



Cultivating the Cyborg Voice: Technology in the Creative Writing Classroom

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Abstract: *This article takes a critical look at pieces generated from a capstone project in a recent mixed-genre Intro to Creative Writing workshop. It was inspired by an open-ended creative project asking students to use technology to generate unconventional works of fiction, poetry, memoir, and theatre. Writer and educator Rebecca Valley's hope when assigning this project was to encourage students to innovate and step outside their standard forms. But beyond mere innovation of form, students surprised her in their capacity to use technology to hybridize their authorial voices – rather than merely changing the form of their own words, they became curators and editors of a new, cyborg voice. The article takes a critical look at the history of cyborg scholarship and the role of technology as a tool for creation in the Intro to Creative Writing classroom. With four excerpts from real student projects, the article suggests that by inviting students to use the cyborg voice, we can also encourage them to question capitalist ideas of romanticized self-expression, “ownership” of language, and marketability.*

Keywords: *poetry, creative writing, cyborg, writing and technology, media studies*

INTRODUCTION: THE STUDENT CYBORG

I ended my Intro to Creative Writing course in Fall 2019 with an open-ended prompt; I asked students to play with creative writing and technology, in any form, any iteration that struck them. I have always been interested in digital forms of creative expression – video games, choose your own adventure stories, translation software, Twitter bots. I wanted students to step into the digital space to shake up their ideas about their writing, and their creative identities. After a semester spent writing and workshopping pieces in the more traditional fashion -- so they felt cohesive, singular, distinct -- I wanted to end the semester by calling that voice into question.

With an open-ended prompt, what you imagine you'll receive is almost never what you get. I was seeking innovation for my students, but what they delivered was an incredible experiment in hybridity. Two students, also close friends, cowrote a poem by sharing a single Twitter account, allowing them to merge into a single, writerly identity across time and space. A pair of bots gave us a dramatic reading of a play about what it means to experience disgust. These works both did and did not belong to my students. I began to think of this work as cyborg in nature – inherently human, but also inherently technological.

Relying on post-humanist, feminist, and post-colonial scholarship, I wanted to explore the cyborg voice – not just conceptually, but experientially. What does it mean to ask students to write in the cyborg voice? In what ways is the cyborg voice rooted in feminist, anti-racist, anti-capitalist ideology? How does writing the cyborg voice allow students to reconsider and experiment with artistic identity? How is their sense of ownership (of language, of story) called into question when technology is an integral part of their creation? And most importantly: what does the cyborg voice bring to the Intro to Creative Writing classroom?

STRIKING GOLD(SMITH): A LINEAGE OF UNCREATIVE WRITING

The text of the assignment (Figure 1) I gave my students during our final weeks was intentionally vague. I asked them simply to “focus on intersections of writing and technology, and how technology can offer us opportunities to open up our writing...” Together, we created a list of possibilities for a final project, including some ideas I brought from previous workshops and readings. I had a singular motivation for my students: I wanted them to experiment. I wanted students to think about what it meant to write something unfamiliar to them. I wanted to shake them out of the idea that they should have one particular style, genre, or “voice” – to avoid the capitalist branding of writers as living in one particular way of creating or being.

In his book *Uncreative Writing*, a treatise inspired by his long-running class of the same name, Kenneth Goldsmith writes:

When the students arrive in class, they are told that they must have their laptops open and connected. And so we have a glimpse into the future. And after seeing what the spectacular results of this are... I am more convinced that I can never go back to a traditional classroom pedagogy. I learn more from the students than they can ever learn from me. The role of the professor now is part party host, part traffic cop, full-time enabler. (9)

Goldsmith's pedagogy is one I relate to, and one that I drew from extensively for this assignment. In my first poetry workshop in college, my professor used Goldsmith to break me out of my preconceived ideas about what writing could be. Now, as a fellow writer among my students, I see myself more days than not as Goldsmith sees himself: an enabling party host with an attendance sheet.

WEEK 13: WRITING AND TECHNOLOGY

For our final study of this semester, we will focus on intersections of writing and technology, and how technology can offer us opportunities to open up our writing to include sound, image, non-linear narrative, surprise, experimentation, and more.

Some ideas for this project might include, but are certainly not limited to:

- Twitter bot accounts - Concepts Bot / Magical Realism Bot
- Writing a video game script, with scenes and visuals
- Cinema/film storyboarding
- Text poems - group chats
- Erasure of text messages
- Writing interactive fiction using Twine or similar software
- Digital poetry comics
- Collaborative or solo Twitter stories
- Instagram stories/poems, etc.
- Creating a video translation of a piece
- Working with audio/recordings/soundscapes, etc.
- Using bots or predictive text to create hybrid human/AI stories
- Playing with the idea of persona by creating fictional social media profiles
- Experimenting with translation and technology i.e. translating and re-translating in Google to create strange new works

Due: 12/04

Presentations: 12/04 and 12/06

Fig. 1

Goldsmith encourages students to push boundaries, to question what they've been told about authorship, plagiarism, appropriation. He wants students to ponder what it really means to "own" language. In the spirit of Goldsmith, with this capstone project, I wanted to offer my students the opportunity to experiment and explore outside the realm of traditional, lines-on-a-page writing practice. I wanted them to consider what it meant to write outside the strict definitions of the self. What emerged was something unfamiliar to all of us – a cyborg voice that made me think in ways I hadn't before about identity, capitalism, post-humanism, and what it means to create.

CYBORGS, TRYBORGS, AND THE COMPLEXITY OF THE DIGITAL VOICE

In her essay "Cyborg Manifesto," Donna Haraway writes about our hybridized organic/cybernetic existence. For Haraway, the incorporation of technology in nearly every aspect of daily life (even in the 1990s, when she authored this text) indicates a world that is no longer purely organic, but cyborg in nature. She reminds us: "By the late twentieth century, our

time, a mythic time, we are all chimeras, theorized and fabricated hybrids of machine and organism; in short, we are cyborgs” (2).

Haraway’s vision of our cyborg world is a world beyond gender, boundaries, and identity politics. The cyborg world is about fusion, affinity, and pleasure – it is anti-capitalist, anti-patriarchal, and anti-category. It is driven by experimentation, pleasure, imperfection, and dismantling of systems. It is a way of thinking that is based in multiple meanings and possibilities – moving away from the binary of good/bad, man/woman, human/non-human, us/them. Haraway writes about the political possibilities of the cyborg, particularly in terms of gender identity and womanhood, urging readers to move beyond the rigid binaries and boundaries of identity politics, into a more nuanced, pleasure-oriented, affinity-based system of acceptance and understanding. She writes: “Cyborgs might consider more seriously the partial, fluid, sometimes aspect of sex and sexual embodiment” (27).

Haraway’s fascination about boundaries – between human/animal and animal/machine – are interesting when thinking about writing practice and the creative self. For Haraway, cyborg language is inherently imperfect, non-conforming, messy: “...the struggle for language and the struggle against perfect communication, against the one code that translates all meaning perfectly” (23). Her focus is on nuance, particularly nuance in identity. This is readily adaptable in conversations about creative identity – particularly in how we define the self.

As an intro-level instructor, I wanted my students to consider the ways their creative selves are shaped by the world around them. Students spent the semester churning out writing in multiple genres and sharing work with their peers, who helped them understand their work. Slowly, students who had not been in a workshop environment before got a preliminary understanding of their strengths and proclivities, and used that feedback to write into a particular voice – to hone it. But while honing a voice is a valuable practice, it can also be a limiting practice. We are told as writers that our work is “dark” or “sensual” or “funny” and we begin to write into those spaces because we have been told that’s who we are. In the era of the personal brand, having a recognizable style is valuable, and it’s marketable. But it can also be trapping, particularly for young writers who haven’t explored the limits of what they might create. And so, I asked my students to use machines to become cyborgs, to “struggle for language” and in the struggle find new avenues for their work. And so, Haraway’s idea of the cyborg became our manifesto – a manifesto of blurry borders between self and other.

But Haraway’s understanding of the cyborg isn’t the only one. In the article “Tryna Free Kansas City”: The Revolutions of Janelle Monáe as Digital Griot,” author Cassandra L. Jones writes about musician Janelle Monáe’s use of cyborgs to explore queerness, sexuality, and race through an Afro-futurist lens. In her albums and music videos, Monáe plays the role of her alter ego, Cindi Mayweather, “a criminal cyborg who dared to fall in love with a human” (52). As the albums progress, Mayweather joins a community of other targeted cyborgs who break social

convention and eventually becomes a “revolutionary figure” (52). Monáe uses her cyborg alter-ego to explore how marginalized bodies move through our digital world. Monáe’s cyborgs, like Haraway’s cyborgs, blur boundaries—but unlike Haraway, Monáe’s cyborgs offer a view of the cyborg voice that centers queerness and Blackness.

Similarly, poet Franny Choi uses her book *Soft Science* to explore the similarities between cyborg bodies and queer, immigrant bodies. Choi used the cyborg voice to write this collection—repurposing tweets and other language using Google translate and other tools. But the cyborg is also a metaphor for her—a way of understanding identity that doesn’t fit within strict binaries. She writes in an interview with the *Paris Review*, “I started to think... my affinity for certain images, like the cyborg...was a way of taking up the incoherence of my gender identity” (Choi). Later, when discussing how she both centers Korean identity in her poetry and feels distant from that identity as a Korean-American writing for a primarily American audience, the interviewer Spencer Quong reflects: “I think that’s an idea that the cyborg embodies, too. It resists strict categorization. It might be both machine and human. You can be both Korean and have ways in which you are unfamiliar with Korea” (qtd. in Choi). For both Choi and Monáe, the cyborg is a symbol of intersectional and complicated identities that refuses to be simplified into a single category.

The term cyborg also has connotations in the world of disability advocacy. Writer, disability advocate and self-proclaimed cyborg Jillian Weise critiques Haraway’s use of the term, particularly given her lack of inclusion of disabled voices and experiences in her manifesto. In a piece she wrote for *Granta*, Weise says: “Disabled women, Deaf women and neurodivergent women are never mentioned in the ‘Cyborg Manifesto’, which is strange, because the manifesto is full of appellations that have been, historically, applied to us (such as ‘monster’ and ‘creature’)” (“Common Cyborg”).

Weise has a name for Haraway’s “cyborgs.” She calls them tryborgs. “They can be recognized because, while they preach cyborg nature, they do not actually depend on machines to breathe, stay alive, talk, walk, hear or hold a magazine” (“Common Cyborg”). For Weise, who is disabled and relies on machines to live, the word cyborg is deeply embodied, and deeply personal. She writes in the poem “Anticipatory Action” from her book *Cyborg Detective*:

If cyborg enunciations are the future
avant-garde, then what are real cyborgs?
Do we have to be avant or can we
be ourselves? (1-4)

It feels wrong to use the word cyborg without acknowledging how disability plays into this terms usage and adoption. Unlike Haraway, who takes on the cyborg as a way of living, I am interested in the cyborg as a way of creating. The ability of my students, or their physical bodies,

may or may not play a role in that creation. Their relationship to technology as an embodied or lived experience is their own. In this piece, I am redefining the word cyborg as a way of thinking about a creative voice, rather than a human identity – my students are not (all) cyborgs, but their creations are. I hope that by adopting this term as a kind of craft rather than an idealized, politicized mode of existence, it's possible to be more inclusive of disabled bodies and voices. I want to simultaneously recognize Weise's view of the cyborg as real, lived experience, and Haraway's idea of the cyborg as a framework for thinking beyond the binary. The merging of these theories warrants an examination of cyborg language, which questions how we use technology to speak and write in new, mechanized ways. For the able-bodied, cyborg language might look like the intentional adoption or inclusion of machines to experiment with form and voice. But for many people, cyborg language is a daily language, or the only available language. Clarifying the “tryborg” nature of this capstone project is an important part of defining and understanding the cyborg voice, and including disabled experience in creative writing pedagogy.

TECHNOLOGY AS CRAFT IN THE INTRO TO CREATIVE WRITING CLASSROOM

Incorporating technology in creative writing pedagogy is not a new concept. Kenneth Goldsmith has been teaching his “Uncreative Writing” course for more than a decade now. It's a given that students will publish and share work digitally, and that writing will exist in a digital space. In our creative writing class, we frequently read work from online literary magazines. Students read and discussed Twine stories, sometimes known as hypertext or interactive fiction, and we explored Joanna Walsh's non-linear illustrated digital novel, *Seed*. At the end of the semester, my students submitted a favorite piece to a digital anthology.

That being said, thinking of technology not only as a tool or mode of publication but also an instrument of craft is surprisingly under-utilized in the creative writing classroom. Adam Koehler writes about this in his exploration of creative writing and new media:

“Although the figure of reader-as-writer is hardly new to scholarship, the recruitment of technologies that require the reader to occupy or construct that duality is. Creative writing studies in the twenty-first century can use the digital environment... as a way of asking imaginative writers to begin examining and imagining writing beyond the sensation provided by lines of language on the page...” (387).

Koehler explores how technology and interactive writing blur the lines between reader and writer. In reading, we are also creating – this is true not only of interactive fiction, but is an inherent part of the conceptual framework of cyborg writing. With cyborg writing, the writer loses control, and the reader gains it. This can cause conflict for intro students, who have been taught to think of reading as a passive act and writing as an active one. The binary between reader and writer breaks down in the creation and publication of interactive digital work.

Aaron Tucker explores the loss of self when writing in the cyborg voice, and the creative possibilities it offers. He writes of his work with digital translation:

Including computers in acts of translation brings critical attention to how symbiotically we collaborate with those computerized machines in our daily acts of writing and reading. This co-activity includes publishing platforms and social media sites, but in the context of my own work, co-operating algorithmically with a computer allows me, as an author, to extend myself beyond my own ‘human’ rationality. (2)

The idea of moving beyond “human rationality” and “co-operating algorithmically with a computer” is at the heart of the cyborg voice – but it also means admitting that the human voice is not the best, the only, the ultimate voice. This post-humanist understanding of creativity is unique, and a little frightening. It means acknowledging and relinquishing control, and opening yourself up into a collaborative, symbiotic relationship. It means stepping back from the strictly personal. It shifts the idea of ownership from “I made this” to “We made this.”

Tucker references Rosi Braidotti’s *The Post-Human* in his treatise on machine translation, writing: “Braidotti defines such a view as resisting an individual-focused and Euro-centric humanism and emphasizes ‘an enlarged sense of inter-connection between self and others, including the non-human or ‘earth’ others’ ” (7). By asking students to remove their binary understanding of reader/writer, to open themselves up to the cyborg voice, we are asking them to experiment with “inter-connection.” We are also asking them to move the focus away from the self. For our students, who have been taught that a primary value of art is self-expression, this might be a painful step. It might seem illogical. But stepping away from the self means opening up the creative practice to new collaborative possibilities. It also acknowledges the hard-to-swallow reality that the work we make doesn’t exist in a vacuum – we are constantly influenced in our language and in our imagination by other people’s stories. By leaning into technological symbiosis and “inter-connection,” students are better able to understand their work as part of a long cultural, linguistic, and social history.

By inviting technology into our intro classrooms, we are also inviting questions of ownership into our discussions of writing practice. We are inviting our students to consider the way that capitalism and ownership are intertwined, and the intersections between a piece’s value and its marketability. We are inviting an exploration of romanticized self-expression, and its limitations. This might seem like lofty material for an intro-level course, but students live and create within these systems. If we don’t call these systems into question in our discussion of craft, we can’t expect students to create work that subverts or questions them.

PRODUCTS, PRODUCTIONS

What does it look like to write in the cyborg voice? I return to the Goldsmith quote above: “I learn more from the students than they can ever learn from me.” To understand how my students began to define the cyborg voice, I want to share four capstone projects, all wildly different in both motive and outcome, but all of which contribute to my definition of the cyborg voice and its significance in the intro classroom.

Project 1: Twitter Co-Authorship

In this project, two students I will call R and J collaborated via Twitter to write a long-distance poem. Their project was simple in its design. They created a joint Twitter account under a false name. Using that account, they tweeted lines of poetry and replied to each other’s lines. The project took place over Thanksgiving break, so they were not in each other’s company while writing – hours or sometimes days passed between the writing of each tweet. The finished piece was a collaborative poem written under their shared pseudonym.



Fig. 2

As you can see from the sample above, the poem itself was lyrically beautiful. But I think the most astonishing part of the project was the way that R and J created a shared online persona, and in that persona a shared anonymity. R and J came into the class with distinct poetic styles and distinct preoccupations. But in this collaborative poem, it is nearly impossible to distinguish one voice from another. By creating one pseudonym, they effectively created new artistic identities for themselves – a hybrid of each of their voices and their shared persona. The melding of two voices into a single online presence speaks to Braidotti’s “inter-connection” (7) but also the adaptability of our artistic “selves.” What we write in conjunction with another voice is distinct from the writing we produce independently – the influence of others is made obvious, where in our independent work it so often remains invisible. By creating a persona together, and speaking through that persona, R and J created a new hybridized, virtual self.

Project 2: Siri Reads a Play

In another project, a student we’ll call S wrote a short play. The writing itself was entirely of her own design – the only technology she used to create the project was a word processor. S chose instead to include machines in the performance of her piece. She had two different virtual assistants perform her work, and recorded their performance for the class. The result was an otherworldly, almost dystopian experience in which two robots spoke about what it means to experience human emotions.

In S’s play, two unnamed characters talk about what disgust feels like. They wax poetic about the things that disgust them – the mercurial nature of small dogs, spilled juice on the sidewalk. They also talk about the physical sensations that accompany disgust. This distinctly human conversation is made strange by the impersonal, sometimes halting reading of the virtual assistant software programs, which seem to speak to each other without understanding each other. There is a familiarity in this exchange; how often do we speak without being heard? But the robotic voices add a chilling, dystopian element to this work. In this piece, which lingers on the challenges of human connection, we see our future. We hear the literal cyborg voice here – human language from a robot mouth. S relinquished control by allowing this robotic performance of her work, and the work is made new by the performers, as a play is made new in each performance. S’s use of the cyborg voice is one of presentation, rather than construction. She allows her language to be borrowed by these robotic voices, who speak without the capacity to understand. After it was done, we listened to it again, marveling at the sometimes funny, sometimes moving, perpetually unsettling nature of this performance.

Project 3: Bot Talk

For his project, student H had one goal – to see what could happen when bots talked to each other. His final piece was an erasure poem of conversations between three bots – Cleverbot, Splotchy, and Evie Bot. He began the conversation with his own line, and then fed the

subsequent responses into various bots to create the rest of the poem. He would not interfere or alter lines – his only role was initiator and translator as he copied and pasted responses from Evie Bot into the Cleverbot engine, and so on. Using these conversations, H then created an erasure poem. The bots responded in stolen language, and anachronisms. They also made startlingly human pleas about love and grief.

H's project is a fascinating one because of his role in the work. He was the initiator and mastermind behind the project, but most of the language of the poem itself was not his own. It couldn't exist without him, but it also isn't quite his. This is made more interesting by the copyright laws around bot chats – you have to cite all content that comes from a bot, which speaks to the bot's agency.

The cyborg voice is perhaps most distinct in this project, in which machines literally generate language that becomes a poem. The human element is the transformation of that content into a poem, and H's editorial eye – in his erasure, he selected which lines to include and discard. As the "author" H didn't actually compose more than a single line. But like a collage, the poem could not exist in its final iteration without his influence.

Project 4: The Sentient Story

One of the final presentations was by a student I'll call M. She used Mac Terminal to code a sentient story – a story that moves on its own, almost like a film, using precoded commands. The story is science fiction – about an unnamed narrator who wakes up on a space ship and speaks to the ship's artificially intelligent interface. Like S's play, the piece was authored by M but performed by a machine. In the piece, M plays with our ideas of the digital and the natural by including images of the natural world to offset the stark, black and white appearance of Mac Terminal.

Unlike a film, M's story was fascinating to me because the story itself is sentient. It is new each time. M programmed the story, and each time she begins the story her Mac runs through its code to open documents, reveal dialogue, or show an image. Each time the story runs it is a live performance, though a programmed performance. M gave words life using the intelligence of a familiar machine – she wrote a story in both our language, and the machine's language.

At the end of her story, the narrator discovers they are on a floating seed bank – their mission is to repopulate the earth with vegetation after a climate catastrophe on Earth. The story ends with a flood of images: trees, flowers, grass, fruit. Though we know this vegetation isn't real – they are just pixels on a screen – the effect is powerful. As an audience member, you feel as if you've entered a lush, digital garden. M's sentient story not only played with the binary of human and machine language, it also explored the fraught nature of human/animal/vegetable

relations. Her story speaks conceptually to the hybridity of our world, and Braidotti's urge to think beyond the self to "the non-human or 'earth' others" (48).

HOW MUCH OF WHAT WE MAKE IS OUR OWN?

In his book *If on a Winter's Night a Traveler*, Italo Calvino writes: "How is it possible to defeat not the authors but the functions of the author, the idea that behind each book there is someone who guarantees a truth in that world of ghosts and inventions [...]" (159).

How do we defeat the functions of the author, the conscious and subconscious control that we impart upon our own creations? For Calvino, who was a member of Oulipo and relied on algorithms and technology to frame and create his work, making space for the non-human was a vital part of the creative process. In the intro classroom, experimenting with technology offers the possibility to step up to the edge of the self, and look at creativity in a new way.

We are taught that creating is ours. That by writing, we are making something that is entirely our own. Our thoughts, our feelings, our art. We forget that we speak with borrowed and distilled ideas in a borrowed and distilled language. By cultivating a cyborg voice, students are forced to step up the creative edge of the self. They begin to ask questions like "how much of this is mine?" This play with creativity and identity is not only generative, but also allows students to begin to ponder what it means for a work to leave the self and enter the world. The cyborg voice is collaborative -- students are forced to reconcile material they don't expect and didn't create, and find ways to incorporate it into a work that fits their idea of self. The cyborg voice pushes students toward innovation and contemplation of art as something larger than any one person.

Roland Barthes writes in his well-known essay "The Death of the Author":

...writing is itself this special voice, consisting of several indiscernible voices, and ... literature is precisely the invention of this voice, to which we cannot assign a specific origin: literature is that neuter, that composite, that oblique into which every subject escapes, the trap where all identity is lost, beginning with the very identity of the body that writes." (1)

The places where our ideas emerge, the sentiments we express in writing, the actual language we use to communicate meaning – they are all borrowed. As we foster the voices and interests of our intro to creative writing students, I think it's also valuable to ask them to consider the ways in which "literature is ... the trap where all identity is lost." With this capstone project, I asked students to give up at least a small part of their artistic identity to write in the cyborg voice. And by giving up that identity, if only for a moment, they were forced to think about not only what they gained creatively, but what they lost. Writing in the cyborg voice is about technology, but it is also about the parts of ourselves we lose when we allow our work to leave the safe space of our mind. Our students have done this all semester, with varying degrees of anxiety and pleasure,

when they share their work with their peers. By writing in the cyborg voice, students are asked to think about the primary tool of their trade – language. And it is only fair that we teach our students that language is a tool that does not only belong to them.

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