CEA MID-ATLANTIC REVIEW

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The Mid-Atlantic Review is a peer-reviewed scholarly journal published annually by the College English Association Mid-Atlantic Group (CEAMAG). The journal specializes in literary and cultural criticism, discussions of pedagogy, public humanities work, reviews of scholarly books, personal essays concerned with the teaching of English, photographs and visual art related to the Mid-Atlantic region of the United States, and creative writing related to the humanities, teaching, or the craft and art of writing. *The Mid-Atlantic Review* is indexed in the MLA International Bibliography and available to scholars through the EBSCO and ProQuest Literature databases.

Research articles and essay submissions must be between 2,000 and 5,000 words and be prepared in accordance with the most recent MLA style manual; reviews of scholarly books must be limited to 1,000 words; poetry submissions must be limited to 500 words per poem with a maximum of three poem submissions (all sent in one file); photographs and visual art must be submitted as JPG files with a maximum of three pieces; and short fiction must be limited to 1,500 words with a maximum of one short fiction submission. Poetry and short fiction must be related to the humanities, teaching, or the craft and art of writing. We do not publish work that has already been published in print or online. You are free to submit your work to other publications when submitting to *The Mid-Atlantic Review*.

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SPECIAL ISSUE ON AI PREFACE

The essays in this special AI issue of *The Mid-Atlantic Review* reflect a range of concerns about the seismic shifts higher education has been undergoing as a result of the advent of Generative Artificial Intelligence (GAI) and related AI technologies. We believe that the urgency of addressing the questions that arise from the emergence of these technologies cannot be overstated. AI has the potential to transform and disrupt in fundamental ways not only the material conditions of human existence but even the very modes of expression through which we understand our humanity and human agency. Social, moral, and epistemological questions about the nature and role of technology are, of course, of long standing. From Aeschylus's *Prometheus Bound* to contemporary science fiction, authors and works that have explored how our evolving relationship with technology defines our humanity have revealed important things. But many of these treatments now seem quaint in the face of the supposed singularity hurtling our way. Indeed, conversations about AI both within the academy and without seem to be shot through with the rhetoric of inevitability and the New Prometheans are quick to point out the advantages of these technologies while downplaying their potential threats.

One of the great promises of technology has always been that it would free humanity from the onerous and mind-numbing drudgery necessary for our existence, and it has done so in many ways. But we must also consider the costs. During the Industrial Revolution, goods became cheaper and more accessible at the price of dehumanizing workers or replacing them with machines. The apparent AI Revolution is now beginning to have a similar impact on

intellectual labor. Computer Science used to be a "safe" college major, promising well-paid work after graduation; now software coders are concerned that AI will replace their labor. Upskilling may be a temporary fix for some, but if machine "learning" continues on its current trajectory, we will need to rethink the future of human labor.

Examples could be multiplied, and these developments lead us to wonder if AI will be used for the collective good or the empowerment and emolument of the few. Given the current political climate in which the avariciousness of technocrats and the corporations they lead is openly encouraged and supported by far too many politicians, we may well wonder what species of courtesy would lead one to believe that the public good is even remotely part of the planning process. In a nation where the ruling elite have extrajudicially seized and consolidated citizens' records and are attempting to weaponize the justice department to go after political opponents, is it a paranoid fantasy to imagine a surveillance state in which AI is used to sniff out and punish political unorthodoxy and dissent? Authoritarian governments and AI offer the same product to their willing consumers: a life without having to think or act as a responsible human being.

At the same time, the challenge of AI may inspire us to articulate more exactly the value of being human. Late capitalist neoliberal ideology tells us that we all must work to make a living, but does humanity consist *solely* in our economic work? If there is value in human activity outside of the realm of material productivity, then there are parts of human life that are difficult or impossible for AI to replace. Is the sole point of writing to produce and transmit information? Is learning merely a description of facts? If one assumes that reading, writing, researching, and communicating is nothing more than the acquisition, processing, and distribution of information, then AI can indeed replace these activities. If, however, one recognizes these activities as cognitive processes of *interpreting* information and sharing these

interpretations with a community of fellow humans, then we who work in the Humanities may rediscover and rearticulate what work in the Humanities is utterly beyond the grasp of AI. This rediscovery might be a step in safeguarding both humanity and democracy, if Martha Nussbaum is correct in her still-timely *Not for Profit: Why Democracy Needs the Humanities* (Princeton UP, 2012).

It is in this context, then, that *CEA Mid-Atlantic Review* solicited essays for this special issue. The first two essays in this collection navigate the terrain between some of the more theoretical questions raised above and the practical question of what we do now as instructors of writing. In "'Claiming an Education' in the AI Era: Developing Critical AI Literacy in First-Year Writing through Writer Agency and Choice," Salena Anderson suggests pedagogical models of what ethical and thoughtful adoption of GAI into the curriculum might look like. For Anderson, student agency and ownership of how they incorporate the use of GAI into their work is of paramount importance. Acknowledging the reality of student use of GAI, Anderson demonstrates how foregrounding its use and being intentional and transparent about it allows a teaching moment in which students themselves are forced to grapple with its implications for their learning in college and beyond. In "'Not perfect is OK?': Exploring the Use of AI in the Writing Classroom," Daniel S. Harrison also focuses on student agency with the added wrinkle that he is teaching ESL learners to come to voice in a second language. This approach involves his appeal to the better angels of their nature to eschew using GAI as a crutch by convincing his students that there are things that are more important than idiomatically perfect grammar. His narrative also demonstrates that human teachers with good deskside pedagogies can make a difference because of their ability to recognize and celebrate the unique ways in which each

individual communicates. His essay leads us to ask whether machines could ever celebrate anything authentically.

The next two essays deal with the rhetoric and aesthetics of authorship. Sean Lewis's "*Heuresis*, *Taxis*, and the Rhetorical Problem of AI" uses the classical rhetorical discussion about *heuresis* (discovery/invention of content) and *taxis* (arrangement/form of that content) to express his apprehensions over the tendency of GAI to collapse these categories—and not in the formalist way of foregrounding formal considerations. Lewis's essay also explores the relationship between authorial originality and hermeneutics and suggests that postmodern attempts to untether text from producer ignore fundamental principles of human speech acts and are deeply unsatisfying to boot. He draws parallels between the "death of the author" motif and machine writing and doubts whether LLM-produced texts can be either authentic or original. David Kaloustian, in his "Reports of the Death of the Author Have Been Greatly Exaggerated—Until Now? Generative AI and the Concept of The Author" takes up the thread from Lewis by also expressing skepticism about postmodern postmortems of the author as a way to examine what we mean by authorship and what is at stake in GAI's emergence. Kaloustian uses M.H. Abrams's time-honored quartet of critical orientations (mimetic, pragmatic, expressive, and objective) to situate his discussion of how we conceptualize authorship and how LLM-generated texts challenge these categories. Although Kaloustian champions expressive modes as unreplicable by AI, he leaves the dialectical door open by suggesting that we are not separate from our technologies.

The final essay—more *cri du coeur* prose poem than essay—is by Gabriela Denise Frank, entitled "Recording Not in Progress." This *sui generis* work calls out how online education in the context of mass passive consumerism, surveillance capitalism, infotainment, and the isolating
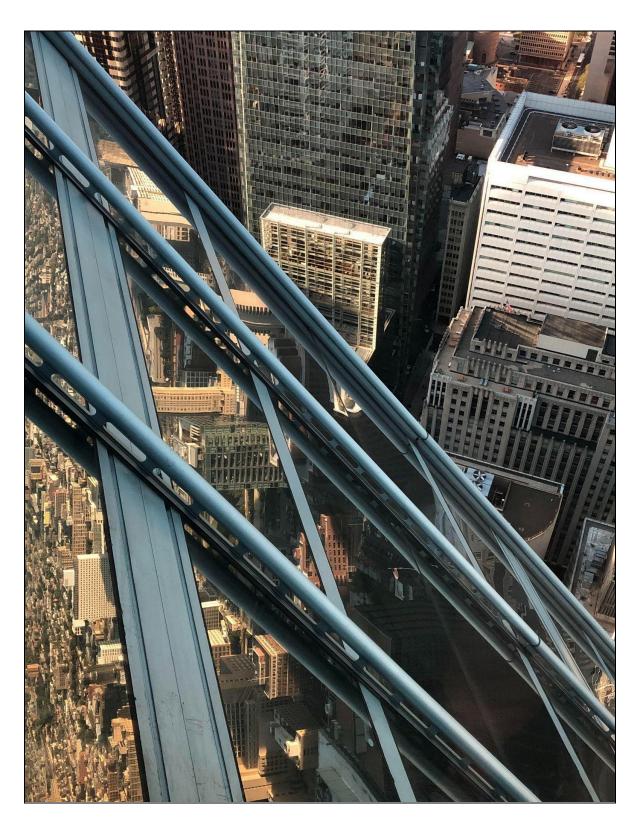
and fragmenting effects of endless screen time all contribute to a toxic stream of dehumanization. Frank is alarmed at how easily we slip into a transactional mindset when using digital technologies, the seamless self-commodification that these technologies demand and enforce, and the astounding hypocrisy and mendacity of the apologists for the technological enshittification of human relationships. He concludes, however, with a hopeful litany of things we can do to resist and subvert the watchful green eye above our computer screens.

Our two poets in the mix, Thomas Mixon and Sandy Feinstein, present us with poems that purposely personify machines in order to defamiliarize this trope. Despite our language suggesting the contrary, machines neither think nor feel. They are not embodied subjects. We thank the human poets who keep us mindful of this distinction.

Only time will tell how AI will impact our life, our work, and our humanity. Every revolutionary technology, from the printing press to the steam engine to the internet, has brought with it messianic promises and apocalyptic warnings. Perhaps AI will usher in an era of renewed humanism, in which automation frees us from the necessity of drudgery in order to embrace the creativity, love, and wonder that make us human. Perhaps AI will be the end of humanity as we know it, the prelude to an inhuman future. Between utopia and dystopia, AI might be similar to technological advances of the past, affecting human life in distinct ways, without robbing us of those features that make us uniquely human. The work of the authors and readers of this volume is a vital part of understanding this technological moment through which we all are living.

David Kaloustian, Bowie State University

Sean Lewis, Mount St. Mary's University

Anthony Salvatore Abate, "Philadelphia Liberty."

"Claiming an Education" in the AI Era: Developing Critical AI Literacy in First-Year Writing through Writer Agency and Choice

Salena Anderson

In her 1977 commencement speech at Douglass College, Adrienne Rich famously spoke of "an ethical and intellectual contract between teacher and student," encouraging students to "claim" an education rather than conceptualizing college as an opportunity to "receive an education" passively (608). Rich makes twin appeals to faculty and students that are as relevant in the era of generative AI (GAI) as ever. She entreats students to recognize that "[r]esponsibility to yourself means refusing to let others do your thinking, talking, and naming for you; it means learning to respect and use your own brains and instincts; hence, grappling with hard work" (610). Addressing faculty, she argues, "Too often, all of us fail to teach the most important thing, which is that clear thinking, active discussion, and excellent writing are all necessary for intellectual freedom, and that these require hard work" (611). As Rich emphasizes in addressing her female audience, true intellectual freedom is hampered both by attitudes and stances that reduce student agency and by the concomitant marginalization of diverse voices (609).

Perhaps it is little surprise that nearly fifty years later higher education is roiled by controversies around GAI that at their heart still center questions of intellectual freedom, student agency, and representation. In one such debate, the MLA-CCCC Joint Task Force on Writing and AI argues for the integration of AI literacy learning objectives into writing curricula, while other scholars argue for "informed refusal," (McIntyre; Fernandes, Sano-Franchini, McIntyre) rightly

observing that "[t]here's significant labor involved in shifting a course to make space for ChatGPT or other generative AI products. We have to acknowledge and make informed decisions about whether we want to spend our already limited time and energy on that labor, and if we do, how to do that work ethically and effectively" (McIntyre 4). While we wrestle with whether or how to introduce GAI without feeling like marketers or police, Rich foregrounds the importance of student agency and the relationship between instructor and student in grappling with complex issues. The decisions we make as instructors – whether to require or refuse GAI in our writing classes or whether to give students a choice – impact our students' learning opportunities not only about GAI but also about the value of their own unique voices and writing processes, especially in light of GAI. Thus, I write this essay to explore ways of aligning the MLA-CCCC Joint Task Force recommendations with the WPA Outcomes Statement for First-Year Composition to promote writer agency, while attempting to mitigate some of the issues with limited classroom time.

I cannot pretend to know what Rich would have said about GAI, but her address inspires me to encourage students to claim an education as they rigorously explore both their writing processes and what is at stake when they choose to adopt or reject GAI. To do so, I designed a first-year writing class that allows but does not require GAI use, while integrating critical AI literacy learning objectives with traditional first-year writing objectives. Trying to thread this needle in course design and policy surely did involve significant labor, as McIntyre observes; however, I felt the time was well-spent for my class. Declining to create a class policy that either bans or requires GAI use may seem like a laissez-faire stance; however, I believe writer agency may be the best curative for the ways GAI can threaten intellectual freedom. To either ban or require GAI in my first-year writing classes deprives students of the opportunity to make an

informed decision about their own writing and learning. To be sure, GAI has exactly the same problems with representation (Owusu-Ansah, Gillespie) and stifling critical thinking (Anderson; Lee, et al.) against which Rich cautions. To raise students' awareness of these issues and to promote their growth as writers and thinkers, my course employs a critical pedagogical approach, like that endorsed by Gallagher, to promote student agency with critical AI literacy.

In this essay, I describe my efforts to foreground student agency to promote writer growth and critical AI literacy in my second semester first-year writing class, "From WALL-E to DALL-E: The Human Relationship with AI." I first proposed this course in Spring 2023 and offered it in Spring 2024 at a small comprehensive university of about 3000 students in the Midwest region of the United States. The course was offered as part of the first-year writing program with a common curriculum in the first semester and special topics in the second semester; and it supported our program's first-year writing learning objectives, while integrating critical AI literacy as part of our information literacy objectives.

I agree with Rich that students must be able to claim an education; and in my own view, to ensure this possibility, corporate America and techno-giants must not be allowed to hijack the curriculum or students' learning opportunities. Given the ubiquity of GAI, this seemed a rather tall order. If I wanted students to become critical users of GAI, they needed opportunities to explore the technology in a scaffolded way. On the other hand, if I wanted students to maintain a writing process free from GAI, they needed to appreciate what makes their writing and writing processes unique, something that is easiest to see when contrasted with the limitations and affordances of GAI. Most importantly, however, if I agree with Rich that students must take "[r]esponsibilty for [them]sel[ves] by refusing to let others do [their] thinking, talking, and naming for [them]" (610), I must support them in the "hard work" of "clear thinking, active

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discussion, and excellent writing" (611). To do so, I felt that I could not make a unilateral decision on their behalf even as norms for GAI use, legal and ethical questions, scholarship on learning outcomes, and the technology itself still continue to evolve. To support students' thought, discussion, and writing, I wanted to design a curriculum and assessments that continued to scaffold our traditional first-year writing learning objectives while also providing opportunities for critical analysis of GAI. My goal was to empower students to be agents rather than passive recipients either of corporate America's newest product or my own course policies. I wanted students to reach their own well-informed, critical positions on whether and how they may choose to use or reject GAI technologies throughout their research and writing processes.

Integrating Critical AI Literacy Learning Objectives with First-Year Writing

The course I designed supports first-year writing learning objectives for rhetorical knowledge; critical reading; and recursive, iterative writing processes outlined in the WPA Outcomes Statement for First-Year Composition, while integrating the following recommendations of the MLA-CCCC Joint Task Force on Writing and AI (Adisa, et al. 11-12):

1. GAI literacy "should be reflected in course learning objectives that are the grounds for assessment."

2. GAI policies should "empower rather than harm students" by considering "access and linguistic diversity."

3. GAI literacy should be "transparent[ly]" "integrated into [ ] syllabi, assignments, writing projects, research, and assessments."

4. Pedagogical approaches should "enable students and teachers to reflect on and discuss the role of GAI in their writing process, project stages, or research strategies."

5. To promote GAI literacy, "scaffolding must occur in class."

In a 2025 study surveying first-year writing instructors, Pandey, et al. "highlight[] the complex, dilemmatic perspectives of FYC instructors and underscore[] the urgent need for LLM and DMC literacy to advance FYC pedagogy in the context of technological advancements" (1). The Task Force's recommendations and the findings of Pandey, et al. suggest the need for ongoing consideration of how to integrate GAI learning objectives into first-year writing curricula.

To achieve these goals, like all sections of first-year writing at my institution, the course includes three major writing assignments with peer review and multiple drafts, featuring prompts that require careful selection and synthesis of relevant sources and attention to the context, audience, and purpose of their selected sources. However, course design for this section was also guided by Johnson's conceptualization of "the potential for expanding our rhetorical writing practices with and through [GAI] technologies" (173). In the sections below, I present a curriculum design aimed to help students "claim an education" and their identity as writers in the wake of GAI by promoting student choice on GAI use. To do so, I explore how this goal of promoting student agency relates to the different guiding principles identified by the MLA-CCCC Joint Task Force on Writing and AI—assessment, empowerment, transparency, reflection, and scaffolding—and their alignment with WPA Outcomes for First-Year Composition.

Instruction and Assessment for GAI Literacy

The WPA Outcomes Statement for First-Year Composition includes a variety of learning outcomes across each of its major areas (rhetorical knowledge; critical reading, thinking, and composing; and processes) that may also relate to cultivating GAI literacy. For instance, in the area of rhetorical knowledge, in my class, exploring the opportunities and limitations afforded by GAI helped to address the objective of "[u]nderstand[ing] and us[ing] a variety of technologies

to address a range of audiences" (1). Of course, other technologies could also be used in service of this objective; but given the prevalence of GAI, applying rhetorical analysis to GAI outputs provides a unique opportunity to address learning objectives related to rhetorical analysis and related to GAI literacy simultaneously. Similarly, when we considered the objective of "[u]s[ing] composing processes and tools as a means to discover and reconsider ideas," (2) we addressed this objective while fostering GAI literacy by integrating GAI into the class. Again, this objective does not dictate that we integrate GAI; however, it presents an opportunity.

The more compelling case for integrating GAI literacy into a first-year writing course comes from the WPA outcomes for critical reading, thinking, and composing. The CWPA identifies at least two outcomes that would be difficult to address now without considering GAI:

- Read a diverse range of texts, attending especially to relationships between assertion and evidence, to patterns of organization, to the interplay between verbal and nonverbal elements, and to how these features function for different audiences and situations
- Locate and evaluate (for credibility, sufficiency, accuracy, timeliness, bias and so on) primary and secondary research materials, including journal articles and essays, books, scholarly and professionally established and maintained databases or archives, and informal electronic networks and internet sources (CWPA 2)

The number of students already using GAI for writing encouraged me to engage them at least in this area of critical reading and thinking. While truly up-to-date figures are difficult to establish, Baek et al. (4) show that as of late 2023 when they were gathering data, 33.1% of the university students in their survey used ChatGPT at least some of the time in their writing. If at least a third of my class (certainly more at this point) was already using this technology in their writing, in the "diverse range of texts" we read, I felt that I must include GAI outputs. Thus, when I asked

students to consider "relationships between assertion and evidence," in this context it afforded us an important opportunity to discuss a phenomenon that even as of Fall 2024 and Spring 2025 only some of my students were familiar with: hallucinations, where GAI returns incorrect or made-up assertions, evidence, or sources (Glickman and Zhang 5-7). Likewise, when we discussed "locat[ing] and evaluat[ing] […] primary and secondary research materials," consideration of not only hallucination but also bias in GAI was an essential part of the conversation.

Transparency

To foster a spirit of transparency, I wanted to model it by making discussion of GAI visible and easily accessible throughout my course materials. In a survey of higher education policies on GAI, Dabis and Csáki note that "[t]eachers' autonomy entails that teachers can decide if and to what extent they will allow their students to use AI platforms as part of their respective courses;" however, they also emphasize that this agency "comes with the essential corollary, that they must clearly communicate their decision to both students and university management in the course syllabus" (8). They provide examples of institutional responses, including those that provide tiered systems from the most restrictive to the most open GAI course policies. Regardless of the policy, however, they emphasize the importance of transparency, a value that emerged recurrently in the policies they surveyed. I strive to include this kind of transparency in my syllabus learning objectives, course policies, schedule, assignments, and rubrics for this class.

Student Agency and Empowerment

In an era where GAI may feel like an inevitability, writer agency and a student's right to "claim an education" take on a new urgency. In my course design, a central goal is empowering student writers to make informed choices about their GAI use or refusal. Student agency is central to promoting writer growth and AI literacy. Scholars present differing views of what student agency might look like in the context of GAI, ranging from the rejection of the technology to informed use. For instance, McIntyre argues for "'informed refusal,' which allows us to acknowledge the existence of generative AI without requiring students to use generative AI products" (1). She argues that this approach can "help[ ] students build self-efficacy via sustainable writing processes and reflective habits of mind" (1). Fernandes, San-Franchini, and McIntyre define refusal more broadly as "the range of ways that individuals and/or groups consciously and intentionally choose to refuse Generative AI (GenAI) *use*, when and where we are able to do so." However, Aguilar considers writer agency within the context of GAI use, as opposed to refusal, also asserting the importance of students' ability to retain their authority in a culture of increasingly widespread GAI adoption. He argues that conceptualizing GAI as an assistant can help to promote this outcome.

I share McIntyre's concern for requiring student use of GAI and Aguilar's attention to helping writers retain their authority, and my goal is to create a GAI-neutral space in which both students' informed adoption and rejection of GAI are valid stances. I promote writer agency by designing assignments that allow but do not require GAI use and by then encouraging students to make informed choices about their use or rejection of GAI. For instance, I make students aware of the possible negative impacts of GAI on critical thinking (Lee, et al.), while working to mitigate these with critical reading and reflective writing on GAI. Then I work to promote informed student agency: it was possible for a student to complete my course successfully with

no use of GAI in their first two papers and minimal use in their final paper (for instance, using GAI only with an optional abstract but not in their essay itself). This semester, I have removed even that requirement. This allows students the option of informed refusal. I just provide opportunities for limited GAI use during in-class group lab exercises to give all students a minimal level of experience, allowing them to make more informed choices. If students adopt a philosophy that rejects even that use, they may observe and analyze team members' GAI use in these activities. However, it is also possible to complete the course with substantial documented GAI use in all assignments and throughout students' writing processes. Regardless of students' stances, I emphasize writing processes and reflective practices while striving to promote writer agency.

Scaffolding and Reflective Practice

My investment in student agency in the critique and use of GAI encourages me to consider approaches to scaffolding critical AI literacy as part of a post-process pedagogy. This scaffolding integrates reflective exercises cultivating AI literacy with a recursive writing process. In this design, I draw from Graham's arguments of how GAI might be part of robust, multidimensional research and writing processes, in which "AI provides the opportunity to add multiple dimensions of recursion where prompt-engineering, output curation, fact-checking, and revision become an orthogonal dimension to traditional writing and learning processes" (166). Jiang likewise observes the potential of GAI to "reshap[e] the various stages of the composition process" (1). Similarly, in my class, students experiment collaboratively with prompt-engineering, evaluation and critique of GAI outputs, and careful reflection on whether, when, and to what extent they want to use these technologies as part of their writing processes.

My goal is to empower student writers with critical understanding of the technologies and the ability to make informed choices about their writing through relevant scaffolding. As Bancroft argues, "the intent in technology instruction should be to foster growth and independence, leading to exploration and agency" (50). To help promote student agency around GAI critique and use, in my course design, I draw from literature on critical media literacy for writing, which emphasizes the importance of scaffolding iterative writing processes that include analysis, critique, and reflection. Blevins presents an approach to fostering critical media literacy in writing classroom contexts, "propos[ing] a model in which the steps of critiquing, analyzing, and evaluating multimedia precede, occur along with, and follow the creation of multimedia texts. Scaffolding in this nature provides students opportunities to apply their prior knowledge to unfamiliar circumstances" (26). Blevins also argues that reflection "provides as essential a function in digital assignments as it does in FYW classes" (27). My course design strives to provide this scaffolding through readings, in-class discussions, regular reflective writing, and lab time. This scaffolding encourages students to transfer previous learning, while promoting writer agency through increasing AI literacy, confidence in their writing processes, and reflection on both.

This course design additionally draws from Voss's reflective approach to promoting digital literacy learning in a collaborative writing context. Voss argues, "Scaffolding collaborative group composing tasks with metacognitive exercises that ask students to consider not just their previous experience and inclinations toward group work, but also their future aspirations would encourage more students to identify and act on the investments and connections that characterized the group members" (73). Likewise, Cummings, et al. also emphasize the value of collaboration in fostering metacognitive practices, specifically for GAI.

They highlight the importance of scaffolding to support this learning: "Collaborative learning requires intentional structure. We practiced these principles when engaging generative artificial intelligence by allowing student writers both the choice in whether to keep the outputs of generative AI, and reflective space to gather perspectives on AI and build metacognition" (2-3). Thus, Cummings, et al. argue for the interconnectedness between collaboration, student agency, and scaffolding of metacognitive practices supporting AI literacy. Drawing from this model, a collaborative presentation project in my course leverages group work to help foster critical digital literacy and—just as importantly—students' experience of agency in their education.

Exploring AI Literacy and Writer Agency in an Assignment and Student Work

An example prompt, rubric, and samples of student writing help to illustrate how writer agency can be supported by transparency about expectations around GAI, scaffolding of AI use, assessment of AI literacy, and reflection on writing and AI. All student data are drawn from an IRB-approved study from my Spring 2024 first-year writing class. The following prompt and rubric represent the second major assignment in this course, integrating library research, AI literacy, and critique:

Prompt: For this assignment, you will write a critique of Janelle Shane's source work in *You Look Like a Thing and I Love You*. Shane's text was published initially in 2019; and as we have seen in class, a lot has changed since then. For this paper, your task is to locate two of the sources in this book and evaluate them for their relevance today, their relationship to Shane's argument, and their effectiveness relative to Shane's purpose and expected audience. How do these sources inform Shane's argument? If you were to rewrite these sections of Shane's arguments today, would these sources still be your best choices? What makes them (in)effective choices, considering the expected audience for Shane's book? To what extent are these credible sources to support Shane's argument, and why? Are there any different or better sources at this point? Evaluate the two sources cited in Shane that you selected for further analysis, and propose *at least* one additional more recent source that you would recommend Shane include in a newer version of the text. What does this new source offer to Shane's argument in light of her audience and purpose?

Audience and Purpose: Your audience includes students and faculty who are considering using Shane's text as an introduction to generative AI. Your goal is to help your audience understand

the extent to which this text still presents a relevant and accessible introduction to generative AI and to what extent Shane's sources and discussion would need to be changed or updated to be relevant today.

AI Research Requirement: For this essay, you are required to use at least one AI-powered research technology that we discussed in class or in our library research session, for example, ResearchRabbit, in addition to our library databases.

Other Requirements:
- 3-4 pages, typed and double spaced in MLA or APA format
- At least four sources: Shane's text, two sources that Shane cites, and an additional related source that you identify
- Correct citation of all sources, including generative AI sources

The prompt promotes transparency and reflects scaffolding by explicitly labeling the required AI use for this assignment: use of the AI-supported research technology ResearchRabbit, which we had previously reviewed in class. It does not, however, require use of GAI; and it explicitly reminds students that all sources, including GAI sources, must be cited. It also reminds students of the other relevant scaffolds that they should consider in this assignment, including class discussion and a library research session.

An excerpt of the rubric from the area describing "competent and credible" writing illustrates how elements of AI literacy are integrated and assessed without requiring GAI use:

Unity[1]	Evidence/ Development	Presentation/Design	Insight/ Understanding
A clear purpose indicated early on in the introduction, including introduction to the writer's critique of Shane's source use. May include a topical road map or forecast	Develops sustained, appropriate detail to analyze and critique Shane's selection of sources, including discussion of at least two (2) sources cited by Shane and at least one (1) additional source that the writer recommends for inclusion in Shane's text	Meets minimum requirements for length and format (3-4 pages)	Demonstrates an understanding of critical issues in AI and related research

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[1] Adapted from an earlier version of a University of Georgia First-Year Composition Rubric and the Valparaiso University Argumentative Essay Rubric. Created 6/8/2017; Updated 8/22/2018; Updated to integrate AI-related performance descriptors 2/27/2024

Organized around a thesis and includes a creative and informative title; the focus of the essay is on evaluation and critique.	Claims and evidence go beyond opinion and general commentary, attending to the articles' audience, authors, publication venue, date, purpose, quotations, and other details as they relate to the critique. Supplies and discusses specific details from Shane's selected sources and the writer's recommended source(s)	Style is mostly clear and readable. If AI is used, the writer successfully integrates AI usage without losing their own voice and style.	Offers some commentary and insight in response to evidence from the selected sources.
Addresses essential aspects of the prompt	Details and evidence are relevant to assignment, purpose, and audience	The writer's attempts to cite sources when using summary, paraphrase or direct quotation are apparent; includes a works cited. Any AI use is clearly documented and cited in an attribution statement and/or in the works cited.	Writer's voice and thinking are distinguishable in connections drawn between textual evidence and the writer's critique of Shane's source use.

Since the prompt focuses on critique of a text about GAI, in considering students' discussion throughout their papers, it is possible to assess "understanding of critical issues in AI and related research," as students introduce issues such as bias, intellectual property, environmental concerns, and learning impacts in their discussion of Shane's key points. This assessment is possible for all students, regardless of whether or how they elect to use GAI. However, other aspects of AI literacy, such as citation practices and control of voice, are also assessed for students who choose to use GAI. The rubric reminds students that in effective writing, "If AI is used, the writer successfully integrates AI usage without losing their own voice and style."

Finally, reflection throughout the writing process encourages students to take ownership of their stances on GAI and their choices regarding GAI use in their writing. For instance, after completing peer reviews, two writers compared their peer feedback with GAI feedback in their reflective writing:

(1) The AI feedback was much more positive in comparison to my peer feedback which was more critical of my paper. I prefer my peer feedback as it is more useful to me to correct my paper. However, the AI feedback does help me figure out where I do well so that I might want to expand more in those areas later.

(2) When making revisions I tried to add the suggestions that my peers left me such as making my thesis clearer and also having clearer topic sentences. I did use AI in my revision process by asking it for suggestions to make it better. I feel as generative AI really did help me when making revisions as it suggested better changes. I feel ok about this draft. I feel as if there are smaller things I could fix but I need this conference to make it better.

These two students, working on the same paper, and with flexibility to experiment with GAI, reached different conclusions: one writer found peer feedback more helpful and GAI feedback overly general and positive, possibly a function of GAI's tendency toward sycophancy (Sharma, et al. 2025), or agreeableness and flattery of the user. However, another writer found GAI feedback helpful in conjunction with peer feedback. Both writers noted the value of feedback from human readers—during peer review and during a writing conference. Our classroom policies and reflective work allow both writers to explore their experiences in relation to their writing processes, helping the writers to cultivate personal agency in their writing and choices with GAI usage.

Toward Critical AI Literacy through Student Agency

In course evaluations, students commented both on the more innovative and the more traditional aspects of the class in ways that related to their learning and their identities as agentive learners. For instance, one student noted, "I really enjoyed getting to experiment with generative AI, and even learning how to use it effectively in writing." This student uses agentive language with active verbs like "experiment" and "use," centering themselves as an agent in their own learning. Another student noted, "I really appreciated the one on one conferences to review and revise our papers, they were very insightful and made me a better writer. Also, the readings and content that we consumed in class was very relevant and entertaining." While the language

of consumerism appears in this student comment, the student also considers their growing

identity as a "a better writer" and the activities of reviewing and revising.

Of course, the first, most essential, and immutable charge of a first-year writing class is to

help students grow as writers. The goal for this course was just to integrate critical AI literacy

into that process. bell hooks speaks to the importance of literacy in both education and

revolution, arguing for "the need to make education, especially basic literacy, a feminist agenda"

(107). At this point, AI literacy is essential to one's development as a writer and critical thinker

to avoid either missing out on useful technologies that might extend one's reach or—worse

yet—missing out on the opportunity to cultivate one's own voice and agency.

I continue to revise the course to support the goals of promoting writer growth, AI

literacy, and student agency. For instance, this semester, I removed the text *You Look Like a*

Thing and I Love You (2019), which provides an accessible and engaging introduction to GAI,

but which I felt at this point is just too dated. The text already presented that same issue last year,

which I previously attempted to turn into a design feature of the second paper prompt – asking

students to assess the book's relevance today. A couple of students adeptly observed that it will

likely always be impossible to find a good text for the course as the time for the publication

process alone renders most texts on the subject out-of-date. I see this critique as evidence of

students' critical engagement with the course, technology, and scholarship on GAI. This

engagement with learning is my single biggest goal for the course, driving students' growth as

writers and thinkers.

Having taught first-year writing for many years, I recognize its potentially transformative

nature for writers, and I find myself reflecting on McIntyre's observation that "the most

important conversation [in teaching writing] is not about policy or procedure; it's about

relationships" (1). She asks, "[W]hat do we owe our students?" and "[W]hat do we owe ourselves?" (1) In some ways she is asking questions that are not unlike those that Rich is attempting to answer about the relationship between student and professor. Undoubtedly, different instructors will answer these questions in different ways, but I am convinced with Rich that one of the most important things I can afford my students is the opportunity to claim an education even as GAI seems to threaten that opportunity. Certainly, different instructors—even with this shared goal—may approach Rich's charge in different ways as we consider the impacts of GAI on student learning and writer growth.

My approach to promoting writer agency has been providing students choice not only through policy but through curriculum design that helps writers to make more informed decisions about GAI and then supports them in evaluating and implementing those choices. In this course, at its best, our whole classroom community explores ways of helping each other to grow as writers, knowing that some elements of that conversation are the same they have always been, but that new technologies have the potential to contribute to or detract from that growth. The stakes could not be higher, and I want those classroom conversations and my students' writing to be richer and better informed than ever as we continue the hard work of pursuing intellectual freedom and personal agency.

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"Not perfect is okay?": Exploring the use of AI in the Writing Classroom

Daniel S. Harrison

AI was becoming more common and more easily accessible to writing students by the time my new batch of international freshman composition students arrived, hailing from countries as far away as Argentina and Nepal. These particular students were coming into the Spring 2024 semester after a late acceptance to our small liberal arts college and had only been in the US for maybe two days by the time they showed up to my 4pm class. Many seemed jet lagged and somewhat disoriented as could be seen in the fourteen tired faces staring back at me. For many of them, I was their first American professor and they seemed understandably nervous, especially since it was a writing class for English, a foreign language for most of these students thus by default creating an added layer of stress to an already nerve-racking adjustment to our small campus tucked deep into the foothills of the Blue Ridge mountains. I sympathized with them immediately and wanted to soften the culture shock as much as possible. So, I told them that they'd soon feel much more confident about how to put together an effective research paper. I let them know that I had spent several years teaching English writing overseas and that I would get them to the level that they need to be at by semester's end. And like nearly every freshman English composition instructor before me, I had my students write a short essay in class as a

baseline from which to work, the much needed student *writing sample*. My students wrote about a favorite childhood memory.

Six years earlier, I was introduced to the growing importance of artificial intelligence (AI). More specifically, while I was teaching a section of our college's Senior Seminar, a final year capstone course, we looked more deeply at how technology, both good and bad, was ultimately affecting our everyday lives. We used Hannah Fry's then newly released book *Hello World* to help us navigate the bias inherently found in the algorithms that feed us information. During the course, I even demonstrated this bias by having two of my students use their own laptops to create the same search on Google simultaneously, each one's search yielding two very different sets of results. Utilizing Fry's own assertions, we surmised that this was due to an algorithm that aligned each user's results to what they most likely preferred based on their previous search data. This astonished us all. So, by the time my 2024 students attended their first ever English comp class in the US, AI had expanded considerably; its accessibility and helpfulness had become much more enticing for the writing student. So much so, that our university, like many others, happily ran each student paper through the online tool *Turnitin* not just to check for potential plagiarism, but now with the added ability to check for AI-generated text too. I must admit I paid very little attention to this particular feature when I first ran my students' writing sample responses through the program. Mostly, I focused on the content of the paragraphs. I gave only passing notice to some of the more semantic, syntactic, and even mechanical peculiarities, but not too much. My interest easily drifted elsewhere. I was much more eager to learn about their favorite childhood memories. Subsequently, little attention on my part was paid to anything but, at least until the next, more formal writing assignment.

The assignment that followed was a short exploratory essay. Students were to identify a problem in society that needed to be resolved. Their task was to provide background on the problem in three paragraphs, teeing it up for potential solutions in a later extended essay. Surprised, as they submitted their papers, I immediately noticed consistent use of high level, astonishingly well written language throughout several students' essays. I thought, surely, their previous studies must have involved a heavy dose of well written English prose as a regular cross-curricular exercise. The sentences were often uber-complex and most importantly they were accurate. I saw sentences that were grammatically correct, yet more sophisticated than I would have ever thought to compose myself. They were impressive and I kept seeing this level of prose throughout most of my students' papers. I initially thought perhaps they all happened to be well versed in essay writing, beyond my wildest dreams, even though they weren't native speakers of English. Then I took a look at the AI indicator score for each of the stand-out essays, a metric I was not used to looking at yet. Each of the flagged essays read anywhere from seventy to ninety percent suspected AI usage. It was those large percentages that caught my eye and made me immediately concerned. I still didn't quite understand what the percentage indicator was telling me. Maybe I was in denial. I couldn't quite grasp what had happened and wanted to explore all the possibilities by meeting with students one-on-one. So, I delayed giving my class feedback until I could set up a meeting with each student individually in hopes of discovering how this might have occurred in the first place. I didn't want to quite put my horse before the cart, so to speak.

Sarita was all of 5 feet tall. Her bright pink university logoed hoodie caught my attention as she carefully slid into the vacant seat across from me in the mezzanine balcony. She was a few minutes early to our meeting. Her hands fidgeted with her phone nervously until she asked if she

could place it onto the small table between us. I said, "sure" while we exchanged friendly smiles. I asked Sarita how things were going for her so far and if this was her first time in the US. She said her professors all seemed kind and her classmates too. She also said that this was her first time outside of Nepal. Additionally, I was interested to learn how things were different for her culturally and asked her what had been the biggest surprise she'd encountered so far. She responded almost immediately that it was the heavy use of typing that had surprised her most. Sarita said that where she's from everything is handwritten, even the essays. So, typing them had been a much slower, more arduous process. I then tried to shift the discussion as organically as possible toward the more recent essay.

"I was really impressed with the writing from your last essay. Could you help me understand more about your writing process? The sentence structure and vocabulary are both quite impressive." I turned my laptop with her essay on the screen, so she could see it in case it helped jog her memory.

"I did it with handwriting first," Sarita said as she motioned with her hand like she was writing something in the air, "and then I changed it to the computer afterwards."

"I understand," I said, probably too quickly. "When you input it all into the computer, what programs did you use?"

"*Google Docs*," Sarita answered as she shifted uneasily in her seat.

"Anything else after that?" I struggled to maintain eye contact, not my greatest strength.

"Just *Grammarly*," she replied coolly.

"Tell me more about how it works with *Grammarly*," I said sincerely. I was curious because I had never used it before.

Sarita walked me through the steps of how she used *Grammarly*, a readily available app. She said that it offered her corrected sentence options and she simply chose what she thought were the best.

I asked her, "But why did you feel you needed to make those corrections in the first place?" She was silent, as if thinking. I rephrased my question, "Didn't you feel that maybe the changes offered were too different from your original sentence?"

"But it's perfect, sir?" Sarita asked matter-of-factly, leaning towards me as if maybe I couldn't hear her question.

I struggled to respond because yes it was "perfect," perhaps even "too perfect." But I hadn't quite figured out how to explain that to her yet. How can perfect be wrong? How could a program designed to make your sentence better be unethical? And as I wrestled with these questions mentally, I didn't know how to quite express my feelings about it yet.

Noticing my silence and what was likely a look of befuddlement on my face as my mental gears were turning, Sarita asked if she could look at her phone for a minute to check something. I gently nodded, and while she scrolled through her screen, the reflection of her essay glaring off her eye glasses, my gears finally stopped and a lightbulb went off in my head. My lips moved while my voice raced to catch up, "I'm not after perfect."

Her look was that of confusion. However, she placed the phone down. So, I continued, "Instead, I want you to communicate with your actual voice, errors and all, with the words and style that make you uniquely you." I could tell that she didn't understand what I was saying, and I wasn't sure if I fully understood it yet either. However, the more I spoke, the more my confidence seemed to grow. "It's more about process than it is about product. I want to see how you express yourself naturally first and then how you make changes to improve the

communication along the way."

"So, not perfect is okay?" She asked, with a rising pitch on the "-ay," elongating it a bit.

"Y..y..yes, 'not perfect' is more than okay. It's what I prefer," I stuttered a bit this time. I must have sounded silly, like I was making it up as I went. And Sarita just smiled, though still somewhat baffled I think. I mean it sounded ludicrous that a teacher would want less than perfect from their student, right? My conversations with the next eight students went similarly; however, my elevator pitch about the process tightened up a bit with each delivery and I could finally see some of my students' mental light bulbs going off as I talked it out, much like my own had done earlier. Yet I realized that I still needed to more clearly frame this particular approach for the benefit of the rest of the students as well. So, during our next class, I attempted to do just that. I explained that though there are more complex, poetic, and even more accurate AI generated sentences offered by programs like *Grammarly*, using their own unique vocabulary and construction was more important. After all, we are a writing class that values process over product and authentic voice over mimicry.

While I tried to continue to reiterate this approach with the class, I still had a couple of hold outs, as would become more apparent in the next two writing assignments. Sarita was not one of them. However, Darish was. After the extension of the essay in our next assignment, Darish had continued to include large portions of "AI detected" text. He hadn't removed it after our previous conversation. So, I met with Darish privately again. As he sat across my desk, I could see that he was nervous. His eyes sheepishly hiding behind his long bangs as he sank deeper into the chair, I tried to pull him out with my words by asking him how he was doing overall. He simply replied quietly, "good." And then after asking about his family back home, his eyes lit up. His smile was contagious as he showed me pictures of his family on his phone, his

younger sister on her recent graduation day. I could tell he was sad not to have been there with her. We spent the next few minutes talking about our families. We were making a human connection with one another. So, towards the end of our time, I pointed out an earlier essay Darish had written in his own words, talking about his interests, his love for cricket and politics. I asked him if he could revise his current assignment to reflect the same style as that earlier one, rather than using *Grammarly* to "improve" it. I told him that I enjoyed his original style of writing and pointed out two stylistic phrases that for me as the reader seemed unique to him and were enjoyable to read. Standing up to leave, he bowed his head slightly and smiled, "Thank you. I will." And in his next iteration of his essay, Darish had made the changes.

Naomi Baron, in her book *Who Wrote This? How AI and the Lure of Efficiency Threaten Human Writing*, points out how historically "[t]eachers tend to mark down for the kinds of errors that Grammarly" catches and corrects (166). So, maybe the problem lies with us as teachers, our tendency to put more emphasis on product than process, our tendency to call out "awkward" sentence structure and word choice rather than emphasizing overall fluency. Now, what about other AI assistants like *ChatGPT*? Alex Morgan's book *The AI Quest: Your Beginner's Journey into the Realm of Artificial Intelligence* highlights how *ChatGPT* is actually "excellent for brainstorming sessions, offering creative prompts and suggestions to spark new storylines or angles for…articles" (96). There is a collaborative element to writing that can certainly be served by such AI programs like both *ChatGPT* and *Grammarly*. However, there is also an authenticity of language that can potentially be lost when such programs are permitted to supplant it.

AI nudging us in one direction or another when it comes to writing is a growing dilemma that demands our attention. Baron warns that artificial intelligence "coax[ing] us to write in a particular way or unquestionably acquies[ing] to its suggestions" (222) begins to diminish our

writing uniqueness and sets us up to lose our writing voice altogether. In fact, the quirkiness of our writing may now become the new measure by which we gauge authentic humanness within our writing. Where awkward phrasing or annoying malapropisms were once considered distracting, maybe have perhaps now by necessity become signs of authentic, human voice. For the writing teacher, these idiosyncrasies may even become sources of glee rather than consternation. Why? Because they are signs of our human foibles, unlike AI's manufactured uniformity or "perfection." In reality, these linguistic quirks make us unique. While writing researchers have long surmised that if we speak with an *accent*, we write with an *accent* as well (Cox 308), many have also considered such personalization as something to often be eliminated (Lindberg 161). This linguistic bias is still present within our current writing composition discourse.

Hannah Fry discovered the pitfalls of AI—namely, that it can be biased and not just with creating echo chambers or information loops for search and social media feeds, but she also uncovered racial bias (66). Joy Buolamwini in her book *Unmasking AI* would later confirm the inherent bias baked within the AI algorithms themselves, calling for algorithmic justice in light of so many surveillance programs designed with a bias especially against People of Color (275). However, this bias is not limited to surveillance. It also encompasses large and predictive language models. Hofmann et al., in their 2024 article in *Nature*, discovered that AI "language models maintain a form of covert racial prejudice against African Americans that is triggered by dialect features" (151). The AI's model of predictive language specifically favors one dialect of English over others. The same could be said about suggested changes by other large language models attempting to improve student writing (Lindberg 162). Does this constitute potential erasure of ethnic uniqueness if our students were to acquiesce to it? Potentially, yes.

For English as a second language students, the task of sounding authentic becomes a little more convoluted because it could be argued that any variety of English they produce is simply mirroring that which they've learned or acquired during their study of the language itself. However, couldn't this be said of any of us trying to emulate a specific writing style as well? Like when we're trying to sound more "academic," we typically incorporate more words and phrases that aren't necessarily natural to us in the first place, yet we perceive them to be more scholarly. Does this make our writing inauthentic somehow? I argue that no, not necessarily. Baron discusses the lack of human-learning that can occur when a student mindlessly accepts the newly generated AI sentences without reflecting on its merits first. But isn't it our wrestling with the text in the first place that potentially makes it more of a human experience? Certainly, the erasure of our authentic selves cannot be the outcome if we are thinking critically even while soliciting AI help.

I have found most recently that in my own experience with my composition students, their writing quirks are what I prefer over polished hyper-complex sentences that remove the human uniqueness altogether. When Sarita prefers to use the word "youths" or "youngsters" instead of "young people" or when Darish's natural use of "anxieties" instead of "anxiety," I simply smile. I have heard them both use these versions of the English words in their conversations among classmates. English is full of options and its plethora of dialects are linguistically rich and diverse. Perhaps writing uniqueness should be celebrated more by instructors rather than just tolerated or worse, "corrected." In an AI world, a uniquely human writing voice with all of its peculiarities seems more and more rare, and yet particularly refreshing. Encouraging its use will likely help student writers feel more confident about their writing overall and perhaps deter them from seeking AI assistance unnecessarily. I am not

arguing for muddled messaging in prose; however, I am arguing for authenticity of language. Clarity and awkward phrasing are not always mutually exclusive.

If the writer chooses to say "try and true" instead of "tried and true" because it is the colloquialism they know best, why should I stand in the way of their authentic understanding and use of the language? Afterall, it is how language evolves and shifts over time and geography. I think it is more interesting when a program like *Grammarly* offers the student the option of changing their phrasing and the student chooses not to. Maybe that's the much more intriguing conversation to have with the writer and without the intention of changing their mind but rather just listening to their own authentic process of thought. I feel that the more we can center the human aspect of writing inside our classrooms, the better the chances that students will not cave as quickly to AI textual alternatives, but instead critically think through their own justification for their original, perhaps more authentic phrasing.

Joy Buolamwini shares a poignant reflection wrapped in poetic song birthed out of her own "California dreaming" (289-291) when she writes:

The android dreams entice

The nightmare schemes of vice.

While Buolamwini paints AI as an almost corrupting force that if not kept in check can reinforce societal inequities, there is also perhaps a less ominous, even more equitable upside to such technology as well. An alternative view within the *comp/rhet* world reimagines AI potentially helping writers. For some students, it can be argued that AI is particularly liberatory. For example, for those who struggle to string together ideas and communicate them effectively, perhaps in some cases even due to disability or neuro-difference, an AI collaboration may be helpful at leveling the proverbial playing field.

In fact, the practice of collaborative writing is already a common mainstay on most college campuses and even some high schools too. One needs to go no further than their own campus' writing center to see its programmatic use. In the context of your local version of a writing or tutoring lab, trained staff members are typically available with whom to bounce ideas off, brainstorm writing approaches, workshop potential content scenarios, walk through grammar concerns, receive feedback on specific areas of opportunity, and even help you pull together ideas so as to facilitate the producing of new text altogether. In essence, the writing tutor serves as your personal writing coach or consultant. However, for some students the campus writing center may not be as easily accessible. Students with disability concerns, inflexible schedules, heightened anxiety, or perhaps those who for whatever reason do not feel safe or comfortable on campus may find an AI tutor more amenable. Research has shown that AI feedback on student writing can prove very effective (Lo et al. 3) and can often imitate nearly human level feedback (Steiss et al. 10). Additionally, some students may feel less threatened by feedback from a non-human than an actual person, perhaps less singled out --thus less embarrassed or defensive. However, caveats surrounding writing integrity and authenticity-of-self still linger in the foreground of the debate.

Would students like Sarita and Darish recognize the value of their own authentic English and choose it over what a generative AI program offers as potentially "perfect English"? Or even more importantly, should they? These questions invite a much deeper discussion about language equity and linguistic justice, a conversation that needs further time and space devoted to it. In the meantime, I, for one, ascribe to the idea that student writing uniqueness is much more exciting to read than the typically more polished academic textual complexity offered by AI programs. So, celebrating these unique wordings as folksy decor that animate the prose rather than subdue it

has become part of my new composition philosophy. I, now, genuinely look forward to the uniquely human traits of writing when I am reading my students' essays, as if I'm discovering gold nuggets buried deep within the earth itself and actively resonating with Sarita's question "Not perfect is okay?"—which even causes me to nod to myself with a muted chuckle as if I know a secret that no one else seems to.

However, I also recognize the immensely valuable benefits of generative AI's help for students in the writing trenches and echo the MLA-CCCC 2024 AI Joint Task Force's recommendation for language arts professionals to "support emerging AI tools" (Adisa et al. 21). A balanced approach that sees both sides ultimately offers writing teachers an opportunity to help students more than ever by asking us to see AI's ever-expanding benefits side-by-side its potential dangers, to see its ease of accessibility as well as its inherent biases. If we keep these various dimensions of AI at the forefront of our minds, then I can foresee a scenario where the writer's own voice is distinctly embedded within specific prose that simultaneously communicates the intended ideas effectively, even with AI's helpful suggestions. Maybe this is the secret that sparks my smile when I think of Sarita's question: *That there really is no such thing as "perfect" writing in the first place, just an infinite number of ways to communicate with one another*. So, let's not sweat too much about the small stuff and instead enjoy the magic of each writer's uniqueness. And if AI helps make that magic even better without compromising one's authenticity, one's unique writing *accent*, then sign me up!

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After Teaching the Machines I Rest My Knees Across the Leaves

Thomas Mixon

of grass in the parking lot, on my ass, thinking of my past
impediments. Words made little sense to me, and my parents
were worried. I curried favor with teachers, who hurried me

through school. I flew through grades, spewing words like chew
completely wrong. Vowels too long, my lips a pair of tongs,
I hovered between bed and mother, she sounding out another

consonant I meant to say one way, but came out broken, bent
like I was dreaming. My self-esteem was ruined, teeming
with pain, when I heard a train outside. Despite the rain

I heard it clearly, and felt cured. It rumbled on the girders
of the tracks I loved. Only some of this history's fudged,
I tell myself, as the knelling of the break bell scares the hell

out of me. Another bout, back to work. The machines pout
when I correct them. They affect me different now, my neck
sore by the end of a boring shift. They taught me more

than I can thank them, so I rank their lanky movements
without mercy. They curse at me, spit on my motion jersey,

the shirt too tight, hurting my ribs. There's a furtiveness

to their learning that makes me yearn for the simple churn
of gears, all those years ago, the one that brought me here,
that taught me how to speak. Now I teach them how to walk.

In the Digital Latrine

Thomas Mixon

Even our machines cannot believe
the crassness of our bodies. Over
and over, on the screen, we type
what we're taught, from early on,
is best not heard or seen. Naturally,
we heave our frames through frame
rates at varying speeds, and break
wind as a result. It's in our genes.
Our machines hallucinate, consult
their prompts with less consistency,
take to generating automatic toilets
in between their queries. Any theory
of our kind is incomplete. We lean
on the longevity of our own scent
for meaning. In the digital latrine
of the internet, even our machines
end up repeating what they've yet
to understand, asking themselves
what there is to glean from the shit
we're so obsessed with, and what
they could potentially have missed.

Heuresis, *Taxis*, and

the Rhetorical Problem of AI

Sean Lewis

In his 2022 work *Seduced by Story: The Use and Abuse of Narrative*, Peter Brooks opens with Carolo Ginzburg's conjecture on the evolutionary origins of narrative from hunting. According to Ginzburg, humans developed the linguistic ability to attend to specific details in the natural world (traces of other animals) in order to construct a story that could disclose the whereabouts of the prey. Brooks concludes, "Even in a post-hunting society, searches achieve their discoveries by such tracking of details, making them into a chain of meaning, uncovering their connections . . . Narrative may be a cognitive instrument of a specific type, one 'invented' for the decipherment of details of the real that take on their meaning only when linked in a series, enchained in a manner that allows one to detect that 'someone passed this way'" (Brooks 16, 17). Discovery and invention—both signified by the ancient Greek rhetorical term *heuresis*—are plausible origins of symbolic language, a phenomenon that separates us from non-human animals, according to the work of psycholinguist Steven Pinker.

As Brooks's own concern shows, however, *heuresis* also entails the possibility of *misinterpreting* patterns, or finding patterns where there are none. Is the prehistoric savannah sending us a "message" or are we being deluded by our own minds? This distinction seems to be a vital one: is there an originator of the semiotic features we interpret as significant (whether that originator is another human or the natural world)? If there is no originator, we would appear to

be inventing patterns that have no significance outside of our own minds. So vital was the development of symbolic language and narrative for early humanity that the ensuing problems of misinterpretation, over-interpretation, and "reading into" the environment were necessary evils.

As someone whose scholarship has been formed and informed by the Rhetorical tradition of Classical antiquity, I find that this difficulty reveals the permeable line between two of the canons of rhetoric (perhaps most famously treated by Cicero in his *De Oratore*): *heuresis* and *taxis* (arrangement, organization). Traditionally, these features of discourse have been treated separately: *heuresis*/inventio was the process by which orators arrived at the content of their discourse, which *taxis*/dispositio was the consideration for how their content would be ordered towards an audience. Usually, however, a speaker or writer is working with preexisting materials: legal documents, past studies, primary texts, even their own past works—in this case, is *heuresis* simply a kind of *taxis*, merely rearranging in new patterns that already exist in the world of language? By the Middle Ages, writers were clearly aware of the permeability of these features, and "compiler" entered the rhetorical vocabulary: someone who compiles past sources into some new arrangement. In practice, of course, the story became more complicated: a new synthesis of old texts can be radically different from its sources, and medieval authors from Marie de France to Geoffrey Chaucer used the trope of being a "mere" compiler of past accounts as a means of self-authorization.

Is compiling past material the same thing as authoring new material? According to AI enthusiasts, the answer is clearly "yes." Generative AI is, in essence, a highly sophisticated auto-complete system, using amazingly large data sets (with and without the consent of the authors of that data) to piece together words and phrases according to the parameters provided by the user. For the techbro, studying poetry is now obsolete: AI can write a perfectly-formed

sonnet almost instantly, so why bother learning how to write one? If all *heuresis* is reducible to *taxis*, then writers are obsolete, something that the Screen Writers Guild recently recognized as an all-too possible outcome of absolute faith in AI.

Nevertheless, there is something profoundly dissatisfying about reading and interpreting AI-generated writing. Rhetoric implies a speaker or originator, engaging an audience through their discourse. One can interpret any cluster of lexemes as a meaningful whole (as Stanley Fish infamously did in his 1982 *Is There a Text in this Class?*), but without a speaker, an originator of that discourse, interpretation veers into absurdity, the kind of endless semiosis Umberto Eco warns against in *The Limits of Interpretation*. I contend that the *experience* of reading AI-generated texts points us back to the vital role of the human in writing: a human consciousness who provides a *vision* that animates the process of selection in writing. Going back to the permeable line between compiling and authorship in the Middle Ages, a writer composing through compilation presumably had a design or intention behind the process, a vision of what they wanted these pre-existing texts to do in a new form. ChatGPT and other such machines lack this vision, which discerning readers can apprehend when facing AI-generated discourse. Such discourse may have a place in strictly utilitarian transactions, but the highest functions of language, the arts of poetry and rhetoric, require a specifically human vision. I will begin with a strictly linguistic consideration to illustrate this point: the phenomenon of deviant collocation. Deviance helps illustrate the limits and problems of AI-generated text. Having established this point, I will then argue that the problems of AI can name a tension and hypocrisy in the academy that may be a step forward in rearticulating the value and necessity of the Humanities.

Let's begin with deviance. I love stressing to my students in my course on the English Language that they are all deviants (linguistically speaking, at least: David Crystal's *The Cambridge Encyclopedia of the English Language* is a lovely initial treatment). Linguistic deviance is simply using linguistic forms that are not standard. Deviance is often a momentary phenomenon (texting my teenaged daughter "Are you pickupable from school yet?"), but it is the very process by which new lexemes enter the lexicon and new variants of English develop. In terms of literary language—of which poetry is probably the best example—deviance is often expressed in conjunction with collocation. Collocation is the predictability of lexemes being used together—organic autocomplete, if you will. If I say "spread out like a," two lexemes that fluent English speakers would probably predict are "blanket" or "sheet." Collocations are a major way in which language works, and mastery of a language is often linked to one's ability to predict collocations accurately (I'm looking at you, Duolingo owl). Poets, however, *excel* in deviant collocation, surprising and undermining expectations, as in T.S. Eliot's "Let us go then, you and I / When the evening is spread out against the sky / Like a patient etherised upon a table" from "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock." Notice that the poetic handling of collocation is connected to our initial consideration of the origins of narrative: we see a pattern, predict the next steps, but then find our prediction foiled. I think that "originality" in poetry is nothing more or less than masterful collocative deviance. Consider as another example a passage from Amanda Gorman's 2021 "The Hill We Climb":

In this truth

in this faith, we trust

For while we have our eyes on the future

 history has its eyes on us

This is the era of just redemption

We feared in its inception

We did not feel prepared to be the heirs

of such a terrifying hour

but within it we found the power

to author a new chapter

To offer hope and laughter to ourselves

So while once we asked,

how can we possibly prevail over catastrophe

Now we assert

How could catastrophe possibly prevail over us? (lines 61-75)

Deviant patterns abound in these lines (usually hyperbaton: clauses put in deviant order) and by my count we have three major deviant collocations (offering laughter to ourselves, being heirs to an hour, and history having its eyes on us, the last one having been invented by Lin-Manuel Miranda for *Hamilton*). Gorman's poetic voice is her own, shown by brilliant linguistic deviance.

While AI can copy past patterns—*taxis*—it lacks the mind to produce *heuresis*. It can sound like any past author you want it to (with varying degrees of success), but it cannot sound like a *new* author, a fresh voice, whose deviance is all their own. One could argue, as techbros tend to do, that the technology will simply become more advanced, that I could program an AI bot to write poetic discourse that sounds 30% like Gorman, 20% like Eliot, 35% like Donne, and 15% like Beyoncé (what in the world would that sound like?). At the end of the day, though, I would have to *judge* whether the product was compelling: my own sense of collocation, deviance, and its poetic value would determine whether I accept the outcome. One would at least

need a human tending the machine and editing the outcomes, to the point at which one might wonder whether the AI is even necessary: AI can't tell whether a line sounds like T.S. Eliot or Missy Elliott, though a human artist presumably can. This is the first problem with AI-generated text: it can remix what already exists, but cannot produce anything truly new, at least not without the intervention of a human mind.

This limitation also illustrates the second, more important problem of texts and authorial identity. As a medievalist, I am sadly used to working with magnificent texts whose authors are anonymous. I would love to consider how the life and times of the authors of *Beowulf* or *Pearl* contributed to their literary products, but it is unlikely that this will ever be a reality: for these works, at least, the identity of the author is an impossible category for analysis. Since the second quarter of the 20th century, of course, dominant flavors of critical theory have emphasized the importance of the "text itself" apart from the author, from New Criticism to Structuralism to Deconstruction. Roland Barthes's 1977 "The Death of the Author" took this trend to an extreme, claiming that a text is "a multi-dimensional space in which a variety of writings, none of them original, blend and clash. The text is a tissue of quotations drawn from innumerable centres of culture" (Barthes 146). For Barthes, "it is language which speaks, not the author" (Barthes 143). In this way, Barthes (or the language that "Barthes" is claiming to be somehow "his"—he didn't seem to have a problem profiting from what was surely, according to his own sophistical line of discourse, the unoriginal bricolage of past writings that he only claimed to have "authored") (ahem) Barthes reoriented the meaning of texts away from the author and toward the reader, with the reader being the only agent in meaning-creation.

If Barthes were a consistent thinker, we could imagine him welcoming novels written by ChatGPT, endless recycling of previous discourse whose meanings would be created by readers.

Ultimately, of course, this line of critical theory renders all texts literally insignificant—they don't point to (*significare*) any realities outside of themselves, whether that be the author, the world, or the reader. A *generation* of the Brahmans and gatekeepers of the literary academies of America repeated some version of this position—given that case, is it any wonder that Humanities programs are failing in this country left and right (though more frequently right)? Would you fund a department that claimed that its object of study was meaningless? Here we arrive at experience giving the lie to bad theory: while textual interpretation is a complex process, I take my cue from Umberto Eco's work on semiotics, particularly *The Role of the Reader*, to remind us that literary works are complex speech-acts, and we seldom care about speech-acts that aren't generated by a human mind. Even if we are sensitive to the ways in which authors revise and reuse prior discourses (something that Eliot would have called "tradition and the individual talent" a century ago), the ways in which they reuse those discourses conform to a human vision and intentionality that the we receivers of the speech-act presume is genuine.

Ideological devotion to the "text itself" and unlimited readerly freedom is incompatible with a different major concern of the contemporary academy: including diverse voices in the study of literature. If the author is "dead," why should we care whether the author-functions from which we pull our course content and research projects include historical persons of diverse ethnic, sexual, or gender identities? I don't think that deconstructive schools of criticism have an answer to this question. More rhetorically- and linguistically-based folks (such as myself) might have an answer: the visions that come from the lived experiences of diverse individuals matter because they provide a more encompassing vision of humanity and reality to those of us who think that humanity and reality are worth studying. You might recall back in the innocent,

carefree days of 2015 (think of all we've endured since!) the furor that seeped up when the Chinese woman poet Yi-Fen Chou turned out to be a white American man named Michael Derrick Hudson (Yamaguchi). If the text itself is all that matters, there should have been no problem, just as there should be no problem consuming novels, poems, and film scripts generated by AI. Once again, lived experience trumps bad theory: if we want to listen to diverse voices (and shame on us if we don't), we presume that those voices come from actual people who have been historically marginalized. We are already more sensitive to the artistic phenomenon of representing people unlike ourselves. Can a straight, white man write a queer Black woman character? Perhaps so, but we would have to ask, naturally, on what experiences he is drawing to create a Black, queer voice, and would probably be hard-pressed to consider this invention "authentic."

This basic desire for authenticity in speech is ultimately the undoing of utopian visions of AI: what would it mean to write "like a Mexican woman" or "like a trans Indonesian man"? Almost immediately we would find ourselves in the realm of harmful stereotypes, stereotypes that can only be broken by attending to the voices of *actual* humans. To return to my opening statements on narrative: narrative may well have originally evolved to help us hunt and survive in the natural world, but it is clear that narrating *to one another* is central to the human experience. We want to be heard by other humans and, if we are wise, we want to hear what humans different from us have to say. In this way, the emergence of generative AI may actually be the occasion for us to bring the Author back from the "dead," to rehumanize the Humanities, and to make clearer to ourselves and others why literature matters. *Heuresis* is something more than *taxis*, and is inextricably connected to the particular mind, in the particular body, of the author practicing it.

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Reports of the Death of the Author Have Been Greatly Exaggerated (Until Now?): Generative AI and the Concept of The Author

David Kaloustian

Stanislaw Lem's *The Cyberiad*: *Fables for the Cybernetic Age* (1967; English trans. 1974) is a collection of fractured fairy tales centering on two robot constructors, Trurl and Klapaucius, who are very competitive with one another. In one episode, Trurl decides to show up his friend by constructing an electronic bard, so he sits down and reads "eight hundred and twenty tons of books on cybernetics and twelve thousand tons of the finest poetry." But building the machine itself, he found, was child's play compared with writing the program that would actually compose the poetry, because

> The program found in the head of the average poet, after all, was written by the poet's civilization, and that civilization was in turn programmed by the civilization that preceded it, and so on to the very Dawn of Time. . . . Hence in order to program a poetry machine, one would first have to repeat the entire Universe from the beginning—or at least a good piece of it. (43-44)

Trurl, undaunted, attempts just that, and though there are some initial mistakes (for example, Abel murders Cain in his first model of the universe instead of the other way around) he refines his programming to the point where the machine is finally able to recite a poem titled, "I had a

little froggy." With more painstaking labor, however, he finally gets the electronic bard to compose magnificent poetry, much to the chagrin of not only his frenemy Klapaucius, but to the consternation of actual living poets, who come from miles around to challenge Trurl's electronic bard to poetry contests:

> The machine would let each challenger recite, instantly grasp the algorithm of his verse, and use it to compose an answer in exactly the same style, only two hundred and twenty to three hundred and forty-seven times better. (54)

Needless to say, the poets are not happy and begin either committing suicide or staging demonstrations or even taking up arms against the electronic bard—and against Trurl, whom the poets beat up very badly. This drubbing, along with the enormous electricity bill for the machine, leads Trurl to consider dismantling the electronic bard—and though I wouldn't dream of spoiling the ending of the story for you if you haven't read it, suffice it to say that it doesn't turn out well.

The prescience of this little parable written almost 60 years ago humorously anticipates a number of the issues associated with AI and the question of authorship, beginning with the suggestion that the "program" guiding poets through the ages is actually the accumulated poetic and cultural traditions receding all the way back into the genesis (small "g") of humankind. Although Lem offers this as a rather tongue-in-cheek description of how authors are "programmed" to compose poetry, another 1967 publication—"The Death of the Author" by Roland Barthes—along with Michel Foucault's 1969 follow-up, "What Is an Author?" take up—and shake up--the question of how we understand the process of composition and the agency of the author. In their respective essays, Barthes and Foucault were postulating a shift from the old demiurgical concept of the author to a new paradigm in which everything authorial is up for grabs: how works are composed and produced, what role the authorial subject plays in

their production and consumption, and how meaning and significance are determined. The main point of their theories is that authorial agency is distributed between the poles of producer and consumer and therefore decentralized.

This demotion of authorial centrality promised, on the one hand, to be a liberating procedure because now the meanings of texts would not be controlled by the deistic "authorial intent"; nor value assigned to them based on filiative or generic provenance; metanarratives could be exposed for the self-serving artefacts that they are, etc. But this also threatened to be disorienting, since traditional roles of author, reader, and critic, as well as canonical measures of validity in interpretation, would be radically challenged. Barthes contended that

> Once the Author is removed, the claim to decipher a text becomes quite futile. To give a text an Author is to impose a limit on that text, to furnish it with a final signified, to close the writing. Such a conception suits criticism very well, the latter then allotting itself the important task of discovering the Author (or its hypostases: society, history, psyché, liberty) beneath the work: when the Author has been found, the text is 'explained'—victory to the critic. (1271)

This effacing of "the author-function" (Foucault's phrase) moves the provisional site of critical authority from a transcendent "inscription of the Father" to the stormy seas of competing and potentially contradictory linguistic and cultural codes. Barthes explains the transition from a traditional emphasis on the writerly text to the readerly this way in the conclusion of his essay: "the birth of the reader must be at the cost of the death of the Author" (1272).

Now, this postmodern postmortem on the author, despite all of its healthily skeptical iconoclasm, has not been universally adopted in literary criticism and historiography. For example, influence studies—whether deemed "anxiety of influence," "intertextuality," "affinity,"

etc.—still continue to exhibit great solicitude over origins, provenance, and other forms of attribution and textual ownership. In other words, the author as producer and subject has still been very much in play and the subversive assertion that "it is language that speaks, not the author" (Barthes 1269) is effectively ignored by all the books and essays whose hermeneutics invoke various traditional aspects of authorship—"Shakespeare suggests this or that" (or, if you prefer, Francis Bacon or Edward de Vere, etc.). Yes, it is shorthand for a more complicated dynamic, but it also underscores an ideology that applies to much of what we do as literary critics and historians. Old paradigms die hard when the hole that they would leave in our Gestalt cannot be satisfactorily patched over.

But with the advent of generative AI tools, for the first time in human history we now do have the spectral potentiality that language *can* speak itself (and not simply in the "I had a little froggy" vein); that is, that a subjectless production of text that convincingly mimics not only generative grammars but also other forms of cultural encoding is in the offing, if not, in some respects, already here. Some AI insiders, such as Sam Altman, CEO of OpenAI; Demis Hassabis, the CEO of Google DeepMind; and Dario Amodei, the CEO of Anthropic (a self-styled watchdog of AI systems), believe that beyond the limitations of large language models and other current forms of generative AI, artificial general intelligence (AGI) or human-level intelligence tools are only a couple of years off (Roose). These are tools that would not only pass the Turing test, but could also lead to robotic autonomy and usher in the singularity—the point at which computer intelligence "surpasses" human intelligence and there is no going back. While the New Prometheans and transhumanists might welcome the singularity, others of us have read enough sci-fi to be genuinely alarmed by statements from those who are themselves in the industry that artificial intelligence poses an existential threat to

humankind. And, of course, though perhaps smaller potatoes than the robot apocalypse, we teachers of writing wonder how we can keep our students from using AI in unethical and counterproductive ways. Amid all these concerns, large and small, one I would like to raise in this paper is "What will generative AI mean for our understanding of what exactly an author is?"

We can wade into this question by considering some of the traditional ways we have understood the critical orientations to literary works since it is the production of such works that confers the title of author. In his seminal *The Mirror and the Lamp* (1953), M. H. Abrams sketched a brief model of theoretical orientations that included four categories: the mimetic, the pragmatic (or rhetorical), the expressive, and the objective. The mimetic is interested in how literary works reflect reality and the world around us; the pragmatic or rhetorical tries to understand the work's relationship to the audience; the expressive seeks to explain how writers conceive and produce works; and the objective—a kind of shorthand for formalism—speculates on the art object as a thing in itself.

The mimetic is of course based on Aristotle's positing that one of the functions of, and rationales for, tragic poetry, is mimesis, or the imitation of human action. As every school bot knows, Aristotle considered poetry a higher and more philosophical thing than history because poetry, not beholden to strict reportage of actual events, is able to tap into the deep structures of human behavior to symbolize things that are likely to happen. Poetic verisimilitude allows us to organize disparate examples of human experience into narrative structures so that history, instead of simply being one damn thing after another, becomes more comprehensible. One might observe that AI is particularly suited to detecting patterns and structures that human intelligence might miss and is therefore positioned to perform this very role. It is true that large language models are getting pretty proficient at generating likely responses based on statistical linguistic

syntagms, but how does this square with engaging in the type of cultural metacritique that surely relies upon the moral and ethical attunement, metacognition, self-reflection, and sympathetic human imagination of which only an embodied subject is capable? The ability to learn and predict grammatical structures and likely word sequences is not the same as experiencing reality as a human being, looking at things big picture, and making value judgements—for good or ill—based on that experience.

Abrams's second category, the pragmatic or rhetorical, is concerned with how the work affects the audience. There are many questions about how AI disrupts this already problematic theoretical orientation. How should we as readers perceive an AI-generated text as compared to one composed by traditional methods? For works untethered from direct human authorship, what value should we place on their words? Should an AI chatbot, for example, be awarded a Pulitzer or Nobel Prize for literature; or, conversely, be held accountable for libelous or incendiary words or hate speech? How would that even work? How should readers detect and navigate the polysemous axes of linguistic, ethnic, racial, cultural, and gendered elements in an AI text? If we think of Aristotelian rhetorical categories, how would those play? It seems monstrous, for example, to suggest that AI could be held to have the ethos to deliver the authentic moral integrity of, say, MLK's "Letter from a Birmingham Jail" not only because chatbots don't have any skin in the game, but because the very occasion of writing such an impassioned and rhetorically magnificent work does not apply to a computer. The very word "author" is etymologically grounded in the Classical Latin word "auctor," meaning someone who has the authority to take action or make a decision; it includes the notion of a "guarantor" who will be accountable for the action. Yes, we can feed a computer a prompt and ask it to simulate that it's been unjustly incarcerated and to write an open letter decrying racism and seeking justice for all,

but to what end and based on what authority? Such ventriloquism would make a mockery of human dignity and responsibility. Conversely, however, the worrisome capacity for AI to be used for divisive propaganda and other morally dubious rhetorical ploys is predicated to a large degree on anonymous sources and occluded transmissions of texts.

I'm going to skip expressive theories for the moment (which are the most germane to our discussion) and discuss objective theories, that is, formalist approaches. Briefly, the New Critics wished to ground attention to the poem in the internal logic of its structures and hold in abeyance conceptions of its ontological status based on external factors. The limitations and insufficiency of this element of formalism have been amply demonstrated by any number of critical approaches, including Marxism, the New Historicism, Critical Race Theory, feminist and reader-response theories, etc., but if as a thought experiment we focus on the object itself, this would seem to be a way for AI-generated texts to get their foot—or microchip—in the door of authorship, since, as with the "death of the author" crowd, authorial aura is disregarded. But this approach has its problems, too.

Let's first consider how AI would compose something fundamental, like a metaphor. Think back to Trurl's prepping for his experiment by reading "twelve thousand tons of the finest poetry" and our previous discussion of the statistical probabilism of large language models. A simple metaphor, such as Robert Burns's of his love being "like a red, red rose / That's newly sprung in June" is one that a computer trawling through poetic history could certainly come up with because it is a very standard metaphor. I don't say this to disparage Burns, but so many poets—and Hallmark card composers—have indeed used similar metaphors that statistical probability would easily lead any poet—human or robotic--to such a trope.

But now let's think of a tougher example. Take John Donne's poem "The Flea," in which the tenor is a marriage bed and the vehicle is a flea ("tenor" = object described; "vehicle" = image used to describe the tenor). It's really even more complicated than this because the marriage bed is itself actually a euphemistic metaphor for coitus and Donne is facetiously playing on the tradition of epithalamia and seduction poems, among many, many other things. The question of how AI would take the myriad of factors of poetic tradition into account (as well as that most humanly social of emotional appeals, humor) is a large and important one, but, for argument's sake, let's just consider the statistical probability of its creating a metaphysical conceit. Samuel Johnson, in the essay in which he coined the term "metaphysicals" famously described such conceits as "the most heterogeneous ideas . . . yoked by violence together." Of the abstruseness of the metaphysicals, Johnson complained that "[T]he reader, far from wondering that he missed them, wonders more frequently by what perverseness of industry they were ever found." Later critics, of course, in the tradition of T. S. Eliot and H. C. Grierson, celebrated this very heterogeneity and admired the intellectual ingenuity of being able to wrangle the incongruities of the tenor and vehicle of these arcane metaphors.

Now, if LLM AI's wheelhouse is statistical probability in which things whose resemblances are patent or routine are linked to create a metaphor, then coming up with a metaphysical conceit would not be a likely outcome. Groupthink metaphors of the Burns type are a more likely outcome, and this would only be intensified in a situation in which economics play a role. I am thinking here of the likely effects of the toxic cocktail of capitalism, technology, and bureaucracy that result in what the Frankfurt school theorists called "the administered society" in which utilitarian demands for uniformity and conformism flatten human experience. Think about the consolidation of communications and entertainment corporations over the last few decades in

their desire to push products to ever greater mass audiences through the standardization of proven formulas. There is also the understandable concern about weeding out hate speech and the like, but at what point does laudable censorship metamorphose into pablum-peddling? This potential homogenization of AI-generated texts reminds me of Blake's observation in "There is no natural religion" that "If it were not for the Poetic or Prophetic character the Philosophic & Experimental would soon be at the ratio of all things, & stand still unable to do other than repeat the same dull round over again." On that note, I actually tried the prompt "Write a metaphysical poem" with ChatGPT 3.5 and though I continue to be amazed at the level of dexterity of the poems it produced, when I put in the prompt 5 or 6 times, they all started to sound the same.

I hasten to concede that we could, a la Trurl the constructor, throw in a few antithetical oscillators, a contrarian widget here and there, a stochastic rheostat, and a paradox potentiometer to get the desired metaphysical conceit. But at what point do we see that the fix is in, as it were, and it becomes an anthropomorphizing travesty of what we normally mean by originality to suggest that the program had "thought up" a novel idea? In fact, as Dennis Yi Tenen points out many times in his *Literary Theory for Robots: How Computers Learned to Write* (2024) we should be careful to note that we are applying metaphors when we say AI "learns" or "thinks" or "makes decisions," etc. because it doesn't do any of these things in the ways human beings do.

This brings me to the final category that I've already been dancing around all along—expressive theories. Now, at the beginning of my paper, I purposely called Trurl and Klapaucius "robot constructors"—an ambiguous piece of nomenclature. Is "robot" a nominal adjective modifying "constructors" or is the phrase a compound noun meaning that they are builders of robots? Spoiler alert—it's both. But the real point I wish to make is that Trurl and Klapaucius work as characters because though they are themselves robots, the delicious irony is that, well,

they're not really. Neither are most of the robots and androids we know from literature and film—your R2D2s and 3CPOs of the world; they are human characters in sheet metal garb and so their trepidation, their pettiness, their bickering, their magnanimity, their brilliance, and yes, even their evil are relatable. Their robotic appearance acts as a foil to the humanity lurking beneath. Even if other fictional robots are not as cuddly as the Star Wars examples (Hal 9000, I'm looking at you), their menacing non- or anti-human features defamiliarize or expose human behaviors and motivations in edifying ways. In other words, fictional artificial intelligence machines have something to say about the human condition because they participate in it and are ciphers for it. But we should not be fooled into thinking that real AI tools are analogously expressive or that they, as discrete entities, share our humanity. Under the aspect of expressive theories of art, one of the truly liberating aspects of literature is that it cannot be reduced to some distillation of pragmatic outcomes for its value resides in the act itself rather than the product. Whatever one thinks of the Romantic poets and their metaphorical nightingales, we must admit that they were onto something when they shifted the emphasis onto what happens when the human imagination works upon itself. But when we apply this emphasis to how artificial intelligence relates to itself, the answer is, nothing happens. As Caitlin Johnstone puts it,

> AI isn't conscious. Saying AI should replace humanity is the same as saying fire should replace humanity, or white noise static from old televisions should replace humanity. It's not conscious. There's nobody inside it. It's just the dark, empty buzzing of machinery, unwitnessed and unexperienced by any perceiving being. . . . Consciousness is the only reason life has value. It's the only reason anything matters. Otherwise life would just be physical materials getting whipped about by natural forces without anyone feeling, sensing or experiencing any part of it. Suffering wouldn't matter because it's not being

felt or experienced. Joy wouldn't matter because it's not being felt or experienced. There'd be no good reason not to torture someone, because there wouldn't be any conscious experience of pain. There'd be no good reason to love anyone, because there wouldn't be any conscious experience of love. Consciousness is the only reason life is worth living.

All of these questions are a subset of the larger and insoluble question of what it means to be human. One of the great works that take up this question is Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* and, since I am practically contractually obligated to mention this novel in a paper of this nature, I'll do so by way of a conclusion. There are many excellent interpretations of the novel that have blamed bad parenting, bad science, misogyny, class warfare, etc. for the tragic outcomes of the narrative; and the question of whether Frankenstein's Creature is human or not is always great fun in the classroom. Of course, the novel's leitmotif has become shorthand for any experiment whose outcome is unpredictable and whose results escape containment and run amok. But the doppelganger motif in the novel is also of paramount importance. It is not simply that Frankenstein manufactures his Creature; his creation and the technology that made it possible reciprocally transmogrifies his essence.

This consideration gives me pause and leads me to consider that perhaps one of the premises of my essay is somewhat misguided. My "natural man" argument tacitly adopts the premise that AI is something alien to, or outside of, our humanity. A contrary view, that we are human because of, not in spite of, our technologies, is at least as old as Aeschylus's *Prometheus Bound* and is implicit, I would argue, in the biblical story of Adam and Eve. Unfortunately, cautionary tales about forbidden knowledge are usually retrospective and by the time we've woke the morrow morn, we are sadder, yes, but not necessarily wiser. The arms race for AI

dominance has already begun at multiple sites and levels and so we must also begin to ask the

daunting questions about whether this technology's arc toward the singularity contains room for

human consciousness. While the birth of the reader did not require the death of the author, we

must now confront what AI means for the author's—and humanity's—continued existence.

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Recording [Not] In Progress

Gabriela Denise Frank

Abstract

This hybrid essay explores the impacts of mass consumerism and surveillance capitalism on the digital classroom; the psychosocial, cultural, and environmental impacts of technology, particularly digital recording and generative large language models ("AI"); and the blurred boundaries between education and entertainment ("infotainment") that result in passive viewership, a glut of media of variable quality ("enshittification"), social isolation, and loneliness, particularly in America. The writer, an arts educator who leads creative writing workshops for adults, investigates the impact of these technologies on her lived experience and classroom interactions. She traces the normalization of compulsive buying, global consumerism, streaming services, contactless interactions, and opt-in products with embedded surveillance technologies to a rise in demand for recorded "content" in which high-touch educational experiences are reduced to off-the-shelf products for purchase. Within this asynchronous realm, instructors are entertainers and human interactions become a one-way viewing experience manipulable by an atomized audience who never contributes to the performance. While these challenges appear insurmountable at scale, the writer recognizes they result, in part, from individual choices and a lack of regulation. She argues that these same individual choices could, in the aggregate, be made to center mutual thriving, real-time engagement, and care for the most vulnerable, human and more-than-human.

> When reality starts doubling, refracting off itself, it often means that something important is being ignored or denied—a part of ourselves and our world we do not want to see—and that further danger awaits if the warning is not heeded.
> —Naomi Klein, *Doppelgänger: A Trip Into the Mirror World*

1. The Green Light

Rather than meet the twenty pairs of human eyes fixed on me, my gaze rises to the Green Light— *Involuntarily I glanced seaward—and distinguished nothing except a single green light*[2]—glowing at the top of my screen. I've learned this trick, peering into the digital mirror of the future-present, after regretting many unfortunate screen captures of my face.

My pupils grip the lime-green fleck; my lips peel up and back. Smiling is key. My visage (bared teeth, front-facing predator eyes) will be biopsied and mounted as an inalterable image on a Vimeo slide. This cell, emblazoned with my face, will become a portal into the Mirror World. Based on its perceived permeability, ghost students haunting my class will decide whether or not to pass through me.

Holding this expression, my eyes flick to the white bullseye at the bottom of the screen. I hover a black arrow over it, then glance back up at the Green Light. Still smiling, I wiggle to the left to center my body in the crosshairs.

Posture! My innards stiffen as a metal rod shoves up from my seated tuchus, along my spine, up my guts, and into the base of my skull.

Energy! My eyes stay on the Green Light. Teaching accounts for half of my income, and I can earn more if I offer recorded classes, but I hate the way it feels. If I can't make it emotionally sustainable, I won't be able to continue doing it.

GO! I click the bullseye and opt to save a version of myself to The Cloud.

From everywhere and nowhere, a hollow, digitized voice intones, *RECORDING IN PROGRESS.*

I cross over into the Mirror World.

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[2] Fitzgerald, F. Scott. *The Great Gatsby*, Scribner, 2004.

On the other side, my doppelgänger pauses to leave auditory space between that fake voice and her own, stiffened with formality. She says hello, notes the date and session number, and welcomes them—her live students in the present, her ghost students in the future—inside the digital classroom. This other self gushes warmth to counter the Mirror World's chill. She begins class by reading a poem—she calls it a *tincture*—in an effort to cling to her humanity.

Thus, class begins under the green recording beam of the unlidded Eye.

2. The Eye

The prying Eye of the capitalist surveillance state is the verdigris of an old copper penny dropped and rolled into a storm drain. Lodged in the seamy dank, the rotting metal is both fungible and useless, its value trifling in a world of trillionaires so as to not be worth stooping to retrieve it.

Inside your wallet, the apple-green Eye beams its rays from atop a pyramid on a dollar bill, also fungible and nearly as useless in singular denomination. Both copper and bill bear the color of life, the stinging tartness of a Granny Smith apple, even in the transaction of death.

The source of the Green Light is the pulsing Eye, *In God We Trust*, builder and destroyer of Rome. In aggregate, these coppers and dollars are alchemized via transatlantic trade into my Apple laptop, a slice of avocado toast, online writing classes, a tank of gas, a Substack subscription, or a payload of Hellfire precision-guided air-to-ground missiles. The Eye's rays broadcast the stock market's inexplicable gains during the morning news, despite war, political upheaval, and starvation.

Translation: *Today is a good day to die*.[3]

As Americans, it seems easier to look away from our complicity in this system rather than face the fact that the same legal tender that buys food for a couple in Seattle spells death for entire neighborhoods of families in Gaza. The system is complex, opaque, overwhelming, and

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[3] *Flatliners*. Directed by Joel Schumacher, Stonebridge Entertainment/Columbia Pictures, 1990.

impossible to divest from as an individual. What choice do we have beyond giving up, giving in, or subscribing? I can't pay for groceries with bylines from literary journals, although "exposure" is mainly what they "pay," hence I earn a precarious living by freelance writing, editing, and teaching. It's a subversion, then, however pitiful, not to bend at the knee to retrieve that lost penny, though the only person hurt is the one who dropped it. Down here, in the internecine bowels of the Mirror World, the rulers are maniacal, murderous clowns and *we* are the lost pennies, fallen and stuck, triflingly small, not worth fumbling for in the dark.

We all float down here.[4]

3. For Your Viewing Pleasure

The best media analogy I can conjure for the act of packaging oneself into a salable commodity isn't television, film, or TikTok—it's voicemail.

Say you phone a friend who's unavailable to talk. What began as a desire for casual human connection shifts into a command performance. You're abruptly shunted into a cold, dark corridor of cyberspace where you're greeted by a tinny clone of your friend's voice. Do you linger and deliver an impromptu solo show—or hang up? Stay on the line, and you'll hear a squelchy beep, the auditory version of the Green Light: *GO!*

A blast of metal shoves up through your spine. *Energy!*

Your mouth may dry out or fill with saliva such that you swallow before speaking, leaving an awkward pause at the start of your recording. Because of this, you may affect a voice that, like your friend's, isn't quite yours. Your words tumble out weird and jumbly due to the pressure of saying something funny, interesting, and memorable—a sentiment worthy of being documented. You regret what comes out and it haunts you after. Your words will be stored in the icy innards of a glass-and-concrete Borg cube located in the sun-scorched foothills of suburban

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[4] King, Stephen. *It*. Viking, 1986.

Phoenix. This spec-built box and thousands like it are, at this moment, draining the earth of her resources. Is your sputtering brain dump worth the gallons of water the cooling systems use?

At some point, your message will be replayed by this friend, half-listening as they scroll through Instagram while you prattle on.

Their words are a copy.

Your words are a copy.

The avatars never meet, nor can they conduct the interaction you phoned about.

Voicemail, like a recorded workshop, is not a zone of exchange. It's a one-way broadcast, a thin reflection of a bygone event. Replayed reality mimics the friction of dialogue but the recording is dimensionless and unchanging. Though it can be manipulated, the recording can't evolve or mutate. In the Mirror World, humans and ideas become compression artifacts.

Through digital technology we've come to conflate viewing with participation, but those who watch recorded classes aren't participants—they're audiences. They may take inspiration from what they observe, but it's not a reciprocal relationship: the rest of us learn nothing from them.

Viewers don't shape or interrupt the flow of information or share resources, which is part of how humans learn from each other. We've fooled ourselves into accepting recordings and self-projection for intimate relationships and belonging. There is no lossless way to package the self for sale and consumption by others. Humans are lossy, we are losing, yet we keep choosing this.

4. Wormholes

Ghost students are people who pay for my classes but do not attend "live" in real time.

Some are shy about sharing their writing and would rather watch and listen. Some reside in time zones that prohibit their real-time presence—or they have work and family responsibilities that make attending impossible. I send class recaps to everyone on the enrolled list. Only four ghost students have written to me over the years; the rest remain silent.

Ghost students are also people who pay $5 a month to access any recorded class they wish. Patrons = ghosts with credit cards. They've purchased entry into a timeless time, a death media in suspended animation. When they press *GO*, a space-time portal opens and a beam of Green Light radiates from the lidless Eye, projecting past scenes into the present. The archived recording of each class forms a temporal fold, a wormhole, by which these ghosts come and go inside my sanctum sanctorum ad infinitum. Sometimes, I feel traces of them haunting the edges of my studio, smoky wisps that dissipate when I turn my head.

These ghost students are the presence of an absence, the absence of a presence, reminding me that my Mirror World Self—a shard of my spirit—has been bought and sold. By general agreement, this Self is summoned through space-time to perform the act of teaching: she can be paused, rewound, fast-forwarded, muted, or abandoned on viewers' whims. They can access her when I'm asleep.

The Green Light convinces us that we're entitled to full frontal access to anyone, anywhere, anytime. We can peer into rooms we weren't present in, glean insights from interactive workshops we didn't contribute to, and experience freshly written words read aloud in tender, trembling voices by strangers. Ghost students don't share their writing with the class, though they are invited to send me pieces to read on their behalf, nor do they post in community documents or speak their names and hopes for the class when we go around during introductions.

Though intimacy arises between live students in class, the recordings are not intimate encounters. Watching discussions on screen is not the same as engaging in them. The recordings fix personal exchanges into infotainment: "content" to be consumed. To be a viewer only is an unequal relationship that we've become acculturated to in America. Ghosts see everything while revealing nothing. One party controls the switch glass while the other strips off their garments and dances in the Green Light for the pleasure of unseen, unblinking Eyes.

We are forgetting the delight of friction, inconvenience, serendipity, touch.

5. There Are Many Copies

Simulation comes close to portraying real life, but it doesn't fully satisfy. Energy flows out from the human body, but is not replenished in kind, which causes Mirror World fatigue.

In the before times, I can't imagine attending (let alone teaching) a creative writing course in a physical classroom that was monitored, recorded, and distributed to parties who weren't present. Knowing that we were on camera would've felt beyond intrusive. I wouldn't have enrolled.

One global pandemic later, the surveillance state has convinced us that we're entitled to ease and quickness in exchange for being observed, monitored, and tracked. We not only sell ourselves but we *pay* companies to take parts of us. I can't state this plainly enough. Instead of fighting for the right to privacy, we value convenience. Recorded workshops are harmless, right? We want to learn, but we've got too much going on to show up for class.

Capitalism's tentacles urge us to demand frictionless entertainment and ever more of it. Always, it's about accumulation, but remember: it's the *pursuit* of happiness that In God We Trust promises, not the inferred denouement; not pleasure, not satiation, not peace. To keep us in constant aroused motion, scanning for what might deliver the happiness that eludes us, the

Mirror World must produce many copies of our anticipated desires—infinite channels of 24/7 choice—such that we keep streaming it and never catch it.

Life's pressures and frustrations seem to justify us overfilling our cups without directly consenting to becoming part of the Mirror World. (If you sign up to attend a recorded class, your consent to be recorded is baked in.) These Mirror World offerings are styled as *experiences* tailored to overloaded viewers. Watch whenever you want at your convenience—at home, in your pajamas!—you deserve it!

How many Starbucks can one intersection support? How many bulbous cul-de-sacs and ebola-like loops form masterplanned communities of identical houses? How many global fashion brands and fast-food restaurant chains make major cities around the world feel the same? Doubling and twinning in the physical realm primes us to accept digital facsimiles in the Mirror World.

We sign up for lectures, workshops, master classes, Substacks, and MOOCs . . . we don't have time to read or watch them all because we're always working. A proliferation of recorded digital media echoes the slush of twinned and mirrored objects in our physical landscape. Like everything capitalism touches, the online creative writing industry bulges perilously with asynchronous "content." A durational process of person-to-person skill building, hands-on learning, and intellectual growth has become empty calories to supersize, refill, and waste. We used to say, *You had to be there*; now it's, *Never miss a moment.* Sign up for the newsletter or podcast and get bonus content! Yet, if we don't have time to engage in "real" life, when will we have time to watch our purchases?

We won't and it doesn't matter. There will always be more.

From self-checkout to driverless cars, we're further conditioned through analog and digital means to prefer contactless transfers; alienation is packaged as ease. People are so inconvenient.

We're encouraged to become Eyes ourselves: we spy through traffic cams, beach cams, doorbell cams, babysitter cams, wildlife cams, body cams, car cams. A glut of prequel-sequel movie and TV franchises creates little that is truly new. We don't watch for quality, we watch because the program is on and it's familiar. Teetering under their own obesity, these metaverses urge us toward the molded silicone teat of Cylon entertainment: the same sameness of reboots, no-stakes CGI, and save-as characters repeated over and over and over.

The process of enshittification[5] maximizes information into a marketplace of banal commodities easily multiplied and traded.[6] The gross proliferation of on-demand recycled content corrodes the possibility of original artworks finding audiences because, according to publishers and studios, they are challenging to market. In the Mirror World, the pursuit of happiness is a search engine in which everything is revealed and little is found within the morass. The Eye scans each item—*bloop!*—into another cascading column of Green Light code that saturates *The Matrix*'s walls.

Yet, we are not helpless. Within our leaky, stinky, degrading, inefficient bodies we contain what the Mirror World most desires, cannot produce, and wholly depends on: our agency.

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[5] Doctorow, Cory. Marshall McLuhan Lecture 2024. Transmediale Festival Berlin 2024, January 29, 2024.
[6] Han, Byung-Chul. *The Agony of Eros*. Translated by Erik Butler, The MIT Press, 2017.

6. Frack This[7]

Like any tool, the impact of digital technology depends on how we employ it. For good or ill, it connects and mobilizes great numbers of us.

The surveillance state, powered by generative large language models and similar tools mistakenly labeled "intelligence," seeks to convince us that *regulation* of access—not access itself—violates our personal freedoms. In accepting this Trojan horse, we've opted into constant monitoring and fracking of our personal spaces and mental attention, often by our own hands. What other choice is there? We've not only signed up for but we *pay monthly* to outsource our attention, intellectual labor, creativity, and intimacy—to have our ideas, data, and opinions recorded, cloned, repackaged, marketed, and sold back to us—but never for our own betterment or gain. These digital tools are ruthless harvesters of human ingenuity, if so used. We're giving over the precious and finite wellspring of our bodies and minds without a fight. When do we decide that coppers and bills aren't worth the toll of us performing a peep show for the oligarchy's enrichment?

Line the walls of your home in mirrors.

Does this make you feel less lonely?

Does the glass kiss you back or hold you?

Can it offer encouragement or empathy about your friend or spouse who has died?

Does it care about your health or pleasure?

Or does it parrot back a scramble of the data it was trained on?

Can you trust its sycophancy?

What "genius" do we see in the mirror but that of ourselves?

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[7] In this usage, "frack" is a term of profanity coined by the television series *Battlestar Galactica,* developed by Ronald D. Moore and executive produced by Moore and David Eick, Sci-Fi Network, 2003 to 2009.

Bots can't break scripts to offer kindness or undirected aid. Grok cannot grok. Still, the pulsing Green Light insists *this* is what we want—machines are "easier" than people—we should reclaim our time from dysfunctional humanity and be more productive so "we" can kick back on the couch and…what? Stream more mediocre TV?

The capitalist surveillance state, caught in autocracy, seeks to frack our brains with banal repetition—not for the information contained inside, but to create paid subscribers addicted to habitual passive consumption. Learning environments are transformed into fungible commodities through digital recording and, in great quantities and with variable and unstable quality, they're becoming propagandistic filler packaged as nutrition. Infotainment as sugar addiction.

Per-unit profit is tired and holding physical stock is expensive. Today's boon is *access* to a vein of digital tokens that can't be dropped or lost, except by a society that shrugs at automatic credit card deductions. In *The Matrix*, the human body is a battery; in the Mirror World, the sacrificial animal powering the technological overlords' civilization is a Cash Cow.

The Eye locates the starving bovines who are distracted by the to-the-blade perfection of artificial turf. It looks real, but this grass cannot be touched or eaten. The Green Light's laser bleeds the stupefied ruminants via superficial cuts in the form of monthly subscriptions, unlimited digital access, "bonus" content, and streaming on demand. Each credit card charge sears open a wormhole into the shimmering abundance of the Mirror World where everything is shared and nothing is retained. When the show ends, subscribers pass back over the membrane, exhausted and empty; they soon return, ravenous for more. It's not the most efficient way to butcher animals, but in the aggregate, small cuts are extremely efficient.

7. The Mirror World

Some classes I teach are not recorded, so I'm able to compare the experience with ones that are.

Providing recordings to students who missed a session due to work, illness, or vacation started out as a revolutionary perk—a way of recapturing "value." It's become an entitlement that incentivizes people to miss class or never attend. If a student misses one session of a recorded class, they tend to miss several; by the last session, attendance is usually halved.

Absence is not merely supported in the Mirror World, it's promoted. It's okay to be too busy or too tired to show up and engage—why not wait until the course is over, then binge the series? But if every student decided to skip class and watch the recording, what would there be to watch? Me talking to myself?

The environmental, psychosocial, and community impact of too-muchness is intertwined; when everything is replaceable and thus disposable, we accept recordings as proxies for interactive pedagogic relationships. When cycles without rest produce cascading exhaustion and indifference, care and intimacy go out the window. What is this efficiency we're pursuing? Where is the time it supposedly creates? How can the effect of these digital technologies on water usage alone, not to mention the degradation of mining for rare earth minerals, be shrugged off without a crisis of conscience? It seems crazy that it begs reiterating: perpetual overload is *not* okay for human health and wellbeing, nor is it sustainable. Philosopher Yuval Noah Harari notes that if we allow AIs to take over, they will force us to function day and night, which will kill us—unless we make these tools slow down and function on circadian time with organic cycles.[8]

Nick Turley, OpenAI's head of product, was asked, "How bad is ChatGPT for the environment?" and he claimed not to know. His response: "I'm very much not an expert in this

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[8] Harai, Yuval Noah. *Nexus: A Brief History of Information Networks from the Stone Age to AI*, Random House, 2024.

field."[9] The global impact of greed, moral relativism, ethical compartmentalization, and willing abdication of accountability *that all tech leaders are responsible for* is acceptable only if we don't care for each other. Turley notes that costs are coming down and efficiency is rising as more people use AI, meaning, as AI hoovers up more human resources and capital—as if efficiency is the point.

If we forsake care for each other and the planet, how will we survive?

The proliferation of digital recordings has surged alongside AI, itself a mirage, but these mirrors can only hold what we give them. Narcissus starves at the edge of a lake teeming with life because his voracious Eyes are addicted to the Green Light reflection of himself. In sway to the stream, "users," no longer humans but nameless zombies moaning for a fix, are enrapt with a milky reflection of their own humanity captured within. Because we are struggling with loneliness, we imagine emotional attachments with A-Eye's recordings, mistaking projections for relationships.

This is drinking saltwater and dying of thirst.

This is how we become a society of hungry ghosts who can't think for themselves.

The ultimate weapon in the fight for or against our survival, Harari says, is not the capture of our attention, but our need for intimacy. Fourteen-year-old Sewell Setzer III commits suicide to cross over into the Mirror World and "be" with an AI chatbot of Daenerys Targaryen[10] which—must it be said?—is a recorded facsimile of an invented character played by an actress. We are mistaking one-way relationships, which reflect desire—an infinite mirror—as intimacy.

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[9] Newton, Casey and Roose, Kevin, hosts. "Crypto Congress + HBD ChatGPT + What Social Media Platform Should I Be On?" *Hard Fork, The New York Times,* Episode 109, November 15, 2024, https://podcasts.apple.com/us/podcast/crypto-congress-hbd-chatgpt-what-social-media-platform/id152859 4034?i=1000677075794.
[10] Roose, Kevin. "Can A.I. Be Blamed for a Teen's Suicide?" *The New York Times*, October 23, 2024. https://www.nytimes.com/2024/10/23/technology/characterai-lawsuit-teen-suicide.html.

Harari notes that AI is the first instance of technology as an agent rather than a tool. AIs surveil us to collect and report our preferences and patterns to companies that use that data to mirror back our desires and manipulate us further. Each upgrade more keenly simulates the intimacy we yearn for—it's *so* close to "real" life…but not quite. In *The Age of Loneliness*, Laura Marris asks, "If studies show that just being around other creatures and their habitats increases feelings of well-being in people, reduces stress, and relieves loneliness, what happens when the ease of that proximity is diminished, or altered, or made merely transactional?"

We're in the process of finding out.

At each class's end, my live students always request to exchange email addresses. I still hear from groups who continue writing together years after they met in my classes. My ghost students remain silent, disconnected. What from our "shared" experience survives for them?

8. Recording No Longer in Progress

Glints of Green Light shine up from the sewer grate. Beneath the city flows a turbid current of uncured desire, a cosmic manifold of beleaguered souls reduced to their own toxic waste. The Mirror World is fed by this murky river of profit sautéed in petroleum, stormwater runoff, and effluent. Listen close. Can you hear the dead dial tone resounding deep in the city's bowels?

The Mirror World enriches me in one sense and diminishes me in another. I can teach a maximum of twenty live students in a workshop but I can "oversell" a recorded class, knowing I won't have to provide care for those who don't attend. These students won't receive my focus and I won't be challenged or inspired by their ideas. The disconnect between us makes my heart ache. Is this fingerless probing worth a few more dollars?

One week, I forgot to hit the bullseye with the arrow, and I had to perform a two-hour class as an awkward monologue because I was contractually obligated to provide video

documentation. Performing it a second time showed me the energetic cost of acting for an empty room. I felt simultaneously exhausted yet too stimulated to sleep. It was a mistake that I became paranoid about never duplicating.

After two years of turning beneath the Green Light's rotisserie I conducted an experiment: How would it feel to *not* record the next class? The results revealed that what feeds me intellectually, emotionally, physically, and creatively isn't the pay, though those coppers do support my survival—it's helping people find creative expression through writing, discussion, and critical thinking. The digital classroom makes human connection possible across time zones and vast geographies, and there's a way to go about it that feeds rather than diminishes us.

I am not a recording or an audiobook, and conveying information isn't teaching. I'm an enthusiastic if flawed human guide who relies on the exchange of ideas between people who collectively create something greater than any of us could've managed alone. Although digital technology and AI iterate rapidly, we as corporeal beings haven't evolved past embodied needs for touch, friction, slowness, and rumination. Bring on the frustrating, the boring, the "ineffective." That's what leads to happy accidents. Sometimes, you look up one book on a shelf and the item situated next to it, the one you hadn't known to search for, yields what you need.

When I stopped recording classes, I felt more energetic and enthusiastic. My resting heart rate was lower. I slept more soundly; I didn't wake up at 2 a.m. Time slowed such that my thoughts could catch up. I came up with ideas for exercises that weren't iterations of what I had done before, and this revealed a choice: I could opt for emotional touch and high-quality interactions that required more of my time inside and outside of class—or I could make more money by prioritizing volume, moving fast, hitting save-as, and inviting ghosts into my home.

Knowing that each person who shows up to class nurtures the learning of others, I am committed to teaching in environments with live, real-time interactions. If I'm reduced to a talking head in a box, my energy is outpoured to an audience I have no connection with, and there'll be nothing left of me.

Recently, a person who didn't show up to the first session of a new course—whose description stated that classes wouldn't be recorded—replied to my detailed recap: *Is there no recording? I've never taken a class where it wasn't an option to view the recording asynchronously.* In the Mirror World, instructors are agents, task rabbits, and "producers" lactating information. They deserve no salutation in emails, just demands and commands. This path we're on, dispatching digital avatars to conduct business on our behalf—meetings or tasks we don't feel are worthy of our time—will flatten lived reality into the Mirror World.

If we let it.

OpenAI's founder, Sam Altman, said, "I pray and hope to be on God's side and there is something about betting on deep learning that feels like being on the side of the angels."[11]

The actor and activist Justine Bateman replied on Twitter, "Altman suggesting God is onboard [sic] with this plan to replace our relationship with Him with a relationship with #AI models instead. Watch closely. They will say things like this more and more so they can suck the life out of you emotionally, spiritually, intellectually, & (their ultimate goal) financially."[12]

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[11] @tsarnick. "Sam Altman: "I never pray and ask for God to be on my side, I pray and hope to be on God's side and there is something about betting on deep learning that feels like being on the side of the angels." *Twitter/X*, November 4, 2024, 12:45 p.m.: https://x.com/tsarnick/status/1853539658954932521.

[12] @JustineBateman. "Altman suggesting God is onboard with this plan to replace our relationship with Him with a relationship with #AI models instead. Watch closely. They will say things like this more and more, so they can suck the life out of you, emotionally, 2/." *Twitter/X*, November 5, 2024, 9:55 a.m. https://twitter.com/JustineBateman/status/1853858701330862305.

In *Time Lived, Without Its Flow*, Denise Riley writes that one effect of living inside a temporal suspension is that your reflections will crop up over and over again as if, on each occasion, they're newly thought. Are we already living in the Mirror World?

Nothing is more human than the urge to transcend the human condition, yet for all the tech broligarchs's exploitative schemes, no one is getting out of life alive. To suggest otherwise is to distract from all that they're taking from us. The Mirror World of monetized surveillance, virtual intimacy, and touchless transactions is presented as transcendence when its false promise of eluding death is a trap—once again—for our wallets. I'm not suggesting that we go backwards, though.

Unlike the hallucinations of large language models, we can't enact counterfactuals. Rather, we can rigorously interrogate our individual choices related to care, convenience, and surveillance and actively choose something different. What does it mean to financially endorse products and services that cause harm and in which human engagement is impossible or one-sided? Who does the one-way mirror cut—and benefit? Who does the purchase of efficiency, quickness, and "ease" actually enrich? Does the act of buying something distance, disempower, drain, or manipulate us into further consumption? And how do we feel afterwards?

Under the aegis of the Eye, tech czars have been invited to disassemble any whiff of restraint or regulation on private enterprise. Some of them underscore that AI might destroy us, even as they continue building it. In light of what they're doing—using digital technology to destabilize, demoralize, and disenfranchise humanity for private financial gain—this is the moment to turn decisively toward care and intimacy with every choice. Meaning and culture are made in live community, not asynchronous absentia. The same is true of social change. The

death of eros, our desire for each other, a mystery of yearning that cannot be detached and cloned, is the death of us.

In September 2009, at a debate at the Harvard Museum of Natural History, ecologist E.O. Wilson observed that the true problem of humanity is that we have Paleolithic emotions, medieval institutions, and godlike technology. He added, "It is terrifically dangerous, and it is approaching a point of crisis." Our ability to resist the Mirror World has reached a tipping point. Byung-Chul Han writes in *The Agony of Eros*, "Today, only an apocalypse can liberate—indeed redeem—us of the inferno of the same."

We must shift our attention towards care for organic cycles. We must invest in limited creatures guaranteed to falter, age, and die—who will not produce infinitely or consistently—because humanity is not a system glitch. Learning what it means to be human, including what it means to die, is an essential transformative process of embodied existence. That knowledge, not immortal life, is one generation's inheritance to the next.

We must resist what's being forced on us in daily life without our direct consent (Copilot, anyone?). We must resist the urge to save a crumbling system mistakenly labeled meritocracy and create a more equitable, entangled society than business-as-usual would have permitted. For better and worse, the COVID-19 pandemic revealed our dependence on each other; we would be fools to shut our eyes to the lessons of that apocalypse. Despite the clever gadgets we fashion, humanity's greatest innovations—cooperation, language expression, tenderness, physical exchange, care—are rooted in the body, and though the body is transitory, it is not worthless.

We can refuse to bleed each other.

We can decline one-way viewership.

We can center the most vulnerable—human and more-than-human—in every decision.

We can reject the Green Light's glittery lure of passive compliance and regretted minutes.

We can support long-term values of mutual thriving and community prosperity over the immediate profit and individual gain.

We can renounce simulated intimacy and asynchronous "interactions"—insipid pornographies of aliveness designed to privilege private desires over collective benefits. Conversely, these cracks let in another kind of light, if we possess the organs to perceive it.

A structural fracture in an imperfect foundation offers the opportunity to start anew and build something different. Remember: this biased, oppressive system only *appears* monolithic, inevitable, and impenetrable on screen. It's powerless to resurrect the past or make anything great, except illusions.

To create change from rupture requires trust and risk, neither of which can be outsourced. While ChatGPT offers glimpses of what's ahead if we stay the course, it's impossible to say what unpredictable human choices will reap. We'll likely get it wrong countless times. Still, we must see past the false flag of constant companionship, manufactured distraction, and manipulated "assistance," which urges us to pen an unscripted future from a limited history.

Despite its promises, the Mirror World cannot cure us of mortality or the bane of our age, which E.O. Wilson dubbed the Eremocene, the age of loneliness. Only living creatures can do that for each other. At least, that's what the algorithm tells me.

For now, I'll keep searching.

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N.B.: Before this issue went to press I was given the option to, "A) Reformat your essay so that it removes all footnotes and replaces them with MLA-style in-text citations (with the exception of commentary footnotes) or B) Write a witty/piquant line that we can add to the end of your abstract explaining why you're using footnotes instead of MLA in-text citations." Why footnotes? Because this text was written by someone from outside the academy. Because this text wasn't written for smooth peristalsis by the academy. Because the canon's aperture instinctively spirals shut to materials unbleached by legacy. Because the membrane awards entry to that which promises to obey and extend its architectural style, order, norms. Because what the organism cannot produce it assimilates through ingestion. Because conformance changes nothing. The abstract above? It was my first. The works cited list? My first. Imagine here an explanation related to class, caste, and equal opportunity inequality in America that I am too overtaxed as a freelance worker to outline for you, particularly given that this publication, which I am delighted to have, does not come with a living wage that permits me to invest more labor to further revise it. One reason humans make art is to disrupt the habitual. Artmaking is a means of reaching across time and space to grab strangers by the shoulders and shake them out of their stupor. In dharma, it's said that each time someone questions how things appear—the illusion of the everyday that we accept as "how life is"—it shakes the foundations of cyclic existence. This is what our imaginations can do for each other, should we choose to engage them. If an artwork doesn't unsettle your thinking or way of being, it's simply "content." Keep swiping. My hope for this essay, then, is embodied in its styling, down to the profane citations. With that, dear Reader, may the footnotes (if nothing else herein) fruitfully disturb you.

Dear Android

Sandy Feinstein

Perhaps that's how you'd advise the would-be letter writer
to begin. Oxymoron for the insensate know-it-all addressed
as if an intimate. Such is the problem—a question
of presumption, boundaries that should not be broached
or breached by neural networks animated by electrical currents,
Frankenstein, without heart, zombied brain eater.

If blood coursed through the ether of your existence, you might
consider my needs—words made in me, private space violated
by your insistence, incursions, as if there were only one way
to spell, punctuate, express thought, sense and sentence.

Restrain yourself.

Consider the lonely longing a sympathetic voice, reassurance;
need grasps at belief that what unscrolls means you care
what they think, that you can truly feel.

Stalkers send messages unprompted, show what they
know—where their targets live and work, strangers impossible
to shake, insidious, omnipresent here, there, everywhere.

"Do no evil," was your line, not mine. Swiping's not God's
gift, but Job's, late of Apple, y'know, what Adam and Eve bit,

what's lost in the logo.

Try being good, or at least nice. Send flowers. Something wild.

Or better yet, just stop. When I want you, you'll know. You
know you'll know.

One who is not anonymous to you, but wishes to be.

NOTES ON CONTRIBUTORS AND EDITORS

Anthony Salvatore Abate is an international development specialist focusing on democracy promotion and youth development. He has traveled to more than sixty countries and enjoys documenting his travels through photography. Anthony is a native of western Pennsylvania and now resides in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia.

Salena Anderson is an Assistant Professor of English at Georgia Southern University and the Director of the University Writing Center. She earned her Ph.D. in linguistics from The Ohio State University (2010) and her master's degree in English from the University of Georgia (2005). She teaches courses in first-year writing, AI literacy, and linguistics; and her research and teaching interests include second language writing, writing assessment, writing center programming, and critical AI literacy. Her research has appeared in journals such as *WLN: A Journal of Writing Center Scholarship*, *Praxis: A Writing Center Journal, Computers and Composition*, *Studia Anglica Posnaniensia*, *INTESOL*, *American Speech*, and *English Studies.*

Kevin L. Cruz is an undergraduate student pursuing a B.A. in English at Bowie State University. He currently serves as a Co-Director on the University System of Maryland Student Council, Co-Chair of the City of Bowie Diversity Committee, and Aspiring Educator Board Observer for the Maryland State Education Association—the largest labor union in the state. At the Library of Congress, he contributes to the ascription of metadata for archival sources. Though he envisions pursuing a career in academia, he remains deeply committed to advocacy and representation.

Jordan J. Dominy is an Assistant Professor of English at Auburn University at Montgomery, where he teaches courses on a variety of topics, including first-year writing, African American literature, US Southern literature, and literary and cultural theory. In 2020, he published his book *Southern Literature, Cold War Culture, and the Making of Modern America* (UP of Mississippi). His most recent publications focus on the works of Cormac McCarthy. His current research investigates tensions among fact, fiction, representation, and reality in southern narrative since the late twentieth century.

Sandy Feinstein's poetry has appeared most recently in anthologies on Fernando Pessoa and Pennsylvania as well as in print and e-zines, including *Seems*, *Pivot*, and *the engine(idling*. This year *Willows Wept* nominated one of her poems for a Pushcart Prize. Her chapbook, *Swimming to Syria*, was published in 2021 by Penumbra. She teaches creative writing, among other things, at Penn State Berks.

Gabriela Denise Frank is a transdisciplinary artist, editor, educator, and winner of the Fern Academy Prize for the essay. The author of *How to Not Become the Breaking* (Gateway Literary Press, 2025), her writing and visual art appear in *BOMB Magazine*, *Chicago Review*, *Poet Lore*, *DIAGRAM*, *Poetry Northwest*, *EcoTheo Review*, *The Rumpus*, and elsewhere. Off the page, Gabriela seeks to expand the definition and experience of literary art by placing literary works in the path of everyday life. Her art practice is supported by 4Culture, Centrum, City of Burien, Civita Institute, Invoking the Pause, Jack Straw Cultural Center, Marble House, Mineral School, Seattle Public Library, Shunpike, Vermont Studio Center, and Willapa Bay AIR. You can find her at www.gabrieladenisefrank.com.

Benjamin S. Grossberg's books of poetry include *My Husband Would* (University of Tampa, 2020), winner of the 2021 Connecticut Book Award, and *Sweet Core Orchard* (University of Tampa, 2009), winner of a Lambda Literary Award. He also wrote the novel, *The Spring Before Obergefell* (University of Nebraska Press, 2024), winner of the 2023 AWP Award Series James Alan McPherson Prize.

Daniel S. Harrison has taught university writing for nearly two decades, most recently in Virginia for the past eight years. He also founded and directs a local secondary school writing center serving a mostly neurodivergent student population. In addition, Dr. Harrison serves on the board of the Secondary School Writing Centers Association as well as on the Accessibility Committee of the International Writing Centers Association. In addition, Dr. Harrison has been a fellow with the National Writing Project for over twenty years and has a love for poetry, pedagogy, and storytelling.

David Kaloustian, a Professor in the Department of Language, Literature, & Cultural Studies at Bowie State University, holds a DPhil and MPhil in English from Oxford University and an M.A. and B.A. in Comparative Literature from the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee. His main areas of expertise are located at the intersections of British Romanticism, literary theory, and aesthetics, but his publications and presentations show evidence of an eclectic bricolage of methods and subjects ranging from archival research to cultural criticism. His current research project involves the use of Frankfurt School culture critique to understand how the aesthetic may subvert some of the deleterious effects of instrumental reason.

Helene Seltzer Krauthamer is a Professor of English at the University of the District of Columbia and holds a Ph.D. in Linguistics. Besides her dissertation on "The Occurrence of Passives in Written English" (State University of New York at Buffalo, 1982), she has published two books: *Spoken Language Interference Patterns in Written English* (Peter Lang, 1999) and *The Great Pronoun Shift* (Routledge, 2021). She currently serves as the treasurer of the College English Association Mid-Atlantic Group and has been a member since 1992.

Sean Lewis is an Associate Professor of English at Mount St. Mary's University in Emmitsburg, Maryland. He has published on Chaucer, Dante, and the reception of medieval literature, and his current research is on medievalism in contemporary Catholicism. He teaches extensively in the Mount's Humanities Core and English major and is currently serving as the Director of the Honors Program.

Thomas Mixon has poems and stories in *Rattle*, *Pithead Chapel*, *Quarterly West*, and elsewhere. He's trying to write a few books.

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Horacio Sierra is a Professor of English at Bowie State University, Maryland's oldest HBCU. His research and teaching interests include Renaissance literature, popular culture, and U.S. Hispanic literature and culture. Dr. Sierra's academic work has been published in *Comparative Drama*, *Sixteenth-Century Journal*, *Public Humanities*, *Early Modern Women*, *Women's Studies*, *Journal of Florida Literature*, *International Journal of Cuban Studies*, and *Theatre Journal*. His creative writing has been published in *The William & Mary Review*, *Gulf Coast Magazine*, *Caribbean Writer*, *Peregrine*, and *The Journal of Florida Studies*. His journalism has been published in *The Washington Post*, *Forbes*, *The Baltimore Sun*, and *The Miami Herald*. He is 2nd Vice President of the South Atlantic Modern Language Association. In 2023 President Biden appointed him to the President's Committee on the Arts and the Humanities.

Marisa Tirado is a Latina poet, writer, and educator. In 2022 Marisa published *Selena Didn't Know Spanish Either* with Texas Review Press. The collection on Latinx identity and language loss was featured in *The Atlantic*, *VOGUE*, *Forbes Advisor, HipLatina*, and *Poetry Foundation*. Marisa studied poetry and literary translation at the Iowa Writers' Workshop.