To reach, not the point where one no longer says I, but the point where it is no longer of any importance whether one says I. We are no longer ourselves. Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*

These meditations are part of an ongoing conversation that began in an online synchronous discussion when I innocently raised the subject of the use of random procedures in digital literary expression, and was stunned at the vehemence of the reaction. I contemplated the volatility of the subject; I wanted to know what was at stake. The results of my inquiry led to a paper I presented at a conference on e-poetry at SUNY Buffalo where, again, the subject of digital literary automata and the role of the human author in these operations raised more than a little heat. The conversations at the conference demonstrated the weight of emotional investment in the idea of the autonomous human subject. No wonder people were getting edgy. A year later, I found myself compelled to revisit the relationship between author and text in these poetic procedures, largely spurred on by an e-mail that was sent to a listserv for a graduate students of the Buffalo Poetics program. The author of the e-mail expresses concern about what she perceived as a masculinist, purifying tendency in procedural poetics. She asks questions about the relationship between gender and digitally generated poetry. In conclusion she writes, " I'm struck by the tremendous amount of anxiety inflected through these processes and explanations" (Russo).

I have also been recently asked to account for these perceptions which are no doubt fueled, in part, by the gender representation in the Object 10 issue on cyberpoetics, and the Buffalo conference from which it sprang. And so, I have been thinking a great deal about the listserv post, and I think I can locate the source of the author's anxiety. I am reading parallel conversations. It has been said that if we look for enactments of current constructed identification of the feminine- multiple, complex, decentered, subversive, transgressive, marginal, web-like, metonymic, destabilizing- in formal literary practice, we will locate them in experimental, or avant-garde traditions (*RE:THINKING:LITERARY: FEMINISM*, 367). Carolyn Guertin adds that these modes of expression are endemic to and constitutive of cybertextual practice. Cyberfeminists talk about moving from an écriture feminine to an écriture digital (Senft). According to Sandy Stone, to enter cyberspace is to don the mantle of the feminine. Nevertheless, much of the critical writing on the nature of the human authorial involvement in the production of the cybertexts of digital

procedural poetry is loaded with the language of traditional patriarchal values: mastery, purity, order, autonomy, incorporeality. No wonder then that these practices are being thought of as boy toys.

If digital procedural poetics is being characterized, erroneously I would argue, as a somehow inherently masculinist practice, I suspect it is because it is also being characterized, equally erroneously, as a practice that completely effaces the involvement of the human author. While this move is normally celebrated as a rather welcome discrediting of the exalted romantic poetic genius, I would argue that it is consistent with and made possible only by the systematic devaluation of materiality and embodiment that informs one possible posthuman future. In *How We Became Posthuman*, N. Katherine Hayles notes that, "Because they have bodies, books and humans have something to lose if they are regarded solely as information patterns" (29). Is it not reasonable that those whose authorial agency has only been recently written into the history of literary production should be hesitant in seeing the redundancy of the human author as a cause for celebration?

Hayles proposes that this pressure towards dematerialization is assisted by the privileging of pattern over presence in an antagonistic relationship. She suggests instead that pattern and presence enjoy a complementary relationship, and that digital informatics reveals that pattern and randomness are bound together in "a complex dialectic that makes them not so much opposites as complements or supplements to one another" (25). The relationship between authorial control and its relinquishment as it is realized in procedural poetics is characterized by a similar supplementarity. Operating in this splice, these procedures point to an emergent posthuman subjective agency.

The algorithmic process at work in these procedures is often referred to as "automatic poetry generation." An examination of this use of the word "automatic" propels us straight into considerations of authorial agency. At once imputing a human-like quality to machines, and a mechanistic nature to living organisms, the word automatic generates a recursive semantic feedback loop. To call a living organism automatic is to rob it of life and volition. To call a machine automatic is to bestow upon it will and independent action. As Haraway once remarked, "Our machines are disturbingly lively, and we ourselves frighteningly inert" (Haraway 152). The phrase begs the question, who or what is the generator in an automatic poetry generator. Who's speaking? It's been noted that this is a question a feminist always asks (Senft). If indeed, the question, "who tells the story" is a feminist one, then, as we

construct the posthuman author, and consider our relationship to a new emergent nonhuman authorship, and readership, we would do well to look to feminism and other theories of writing and subjectivity that been concerned with alterity. I wish here to examine the implications of the relinquishment of authorial control and the deliberate effacement of the human subject in procedural poetics from a perspective that locates itself in a resistance against a dematerialized notion of the posthuman, of information and of textual practice. While it would be misleading and counter-productive to identity this as an inherently feminist position, it is useful to consider why feminists would have a vested interest in its application.

The use of randomness, the deliberate construction of chance, is central to procedural poetic work that seeks to complicate authorial control. Randomness is also central to information theory, and a major character in the story of how information lost its body. Nevertheless, it is important to acknowledge that the randomness of digital text generators is not truly random. Computer-based random event generators are in themselves deterministic procedures, but the results they produce have the appearance of obeying no particular law. This simulated pseudo-randomness, according to the *Web Dictionary of Cybernetics*, generates behaviour that is "nearly impossible to predict without knowledge of the starting number and its algorithm" (Principia Cybernetica Web).

So although we are simulating randomness, the loss of control, or at least the perception of the loss of control, is authentic. I would therefore like to place the use of randomness in the larger context of work that problematize authorial control, although randomness and chaos hold particular interest to those wishing to occupy and subvert those spaces to which women have been traditionally assigned.

These procedures are certainly very different and are used differently to different ends. But the nervousness with which they are viewed is similar as Jackson Mac Low observes:

> Everything in the bin may be tainted with a contempt or dislike that may arise from the fact that the artwork is thought not to be entirely the work of the individual artist. Whatever may come into it may not be the result of choices--on whatever level--of the artist. The dislike may arise from a kind of despair or fear that the "self"--the "subject"--is being intrinsically denigrated. Indeed, these methods and others first arose from an attempt to lessen (or even vainly to try to do away with) the hegemony of

> the ego of the artist in the making of the artwork.

If the implied redundancy of authorial involvement gives feminist critics of procedural poetics pause, the paradoxical use of these same procedures in order to reassert control over literary production isn't necessarily more attractive. Critiquing the surrealist's technique of automatic writing, Queneau proclaims that:

> ... the poet is never inspired, because he is the master of that which appears to others as inspiration. He does not wait for inspiration to fall out of the heavens on him like roasted ortolan. He knows how to hunt, and lives by the incontestable proverb, 'God helps those who help themselves.' He is never inspired because he is unceasingly inspired, because the powers of poetry are always at this disposition, subject to his will, submissive to his own activity. (quoted in Motte Jr., 36)

This mastery is achieved through the rigorous application of formal procedures. "The classical playwright who writes his tragedy observing a certain number of familiar rules is freer than the poet who writes that which comes into his head, who is the slave of other rules of which he is ignorant" (quoted in Motte Jr. 18). The OuLiPo's championing of processual literature for its power to free the poet of unconscious rules resembles Burrough's use of cutups as a way to guarantee the autonomy of the individual. As described in *The Ticket that Exploded*, randomness is a tool used to "break obsessional associations"- personal, and cultural, and those of the WORD.

Ironically, what these stories suggest is that individual autonomy is not part of our native processes- we have to surrender to the workings of an outside force to gain independence. Even as these writers champion the individual autonomy of the human subject, they reveal what a fragile property it is. More is at stake here than the loss of the conscious control of the author/programmer. What is at stake is the idea of conscious agency in the human subject itself.

Conscious agency can be said to be a native function of the liberal human subject only in so far as the liberal human subject is a constructed entity. This is what is so threatening about the emerging figure of the posthuman cyborg. Joseph Weizenbaum and the OuLiPo make strange bedfellows but they are united in their anxiety to protect maintain the individual autonomy of the human subject, even as she plays in the garden of algorithms. However, as Hayles elaborates in *How We Became Posthuman*, "In the posthuman view.. conscious

agency has never been “in control” (288). Nevertheless, just because we are not fully in control does not mean that we are wholly absent, or completely passive. Feminists have known the truth of this for some time.

Christian Bök has said that *The Policeman's Beard is Half-Constructed*, the only full length volume of poetry said to be written by an artificial intelligence, signifies the redundance of the involvement of a human author in the production of literature. On the surface, it seems that William Chamberlain, the programmer of and official editor for Racter, the text's reputed machinic author, would likely agree, as in the preface to the book, he himself rejects any authorship status. Even if we are to ignore his role in writing the code which produced the texts, or selecting the input texts, and I don’t believe we can, Jorn Barger & Espen Aarseth both note that Chamberlain played an active role in tweaking Racter's output through templates that would further shape the text (Barger, Aarseth 132-4). In any event, in Chamberlain's case, one doubts the seriousness of his disavowal of authorship status. As Aarseth notes, Chamberlain's insistence on the authenticity of the work in the preface is the oldest trick in the book (Aarseth 134).

Christian Bök suggests that the idiosyncratic stylistic quirks of the human author might be analyzed so as to construct an algorithmically identical writing machine, able to prolong the writer's activity beyond the grave. At times, I also doubt the seriousness of Bök's claims for Racter's autonomy, but I do take seriously the fetishization of the pure machine, the lightness of the authorless book that, in Blanchot's words, “lacks the seriousness, the labor, the heavy pangs, the weight of a whole life that has been poured into it” (quoted in McCaffery, 225). The language recalls the techno-ecstatic dreams of Hans Moravec, who still longs to jack into a Gibsonian incorporeal cyber-utopia. I'm not ready for my upload, yet, Mr. Moravec. Cyberfeminists, such as Fiona Hovendem have raised particular objections to this tendency noting that, “The desire for “meat-free” existence plays into desires to escape from the real, but is also enabled by the men/ women- mind/body split, and the invisible work of woman in maintaining and caring for bodies” (Hovendem, 252). Indeed, Katherine Hayles’ story of how information lost its body pays close attention to the nearly invisible activity of one Ms. Janet Freed, the secretary, who dutifully cared for the transcribed notes of the Macy Conferences, notes which ironically asserted the redundance of the material body of information.

Christian Bök remarks that Racter is a witless machine that knows very

little about poetics. In John Searle's famous Chinese Room experiment, Searle proposed that if he were inside a closed room and handed Chinese characters through a slot and given instructions as to how to arrange them, he could carry out an accurate conversation in Chinese, but it would be improper to say that Searle knows very much about Chinese. But, as Edwin Hutchins argues, it is not Searle who knows Chinese, but rather the room (Halyes 289). The experiment, in this light, becomes a rather effective model for the notion of distributed cognition. It's also an interesting inversion of the relationship between human and machine that we find in Racter. Searle, inside the box, forgot the box. Bök, outside the box, wills to ignore Chamberlain, also outside the box. And what of the person who designed the algorithms for the Chinese room experiment? And, as Joan Retallack asks, what of the Woman in the Chinese Room:

> imagine that you are locked in a room and in this room are several baskets full of Chinese characters she is glad they are Chinese of course glad to continue Pound's Orientalism there will be no punctuated vanishing points she is given only rules of syntax not semantic rules she is relived of the burden of making meaning she need only make sense for the food to be pushed through the slot in the door it is thought that these are situations more familiar than we would like to them to be in the new technologies and to men more than to women but it oddly feels quite normal.
> (from *How to do things with Words*)

The machine as author is a new Other, and Retallack does well to remind us of Pound's Orientalism. I wonder if we are guilty of appropriating its poetics to our own ends - a very human thing to do - when we set the machine up as a latent, primitive being, like some noble savage? Let's be honest. We value Racter's output because it reminds us of our own. If it were truly alien- we wouldn't like it. We likely wouldn't even be able to read it.

Make no mistake: I am not interested in rescuing Chamberlain's poetic genius in the name of autonomous human creativity. But I am not interested in replacing this autonomous creative human with an autonomous creative machine, although I would like to meet such a creature. I would like to read its work. There are just two problems. First, I do not think I have yet met one, and until I see the work of a machine producing text of its own volition for its own purposes, I will not grant it the same autonomy that I grant to the human (which, admittedly, is very little.) Secondly, how will I know these machines

and texts when I see them? I imagine that there exists a large body of robopoetic work, but that it unrecognizable to us, bubbling away in the space-off. If it's anywhere, I would say it's being produced by the creatures in Ray Tierra's Artificial Life programs, who are left to evolve pretty much to their own devices, rather than having to slavishly reproduce William Chamberlain's vision of poetics.

Of course, Searle dreamt up the Chinese room in response to an earlier experiment of Alan Turing's, and Retallack's poem also reminds us that Turing proposed two tests- one in which it was to be seen whether a machine could pass for a human, and an earlier version in which gender was the subject of this cybernetic Pepsi challenge. We might thus read Chamberlain's signature as an act of literary transvestitism, parallel to those of male authors' ventriloquism of the female voice. In these gestures, the signature is critical. Indeed, Racter seems to be such a bad candidate for an example of egoless authorship, that it does cause one to question the eagerness to claim it in the name of robopoetics. It feels embarrassingly reductive to attribute the gesture to a masculinist dream of a disembodied, pure mind. But the gesture itself feels reductive. Could the problem be as simple as the Sibylline heroine of Jeff Noon's Pollen wryly observed, " All you pure boys want is more purity. You can't stand confusion" (239).

Can we avoid the pitfalls of gender essentialism if we make such a claim? To resist the dematerialization of the posthuman subject by locating it in a material gendered body is not to fix that subject in an essentialist gender framework. That would to amount to substituting one purity for another. It is crucial to remember that the embodied material subject that cyberfeminists occupy is itself a construction- bodies may be material, but materiality itself is an iteration of a performance.

As an alternate reading of procedural poetics, I would like to offer recent writings about the work of Tina Darragh and Joan Retallack. If it appears that I'm stacking the gender deck here, it's not from a desire to exclusively locate feminist practice in female authorship, in the clinamal swerve of a woman's hip. I do think, that in the name of creating a more accurate representation of the landscape, there is value in drawing attention to the work of female practitioners of procedural poetry, and so here I would mention Harriet Mullen's *Sleeping with the Dictionary*, *Cunt Ups*, by Dodie Bellamy, and the work of Margaret Christakos, most notably, the recent *Excessive Love Prosthesis*.

Contemporary readings of Retallack and Darragh locate their poetics at the intersection of cybernetics and considerations of authorship. Jena Osman, in conversation with Darragh, notes:

> (self-expression in Retallack's work) is not considered something to be avoided the way Cage thought it was. In fact, it is a political necessity: in a world that fails to give voice to certain subjectivities (those of women or minorities, for instance) it is not acceptable to simply eradicate the "intentional" or "quasiintentional" voice of the author (although certainly there's room for intentionality's critique). Such an eradication would mirror the social error that the "poethical" work hopes to counter aesthetically. You do not efface your identity as a subject (gendered) coming into contact with the world's materials (also gendered). (Philly Talk 4)

In the recent anthology *Telling it Slant*, Osman pursues this further, grounding Darragh's notions of subjectivity in the oscillation between the I and the "I in error." This oscillation could be the result of having Anglo-American feminists in one ear, telling us that creative self-definition is an essential part of the feminist struggle, while Cixous and Irigaray's lips whisper in the other ear that the dream of self-control, self-identification and self-definition is a patriarchal one. But I am inclined to believe that it has more to do with the fact that both of these women are students of chaos, randomness, and error. Joan Retallack attended to chance the way Cage attended to silence, and found it full:

> The selective foregrounding of chance makes it possible to bring to light and sound things that are otherwise potently absent or ominous. Perhaps because we've tended to be uncomfortable with things outside what we take to be the realm of control, we miss/ignore/deny the circumstantial evidence that chance is all around us. Hence the silences--feminine, phobic, phallic--wherein lie unmined energies of chance.
> (from *SECNÀHC GNIKÀT: TAKING CHANCES*)

In the *Errata 5uites*, Retallack applies these energies to well known passages of theoretical tomes, celebrating the noise that corrupts the signal. Significantly, both the "error" and the "correction" are voiced in the text, acknowledging that information depends on both pattern and randomness. For Darragh, the error is productive of meaning: "blank .. implies a hidden narrative.. the blank is a gap, an error, a defective

message, if you will, of the conscious narrative at hand. The mistake illuminates" (quoted in Osman, *Telling it Slant*, 274). Osman, notes that the "error is what keeps us from deluding ourselves that our experience can be understood in romantic terms such as wholeness and grand designs." And in that statement, she brings us back to Haraway and Hayles and their battle against a dream language that translates perfectly- Haraway who sounded the war cry, and Hayles who located the battlefield in cybernetic discourse, and Claude Shannon's abhorrence of equivocation.

Just as Katherine Hayles finds it necessary to repeat through her volume that she, in her critique of the disembodied posthuman subject, is not interested in recuperating the liberal human subject, but rather wishing to offer an alternate vision of the posthuman, I do feel the need to re-assert that I have no special love for the human author that I wish to protect her. In fact, I am quite interested in seeing the nature of authorial involvement in texts continue to change in our increasingly networked, distributed world. And if it should indeed come to pass that we find ourselves in the company of autonomous artificial poets, I will not flinch from exploring the implications. I might even cheer. I do not think we're there yet. And I do think there is a danger in the misrepresentation of our situation. And that may indeed be cause for some anxiety.