

Furious

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Furious

Technological Feminism and Digital Futures

Caroline Bassett, Sarah Kember, Kate O’Riordan

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Feminist Futures: A Conditional Paeon for the Anything-Digital

paeon

n. (in classical prosody) a foot of one long and three short syllables in any order

(thefreedictionary.com)

paeon, paeon, peon

A paeon (pronounced PEE-in, sometimes spelled pean) is a fervent expression of joy or praise, often in song.

A paeon (pronounced PEE-in or PEE-on) is a four-syllable metrical foot in prosody. Anyone who doesn't analyze poetry will never have a use for the word.

A peon (pronounced PEE-on) is an unskilled laborer or menial worker. Today, use of the word is most common in Indian English, where it's used to describe any worker and presumably doesn't have negative connotations. In American and British English, peon has an insulting tone. No one, in the US at least, wants to be a peon.

The first two words have origins in the same Greek term; peon comes from the Medieval Latin term for foot soldier.

(grammarist.com)

This is a metrical book in one long and, in any order, three shorter chapters: a four-syllable metrical foot in prosody. Thus, a paeon, of a kind, about the digital or post-digital; we don't care which. One is shorthand for a formation it does not describe. The second labels a change within that formation we do not necessarily accept. This is a form of poetic writing that wants to grapple with our contemporary constellation. This is not a book about labels.

This constellation, from our point of view, orbits around the attractions of big data, of computable everything, of smart things, of clean diagrams, beautiful patterns, future environments: of worlds that are

made into data and then into something else. New cleaner, smarter, more real versions of life, which just is, which denies the crafting that goes into making it look like that. It gravitates towards an architecture that aims for ubiquity, invisibility and control, while making a world of devices, applications and algorithms.

The current constellation configures a technocratic world of endless new media, although it doesn't need to take that shape. At the same time, some of those that might contest it have given up the tools that would enable them to intervene. Media theorizing and technological fantasizing too often come together in the pursuit of beautiful abstractions. Big data patterns media theory as much as it does the politics of technology. Machine logics, data analytics and the archaeologies of media-in-themselves (dug out of what, by who, to what end?) are the new languages of media. They have emerged because of an apparent consensus that we are all – and equally – post-human now. Who needs language in a subjectless, extinct, anthropocenic (not anthropocentric?) object oriented world? Wherever do subjects and stories go in worlds of wonderful, world-changing technological things? In a world of code, who writes about the end of writing? Absenting ourselves from our futures is a sleight of hand. 'We' humans re-enter the scene unseen, a specter: the subject that haunts the object. Are we dealing once again with archetypes?

As the archetypal subject re-presents itself in its absence and in the declaration of its ending at the hands of the digital, it is important, once again, once upon this time, to relate to our differences. There is no universal, no absolute, no end, no beginning, no ontological distinctions and substitutions. 'We' continue to coexist differently in, and differentially as the world of dynamic matter, lively computers, and mediation. Now to that other 'we'; as writers, as the authors of this book, we three are quite happy with translations and transformations: data, text, body – when they are recognized as circular, multiply directioned, iterative and not closed. What we want to refuse, as well as the most simplistic of substitutions, subjects for objects, humans for things, is a particular series of declensions: roughly those that turn bodies to text, texts to data, data to diagrams, and that then purge this final figure, the diagram, the architecture, of its impure pasts. These are the dominant modes of the computational, big data and materialism. But to say this again: this mode – body, text, data, diagram – there's nothing wrong with this. The problem comes when what comes at the end, the diagram, the beautiful

structure, the new machine, refuses to accept or acknowledge where it came from, and gives itself as the only possible answer, *the* solution. Dissolving into itself its component parts it re-renders itself as beyond all that old fashioning: creating beautiful abstractions.

It might be useful to note that this declension itself gets reduced still further: text and data. No bodies at all, never mind subjects. And no need to think about the complexity of the diagram, only to see it as data speaking itself and thereby speaking its irreducible truth. Information is beautiful. Information in, data out. We maintain that this – though it had a moment with the text – is not writing.

Declension produces a story that lively materials generate information and data, and are fully understandable in those forms. For example, genomes are sequenced and made as data, patterning new versions of life-like engineered organisms, printed as a book of life that tells no story, but just is. Or lives are cleaned up and cut up through the forms that take to data; photos, comments, likes and shares. Big biomedica and small social media both make a world known through forms in which information science, big data architects, search and algorithms become the necessary way of knowing. That's the story given about computation, big data and the solutions it provides. This is a story that refuses to call itself a story; that says story doesn't count. And it isn't an accident that this suddenly looks like that savage reduction of narrative itself to the binary: in/out. Narrative into sadism; we must either *be* seduced by beautiful information, or *consent* to be seduced by it. It is a narratological violence that has its connections to older links between formalism, cybernetics, and structuralism. Interpretation, meaning, alternative desires and whole lives are cut out of a story that explains itself in its own terms while denying its own storytelling capacities.

Of course they tell a good story, those chief architects of life after new media, those corporate voices that sometimes seem to be humans (the Founders, the Entrepreneurs, the Architects, all of them puissant only because of their industrial extensions). They use all the tools in the book to do it, including eliding realism with the coming real: blueprints, future visions and prototypes. Their scientifically designed futures are science fictions, we should recall, and like other science fictions, they exploit all forms of the possible real, to produce an affective engagement with the tale. You'd better believe it, because this is really coming!

Too many of the demigods of object oriented media theory tell these kinds of stories too. They also deny that they are telling tales, even while

their storytelling is all too apparent. Look at their fantastic construction of desirable worlds made of gadgets and impossible anatomies, mountains that speak, objects that hum, people in the right order, a leveled out space in which objects give us new forms of enlightenment, to which we freely attend, and entrance to which is freely given – ‘women are welcome here’ – they say. These though are tributary tales; the mainstream comes from the fable makers of the computational industries.

Computational industries give us fables of an inevitable time to come. They give us a post-political conflict-free epic, a myth of benign digital conquest, that scales all ways: from the newly made heroes of the deep history of computing, geological forms, renaissance artists; to the founders of the valley; all the way up from invisible information infrastructures; the beneath and beyond perceptible logics of algorithm and database; to autonomous modes of transport, smart-glass homes and cities and global – if not cosmic – connectivity.

The world that these founders made, their imaginary universe, or the universe of their hubris, potently performative, is multi-scalar and highly structured. It is resigned to inequality – although also politely regrets it – while actively redesigning it. It serves everyone everywhere (though some a lot more than others), and is centered on neutralized, un-differentiated data-connected, muted (we have voice recognition technologies for that old speaking and writing routine), object-filtered, always already enhanced and optimized, declined, substituted, techno-subjects. Citizen tech is a universal figure, indifferent to difference, carved out of its own self-same consumer category, a seamless match, a perfect pairing; the very manifestation of its object correlative. We have Janet for her smart kitchen and John for his kitted out car. The universal segues, in all manner of tech driven visions, narratives, promotions, into the optimized, perfected and above all productive citizen of our times. Indeed what is being driven at here is universal productivity, the generating if not working citizen; we’re heading in a different direction.

It is tempting to hate this world, and its totalitarian way of dealing with its gendered techno-subjects, but here comes the trickiness: it wraps servitude in a promise of personal service, and is in this way seductive. Everybody is special. There are no ugly sisters, but only those, 7.53 billion to whom proper attention is paid. They are served in order to be served up as data. Technology humbles itself in order to be crowned through translations, declensions and substitutions. We are back to weird tales and fairy stories.

Let's twist their tales and write our own.

And, since we've invoked the ugly sisters, let's begin with glass slippers and Cinderella subjects. Let's talk of the magical properties of manufactured glass, a mirror for the modern myths of the anything-digital world. In this new world, Cinderella subjects, scullery maids for nuclear families, Cinderella-everybodies, are immediately recognized as the rightful heirs to glass slippers, dodging the unproductive ugly sisters, who are pacified by their own magical mirrors.

Cinderella's new slipper is a speech-enabled translucent kitchen worktop that asks her if she'd like help with her baking, or an augmented reality bathroom mirror that displays a punishing schedule of meetings before she has brushed her teeth.

Cinderella's new slipper is a transparent interactive screen that obliges her to programme the home ambient intelligence system while checking her to-do list and getting children off to school. It is her car windscreen that counts down the time to her destination in seconds and the ubiquitous default health app on her phone through which she must measure her steps, calories, sleep, contacts, likes, loves and life.

Cinderella is both potential and *potentia*. She does not get to choose which. Her time is cut out for her, cut in to her, carved up into an increasingly unsustainable, fine-grained pattern of work-rest-and-play. She is reconstituted and re-ordered in time even as she continues to emerge *as time* (as life itself). She is the menial, domestic and professional worker without end – a real peon: a real labourer for the post-digital.

In this new world, you don't want to be Cinderella, yet she is everywhere, luminously reflected, projected, magnified and rotated in twenty-first century glass worlds. As for the others – the ugly sisters have had their faces smoothed, their ungovernable tempers tempered, and their smiles painted on; they're fit for the labour of social media and are busy posting to Instagram. So how are they different now, from Cinderella? And the scullery maids? They have been automated out of existence – fully redundant figures in the new economy.

This everybody-Cinderella, the heroine of the old tales like it or not (perhaps she always hated the prince), is now the figure for a new sexual contract. Cinderella is a constitutive part of a transparent environment that is intuitive, affective, gestural, sensory and haptic. She can speak or be seen; voice or visibility, not both. She unlearns to write, courtesy of predictive texts and voice-recognition software that promises to say it all for her. Automation re-organizes the shift from voice to written inscrip-

tion, threatening to take away that moment of making distance between speaking and writing, between what is captured and what is thought. Retain the breath, but close the distance.

This is the future that has, for a long time, been in design. It was the future of the 1950s when the correlation of technics and life was distilled into times and spaces for the containment and proliferation of female labour, and into new regimes and techniques of productivity and reproductivity in an era of Cold War. Now Microsoft, no less than Monsanto, puts Cinderella back in the kitchen. The difference is that in the 50s, Monsanto's kitchen was made of melamine. Now Microsoft's (Google's, Corning's) kitchen is made of glass. Glass is the new plastic. Glass is the new skin, the sensual, thin, flexible, soon-to-be elastic (post-plastic) material that wraps around Cinderella's body, first transforming it, then transforming *into* it, a proper grotesque, a grimmer fairy tale future.

The architects of today's infrastructure are part of the same economy as the smaller games and wearable technology industries. For instance, those who design 'chastity' bras that pop open when our prince comes and those who make violently misogynistic games and then react with violent misogyny when they are challenged for doing so. Under the conditions of impossibility of the new sexual contract, voice or visibility, labour or life, what is to be done?

Let's twist again: Cinderella could do something else. As writers, we can direct our characters, set them on a different path, or place them in a different universe, real or imagined. Which might be the point; our Cinderella stays with mediation. Nothing appears to her without being made communicable. A new or old world is not conjured directly from atoms, or quarks, or geology, or imagination without processes of communication, pictures, language, forms, connections, negotiations. She does not conspire with the nowhere and everywhere point of view, nor turn away from the cultural and textual.

Everything is full of meaning, but who is to say what and how that meaning is made. After all, in the fairy tale, Cinderella's mice were horses, and vegetables were her carriage. That was magic. But in this scientific, or rather scientific world, it is also the case that anything can be something else (pig fuckers become prime ministers, gropers become presidents, etc). The point is that *whose* something gets to count as the real thing, is up for grabs. Meaning was never perfect, meaning and mattering always slip and slide, you have to grab onto something. The question is, what? Neurology, materialisms and other ontologically

oriented approaches look for what's solid. Absolutist medium theory alights on the technology as the message and evacuates the content. How then can the world appear? Cinderella eschews such purifications and knows that pages and pictures, symbols and texts, count as part of the world too; are in fact intrinsic to it.

Writing counts.

So does writing new stories. And we begin by saying that these things we are given as uncontested coming realities, inevitable developments, *are* stories. If this book itself is also story (which it is), it is a different one. It is one that contests the demands of technological stories to become mythical prediction. We reject their attempt to act as performative origin stories, forms of future prediction that set out to *make* what they say will come, a snapped shut circle.

We want to find different accounts, and new possibilities, and we look around, therefore, for other allies. Those who see literary forms as material things that provoke actions but are not executable. Those with critical views of technology too, and those who claim interventional expertise, doubled, redoubled, tripled, intelligences, those who know they can make a difference.

All too often though, what we find when we look for allies, are the old princes, naked and ornate, who know there are some problems with this looking glass world, but are – let's face it – easily enchanted. And who would want to give away the role of the prince, with its illusion of action, for the life of the princess, bound into the tale, as she is foot-bound by her glass shoes?

These princes, particularly the ones *who choose* to be princes, the demigods of particular kinds of theory, are complicit in this future. Some evoke figures of furious women in the service of producing entirely man-made theories of everything and forgetting about bodies, abandoning identities. They see everything from nowhere, at one with the world of things that just are, or very soon will be. They ask what it is like to be glass, sliding in to become transparent, using this as justification for their failure to take a standpoint of their own. They do not ask what this glass does, how it makes a cut, who bleeds. They are willfully ignorant of Cinderella's eye view and don't, in any case, think it matters.

They have abandoned any interest in those divisions between service/servitude, flattened out affect and texture, smoothed over divisions that organize humans, and are far more interested in other forms of empathy:

how to feel like code, how glass moves, and at what fascinating, scintillating scales. Absolute speed and molecular sloth.

They think we are all ‘after humanity’ and thereby think it’s fine to ignore, or simply refuse to reveal, the mess that Cinderella is in. The particular grotesque of skin and glass, glass as skin – the transparent morphing in, and as time, disciplined by service/servitude, that constitutes her day’s labour. And remember that Cinderella is the figure for ourselves, the digital subjects.

These theoretical demigods believe, with the architects (as the architects) in the *potentia* of glass. They affirm and attest this *potentia*, having no more need for the negativity of critique.

As part of that, they have relinquished language – or so they say. Narratives do not matter; representation is always false. Matter is all that matters. Matter is all that matters. Matter is all that matters. This is a chant. This is a paean for the post-digital. And hearing it, Cinderellas everywhere (also everyware and everywear), and those are who in danger of *becoming* Cinderellas, should beware. You are the peon the paean is not sung for. Your future is to be cut out. Or be cut in. Either way you serve, and are served up, and badly served, denied the tools to speak and write – even while forced to become productive.

But like we said, let’s twist again.

Suppose you refuse to be *that* Cinderella? Suppose the tail/tale didn’t wag for you, that you didn’t wear it; the whiteness, heteronormativity, class aspiration, universal subjectivity, even as myth? Well, then, or so you were told, you could try out at being the prince (but even then . . .). Beyond those two roles, they warned, was only the abyss of the unnamed, bit characters, plot functions without function, actants without agency (human or machine), illegitimacy and indeterminacy.

Those divisions don’t work, at least if you think freedom matters. There are places and bodies in between. We want to jump into the abyss. From there we can rethink what bodies are, and what subjects are, and what biotechnological subjects might become – and what a new politics of the material might be.

We refuse to be saved like Cinderella, we don’t want to be saved; it should be obvious why. It’s been clear, at least since Microsoft Word, and certainly since *The Circle*, that salvation is a form of capture. That’s precisely why – as Margaret Atwood noted, its Cinderella heroine is herself a distress signal – Mae Day; May Day, M’aidez; help me, MeToo. This might become a call for some solidarity.

Another kind of other salvage operation, our own, begins by refusing the tale that refuses the tale, as the start of its own tale. So here are the bare bones of a different story.

This is a story of whatever and wherever digital media, and of whatever, wherever, whoever. It is about the fabulated composite writing body we constitute, and it looks for differently constituted bodies than our own. We are an agglomeration, an intersection; we make no claims at all to be complete.

Although our fabulation still turns on Cinderella's swollen feet, our inelegant pirouette can turn at different scales, and has greater ambitions to intersect. We're not giving scale, subjectivity or new forms of collectivity away to the mountain viewers.

PAEAN, PAEON, PEONS AND WRITING

So here it is. Our four-syllable paeon – a metrical book in one long and, in any order, three short chapters (who's counting?). Impure poetry, you might say. We do. Which is not to say we are poets. We'd rather name ourselves peons. Peons: menial labourers. How can we include ourselves in this category given our professor-ated natures, and good jobs, our white western status? Incredulity might seem a reasonable response. Bear with us. We have our reasons.

The first: we are peons because we work on texts, labour on them, by hand, by highly augmented, automated hand. We have no problem with automation *per se*; dividing bodies and machines was last century's debate. It's not where we draw lines now, and was an old red line we never respected anyway. How could anybody who read Haraway seriously? And we did.

So no red lines. But instead: inscription ensembles involving keyboards and screens, keys and pages, pens and paper, hands and heads. Writing. We are peons because we are enamoured of the labour of writing. We want to recognize that by-handedness, that particular labour that is supposedly to be automated out of existence, but that continues to inform, inscribe, be inscribed into contemporary computational formations. We are enamoured not least because the labour of writing is systemically devalued in that recent tradition of the digital which denies its own form, preferring formations from which all that is not absolutely inhuman is to be expunged (ideally), or regarded as only an obstacle to getting to the real, not the real event but the pure essence, the quiddity of the thing.

Second, we enroll ourselves as peons because we claim solidarity with others. We write with an awareness that many of these others have lives far, far harder than our own. But we are – like almost everybody else – increasingly made peon-ic by neoliberalism, in our case through our interpellation into the academy with its flexible, extensible, wrap-around desires to own us. And its assumption that it always has the right to demand more, or to spit us out if our label no longer fits whatever re-fit, whichever revamp or newly metrical measure is provided (back to paeons too then; it's our metrical measures against those valourized in the academy).

Finally, we are peons because we are women. Because we are feminists, and because we are feminist women writing about the digital. Because we declare that there is work to be done, and that it demands peons to do it. Because we are casting a vote of no confidence in the emergent politicians of post-human, post-digital environments and networked, distributed, intelligent things-in-themselves. Specifically, we do not care what it is like to be a computer, or not when this query enacts a fantasy of unmediation; of things that just are, and of human-technological futures that write themselves. That world view has no room for questions concerning solidarity, equality, or – let us invoke a word that is almost quaint these days – liberation; meaning this to frame demands for freedom that go far beyond simple equality (although they begin with it), because they are also demands to reopen horizons, to begin to imagine and develop radical transformations.

This is where we stand in relation to the labour of writing. We defend this labour and seek to augment it as far as possible. This is not an anti-computing thesis. Writing is central to us. And we see our labour as a labour in writing. Labouring to inscribe and to accept the distance between writing and voice, to have both. We are writing to speak. Amongst other things.

This means we are working with writing tools. We won't give them away, not least because we have noticed that the nominal, anonymised, normative, he-who-shall-not-be-named media theorist, who may think he is amongst the demigods, declares he is willing to relinquish, (or rather, be seen to relinquish) tools at his disposal – including narrative, poetry, storytelling, representation and critique. Meanwhile, the architects of the post-digital universe – those residing currently at Google (*et. al.*) are emphatically not.