatus that is the network. Humans become an “appendage of flesh upon a machine of iron,” as Marx put it. I work on a computer that cost over a thousand dollars and I use devices costing millions of dollars in research and development and I communicate using telecommunications systems costing and generating billions of dollars worldwide. Writing rides and expresses capital’s flexibility and extent. It is not possible to be a writer without assuming and expressing this debt. It is not possible – for anyone, in any context, at any time – to discuss electronic literature without re-announcing this debt. *Debt is the work*. It is the condition of writing and the discourse it produces. The ELO’s well-known definition of electronic literature as “works with important literary aspects that take advantage of the capabilities and contexts provided by the stand-alone or networked computer” is a way of saying that such works are *obligated and in debt*. The work “takes advantage” of what is provided, and only becomes the work, only becomes literature, by this *taking* and by this *provision*, by the part that is given, and by the *advantage* that is taken. Writers continually accumulate and pay off the debt through the creation of work. Is there an exit strategy? Can we refuse our obligations?

You might ask, why debt? Why not generosity and infinite gift giving, why not writing as a poetics that always invents anew? To which I reply: look around you. We occupy cultures of debt, of borrowing, of mortgaging off our houses and jobs. How odd it is to think of such conditions separately from and as not applying to our writing. Electronic writing only is possible if it starts from this condition of debt. The crowd is a complex sociality – it is not the immediacy

and intimacy of bodies – and its density is floating commitments and protocols. Of course, writing is both contracting into and breaking up contracts. Debt may be paid or not. To write is to parasite the institution, to occupy its space, to set up on the medium and generate the work.

Literary community is not fulfilling obligation and debt, but is acceleration and release: acceleration of myself, release towards the work. Literature breaks all debts and obligations. To write a work of literature is to write such a break.

I may never break through, I may never write literature. I dream of breaking through, I dream of writing literature.

3. Axiomatics

All these are axiomatics, self-evident operations of media on generalized flows in differential relations – think of Castell’s “space of flows” - without specifying specific media forms or media specificity or encodings. Debt and obligation are a generalized way of understanding the axiomatic relation to media, assuming no prior condition: no format, no materiality, also no memory, no reference to truth or falsity, only combinations and productions. The point is not codes or significations – rather, codes and significations become the message or content of the media – the point is rather to institute a “substance” that can be worked over and made into *works*.

The intensity begins from the writer’s name. The name can be any inscription at all. Intensify any inscription to make it a name. All the questions of reference, of truth, of rhetoric, are used up and not longer relevant. The surface of medium is not a sign but a splitting and an elsewhere that organizes signs around it. So too the electronic writers’ name (and the works that are given the

writers' name) are references to the surface of media and not to a putative biographical writer. This is the case even when the biographical writer is present – as many such writers often are at conferences or readings. In such cases, the writers still defer to the medium, they are there to show the work, they are there to describe its construction. Their presence, their body, their interiority is secondary and incorporated into the relation to the surface of the medium.

What does electronic writing mean? Can we even ask this question? Refuse it. Instead, start from points of expression, start from the extended surface of the medium as cybernetic zero point. The electronic writer dreams of giving a name to the zero.

Crowds constitute and program themselves through the commitments and contracts, and not through the communion of bodies and parts. Crowd operates through mnemotechnic delirium rather than bodily intensity. Because crowds come with nothing, because the axiomatics of media negate all memory and traces, the crowd must create memory for itself. The crowd's memory is always artificial. It is any memory at all. The point is not a particular memory but mnemotechnic production from the cybernetic zero point of inscription. The crowd operates *as if* that memory were attachment, as if it were the navel binding all to the medium. Heinz von Foerster wrote of “zero order cybernetics,” the autopoietic threshold “when activity becomes structured; when behavior emerges, but one doesn't reflect on the ‘why’ and the ‘how’ of this behavior. One just acts.” He concluded: “This is when cybernetics is implicit.” The implicit zero point is what we re-member after the fact, constituting ourselves in relation to the infinitely stretched thin medium that is everywhere.

The dream grows to sharing the name and what it includes. The fascination with text generation, for example – such as Nick Montfort's Taroko Gorge – can not be separated from the act of

naming the flow of generated text, naming it as mine. Rather than approach the generated text as meaningful or not, instead the text becomes “interesting” and significant because of the author’s name. The name illuminates the text, the nonsense of which text indexes the naming of the zero point. We discover structure and movement in the generated text precisely because of the function of the name.

Electronic writers enter the crowd by naming their work electronic writing. The name is the latency of the crowd of electronic writers in any and all medial flows. It is as I said already. Crowds form with pressure from above through availability of funding and prizes and university positions and residencies and the like. These names and institutions situate the crowd, hold bodies in place, and provide a name for all to share. Think of the institutional names in the history of electronic literature: Buffalo, Brown, Bergen, Siegen, Sydney, and so on. Or: crowds form through codified communications, emerging from listservs or blogs, crowding around the site of communication, and recognize themselves through their repeated inscription in this site. The code of communication is the memory they share. They name themselves in this way. Or: crowds form around other crowds. The crowd of E-Poets, identified in relation to avant-garde poetry, or the crowd of experimental pomo fiction writers now become electronic literature writers. Or, perhaps easiest and most common: crowds form around use of technologies. I am a Flash poet, I can say, or I am a code worker. I can present my output, I can name my work.

Think of Gregory Bateson’s “plateaus,” later adapted by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, defined as “some sort of continuing plateau of intensity [...] substituted for climax.” Bateson draws comparisons to Balinese culture, to trance states, to the infant held in suspension by the mother’s erotic stroking, to legal quarrels, to music, and to warfare. There is refusal of termination, turning away from fixity, and withdrawal from conclusion. There is no end, no goal,

only continuing intensity. The emergence from cybernetic zero point to the mnemotechnics of the name establishes a plateau for the crowd, a common intensity felt within our bodies but not shared communally. Each electronic writer occupies the plateau and is able to announce: I am a writer, I belong with and follow the crowd.

Plateaus of intensity both negate and substitute for the absent body. Writing is the plateau. It is insufficient to understand writing as manipulation of material traces, even in the modified form of matter organized through digital codes. Such a view is an atavistic hangover of the content and substance of earlier situations. We are not writers in this way. The axiomatics of media are immaterial and virtual: any and all markings, whether digital or not, whether on the net or not, can be taken in to the field of electronic writing.

For example, the concept of *file* and *format* are conceptually radical in ways that we do not grasp. A format is the format of a file, which is to say that a format is a format, and a file is a file. Consider the Internet Request for Comments or RFC #1341 from 1992, entitled "MIME (Multipurpose Internet Mail Extensions): Mechanisms for Specifying and Describing the Format of Internet Message Bodies," authored by N. Borenstein and N. Freed. In the simplest sense, this document defines the format of email messages and their attachments. Several revised RFCs follow and obsolete this one. Notably, RFC #2045 and #2046 and later #4288 and #4289 expand the mechanisms for specifying and describing to "arbitrarily labeled content." The format of internet messages was defined earlier, in 1982 by RFC #822, but, as later RFCs frequently remark, little was done to define the message body. The omission was precise: the body was undefined and could be *anything* that could be carried by the ASCII wrapper of the message header. As the later RFCs note, the goal of the MIME type mechanisms is to provide definitions for "textual message bodies in character sets other than US-ASCII" and "an extensible set of

different formats for non-textual message bodies.” The goal seems very simple but MIME type is in fact one of the most ungraspable and complex aspects of the internet. The extensible set makes it possible for the message header to refer to any format as content, where the notion of “any format” remains undefined and open. While the specifications in RFC document are directed at email messages, they subsequently were expanded to apply to protocols such as HTTP (for all webpages), RTP (used for VoIP), and SIP (used for streaming video). In short, MIME type identifies and names the format – the type - of any and all files on the internet. IANA, the Internet Assigned Names Authority, references the MIME types when it lists allowable media. These include: application, audio, example, image, message, model, multipart, text, and video. The experimental types, or the example and model types, mixed in with the more specific types, point to the axiomatic function of MIME. More precisely, as a set of *mechanisms*, the MIME type specification is a *machine* that writes the name of *any* object and includes it within the net.

The World Wide Web Consortium declares “the architecture of the web depends on applications making dispatching and security decisions for resources based on their Internet Media Types and other MIME headers. It is a serious error for the response body to be inconsistent with assertions made about it by the MIME headers.” In truth, nothing prevents such dangerous assertions; nothing requires a file to be serious and dependable. The looseness of designation, the fact that a file can be other than what it claims to be allows for spoofing and malicious attacks through hidden scripts and applications.

What is a “format” or, for that matter, what is a “file”? File names are introduced around 1962 for purposes of identification. The fact that these problematic terms are described in terms of mime, in terms of mimesis, situates format and file in a history of similitudes and mimetics. It is possible to say that a file has a format and that a special type of file defines formats. It is possible

to refuse the question and say that files and formats are definitions of data, which is to say that they are categorical and indefinable types, or better that they are mechanisms and axioms of media. What does MIME type mime? What similitude and mimetics? The fact is that we are unable to define what we mean by a file name, other than to recognize it as yet another form of debt or obligation to the zero degree of the surface of media. The author gives the work a name. Filenames are one obligation between the writer and machine. For a start, the obligation that the name of the work names the work. We honor and invest in this obligation when we create archives to preserve work, or when we create an entry for and about a work in a database such as ELMCIP or the ELD. The name contracts that the work exists and will be maintained through the persistence or hardness of the link between name and work. When we are concerned with toolchains and software upgrades, it is not just the operational question of whether we can access Michael Joyce's *Afternoon* on the old Hypercard files – or more recently whether we can recreate Flash files in HTML 5 – no, these concerns with the archive and the material are about maintaining accounts and obligations of and towards the work. We are never simple considering the materiality and specificity of the medium; we are always tallying up our debts.

4. Electronic Literature?

It is obvious - though no one seems to be willing to write this down, to admit to it - that no theory exists to analyze literary texts and signs on the computer and the network. *There is almost no consideration of electronic writing as literature.* We still do not know how to think about the literariness of media. What is literature and how is it possible? Surely this question – maintaining it, following it, keeping the question alive – is what fascinates us and why we continue to discover literature as this very question.

Do not get me wrong: there are admirable descriptive formalisms and historical genealogies of electronic literature. All these function as criticism should, but they do not explain how such inscriptions *become or exist as literary*. To describe genealogies – I think of Christopher Funkhouser’s admirable work or the community mapping of the ELMCIP project – is not to understand conditions of existence. I wish I could say that we tried and failed to produce such a theory, but I cannot. We have not even tried. In fact, there is no attempt to determine the necessity and existence of electronic literature. Our dealings with electronic literature so far – again, not critical descriptions and genealogies but fundamental philosophies - are meager, amounting to little more than repetitions of early literary criticism.

At stake is whether we can delimit a domain of electronic literature separate from the totality of literature (literally, all written texts). The problem is that existing criticism begins from the presumption that “there is” electronic literature and proceeds to describe the various works in existence. In *Electronic Literature*, still the only book explicitly on the subject of electronic literature - that is, on literature in the large sense of the excessive mass of produced texts - in this book N. Katherine Hayles explicitly *refuses* to theorize the subject of her book. It is not the place to do so, she declares. No doubt the results are productive for maintaining distributions of texts and readings in a field of literary and non-literary inscriptions. No doubt, as well, the results are *useless* for a theory electronic literature.

5. The Literary Community

So far I used the term literature sparingly and only to refer to the works that fall within the circuits of debt and obligation. I refused to refer to electronic literature in any general sense because I was describing the crowd of electronic writers. There is, on the other hand, the *literary*

community that exists not because of the dynamics of crowds that characterize capital and inscription in relation to the surface of media but in and through the shared intimacy that is literature.

To read and write literature is to enter a secret community of lovers, lovers of literature who are able to share in writing and reading but unable to say the secret that brings them together.

The poet Robert Duncan wrote of the “drama of our time” as the coming of us all into one fate, “the dream of everyone, everywhere.” *Dream* here does not mean something insubstantial and passing in the night, or something standing in for a personal psychodrama. It means precisely a delirium of sensation because of a relation to the surface of the medium. The delirium is global, geopolitical, racial, gendered. It is delirium deliriously quoting cultural material. The delirium of the medium lets me dream of the other’s body – dream of you – in emails or txts, in photos, in Skype calls. In all these, I recognize you. The *no body* that situates my body elsewhere leads me to imagine bodies in every flow of text, leads me to imagine displays of *your body* in every image.

No flesh is bared. No organ is presented in electronic writing. No flow of text is bodily flows of blood or mucus or saliva. My body is bound and fixed before the computer. Yours is the same. No trace carries over, no body part, no fluid, no piece of bone. The fact is axiomatic, material, physical, and philosophical. The computer’s mouse may measure the movements of my hand but it is first and foremost an object of breaking and sending. In the absence of the body, in the negation of the real, sending is infinite and breaking is intense. Stopped and coupled, I display my dorsal plane, engage in ape-like flashing of my posterior while I flow and seep across the machine’s surface, while I lock and load onto its display.

The dorsal-ventral axis or DV connects the tips of my body. Top of the head to feet, buttocks to belly, with semi-symmetrical halves on the left and right of this seam. The rostral from Latin *rostrum* or cranial from the Greek for skull or cephalic from the Greek for head refers to the forward angled head of those beings with distinct heads on their anterior; that is, us. Our bodies are cephalic and ventral. Ventral from the Latin *venter* for belly. Our bodies are angled forward and upwards. Our ventral surface, defined by the seam of the DV, opens us to the world, or closes as we close our eyes and fold our arms and shoulders inwards on the axis. The ventral is our facing and direction. The coronal plane divides my body into ventral and dorsal, slicing front and back, transecting my standing body in half. We are crossed by lines and dotted by points. Upright and on display, we project a transverse plane parallel to the ground and forward from the ventral axis towards the world.

The ventral and transverse *project* from my body. The ventral and traverse are *stopped*, put into relation and transformed, the axes segmented and the plane *broken*. What describes these changes? Stoppages: the eye's gaze stops on the thickness of things, the skin on the surface of my finger is stopped, the flow of saliva or mucus or semen or blood is stopped. Stoppages by things encountered, stimulations and intensifications at edges and openings. Stoppages for upright beings, cranial and cephalic organisms who face objects above the transversal. Stoppages or scintillations: the flashing display of our surface, continuous posturing and display of our own bodies, offered to the world with no hope of return. A computer screen is for bodies organized like me and for my kind of surface. I am stopped by the screen. The screen couples with the ventral and transversal.

The intensification and sending of the stoppage means forget your name, forget your files, forget your works. Literature blurs and vanishes all of it. Literature discovers organs sprouting from the

medium like flowers. They are the sounds and the visions that let us speak and let us see and hear: images on screen, sounds, and words. There are organs everywhere on media – wagging, jerking, splayed. The place of organs and body parts and objects and detritus is released into the abstraction of the medium. The flows *were* mine, were parts of my body's becoming liquid. The flows on the surface of media are abstract, are nothing but flow. This de-subjectification and un-signing of flows means that all the bare flesh on the internet – from Facebook faces to endless porn – is not bared and reveals nothing. They are cool or lukewarm image-codes that we cannot evaluate. How is it that I come to desire the array of pixels in a porn image or identify a Facebook face as my child?