NEW LITERARY HYBRIDS IN THE AGE OF MULTIMEDIA EXPRESSION
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CROSSING BORDERS, CROSSING GENRES

Edited by

MARCEL CORNIS-POPE
Virginia Commonwealth University
Author-Reader Interactions in the Age of Hypertextual and Multimedia Communication

Marcel Cornis-Pope
Virginia Commonwealth University, USA

The particular importance of network textuality — that is, textuality written, stored, and read on a computer network appears when technology transforms readers into reader-authors or “wreaders,” because any contribution, any change in the web created by one reader, quickly becomes available to other readers. The ability to write within a particular web in turn transforms comments from private notes, such as one takes in margins of one’s own copy of a text, into public statements that, especially within educational settings, have powerfully democratizing effects.

George P. Landow, Hyper / Text / Theory (14)

1. Network Textuality and Multimedia Literacy

Historically, textual study meant writing and reading verbal texts in the medium of print. During the last few decades, however, the concept of “texts” has expanded far beyond the printed word. “Texts” now include web publications, advertising, film, television, graphic media, mixed media texts, and even installations. A truly literate public must be able to write and read in these multiply-defined textual media. Instead of resisting these paradigm changes, literary and cultural studies can participate in defining the new, expanded literacies of the present by providing us with the tools to negotiate a broader range of discourses and texts.

Contemporary literary theory has made an important step in that direction, moving away from the concept of the self-contained work, secure in its boundaries and rhetoric, to the idea of an open-ended text, whose boundaries are continually expanded through the collaborative work of writers and readers. Writers engage in a dynamic, open-ended process of signification, producing multiple textual variants. Readers are challenged to move from linear modes of reading, to multilevel and interactive modes of rereading/rewriting that take into account a text’s complexity as well as the relationship among author, culture, and reader. In George Landow’s coinage, writers and readers are joined to become an interactive “wreader” (Hyper / Text / Theory 14).

These shifts have been reinforced and aided by new hypertext and networked communication technologies that have emerged over the past three decades. Developed by cognitive psychologists and computer programmers, hypertextuality is a nonlinear mode of reading/writing that mimics the way the brain works: associating, cross-referencing, and networking data. As recommended by interactional learning theories, the new electronic technologies allow us to interact with the text more closely, highlighting its associative/dissociative impulses and enriching its structures with layers of annotations, linked intertexts and “winding paths” of signifiers. Electronically-assisted textual production has often resulted in “perceptual and conceptual breakthroughs,” replacing the linear logic of reading and writing with the creative logic of patterning, where the writer and the reader do not discover or recognize a preexisting
pattern; rather, they make patterns possible” (Travis 9). On a more general level, electronic and global networking technologies have mediated a quiet revolution in the humanities and the arts, introducing new forms of scholarly and creative production and reception. A “new paradigm for textual analysis” (Kaufman, “Computers and Cultural Studies” [5 December 1999]: 1) has been made available, with powerful text-based search engines, multiple layers of indexing, and multi-media contextualizations.

In what follows, I will first emphasize the impact of the new hypermedia technologies on creative writing. Writers from various cultures have taken advantage of the current computer-saturated environment by producing hypertexts, hypermedia installations, and animated works that have stretched the very definition of textuality, moving beyond the verbal to the visual, the aural and the kinetic. In the second part of my discussion, I will emphasize the pedagogical advantages of a computer-assisted and collaborative approach to textual interpretation.

2. Composing in Multimedia Environments

One of the most important shifts in textual production has been the emphasis on its “non- or multilinearity, its multivocality, and its inevitable blending of media and modes, particularly its tendency to marry the visual and the verbal” (Landow, Hypertext 3.0 220). Anticipated by late modernist experiments in collage and linking, and the more recent postmodern emphasis on parallel structures and textual dissemination, hypertext poetry and fiction encourages “(1) reader choice, intervention, and empowerment, (2) inclusion of extralinguistic texts (images, motion, sound), (3) complexity of network structure, and (4) degrees of multiplicity and variation in literary elements, such as plot, characterization, setting, and so forth” (Landow, Hypertext 3.0 217). Hypertextual writing calls into question the Aristotelian notions of “fixed sequence,” “definite beginning and ending” and “the conception of unity or wholeness associated with all these other concepts (218–19).

To take one example, Michael Joyce’s pioneering hypertext fiction, afternoon (1987), composed of 539 lexias and 951 links connecting them, is presented to the reader as “work in progress.” Even though this text has a fixed starting point, it develops alternative paths, challenging our expectations of textual coherence, fixed sequence, and especially closure. Joyce’s text juxtaposes lexias in what at first seems to be an arbitrary way but, as in cinematic cross-cutting, these lexias begin to find some relevance together. The “responsibility for closure,” for stopping, belongs to the reader (Landow, Hypertext 3.0 228). But as Michael Joyce warns in Of Two Minds, his text in progress will not make this task easy for the reader:

I wanted, quite simply, to write a novel that would change in successive readings and to make those changing versions according to the connections that I had for some time naturally discovered in the process of writing and that I wanted my readers to share. In my eyes, paragraphs on many different pages could just as well go with paragraphs on many other pages, although with different effects and for different purposes. All that kept me from doing so was the fact that, in print at least, one paragraph inevitably follows another. It seemed to me that if I, as author, could use a computer to move paragraphs about, it wouldn’t take much to let readers do so according to some other plan (Landow, 31).
Unlike *afternoon*, which basically encourages the reader to follow the sequences laid down by the author, Shelley Jackson’s *Patchwork Girl* (1995), written in a version of Storyspace that includes graphic mapping, promotes free browsing while also encouraging readers to piece together a certain motif through a search tool. Jackson's interactive rewriting of Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* (1818) is not only a technological tour de force, but also a subtle commentary on writing and female identity. Her hypertext reverses the story we know from Mary Shelley’s novel, pointing out ironically that no man could have carried in his arms a basket full of stones and the female monster’s body, in order to throw it into the sea, as Shelley’s novel suggests. This story, Jackson’s hypertext implies, was a convenient “cover up” for what really happened: the female monster was set free in order to save her male creator from embarrassment. As Teresa Dobson and Rebecca Luce-Kapler explain further, Jackson’s “satirical feminist reading of *Frankenstein*” proposes a “staged death, a way of liberating both monster and creator [...] from the constraints facing a nineteenth-century woman with young, ailing children, a husband with an overactive imagination, and a somewhat horrifying manuscript that seems to be taking on a life of its own” (270). Subsequently, Jackson’s hypertext reveals the monster’s love affair with her symbolic mother (writer Mary Shelley), her sea voyage to America, and her final settlement in California where she buys an identity intended to hide the fact that she is an assemblage of used body parts.

The emphasis on gender in Jackson’s rewriting is most evident in the thirty-lexia section entitled “Crazy Quilt,” which thematizes the importance of patchwork as a tool of female creativity. Relying as much on cutting as on stitching, this section is composed of various textual snatches, mixing feminist theory, history, literature, autobiography, biography (that of Mary Shelley and of the female monster), high culture and pop culture. As suggested by the symbolic map of the narrative, which represents the segmented body of a female figure, the entire hypernarrative depends on the conflicting operations of cutting and suturing, made visible in the scars of the body-text.

The main character, the female monster that in Mary Shelley’s novel was supposedly destroyed by the misogynistic scientist Victor Frankenstein, challenges the reader to piece her back together:

> I am buried here. You can resurrect me, but only piecemeal. If you want to see the whole, you will have to sew me together yourself. (In time you may find appended a pattern and instructions — for now, you will have to put it together any which way, as the scientist Frankenstein was forced to do.) Like him, you will make use of a machine of mysterious complexity to animate these parts. (n.p.)

We are further reminded that “all bodies are written bodies, all lives pieces of writing” (n. p.). The digital collage-narrative of Shelley Jackson’s (and Mary Shelley’s) female monster must be negotiated by every reader patiently, until the story of Everywoman is created through assemblage, concatenation, and juxtaposition. Yet the emerging text also warns us that, in piecing together the segmented female body, we behave much like Victor Frankenstein, the self-absorbed male scientist enamored with his own skill in recreating nature to his own liking. What saves us from the fate of Victor Frankenstein is the fact that, at best, our interpretive stitching remains provisional, destabilizing the text as much as it constitutes it, emphasizing the cracks and scars
that cannot be covered up. The Patchwork Girl wisely comments on the limitations but also the power of her body composed of stitched together parts:

My real skeleton is made of scars: a web that traverses me in three-dimensions. What holds me together is what marks my dispersal. I am most myself in the gaps between my parts, though if they sailed away in all directions in a grisly regatta there would be nothing left here in my place.

For that reason, though, I am hard to do in. The links can stretch very far before they break, and if I am the queen of dispersal then however far you take my separate parts [...] you only confirm my reign. (n.p.)

*Patchwork Girl* thus challenges the “transcendent ideal of the autonomous,” mainly male creator (Hayles, *My Mother Was a Computer* 146), emphasizing instead the need for cooperation among the original female author (Mary Shelley), her female character (The Monster), and Shelley Jackson as a rewriter. All three are confronted with the monstrous, patched-together materiality of creation. Already Mary Shelley’s original novel called into question the romantic (male) notion of organic, self-contained creation. Shelley Jackson takes this idea to its ultimate consequences, presenting us with a textual quilt which “insists on the collaborative nature of its productions [...] and] the distribution of authorship” (Hayles 161). She also reminds us that, as Elaine Showalter has argued with reference to the process and metaphor of female quilting, “the meaning of the quilt, its special symbolism, resides in the individual piece, the fragment that recalls a costume and a memory” (Showalter 230).

Beginning in the 1990s, hypertextuality became more elaborate, involving complicated self-generating and auto-destructive strategies, as in William Gibson’s memory performance poem, *Agrippa*. In *Agrippa* the traditional book-bound text is scrambled, gutted out, and, in an illegible code, replaced with a recording embedded in the gutted book, which self-destructs as we listen to it. Other more recent works take the mix of media even further, overlapping image, text, sound and motion. I will briefly illustrate this using the example of the digital work produced for the web by Alan Bigelow. As his own article at the beginning of Part Four in the present volume makes clear, Bigelow has created poems and stories in Flash, mixing text (often reduced to a minimum) with images, audio, video, and other electronic components. These stories are experienced primarily as events on the web or in gallery installations.

Originally a fiction writer in traditional text genres, Alan Bigelow started working in Flash in 2000. His digital work, installations, and conversations concerning this work have been featured on his own website as well as on the websites of major centers of electronic art (Turbulence.org, Rhizome.org, Los Angeles Center for Digital Arts, FreeWaves.org, Media-N: Journal of the New Media Caucus, E-Poetry 2007, Art Tech Media, JavaMuseum.org, Electrofringe, chico.art.net, etc.). His own teaching has extended from the classroom at Medaille College in Buffalo, New York, to online teaching in Creative Writing and New Media at De Montfort University in Leicester, UK.

One of his characteristic works, MyNovel.org (2006), takes six classic novels (*Moby-Dick*, *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, *The Scarlet Letter*, *Lolita*, 1984, and *On The Road*) and compresses them into four sentences each. These four-sentence novels play against a shifting series of Flash background movies. At any point, if readers wish to, they can write their own short narratives by using the tools included on the site. MyNovel.org challenges our assumptions about traditional
genre distinctions, mixing novel, short story, and poetry, while also forcing the literary text off the static page and merging it with other art forms. Writing becomes an event that redefines itself continually, while also drawing on the reader/viewer's own creativity.

Alan Bigelow’s own website contains further animated work based, according to the author’s Work Statement, on the following three premises:

1) [T]he stories should be multimedia events; 2) they should be easy to navigate, and 3) they should be interactive. In addition to navigating through the stories — and triggering certain Flash events — users can also write into some of these narratives, giving them the opportunity to contribute to the stories’ creation and continued growth.

The heuristic and experiential rewards of such examples of electronic and multimedia writing may not be immediately apparent. Though more authentically dialogic than printed narratives, hypertext and hypermedia fiction inevitably put limitations on interactive creativity and explorativeness. We could, in fact, agree with Molly Travis that a printed text can provide a well-trained reader with the experience of a “nearly endless narrative” more easily than an electronic hypertext, where the complicated logistic of navigating multipaths and the pressure of “randomness and expansiveness might come to feel as oppressive [to readers] as linearity and closure did for modern and postmodern writers” (108). However, a hypertext can clearly teach even a less adept reader to read in a multiplex, associationist way, navigating alternative paths through a text. Hypertextual and virtual reality technologies also enhance the social nature of reading and writing, enabling more people to interact than ever before. At present there are more than a hundred million multi-page websites, which makes this new electronic marketplace relatively unpredictable. Like any other marketplace, it is not entirely free, but increasingly controlled by corporative, governmental, and group interests. As Cynthia L. Selfe and Richard J. Selfe, Jr., have argued, on the web

the values of our culture — ideological, political, economic, educational — are mapped both implicitly and explicitly, constituting a complex set of material relations among culture, technology, and technology users. [S]uch maps are never ideologically innocent or inert […] they order the virtual world according to a certain set of historical and social values that make up our culture. [I]t is important to identify the cultural information passed along in maps of computer interfaces […] because this information can serve to reproduce […] the asymmetrical power relations that […] have shaped the educational system. (485)

Therefore, the interactive-critical skills of those who create and navigate work on the Internet are more necessary than ever.

3. Reading: From Text Interpretation to Critical Reformulation

Contemporary critical theories have challenged the traditional plot of interpretation, whose “worry” and “torment,” as Henry James put it, has been to unveil an “interesting and remunerative [authorial] secret, imperfect as it is” (The Complete Notebooks 138). Questioning the quest-for-meaning paradigm in literary interpretation, these theories encourage readers to intervene actively in the process of meaning-making through complex operations of intersubjective
negotiation (reader response), rhetorical problematization (deconstruction), sociocultural re-formulation (feminism, new historicism), and cross-cultural translation (postcolonial/multicultural criticism). Critical reading becomes “a dynamic process of recreation” (Iser, “The Reading Process” 279) which allows readers to formulate “alien” thoughts and perspectives but also to question existing perspectives and norms (Iser, The Act of Reading 147). In addition to freeing readers’ imaginations, this critical practice also engages readers more meaningfully with their culture’s texts and “web of relations,” encouraging them to carry their reading/writing strategies “over into the public sphere” in order to reformulate “their sociocultural positioning” (Di Leo and Moraru 242).1

The two competing paradigms of critical reading — one text-centered, the other transactive and reformulative — seem at first glance separated by a profound disagreement. The first position holds that “there is a meaning in a text, ‘put in’ by a writer, which has to be ‘fished out’ by the reader/hearer/critic/analyst in order for the interpretive process to take place” (Birch 21). The opposite position proposes to focus on how texts articulate, rather than what they mean, and on interpretation as a construction of meaning, a socially-grounded practice of cultural exchange. Each perspective is significant in the broader critical dynamic. Recent critical pedagogy has managed to integrate aspects of both perspectives, allowing us to move beyond the traditional opposition between an “objectivist,” text-based, and a “subjectivist,” interactive concept of signification. Readers are invited to explore the relationship between text, culture, author and reader, making their interpretations more responsive to the conflicting cultural experiences brought into contact. They are also urged to intervene actively in the process of meaning making, “reconfiguring” the world of the text from alternative points of view. Interpretation becomes an act of “rewriting,” teasing out new meanings from the culture and the text.

In my own work (see Hermeneutic Desire and Critical Rewriting, chaps. 1, 6–8; also “Hypertextual and Networked Communication in Undergraduate Literature Classes” and “The Rereading/Rewriting Process,” the latter coauthored with Ann Woodlief), I have recommended a re-creative model of literary interpretation based on strategies of rereading/rewriting. This approach, I have argued, can benefit readers in several ways: a) freeing them from the “quest-for-meaning” paradigm (or mere textual consumption) and channeling their interpretive abilities into more active modes of critical analysis and construction; and, b) enabling readers to examine and correct their own reading habits and assumptions. Reading and writing become inseparable in this perspective, part of a critical dialectic that both interprets and reperforms the text.

In most theoretical models of critical reading, the transition from a naturalized, early response to a self-conscious critical interpretation requires a stage of rereading. The activities of rereading described by Roland Barthes, Wolfgang Iser, Michael Riffaterre, Paul Ricoeur, or more recently by Thomas M. Leitch and Matei Calinescu, refocus the reader’s attention on the text’s ideology, usually missed in the first reading. When re-reading we are “thrown into language,
into its flow and surprises,” compelled to recognize the role that language and culture play in the text (Kaufer and Waller 83). Ideally, rereading should lead to (re)writing, to a self-conscious critical performance that will negotiate the text’s experiential and cultural propositions in relation to those of the reader.

Networked, hypertextual electronic environments offer us additional opportunities to perform these interrelated operations as readers in a nonlinear field, bridging reading with writing, and response with interpretation. In the typical literature class I have taught over the past twenty-five years, students met in a networked computer lab to read, write, and converse mostly electronically, achieving a level of interaction that cannot be reproduced in a traditional classroom. Our tools for navigating the world of “hypertrails” were first a Window-based hypertexting program, GUIDE, and StorySpace; more recently we have used the Internet, with Netscape Composer and XML. Our tools for electronic interaction are discussion forums such as those provided originally by W. W. Norton’s CONNECT program and more recently by Blackboard. These electronic forums allow the literature class to function as an interactive interpretive community, exchanging interpretations online that are individually persuasive and collectively aware of the larger conventions at work.

The electronic technologies encourage students to read in a multisequential and exploratory fashion, producing “hypertextual” criticism (annotating, cross-referencing, and linking texts), and communicating among themselves throughout the reading and writing process. The teacher interacts with her/his students not as an “authoritative interpreter” but rather as a facilitator who can deliver useful information and respond as one member of this community of readers. By segmenting the critical process into discrete steps (experiential first readings, reflexive rereading, critical analysis, and self-analysis), students are made aware of their choices and helped, through carefully designed reading and writing protocols, to readjust their interpretive approaches after each stage.

As a rule, a first reading is emotional, selective, and generally uncritical. The reading process relies heavily on sequential and holistic procedures, on “naturalization” (Jonathan Culler), “consistency-building” (Wolfgang Iser, The Act of Reading 122–30), “selective attention” (Louise M. Rosenblatt). We read for closure and coherence, singling out helpful clues and eliminating problematic ones, and we are disappointed when a text resists our synthesis. My procedure during this early stage of interpretation is to slow down and disrupt the linear progress of first reading through analytic questionnaires and interpretive tasks. Students are introduced to the authoring mode of hypertext programs like GUIDE, StorySpace, or Netscape Composer, and asked to annotate the text as they are reading it, embedding definitions, comments and questions in note buttons. The electronic annotation of the text is followed by an electronic discussion in Blackboard, in which students exchange and fine-tune their first reading responses.

A more systematic exploration of the cultural and rhetorical aspects of a text can only be achieved through rereading. Rereading allows us to retrace and analyze our first reading responses, relating them back to the text’s prompts, but also to the assumptions, experiences and biases that we bring to the text. At its best, re-reading is a form of re-writing, teasing out new implications, emphasizing both “otherness” and self-discovery in reading, connecting the text under discussion with other texts and experiences. Hypertextual technology is very helpful in this regard, enabling students to move more easily from a linear first reading to a multisequential
exploration of a text. Students are presented with a hypertext version of the literary work prepared by previous classes, which includes thematic and lexical annotations, reference links to other literary and historical texts, and internal “trails” that connect images, phrases or themes, offering alternative reading trajectories through the work. For example, the hypertext of T. S. Eliot’s “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock” contains interrogative annotations, external links to Eliot’s cultural references, and a number of internal “trails” that map the motifs of erotic longing, sickness, drowning, and (self-)questioning. By using the mouse, students control the order of reading, creating their own interpretive pathways through the hypertext’s annotations and associated materials.

It has been my experience that students welcome the opportunity to move from reading hypertext, which constrains their freedom of movement among already established paths, to constructing hypertext, which “permits the reader to structurally alter the text,” engaging “in creative cybernetic interactivity” (Travis 101, 103). Thus, after they become acquainted with the authoring techniques of different hypertexting programs, students are asked to create their own hypertextual trails during rereading, stringing together theme words and patterns of images, and prefacing them with an annotation that calls attention to the significance of that particular strand. I also invite students to bring their own “intertexts” (brief sections of relevant works written by the same or related authors), and link them to the text they are rereading. These intertexts expand the reading frame, throwing a thought-provoking light on the story or poem under examination.

The interactive critical pedagogy I have been describing should offer students ample opportunity to move from reading to writing, and from understanding to reformulation, so as to experience a stronger mode of cultural construction. In the process, students are encouraged to engage with the text through a multilevel approach, gaining access to the rich internal linkages that a literary text develops and connecting them further to relevant “intertexts” (biographical, historical, narrative). They are taught, in other words, to perform “hypertextual criticism.” This type of criticism shares the advantages of hypertextuality: multilinear or networked organization, open-endedness, greater inclusion of intertextual information, interactive authorship, etc. More importantly, hypertextual interpretation is a form of “participatory” criticism, bridging reading with writing, response with interpretation, questioning with argument. In that sense, hypertextual criticism has been anticipated by a number of directions in poststructuralist theory, from Jacques Derrida’s elaborate “notes” and parallel commentaries, to the mixed genre criticism (autobiography, interpretation, and narrative) practiced by feminist critics like Julia Kristeva, Hélène Cixous, or Adrienne Rich. It also resembles the hybrid genre of “critifiction” developed by postmodern writers like Robert Coover, Raymond Federman, Grace Paley, and Joanna Russ, who question the traditional boundaries between text and its interpretation, criticism and fiction.

However awkward or complex, hypertextual and interactive technologies allow students to experience the three modes of textualization described by Robert Scholes (24), blending “text-within-text,” “text-upon-text,” and “text-against-text” in complex critical productions that satisfy visually as well as intellectually.
4. Final Assessment

Computer technologies such as hypertext reading/writing and networked communication have introduced an interactive component into the writing and interpretation of literature, giving authors and readers a better sense of the configurational, multileveled nature of literature. However, before we can derive the intended benefits from these new technologies, we need to interrogate their limitations. As long as these technologies are used to ask “fairly traditional questions of traditional texts” (Olsen 312), they will deliver modest results. Rather than use these electronic technologies to reinforce old habits of reading and writing, we should take full advantage of the fact that they can provide us with an interactive space where links to others and otherness can occur. One of our urgent tasks is to integrate literature into the global informational environment, where it can function as an imaginative partner teaching its interpretive competencies to other components of the media landscape. The global informational environment will be significantly enriched if we apply to it the competencies of creative authorship, critical rereading and rewriting, and cultural reformulation.