Art, Work, Endlessness: Flarf and Conceptual Poetry among the Trolls

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The image reproduced here is Yoshua Okón, *Parking Lotus* (2001). Color photograph. 40 x 30 inches. Many thanks to the artist for permission to include this still in my essay.

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A man wearing a badge—he is a security guard, not a police officer, we quickly realize—sits cross-legged in a parking lot. His hands rest on his knees, as if he were meditating, though he looks distinctly uncomfortable. The video we are watching forms part of Yoshua Okón's *Parking Lotus* series, in which he asked "security guards around Los Angeles . . . to meditate in the parking lots where they worked."[1] Okón also created an extensive conceptual architecture for the project, drafting a charter statement for a fictitious Los Angeles Security Guard Meditation Movement that claimed to "represent close to 5,000 security guards for the purposes of organizing meditation breaks in the parking lots of the areas they are guarding." The movement's goals, as Okón describes them, were therapeutic, aiming to help the guards "go beyond their context" and "transcend the ugliness and stress of the parking lots."[2] In the video installations for *Parking Lotus* this transcendence is literalized, humorously, in the gradual levitation of the guard, rising up and out of the frame until only the barren "context" of the parking lot remains. But the discomfort on the guard's face belies his apparent liberation; transcendence seems like something done to the guard rather than an act he performs on himself.

Okón's therapeutic approach to the degradations of labor resembles strategies that have for decades been essential to corporate initiatives to boost morale, increase productivity, and avoid workplace conflict. Beginning in the 1930s, management theory turned to therapeutic models, borrowing from psychoanalysis to train managers in the powers of empathy, active listening, and emotional transparency.[3] As implementation of the numbing routines of Taylorism fostered all manner of resistance and dysfunction, industrial psychologists such as Elton Mayo attempted to inculcate positive motivations and a sense of self-importance among line workers in opposition to reigning managerial orthodoxy.[4] These managers

1. *Parking Lotus* (2001), vimeo.com/103274648
2. Yoshua Okón, manifesto for *Parking Lotus*, www.yoshuaokon.com/ing/works/parkinglotus/manifesto.html
3. See Eva Illouz, *Cold Intimacies: The Making of Emotional Capitalism* (Cambridge, 2007), pp. 18–23.
4. See Stephen P. Waring, *Taylorism Transformed: Scientific Management Theory since 1945* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 1994).

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themselves suffered from motivation problems and psychic dysfunction of the sort chronicled in oft-cited postwar books such as William Whyte's *The Organization Man* and David Riesman's *The Lonely Crowd*, and many elements of industrial psychology were originally designed for this class. Abraham Maslow's well-known theory of self-actualization, itself derived from the practices of artists, was first popularized as an attempt to promote creativity and initiative among managers.[5] Today, as a look at the business section of any airport bookstore will reveal, these therapeutic models are the norm, having somehow merged during the 1980s with a vulgarized Eastern spirituality that brings the soothing wisdom of Buddhism or Taoism to bear on the agonistics of the office in a manner not so different from *Parking Lotus*.[6] If originally developed for the ranks of executives, middle managers, and "creatives," from the 1970s onward such assuaging values seeped downward through the ranks, and laterally, into other occupations, as part of a general remaking of corporate culture, according to the new postindustrial watchwords of *teamwork*, *flexibility*, and *participation*. Recuperation does necessarily mean neutralization.

The peace that Okón's interventions might bring would doubtless improve the lives of the security guards. And it is worth emphasizing that, despite the extension of these management ideas into less privileged labor strata, the immigrant workers photographed in *Parking Lotus* are typically treated to the "soft" management approach in superficial ways or not at all. Nonetheless, I start with Okón's work because it shares with recent artistic and literary treatments of labor a certain foreshortened imagination, an inability to conceive of the work of art as anything but a salve for the injuries of work. These projects confirm Kathi Week's argument in *The Problem with Work* that critiques of the workplace and demands for "better work" dating back to the 1960s have "been absorbed . . . comfortably into the warp and woof of contemporary managerial discourses," such that "programs presented under the rubric of work enrichment are also methods of work intensification." In order to reverse the "bad dialectic" in which "quality becomes quantity as the call for better work is translated into a requirement for more work," her book argues for a politics oriented around demands for "less work" that might then allow people to

5. See Sarah Brouillette, "Antisocial Psychology," *Mediations* 26 (Fall–Spring 2012–13): 107–17.

6. The history of Eastern religion as a management discourse is analyzed and narrated impressively in R. John Williams, "Technê-Zen and the Spiritual Quality of Global Capitalism," *Critical Inquiry* 38 (Sept. 2011): 17–70.

seek out quality of life beyond the workplace.[7] In light of this critique, it is significant that the mock charter for Okón's project recommends that workers meditate before clocking in or during their lunch break rather than encouraging them to steal back parts of the workday for themselves.

An earlier generation of writers and artists had a far more expansive sense of the possibilities for artistic challenges to regimes of labor; while minimalist sculptors and pop artists adopted the methods and aesthetics of Taylorized industrial production, many conceptual, performance, and installation artists—Dan Graham, Allan Kaprow, Tehching Hsieh, and Lee Lozano, to name a few—engaged in a far-ranging critique of the division between work and play, waged and unwaged work, as well as the divisions of labor themselves, which separated the mental from the manual and the creative from the menial.[8] In some cases, these challenges amounted to the demand for "better work" Weeks describes, demands for a more satisfying and creative work life, for the humanization of labor, and the replacement of deskilled, specialized activities with varied, mentally rewarding ones.[9] But in its maximalist variant—evidenced in all sorts of antiart projects and declarations from Fluxus and Happenings to the Situationist International—the artistic critique implied a total negation of labor by art, a revolutionary conquest of the workday by a generalized aesthetic activity no longer confined to the limited arena claimed by art. This total critique reconstituted the historical avant-garde's project of liquidating "art as an activity that is split off from the praxis of life."[10] For the Situationists, who produced the most totalizing of these total critiques, the task was to lib-

7. Kathi Weeks, *The Problem with Work: Feminism, Marxism, Antiwork Politics, and Postwork Imaginaries* (Durham, N.C., 2011), pp. 105, 107.

8. On minimalism, see Julia Bryan-Wilson, *Art Workers: Radical Practice in the Vietnam War Era* (Berkeley, 2011), pp. 41–126. For a survey of the breadth and variety of engagements with labor by postwar artists, see the invaluable catalog for the exhibition, *Work Ethic*, organized by Helen Molesworth, *Work Ethic* (exhibition catalog, Baltimore Museum of Art, 2003).

9. To give just one example of the humanizing tendency, we might examine what is considered by many to be the seminal exhibition of conceptual art, Seth Siegelaub's *January 5–31, 1969*, referred to later on as the *Office Show* because Siegelaub rented vacant office space for exhibition in lieu of a formal gallery. Though Chris Gilbert describes the artists involved—Robert Barry, Joseph Kosuth, Douglas Huebler, and Lawrence Weiner—as "emulating the capacities of office workers," the show might properly be said to function as an emptying out and repurposing of the routines of office work, with Barry "displaying" radio frequencies, Weiner removing a panel of the wall, and Huebler featuring a map marked with a journey that could be taken or not taken (Chris Gilbert, "Herbie Goes Bananas: Fantasies of Leisure and Labor from the New Left to the New Economy," in *Work Ethic*, p. 72). The show opened up office work to a series of creative possibilities, vistas, and journeys normally foreclosed, but still retained the structure of office work, employing Adrian Piper to answer questions about the works and function as "receptionist." For a detailed description of the show, see Bruce Altshuler, *The Avant-Garde in Exhibition: New Art in the Twentieth Century* (New York, 1994), pp. 236–43.

10. Peter Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, trans. Michael Shaw (Minneapolis, 1984), p. 56.

erate art from the confines of rotten social institutions and use its technical powers for the transformation of everyday life, thereby abolishing the category of art as such. As Fluxus founder George Maciunas put it, the artistic experiments of this period were motivated by "the desire to stop the waste of material and human resources . . . and divert it to socially constructive ends."[11]

Okón's project is not so much a turning away from this history but its logical extension, the end result of Weeks's "bad dialectic." Part of this history has to do with a political economic miscalculation on the part of those engaging in these qualitative critiques. In the 1960s and 1970s, work seemed to be losing its centrality within capitalism, as average hours fell and as commentators from both the Left and Right spoke of an imminent end of work brought about by automation. As capitalism was already meeting demands for less work, it made sense to focus attention elsewhere: on working conditions, for instance. Contrary to all expectations, however, what has emerged in the last few decades has been a profound renewal of work, evident not only in the mounting average workweek but in the absorption of nonwork activities by work. The explanation for this reversal will be found in political economy first and foremost, chiefly in the emergence of a vast labor market in low-paid services, but I want to argue that the artworks described above, along with congruent developments in literature, play a minor role in this transformation, effecting rather than merely reflecting it. By modeling activity that was mutable, collaborative, participatory, and open to contingency, these writers and artists provided a formative vocabulary for the mounting dissatisfaction with the qualitative character of labor, shaping the way in which workers would articulate their unhappiness as well as the way that this unhappiness was understood by corporate management and the political class. In subsequent decades, this qualitative or "artistic" critique and its vocabulary would become the impetus for a profound refashioning of labor and its motivational structures.[12] As the example of Okón shows, this vocabulary continues to inform artistic practice even though the interceding historical sequence has greatly attenuated its power. As I will argue in the following pages, with specific examples drawn from the belated avant-gardes of so-called Flarf and conceptual poetry, as well as David Foster Wallace's last unfinished novel, *The Pale King*, the unacknowledged inheritance of the neo-avant-garde vocabularies

11. Quoted in Natasha Lushetich, *Fluxus: The Practice of Non-Duality* (Amsterdam, 2014), p. 114.

12. The concept of the artistic critique as name for the qualitative critique of labor drawing upon the rhetoric of the arts is borrowed from Luc Boltanski and Eve Chiapello, *The New Spirit of Capitalism*, trans. Gregory Elliott (London, 2005), pp. 419–82.

from the 1960s and 1970s creates a real impasse for those artists and writers who would critique contemporary labor from the standpoint of quality. In a concluding section, I indicate a possible route beyond this impasse, with a reading of some recent poems by Sean Bonney.

To look at one example of the vocabulary I am describing, consider how the concept of participation formed an important touchstone during the 1950s and 1960s; one notes it in the antiart experiments that transformed spectators into participants and equally in the literary avant-gardes, whose sense of the political valence of language experiments matched Barthes's description of the writerly text through which readers actively participate in the elaboration of meanings. Eventually, this vocabulary, amplified by the counterculture, was deployed by workers as a demand for participation at work, as a critique of unilateral decision making, and the "anachronistic authoritarianism of the workplace."[13] This artistic critique of labor came to a head in the wave of struggles associated with May '68 and its aftermath. Employers met the call for self-management and increased autonomy by instituting forms of internalized, impersonal control that meant anxious self-harrying; they met the demand for community and cooperation with the organizational concept of teamwork, in which employees drive each other to work harder, independent of managerial imperatives; they met the demand for variety in work by piling on new responsibilities; they met the challenge to the domination of work over life by shifting to part-time, contingent, and at-will work; and, finally, they met the demand for creativity and authenticity by incorporating elements of play, fun, de-repression, intimacy, and affective intensity into the workplace. Scrambling the values associated with work and nonwork and undoing the comparatively rigid work calendars of the preceding period, this transformation did much to blur the line dividing work time from nonwork time.

The economic crisis of the mid-1970s cemented these developments, forcing corporations to make such techniques function as modes of accumulation rather than amelioration. Finding profit taking through investment in the productive apparatus increasingly difficult, firms instead utilized these new "flexible" managerial techniques to encourage employees to work harder and longer. We might conclude that, in contradistinction to the projections of the 1960s, the corporate recuperation of

13. Department of Health, Education, and Welfare, *Work in America: Report* (Cambridge, Mass., 1973), p. xv. Part of the story of the influence of the counterculture on corporate culture is told in Fred Turner, *From Counterculture to Cyberculture: Stewart Brand, the Whole Earth Network, and the Rise of Digital Utopianism* (Chicago, 2006).

the artistic critique used the ideology of the end of art to cancel out the end of labor. It developed new affective relationships to work and new psychological incentives through and as art that turned the open frontier of expanding leisure into the 24/7 of the inescapable job. This has been especially true since the advent of new technologies that, in creating mediatic platforms that suture home to workplace to street, have allowed us to work anywhere and anytime and therefore work *always*, endlessly.

Art and Endlessness

If the end of art canceled out the end of labor, the reverse was also true. Rather than dying, art has manifestly lived on after its failed self-abolition, aerosolized, freed from the constraints of medium and institution, but nonetheless still domesticated by the commodity form and the world of labor it once opposed. Art has become one technique of communication or management among many and quite successful as such. This holds true as much for the visual and postvisual arts as for literature, which, though its ambitions were rarely stated as grandly as those of the other arts, likewise suffers the same crisis of vocation. The result is another kind of endlessness, a lack of purpose. Art and literature can no longer offer credible challenges to the status quo. What possibilities for the aesthetic critique of work remain now that workplaces have been designed to anticipate and neutralize such critiques? What happens when art confronts a workplace whose very technologies, attitudes, and structures are a materialization of its own defeated challenges? The technological dimension is crucial here because digital technology remains one of the main sites for and mechanisms of this restructuring. The shift from mainframe to personal computers, for instance, and the rise of networking was, in many regards, a result of these earlier organizational transformations, which emphasized lateral connections among workers and the effective autonomy of individuals and work groups. Computing allows for management to become an infrastructure rather than a personal, face-to-face relationship. Recognizing this history should lead us to be skeptical in the face of claims about the emancipatory possibilities of this technology. Information technology, as my narrative has it, was the fruit of a counterrevolutionary turn from the very beginning. Attention to this history can show us how many of the values attached to web 2.0 have their roots in the defeated resistance of the 1960s and 1970s.

Because it often explicitly invokes white-collar work and also because it uses digital technology, the suggestively titled Flarf poetry—an experimentalist writing movement that emerged in 2001—is a good place to examine the legacy of the restructuring described above. Like the postmedium art of Okón, experimental poetry is a cultural zone where novelty remains the

measure of value and where the crisis of vocation, of endlessness, is acutely felt. In the case of Flarf, this is signaled from the outset by the semi-parodic name it adopts, demonstrating its inability to take itself seriously. Described as "a kind of corrosive, cute, or cloying, awfulness" effected, poetry-wise, through the collage of material appropriated from "internet chat-room drivel and spam scripts," most Flarf poems initially followed a fairly simple procedure.[14] As Mike Magee describes it: "you search Google for 2 disparate terms, like 'anarchy + tuna melt' [and] using only the quotes captured by Google (never the actual websites themselves) you stitch words, phrases, clauses, sentences together to create poems" ("FF").

Importantly for my argument, Flarf was not simply a set of compositional practices but a compositional location as well. In the retrospective definition that practitioner Drew Gardner provides for fellow Flarfist Jordan Davis, "'Flarf was a bunch of us fucking around with google on the man's dime.'"[15] Before the age of smartphones, white-collar workplaces were some of the only spaces that allowed for the redirection of company equipment and time in this manner, and so, unsurprisingly, Flarf's "'bored-at-work google sculpting'" frequently foregrounds the managerial boilerplate of the contemporary office.[16] The poems therefore figure resistance to work on multiple levels, redirecting company time and company language, as we can see from this early contribution by Katie Degentesh to the email list that served as a sounding board for Flarf poets:

> FROM: Human Resources Loveroll
> DATE: May 8, 2001
> RE: Hot Hatred and Hot Business Coital Attire
>
> In the spirit of the upcoming season, hot hatred and business coital attire will begin on Monday, May 21 and end on Friday, August 31, 2001.
>
> Hot Hatred
>
> As hot approaches we are pleased to remind all employees that we will be milking a condensed milk week. During the hot months, there will be extended office hatred Monday through Thursday, allowing for a * day on Friday. Please see the guidelines below:

14. Michael Magee and Kasey Mohammed, "The Flarf Files," Aug. 2003, epc.buffalo.edu/authors/bernstein/syllabi/readings/flarf.html; hereafter abbreviated "FF."
15. Jordan Davis, review of *Okay, Okay* by Diana Hamilton, *Constant Critic*, 24 Mar. 2013, www.constantcritic.com/jordan_davis/okay-okay/
16. Ibid.

> Regular office hatred will be 9:00 a.m. - 5:30 p.m. Monday through Thursday and 9:00 a.m. - 1:00 p.m. on Friday. In order to accommodate this schedule, lunch periods, which are unloved, should be limited to 45 pieces of popcorn. Department heads may allow an individual to adjust his/her core milking hatred while still milking the full weekly hatred. All employees will milk their regularly scheduled hatred within a week (barring evacuation or jail time) regardless of starting or ending time.
>
> The office will remain open on Friday afternoons for those of you who wish to complete pregnancies or have regular milk to finish, however, there will be no mailroom or reception services beyond 1:00 p.m. ["FF"]

Though Degentesh's poem uncharacteristically uses word substitution rather than a Google search query—replacing *milk* with *work*, *casual* with *coital*, and so on—it nonetheless introduces terrain common to Flarf poems, playing up the opposition between public and private worlds, given here as a conflict between the bureaucratic protocols of office work and the demands of intimate life. But in my reading the poem is ultimately less about the conflict between these spheres than it is about their interchangeability—the easy swapping of *coital* for *casual*, *milk* for *work*, and *hatred* for *hours*. In other words, the poem registers the ways in which the contemporary workplace and its motivational structures depend upon an ambient sexualization that is solicited and then administered rather than repressed. As for parenting, though the poem might at first seem to suggest the incompatibility of the rigid workplace schedule and the demands of childcare, subordinating the provision of breast milk to the metric time of the "regularly scheduled hatred" that must occur "regardless of starting or ending time," the final paragraph opens up, by contrast, the possibility of special allowances for those "who wish to complete pregnancies or have regular milk to finish."

The poem's newly interchangeable terms provide an especially noteworthy insight: allowances made for the life circumstances of parents mean *staying at work longer*. As we now know, the introduction of more flexible work schedules and practices such as telecommuting, undertaken at first in response to the demands of working mothers and parents, has not at all served to decenter work and working life or allow home life and leisure to gain a new primacy.[17] On the contrary, "flexibilization" of working hours has

17. For an excellent history of the feminist demand for flexible labor as well as its shortcomings, see Kathryn A. Cady, "Flexible Labor," *Feminist Media Studies* 13, no. 3 (2013): 395–414.

been used to the benefit of employers: flexible hours and telecommuting have enabled certain salaried workers (parents especially) to work longer workweeks overall, cramming work into every corner of the day.[18]

The merger of work and nonwork time that results has produced an entirely different emotional tone within the contemporary workplace. Rather than the overt repression of affects associated with the space of nonwork, with the home and the street, workplaces have attempted to absorb such feeling states and adapt them to the production of more highly motivated and work-identified employees. Workers are asked to express passionate feelings, even "hot hatred," that managers previously saw as dangerous and sought to repress. Enthusiasm, sympathy, and sensitivity are cultivated as important motivational counterweights to the native indifference and anxiety of many workplaces, and workers now succeed through the performance and transmission of emotional intensities. For Eva Illouz, who chronicles the emotional turn in corporate culture, the new psychologized management theory made it such that "being a good communicator" is the distinguishing trait of the effective worker. In this environment, "professional competence [is] defined in emotional terms, by the capacity to acknowledge and empathize with others."[19] Under such a paradigm, workers are taught not only to perform emotionality but also to seek in work the satisfactions they might once have expected from the world beyond, leading to a hyperidentification with work. One consequence is a sexualization of the workplace and work processes ("business coital attire") that proceeded with little interference from the sexual harassment law established in the 1980s and 1990s.[20]

18. Lonnie Golden describes this type of flexibility, primarily manifesting among workers who work more than fifty hours per week, as part of a general "polarization of work hours." As Golden writes, the "frequency distribution of flexible scheduling across ranges of usual weekly hours is U-shaped," suggesting that "workers who wish to gain greater access to a flexible schedule sometimes must be willing to work very long workweeks (50 or more hours), work regularly nondaytime hours such as evening shifts, work irregular shifts, work an unpredictable number of hours each week, or make a transition to either part-time work or self-employment" (Lonnie Golden, "Flexible Work Schedules: What Are We Trading off to Get Them," *Monthly Labor Review* 124 [Mar. 2001]: 50, 55, 62). These two types of employer-directed flexibility, part of a general offensive by employers, are quite different than the progressive, feminist demands for flexibility detailed in books like Arlie Hochschild and Anne Machung's *The Second Shift* (New York, 1989), in which reduced and rearranged workweeks, allowing for family needs, would be exchanged for the higher productivity that resulted from the good morale such flexibility encouraged. For more information on the bifurcation of labor time, see Jerry A. Jacobs, *The Time Divide: Work, Family, and Gender Inequality* (Cambridge, Mass., 2004).

19. Illouz, *Cold Intimacies*, p. 22.

20. See Cynthia Cockburn, *In the Way of Women: Men's Resistance to Sex Equality in Organizations* (Ithaca, N.Y., 1991), pp. 56–58.

The emphasis on good communication within the workplace might explain Flarf's absurdist turn, as if it were disrupting the discursive field of pragmatic office memos by resorting to a poetry of "integral zebra-cellist-messiah dining halls" where "T.S. Eliot's poetry is 'about women's basketball.'"[21] One of the ambiguities we encounter, however, in studying the transformation of workplaces is that this kind of goofiness seems both a mode of resistance to the white-collar workplace as well as a means by which corporations create a fun, uninhibited, and affectively charged environment. Peter Fleming, for instance, chronicles the rise of a new "pop management publishing industry" where " 'fun-sultants' advise otherwise *quondam* and staid managers how to build cultures of fun . . . as a quick method for motivating staff, gaining their full engagement with the labour process, and selling the firm to customers and/or contractors."[22] Indeed, irrational behavior of this sort might be an aid to good communication rather than a hindrance to it. As one advocate of humor management puts it: "Humour plays a vital role in helping to close the communication gap between leader and followers, helping to extract information, which might not otherwise be volunteered."[23] In light of this ambiguity, Degentesh's poem may be a satire of the office memo genre, designed to challenge both the rigidity of the workplace and its absorption of nonwork activities and affects, or it may be the poetic equivalent of casual Friday, one example of the ludic nonconformity that firms will tolerate or even encourage in order to let their workers blow off steam and stay motivated.

Other Flarf poems meditate rather explicitly on this ambiguity. In Rodney Koeneke's "My Blog," we encounter a cyberslacking speaker who is "bored down here in shipping" and blogging instead of fulfilling work responsibilities. And yet, in the absence of the clear-cut outside to work that "kids" or "school" might provide, the speaker has difficulty distinguishing between work activities and goofing off:

> Not having kids, not going to school
> I mindmeld with an array of daily visitors
> screens flip from classroom to business to leisure[24]

21. K. Silem Mohammad, *Breathalyzer* (Washington, D.C., 2008), pp. 13, 28.

22. Peter Fleming, *Authenticity and the Cultural Politics of Work: New Forms of Informal Control* (Oxford, 2009), p. 57. See also Fleming, "Workers' Playtime? Boundaries and Cynicism in a 'Culture of Fun' Program," *Journal of Applied Behavioral Science* 41 (Sept. 2005): 285–303.

23. Quoted in Fleming, *Authenticity and the Cultural Politics of Work*, p. 67.

24. Rodney Koeneke, "My Blog," *Musée Mechanique* (Buffalo, N.Y., 2006), p. 59; hereafter abbreviated "MB."

An apparatus for sympathetic identification, the blog encourages people to cultivate the affective reciprocity that Illouz identifies as the hallmark of modern management theory. The collective "mindmeld" that results is a model not only for the construction of the Flarf poem, stitched together from appropriated bits of other people's writing and then edited collaboratively on an email list, but also the teamwork-based protocols of the modern workplace. Further, the poem describes a new media platform that obtains across a number of homological situations in the once differentiated but now continuous spaces of "classroom to business to leisure." Unsurprisingly, the poem suspects that these diversions might simply be another form of white-collar labor slated for absorption by the final instance of corporate ownership:

> I feel obliged
> to blog about guy in Receiving with grody leisure suit
> & that's the whole point—to flip unseemly power
> & hope we're not so sanguine about Google
> buying Blogger
> {Google + Blogger = Mainstream weblog acceptance . . .}
> ["MB," pp. 59–60]

The "flip" to which the speaker submits unseemly power is easily reversed, and it should be no surprise that a few stanzas later "flip" becomes, through the anaphoric logic of the poem, "flip-flops." The obligation the speaker feels to blog about a coworker makes the critical gesture seem deeply ambiguous, part of the speaker's work responsibilities as much as a resistance to them. If Fleming is right that corporations absorb resistance through a "debasing mimesis" that "eviscerates what it mimics," then the speaker's antagonist presents a peculiar object of criticism indeed, wearing a "leisure suit" at work and therefore disabling the distinction between work and nonwork activity that the speaker's critique requires.[25] Indeed, the fact that his nemesis works in receiving—the mirror image of shipping—makes us think that the speaker is merely fighting his own cross-departmental doppelgänger, his own image flipped, as it were, in the mimetic corporate mirror.

Troll Poetics and the Rotated Axis of Antagonism

One consequence of the delayering of the modern corporation, which eliminates middle managers and establishes horizontal connections among workers, is that antagonism likewise gets sent laterally, toward other

25. Fleming, *Authenticity and the Cultural Politics of Work*, pp. 118, 82.

workers rather than vertically toward management. Hence, the speaker of "My Blog" reminisces about the printed matter that preceded blogs—"cute little flipbooks . . . / that flipped from horizontal / to vertical position at will" ("MB," p. 60). This rotation of the axis of antagonism seems to be the one type of "flip" not permitted in Koeneke's poetic universe, a fact that might explain not only the conclusion of Koeneke's poem but Flarf's often controversial attraction toward the provocative or offensive, employing found language that is racist, sexist, or homophobic. If Degentesh, Koeneke, and other Flarf poets describe, critically, the problem that challenges to the workplace confront today, in the wake of managerial restructuring, other Flarf works might be said to enact the consequences of this restructuring. Some readers will remember the way that Mike Magee's poem "Their Guys, Their Glittering Asian Guys, Are Gay" ignited an extensive debate, both online and in print, about the ethical and political values of appropriating hateful social materials.[26] Defenders of the poem insisted that it was a satirical emptying-out of homophobic, misogynist, and Orientalist discourse—and particularly the association of Asian men with effeminacy or gayness—while its detractors accused it of what has since been dubbed ironic racism, wherein a person deploys and enjoys scare-quoted racist language or engages in scare-quoted minstrelsy.[27] For Gary Sullivan, who coined the term *Flarf*, the value of this kind of language lay elsewhere, not in its value as realism, but, to pick up on old avant-garde aims, in its power to shock and provoke. In his original formulation, he controversially described Flarf poems as "Wrong. Un-P.C. Out of control. 'Not okay.'" As Sullivan recalls, "the flarf 'voice' in my head was that of my father, a transplanted southerner…who has a lot of opinions that kind of horrify me." For Sullivan, such a voice served as an expressive inducement, " a way of keeping [his] own tendencies toward repression . . . at bay" ("FF").

Sullivan's characterization is, therefore, profoundly therapeutic in its orientation, not all that different from the most commonplace characterization of the value of talk therapy, which, as we learn from Illouz, has been foundational as a model for management. At the same time, language of

26. See Magee, "Their Guys, Their Asian Glittering Guys, Are Gay," mainstreampoetry.blogspot.com/2006/05/their-guys-their-asian-glittering-guys.html

27. For a summary of the debate, see Brian M. Reed, *Nobody's Business: Twenty-First Century Avant-Garde Poetics* (Ithaca, N.Y., 2013), pp. 121–60, and Craig Perez, "My Michael Magee and the Frontier of Democratic Symbolic Action," *Jacket*, no. 33 (July 2007): jacketmagazine.com/33/perez-flarf.shtml. Reed more or less endorses the view of the poem's defenders, insisting that such dramatic monologues are satires of "the casual cruelty that passes for sophisticated cynical humor in the American 'mainstream'" (Reed, *Nobody's Business*, p. 111).

this sort would most certainly be considered a transgression of the norms of "good communication" in effect within most workplaces, norms that will almost always feature at least perfunctory injunctions against offensive language, sexual harassment, and other forms of microaggression. However, the more workplaces emphasize de-repression, liberation, and management through humor, the more they solicit the kind of language and behavior that violates norms of good communication and behavior. This isn't a contradiction so much as it is a strategy, a way of directing the tilting antagonisms and aggressions of the workplace away from management. In such an environment, antagonisms of this sort are likely to emerge in a veiled form: pranks, jokes, and ironic innuendo. Sullivan's Flarf voice—the rural, white, Southern, lower-class, conservative originator of his found language—becomes the perfect puppet through which to ventriloquize disavowed antagonism in a form that manages to join the class condescension of white-collar workers with whatever "horrifying" thoughts the Flarf voice entails. Often, these thoughts reflect masculine anxiety and resentment in the face of an increasingly feminized labor process. As Illouz and others have made clear, the post-Taylorist transformation of management theory and the emphasis on teamwork and communicativity has meant a feminization of work, deployed through management techniques that privilege irrationality, intuition, fluidity, faith, and emotion. For Illouz, "the ethos of communication *blurs gender divisions* by inviting men and women to control their negative emotions, be friendly, view themselves through others' eyes, and empathize with others."[28] In Magee's poem, these anxieties are complicated even further by the addition of anti-Asian discourse, reacting not only to the newfound success of Asian corporations and countries but the "model minority" status of Asian Americans, both aspects that are associated with the newly feminized, ludic workplace in which "an Asian business man rips off his coat, revealing a glittering, Vegas style."[29]

Other Flarf poems work much harder to contain these violent energies by properly signposting and scare quoting them, making sure the reader knows how to interpret and channel their satirical energies. Such is the case with one of the most famous Flarf poems, Drew Gardner's "Chicks Dig War," which might be read as a critical, Google-enabled scan of such anxieties of feminization as manifest in the subbasements of the internet,

28. Illouz, *Cold Intimacies*, p. 23.

29. Magee, "Their Guys, Their Asian Glittering Guys, Are Gay." For an important account of the role that "Asian" character plays in contemporary workplaces, see Colleen Lye, "Unmarked Character and the 'Rise of Asia': Ed Park's Personal Days," *Verge* 1 (Spring 2015): 230–55.

a place where "women are excellent teachers / of the bitter lesson that being / anti-war does not get a man laid."[30] Composed from the scattered phrases of search results fished up from the murky waters of the internet, Gardner's Flarf models the psychic structure of paranoia—that is, the projection of anxieties and fantasies into a morass of uncoordinated linguistic fragments in which it is possible to hear or see almost anything. Perhaps because of its management of a consistent tone, Gardner's poem is an attempt to map this projective thinking. Indeed, his poem might, in this sense, reveal the fundamentally projective character of search functions in general, especially those offered by Google, which take a user's search history and create results pages tailored to that person's interests. The ultimate effect of these algorithms is the creation of what Eli Pariser has called a "filter bubble," an individualized sorting of information such that one's views, tastes, and experiences are always confirmed rather than challenged.[31] For instance, a statement like "women are excellent teachers"—drawn from one website or used as a search string—rests on certain fairly standard assumptions about the kind of work appropriate for women. But detached from its context, it magnetizes to itself all kinds of projected material, confirming the deep anxieties about gender roles that the initial statement might have assuaged. It would be harder to find a better description of the forms of projection and displacement at work in male resentment than the psychobiological thesis the poem concludes with, which confirms the social necessity of "male aggressiveness" but makes it, paradoxically, the feature of a dominated sex class:

> Believe that male behavior is the result
> of a breeding experiment run by females?
> In case you missed it,
> the basic implication is that by following
> their natural proclivity to breed with
> John Ashcroft
> women are an anti-civilizing force,
> actively creating more male aggressiveness.
> It would seem that a wise society would have an
> interest in creating a counter-force to oppose this.[32]

30. Drew Gardner, "Chicks Dig War," *Petroleum Hat* (New York, 2005), p. 20.
31. See Eli Pariser, *The Filter Bubble: How the New Personalized Web Is Changing What We Read and How We Think* (New York, 2012).
32. Gardner, "Chicks Dig War," p. 20.

The poem cleverly distributes its internet cullings in such a way that the question-begging projections of male ressentiment are exposed to the reader's ridicule. At the same time, we don't come any closer to understanding the source of these antagonisms; the "counter-force" proposed, seriously or not, in the final lines would, at best, bring us back to the very beginning because we have no clear idea who to oppose other than the aggressive males and the women who incite them.

Gardner and his colleagues would likely shrug off any expectations that Flarf should engage in this kind of critical realistic work because Flarf is essentially a form of play, a way of "fucking around on the man's dime," as Gardner says. In this regard, Flarf's desperate insistence on fun, its transgression of communicative norms, and its reliance on provocative social materials drawn from the netherworld of the internet might be read as a literary reworking of the spirit of the so-called internet troll—the infamous denizen of ill-reputed websites like 4chan and Reddit, whose own aggressive and often hateful fun-making serves no end besides provocation.

Like Flarf, the troll's main sport is the sabotage of communicative norms, provoking outrage through purposefully provocative commentary. Like Flarf, troll humor moves quickly from the goofy to the violent. Trolling depends on the functional anonymity provided by the online world, along with the ability to create "flexible" shifting identities through various online avatars and accounts, something that resembles the patchwork speakers of the Flarf poems as well as the patchwork laborers of the postindustrial era. But we might also consider the troll's attraction to the anonymity of the web as a reaction to the compulsory visibility and accountability demanded by face-to-face interactions, especially those in the workplace.[33] In some accounts, trolls aim to protect the freedom and openness (and also opacity) of the internet world from the norms of meatspace and the incursions of corporate content providers; they want "to maintain the idea of the internet as a space where manners and norms are suspended."[34] Others, however, emphasize the ludic, anti-instrumental character of troll activity, undertaken "for the lulz," as the saying goes, for the sake of diversion and as expression of a "pervasive, nihilistic, ungov-

33. Both Harry Halpin and Gabriella Coleman read Anonymous—which emerges from, but also against, the "troll space" of 4chan—as a reaction against the logics of celebrity, recognition, and personal identity offered up by sites like Facebook; see Harry Halpin, "The Philosophy of Anonymous: Ontological Politics without Identity," *Radical Philosophy*, no. 176 (Dec. 2012): 19–28, and Gabriella Coleman, "Our Weirdness Is Free," *Triple Canopy*, no. 15 (2012): canopycanopycanopy.com/issues/15/contents/our_weirdness_is_free
34. Glen Fuller, Christian McCrea, and Jason Wilson, "Editorial: Troll Theory?" *Fibreculture Journal*, no. 22 (2013): 2.

ernable incivility" that despairs of changing underlying conditions.[35] In this account, the troll engages in conflict for its own sake, Ares-like, often playing both sides. The troll shares with Flarf a fundamental ambiguity; trolling can be a sadistic laugh had at another's expense or, alternately, undertaken in service of some sense of justice, used to dethrone the powerful and arrogant, avenge victims, or extract the truth.

Given the resemblance between trolling and the workplace pranks that form the subject of so many white-collar comedies, it's not surprising that, when outed, so many trolls turn out to be white-collar workers "fucking around on the man's dime." Nathaniel Tkacz, notably, defines the troll as that which is excluded from the new "collaborative" work methods of the internet and the postindustrial office, revealing the way that these horizontal, putatively democratic processes rely on impersonal norms and "frames."[36] The deliberately stupid humor of the troll, directed horizontally toward peers rather than toward superiors, represents the outcome of corporate strategies of restructuring, the effect of complaints and upsets that no longer find any clear targets or means of redress, much less any of the coherence of a strategy of resistance, given that they are constitutively excluded by the communicative norms of the workplace. Diverted and neutralized by the restructuring, these antagonisms remain susceptible to transformation according to scapegoating logics and narratives. Trolling, in this regard, represents the ungainly remainder of the qualitative challenge now that all such challenges seem to be anticipated by the mandated nonconformity and routinized fun of the workplace. What possible challenge can the zaniness of Flarf or the troll deliver when workers are themselves exhorted to participate in team-building exercises where they "wrap each other in toilet paper and aluminum foil, build sandcastles and imitate animals" or perform together a rendition of Kermit the Frog's "Rainbow Connection"?[37]

The Saturation of the Qualitative Critique

Flarf represents one response to this impasse, an attempt to beat the culture of forced fun at its own game. Other poets, associated with so-called conceptual poetry, will adopt another strategy, antiludic and anhedonic where Flarf insists on play and pleasure. Flarf is often mentioned together with conceptual poetry and for good reason. Both emerged at

35. Ibid., p. 5.

36. Nathaniel Tkacz, "Trolls, Peers, and the Diagram of Collaboration," *Fibreculture Journal*, no. 22 (2013): 26.

37. Carl Cederström and Fleming, *Dead Man Working* (Winchester, 2012), p. 45.

about the same time, and both positioned themselves as self-conscious writing movements when most experimental writers had eschewed explicit group identity. Like the avant-gardes of the past, their bid for recognition depended upon claims about the changed context for poetry and the need for innovation that could respond to evolving history. The argument often revolved around information technology and the new internet-based discursive environment of blogs, websites, and mailing lists through which poets were distributing and discussing their work. Flarf and conceptual poetry were, as their exponents argued, the forms adequate to this environment. Both modes were, in this sense, about an encounter between old and new media; the writers registered and explored the characteristics of the new media environment through its effect on poetic form and the form of the book, the codex, in which their experiments were often collected after provisional digital exhibition. Finally, both movements were explicitly about information work, not only based upon the same techniques and procedures, but often addressed to such work at the level of content. For conceptualist impresario and gadfly Kenneth Goldsmith, "conceptual writing" is an aestheticized form of "information management" and "word processing." As he declares, "the office is the next frontier of writing" and an "electronic Post-It universe imbues the new writing, adopting corporate-speak as its lingo." Blending the mundanity of the office with the exoticism of its putative opposite, this kind of writing "requires the expertise of a secretary crossed with the attitude of a pirate: replicating, organizing, mirroring, archiving, and reprinting, along with a more clandestine proclivity for bootlegging, plundering, hoarding, and file sharing."[38]

Thus, it should not surprise us that one of the most acclaimed and controversial works of conceptual poetry of the last few years, Vanessa Place's *Statement of Facts*, is an exact reproduction of the briefs she wrote as a public criminal appellate defense lawyer representing accused sex offenders.[39] Place's book offers one of the most remarkable confirmations of the thesis that work activity and nonwork activity have become nearly identical at present, such that the difference between legal brief and poem is entirely nominal, an effect of context. *Statement of Facts* is a poem for the end of the end of work, a poem of work's endlessness. We might draw similar conclusions from any number of conceptual works. Consider, for instance, Goldsmith's own project *Day*, wherein he transcribed the entire

38. Kenneth Goldsmith, *Uncreative Writing: Managing Language in the Digital Age* (New York, 2013), p. 220.

39. See Vanessa Place, *Tragodía 1: Statement of Facts* (Los Angeles, 2011).

contents of a single issue of the *New York Times*, running multiple articles and ads together as he copied across the columns, deforming and deformatting the *New York Times* layout.[40] Such a project renders poetic composition identical to mere routine clerical work, data entry.

Despite all of these points of similarity, there are crucial differences between Flarf and conceptual poetry. Whereas Flarf insists on fun and goofy humor, much conceptual poetry is relentlessly austere, deliberately boring. Conceptualists are often trolls, but usually humorless or at best deadpan ones, engaging in jokeless provocation or exercises in which the joke is conceptual, a blank humor that unfolds as a function of setting or frame.[41] If Flarf represents the attempt to exaggerate the forced fun of the workplace, to recover its liberatory power in a world where fun has become work, then conceptual poetry exposes the deep "unfun" of the workplace, its reality as routinized, mechanical information management.

This is where Goldsmith's description of conceptual poetry as "uncreative writing" is perhaps useful. It counteracts "new economy" rhetoric that declares high-tech work a distinct, superior form of laboring in which value derives from creativity or information rather than labor time pure and simple. There is a twist, though, because Goldsmith often characterizes his work through analogies with creative info-labor, comparing poets to programmers. And he remains committed to a narrative of avant-garde innovation and technical progress, suggesting a hidden font of creativity beneath the routine cutting and pasting, data mining, databasing, and word processing of conceptual poetry. He says of the process of

40. See Goldsmith, *Day* (Great Barrington, Mass., 2003).

41. The characterology of the troll also illuminates the unfortunate recent history of Goldsmith and Place, both of whom outraged audiences in 2015 through varieties of the blank humor described above. First, in the midst of the unfolding Black Lives Matter movement sparked by the police murders of Eric Garner and Michael Brown, Goldsmith read a rearranged transcript of Michael Brown's autopsy report to an audience at Brown University, ending on a description of Brown's genitalia. Months later, after substantial discussions of Goldsmith's work, Vanessa Place angered many with a blackface retweeting of sentences from *Gone with the Wind*, using a Twitter account whose avatar was an image of Hattie McDaniel as "Mammy" in the film version of the novel. Defenses of Goldsmith's and Place's appropriations asserted that they were simply making visible racism that already existed in the world, withdrawing all critical commentary and ironic inflection of the sort we get with Flarf so that audiences (presumed to be white, by the logic of this defense) could reflect on the legacy of antiblack racism. As with Flarf and its trollery, these works take aim at the presumed falsity of political correctness; in a note, Place defends her *Gone with the Wind* tweets by suggesting that they unmask the self-serving piety of a politically correct audience, performing her own complicity with blackface appropriation in order to implicate a white audience. As I note below, this represents the zero degree of resistance, in which the artist can only imagine traumatizing or traumatized repetitions of the status quo. See Vanessa Place, "Artist Statement: Gone with the Wind @ Vanessa Place," *Facebook*, 18 May 2015, tinyurl.com/owh9tg2

composing *Day* that "there were as many decisions, moral quandaries, linguistic preferences, and philosophical dilemmas as there are in an original or collaged work." Admitting the duplicity of his characterization, he writes that he "nonetheless still trumpet[s] the work's 'valuelessness,' its 'nutritionlessness,'" its lack of creativity and originality when clearly the opposite is true." However, afraid to leave such naked contradiction itself uncontradicted, Goldsmith doubles down on his unreliability immediately after writing the sentence above, undermining even his own confession of secret creativity and writing that he is "not doing much more than trying to catch literature up with appropriative fads the art world moved past decades ago."[42] The work of innovation—catching up with the art world—is itself just duplication of something already done elsewhere. Rather than providing a simple negation of the rhetoric of creativity, as he imagines himself doing, Goldsmith shows us the fundamental uncreativity of creativity. A work like *Day* demonstrates, through its tedious unreadability, how utterly menial, mind-numbing, and uncreative white-collar work really is while, on the other hand, revealing how little it takes to make such routines seem creative. The most charitable reading of the "conceptual turn" in experimental poetry is that it marks a moment when the aura of fun, fulfillment, and creativity suddenly vanishes, and what remains is the endlessness of the working day and its technicized cognitions. Refusing the supplemental enjoyment of the workplace, conceptual poetry of the sort we've examined renders visible the exhaustion, boredom, and inanity of much of what we do for pay, but it also marks, at the same time, the cynical zero degree of resistance to work. In place of critique, we find a pure repetition: of the workday, the news, the violence of the state, the injuries of history. And yet, just like Goldsmith's retro-avant-gardism, this emptying out of the libidinal content of the work landscape seems to return us to the point at which we began, to return us to the alienation of the office before its restructuring. The conceptual poetry of work shares something, in this regard, with Wallace's *The Pale King*, which treats the restructuring of white-collar labor processes during the 1980s (using the IRS as its example) more intensively than any other contemporary novel, offering a direct indictment of the qualitative critique and concomitant demands for novelty, diversion, and amusement, implying that they have reinforced a culture of widespread selfishness and puerility. Wallace's writing has always figured entertainment and the need for diversion as dangerous addiction; witness *The Entertainment* from *Infinite Jest*, a film so interesting that viewers watch it compulsively

42. Goldsmith, *Uncreative Writing*, p. 120.

until they die of starvation. In *The Pale King* this manifests as nostalgia for the old conformities and norms of the prerestructuring IRS as well as an explicit call for people to confront and, through acceptance, transcend the tedium exemplified by tax work, acting less from self-interest than from a sense of responsibility. As one of the characters in the novel recalls an accounting professor telling him (the character is, not incidentally, addicted to the stimulant Obetrol because of its capacity to allow him to pay attention): "'True heroism is you, alone, in a designated work space. True heroism is minutes, hours, weeks, year upon year of the quiet, precise, judicious exercise of probity and care—with no one there to see or cheer. . . . Routine, repetition, tedium, monotony, ephemeracy, inconsequence, abstraction, disorder, boredom, angst, ennui—these are the true hero's enemies and make no mistake they are fearsome indeed.'"[43] These lines echo Wallace's commencement speech at Kenyon College, given in 2005, in which he warns students that their future will involve no small amount of "boredom, routine, and petty frustration" in the face of which the "the really important kind of freedom involves attention, and awareness, and discipline, and effort, and being able to truly care about other people and to sacrifice for them, over and over, in myriad petty little unsexy ways, everyday."[44]

Unwork and Endlessness

Wallace develops a response to the saturation of the qualitative critique diametrically opposed to Flarf's response, an explicit exhortation to embrace the boredom and alienation of work and instead sublimate the desire for creativity, variety, autonomy, and empowerment at the root of these critiques with an ethics of sacrifice, responsibility, and discipline. But perhaps instead of negating these desires we might redirect them. Perhaps the task of the aesthetic challenge in our time is not to demand freedom in work but freedom from work, as Weeks has suggested. If the restructuring of the workplace since the 1970s has neutralized many modes of struggle within it, then workers and other proletarians may need to look for modes of struggle against work that emerge from outside of work as such.[45] The art and writing that responds to such a condition might make

43. David Foster Wallace, *The Pale King: An Unfinished Novel* (New York, 2011), p. 231.

44. Wallace, *This Is Water: Some Thoughts, Delivered on a Significant Occasion, about Living a Compassionate Life* (New York, 2009), pp. 65, 120.

45. I develop these arguments in articles published elsewhere, noting the waning of contestation at the site of production over the last several decades and the emergence of tactics (blockades, occupations, riots) that situate antagonism beyond the workplace proper, even when the antagonists are workers. See Jasper Bernes, "Logistics, Counterlogistics, and the Communist Prospect," *Endnotes*, no. 3 (Sept. 2013): 172–201 and "The Double Barricade and the Glass Floor," in *Communization and Its Discontents*, ed. Benjamin Noys (Wivenhoe, 2011), pp. 157–75.

wagelessness its object of critique as much as wagefulness, examining forms of domination within and beyond the workplace.[46] It might look something like the prose poems in Sean Bonney's collection, *Letters against the Firmament*, poems that take unemployment and submission to the humiliations of the British welfare system under conditions of unfolding austerity as their starting point, writing from a "stereotypical amalgam of unwork, sarcasm, hunger and a spiteful radius of pure fear."[47] Bonney's epistolary poems are written against (though not addressed to) the ruling powers in Britain during the crisis years of 2010–13. They are particularly hostile toward the Department of Work and Pensions (DWP) and its neoliberal workfare system (a reform of the British dole) and Jobcentres, with the Minister of the DWP, Iain Duncan Smith, reappearing throughout as a demonic presence, "a talking claw" (*LF*, p. 111). The letters are not addressed to Duncan Smith, however, but to an intimate of the speaker, someone who seems both friend and superior (at one point the speaker asks the addressee for a letter of reference). As with the works discussed above, the object of critique can only be reached indirectly.

Shifting the object of critique from the workplace to the fact of labor itself, as well as the repressive institutions designed to force benefits claimants back into the sale of their labor power, Bonney sidesteps the dilemmas of the aesthetic critique, launching his sentences into a many-sided jeremiad where "each note" of a contemplated Cecil Taylor song "could, magnetically, pull everything that any specific hour absolutely is not right into the centre of that hour, producing a kind of negative half-life where the time-zones selected by the Jobcentre as representative of the entirety of human life are damaged irrevocably" (*LF*, p. 46). The speaker of Bonney's poems is dispossessed not only of the products of labor but of the opportunity for labor, reminding us of the physiological basis of exploitation, the "real hunger, sharp, greedy and endless" that renders proletarians dependent upon wages for survival (*LF*, p. 95). The peculiarity of the speaker's position is accentuated by the institution of the Jobcentre and the neoliberal concept of "workfare," which turns lack of work into work itself by requiring benefits claimants to spend at least thirty hours weekly searching for employment, undergoing retraining, or performing community service. "Unwork" is not the negation of work but

46. On wagelessness, see Aaron Benanav, "Misery and Debt: On the Logic and History of Surplus Populations and Surplus Capital," *Endnotes*, no. 2 (Apr. 2010): 20–51, and Michael Denning, "Wageless Life," *New Left Review*, n.s. 2 (Dec. 2010): 79–97.

47. See Sean Bonney, *Letters against the Firmament* (London, 2015), p. 46; hereafter abbreviated *LF*.

its underlying form, emptied of content, something Bonney connects to the novel British invention of "zero-hours contracts," described by him as "anti-magnetic nebulae sucking the working day inside out" (*LF*, p. 100). Allowing employers to vary employee hours by will, these contracts prompt Bonney to think of the workfare regime as a "negative-hours" contract (*LF*, p. 100). This draws out the potential downside of appeals for less work that depend on state subsidy; without specification of the terms, these conditions of unwork might involve added exposure to the coercive violence of the state.

For Bonney, the age demands a critique of both work and unwork, and that means repositioning rather than abandoning the demand for various, creative, and meaningful activity that we inherit from the aesthetic critique. These expressive activities appear, here, under the sign of carnivalesque riot and rebellion, offering up not enjoyment in work but enjoyment beyond and against work. However, given the tendency of release from work to become lack of work or unwork, such joys are inextricable from agonies various and sundry. He thusly describes the celebrations in response to Margaret Thatcher's death as the ecstatic proliferation of plague:

> It was like we were a blister on the law. Inmates. Fancy-dress jacobins. Jesters. And yes. Every single one of us was well aware that we hadn't won anything, that her legacy "still lived on", and whatever other sanctimonious spittle was being coughed up by liberal shitheads in the *Guardian* and on Facebook. That wasn't the point. It was horrible. Deliberately so. Like the plague-feast in *Nosferatu*. I loved it. I had two bottles of champagne, a handful of pills and a massive cigar, it was great. I walked home and I wanted to spray-paint "Never Work" on the wall of every Job Centre I passed. [*LF*, p. 99]

In this poem, the schadenfreude of the troll finally finds its target, even if the address is indirect and incomplete, and (as he acknowledges) it personifies in the figure of Thatcher complex processes of economic restructuring. Bonney's *Letters against the Firmament* presents the imperfect and incomplete working-through of these otherwise obstructed antagonisms, hinting at the possibility of a choice between two types of challenge to the regime of work and two types of endlessness. There is, of course, the bad infinity we are already familiar with: "an endless, undifferentiated regime of ersatz work" interrupted occasionally by a "Thatcher death-day as some kind of workers holiday" (*LF*, p. 100). But there is also something else: the possibility that these celebrations might take place "every day, for ever and ever," a possibility that, for the time being, can only be uttered slantwise, stamped by the affects of the troll and likened to "a ring of plague-sores, botulism and roses" (*LF*, p. 100).

The Cognitive Nonconscious: Enlarging the Mind of the Humanities

N. Katherine Hayles

Rooted in anthropocentric projection, the perception that consciousness and advanced thinking necessarily go together has centuries, if not millennia, of tradition behind it. Recently, however, a broad-based reassessment of the limitations of consciousness has led to a correspondingly broad revision of the functions performed by other cognitive capacities and the critical roles they play in human neurological processes. Consciousness occupies a central position in our thinking not because it is the whole of cognition but because it creates the (sometimes fictitious) narratives that make sense of our lives and support basic assumptions about worldly coherence. Cognition, by contrast, is a much broader capacity that extends far beyond consciousness into other neurological brain processes; it is also pervasive in other life forms and complex technical systems. Although the cognitive capacity that exists beyond consciousness goes by various names, I call it nonconscious cognition.

To clarify the significance of nonconscious cognition, a brief review of terminology is helpful. Many neuroscientists distinguish at least two levels of consciousness: core or primary consciousness, an awareness of self and others shared by humans, many mammals, and some aquatic species such as octopi; and higher or secondary consciousness, associated with symbolic reasoning, abstract thought, verbal language, mathematics, and so forth, evident only in humans and (perhaps) a few primates.[1] Making

1. See Antonio Damasio, *The Feeling of What Happens: Body and Emotion in the Making of Consciousness* (New York, 1999); David Eagleman, *Incognito: The Secret Lives of the Brain* (New

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