

Meditations upon Hypertext: A Rhetorethics for Cyborgs

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And behind all these questions, we would hear hardly anything but the stirring of an indifference: "What difference does it make who is speaking?"
Michel Foucault

[I]nsofar as evaluating does occur . . . it is usually helped by knowing where the author is coming from. What the fallacies of relevance reject, I value.
Joyce Trebilcot

The rhetoric surrounding electronic text resounds with terms like "freedom" and "democracy."¹ Promising to narrow the gap between reader and writer, universalize information access, and dethrone authoritarian hierarchy in favor of collaborative networking, electronic text ought to sound like the postmodern feminist's dream come true.

Electronic text has the potential to do all its proponents promise, and more. What it actually is or will be doing immediately may be a quite different story. Hypertext is a technology.² The liberatory potential of such technology is only actualized to the extent that the human user is able to do so. Our ability to actualize that potential is limited by the lack of an adequate theory of hypertext reading which accounts for ethical and political issues of identity or subjectivity. I would then like to identify some examples of this problem and speculate on some responses; specifically, I would like to consider what sort of reader and/or reading practices hypertext requires.

Critics have pointed to hypertext as the actualization of postmodern theoretical ideals. Antihierarchical by nature, according to these critics, hypertext explodes conventional notions of closure and textual boundaries and radically disperses author-ity, extending it to the reader in the very act of reading. It seems almost as though theory has not only anticipated hypertext, but demanded it. However, as Landow and Delany point out, "hypertext creates an almost embarrassingly literal reification or actualization" of theoretical fantasies (10). Those who deal with a hermeneutics of specificity, in particular, may find the dispersal of the author problematic.

For good or ill, gender and ethnicity specialists have often worked from assumptions about subject positioning and intentionality linked to author identity. Foucault defines the author-function as a temporal and idiosyncratic

set of boundaries which serve to limit the freeplay of the text in a particular corpus. The author function has historically, particularly in gender and ethnicity studies, played itself out as *ethos*. In hypermedia, these assumptions are simply not workable. Even if an assumed (performative) subject position is identified by a networker, we face the question of performative competence, motive, and so forth, which refer us back to the issue of identity.

Who's Online?

Identity politics enter a new phase of complexity on the network. As things now stand, users work within a politics of performativity, rather than essences, although some may choose to "perform" a particular "essential" role, e.g., I might self-consciously position myself as a white U.S. American woman. Although most netters use their own names and legal identities, many choose "handles," and some netters have several such identities. I know women who use gender-neutral or masculine-sounding handles on the net for a variety of reasons. (The one most usually given is that one gets more respect that way.) A colleague of mine in sociology used an electronic bulletin board to extend class discussion in a class concerned with race and ethnicity, in which the participants were racially mixed. She reported that participants, often choosing to be anonymous, were able to discuss issues much more freely—not simply because their names weren't known, but because their racial/ethnic identity could be acknowledged or ignored (or perhaps even disavowed) post by post (Schleiter). I have found that in private electronic conversations, *ethos* is clearly important to many netters, who will, in a first communication, often baldly ask their interlocutor to identify sex, age, ethnicity, etc. On an academic list, one listmember responded to a discussion of whether e-messages should be more formal and carefully edited, by affirming the pleasures of "reading between the lines" and "seeing a personality profile" emerge from a history of several postings.³ Assessment of *ethos* also often drives responses to bulletin boards and lists (does a post represent a legitimately held, if extreme, opinion, or merely flame-bait?) Often a netter's handle, or history of previous postings (which constitute a "body of work" within which an author function is perceived) will provide the basis for the decision—that is, for an assessment of the *ethos* of the post.

A long-standing and reasonably graceful means of eliding these questions is to "shift grounds" from individual to cultural identity. As many critics of hypertext have noted, Bakhtin's "polyphony" gives us a way to talk about the many-voicedness of hypermedia. Again, however, we are returned to a similar quandary. When Bakhtin speaks of Dostoevski as polyphonic, we are still working through Dostoevski as the organizing identity.⁴ We know what culture is being represented. The net has no such narrowly defined identity, and what it does have is changing daily. *Currently*, however, we can make some general statements about net culture.

Net culture is global, transcending national boundaries. However, net culture does not currently transcend class boundaries evenly. That means that, although theoretically international, the net is now overwhelmingly first-world,

white, and culturally or economically elite. It is also technologically adept, which in combination with the above descriptors, adds the further current descriptor, male. Plans under debate to make the internet a pay-per-message service would eliminate most academics, students and working class netters, or at least substantially reduce the volume of their networking, (especially for non-subsidized hypertext productions), reducing net culture to its other major constituency—business people. In short, although the potential for democratic information creation and access across all boundaries exists in the technology, just as it did in early print culture, it is presently only potential, just as it was in early print culture. As Landow pointed out in 1992, “[D]ividing the world into the informationally rich and informationally impoverished . . . would produce a kind of techno-feudalism . . . Now is the time to protect ourselves from such a future” (*Hypertext*, 199). Unfortunately, although still fluid enough to change, this is essentially the structure we now have.

As a technology is being developed, the groundwork for its uses, its representation to and within a culture, and its politics are conceptualized with it and become part of it. As Barthes, Derrida and many others have pointed out, the subversive potential of print culture has always been enormous. As Showalter, Gallagher, McDowell and many others have also pointed out, that potential took a long time to even begin to be actuated, because of assumptions built into the production and dissemination of print culture that reinforced the hierarchical organization of the general culture.

“Space—The Final Frontier”

The rhetoric surrounding the net, the web and hypertext is fascinating, consisting (as does any complex discourse) of many base metaphors. Many of these metaphors are collaborative and anti-hierarchical (e.g. networking, the Web). However, given the culture of the net, sketched out in the broadest possible strokes above, one very dominant metaphor deserves particular attention, and that is the metaphor of movement through space. Net-discourse is riddled with it: the information superhighway takes us through cyberspace; we used to go into gopherspace to find out the best site to telnet to; now we walk (or crawl) the Web, etc. Hypertext is organized in space rather than time—instead of a linear narrative, we shift planes, jump into other areas, go through a window into another screen. Instead of “then X event happened,” we have “then [the reader] went to X location in the web.” Often, the rhetoric of netting reminds one of colonial narrative—stories of exploration, expansion, acquisition and cooptation. Coover describes the multiple choices of hypertext in terms reminiscent of early twentieth century imperialism—“the allure of the blank spaces of these fabulous networks, these green-limned gardens of multiply forking paths” (in Landow, 1992, 105).⁵ Bolter has written persuasively and in detail about the spatialization of electronic textuality, arguing that “in place of hierarchy, we have a writing that is . . . ‘topographic’” (25). And Landow conceives the problem of composing hypertext to be largely an issue of providing (imposing?) spatial orientation for

(on?) the reader: “Designers . . . confront two related problems, the first of which is how to indicate the destination of links, and the second, how to welcome the user on arrival to that destination” (*Hypertext*, 188-189). When those who decide what that seductive space is to be filled with—what information will be “mapped” there and how—are the global elite, the politics of inclusion become highly charged. As Landow points out, in a medium in which many texts are easily available, a text which is not on the web falls even farther into the margin and out of sight (*Hypertext*, 188-89). Further, the need to organize information by lexias, and the desire to present them in a form which makes sense in a screen by screen format inevitably shapes the ways in which information is presented according to the biases of the “authors.” Even if the dissenting voices of Others link to existing lexias, their inclusions are shaped by the texts that prompt them. This, of course, is true of any medium, but it may be less obvious in a medium that has pretensions of all-inclusiveness and polyphony. The rhetoric of democracy and access often seems to be more about the future inclusion of Others in a preexisting space already mapped than about the inclusion of those Others in a process of creation.

The spatial metaphor is pernicious. Ulmer quotes Hinton and Anderson, perhaps to raise exactly this point: “The connectionist model, however, offers a completely different conception, in which information is not stored anywhere in particular. Rather it is stored everywhere. Information is better thought of as ‘evoked’ than ‘found’” (Ulmer 148-49).⁶ An interesting question is why the “docuverse” is described spatially in the first place. It may have to do with the net’s problematic blending of public and private—the fact that one may be seated in one’s bedroom in a bath towel having a casual conversation with several hundred people. Perhaps we define it as space simply because of the dichotomy between public and private space; because there is no “room” to understand the experience of the net in the overdetermined spaces we already inhabit, we must assume it exists “elsewhere.”

All That Was Solid Melts into Metaphorical Anachronisms

These issues are, at least in part, issues of transition. Part of the problem is that, inevitably, hypertext pioneers are still thinking in structures codified by print. Hence Landow’s emphasis on the reader’s “not getting lost” in hyperspace, the notion of the map, the link that “makes sense”—in short, the whole notion of hypertextual coherence. In truly hypertextual reading, one cannot “get lost” because there is no particular place one is going in the first place, there is no destination to “get to” other than the screen(s) in which you are. Harpold recently pointed out that the language of navigation is negative—it implies the possibility of displacement and loss, and that the “accidents” of reading hypertext are part of the “general condition of the hypertext as *text*” (Harpold’s emphasis, “Contingencies” 127, 137). Moulthrop has questioned the appropriateness of hyperhetorics to date, noting that hypertext rhetoric must be “founded not on coherence and order but on instability and ‘chaos,’ an understanding of structure

not as an imposition from without but as spontaneous development from within" (155). Even here, however, Moulthrop resorts to a model of Pynchonian "paranoia" which creates a totalizing coherence in which all things are linked and in which the reader's task is simply to uncover the hidden significance of the connection. Yet, as Rosello has pointed out, "screeners' fear of disorientation may be a metaphorical anachronism" (139).

Moulthrop does not consistently remain beyond his assumption of a necessary coherence because we are working with the notion of a certain kind of narratee for hypertext. This narratee is a highly skilled reader in conventional print and film forms and assumes that materials which are proximate to each other (either sequenced or linked) have a meaningful relationship. This narratee fills those gaps which Bolter found in the links, almost by default. This narratee expects an overall unified meaning in all materials which such proximity, and will seek a closure that is structural, if not narrative.

None of these assumptions will work in the docuverse envisioned for hypertext. Links can be extended almost indefinitely. There will be no closure other than that created by the reader's decision to stop interacting with the text—which will mean the demise of formal argument as we know it, since that is driven by closure. Suasive rhetoric in general may go the way of recent political campaigning—into the sound bite or single screen, since the control of the extended structure and sequence of the reader/audience's exposure to data on which complex suasive texts or performances have traditionally depended will not be available to the author. It will also not be necessary to invest links with meaning, unless the reader is motivated to. It will be just as valid, to interpret lexias discontinuously as to perceive them as coherent. Another possibility is that "real" authorship will be defined as the creativity of the implied meaning in links between divergent texts authored by others, and that the links themselves are what will be "read" with most aesthetic interest, while the linked documents will be subordinated to the linkage structure. As Ulmer points out, hypertext structures meaning like collage—conductively rather than in- or deductively, like exposition (160-61).

Who Else is Online

In any case, given the historical differences between women's and men's relationship to space, particularly public space, the metaphors of exploration (historically linked to domination) should give us pause. As Mireille Rosello rather indignantly responds to Bolter's notion of writing as the exploitation of space, "To exploit indeed," agreeing with Ulmer's critique of hypertext metaphors inappropriately redolent of colonization—to which we might add a reference to the gendered associations of that "virgin territory" (129).

Given the historical tendency of collective nouns like "culture" to elide and suppress women's and minorities' voices while seeming to "speak for them," critical positions built on decades of painstaking retrievals of individual voices must now include strategies for approaching the much heralded "dispersal" of

textual and authorial boundaries and identities. Although hypertext allows a reader to move from one “voice” to another with ease, it is also possible that a reader’s sense of distinctions between those voices may be blurred, or at least subordinated to the form which dominates the reader’s encounter with those voices. Landow argues that although “[t]he capacity of hypertext to initiate the novice into a disciplinary culture suggests that this new medium has an almost totalitarian capacity to model encounters with texts. . . , the intrinsically antihierarchical nature of hypertext counteracts such a danger,” since the reader controls the path s/he takes (Landow and Delany, 23). I find this unconvincing. Harpold observes that the reader comes to experience the links as relatively seamless (like the suturing of a well edited film): “Narrative suture is what shores up the gaps in hypertextual discourse; it’s what makes credible the link’s function as a marker of connection and integration, rather than one of division and fragmentation.” As Harpold goes on to argue, however, describing the links as a kind of knotting, “if you take apart a knot, there is nothing inside it” (“Threnody,” 177). I would suggest that the links function much as Iser’s gaps do—they invite the reader to invest them with meaning. In so doing, however, they create a false continuity between documents that, in their original contexts, might work from radically different epistemological or political stances. Experience tells us whose voices tend to be coopted by powerful narrative structures.

Writings on hypertext so far have tended to collapse the political issues of representation into the fairly simplistic one of canon-formation. Although this is certainly important, it fails to directly address issues of readership; that is, it is not only what is offered to the reader, but how it is offered.⁷ It is also often argued that as the userbase grows, elitist interpretation will self-correct—that is, that as more “marginal” voices are added to the net, elitist, racist and sexist representation and interpretation will not go unchallenged. However, as theorists like Ngugi wa Thiong’o and Patrocínio Schweickart point out, there is a colonization of the mind far more subtle and potent than that of the bookshelf—although it can certainly include the bookshelf—or CD Rom. As Schweickart argues, the problem is not merely that women’s literature is not read, but that women are taught to become “good” readers by reading like males—according to male standards and adopting male worldview. wa Thiong’o makes a similar point regarding the enculturating/colonizing effects of colonial and post-colonial education on the colonized subject.⁸ Certainly the work of Belenky or of Robin Lakoff would tend to indicate that there are strongly marked gender differences in Western culture in the ways in which women and men respond to verbal aggression, in their willingness to challenge other’s perceptions and in their assessments of the potential value of their own ideas and responses. Hypertext may provide a medium for challenge of these enculturated differences—in the relative “privacy” of electronic conversation, a woman (or other minority) may feel less intimidated. Certainly a computer will not engage in the unconscious gender-selective reinforcement that we know teachers and other caretakers fall into, which reinforce children’s (and adults’) differential

assessments of the relative merits of their contributions to discussion. However, to assume that hypermedia will automatically empower marginalized speakers/writers is dangerously utopian. Hypertext may also, in its “almost totalitarian capacity to model encounters with the text” simply be an extraordinarily efficient tool to immasculate and colonize the marginal subject.⁹

Perhaps the most basic example of critical blindness is its disinclination to deal with the materiality of hypertext and its supporting hardware. Nowhere in the celebration of hypertext’s polylogic inclusiveness is the acknowledgement of the muteness encoded into the electronic component’s very existence—that of the overwhelmingly “Third World” female work force who produces it, working under conditions few of the people who actually use computers would be willing to accept.¹⁰ The refusal to address the material conditions of electronic and therefore hypertextual production as integral to any attempt to theorize the nature of hypertext is in some ways analogous to the suppression of the body in Western thought—it dooms the project to a partiality which is tantamount at least to a kind of naivete and at worst to a kind of totalitarianism.

Wreading

Thus hypertext’s “inclusiveness” really refers to an elite group. Within this group remains an issue of hierarchy emerging from the subject positions of the user in the larger social context, of which the net is a part. And within that hierarchy remains the gap—narrowing fast—between author and reader. It is precisely the issue of the reader’s control which I would like to address. While singing the praises of a mode of reading which liberates and empowers the reader, dispersing the author, most hyperhetorics have focused (paradoxically enough) on the author’s control over the text and obligation to the reader as comparatively helpless—easily “lost” and frustrated. (This may result in part from the focus on pedagogic uses for hypertexts.) However, if we really believe that the reader is given equal authority in the brave new docuverse—both as re-creator/reader and as creator/author—in short, if we really see the collapse of the distinctions between author and reader, then the rhetoric of hypertext must call for an intensely self-reflective reader/writer who is always meta-reading the self as s/he “reads” the hypertext, because the only ethos s/he can reliably read there will be her/his own.¹¹ In short, the reader, in all ignorance of the ethos of the multiple authorship of net culture, must take sole responsibility for critical distance from the information offered there, for the appropriateness of paths chosen, and for the creation of new paths to reflect her/his own subjectivities. For the user to produce coherence in her/his re/creation (no longer separable terms), s/he will have to maintain, for the duration of one interfacing, meta-awareness of a coherent subjectivity which s/he uses to organize the experience of the text. Author-ity devolves upon the user, and with it comes the responsibility to know the self that is reading, its goals and values—and to perform it consistently (35).¹² Secondly, s/he must assume not that s/he is moving through space or across a unified topography of text, but between and through different

voices, which each requires recognition. Thus, we are talking about an ethics which, since the reader and writer have lost distinction, is also a rhetoric—a rhetorethics of hypertext.

It is precisely this rhetorethics which reading theory and writing theory—which had been converging even without hypertext—have logically demanded, just as poststructuralism logically demanded hypertext without knowing it existed. A readerly text leads us back to Iser, Fish et al., and gender/ethnicity/colonialism theories lead us inevitably to the politics—and ethics—of subjectivity.¹³

This reader must, as a starting point, be highly literate—electronically literate, that is. This reader must be as competent in the creation of hypertext as in its recreation, or we see no true phenomenological change, only an expanded version of print reading—after all, the reader who is only free to follow paths created by others, regardless of how multiple those choices are, still has little ultimate author-ity over the text, except as s/he recreates it. Even a resisting reader does not have the authority of the author; a peace protester may “reread” the law, but that will not provide the protester with the status of the legislator or even judge—a point that becomes painfully obvious at sentencing hearings.

The Political Cyborg

The notion of a rhetorethics of hypertext can hardly be discussed without reference to Haraway’s foundational “Manifesto”—“an argument for *pleasure* in the confusion of boundaries and *responsibility* in their construction” (Haraway’s emphasis, 174). It is surprising that the early key printed works on hypertext and literary theory (e.g. Landow in 1991 or 1992, or Bolter in 1991) do not address Haraway, or indeed, feminist theory generally. In fact, these printed works deal almost entirely with issues of structure, reducing political components to issues of canon formation. The political uses of deconstructive theory (as exemplified by Barbara Johnson, for example,) are ignored; in fact, Bolter suggests that hypertext ends the deconstructive project: “An electronic text already comes to us in pieces, as a tentative, fluid collection of words: why seek to deconstruct it further?” (165). Bolter’s argument in this strange section of his book, the (il)logic of which is not replicated elsewhere in his fine analysis, is basically that since hypertext does not “take itself seriously,” the need for a rigorously critical, subversive reading disappears. Haraway’s essay (originally published in 1985) is the answer which anticipates Bolter’s question—as subsequent theorists such as Turkle, Rosenberg and Stone have recognized. Her “cyborg”—which easily fits as a definition of the ideal hypertext naratee envisioned by Landow, Bolter, Moulthrop, and, insightfully, Ulmer—“is resolutely committed to partiality, irony, intimacy and perversity. . . . No longer structured by the polarity of public and private, the cyborg defines a technological polis. . . . Nature and culture are reworked; the one can no longer be the resource for appropriation by the other. [So much for Coover’s “green limned paths.”] The relationships for forming wholes from parts, including those of polarity and hierarchical domination, are at issue in the cyborg world” (Haraway, 175). Haraway’s thumbnail sketch of

the “informatics of domination” is too important to be summarized here (better to link the whole article). Haraway argues that the cyborg, lacking the Edenic origin-narrative, is not crippled by a totalitarian utopian vision.¹⁴ I would argue that the cartological musings of those who would turn hyperspace into a landscape are precisely efforts to create an Edenic “garden” within which reading moves away from linear narratives of loss, mortality and castration toward an oceanic (and on to navigational tropes) polymorphous perversity—from the father to the mother, so to speak.¹⁵ (Although Harpold argues persuasively that links within hypertext act as fetishes, providing an acceptable simulation in place of the castrated phallus, within a cyborgian model of interaction, simulation may be more potent than reality [“Contingencies” 134].) The trouble here is that the pleasureable confusion of boundaries here indicated has no “responsibility”; it regresses to the totalizing solipsism of the infant.

The cyborg reader must resist not only the traditionally utopian impulse being mapped on to hyperspace, but also the utopian impulse of a cynicism that does not admit its vulnerability. As Flynn notes, critical reading takes place when one is neither wholly dominating the text nor dominated by the text, but at that liminal point between absolute credulity and unthinking rejection. The oscillation that hypertext creates between the user’s awarenesses of medium and message has been cited as a way to maintain a qualified distance from the text. But one might as well say that the act of turning pages creates such an oscillation, reminding the reader that s/he is holding a book. As a reader grows adept with the technology, turning pages and linking both take place at a secondary level of consciousness—in the same way that film cuts no longer require the literate viewer to consciously become aware of the transition in scene. Exposed to the ultimate seductiveness of a hypertextual docuverse which does not (supposedly) take itself seriously, the cyborg reader must take the text very seriously indeed. Whether in the currently elitist, masculinist culture of the net or in some future vision of universal access and document linkage, the material reality of the net will still reflect the greater economic and political reality—and in a total “docuverse” scenario, we can expect the informatics of domination—governmental and market-based—to permeate the hypertextual “space” to the same extent as and even more subtly than it does television.

Multiplicity and Responsibility

Will the kinetic, polyphonal structure of hypertext allow the nostalgia for unity to be mapped into its substance? More to the point, will the cyborg reader shaped by hypertextual practices resist the seductions of an ersatz coherence? Recent work on the psychology of narrative suggests s/he just might. The notion of a split self is, of course, fundamental to Western philosophy. The notion that the split might be between different sub-selves—in a sense, different *people*—has been around at least since the Freudian concepts of introjection and imagoes. Recent work, however, suggests that people are becoming more comfortable with the notion of being comprised of, not merely different aspects of the same

person, but different people. The unitary notion of the self, in this schema, is not that of an ego, or dominant personality, but that of a *function*—a function of coordination and awareness. The difference between a “normal” person and a person with multiple personality disorder, then, is this coordinating function—the healthy person is comprised of a continuous polylogue, while the ill person suffers from a kind of repressive serial monology (Hermans and Kempen 120, and *passim*). These selves are both internalized from the “outside” social world of voices and narratives, both individual and collective, and synthesized “within.” I’m placing these adverbs in quotes because the implications of the psychology of narrative, like those of hypertext, abolish the meaning of the distinction between public and private, social and individual: “There is no rigid boundary between self and not-self. On the contrary, the self/world boundary is highly permeable” (Hermans and Kempen 119).¹⁶ Sherry Turkle and Alluquere Stone both examine the concept of identity in specific relationship to technoculture, concluding that netlife leads to an increasing sense of multiplicity. Turkle notes that the Internet has become “a significant social laboratory for experimenting with the constructions . . . of self that characterize postmodern life. . . . Are we watching the slow emergence of a new, more multiple style of thinking about the mind?” (180). Stone suggests that, “in contrast to the relentlessly monistic articulations of physical and virtual space that law and science favor [based on the identification of the unitary self with the material body], let us juxtapose the mode of the technosocial, of reinvention and encounter in a technological space viewed as itself a social and physical environment, as a kind of nature . . . [which] evokes unruly multiplicity as an integral part of social identity” (42).

While narrative psychology has been working toward a view of the self as multiple, feminist moral philosophers have been privileging narrative to move in the opposite direction—toward a notion of the self as unified and centered and an ethics which depends on care-respect for persons as subjects of I-Thou relationships. Margaret Urban Walker argues, “we don’t and can’t identify people’s emotions, intentions and other mental states with momentary . . . phenomena. Instead we identify these features of people by attending to how their beliefs, feelings, modes of expression, circumstances and more, arranged in characteristic ways and often spread out in time, configure into a recognizable kind of story. Practically this means that [we are required to pay] acute attention to the minute and specific, to history and incident, in grasping cases in a morally adequate way” (167).

The fundamental question remains: how can a rhetorics of hypertext be created which addresses both the “responsibility in the construction” of boundaries that Haraway calls for and the “pleasure” in their confusion and addresses the issues of identity and ethos that a responsible politics requires, which services both a multiplicity of selves and protects the distinctions between selves and others? And how can we engage a feminist ethics of care-respect if that requires the notion of a heavily contextualized encounter with a unified self which is identical with an identifiable subject position? In a hypertextual

encounter with other voices, it is not possible or even desirable to read each utterance as part of an ongoing and highly centralized narrative of self. I would also argue that the notion of the central and centered self is disempowering in that it implies the imposition of a fairly static identity as a moral good.¹⁷ However, although it is not always possible to “know” the other voices in a hypertext in the richly contextualized, long term fashion prescribed by the care-respect model, it is possible to know one’s own selves in that way—that is, to narrate the selves in such a way as to acknowledge one’s needs and to respond to the other voices in the hypertext—as a reader/writer—in a way that is consistent with one’s own narratives and which maintains them in a caring manner. It is also ethically incumbent upon the reader/writer to make explicit those narratives as the meta- and con-text of any reading/writing. This will not make hypertext more inclusive, but it may make it less totalitarian and more humane. In short, the ethics of care, in the context of a communications technology which discourages the user from making judgements about texts based on an “ethos” which they can read into (or map onto) the text requires that one, insofar as it is possible, do that metatextual work oneself as part of “caring for” the other.¹⁸ Self-knowledge and self-expression become not merely a right but a responsibility, because only when we know who we are can we understand that we cannot speak for or as others. Only then can we understand what is lost in the enforced mutenesses which allow some of us to be heard.

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Notes

¹For examples, see Landow (1992), although in 1994, he does modify this position and Bolter (7). For extended critiques of these claims, see Rosenberg and also Ess.

²I am using the term hypertext all-inclusively here. First, let me define hypertext as the technology exists. Hypertext programs allow the writer to create “webbed” documents. The best example is the Web itself—a large hypertext. However, there are also smaller hypertexts which may be loaded onto the web, or stored separately. In a text devoted to Shelley the reader might, for example, begin on a screen that contains a paragraph from a novel by Shelley. From there, the user could go to the next paragraph in Shelley, or a screen containing biographical information on Shelley, or information on the literary period of publication, or a critique of the novel, or literally any other text the author wishes to place in the web. The reader can switch screens, or have several on view at once, or see an overview of what links (what other texts are connected) are available, or so forth. Additionally, with a multimedia package, it is possible to add sounds, graphics, scanned in photos or videoclips. Theodore Holm Nelson has envisioned an all encompassing “docuverse” in which any and every text will be online and multiply linked—and the links will multiply exponentially, since every reader is potentially also an author—can create new links, write their own text or enter someone else’s and link that. As has been pointed out, e-mail lists and electronic bulletin boards function as a primitive hypertext now, forming a vast series of linked documents. (Hypertext fictions, as they exist now, have tended to be very author-controlled, and thus have yet to fully realize the possibilities inherent in the technology). Thus, when I speak of hypertext in this essay, I mean not only a specific hypertext like the In Memoriam Web, but the larger hypertextual universe of the Net and Web, and the foreseeable docuversal future.

³In more detail, here is the relevant part of the post: "I for one would be sorry if people kept their views to themselves or watched every word."

Consider, also, some of the heuristic pleasure you would deprive us of: reading between the lines, the sense of some messages being exchanged behind other messages, the personality profiles that begin to emerge . . ."

Clearly, this poster is strongly interested in issue of ethos—as a reader. As a writer, however, the poster refuses

her/his reader those "pleasures" discussed above by refusing to sign—"no signature except the electronic address [which the poster probably cannot remove anyway], since I hope I speak for many" (June 26, 1994, [9:13:26] on VICTORIA@IUBVM.UCS.INDIANA.EDU).

⁴Mikhail Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevski's Poetics*. For a detailed discussion of the dialogic polylogism of the novel, see also Mikhail Bakhtin, "Discourse in the Novel."

⁵Compare to Marlow's comment in *Heart of Darkness*: "Now when I was a little chap I had a passion for maps. . . . At that time there were many blank spaces on the earth, and when I saw one that looked particularly inviting on a map (but they all look that) I would put my finger on it and say, When I grow up I will go there" (1763). The implications of the uses of landscape have been amply documented by a generation of critics since Baym, and the work done by theorists of colonialism is here of particular interest.

⁶I am here making a supposition about Ulmer's motive in linking the following quote with others relating to spatial metaphors—i.e., I'm reading into Ulmer's link/gap.

⁷Perhaps one example from Landow will serve as demonstration (*Hypertext*, 148). The screen pictured is from a hypertext teaching database on English Literature. The screen shows that the user is reading Sara Suleri, and seeking further information. A graphic dominates the screen; it is a scanned-in photo of an attractive South Asian woman—head only—in traditional costume, with a large nose ring. Clearly the graphic is meant to intrigue the program's users—the woman is young, beautiful, and exotic-looking, at least from a Western point of view. The title of this graphic—and of the wealth of information the user can access from this screen—is "South Asian Women OV [overview]."

I am working from an illustration in a printed book, and have not examined the database in question. But I would speculate that there is no equivalent screen which totalizes "North American Men" or even "North American White Men" in quite the same way. Depending on what one wanted to emphasize, it might be more appropriate to scan in either the farmer's face in "American Gothic" or a photo of Donald Trump. But if we did use either one, we would hardly worry about American college students mistaking such a representation as "true" or inclusive for the entire set of white American males. That, however, is not true of the "Other." The very fact that Southeast Asian women are "other" to most college-aged Americans demands some sort of representation of them, and simultaneously increases the likelihood that the representation will be accepted as definitive. My purpose here is not to criticize the database—a picture of a Southeast Asian woman in a Western business suit would be just as totalizing and inaccurate—but to point out that readers come with certain assumptions to the text which can at least be moderated by a clear sense of the writer's ethos—that is, it is easier to get "lost" in a sense of information as "fact" if one loses awareness of the specific authorial voice which situates itself in history and culture—in short, a subjectivity. In this scenario, it might be easier for a student to maintain awareness of a professor's subjectivity when s/he sees that fifty-five year old white male with a Texan accent in class than it is when information organized by that professor is simply presented on the screen in the form of decontextualized and recontextualized documents. In this instance, the dispersal of the author refers not to the author's authority, but to her/his responsibility—s/he can no longer be easily called to account.

⁸I am using Schweickart and wa Thiong'o simply because they come to mind as particularly lucid and compelling discussions of the colonization of marginal subjectivity. However, there are many other theorists who have developed these same observations; the classic, of course, being Frantz Fanon's *Black Skin, White Masks*.

⁹"Immasculate" is Schweickart's term for the process by which women have historically been taught to read as male or masculine subjects.

¹⁰See Ong and also Fuentes and Ehrenreich. Women (and men) in "First World" countries also produce microelectronic components, often in the "homework" model, which often creates special problems in exploitation since homeworkers are isolated and more than usually economically dependent.

It is important to note, however, that this issue is not specific to hypertext, but to the entire production of liberal humanist scholarship recently; e.g., this article was composed on a computer manufactured in developing nations and assembled in the U.S.

¹¹This combined author/reader has been graced with many neologisms, perhaps the most charming of which is "wreader," whose originator is unknown to me.

¹²Diana Fuss argues "[W]ays of reading are historically specific and culturally variable, and reading positions are always constructed, assigned or mapped. . . . Readers, like texts, are constructed; they inhabit reading practices rather than create them *ex nihilo*."

¹³See Iser; Fish.

¹⁴It is astonishing how often Haraway is misread. William Covino, for example, has just recently read Haraway's cyborg as a "utopian vision" calling for a "giant self, a cosmological individual" (369, 368). Not only does this misread the original, but it takes no account of Haraway's subsequent commentary and refinement of the cyborg idea, which is "resolutely multiple" (hardly a "giant self"); as Haraway notes "the cyborg is from the start a polluted category. . . . It's an offspring of World War II nuclear culture, and there's no possibility of working out that position to imagine yourself in the Garden of Eden or returning to pre-Oedipal bliss. . . . cyborg writing is resolutely committed to foregrounding the apparatus of its own authority. . . . [without] eschewing authority" (Olson 4-5). Covino also makes the peculiar error of arguing that the cyborg's transgressive properties are limited by the computer codes governing access to cyberspace: "The hyper-conventionality of the cyborg is perhaps too obvious to require an argument. . . governed as she is by a technological language that preceded her emergence" (370). Covino seems to believe that computer language exists as Presence, preceding the human beings who have created the language and programmed the software. (God in the machine?) Covino does make the crucial point, however, that Gingrich also wanted to see every subject "wired" and not toward the goal Haraway envisions. As he notes, the poor do not have access to cyberculture and this may mark a kind of transgression in itself—that NOT being wired may be a kind of resistance. The celebration of virtuality at the expense of materiality, of multiplicity in performance versus individual bodies, tends to hide the fact that the figure of the cyborg can be envisioned and used as a disciplinary construct. This is of course a very old science fiction theme.

¹⁵Landow argues that the reliance on tropes of death and loss are endemic to print culture and are more specifically a critical reaction to the exhaustion of print: "Whereas terms like death, vanish, loss and expressions of depletion and impoverishment color critical theory, the vocabulary of freedom, energy and empowerment marks writings on hypertext. . . . Most poststructuralists write from within the twilight of a wished-for coming day; most writers of hypertext write of many of the same things from within the dawn" (Landow, *Hypertext*, 87).

¹⁶For a discussion of the philosophical discourse underlying the recent direction of narrative psychological research, see also Anthony Paul Kerby's *Narrative and the Self*. I would suggest that this development in psychology reflects the general state of transition in a culture whose epistemology is being transformed, in part by evolving communications technology. Just as we impose the false and regressive trope of space on the net, and insist on coherence in a form which we celebrate for violating our expectations of unity, we become ready to accept the notion of multiple selves, a slippage of subject positions and the mingling of inner and outer, self and world which the cyborg represents—yet rely on the notion of an organizing function to keep those selves together, unified. As those boundaries become more permeable, they become very highly charged—we become obsessed with figuring out where they are and what they exclude precisely because they are so unstable and change so quickly. *We have no experience with not caring about meaning*. Hypertext's promised "freedom" may be freedom from (compulsory) interpretation. Perhaps this is why hypertextual theory comes back to the problem of closure and of coherence, why we read the text of the internet in search of ethos, and why scholarship in general has taken a renewed interest in the body in recent years—the

body is the visible sign of the unity of the multiple subject positions that can make up one "person." Perhaps, as the cyborg reader develops, s/he will come to have no epistemological requirement for unity or coherence, little anxiety about personal boundaries, and will not cavil at the imposition of the ethos of any of a multitude of selves upon the text s/he evokes. In the meantime, however, we need to attempt to make the net both materially horizontal and inclusive (which means resisting any rulings or laws which would reinforce informational elitism) and to avoid encoding an elite hypertextual ethos in a totalizing Edenic narrative.

¹⁷I am here engaging Winnie Tomm's argument. Although I agree fundamentally with her premise that self exists in a tension between connectedness and separation in the context of interlocking circles of community and relatedness, I disagree with her emphasis on the centered self which is internally coherent over time. In a comment which might have been written about netting, but was not, Tomm avers "A theory of ethic must take into account the interconnecting circles of a person's existence. Recognizing self, home and community as interacting networks means acknowledging the interweaving strands of societal and personal rights and responsibilities. Justice and caring derive from the common source of the desire to express one's power . . . [it] reflects the more abstract concern to protect the right of self expression in the face of conflicting expressions" (105).

¹⁸Perhaps I will be accused here of a certain naivete in that the tradition of psychology gives us to understand that our urge to know ourselves is always subverted by our own defenses. However, that does not lessen our moral responsibility to act in accordance with our beliefs and values in so far as we are able to know them—here, "acting in accordance with" means also that we must articulate them—if nothing else to expose them to the scrutiny of others who may then choose to interpret our actions as contrary to our stated beliefs/intentions. Another kind of naivete is political—and certainly the call to an individual ethics may seem to elide political solutions. However, the net does, at this time, by its nature preclude a rule governed solution to its ethical problems. And as Nel Noddings points out, although "our own ethicality is not entirely 'up to us'. . . we are fragile; we depend upon each other even for our own goodness [yet] The duty to enhance the ethical ideal . . . invokes a duty to promote skepticism and noninstitutional affiliation. In a deep sense, no institution or nation can be ethical. . . . Only the individual can be truly called to ethical behavior . . . Everything depends, then, on the will to be good, to remain in caring relation to the other"(102).

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