

## ISSUE NO. 8

# Rule-guided Expression: Gender Dissent across Mediated Literary Works

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This paper is concerned with the examination of rule-guided cultural and thematic battles enacted by women writers in two historical moments—the late nineteenth- and early twenty-first centuries—against the dominant cultural institutions of their time. Such battles, evaluated in the Anglophone world of letters at large, bring to light women’s often inconspicuous strategies for legislating new mechanisms of written expression within the established authoring and reading practices of their times. The recurring patterns we detect in these strategies offer a point of departure to explore continuities connecting the woman’s right to productive labor movement in the nineteenth-century with woman’s right to control their own digital labor in the twenty-first century—two moments in time when varying feminist discourses were converging around the conceptualization of “new woman.”<sup>[1]</sup> Both the mobility-limited late nineteenth century society and the apparently digitally-democratized twenty-first century seem to call for female writing subjects, who are often seen at the margins of the “social factory,”<sup>[2]</sup> to intervene through specific literary acts of disturbance. Such acts of disturbance, when closely analyzed, can be seen as both exposing and altering the rule-based systems in which these authors are confrontationally embedded. In assessing how the tensions generated by an increasingly mechanized, industrialized, electronic, and software-automated trajectory over the last centuries are reflected in literary expression by select female writers, we discovered that the acts of literary subversions enacted by these women share many a commonality when it comes to their basic operative functioning. First, they usually unfold by means of a three-piece set of features that we illustrate in our close readings of the specific works we discuss. Second, they seem to occur in historical periods characterized by rapid modernizing changes marked by the appearance of technological networks. Third, these acts can be most clearly seen as similar once we look at them from, as it were, a typological perspective:<sup>[3]</sup> what nineteenth-century print authors envisioned for the heroines and female characters of their novels seems to be eventually re-enacted and transposed into concrete authorial practices by female writers operating in born-digital environments. Without claiming such a tendency to work as a fundamental prerogative of *all* women’s writing or without contending that it constitutes an ongoing inclination reaching well beyond the epochs we are considering, the mere existence of the recurring structures we uncover in this paper proves both intriguingly meaningful and undoubtedly

promising in terms of further scholarly interrogation on the issue of gender-based forms of expression in the literary field.

## Editorial (N)etiquette and its Margins

Recent academic discussions about users of digital devices and the various forms of their conscious intervention in the transformation process operated by digital technologies have addressed the most variegated set of issues. Scholarly contributions on the subject of how we can act as fully empowered citizens of the digital age have ranged from so-called “hacktivism” and “tactical” use of media,<sup>[4]</sup> to more intuitive issues raised by the computerization of bureaucratic systems, the problem of the digital divide, or the need for theoretical and cultural reflections about a newly emerging digital aesthetics. As one of the major scholars who tried to outline a helpful matrix for such a complex web of issues, Alexander Galloway in *Protocol: How Control Exists After Decentralization* offers both a concrete and metaphorical model of our digital condition. He identifies such a condition as the outcome of a crucial interplay among three elements: a theoretical tool offered by critical theory such as the concept of the *network* (or Deleuze and Guattari’s rhizome), a hardware technology such as the digital *computer*, and a “management style” that he characterizes as *protocol*. Of these three elements, Galloway considers protocol as the truly crucial one. In Galloway’s view, it is easy to be captivated by the apparent liberating power of both the non-hierarchical structure of the network or by the freedom to assemble pieces of hardware that are increasingly responding to our subjective needs as individual computer users. It is even easier, however, to forget the incredibly constraining power exerted by the set of rules on which these two entities – software and hardware – depend for their functioning.<sup>[5]</sup> Such a pre-existing set of rules is precisely what is defined as *protocol*. Galloway describes this last concept in computing terms as “the set of recommendations and rules that outline specific technical standards” (6) but he also considers its etymological implications when he extends it to “any introductory paper summarizing the key points of a diplomatic agreement or treaty” (7). Most importantly, he treats the persistence of protocological control as a form of agency affecting “the functioning of bodies within social space” (12) and as spawning “counter-protocological forces” (13). It is fairly evident how, from this point of view, any producer of textual artifacts in a social space, is always subject to the acceptance of some kind of *protocol*. Just like digital writers today are coerced by the *http* or *ftp* modalities of files transfer (regardless of their file’s creative contents), nineteenth-century female authors were constrained by (often male-dominated) editorial bodies that would implicitly impose pre-existing rules and

procedures for their actual possibilities of expression, especially in terms of literary genres or narrative structures.

In our age of information and media technology, where print and digital textuality coexist, John Cayley, like other twenty-first-century writers, has observed that

*the institutions that dominate literature and language arts are editorial bodies (universities, publishers, the world of letters) and for these authorities, the textual event is still ultimately determined by a simple test: ‘can it be printed?’ In recent years, this formulation may have been slightly modified (by the Web in particular) to ‘can it be printed out?’ (324)*

If we extend Cayley’s primary concern for media affordances in the above passage to the larger dynamics that have been regulating the social mechanism of published literature in the Anglophone literary world in the last two centuries, we can recognize some of the tests that have been regularly administered by the editorial world and imposed on writers who often operated at its margins. Publishers have, for example, often shown a persistent tendency to reabsorb problems that gender might have caused to their audience by amending gender-based differences in various historical periods. This was, of course, true for many early women writers who used male pseudonyms, who catered to the demands of the literary marketplace, and/or whose authorial-authenticity was often questioned; see, for example, Mary Ann Evans (George Eliot) publishing under a male pseudonym or Phillis Wheatley subjected to a disturbing and concrete instantiation of the above publishing test.<sup>[6]</sup>

A late nineteenth-century example related to Caley’s “simple test” is similarly found in Elizabeth Stuart Phelps who, like other late nineteenth-century women writers, chose to rewrite the marriage-plot novel and end the novel with the female protagonist choosing career over marriage. Writing under her own name, Phelps in her novel *The Silent Partner* (1871) suggests that middle- and upper-class white woman use their charitable work as a sort of apprenticeship to be parlayed into participation in the workforce as businesswomen. Though her advice may have been practically sound, public reception of the ideology behind her message indicates the readership’s response to her suggestions. An 1871 book review by *The New York Times* responds to Phelps’s suggestion of a middle-class businesswoman:

*Breaking all other engagements of her former life, [the main female character Perley] devotes herself to this work [in the business world]. With this extremely unsatisfactory and discouraging conclusion the story closes. The example of the*

*Silent Partner is one that would be followed by few, and after the vivid and pathetic statement of so many painful facts, something more hopeful is looked for.*  
(2)

Phelps's admonishment for middle-class women to take on an active role in the economy pushes the limits of traditional gender roles as constructed by society and its principles of gentility. Not only is Perley's devotion to her work in the public realm deemed "extremely unsatisfactory," but, the reviewer vows, hers is a model that will be "followed by few."

As different historical periods have been characterized by remarkable societal transformations in relation to the increasing developments of technological networks, we might assume that editorial bodies have imposed from time to time updated tests and updated forms of control on the writers of their time. Scholars such as David Nye interpret each network – the mail network, the railway network, the telegraph network, the telephone network, up to the contemporary television and computer networks – as a "marker of difference," i.e. as a cultural "refresh," to use computing jargon, that updated the dynamics originating in the societal and economic structure of the nineteenth century. An understanding of the role of women writers and their margin of interventions within the network constituted by the modern world of letters can therefore hardly do without an understanding of such dynamics in the late nineteenth-century – a historical period in which modernity is usually seen as beginning to shape the relation between cultural expression and labor along identity-based concerns. As Kevin Kenny points out in a survey of historical scholarly perspectives on labor in the nineteenth century, "the complexity of nineteenth-century American labor history is greatly magnified once the analysis is pushed beyond white male labor to include women, African Americans and various other ethnic and racial groups" (173). Which is to say that identity-based concerns about labor and the forms of representation through which these issues found expression are of crucial importance to understanding women's writing strategies along a trajectory that brings us to the subjective cultural and technical work as it relates to postindustrial economy. For scholars like Tiziana Terranova, the marker of difference of our specific age, i.e. the appearance of the internet network, does not represent an event that should implicitly disrupt or radically change our analyses of the relationship between identity, labor, and creative practices. As she remarks, "it is fundamental to move beyond the notion that cyberspace is about escaping reality in order to understand how the reality of the Internet is deeply connected to the development of late postindustrial societies as a whole" (100). In other words, rather than a sort of unprecedented parallel reality in need of new specific

models of analysis, so-called cyberspace is to be intended rather as a setting that mirrors the complexity of the interplay between gender, race, and the discourses about labor. As a result, it becomes crucial to assess in what social and cultural zones female literary authors felt confident in counter-operating against the norms that formed the protocological literary control in each of the two centuries. We begin then with a set of nineteenth-century women writers who, in taking as the subject of their fiction the relationship between women's public labor and middle-class status, challenged editorial protocol and defied genre conventions of the time.

## Nineteenth-Century Freedom from Editorial Protocol and Genre Convention

Although women writers have long dealt with the relationship between women and work, the literature published between 1870 and 1890 saw a new variation on the theme of women's work emerge.<sup>[7]</sup> While remnants of domestic fiction abound in the literature of the period, when it came to the work undertaken by the female protagonists, the themes decidedly did not follow in the tradition of domestic fiction. This subgenre, which this paper calls women's career fiction—literature that explored the relationship between women, career, and class—attempted to answer the “woman question” of the period. In an article from the December 1880 issue of *The Atlantic Monthly*, reformer and writer Kate Gannett Wells contemplates what to make of contemporary women at the intersection of professional work and literature:

*What is this curious product of today, the American girl or woman? Does the heroine of any American novel fitly stand as a type of what she is? And, furthermore, is it possible for any novel, within the next fifty years, truly to depict her as a finality, when she is still emerging from new conditions in a comparatively old civilization, when she doesn't not yet understand herself, and when her actions are often the awkward results of motives, complex in their character, unconsciously to herself? (818)*

The female protagonists of women's career fiction in the late nineteenth-century were indeed “emerging” and beginning to know themselves. This was seen in novels such as *The Silent Partner* (1871) and *Doctor Zay* (1882) by Elizabeth Stuart Phelps, *Work: A Story of Experience* (1873) by Louisa May Alcott, *Fettered for Life, or, Lord and Master: A Story of To-day* (1874) by Lillie Devereux Blake, *The Country Doctor* (1884) by Sarah Orne Jewett as well as in short stories such as Louise Stockton's *Sylvia's Suitors* (1880), D. A. Shepherd's *Two Girls that Tried Farming* (1875), Julie K. Wetherill's *Not Mute, but Inglorious* (1884), Rose Terry Cooke's *Mrs. Flint's Married Experience*

([http://digital.library.cornell.edu.lp.hscl.ufl.edu/cgi/t/text/pageviewer-idx?](http://digital.library.cornell.edu.lp.hscl.ufl.edu/cgi/t/text/pageviewer-idx?c=harp;cc=harp;rgn=full%20text;idno=harp0062-1;didno=harp0062-1;view=image;seq=0089;node=harp0062-1%3A12)

c=harp;cc=harp;rgn=full%20text;idno=harp0062-1;didno=harp0062-1;view=image;seq=0089;node=harp0062-1%3A12) (1880) and Kate Chopin's *Wiser than a God* (1889), poetry including Emily Dickinson's "She rose to His Requirement" (732), Lucy Larcom's "An Idyl Work" (1875), and Charlotte Perkins Gilman's "Wedded Bliss" (1893) and non-fiction essays like Wells' and others' noted in this section. And though many would agree that Wells' prediction of "fifty years" falls short — women's print literature, to this day, still grapples with what it means to be a career woman and, as we will see, women's born-digital literature often addresses labor as the subject material for the works they produce — the literature of the time made enormous strides in generating the dialogue that still exists today.

This section outlines these strides by marking the three major elements of the plot that are particular to this set of texts. These three elements can be found across women's career fiction of the 1870s and 1880s and, as this paper argues, ultimately helped transition the female protagonists away from the True Woman toward the New Woman figure, the eventual product of these counter-protocological attempts. Ranging from discrete insinuations to explicit admonishments, these elements include, first, a moment in which a character declares her intent to live an economically independent, self-determined life—a life of personal freedom. This often involves the character's removal of self from her everyday world. This removal can be partial or total, physical, mental, or imaginary, but some separation of the heroine from her usual world must occur. An example of this is seen in Louisa May Alcott's novel *Work*. When Alcott opened her novel with the lines: "Aunt Betsey, there's going to be a new Declaration of Independence"(5), it was as if her protagonist Christie Devon, in announcing that she was leaving the home to engage in paid work, was announcing for an entire generation of writers that times were changing. Variations on this removal include leaving the home, rejecting a romantic or familial relationship that confines her to a one-dimensional duty such as fiancé, wife, mother, or daughter, beginning a new line of employment, and even just setting her mind to making a change in her life. The removal of the heroine from her typical, everyday life is essential to this genre because it helps to focus her attention on the features of identity, selfhood, and symbolic meanings that have contributed to her understanding of her place in society as well as the values, morals, and hopes with which she wishes to replace them. It is through this attention that she moves beyond her station at the opening of the novel and transcends her lot in life. This ceremonial detachment from a previous selfhood marks a crucial distinction among the works that make up women's career fiction; it tells the reader

that the female protagonist is about to participate in something extremely important and also, because of the social circumstances that the readers were undoubtedly familiar with, challenging.

The second major element of the plot is a desire for intellectual work in traditionally male professions. These characters aspire to engage in professional careers that require skills beyond the nurturing nature of a maternal figure. These story lines touch on, to varying degrees, women's careers as doctors, entrepreneurs, journalists, businesswomen, and lawyers. Such is the case of Perley Kelso in Phelps' *The Silent Partner*. Upon her father's death, the young heiress approaches Mr. Hayle, her father's business partner, intent to claim her stake in Hayle and Kelso Mills and devote herself to a career:

*'Whatever responsibilities,' said Perley, with a slight twitch of annoyance between her eyes, and speaking still to the elder gentleman, — 'whatever responsibilities rest upon me, as sole heir to my father's property, I am anxious to fulfill in person. Whatever connection I have with the Hayle and Kelso Mills, I am anxious, I am exceedingly anxious, to meet in person. And I thought,' added the young lady, innocently, 'that the simplest way would be for me to become a partner.'* (57)

More important than transgressing gender boundaries and simply stepping into professions that were considered traditionally male, the careers that these heroines undertake are meaningful, self-fulfilling, intellectual, and passion-filled. These works, like *The Silent Partner*, narrate the relationship between self-authorization and professional work that Wells saw taking hold around her at the time. She commented:

*Professional women have found that, however dear the home is, they can exist without it. ... The simple fact is that women have found that they can have occupation, respectability, and even dignity disconnected from the home. The tendency is that in the discovery of this possibility they are... acquiring more of self.* (819)

Wells' assessment of women of the time parallels the genre's first two major elements of the plot: separation from a former life (typically, disassociation from the home) and the inclination to develop more of a self through professional work. Particularly interesting in Wells' assessment is not just her commentary that women have discovered that "they can exist without [the home]" or that women have found that they can have "occupation, respectability, and even dignity" apart from the home, but the idea that Wells finds each of these to be intricately connected with one another—that the links

between occupation, selfhood, and life beyond the home are not arbitrary or random, but significant, suggestive, and worthy of attention.

The third and perhaps most significant feature of this subgenre is the female protagonist's conscientious choice to work despite an economically secure position. The idea of white, middle-class women leaving the home to work was one that was increasingly on the minds of an uneasy readership. Leaving the home not only meant (in many cases) financial instability for these characters, but it also threatened gender hierarchies and class order. The question of how to retain one's gentility and pursue a self-determined path through professional work became a hotly debated topic of the day. In her 1882 book *Money-Making for Ladies*, Ella Rodman Church raises the issue:

*What, then, shall Ysolte do? Her case is undoubtedly hard. She lacks a new silk dress, means to purchase Christmas presents, and various comforts and belongings of civilized life; but hope may perhaps be found for her and for the rest of that numerous class who, while not obliged to enter the ranks of recognized workingwomen, yet feel the need of increasing a limited income. How a lady can make money and not lose social caste is a question of absorbing interest, but one that is seldom answered satisfactorily. (112)*

And in the June 1880 issue of *Harper's New Monthly Magazine*, William H. Rideing in a piece entitled "Working-Women in New York" distinguishes between three different classes of workingwomen within the first page of his article:

*There are thousands of working-girls in New York who dress and live well, who have aptitude, dexterity, intelligence, and experience. It is they ... who, as designers and decorators, find positions of varied usefulness; and who, in retouching photographs, dress-making, and doing various work requiring facility and taste, command fair salaries. There is another class, poorer but still capable of earning a sum sufficient for decent board and clothing—the workers on upholstery, fringes, feathers, and millinery goods. But there are many more thousands in the city with no special ability and no special value, who toil, and blind themselves, and wear themselves to death, for an unimaginable, incredible pittance....(25)*

While the main purpose of his article is to support and promote the Workingwoman's Protective Union, a society established to promote the interests of women who obtain a livelihood by other employments than household service, Rideing acknowledges the correlation between class status and the type of work a woman undertakes. Acutely aware of this tension between women, work, and class status, the late nineteenth-



century women writers discussed here valorized work for their heroines; they argued that work should be a part of middle-class status, not a detractor from it.

In the midst of debate over women's public work, these writers argued that middle- and upper-class protagonists, in spite of their economically-secure positions, needed to make the conscientious choice to engage in paid work and to pursue professional careers. Unsatisfied with the current state of women's professional careers, (for example, Ella Rodman Church advises her readers that "Teaching...has always been a popular employment with the educated, chiefly because it is one of the few employments in which a lady may openly engage without the least compromise of her social standing" (116)), they push their protagonists into a wider range of occupations, such as, in the case of Laura Stanley in Lillie Devereux Blake's *Fettered for Life*, the fine arts. When asked how she ended up in New York City, Laura replies, "I came because I wanted to earn my own living, and I thought I could do it better here than anywhere else" (20-21). As we learn Laura's backstory, we come to understand that despite being the daughter of a wealthy farmer and being educated at Essex, an esteemed school for women, Laura has moved to New York to pursue her professional dream of becoming the country's first truly "great woman-painter" (64). Popular women writers were convinced of the benefits of professional careers for women: meaningful work undertaken by their protagonists allowed these writers to challenge traditional notions of womanhood, debunk the myth of companionate marriage, question traditional notions of American masculinity, explore institutional sexism (legal, political, economic, and cultural), and influence American culture. These popular women writers—who were, in many ways, cultural arbiters of their time—sought to reconfigure notions of class status by incorporating work in ways that challenged genre conventions and editorial protocol.

## Countering Technological Protocols via Digital Literature

The potentially disruptive role the above American women writers have ascribed to imagination when used to defy thematic conventions in their time can today be found operating on a much larger global scale in some of the twenty-first century technology-based experimental writing produced by female authors in the field of electronic literature. Although the United States has played a major role in the construction of our visions of modernity by means of a mass-produced imagery, set in motion by the increased circulation of goods, people, and ideas across transcontinental routes, the contemporary "electronic elsewheres"<sup>[8]</sup> of cloud computing, augmented realities, and

globally hyper-linked databases have in recent times extended well beyond its geographical and cultural boundaries. While many of the top computer manufacturers (Dell, IBM, Hewlett-Packard, Apple) are still located in the United States, the advent of digital technology and networked instantaneous communication today functions as a so-called imagery relay that makes the American environment appear less and less as a natural or neutral setting for electronic forms of expression. As Arjun Appadurai explains in “Disjuncture and Difference in the Global Cultural Economy,”

*the United States is no longer the puppeteer of a world system of images, but is only one node of a complex transnational construction of imaginary landscapes. The world we live in today is characterized by a new role for the imagination in social life. [...] The image, the imagined, the imaginary – these are all terms which direct us to something critical and new in global cultural processes: the imagination as a social practice. (4-5)*

Far from the Coleridge-ian philosophical separation between fantasy and imagination, both strictly related to authors’ *poesis* function in the purely textual dimension, imagination becomes, in Appadurai’s terms, a form of labor to be intended both as “culturally organized practice” and as “a form of negotiation between sites of agency (‘individuals’) and globally defined fields of possibility” (5). In envisioning the routes of such processes of imagination-based social practices moving from the ideally American radiating center, Dutch e-literature author Annie Abrahams, who has been living in France since 1987, and Australian codework poet Mary-Anne Breeze (also known as Mez) can be seen as modern Anglophone literary catalysts of the instances of the previously discussed nineteenth-century American writers such as Alcott, Phelps, Blake, and Jewett in a world increasingly imposing norms and standards both in digital labor and language-based technological expressions. Our brief analysis of works such as Abrahams’s *Separation/Séparation* or Mez’s *\_cross.ova.ing 4rm.blog.2.log 07/08* highlights how female electronic writing seems both to update the abovementioned three elements detected in the women’s career literature and translate them into the pragmatic dimension of digitally-mediated language expression.

Available both in English and French version, *Separation/Séparation* was written, in Annie Abrahams’s words, “during a stay in the hospital in 2001. Computer workers often neglect their bodies and by doing so they risk the development of what is called “Repetitive Strain Injury”<sup>[9]</sup> (RSI). Abrahams composes *Separation/Séparation*, that is, precisely to address the possible insurgence of musculoskeletal problems due to fast repetitive movements engendered by computer labor. As a consequence, the text

unfolds according to the underlying idea that it would have to be read at a very slow pace – a pace that, when not respected, collapses the text itself. When such a textual accident occurs, the resulting textual outcome forces the reader to take a break and to perform a set of exercises as physical penitence.<sup>[10]</sup> These exercises *de facto* interrupt the reader from any action upon the written surface of *Separation/Séparation's* literary text and thus they adequately protect her against RSI. It is interesting to note how Abrahams's imagination works in the direction of building a specific *utterance* by means of a code-based literary work. We can see such specific utterance as concerned with a fundamental urge toward change. The work, that is, encourages readers to change their *attitude* towards the machine and, consequently, their relation to (the) work itself. Abrahams's literary work ultimately urges readers to change their relation to their own body as they usually perform *reading* at their computer desks.

Such behavioral change is not just simply mediated *by* the work but gets actually re-directed towards the digital literary artifact itself in terms of *reading* practice. Readers have to click slowly in order to *read* the work itself. The poetics animating Abrahams's work is, in other words, activated by the actual performance of a different way of reading: being patient and/or *identifying with* the patient allow the reading experience of the text. An important consequence is that Abrahams's e-literature piece does not produce behavioral change as a (post-reading) effect – as a text produced within the technology of print would assume – but encourages behavioral change as *part of* its very aesthetic fruition (i.e., along the reading). Annie Abrahams' work is, in other words, defining rules for human behaviour, i.e. counter-protocological rules that question the ones established by our editorial bodies (and the community of letters at large) for regulating what counts as human reading.

A similar operation is the one carried out by Mez in her codework piece *\_cross.ova.ing 4rm.blog.2.log 07/08 XXtracts*. The term *codework* (coined by Alan Sondheim in 2001) identifies a variety of artistic practices by an international community of “writers and programmer-artists” whose digital works, according to Florian Cramer, “reflect the intrinsic textuality of the computer.”<sup>[11]</sup> As Rita Raley observes,

*Broadly, codework makes exterior the interior workings of the computer. One formal purpose is to bring the function and code of the computer to a kind of visibility. That is, to illuminate the many layers of code – the tower of programming languages that underlies the representation of natural languages on the screen. For all of the differences among particular instances or events of codework, they all incorporate elements of code, whether executable or not. Code*

*appears in the text, then, in whole or in part, in the form of a functioning script, an operator, and/or a static symbol. (n.p.)*

As we can easily derive from these commentaries, the practice of codework has generated a complex debate on the role of code in language and literary art. The issue is, of course, part of a larger debate on the role of materiality<sup>[12]</sup> in poetic language and on the tradition of experimentations that focused on making it *visible*.

Many a critic sees codework precisely as reaction to the widespread assumption that code is inherently and primarily *functional*. As a result, they treat codework as an opportunity to claim code as a proper signifying system that allows for expressive and semantic practices.<sup>[13]</sup> In making “exterior the interior workings of the computer,” as Rita Raley observes in the passage quoted above, codework poetry seems therefore to co-opt informatics specialized languages into the larger issue of expressive possibilities of poetic signification as such. Since poetry is usually regarded as a literary form in which language is used for its evocative qualities to enrich its basic meaning, analysis of codework frequently has often paid attention to the ways in which code can charge poetic creations with additional meaning(s). Our analysis of Mez’s work conversely highlights the ways in which the computer idiolect can bring into prominence the rule-guided nature of ordinary language, even in circumstances in which so-called natural language is used for aesthetic purposes.

Mary-Anne Breeze, or Mez as she is frequently referred to, is considered one of the most noteworthy authors working on the poetic threshold (or interstice) between so-called natural language and the domains of a traditionally male-oriented profession of computer programming and software design. She is renowned for writing in a personal digital creolized idiom she terms “Mezangelle”, a software-oriented *pidgin* of which *\_cross.ova.ing 4rm.blog.2.log 07/08 XXtracts\_* offers a vibrant example. Made up of ten separate sections, the piece provides us with a wide range of the different ways in which Mez blends elements characteristic of code writing with creative juxtapositions of words from natural language. The two components are frequently simultaneously both interconnected and disjointed by means of parenthetical and punctuation signs. A look at some of the sections’ titles can make basic Mezangelle features effectively evident for the unfamiliar reader:

2. *bet[t]a[living.thru.brutal\_ness]*

3. *\_trEm[d]o[lls]r\_*

6. #dn[p]a[per.cut here.]bird#

10. Sel[f]e[le]ct>Proc.ess>[1st]S.kin

As we can see, strings of text written in Mezangelle leave a wide margin of negotiation of the ways in which we might *execute* a text by means of reading according to the circumstances of interaction and presuppositions. When reading title number 2, for example, we can decide to momentarily suspend the bracketed “t” and have the word *beta*<sup>[14]</sup> as a qualifier apparently referring to the subsequent bracketed content. Alternatively, we can decide to include the bracketed letter “t” in our ceaseless processing of the text line. In this case we would obtain the word “betta” (ideal phonetic rendition of “better”) as a quite different qualifier for the subsequent string. As we can gather from these samples, the generative possibilities of the Mezangelle idiom arise from the ways in which readers can decide to join, skip, dis-connect, retrieve and/or temporarily suspend linguistic elements along the reading process. In other words, such possibilities are contingent not so much on the polyvalent ambiguity of the syntagmatic units of signification as they are on the ways in which readers play different language-games with the protocol-based mechanisms of interpretation usually assumed for reading. Reading Mez’s codework poetry relies on a continual process of inferring rules of reading *from* the text by keeping in mind some decision along the reading process of the Mezangelle language. In claiming that joining, skipping, dis-connecting, re-connecting, etc. are the correct steps to be taken according to an alleged general working principle of *\_cross.ova.ing 4rm.blog.2.log 07/08 XXtracts*, we neither anticipate nor prescribe that readers will enact such kind of actions. We rather simply postulate that the work’s fundamental reading rule has not been followed if readers *did not* do such kind of actions.

Although the prefatory notes on the *Electronic Literature Collection Vol. 2* explain how “this most software-aware project is actually software independent, as Mez has no patience or capacity for operating within the fixity of an ‘application,’ not to mention that of the person, place or nation-state,” the piece results anyway in literary coded instructions. If the *Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary* states that, in computing terms, an executable file causes “to perform indicated tasks according to encoded instructions,” then we can think about *\_cross.ova.ing 4rm.blog.2.log 07/08 XXtracts\_* as producing such an effect on a human reader rather than on a physical CPU. By establishing mechanisms and circumstances for human rule-following, the codework piece is by default *executable*. In other words, regardless of the executable nature of Mez’s codework piece when processed/read by a digital machine, for the human reader codework is always executable in relation to human rule-following.<sup>[15]</sup> And it is

precisely here that Mez's literary practices can be seen as addressing the issue *protocol*. If we remember Galloway's words about protocol being responsible for regulating the working of individuals within social spaces in the opening of our paper, we can see Mez's poetry as a counter-protocological force against the institutionalized experience envisioned by the editorial bodies in terms of standardizing reading procedures. Regardless of the particular interpretation of the text in terms of possible signified meaning(s), the crucial aspect concerning the reading of *\_cross.o.v.a.i.n.g 4rm.blog.2.log 07/08 XXtracts\_* is that we make sense of the fragment by means of manipulating the text, i.e. by means of *operating on* the poetic text just as we had to do in the case of Annie Abrahams's *Separation/Séparation*.

It is possible therefore to conclude that the literary operations carried out by these digital authors are not radically different from their nineteenth century American counterparts once we merely shift our critical focus from the level of forms of representation to the one of language use. The three elements both Abrahams and Mez seem to share with late nineteenth-century American writers can be listed in their reconfigured guise as follows: first, they both enact a will to remove their selves from dominant textual institutions by means of an act of *independent self-determined language*. Whereas Annie Abrahams creates her poem in the unusual no-man land of in-between linguistic (English and French) and gestural language, Mez goes as far as to even create a whole new language of her own called Mezengelle that lives in the no-man's land of natural and programming languages. Second, they both re-enact the women's career literature female protagonists' desire for self-fulfillment by means of intellectual work in traditionally male professions. Both authors operate at the level of code, namely produce intellectual work in the traditionally male-oriented job of software developer: Abrahams introduces in the source code of *Separation/Séparation* a set of algorithmic conditions in order to counter-regulate human reading while Mez subverts the perfectly validated code<sup>[16]</sup> by means of dys-functional signification processes. Third, just like female characters in the nineteenth-century works we considered, they too abandon the certainty typical of economic security by rejecting the more familiar editorial mechanisms of print literary expression. These female authors venture in an unknown future made of code-based creative labor and decide to work in the context of e-literature, a literary genre that, far from producing best-selling works by meeting editorial marketing rules, has so far received very little institutional legitimization.

In the light of these recurring patterns between the 1870-90 and 1990-2010 periods, it emerges that the digital (as a consequence of the general apparatus shift often associated with transformation in technologies of digital communication) seems to have, at best, merely shifted the areas in which such three-element sets of female expressive strategies work most effectively. The digital seems to mainly have pushed female writers' interventions towards different areas of the *distributed network* represented by the editorial apparatus: women writers reorient their literary intentions from (book) content to (writing) channel, from forms of representation to affordances of representation, from language trope to language act or – to put it in an ultimate version of a scholarly debate on avant-garde modernism – from *mimesis* to *instantiation*. The transformative dynamics that brought women authors to enact their counter-strategies along an evolving trajectory that, from the subversion of conventional novel genre takes today the form of a repurposing of technology-based speech acts, are hardly conceivable outside scholarly analyses marked by historical specificity. However, the recurrence of the patterns we highlight across centuries and the update of battles against genre-rules constraints into reading rules constraints seem to make women literary writing a vigilant – and to some extent trans-historical – resistance against the evolution of editorial concerns that seems to inevitably follow the development of new technological and societal networks. As such strategies of literary expression, predominantly speculative in nature in nineteenth-century literary productions, are more and more blending with empirical ones in the creation of new media and digital literary artifact, critical female writing remarkably stays as an operational critique on the ways each age regulates its own production and consumption of language-based expression.

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## Notes

1. We are thinking here about both the nineteenth-century New Woman figure and the contemporary dissemination of third-wave feminist ideology through the internet and social media: feminist blogs, Instagram, Twitter, Facebook, digitized magazines, and even celebrity culture.
2. For more on this concept, see Hardt, Michael and Antonio Negri. *Empire*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 2001.
3. In Christian theology, typology refers to the interpretation of some characters and stories in the *Old Testament* as allegories foreshadowing the *New Testament*.
4. For more on this, see: Raley, Rita. *Tactical Media*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 2009.
5. Running the risk of over-simplification, we might illustrate Galloway's point of view by observing that a user can be free to decide what kind of hyper-linked content to upload on a certain web page and from what specific machine or operating system such an upload can take place. However, as long as the process of uploading is regulated by the standardized so-called Hyper-Textual-Transfer-Protocol (the http:// string of characters we see at the beginning of most web pages' URLs), the user's margin of intervention or actual freedom to make a true difference on the structure of the internet remains strictly regimented by the user's acceptance of a rigid, if not inalterable, pre-existing procedure.

6. Phillis Wheatley's *Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral* was published in England after a group of prominent Boston men tested Phillis in order to prove she was the actual author of her poems and that she truly was endowed with the knowledge of the religious and mythological issues her poems contained. Their signed statement appears in the opening of the 1773 edition.

7. While there were some early nineteenth-century women writers like Margaret Fuller, Fanny Fern, and Sarah Grimke who promoted women's economic independence in their non-fiction writing, it wasn't until after the Civil War, however, when the theme of women's work became a literary trend—if not a formal subgenre—in women's fictional literature and the figure of the middle-class career woman emerged.

8. For more on this, see Lisa Nakamura in *Electronic Elsewheres*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 2009.

9. Repetitive strain injury (RSI) (also known as “repetitive motion injuries” or “repetitive motion disorder”) can be conceived of as an injury of the musculoskeletal and nervous systems that may be caused by repetitive tasks. In carrying out light exertions and various kinds of mechanical compressions such as pressing against hard surfaces and assuming awkward positions, computer users can incur forms of injuries that may include non-specific arm pain or upper limb disorders.

10. To have a sense of the counter-protocological agency of this electronic literary work it is sufficient to read it by means of fast pace mouse clicking at:

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11. In Cramer's view, codework poets such as Alan Sondheim, Ted Warnell, Talan Memmott, Mez, Jodi, and others produce their text-based artworks “by playing with the confusions and thresholds of machine language and human language, and by reflecting the cultural implications of these overlaps.” Cramer's article, “Digital Code and Literary Text,” is published at

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example argues that, before the renovated focus on materiality encouraged by digital literary productions, “with significant exceptions, print literature was widely regarded as not having a body, only a speaking mind” (32). See Hayles, N. K. *Writing Machines*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2002.

13. Scholars such as Aden Evens, for instance, emphasize code’s hidden aesthetic dimension, especially when he observes that two snippets of codes might produce, for example, the same executable file while featuring different styles in terms of code writing. Other critics, such as Mark Marino, build projects like *Critical Code Studies* on a similar assumption, i.e. that there is an often poorly analyzed dimension of code in relation to the possibility of characterizing it as a meaning-making practice that is culturally configured. Leonardo Flores seems to push the issue even further towards a substantially formalist perspective. In arguing for close reading of code, he often, in fact, brings to light the “repressed” dimension of code. All these views share a concern for a dichotomy between depth and surface that pertains to computer textuality as much as to language itself. It seems as though the relationship between source code and visualized text on the screen virtually mirrors the conceptual relationship between hidden meaning and visible signifiers (in this case strings made of coded text).

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—CITATION—

Allukian, K., Carassai, M. (2015) Rule-guided Expression: Gender Dissent across

Mediated Literary Works. *Ada: A Journal of Gender, New Media, and Technology*, No.8.

**doi:10.7264/N3H41PQ2** (<http://dx.doi.org/10.7264/N3H41PQ2>)

This article has been openly peer reviewed at **Ada Review**

(<http://adareview.fembotcollective.org/ada-issue-8-gender-globalization-and-the-digital/rule-guided-expression-gender-dissent-across-mediated-literary-works/>) .



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**Footnotes** ( returns to text)

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◀ **DIGITAL AESTHETICS**   ◀ **DIGITAL WRITING**   ◀ **LABOR**   ◀ **PEER REVIEWED**   ◀ **PROTOCOL**  
◀ **WOMEN IN LITERATURE**

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## 2 THOUGHTS ON “RULE-GUIDED EXPRESSION: GENDER DISSENT ACROSS MEDIATED LITERARY WORKS”

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Ada: A Journal of Gender, New Media, and Technology  
ISSN 2325-0496

