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Generative Unknowing: Nathan Allen Jones' *Glitch Poetics*

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*In his review of **Glitch Poetics**, Richard Carter finds more than a close reading of contemporary e-lit and AI enhanced writing. In a book that is both aesthetic and machinic, critical and creative, Jones explores the nature of writing itself "and, indeed, reading, in an environment saturated by the rhythms and predilections of digital code."*

In the days before writing this review of Nathan Allen Jones' *Glitch Poetics* (Open Humanities Press 2022), I found myself spending considerable time working with OpenAI's GPT-3 (Generative Pre-trained Transformer). GPT-3 is a vivid emblem of current AI research, a language model derived from machine learning processes, trained on hundreds of gigabytes of text from digitised sources, and charting the semantic weightings and probabilities that bind discrete words into meaningful statements. When supplied with written prompts of varying detail and specificity, GPT-3 is able to generate streams of text that are appropriate to the prompt—emulating, at best, the intelligibility and granularity of human compositions, although often requiring some measure of manual editing.

Following its release in 2020, there has been a flurry of popular discussion and critical analysis concerning the implications of this mode of automated writing—of its relationship to human literary art (see e.g. Elkins and Chun 2020), or the threat it poses to the content writing profession (see e.g. Dale 2021), or even whether it is indicative of artificial sentience (see e.g. Floridi and Chiriatti 2020). Where GPT-3 engages me is less concerning these debates—perennial to AI research—but its ability, instead, to vividly condense many issues concerning the nature of writing, and, indeed, reading, in an environment saturated by the rhythms and predilections of digital code. Every output of GPT-3 is based on the synthesis of its training materials into a diffuse body of attractors and vectors, a phase space of texts written and to come, which then coalesce into a text that is the ghost of its myriad antecedents. As a form of discursive search-engine, GPT-3 is the product of a world in which language is algorithmically analysed, rearticulated, and predictively engineered towards specified outcomes—often for the sake of further data gathering and retrieval.

It may be tempting, at this point, to present the very existence of GPT-3 as a figuration of contemporary writing that is increasingly beholden to machinic impulses of efficiency, standardization, and an emphasis on keywords. While this may potentially hold true for quotidian interactions with digital systems, Jones's motivation in *Glitch Poetics* is to examine how modern, human-crafted literature and poetry is deploying its expressive powers to offer a more resistive, unsettling rearticulation of the digital encounter. Jones's project extends considerably beyond highlighting any overtly digital themes depicted in specific texts, or any express stylistic devices they might employ—such as the vernacular of tweets, texts, emails, and Reddit threads—but towards something more subtle: engaging the weightings, allusions, and resonances that gather around the words available to articulate our being in a digital world, whether consciously or otherwise. The impacts of these are therefore not simply confined to the act of writing within, for, or about a digital environment, but extend into how texts negotiate their digital contexts of composition and reception more broadly, irrespective of whether this was their intended focus, or indeed, originally part of the contexts in which they were composed.

In *Glitch Poetics*, Jones focuses his analysis primarily on the influence of 'glitches' specifically in shaping the language employed by certain contemporary authors, and how they seek to characterise anew the experience of digital life:

I suggest that literary and media innovations and experiments, glitch language and media together produce modes of language practice that can re-fascinate us in the digital world and bring it into question once again. "Glitch poetics" is a mode of reading and writing language errors in contemporary literature in ways that reflect something new about our encounters with digital technology. It is an emergent literary style, a media realism in which literary language is entangled in today's hyper-mediated conditions, making them speak about the way things are and will be as we integrate digital technologies ever deeper into our lives.

It is concerning this point of digital integration that Jones emphasises his critical project as not simply the close reading of contemporary works, but to emphasise a need to reorient the practices and concerns of *poetics* itself as a critical endeavour:

Glitching poetics means infecting, impurifying, diverting its concerns, finding between-spaces where it speaks to other disciplines, fields and modes of articulation. It also means pushing the tools of poetics up against modes of language practice outside of the literary. In my work, the critical arguments hover between analysis of poetry and literature, media use, media forms and theory, and artistic deployments of language in video art and performance. In this way, the book seeks a purchase that, as I show, much contemporary poetry does have, but the criticism around it rarely offers. (23)

Jones, influenced significantly by the earlier work of Olga Goriunova (2019) and Rosa Menkman (2011), grounds his conception of digital error in the work of varied glitch artists and theorists, who attentively foster or recreate the surprising, radiant, emergent disruptions of digital breakdowns as a way of ‘unknowing’ our expectations and understandings of technology. In other words, these figures perceive how the failures heralded by glitches span across technologies, cultures, and languages in ways that highlight the hidden structures and processes that enable and delimit the digital encounter. It is here that Jones notes how artists ‘working in experimental poetry and the critical off-shoots of poetry called ‘poetics’ often conceive of language as a system of logics that can be bent and broken to deviate from the conditions of the sayable delimited by existing norms’ (22). This crafting of errancy may lack the viscerally disruptive, often unwelcome surprise brought about by the functional unravelling of digital systems, interfaces, and working patterns, but they still provide a matrix through which to read diffractively the complex (and frequently frictional, uncertain) entanglements of the human and the digital across everyday experience.

Jones illustrates his critical project by conducting a series of close analyses over three chapters, each one focusing on a particular modality of glitched writing, reading, and encountering as it manifests across mixed media artefacts, lyric poetry, critical tracts, and ‘realist’ prose novels. In the chapter ‘Body-System-Glitch’, Jones adapts Lauren Berlant’s (2016) concept of ‘glitchfrastructure’ to characterise the embodied experience of encountering and processing conscious errors written into literary works. Here, Jones cites a diverse range of creative works by Caroline Bergvall, Erica Scourti, Young Hae Chang Heavy Industries, and J.R. Carpenter, who performatively rearticulate their own words through technology. Using transcription toolsets, speed readers, and algorithmic disordering, these artists and writers induce errors of sensory perception, semantics, and reading comprehension. The result is a vivid expression of the multiply lived and embodied registers of the glitch encounter that Jones forwards as being central to glitch poetics, not only in terms of its expressive potentials, but also its critical emphasis on the entangled material conditions of digitally mediated being.

In the chapter ‘Lyric-Code-Glitch’, Jones examines the role of contemporary lyric modes that transcribe a ‘poetics of error’, revealing the varying proximities, durations, and logics of digital code as it striates contemporary experience—and thus, the means through which it is communicated and interpreted. Through close reading the works of Ben Lerner and Keston Sutherland alongside digital performance artworks by Rosa Menkman, Alex Mclean, and Jon Satrom, Jones excavates a range of linguistic methods in which repetition, disjunction, accumulation, and irregularity accelerate beyond breaking point the corporately ‘kitsch’ intersections of personal-political relations within the contemporary moment.

In the final chapter ‘Proto-Media-Realist Glitch’, Jones concludes his exploration of glitch poetics through the work of authors past and present, including Megan Boyle, Sally Rooney, Tao Lin, Samuel Beckett, James Joyce, Nick Montfort, Ryan Trecartin, and David Peace. Uniting these highly varied examples is an engagement with the radical traditions of literary

realism. Emerging originally out of efforts at depicting the transformative socio-technical developments of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Jones observes how literary realism is gaining a renewed currency in the present moment: ‘the effect of reading modernist and artificial intelligence works together is that the protorealism of the earlier works, entirely written by a human author, offers a glimpse at the mechanics of the computational forms of cognition that increasingly dictate our own working and thinking’ (231). Here, Jones argues that the conjunction of literary realism and glitch poetics captures the intensities, tensions, fragmentations, and challenges of contemporary political life in an algorithmically driven, datafied world. In so doing, they provide a vehicle for discerning new possibilities for the real that unbind the cyclopean interfaces of pristinely functional, often profoundly exploitative digital operations.

Glitch Poetics offers a singularly detailed account of the significance of digital contexts in their most vivid form, at the moment of breakdown, in shaping the linguistic arts that give voice to contemporary experience. Jones presents an outlook in which texts are engaged from the standpoint of their possibilities for meaning, of their potential to speak to a range of contexts and concerns far beyond the immediate spaces and times in which they were crafted—with their explicit themes and outlooks becoming turned, by resonances of language, into windows for re-examining digital processes, and their bodily, psychological, and political affects. Admittedly, *Glitch Poetics* is not particularly concerned with mapping the impacts of specific digital artefacts and infrastructures, as they might variously manifest or resonate with its chosen examples, but traces instead the broad languages of error as they are woven throughout the techniques of prose and poetry. In so doing, Jones reveals both their purchase on existing cultural logics, and their ability to articulate future affinities and possibilities.

In reflecting on the significance of *Glitch Poetics* when it comes to my own practice as an artist and writer, and what it might say concerning the very latest developments in algorithmic art and writing more broadly, I am particularly engaged by Jones’s frequent invocation of writing in which error manifests not as ‘failure’ but through capturing the alien texture of wholly normative operations—especially those in which wayward outputs are the very signature of correct functioning.

At the start of the book, Jones recounts the unsettling experience of listening to a synthesised voice on the other end of the phoneline, comprised of myriad recordings of human speech condensed algorithmically into a coherent waveform of a single voice. This vast and opaque process is nevertheless designed to inculcate a sense of intimacy and affective deference to an otherwise intrusive message, with the careful injection of disfluencies serving as tools of persuasive authenticity. My own creative work with GPT-3 has been driven by a not dissimilar pursuit, supplying prompts that specify varying levels of desired errancy, and thus outputting materials that bear the apparent traces of lively written discourse between real people—wherein errors of spelling and grammar can be assimilated more readily as markers of authenticity.

At a later point in *Glitch Poetics*, Jones invokes Google's Deep Dream image generator, a machine learning system that excavates affinities between the structures of a given source image and a vast database of scoured visual material, inscribing the strongest resonances of the latter onto the former, and so outputting a bizarre, alien pastiche. In very recent years, popular interest in Deep Dream has been eclipsed by powerful machine learning image synthesisers, such as DALL-E 2, Midjourney, and Stable Diffusion 2. Like GPT-3, these are natural language models that are mapped onto descriptively tagged visual materials. When supplied with a textual prompt, they output a synthesised image that matches the weightings and allusions associated with its constituent keywords. In using these systems, it becomes apparent immediately that specifying art styles that are popularly considered abstract or diffusive often helps disguise the inevitable disjunctures in line and form that characterise their outputs—lending a formal coherency to endemic visual aporia, even if this runs wholly against the once radically disruptive intent behind the original style (see Fig 1.)



Figure 1. Stable Diffusion output using the prompt 'a painting of a dystopian neo tokyo cyberpunk city by vincent van gogh', generated by the Carter.

These colourful writing and imaging machines, and their ambiguous relationships with error vis-à-vis a generalised novelty, have a particular import for the very final part of Jones's critical project, a collection of poems entitled *On the Point of Tearing and Disintegrating Uncontrollably* (2022). Intended as an accompaniment to the book, these poems were authored by Jones as an exercise in consciously crafting a form of glitch poetics, as opposed to conducting its scholarly excavation after-the-fact. Overlaid across each poem are a series of partly coherent portmanteau generated using Torch-RNN, a simple machine learning architecture that was trained on the contents of *Glitch Poetics*. Jones describes his collection as emerging from the conviction that glitches will represent a key methodology for collaborating with these large natural language models in the future. This follows in the spirit

of his project as a whole, wherein the glitch breaks apart normative expectations, understandings, and possibilities concerning digital systems—in this case, a deliberate disruption of any assumed fidelity towards human writing and image-making, and reaching instead towards a more-than-human mode of creative collaboration and expression (see Fig. 2).

At a moment when, superficially at least, the compositional powers of digital systems appear able to emulate those of any human artist—with concomitant arguments as to whether their outputs are truly ‘creative’ or merely excavations of the human cultural archive—*Glitch Poetics* demonstrates the value of crafted disruptions that will prove instrumental in short-circuiting these reductive associations for both artist and machine. In championing the possibilities for meaning in texts that speak to digital conditions but are irreducible to them, *Glitch Poetics* highlights the role of future art in exceeding the capacity of technical systems to subsume errors of playful misuse, and thus, the inherent generative potentials of unknowing the digital.

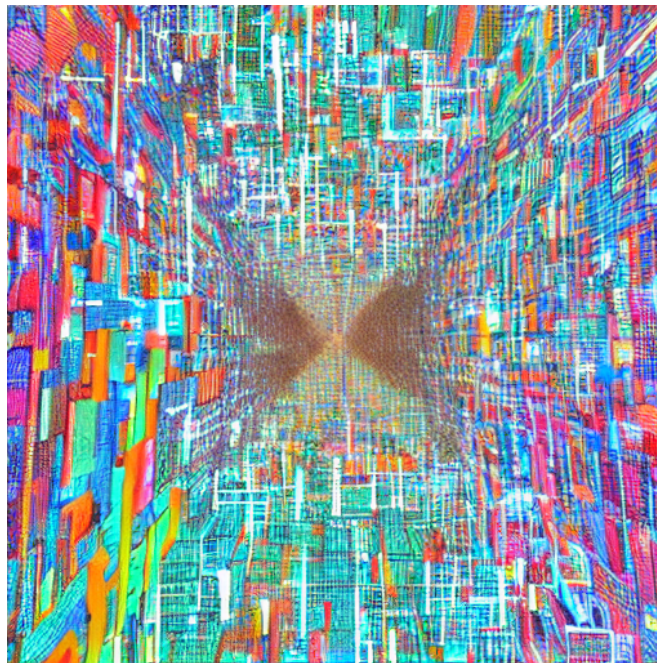


Figure 2. Stable Diffusion output using the prompt ‘glitch poetics’, generated by the author.

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