

Analyses

A Digital Lyric: Rachel Zolf's *Human Resources*

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How to write
persuasive
body copy

- 1 Take on commodity form
 - 2 Start selling in the first line
 - 3 Stick to the surface
 - 4 Be relevant
 - 5 Heed the Clarity Commandment
 - 6 Support your claims
 - 7 Burn out meaning
- (Rachel Zolf, *Human Resources*)

If this essay were to follow the kinds of enumerated instructions for corporate communications that intersperse the pages of Rachel Zolf's *Human Resources*, I suspect the rules governing such restricted expenditure might look something like this:

How to write
effective
introductions

- 1 Begin with the obvious
- 2 Articulate the issue
- 3 Oversimplify context
- 4 Account for critics
- 5 Sell your relevancy
- 6 End with a memorable catch-phrase

Bearing these rules in mind:

One of the major challenges facing feminist poets today is the struggle to make visible the kinds of female experiences that have been historically underrepresented by a white-male dominated literary tradition. Yet, as the problematic phrase ‘female experience’ immediately evokes, third-wave feminists are rightfully weary of such ‘essentialist’ notions of gender and cultural categories, and the falsely universal definitions they imply. Although recognizable gender markers and transparent language undeniably bring once private lives into a public sphere – as the confessional lyric clearly illustrates – the inevitable cost of such a strategy is to enter into the same systems of linguistic power that have traditionally silenced the very voices trying to gain recognition. At the same time, to completely enter into an avant-garde program disrupting ‘the language of the oppressor’ (through techniques like ungrammatical syntax, abandonment of the writing subject, or emphasizing the materiality of language over its semantic value) would risk deserting the fundamental aim of representation. The issue comes down to a catch-22 of categories: the lyric is too complaisant, the avant-garde too opaque.

Of course, such an introduction immediately creates a number of problems. Even the labels ‘avant-garde’ and ‘lyric’ are problematic from the outset,¹ and, indeed, one of the central strategies of feminist poets in the twentieth and twenty-first century has been to complicate the divisions between the two categories. Such is the case with any number of postmodern poets, which could be found in investigations like Linda Kinnahan’s *Lyric Interventions: Feminism, Experimental Poetry and Contemporary Discourse* or anthologies like *American Women Poets in the 21st Century: Where Lyric Meets Language*, edited by Juliana Spahr and Claudia Rankine. As the introductions to both these books point out, poets like Rae Armentrout, Barbara Guest, Susan Howe and Lyn Hejinian engage with questions of subjectivity while simultaneously opposing the lyric as “a genre authorizing the self’s primacy” (Kinnahan 9) or an “intimate and interior space” (Spahr 1). Resisting the complete eradication of the writing subject that has been favoured by much of the twentieth century avant-garde, these poets opt instead for problematizing the speaking ‘I’ and taking questions of lyric subjectivity into a socially engaged arena.

This essay investigates the ways *Human Resources* not only engages with the lyric/avant-garde experiment, but also extends it into new territory. Specifically, I consider Zolf’s use of digital technologies in her writing process as a way of creating a writing subject that neither escapes into interiority, nor pulpits a singular political representation of the female experience. By reflecting the conditions of contemporary culture, in which

the daily interactions with language have become mediated by digital technologies, *Human Resources* presents the fluid interactions between the seemingly opposite dichotomies of human and machine, self and other, and experimental technique and lyric convention. In effect, *Human Resources* offers a kind of digital lyric that might offer insight into how the familiar digital landscape may help to challenge our assumptions about what it means to write lyric poetry.

The Human/Machine and Lyric/Experimental Divide

Although most of *Human Resources* is crafted by Zolf's own hand (what she calls in her notes "the author's proprietary machine-mind™"), the text is also infused with poems created with a Flash-based poetry generating program. Some might approach the use of Flash Poetry Generator 3.0 as a means of showing the irrelevance of the human for writing poetry. However, in *Human Resources* the generator is used in such a way that the individual writer remains quite present, and even essential throughout the process. The generator itself is simple to operate: a user enters nouns and verbs into dialogue boxes. Those words are then manipulated by the algorithm and outputted into unpredictable, disjunctive combinations (LaCook). Even though the arrangement of words is technically 'automated' by the program in a way suggestive of the agency-diminishing tactics of avant-garde procedural or chance operation poets, Zolf manages to manipulate the generator in such a way as to emphasize the human behind the machine:

lesbian, writeing [sic] you is like
loesing [sic] the shit, only worse.
While Jew voids the money, I
write over a narrow Jew.
Because of these excesss [sic] acquire
as if money were a Jew for
acquireing [sic], you should write
your lesbian, while shit
acquires. (15)

The passage clearly resists the transparent expressivity associated with the traditional lyric; there is no indication as to whom the "you," "I," "Jew" or "lesbian" may be referring. As well, although the phrases are more or less grammatically intact, the voice resists any intimate confessionalism. The ambiguity of the referents resists any clear communication of thought or emotion ("Because of these excesss" – what excesses? "you should write / your lesbian" – how does one write one's lesbian?). Despite the lack of transparency, undeniably charged identity ("Jew" and "lesbian") are used repetitively. It might be tempting to attrib-

ute such themes to autobiographical connections to the author, yet, the automation of the writing technique makes it difficult to attribute to the words an interior retreat, or lyrical outpouring of expression. Instead, the generator creates a lyric subject in which human linguistic output is mediated, and very much disrupted, through the program's code. The program quite literally unsettles any natural thought patterns of the writer, representing an inescapable fact of subjectivity: one can control the portrayal of identity, but only *within* the external systems that ideologically, culturally, or linguistically determine what it is possible to say.

Speaking of her own digital poetry-generator, Katherine Parrish suggests that instead of approaching text generators from the question "who/what" is in control (poet/machine/chance), it is more appropriate to think in terms of a "distributed agency across author/programmer/ algorithm/text & reader" (46). Parrish questions the idea that any generator can be completely automated, pointing out that the coder – the human writing the program, with human assumptions about how language works – is at all times present behind the resulting lines. The observation can be applied quite directly to the way *Human Resources* engages the generator (and in a way, the observation can also extend in some way to all poetry declaring the abandonment of the writing subject). In automatic, procedural or chance driven texts, we might be tempted to echo Roland Barthes, and assert that the death of the author occurs when the "modern sriptor is born simultaneously with the text" (145). Or, in other words, the author no longer "nourishes" the book and no longer "exists before it, thinks, suffers, lives for it, is the same relation of antecedence to his work as a father to his child" (Barthes 145). *Human Resources* reveals quite the opposite; with the choice of words inputted into the poetry generator, the author's choice of words "nourishes" the text in such a way that it could not "exist before" the writer. If we consider the simultaneous presence/absences of author and machine, self and other, agency and chance, if the author is really is dead, then in *Human Resources* it assumes multiple corpses.

It should be noted that the poetic style demonstrated by the poetry generator is no way representative of *all* the poems in *Human Resources*. Quite the opposite, the lineated poems created by the poetry generator are interspersed among less conventional prose poems, as well as poems presented as bulleted or enumerated lists with titles like "How to write for the Internet" (73), "Where to look for inspiration" (33), or "Shopping list of motivators" (19). Curiously, the poetry generator's output, with its rather lyric-looking lines and shorter length, evokes a more conventional structure of poetry than the human-written forms.

Another point important to acknowledge before going further is that the

generator's syntactical construction (or lack of it) is not representative of the entire text. At some points, simple declaratives make the speaking subject far more evident: "I'm totally medicated as I type" (5); "I won't remember that avant-garde chaos frees the writing machine's choked circuits" (65); "My head's spinning in reverse 360s just to close the loop with you" (7). Other times, the disjunctive syntax offers no indication of the enunciator:

Stink boston beach ridiculous sexual nine6five of money repulsive. Bills and coins fingered by infinite unwashed hands painting the tricks. Filthy lucre – some of the lucky end up 'rolling in it,' making 'piles' of 'money up the ass.' Commodity form is not a simple state of mind – you need reader involvement, which means getting a reaction, not giving a recitation on what two W64 good Q64 out is time 66 death sixty-six. Money makes words into alien things and psychology + communication = salesmanship. (40)

As evident in the above passage, there are moments where the language is quite musical ("fingered by infinite unwashed hands"), while other times the language turns into mechanical utterance of codes ("W64 good Q64 out is time 66 death sixty-six"). Merging clear prose with the non-transparent use of numbers (nine6five), codes (W64, Q64), and symbols (+, =), the text straddles a boundary between lyric articulation and experimental ruptures in communication. Much like Donna Haraway's cyborg, defined at its most basic as "a hybrid of machine and organism" (Haraway 149), the text challenges the boundaries between human/machine, body/consciousness, and material/immaterial, and yet, never abandons these categories entirely. The result is poetry that at once enters into lyric investigations of identity, while still managing to present the inevitable social and cultural influences that partially determine the conditions of self-expression.

The Individual Agency/Social Determinacy of Language

One of the ongoing themes in *Human Resources* is the idea of writing as an economy – as Steve McCaffery describes it, thinking of writing in terms of "the distribution and circulation of numerous forces and intensities that saturate a text" (201). This is particularly true where Zolf uses her experience in corporate communications to emphasize how writing can become reliant on replicable structures of restricted economic exchange, "whose operation is based upon valorized notions of restraint, conservation, investment, profit, accumulation and cautious proceduralities in risk taking" (McCaffery 203). Adhering to this definition of the restricted economy, we see "the tyranny of the subject-verb predicate" (55) or the "the Communicating Bad News template" (38), as well as the nonnegotiable lists describing: "How to warm up your motor and find you

Big Idea” (11), “How to write a title” (27), “Where to look for inspiration” (33) and “How to write persuasive body copy” (45). These “how tos” of the writing process imply an almost oppressive power teaching, or, more appropriately, *programming* the writer to create output as perfectly efficient and predictable as a software program. One might expect that the mechanization of language – the automated, fill-in-the blank type activities of writing – would suggest an action totally devoid of any individual agency. Unexpectedly, the very tools that seem to automate the exchange values of language end up creating opportunities to expand individual reading, individual expression, and the general economy of language.

As an example, the Gematria of Nothing² (GON) is a digital tool where a seemingly closed system of linguistic values is co-opted into a means for individualized expression. The GON is based on the sacred Gematria numerology, which assigns each letter in the Hebrew language a numerical value (positive or negative). Every word is therefore made up of a series of integers, and by combining these values, words and phrases generate their own numeric value. These values can then be used against the values of other words and phrases in a relational comparison. In *Human Resources*, those numeric values are first presented in superscript: “Change^(G46)” (16) or “Couldn’t bear the anxiety, couldn’t write^(G-5)” (12). Then, as the book progresses, the codes eventually settle down beside the text: “labrys power G7 ghoulish philology” (66), suggesting a signifying system on equal terms with language itself.

Clearly, the writer has no control over how these codes manifest, and is more or less at the mercy of the GON system when recording the values. However, as deterministic as the writing process may seem, the entire use of the GON is saturated with an impulse of almost rebellious self-expression. The fact is, while the Gematria is a sincere and sacred numerology, originally designed for the interpretation of Biblical texts, the GON is described in the author’s notes as “a bizarre Christ-, crow- and express-laden attempt to co-opt the serious practice of Hebrew numerology and apply it to select English words and phrases” (93). The GON, at least according to the Zolf, is a profane distortion of a culturally and linguistically significant tradition. The reason why “the author co-opts GON for HR purposes” (Zolf 93) is never explained, however; to adopt a tool that takes a serious sacred system and turns it into “a bizarre Christ-, crow- and express-laden” co-optation suggests a sense of irony, or at least irreverence, towards the whole subject matter. Conclusions are difficult to make, but by using the GON the author expresses a different attitude toward the cultural practice than would be established if more sacred versions of the numerology had been adopted.

Similar to the Gematria engine, WordCount and QueryCount are two other engines that generate numerical values for words. WordCount is a

search engine/database that ranks the most frequently used words in the English language, while QueryCount, a program inside it, ranks the words most frequently searched (queried) in WordCount. In the same pattern as the GON, these numerical values for words are used at first as an easily dismissible superscripted tags on the words. Then later, these codes descend to the level of the text itself. Eventually, the letters denoting the search engines drop away entirely:

Ambiguities of the human conditions are a threat to surfeit 1267.
Sonnet's sublime orgasmic 447 one of the iterations of the houses.
I hold them on the page, Valéry's face a void queued up for release.
Hat's off, this won't be floated 65 without dissemination. (83)

The numeric codes require new interpretive strategies: does the reader return to the search engines to decode the values? If so, then the book cannot be thought of as a self-contained unit; the decryption key for its exchange values literally lies beyond the page. And, on separate but related note, what are we to make of the parallel codes? What does it mean, for instance, when we see a phrase like “economic (W383) love (W384)” (70)? The 383rd most common used (and therefore valued?) word in English is ‘economic,’ which is one degree more significant than ‘love’? Who wrote this sequence: the WordCount engine, the author who found and framed it as poetry, or the entire community of English language speakers who collectively determined how often these words are used? The rankings of these engines are clearly out of the hands of any individual user, yet the way the rankings are *decoded* requires subjective agency. Like Saussure’s observation that “speech has both an individual and a social side, and we cannot conceive the one without the other” (244), the Word and QueryCount tools entail both a fixed system of signs and their individual execution. As much as the databases seem like cold, mechanized methods of assigning language fixed values, in some ways they do represent a re-investment in the ‘human resources’ of the linguistic exchange. The whim of the human can still determine, and undermine, what the codes signify on the the page.

The decoding of the QueryCount codes becomes even more open to interpretation if we consider its rankings change, hour by hour, while users continue to query different words (Zolf 93). Consequently, the Q-codes at the time of writing will more than likely be different than those at the time of reading. Simultaneously enacting multiple referents, the Q-codes are a literal embodiment of what N. Katherine Hayles calls the “flickering signifier” (26), which is a term referring to a fundamental change in the nature of information when it is digitized. Unlike the physical inscriptions of print, Hayles tells us, the ease at which text can change

on the screen results in an unstable condition for the text where “no simple one-to-one correspondence exists between signifier and signified” (25-26). Much like the Q-codes, the flickering signifier unshackles the physical signifier from its monetary signified, and allows the word to take on multiple and constantly shifting referents.

As a consequence of all the individualized reading strategies, the decoding of Word and QueryCount does not necessarily arrive at definitive, or even productive, conclusions. Much like the general economy, with its celebration of wasteful excess instead of accumulation, the efficient exchange between sign and referent is challenged in favour of multiple, and even contradictory, reading paths. This is not to say the relationship between sign and referent is completely eradicated. As already mentioned, there are still methods to reestablish the link between the two, such as returning to online generator, inputting the codes, or negotiating other reading strategies. As McCaffery suggests, the opportunities for the general economy do not replace the restricted as strict alternative, but are merely uncovered from their once “suppressed or ignored” positions within the operations of language (203).

Another suppressed potential surfacing in the Q-codes are the psychological drives of language users. Because QueryCount essentially reflects the collective action of all WordCount users (their individual decisions of what words were important to enter into the search engine), the values offer insight into the collective psyche of the population engaging with the tool. Such is the case in a curious poem that calls upon the QueryCount values, and what is possibly a found poem of the ranking itself:

Mass affluent consumers’ key satisfaction drivers aspirational by most common queries of most-common English-words engine: fuck Q1 sex Q2 love the shit god i penis cunt a ass jesus dog Q13 pussy hate bush john me hello vagina america bitch cat dick you war yes he like and cock no damn david gay man computer money word mother michael poop Q42 happy mom asshole orgasm he mike apple peace help one hi car bob fart cool it chris microsoft crap woman what good is death hell conquistador iraq james house mark butt corn girl paul home dad work but of beer nigger andrew tom tit tits usa anal baby stupid joe father kill mary school sarah smith Q100 re-scoped the gestimate - the generic one month is longer than 30 days. You can control the reader's reaction without changing the facts (36)

Because the QueryCount ranking has shifted since the time this poem was written, it is impossible to verify if the words following the colon were ever a verbatim listing of the ranking. Yet the codes interspersed in the passage (Q13, Q42, Q100) keep pace with another poem where the WordCount ranking is listed (34). This poem, of course, is verifiably a verbatim listing, because the rankings of that engine do not change. The parallel be-

tween the two poems suggests the passage above did represent the Query-Count ranking at one point in time. If so, then the recurring themes of obscenity, body, politics, money and religion offer interesting insight into a communal consciousness. It seems the words people find most important or most interesting to query create a motley collection of both sacred and profane, both political and personal. Interestingly, this collective unconsciousness of sex drives, religious interests and political matters reveals a set of preoccupations not indicated by the most commonly used words in the English language, a ranking that starts with banal words like ‘the, of, an, in, a, to, that, it, is, was...’. Not until language usage is embodied in the specific contexts of the real world do these underlying drives emerge. By appropriating the list into poetry, Zolf quite literally allows this social consciousness to influence, and even determine, the text.

The passage above also contains word combinations that are adopted in other poems: “stupid boy joe father stage” (24) and “america bitch cat” (16). Again, the author’s writing is infiltrated by the voices of the community, as boundaries blur between what is individual agency in the writing and what is borrowed or determined by the communal forces of language. Furthermore, we can remember that the algorithms of these programs themselves – and their coders – also play a part in this writing process. In this way, digital technologies, and particularly those existing as networked systems of language, offer new opportunities to write poetry where author, community and machine almost indistinguishably create a distributed writing subject made up of many interconnected nodes.

Although experimental forms of the lyric have existed for quite some time, as the postmodern age flirts with the digital age, the already perceptible changes to subjectivity and authorship deserve consideration within a poetry engaging with the new conditions of writing in digital landscapes. *Human Resources* provides one of many manifestations of a digital poetry investigating what it means to exist and write in a culture where digital technologies continue to infiltrate the everyday uses of language. Everything from poetry generators, to search engines, to hypertext, to onscreen animations offer the possibility of blending machine and organism, lyric and experimentalism, agency and determinism. These experiments initiate strategies that begin to blur boundaries between the agency recognizable in the “essentially defined woman,” and the inevitable social determinants challenging her existence. At the risk of sounding too essentialist, or ending on a catch-phrase: the possibilities for the digital lyric are just beginning to emerge.

Notes

1. Any homogenous definition of these terms would inevitably prove insufficient. In fact, the following discussion explores the necessary complication of these categories, and in so doing suggests the useful overlaps between the two. As an imperfect distinction, experimental poetry may be distinguished as those works that exhibit perceptible inheritances from poetry communities since Modernism that have operated outside of, or in opposition to, mainstream practice (an incomplete list of which would include the New York School, Black Mountain School, and L=A=N=G=U=A =G =E poetry).
2. Found at www.mysticalinternet.com.

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